Inclusive Deaf Studies: Barriers and Pathways

Jane K. Fernandes  
University of North Carolina Asheville  
Shirley Shultz Myers  
Gallaudet University

Joining scholars signaling the need for new directions in Deaf Studies, the authors recommend a more expansive, nuanced, and interdisciplinary approach that encompasses the many ways deaf people live today. Rather than destroy Deaf culture, this approach is the only realistic way to allow it and Deaf Studies to survive. Deaf Studies today continues the focus of founding scholarship on native White American Sign Language users, now head of a powerful hierarchy through which they receive privileged status at the expense of deaf people with different language backgrounds and races or ethnicities. This marginalization is unsustainable and impedes knowledge. A companion article (this issue), “Deaf Studies: A Critique of the Predominant U.S. Theoretical Direction,” analyzes this reactive stance that is oriented by a focus on audism built on the concepts of phonocentrism and colonialism.

For Deaf Studies to be fully an academic field upholding intellectual values, scholars must broaden their focus of study to encompass diverse deaf people—diverse in communication, culture, race, and ethnicity. A companion article, “Deaf Studies: A Critique of the Predominant U.S. Theoretical Direction,” looks at the intellectual stance framed by a theory of audism and built on concepts of phonocentrism and colonialism. Together, the two articles reveal the predominant direction in Deaf Studies and in the core White Deaf community as reactive toward changing historical conditions and the variety of deaf lives today. Incorporating other scholars’ signals of the need for new directions in Deaf Studies, the authors recommend that the field take a more expansive, nuanced, and interdisciplinary approach that encompasses the many ways deaf people live today. Some worry that such changes will destroy Deaf culture. In the face of tremendous changes in technology and greater access for deaf people to the hearing mainstream, it is the only realistic way to allow it and Deaf Studies to survive.

The predominant direction in Deaf Studies departments and programs in U.S. institutions of higher education, however, continues the focus and concerns that established the field in the 1970s with the scholarly recognition of American Sign Language (ASL) and Deaf culture. This founding scholarship validates and instills pride in native ASL users and demarcates boundaries of Deaf culture. What remains in the shadows is the fact that the pride of ASL users has evolved into a powerful hierarchy through which native White ASL users and those born into Deaf culture receive privileged status at the expense of other deaf people. Changing historical conditions are eschewed for a frame of audism that casts events as part of a repeating, endless oppression by hearing people in which deaf people participate as a marginalized, embattled Other. Certainly, native users of ASL maintained the language and culture associated with it through times of extreme oppression. Hence, this group will always have historical importance. However, today both activists and some scholars fix cultural borders and stigmatize ways other deaf people live. These issues demonstrate barriers to an inclusive and proactive Deaf Studies.

Deaf Studies Departments and Programs: The State of the Field

To date, at least 19 programs in the United States and at least six programs in three countries offer academic credentials in Deaf Studies. In the United States, five
programs offer degrees at the AA level (typically 2 years of university study) whereas most of the others are at the BA/BS level. Only three offer degrees at the graduate level: Lamar University offers BS/MS/PhD degrees in Deaf Studies and Education and Boston University and Gallaudet University offer a Masters degree in Deaf Studies although Boston University’s program is housed with the School of Education.

As an emergent academic discipline in its own right, Deaf Studies is still developing the relatively greater complexity and variety of theoretical paradigms, tools, and methods of more established disciplines or professions. It also is just beginning to make connection with interdisciplinary areas of inquiry that draw from those established disciplines and professions. A few scholars of Deaf Studies in graduate programs in the United States work within established disciplines or professions such as linguistics or education. These scholars do not approach Deaf Studies as a separate academic discipline but as a research focus within their disciplines. Some are affiliated with anthropology (Yale University, University of Texas, Austin) or more specifically medical anthropology (Yale University) and linguistic anthropology (University of California, Los Angeles). Embedded within more established disciplines, these scholars draw upon and apply various theoretical frameworks, research methods, and tools to their work. Audism has been the theoretical framework particularly at Gallaudet University, California State University at Northridge, Utah Valley State College, and Boston University.

In line with academic purposes, some Deaf Studies scholars have sought to contribute to knowledge about deaf life and to ongoing academic discussions about culture and language in general. Great potential lies in this direction, and our critique is in part meant to point to the need to build an effective theoretical ground for such contributions (and to indicate those scholars who are moving in this direction already). For now, a good number of doctoral students who might want to work in Deaf Studies often need to find a faculty mentor who shares similar research or theoretical interests and then convince that potential mentor of the connections to the students’ interests in Deaf Studies. For example, someone desiring to study deaf schools in Thailand might need to find a faculty mentor who studies minority pedagogies and then convince that person of the linkages to pedagogy in deaf schools. These linkages represent important paths to contributing to the wider body of knowledge.

Interdisciplinary connections will arise from more research that is primary. Studying those outside of the Deaf cultural group as well as those inside it—especially those who must move back and forth—is a vitally important path to making contributions and also to strengthening the viability of Deaf Studies as an academic specialization. However, we contend that other roles for Deaf Studies, stemming partly from the limitations of an underdeveloped theoretical base and delimited focus, have overshadowed the primary academic role of creating knowledge about all deaf life that may contribute to wider intellectual discussions. These other roles involve fixing cultural borders, also known as boundary marking, and stigmatization. In other words, both Deaf political leaders and scholar activists have harnessed a limited body of knowledge about a core Deaf cultural group in the service of sociopolitical ends.

Some Deaf Studies scholars have focused the work of maintaining boundaries within two roles of conversion. One role is to convince hearing people of the value of ASL and Deaf culture. The other is to pull in deaf people to a particular brand of ASL and practice of Deaf culture from other ways of being deaf. Bechter’s (2008) provocative view is that the signing Deaf community is “a community of ‘converts,’ at least in large part” because “most signers are not born to signers.” Hence the culture “must presumably relate in some way to this unorthodox pattern of socialization” (p. 61). Bechter demarcates the field of study as the signing Deaf community, thereby excluding other ways to be deaf. Moreover, it is not yet clear how much his work is a description of a conversion process and how much promulgation of a proscription—marking boundaries of an elite group of native signers and subtly stigmatizing converts.

Boundary Marking in Scholarship: Describing or Proscribing

A well-known tenet of sociologists and cultural studies scholars is that societies or communities have
strategies of boundary maintenance (Marshall, 1998). Reporting these boundaries and describing efforts to maintain them are obligations of scholars. Audism and a U.S. version of Deafhood are particular strategies to maintain a core Deaf culture. If these strategies did not exist, possibly something else would come to the fore to help Deaf culture’s struggle to maintain itself. However, boundary maintenance is not the only phenomenon observed in the behavior of other groups. Increased fluidity and permeability of these boundaries in response to increasing interaction among larger social networks also may occur (Friesen, 1999). What happens if we realize, as some do now, that a certain academic understanding of deaf life can serve a political argument? Such scholarship may facilitate a political argument against the threat of massive change from technology such as cochlear implants. It also can be a proscription for deaf life with artificially narrow boundaries that exclude other kinds of deaf people, such as people from different language backgrounds and people of various races and ethnicities other than White. Evidence exists of proscribing terms of membership in order to preserve Deaf culture at the expense of sustainability and social justice.

If scholars were merely describing what is, they would be studying empirically all the ways deaf people live. We would see more studies of native Black signers, of deaf families or communities such as oral deaf families or communities, of deaf children growing up in the United States in homes where Spanish is spoken, and of deaf families who support implants or who rely primarily on implants. Instead, too much academic study, particularly at Gallaudet, as well as at National Technical Institute for the Deaf, California State University, Northridge, Utah Valley State College, and Boston University, continues to concentrate on White Deaf families who use their version of ASL—established as the standard, whereas other forms of signing are, at best, called dialects and, at worst, wrong or impossible. It also proscribes study of their cultural norms, so that other cultural norms of other deaf people are seen as deviations from the norm of Deaf culture, as non-Deaf, or even as unhealthy manifestations of deaf people with unrealized Deafhood. Scholars need to study these insider values and ways certainly, but academic standards of completeness would necessitate acknowledging and studying other deaf people’s views about their different but equally satisfying lives or their different and also oppressed lives. In short, in order to make valid claims about deaf people, the sample must be larger and more diverse.

The core White Deaf community might expect conformity to its standard and place themselves at the head of a hierarchy of a language and cultural group they claim is for all deaf people. Scholarship, on the other hand, must consciously check tendencies to organize differences among communication choices into hierarchies or to overgeneralize about deaf life based on one group. Ladd (2003) notes that most postcolonial theorists reject cultural essentialism as a “product of a colonial gaze which saw each native group as a homogeneous entity holding the same views and thus reduced them to a racist caricature” (p. 217). He laments this development in postcolonial theory, asserting that a singular collective identity allows enough visibility to enable deaf people to counteract hearing privilege (p. 80). Hence, following Spivak (Landry & MacLean, 1996), he suggests “essentialist concepts such as Deafhood are at the least strategically viable for the foreseeable future” and believes such work may “make a contribution across the several disciplines concerned with essentialism” (p. 217). We caution against such a strategy—no end, however well intentioned, justifies this essentialism for the following reason: As we noted in the companion article (this issue), perpetuating a binary opposition—hearing-Deaf—that itself arises out of audism and hearing privilege can easily exacerbate it. Polarizing opposites then trap deaf people within the very ideas they wish to challenge. The further danger is that concerns over authentic deaf life can distract from a focus on audism and the many different ways deaf people experience it.

Consider the idea that fixing culture may also be an instance of excessive multiculturalism. For example, Cooley (2004) writes, “Unfortunately, the definition used by most multiculturalists is not a fluid and malleable entity of people that fluctuates with time, the environment, and influence from and upon other cultures—a definition that one might hope to expect from such progressive thinkers. Their definition is in fact quite the opposite perspective; that is, the
definition advocated by multiculturalists is to view cultures as hard, fixed, and in need of preservation like species of wild animals or exotic plants. Multiculturalists believe all cultures have unique qualities that should be defended simply because they exist and are thought to be unique. Whatever the motive, idealistic or corrupt, fixing despite continual change has had a detrimental effect on Deaf Studies as an academic field and will only intensify if the current direction continues.

What is the loss if deaf people seem more and more assimilated into American society? What is the loss if the boundaries of American culture itself shift as a result of greater inclusion of deaf people? Whose place is it to decide how deaf people are to live? Does it weaken the integrity of ASL to mix together differences in signing in different social groups or to mix in English or show practical strategies of mediating? Are not scholars to describe, not proscribe and prescribe? What is the gain of studying all the ways deaf people navigate different communication situations? No deaf person lives in one culture, and this reality, if studied, could contribute significantly to fields such as cultural studies, possibly changing these fields just as establishing ASL as a language changed linguistics.

We understand Bechter (2008) to be moving in this direction when he points out that instead of a “classic,” “autonomous” culture, Deaf culture is “based on the inherent intersection of deaf and nondeaf worlds” (p. 60), although his emphasis on studying the “signing community empirically” (p. 73) diverges from our sense of all the empirical realities (p. 71) needing study.

Indicating this way forward, Padden and Humphries (2005) recognize the complexity of the Deaf community by acknowledging how forces in the larger society work to divide deaf people, while still children, into overly small categories for the purpose of education (“deaf, hard of hearing, oral, manual, Black, White,” p. 55). Davis (2007) makes a similar observation when he criticizes definitions of deaf people based on “ethnicity, minority status, and nationhood (including ‘deaf world’ and ‘Deaf culture’).” He writes, “We would be better off expanding our current notions of identity by being less Procrustean and more flexible. Rather than trying to force the foot into a glass slipper, why not make a variety of new shoes that actually fit” (para. 22)? Davis (2008) also examines the shortcomings of these and other ways deaf people define themselves in “Postdeafness,” the last chapter of Open Your Eyes: Deaf Studies Talking.

Prescribing Marginalization of Hybrid Forms of Communication

We emphasize the following: one, we know ASL and English have divergent sign or word orders and grammars; two, we know ASL needs to be studied as a language in its own right; and three, many people who use ASL are not skilled at it. We understand that deaf children need to acquire a full language, and in many cases, ASL is the language most suited to a deaf child’s sensory orientation. We have long been strong advocates for ASL in every way. However, we believe the intentional combination of ASL and English, when done by a person proficient and fluent in both, represents a hybrid form of communication, if not language, that should be explored as new possibility rather than dismissed out of hand as impossible. Although one may argue persuasively that two oral languages cannot be spoken at the same time by the same speaker, the fact is that ASL and English take place in different spaces and a person fluent in both is particularly well suited to exploring how a form of two languages could be managed simultaneously to communicate with speakers of both. The discussion that follows takes place within this context of principles and hypotheses.

When ASL and Deaf culture scholars encourage readers and students to pick out their own and other people’s deviations from standard ASL signers, they may be seeking to establish the linguistic parameters of a language, but at the same time, they unintentionally perpetuate an already established academic history of the White Deaf elite who served as the first models of ASL and informants on Deaf culture. Bahan (2006) writes: “... because Deaf people are also members of the majority culture (i.e., American culture), they interact on a daily basis with English-speaking people by communicating with them in a variety of ways: speaking or writing. Although literate knowledge is accessed in a language (English) that is not primarily used in face-to-face situations among members of the
DEAF-WORLD, we cannot ignore the relationship between the two cultures and their influence on each other (p. 22).” Although Bahan acknowledges both ASL and English within the Deaf community, the text is accompanied by a note that makes it clear that he gives special status as standard or norm setters to those who use ASL exclusively in face-to-face communication. The note says, “There are, however, some Deaf bilinguals who are more proficient in English than ASL, and this shows up in the way they converse. The fact that the community acknowledges this by labeling this group of people as ‘English signers’ suggests some deviation from the expected face-to-face norm” (p. 46).

Privileging a particular way of signing may well be an example of what Armstrong (1999) says is a linguistic boundary marker that gains force through appreciation for a group small enough to maintain reliance on face-to-face contact: “If we hypothesize that there is an upper limit on the size of social groups that can be organized effectively simply through mechanisms of face-to-face interaction, it becomes possible to understand why it is so useful for human beings to be able to distinguish absolutely and easily between in-group and out-group members…. Boundary maintenance devices could work at the level of entirely separate language groups as well as to identify class differences within groups.” Reasons for preserving a preference for native signers do not cite this process certainly, just as other cultural processes are often not known or manipulated consciously, but the motivation is plausible. Armstrong cites work by James Woodward and Harry Markowicz (1975) identifying a “vernacular ASL which is relatively inaccessible to hearing people” (pp. 151–152).

Today we understand that it also excludes or stigmatizes a good number of deaf people: This concept of a single standard helps bring to light an internal contradiction concerning the notion of an inclusiveness that necessitates imitation of a standard ASL based predominantly on White Deaf signers. In other words, asking deaf people to imitate a standard they can never quite reach—without having grown up as a White Deaf native signer, a difference said to always show itself—marks the status of those who sign differently from the White Deaf native ideal as perpetually second-class. As a result, this boundary marker guarantees the intimacy of equals among an elite group only and uses subtle stigmatization to exclude many other ways to sign and live as a deaf person. Even when someone learns this standard of ASL flawlessly, the past of the person that lacks some aspects of the Deaf ideal is always mentioned as a marker of lesser status. Perhaps the person may not have intended to mark the other person as being of lesser status and only consciously thought of sharing information in the highly context dependent Deaf community, but the effect of it does mark the person as an outsider and of lesser status.

Some may acknowledge that today non-native signers are relegated to second class status but then argue that teaching all deaf babies ASL from the start will erase the difference in status. Trends of the past 20 years, with no indications of reversals, show that the realistic chances of having all deaf babies learn ASL are slim, thereby guaranteeing the continued privileged status of native signers. Thus, deaf babies born to nonsigning parents or deaf children who become deaf in early childhood and who have nonsigning parents are at a disadvantage in both the deaf and the hearing worlds. If they later try to become more Deaf-like, they are measured against the deaf norm. Indeed, learning about the process of assimilating into Deaf culture can shed much light on the nature of the boundaries as well as strategies to maintain them.

Various social and linguistic pressures are brought to bear on deaf people who diverge from the White ASL and associated practices of Deaf culture to persuade them to act in the more acceptable Deaf culture way. Examples of such pressures are disparagement and marginalization, subtle and not-so-subtle, especially within deaf educational institutions. Controlling turn taking and denying eye contact are two of the more subtle strategies of marginalization. An example of those targeted for such pressures are the many students today, both White and of color, who are growing up learning both ASL and English (speaking and writing), the belief being that bilingualism gives them the opportunity to be participants in both Deaf and hearing worlds. At Gallaudet, two students of color, one White student from an oral background, and one White hearing student who signs well all reported at different times that they experienced these strategies...
of marginalization—and all four of these students used the same word to describe how these strategies made them feel: invisible (Anonymous, personal communications, various, between January 28 and March 30, 2009). Some of these non-Deaf people are creating combinations of signing and speech that work for them. Yet, standard ASL precludes the use of voice and much tension exists around anyone who tries to sign and voice simultaneously, even if only for a specific group of people with a specific purpose. Rather than encouraging the exploration of this merger of languages open-mindedly, it is belittled and rejected out of hand.

In discussing these hybrid forms of communication, we emphasize that we are not talking about educational policy or any practices in classrooms. Some of the research (Paul, 2008) on SimCom—simultaneous communication, speaking, and signing together—concentrated on hearing teachers in classrooms with deaf children. The well-known finding is that because these hearing teachers were fluent in English and were taught to put signs “on top” of their English words, the result maintained the integrity of English but broke down the ASL into something incomprehensible. We advocate for a complete language to be represented to deaf children. However, we are talking instead about deaf cultural studies advocating for more knowledge about how deaf adults live with two languages, including hybrids of any kind as well as contact language—interaction between two languages.

For deaf adults who are balanced bilinguals in both ASL and English, some combinations may occur in certain situations without compromising intelligibility. This outcome is a possibility, according to Armstrong (1999), given “a common and simultaneous evolutionary history of speech and manual gesture” and some evidence that “SimCom can operate much like natural language in satisfying the normal communication needs of its users” (p. 126). Armstrong also notes what he characterizes as Carol Padden’s “interesting [1990] counterpoint to the political controversy” about Sim-Com: “In Italian sign language, the mouthed Italian word functions as the visible sign” whereas “an American would fingerspell English words.” American Deaf people would characterize this feature of Italian sign language as oral rather than a feature of signed language. Her conclusion, according to Armstrong, is that “there needs to be more consideration given to such ‘non-pure’ systems” (p. 127)—in short for more flexibility in our conceptions of visual and signed languages. Above all, scholarship including rather than banning hybrid communication would allow for fuller descriptive study of the advantages as well as the pitfalls of a type of signing that many deaf people today use.

Prejudging these kinds of integrations against a core Deaf value rather than describing them, for instance, as a middle ground between hearing and Deaf ways—realistically where many deaf people live—scholars are engaged in perpetuating a maladaptive myth rather than studying the reality of a complex group. A case in point: The first Miss Deaf America pageant in 1972 made such news that the winner and Miss Gallaudet, Ann Billington (now Ann Cassell), met then President Gerald R. Ford in the Oval Office. Billington Cassell learned to sign as a college student at Gallaudet; she also used her voice and signed during the pageant. In a 2008 lecture discussing the pageant winner, a Gallaudet Deaf Studies professor echoed a viewpoint Burch (2006) described as gaining ground after the Deaf President Now protest of 1988: In having grown up orally and, during the pageant, having used her speaking voice while signing, this first winner was not representative of the Deaf community (Anonymous, personal communication, December 12, 2008). Here, we see the non-neutral control of a single standard.

Study of how this hard-of-hearing winner of the Miss Deaf America pageant moves between the world of her upbringing and this Deaf cultural event, as well as how Heather Whitestone, winner of Miss America, negotiates different communities could shed light on hybridization phenomena featured in Cultural Studies (e.g., Lewis, 2002, p. 334). Studies of the negotiation of national boundaries and international deaf events extends such potential contributions, as Murray (2008) suggests, to transnational studies. In short, there is space for meaningful—even paradigm-shifting—contribution from Deaf Studies to the larger academic community and body of knowledge, but the focus of study needs to expand in order to have adequate data from a variety of sources, data that in turn require theories with the greatest and most credible explanatory power.
In his notion of “culture talking,” Humphries (2008) explains what could be an aspect of this kind of inclusive focus. Humphries sees a need to move beyond “proving” and “exhibiting” Deaf culture for the consumption of others. Instead, he mentions several promising examples of emerging work in various disciplines on how a necessarily changing “Deaf culture moves through the world”: In education, for example, he suggests “indigenous practices” of deaf teachers—visucentric learning would be our example; in history, he suggests “the evolution of ideas and practices within Deaf communities [we note the plural].” Most important in the present context is Humphries’ discussion of “culture talking” in which he suggests a “likely” focus in “other areas of study” (we suggest an expanded and transformed Deaf Studies): a “look at cultural processes rather than ‘the culture,’ an important orientation for avoiding the trap of ‘what is and what isn’t’ Deaf culture, …” (pp. 40–41).

We would agree that culture talking recognizes that the category of DEAF is in flux, and we mean to point to one reason it is—increased self-consciousness of those growing up outside of White-dominated ASL and Deaf culture.

White Deaf Boundaries and the Marginalization of Ethnic and Racial Differences

The argument to expand descriptions of ASL is the strongest concerning models of native multigenerational ASL users of color. Linguists used predominantly White Deaf people of White Deaf parents to establish that ASL is a language and that Deaf culture exists with its own set of meanings that govern and are shaped by the Deaf community. On occasion, linguists have included deaf people of color as informants in their research. For example, Nathie Marbury, an African American deaf woman, was one of the models of the early “green” book on teaching ASL by Baker-Shenk and Cokely (1991). Ms. Marbury is the sign model for the last chapter of the first book. When that text is used in ASL instruction, the last chapter is often not taught because (reasons the authors learned ourselves) “there isn’t enough time” or because “the ASL is not a great model—there were a few mistakes made.” Rather than modifying the predominantly White standard to include variations without hierarchy, teachers and students of ASL and Deaf Studies focus their attention almost exclusively on the White deaf models of ASL and Deaf Culture. What is it but a legacy of White privilege that leads to a preference for White signers? Moreover, including signers of color who are deemed as signing like White Deaf people—with no “mistakes”—misses our point.

The language and culture of White Deaf Americans have been the standard against which deaf Americans of color and all other deaf people are measured. Deaf people of color and other deaf people who become accepted as members of Deaf culture have to demonstrate ability to use the standard or universal White Deaf ASL. Only rarely do we read of ASL linguists documenting ASL as used by Deaf communities of color or scholars looking into other language and expressions of culture of other deaf people. Carolyn McCaskill and Ceil Lucas have undertaken with several other researchers—graduate research assistants Roxanne Dummett, Joseph Hill, and Randall Hogue; Robert Bayley, University of California, Davis; and community representative Pamela Baldwin—“The Black ASL Project.” They are interviewing over 75 people in six states (North Carolina, Alabama, Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas, and Virginia), either older than 55 years or younger than 35 years, about their school experience and sign language use. This is a move in the right direction. More such studies need to occur. We note, however, that the title of the project itself marks the difference between White and Black sign languages. We assume ASL is the language of White people. When studying Black signers, researchers must insert the term Black so that we will understand this type of signing represents a deviation from the norm, at least until revised standards of ASL integrate the features of this minority within the minority of deaf people. The paucity of study and research into the signing and culture(s) of various deaf Americans of color suppresses their identity and hinders their education. It also allows an incomplete description of signing deaf people in the United States that potentially distorts potential contributions to knowledge generally.

We acknowledge that the limited study of deaf people of color is in part due to the limited number
of researchers who are capable of exploring these communities. Although the validity of ASL as a language has been firmly established, we are still in the early stages of building detailed knowledge about ASL. Recognizing this limitation of the founding and ongoing research requires academia to give concerted effort to preparing those who can study signers of color for a more complete description of ASL. However, instead of acknowledging this limitation, some scholars, particularly scholar activists, adhere to the initial formulation based on a relatively limited sample. Unwittingly or not, sticking with rather than reexamining this early scholarship at least partly contributes to the privilege and elitism that White Deaf ASL users and Deaf culture natives have.

Scholars who are serious about being inclusive—also the intellectual value of completeness—would approach things differently. If all they can do is work with White Deaf native signers, then every paper they write should have a caveat saying the results are limited to their White Deaf frame of reference. Or they could seek out people who could help them gain access to other types of deaf people. In fact, people have been available but have been ignored—for instance, one of us observed at a deaf school that White Deaf students persistently marginalized one African American girl from a multigenerational Deaf African American family. Rather than seeing her life experience as an important one to know about within the totality of Deaf Studies, researchers who came daily to the school to observe White Deaf students with Deaf families also continually ignored her. The early researchers did not include such a caveat about such limitation because they were establishing “THE” language and culture. But why do some persist with the same myopic privileging of one way of signing?

This point is similar to what many now realize about history generally—for instance, that we have left out most of our history by focusing on White people and by having primarily White men serve as authors. Bennett (2007), an Ohio State graduate student, found an example close to home in the history of the Ohio School for the Deaf. Looking over materials in the archives, Bennett found no mention of race or any other ethnic, bodily, or religious identifiers in early editions of the school newspaper and other documents from the earliest years through the 1950s, even though “there were Black students in the early days of the Ohio School for the Deaf and … one, a man named Park Plum, had stayed on in a teaching capacity for many years.” Bennett could find no information at all on Park Plum either in the archives or online. More recent issues of the school newsletter (the current decade) had pictures including students of color but no writing done on the topic of race. Bennett commented that her women’s studies training had taught her to recognize that “absence signifies as strongly or stronger than presence.”

The syllabus for Gallaudet’s Introduction to Deaf Studies (DST 101)—received from a faculty member teaching the course—shows that inclusion is not a focus. In this multisection premajor course requirement with coordinated content and readings, students learn the “basic” White Deaf community and culture information. Studies on Deaf Black people, corralled with courses on Deaf women’s studies, disability studies, ASL literature, a comparative analysis of ASL and English, and art (Deaf View/Image Art), is a separate elective course for Deaf Studies majors. Why is an introductory level of African American (and other kinds of deaf people’s) lives not integrated into the regular introductory course, with electives providing more advanced or in-depth specializations? If the scholarly approach to the community were an inclusive poststructuralist one, academics would not establish White deaf founding scholarship first and teach the “others” later as if the knowledge itself, rather than the timing of the scholarship, was chronological.

Control of the Social Group Practicing Deaf Culture as Itself a Legacy of Audism

Continued resistance to studying and knowing the many ways deaf people live in the world will prevent differences within the Deaf community from being explored and understood. When they are not examined consciously, they become barriers to the advancement of human knowledge and hindrances to a community’s uniting for its own greater good. Expecting everyone to see the light of the true Deaf way has led to the fractured and conflicted community we have today. In other words, there will be no unity
without embracing the diversity that already exists among deaf people.

What is less clear than the destructive conditions themselves—the hurtful siege mentality and the fracturing of the Deaf community in reaction to these societal pressures—is the source of them. Both are in fact demonstrations of institutional audism. It is audism that has forced members of a Deaf cultural group who are the most different from the hearing norm to be pitted against deaf people who can speak English and thereby gain greater access to the privileges of the hearing world than deaf people who cannot speak. Although there is discrimination against deaf people of all kinds, it is most intensely directed at those who practice Deaf culture. They have a different language, different values, traditions, and rules of behavior. And although they may see speaking English as a nice skill to have, they do not place great value on it (although written English is acceptable and even encouraged in some corners). Thus, these are the people most commonly represented in Deaf Studies for good cause; however, given the diversity of deaf people and the very real pressures on deaf life that exacerbate divisions, the future of the field must move from a focus on a homogeneous group to study of heterogeneous groups. To be clear, such diversity includes race and ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, and socioeconomic status as well as audiological status, use of amplification, parentage, schooling, preferred language use, and communication methods.

A Reactive Version of Deafhood as a Legacy of Audism and Racism

Originating the concept of Deafhood and introducing it in his book, *Understanding Deaf culture: In Search of Deafhood*, Ladd (2003) defined Deafhood so as to contrast it with the medical diagnosis of deafness as a loss of hearing and with negative social constructions of deafness such as the idea that it is better to hear and speak. In contrast, the concept of Deafhood promulgates the information that deaf people can and do use Sign Language as their native language and thus have the ability to speak and be intelligent. Rather than being an undesirable physical condition of loss, then, being deaf is a source of pride and affirmation. Achieving this healthy outcome—a fully realized Deafhood—involves a deaf person’s constant introspection and long process to reconcile being deaf in positive terms. Ladd posits that every deaf child, every hearing family with a deaf child, and every deaf adult make this Deafhood journey. On the one hand, Ladd seems to suggest that various kinds of deaf people, whether they sign or speak English, may make a journey to reconcile themselves to being deaf and being proud of it. Yet, there also seems to be the suggestion that the best circumstance for adopting such a positive self-conception is when a deaf child is surrounded by other deaf people who use sign language. In contrast, if surrounded by hearing family and hearing people in school and community, there is the suggestion that a deaf child often internalizes hearing people’s negative views of deaf people—which equates with an unrealized Deafhood. Whether Deafhood is an open process resulting in a variety of ways to be deaf or in a single outcome has confused many. However, two examples make apparent this confusion in the U.S. version of Deafhood. The first one makes clear issues of race and exclusion intertwining with Deafhood in the 2006 positions of the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) board on Deafhood and diversity. The second one reveals division and confusion that came to the fore in 2008 concerning a U.S. organization called Deaf Bilingual Coalition (DBC).

Deafhood and Diversity at the NAD

At the 2006 NAD conference in Palm Desert, California, a strong movement emerged to acknowledge deaf people’s racial and ethnic identities, particularly those of people of color who experience exclusion and marginalization within this national advocacy community. In part a consequence of heightened racial awareness generated by the 2006 protest at Gallaudet University that same year, a panel of presidents of national deaf organizations of color was one of the most talked about panels during and after the conference. Moreover, because the traditional process of electing the NAD Board of Directors invariably leads to an all-White Board, the NAD decided to appoint two deaf women of color to the NAD Board of Directors to represent
the views of deaf people of color. The inclusion of the deaf women of color on the Board was well intentioned but nevertheless fraught with difficulty. For instance, a request for the two women of color to pay their own way like other directors awkwardly assumed a camaraderie that did not exist for everyone equally: The White Board members frequently acted as if the appointed members of color were not even present—talking over and around them and not acknowledging their contributions or presence in follow-up written communications (Anonymous, personal communication, February 19, 2007).

The Board also dealt inadequately with recommendations for diversity policies and activities, created with painstaking care over a 2-year period, by their own Diversity Strategic Team (DST). One of the DST recommendations involved the adoption of a “zero tolerance” policy against racism within the NAD. Unfortunately, the NAD rejected the “zero tolerance” policy toward racism substituting instead the more subtle goal of striving for “higher standards of diversity and inclusion.” Another recommendation the DST made was that DST members provide direct diversity training to the NAD Board and at NAD regional conferences. This recommendation summarizing 2 years of work failed to get support, whereas a relatively more last-minute motion that all state association members receive Deafhood training passed. Not coincidentally, Deafhood is the foremost interest of the traditional, White Deaf members. The NAD’s rejection of the DST’s recommendations although supporting Deafhood training left many deaf people of color skeptical about whether the NAD is serious about addressing racism within its own ranks (Anonymous, personal communication, July 1, 2008). Furthermore, the 2008 NAD conference did not include a single workshop or activity on racism.

As a result of the NAD’s maintenance of the status quo focus on the concerns, understanding, and interests of its White Deaf traditional base, deaf people of color are now considering withdrawing from the NAD and forming a separate coalition of minority deaf organizations that will address the needs of many other deaf people with diverse life style choices deemed deficient by NAD’s brand of Deafhood (Anonymous, personal communications, various between July 1, 2008, and April 26, 2009). Although the splintering of NAD into identity groups (National Asian Deaf Congress, National Black Deaf Advocates, National Council of Hispano Deaf and Hard of Hearing, and Intertribal Council) is not new, what is new is the notion that all of these marginalized people might form a new organization inclusive of all.

Deaf Bilingual Coalition

One organization with a number of members also presenting on Deafhood (Sewell, 2008) in the United States is DBC (2008). Mostly over the summer of 2008, reports in blogs and vlogs of communications from and within DBC indicate tense cultural processes at work that explain the fracturing of the coalition and eventual collapse. (Recently, some members of this group have created another organization, Audism Free America.) A well-known deaf blogger who goes by the name of Mishka (2008) reported contradictions among various public messages and blogs:

“DBC stands by its mission and continues to promote a clear vision that we support ALL Deaf infants and children to have access to ASL from birth and to be fluent in ASL and English (bilingual). DBC is not against speech and listening training as long as it is partnered with ASL. However, in the Milwaukee article, a DBC spokesperson [sic] indicates there is more to DBC than the promotion of ASL alone: “The two groups will bring their competing agendas to Milwaukee in separate national conferences this week: one that views cochlear implants and auditory-based therapies as a way to give children access to the wider world; and the other that sees them as unnecessary and an affront to who deaf people are as individuals… . We’re concerned about the audism behind the implants—this belief that hearing is more advantageous than being deaf. It’s the same as racism,” she said… . “You’re only learning how to speak, to regurgitate the words, and only a small percentage of deaf people are successful at that,” … .

Mishka Zena concluded, “This contradicts with [sic] the mission statement at DBC website, promoting ASL while not opposing speech and listening training, as long as they are partnered with ASL.” DBC
originator John Egbert (2008) remonstrated in response to Mishka Zena’s blog, “And let me emphasize that DBC is not against ci [cochlear implants] or speech or hearing aids” (Msg. 95, para. 5). However, besides the statements Mishka Zena found that contradicted this position, Hokocan (2008) also verified rejection of this kind of technology (Msg. 94).

Although some insisted the comments were taken out of context, another response (Florin, 2008, Msg. 192) stated that the media did not take the statements out of context: “She [the DBC spokesperson] did actually say those exact words in front of my eyes at a recent convention. They are bad news for promoting ASL/English bilingualism. They have their inner agendas.” In addition, a former member of the core committee wrote: “...I was condemned by [a] DBC leader for discussing DBC business in details via ... [written English]. I was asked not to discuss anything on email because the leader could not process her thoughts in ... [English]. She went on to instruct me to use e-mail only to set up VP appointments” (Sewell, 2008).

A Call for a Proactive and Inclusive Stance

Characterizing the “anxiety of culture” as the “problem of the times,” Padden and Humphries (2005) suggest that we need a shift from fixing culture to making and re-making culture “for the moment and in the moment” (p. 142). We agree, but we also state explicitly and even emphasize what Padden and Humphries imply, namely that some of these people do not come from or express the idea of deaf people as a separate and monolithic culture. Thus the boundaries between deaf and hearing life and between Deaf and variously marginalized deaf people will blur, crack, fade away, re-form, and give way again. Given the totality of deaf people today, it already is impossible to talk about the “true” or one Deaf way. Davis (2007) gets at the challenge of understanding what it is to be deaf today when he mentions that:

a reexamination of identity politics is under way in this country that questions even the concept of group identity. Postmodernism combined with globalization has undermined traditional notions of individual and community. It’s hard enough to say what it is to be an “American” now, let alone a member of a minority in the United States. It seems to me the minority model of deaf identity is too crude, too rigid, too limiting (para. 10).

As part of the community of scholars, scholars of Deaf Studies need to become more self-critical and inclusive of these many ways that Deaf and deaf people live in the United States and in the world. We further suggest that Deaf Studies curricula and faculty expertise should reflect this complexity.

Going beyond rigid oppositions—between deaf and hearing people, sign and speech—Brueggemann (1999) addresses the challenge of studying diverse deaf people: “Rhetoric, like deaf education, prefers the binaries, thrives on opposition. And both rhetoric and deaf education, too, tend to stay locked in those oppositions, afraid to engage the hyphens and enter into the gap between the binaries and in doing [so] to consult deaf persons on the very matters concerning them most” (p. 169). Scholars may also find deaf people who have found new ways to live beyond even hyphenation or in new spaces beyond the one between these fixed terms.

Putting aside our critique of phonocentrism and colonialism, our view that we need to go beyond rigid oppositions finds some common ground with Michael Davidson’s example of what might occur in a postcolonial period that challenges phonocentrism (or, rather, challenges audist assumptions as well as some Deaf assumptions). Davidson (2006) discusses how “the eruption of speech (or ... text)” in the work of three Deaf performance artists (Peter Cook, Aaron Williamson, and Joseph Grigely) “challenges the conventional opposition of signing and speech and allows for more complex, hybrid combinations” (p. 217). In contrast, “ASL poets like Clayton Valli, Ella Mae Lentz, Debbie Rennie, and others” use ASL to demarcate a group of those who understand the ASL and, by disallowing “acoustic prosodic models,” exclude people who do not understand it. In doing so, they also provide a restrictive sense of Deaf culture as a “single entity” or set of practices and “generalize a rather broad continuum of persons variously positioned with respect to deafness,” including “children who are deaf but whose family is hearing or hearing children of deaf parents as well as persons who have
become deaf later in life or who still retain some hearing. ... Such differences often become obscured in a more general celebration of an authentic (e.g., soundless, textless, ASL-based) poetry” (pp. 217–218). When artists “violate” this “authenticity,” they reach a wider audience and “comment suggestively on issues of language and communication in general, insofar as they are based on a phonocentric model” (218).

Toward an Emergent Model for Deaf Studies

As we have noted throughout, there are some indications of new directions that could form parts of a new paradigm—Padden and Humphries (2005); Davidson (2006); Davis (2007); Brueggemann (1999); Bechter (2008); Murray (2008); and Humphries (2008) are noted here; in addition, Davis (2008) expands his discussion of deafness, and Brueggemann (2008) speculates on expanding ways to be deaf and approaches to studying deaf people that need to be part of Deaf Studies. A model for the development of Deaf Studies as an academic field is emerging from such ideas as well as some we suggest here. Current institutional structures form another context from which a model can emerge that better fits an expanded and transformed Deaf Studies.

To carve out new territory, Deaf Studies must first broaden the group that is studied by cultivating sensitivity to biases and awareness of various systems of privilege. That is, it must not remain reactive but become consciously proactive. For example, just as audism is an issue for both deaf and hearing people, other rationalizations of privilege such as racism, sexism, and heterosexism are also issues for all deaf people and their allies. Indeed, in coming to terms with privilege, individuals must do their own work by engaging in introspection as well as in dialogue with others because individual change and systemic change are dynamically interrelated. Despite the difficulty and discomfort that this oftentimes-subtle work may cause us, each of us needs to embrace it in order to develop conscious understanding and change both individual and institutional behaviors.

At the institutional level, scholars can begin to broaden the subjects of their studies. For example, not just ASL users but also other deaf people can teach us about a visual–spatial orientation. For another example, Deaf Studies scholars might look into deaf people who speak without hearing or understanding themselves speak, or they might look into what hearing aids or implants do for deaf people’s hearing themselves speak, especially in how that experience relates to seeing oneself sign. Deaf Studies also needs to engage rigorously with all disciplines that allow us to study how deaf people live in the world. Thus, along with elaboration of new understandings of audism and other forms of privilege, and along with new lines of inquiry about the variety of ways to be deaf, issues with interdisciplinary study in Deaf Studies form an area for future exploration and research.

A new paradigm probably will necessitate different institutional structures as well. When hearing colleges and universities establish Deaf Studies departments, they are frequently complicated by overlapping interests in audiology and speech, education, and interpreting. Foreign language departments are often seen as guideposts for ASL and Deaf Studies departments; however, the model falls short in practice. ASL and Deaf Studies departments strive to keep their academic focus strictly on the group of Deaf people who use ASL as their primary language. As such, they do not include other deaf people who use other languages and have other belief systems. By contrast, in a French department at a liberal arts college, a serious student would expect, and get, courses covering the language, literature, and culture of all of the peoples who speak French (e.g., people in France, Africa, and Tahiti) regardless of geography, race, or ideology. In addition, some departments are moving toward study of the ways that languages are used in the world—for instance, in border interactions of French with Arabic.

Where Deaf Studies departments have modeled themselves on programs geared to specific subsets of people such as Women’s Studies, American Studies, Black Studies, or Disability Studies they have diverged in several ways that reveal the activist roots from which they have sprung. Women’s Studies include the broad spectrum of ways women live throughout the world regardless of race, sexual preference, gender expression, class, or geography. The field today is not devoted exclusively to women known as feminist leaders. And Disability Studies focuses on the complex array of issues that influence the identity
and lives of people with all types of disabilities. At different times, Deaf Studies departments have tried to emulate aspects of these more established university departments and programs, but we have yet to find one paradigm that fits the needs of the emerging academic field of inquiry into Deaf communities.

Primary research on more kinds of deaf people as well as nuanced study of variations within communities of deaf people will inspire creation of a larger, multifaceted paradigm. At the same time, a theoretical exploration of an interdisciplinary new paradigm may clarify primary research projects. Forthcoming papers will address both areas. Building scholarly contributions based on this new direction is a massive undertaking for future scholarship; we hope many scholars will join in this undertaking and contribute significantly to the wider body of knowledge of cultures and communities in this era of globalization.

References


Received November 14, 2008; revisions received April 27, 2009; accepted June 11, 2009.