

“Deafscapes: The Landscape and Heritage of the Deaf world” Institute of British Geographers Annual Conference: London, Sept 2nd 2005.

Good morning, I'm please to be here, and pleased to be able to present this paper into a forum concerned with “Inclusion and Diversity”.

This paper concentrates on just those issues. However, not necessarily from the point of view that you might expect. It is about inclusion, yes... and diversity too... but this is not a paper describing the geographies of a marginal group... instead, it questions the extent to which our lives are made easier by having marginal categories in which we can leave people and theories of marginalization with which to analyze them... and an open question about what might happen if we take a traditionally marginalized group and include them at the heart of our theory.

The group in question is Deaf people. I begin by suggesting that there is much more to the situation of Deaf people than we have been aware of and that we have been largely unable to see because of our assumption that Deaf people form a homogenous group that belong to the category “disabled”. I then move on to explore a number of theoretical frameworks that we could use to contain the new evidence of Deaf people. At the end I would welcome any feedback and suggestions of theoretical areas that would be of benefit to this study.

Traditional history

Initially then, I begin by presenting two different versions of Deaf history.

The first is straightforward and begins with small numbers of isolated deaf individuals scattered randomly and thinly across a pre-industrial landscape in which they cope as best they can within their own communities, employed in physical labour and interacting with others through ad-hoc gestures. This situation continues until just after the Enlightenment at which point, from about the mid 18th century, hot-spots of education gradually begin to appear all over Northern Europe, particularly in France where a large school in Paris, founded just after the Revolution, becomes continental Europe's premier centre for Deaf education, spawning other schools throughout Europe and North America.

The education offered by these schools at the time is mostly taught by priests, and based on Christian teaching. However, because of this, it has to include some form of communication training in order to allow the Deaf children to access information. In some schools, lip reading and speech is promoted. In others, formal sign languages are invented and taught to the children. From the early 19th century, as pedagogical discourses change, we see a rise in medical and technological interventions and a gradual shift in methods as the aim of the education shifts away from the need to teach the gospel and towards the more urgently felt need to integrate Deaf people into society. By the end of the 19th century, religious teaching has mostly given way to academic and vocational training and sign language has largely been replaced by speech training and lip-reading. Furthering this, the 20th century then sees technological and medical advances which allow for early intervention aimed at restoring physical hearing and by the end of the 20th century, the situation of Deaf people has actually come full circle integrating them back into society as individuals... However, this time with effective communication.

Deaf history of Deaf

However, there is an alternative deaf history that is utterly different.

This history begins with an indication that whilst isolation might have been the fate of some Deaf people, fully developed communities of Deaf people existed over 2000 years ago who used sign language for all parts of everyday life including philosophical argument, technical explanation, teaching and business. Given that only 1 in 1000 people are actually born Deaf it is hard to see how sign languages that sophisticated might have evolved. However, the factor that is often

forgotten is the ingredient of Deaf families, some of whom show over 200 years of uninterrupted Deafness. There is no doubt at all that these families represent the heartland in which sign language communities originally developed, drawing in other Deaf people, and even sometimes hearing people.

It is this crucial ability of the Deaf community to pass on sign language and culture to subsequent generations which allows the development of what we find. Instead of isolated Deaf individuals, we actually find extensive networks of Deaf communities extending across Europe, the Middle East and North America, which have little to do with the hearing world, but are constructed independently, according to factors within the Deaf world. Resembling more a series of interconnected nodes, more like a synaptic map of the brain than a modern territorial map, this landscape exists, not as the hearing world simply 'replicated in sign language' but as an entirely separate landscape in which Deaf people live, dipping into largely foreign, hearing worlds only when they chose.

The nature of the Deafscape

It is worth pausing for a moment to consider the nature of this historical *Deafscape* and those who inhabited it

Firstly, it was intangible and separated from the hearing world through a communicative divide, its spaces were those of interaction through sign language and the traditions and cultural memories that are held by Deaf people and performed when they come together. Its loci were indigenous sign language communities: its borders, the relationships and associations between those communities; its concentrations, distribution and pathways largely based on the same geographies of travel that produced the dialect continua in Ancient Europe and events that particularly impacted Deaf people.

Its inhabitants, therefore, were not simply people with a measure of hearing loss, but those who can access a sign language world. Deaf families at the core, the deaf (or hearing) children of these families, other deaf people close enough to be drawn in... and, in several cases, substantial numbers of hearing people who interacted with Deaf people on a daily basis and grow up knowing sign language.

Thirdly, within the Deafscape, Deaf people were not disabled. Not only that but, viewing themselves as an inevitably 'visual' people, with a distinct cognitive development based on visual and spatial thinking, they portrayed themselves as part of an entirely different order of nature. Linking sign language, Deaf space and ideas of naturalness together into a metaphysics of health and community well being, they resembled much more a first-nation than they do a modern individualistic community.

The Deafscape through Deaf education

So... what effect did Deaf education have on this? Well, clearly, the spaces into which the Deaf schools were established were already criss-crossed by this Deafscape... particular urban centres having their own extant Deaf communities. Thus, their creation had an effect rather like placing a magnet under a tray of iron filings, exerting a magnetic attraction upon the Deafscape, pulling young Deaf people from multiple communities into a relatively few specific centres and concentrating all of the interconnected filaments of the Deafscape around particular focal points.

To begin with, the effects of this were tremendously exciting. With little initial teacher interference outside of the classroom Deaf people were free to craft these schools into extraordinarily strong Deaf spaces. Within 50 years the schools became virtual capital cities of the Deafscape populated by strong, educated Deaf people involved in art and politics who began to share Deaf thinking with the outside world. The schools themselves became established landmarks of the Deafscape, central nodes in communicative networks based around increasingly standardised sign languages

and physical Deaf 'places', locations invested with Deaf history and significance.

However, there was a catch. Whilst the ancient Deafscape networks outside of the schools did not disappear, their importance was weakened by these new centralised school networks. This was not a problem whilst Deaf people were allowed to simply 'annexe' the school spaces and networks whilst preserving the original Deafscape metaphysics. However, it was not long before it became apparent that the discursive systems through which the schools had been set up were not those of Deaf people themselves, but rather those of a hearing society which was increasingly perceiving Deaf people as a target for medical and pedagogical intervention. In the latter half of the 19th century, as these policies were applied with increasing force, the areas of the Deafscape that had twisted themselves around the spaces of the schools were most heavily impacted. Sign languages were banned and interactive spaces were controlled and watched.

However, the Deafscape did not die away... By the early 20th century, it was again forced to reconfigure itself around the interactive spaces of Deaf communities or Deaf families. However, the schools retained a central role. Despite the fact that the only interactive spaces available to students within Deaf schools were those carved out behind teachers' backs, below the eye-line of desks or in the candle-lit spaces under the blankets of the beds, it was in these clandestine spaces that non-Deaf family children could be taught sign language and Deaf culture and so access the Deafscape... By the mid and late 20th century, the schools had become principle battle grounds for control over Deaf people... those where sufficient observation and control could be maintained largely produced students who could not sign and considered themselves disabled hearing people... those where sufficient Deaf space could be carved out produced students who could sign, and so could access and form the future Deafscape...

Which brings us up to the present day... The Deafscape has continued to evolve in a form that is largely fragmented along lines described by hearing policies. In the background there is still a thin tissue of Deaf families and spontaneous Deaf communities... However, those regions characterised by strong oral teaching have become virtual wastelands as those attending Deaf schools there often leave without being able to sign and so lose the ability to access the Deafscape. Others, where the primary policy is integration, preserve a Deafscape that is entangled with the hearing world. Others, where Deaf people have traditionally remained segregated from a hearing population, have found it easier to preserve the strongly Deaf spaces that characterise a school-based Deafscape.

Exploring the Deafscape

So, what does all of this tell us? Well firstly, it tells us that there is an enormously interesting world out there that we are only beginning to identify and explore... I'll come to that in a moment... However, more fundamentally, it suggests to me that we haven't seen the world of Deaf people, because we've looked past it assuming that we're actually looking at something else...

Part of the reason for this, I think, is our word 'deaf'... Yves Delaporte has described the whole of Deaf history as the 'history of a word', and to an extent he is right. Deaf history is shaped by the assumption that all people characterised by some form of (particularly profound) hearing loss can be treated as the same... Thus, when we find evidence of sign language, Deaf culture, Deaf performance literature and so on... we automatically try to fit it into a disability framework or consign it to a literature on marginal identities... (if you're interested in looking into this further, you can reference the paper that myself and two colleagues presented here last year which will be coming out in Environment and Planning A).

However, if we are prepared to accept a Deaf-centred view, we are presented with the further challenge of trying to understand it through familiar frameworks...

Cultural landscapes

Do you, for example, analyse the Deafscape as a cultural landscape? It is subject to differing representations... intricately constructed, held in memory and must be performed to exist. It bears a striking resemblance to the metaphysical landscapes of indigenous communities, linking language and space together with ideas of naturalness. It has also been heavily commodified... large numbers of sign language 'tourists' visit every year stripping out the language as a cultural icon to be used in everything from performance, church worship and infant potty training. It is intrinsically linked to Deaf people's identities and feelings of home... yes, it could well fit into a cultural landscape model.

However, the evidence also challenges a cultural landscape model... How do we describe a landscape whose only physical form is the potential of a Deaf or hearing body, but which is actually constituted by intangible spaces of sign language interaction? How do we deal with the fact that the imaginative aspect of the landscape is not an overcoding, or interpretation of a physical schema but actually the landscape itself? Do we take seriously Deaf claims that their culture is under threat and seek to maintain it through heritage attention?... if we do, do we join Deaf people in condemning medical intervention, speech training and integrated schooling as forms of eugenics, cultural genocide and Holocaust?

Post-colonialism and development

So... instead, maybe you try to analyse the Deafscape within a post-colonial and development model? Populated by subalterns who cannot make their voices heard... colonised by powers who, for whatever reason, impose their own imaginations of the subaltern population? Characterised by notions of progress imposed from outside? Mined for economic potential in medical, educational and linguistic fields? Subject to development intervention by well-meaning philanthropic organisations?... yes, it could fit into a post-colonial model too...

However, there are also problems here ... How do we equate the Deafscape ideas of inevitability and naturalness with Spivak's strategic essentialism as a fictionally adopted political tool? How do we model the colonisation of Deaf people when they emerge from within every people group on the planet?

Nationalism and territory

Or, do you try a nationalism and territory-based model? Deaf people, as a linguistic minority, possibly even an indigenous people group, oppressed by an occupying power for over 200 years, wielding their own history and culture as iconic weapons of war, attempting to secure sovereignty through a separatist, utopian state... again, yes, you could apply a nationalism model... If it weren't for the fact that Deaf people appear to be both diasporic and indigenous, non-territorial and yet anchored in a fundamental Deaf space, non-racial and yet physically predisposed, defined by individual sign language and yet part of an international Deaf community.

Problematizing models

Simplistic as these presentations are... they clearly illustrate the possibility of understanding the Deafscape and Deaf people through frameworks that are not based in disability. They also demonstrate the considerable power that Deaf evidence has in problematising and reconfiguring analytical frameworks... However, it is in seeking to make peace with this final conclusion that we stumble, as it were, at the last fence. The reason for this is that, in our modern minds, no matter how we stack the evidence, the Deafscape must always carry the stigma of disability and therefore is something which most of us would choose to see eradicated rather than preserved.

However, we position it, we cannot simply dismiss the evidence of the Deafscape or disqualify it unless it is by reference to larger discursive systems than I have outlined. On the other hand, we cannot simply accept the Deafscape without accepting the considerable disruption that it causes to our comfortable ways of thinking. And so mindful of the discomfort this might cause, I'm afraid

that it is in this no-man's land that I must end.