

# *Deaf Geographies: Spaces of Ownership and Other Real and Imaginary Places*

*... or what does Geography look like in Deaf hands.*

As people never tire of telling me, Geography and Deaf Studies do not, at first, appear to be particularly natural bed fellows. Indeed, I would never have associated them myself if it had not been for the ESRC's funding programme which required me to go through a second masters degree and the vagaries of departmental loyalties that eventually pushed me towards the geographical sciences.

One of the reasons for this apparent failure to meet is the approach that each has, so far, taken to the other. Geographers have, ignored what Deaf culture has to offer and targeted deaf people as a source for evidence within a wider category of "disability geographies". The issues that have interested them are: Deaf access to environments, marginalisation of young Deaf people and the performance of Deaf identities. However, for all its post-colonial reflexivity, geography as a discipline has never recognised Deaf people's potential contribution to Geography, or allowed for Deaf discourses to affect geography itself.

Similarly, Deaf studies has paid lip service to 'geography' by noting the regional, national and global distributions of Deaf culture and the roles of each in the global Deaf community. However, despite the rise in Deaf-centred evocations of concepts such as: colonialism, nationhood, space and territory and performed identities, all debates that would otherwise flatter a mainstream human geography department, Deaf studies has not yet engaged seriously with Geographical thinking.

## *Deaf Geographies*

There is clear evidence that considerable empowerment is available to both disciplines through a constructive encounter which should yield, not a *geography of Deaf people*, but a *Deaf geography*. For Geography, this represents an opportunity that matches those offered by post-colonial and feminist academic enquiry; to explore what the discipline looks like 'through new eyes', problematising and re-structuring geographical theory from a completely novel starting-point. For Deaf people, it represents the adoption of a powerful, if unfamiliar set of analytical tools that have been developed and honed in the familiarly dangerous borderlands between the political and academic agendas of post-structuralism, post-essentialism, identity politics, post-modernism, and post-rationalism.

## *Spaces*

The ideal place to begin this exploration of a Deaf geography is through the concept of space. Immediately, this raises a number of questions, not least of which is how we might sign 'space'. Space, as traditionally signed with the movement of the elbows is

appropriate for the space one might need in a crush of people; for example in a lift. However, to describe a open, countryside space a different sign is needed, a third sign to describe outer space, a fourth sign to depict personal comfort space, a fifth to designate a parking space and a sixth to show the delimited space of a room. Furthermore, these are only the signs for physically delimitable spaces, figurative space is altogether different: space to think can be expressed in several different ways, spaces of independence are different again as are virtual and interactive spaces.

Interestingly, by forcing a more full description, Deaf language here has immediately defused one of the big debates that frames the last 100 years of geographical thinking; the question of what space actually is. Long ago, Geographers believed that space was simply a quantifiable and describable set of dimensions. For example: if a room measured five metres by 5 metres, it contained twenty-five square metres of space. The challenge for geographers was to map space, to describe it, to chart it and count it and divide it up and, thereby, conquer it. However, this thinking was forced to change. Here's why:

Imagine me sitting at my desk. Immediately in front of me sits my computer screen, with the keyboard below and the mouse to the right. A little further away sits a pad of paper that I use to write notes and a stack of books and right at the back of the desk, where I can reach it if I stretch, sits a stack of abandoned papers and notes that I haven't looked at in a while. Behind me, on the other side of the room, is a cupboard that contains the coffee.

Now, despite the fact that it's further away I use that cupboard, and the floor from my desk to it and back more than I use the 'abandoned papers' corner of my desk. In fact, I use the corridor outside and the kitchen downstairs more too. Although, I don't use all of the kitchen, there are several cupboards that I've never opened. And I don't use all of the corridor, because I stop where the door goes to the stairs and never go down the far end.

As part of my job I also move around the university. I work here and in geography and I use the social sciences and geography libraries so my daily working space is a mixture of those two departments and doesn't include somewhere like psychology which, even though it's physically closer than geography, seems a lot further away because I don't know the department and I never go there.

So spaces *can* be described in terms of simple surface areas where everything appears equal but this is not how we use them. What actually happens is that, as we live, we give different importances to different spaces. We form mental habits about spaces and, as we do things, there is a very real sense in which we create spaces. (More information on this is available in work by Henri Lefebvre)

A good example of this is the White Hart, the Scream pub on Park road. If you went in there, you could measure the pub and describe its dimensions. However, each part of the pub is used for different things. Some people will go to the pub most evenings creating a friendship space, or an isolation space in which they adopt particular mindsets and behaviours. Others will only go to the pub on a football night to watch the match. On those evenings they help to create a football-watching space within sight of the big screen which is usually, otherwise ignored. On a Thursday evening,

Deaf people and hearing signers go to the pub. Sitting around in a circle, they create a Deaf space through sign language communication.

From time to time, these created spaces clash. Deaf people will arrive at the same time as a football match. At those times, not only do you see Deaf people trying to create a Deaf space within a football crowd, but you also see football supporters wandering bewildered into the Deaf space. It is at times like these that different nature of these different spaces becomes most apparent.

### *Deaf space: Where from?*

So, if space is not something that's simply static but produced by what we do, where does Deaf space come from? Well, a good way to approach this question is to recognise that we create spaces as contexts that allow us to do something. A football-watching space is created to allow people to watch football with all of the appropriate cultural attachments: permission to shout, emotional excitement, the importance of particular colours, shared traditions of support, a common memory of past games and so on. So, a Deaf space would be a space created in order to allow people to be Deaf with all the tradition and culture that that involves.

Where does this come from? Well, the most obvious answer is that it comes from the communicative divide that separates Deaf people from hearing people because of the different mediums used by each group's natural language. However, even this is not particularly cut and dried. Firstly, whilst Deaf people cannot hear, this does not mean that they are entirely cut off from hearing culture and communication. Secondly, it is possible for hearing people to access Deaf information through sign language albeit not with the same cognitive, experiential or cognitive background as Deaf people. Thirdly, there are all kinds of 'marginal' identities. Not marginal in terms of 'being on the edge' but marginal through their position along the hearing/Deaf threshold: Interpreters, CODAs, and even those who are in the process of migrating from one side to the other or floating between the two: ex-oral deaf people, hearing researchers and so on.

With culture being transmitted through communication, the Deaf/hearing communicative divide is certainly one key element leading to the emergence of Deaf space. However, we only need to consider the situation of non-signing, 'deaf' people to see that it is not the only one. A further element is needed to define where Deaf space really comes from and what it is.

A key to this is to look back at the historical development of Deaf space, something that I'm doing in my PhD. Prior to the emergence of Deaf schools and the communicative spaces that Deaf people created within Deaf schools, there was a clear distinction between Deaf people who lives in isolation and those who lives either as a part of a Deaf family, or within a naturally emerging Deaf community in a city or a region with a high enough number of Deaf people. It is this Deaf 'association' that is a further key to the emergence of Deaf space.

## *Spaces of Ownership*

Where does Deaf association come from? It comes from the ability to communicate with other Deaf people in sign language. Where does sign language come from? It comes from the natural interaction of Deaf people. Where does all this happen? In Deaf spaces. How are the Deaf spaces generated? Through this communicative interaction. Clearly, all of these elements are associated and key into each other driving what could be called a Deaf ‘ecosystem’ in which every part relies on every other part.

Whilst I don’t want to take too much time to do it here, this argument has links to my own research work on BSL ownership, which examines the elements that lead to the creation of a healthy Deaf ecosystem. For the sake of brevity, the principle finding of that research is that Deaf ownership of BSL is not merely a political “line in the sand” but rather an ontological necessity that guarantees the well-being of the Deaf community through *natural* Deaf control of the language, and thus of the very foundation of the holistic, spontaneous process that gives rise to Deafhood itself. If Space is a context in which you can *do* something, then Deaf space is a context in which you can *do Deaf* with all that it entails.

Clearly then, the crucial defining element of Deaf space is what fills it: Deaf language, leading to Deaf community, leading to Deaf culture, leading to Deaf stories and folklore, leading to Deaf history, leading to Deaf theory and beliefs. All of this is the defining content of Deaf space summed up beautifully in the traditional sign that shows belonging to a natural and healthy being-Deaf; DEAF THEIRS.

### *Deaf space: Where is it?*

However, having explored where Deaf space comes from and defined the content of Deaf space as DEAF THEIRS space, the question still remains: Where is Deaf space?

Actually, there is no easy answer to this, and this is where things become a little more complicated. Think again of the Deaf communicative circle in the White Hart: The Deaf space is created through communication along with its cultural mores, traditions and so on intact. However, when Deaf people leave the pub and go to their separate homes, the Deaf space disappears again. Deaf space appears and disappears as deaf people communicate with each other and create those spaces that allow them to be Deaf. Mind you, the same happens to the football-watching space; that ‘pocket’ of space that was created to allow people to watch football is gone and will only re-emerge at the date of the next fixture.

So, if Deaf space keeps appearing and disappearing, where is this DEAF THEIRS content that fills it? It is stored in the minds of Deaf people; in the form of language, habits, traditions and memories. When Deaf people meet up and create a communicative space, these ingredients are brought out to structure and fill it. These ingredients are not renegotiated each time Deaf people meet up, they have already

been created, agreed upon, practised and developed through countless previous Deaf interactions extending back into history.

There are two implications of this: Firstly, this cultural content of Deaf space must be learned by new arrivals into the Deaf community, including the ability to access the information through sign language itself. Secondly, the whole ecosystem assembly of Deaf space and its cultural content is constantly shifting as it is added to and adapted each time Deaf people meet. Although it would be stretching the remit of this talk to examine questions that surround both of these assertions, it is interesting to consider that both of these processes are variably regulated by the same issues of Deaf *naturalness* that surround Deaf ownership (one really good example of this in practice is Donna and Paddy's research into Deaf education... ask them about the differences between Deaf and hearing controlled spaces in the classroom).

## *Spaces of Knowledge*

So, having established the mechanisms that lead to the creation and maintenance of Deaf space and the preservation of its contents within the minds of Deaf people, and outlined some of the further debates surrounding each aspect of this. It is time to give an example of this in practice.

For this, we can turn to the evolution of Deaf spaces within Deaf schooling networks. We know about the history of the school that was set up in Paris. However, less is explicitly known about the Deaf spaces that were carved out over time as Deaf people within the school interacted incorporating language and culture from the surrounding Paris Deaf community and developing their own according to the principles of Deaf naturalness. These spaces did not only develop within the Paris school, but also within other Deaf schools; in Bordeaux for example, and in the United States and in the networks and Deaf communities between and beyond the schools.

The content of these Deaf spaces, the processes that govern their creation and maintenance and an understanding of the connections between them forms an ensemble that we might call 'Deaf knowledge' (this is only a first stab at defining what Deaf knowledge is). Again we find this loop: Deaf knowledge is what makes possible Deaf space, but Deaf space makes Deaf knowledge possible. This means that Deaf thinking doesn't fully make sense unless it is seen in the context of Deaf space.

There are two other points that are also worth mentioning here. The first is that different areas of the Deaf knowledge network show different forms of Deaf space and Deaf space content. Of course, this might be natural (there is, after all, nothing that says that all natural Deaf spaces will be the same, only that they will be similarly natural) but it could also be through non-Deaf interference in Deaf spaces, which has led to their structure or content changing.

## *Imaginary Places*

However, a second point exists that is worth exploring. If, as we previously suggested, Deaf space is created as Deaf people interact, and filled with Deaf knowledge that is

held in the minds of Deaf people. This Deaf knowledge includes information about different spaces and the network itself and the role that each place or connection plays.

A good example of this is the Deaf spaces connected to Deaf schools. We have seen before that the bricks and walls and doors and windows are not Deaf space. However, we know that a lot of Deaf people see Deaf schools as the place where they first encountered Deaf spaces; learning sign language and the culture that allows them to be Deaf. What we have to accept though, is that if the buildings themselves are not part of Deaf space, the Deaf spaces linked to those schools are actually built up through the thousands of memories that Deaf people have of what happened there.

## *Place*

This is a process that, in geography, is called 'place' and it seems to work like this: Deaf people create Deaf space through interaction. This space is filled with previously agreed culture, history, language and so on that are held in the memories of Deaf people themselves. As Deaf people continue to interact, more memories are made. However, these new memories also include information about the place where they are made. When Deaf people stop interacting and the Deaf space closes up again, these memories are stored back in Deaf people's minds to be brought out again next time there is a Deaf space but because they are tangled up with particular places, these places remain part of Deaf imagination.

That's why this section is called 'imaginary places'. Deaf spaces are created by the possibility of being Deaf. However, the content of those spaces is fully imaginary. That doesn't mean that it doesn't exist but that what fills those spaces actually only exists in the memories and imaginations of Deaf people themselves.

However, this gives us a bit of a problem because it's not only Deaf people who have memories about Deaf schools. Hearing people: teachers, doctors, audiologists, speech therapists etc. all go through the same processes. However, since they are not Deaf, the space that they create and the places that they remember are not the same as those of Deaf people.

## *Real places*

Of course, what this does is to set up differently imagined places whose claims to validity immediately call into play the very knowledge-creation processes that are in question. If Deaf knowledges and the structures that lead to them are created within Deaf spaces and the same is true for non-Deaf knowledges, it is hard to see how either will acknowledge the other's claim to validity.

... lead into discussion concerning how useful this is as a way of exploring Deaf culture and, given this presentation of geographical theory, how useful this might be if it was taken by Deaf people and transformed into a *Deaf Geography*.