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Since the abstract submission I have retitled and oriented this paper, I hope that this renders more fitting to the spirit of the Centre for Imaginative Ethnography meetings at the Casa Dranguet. This is my attempt to amplify/gather some of the most interesting intersectional solidarities I've had the privilege to observe and learn about over the past few years...so...new title:

What I learned about Linguistic Anthropology, Indigenous Decolonization Projects and Queer Safe Space from Deaf Culture

I am the shittiest finger-speller in class. I have signed up for a five week intensive beginner's class in ASL at Vancouver Community College and unbeknownst to me, before the class even began, the youtube generation (of which the class of 18 is predominantly comprised) has latched onto the sign alphabet like elementary school girls to pig latin. When I manage to grasp the letters a classmate signs to me, I still have considerable trouble assembling them into a full word before the signer in question is onto the next thing. My letters are awkwardly stamped and laboured. Consistent with trends in who studies ASL, the class is dominated by young women. There are two guys. About half have the intention of continuing into the full time ASL program at the college to eventually move into a full time sign language interpretation program. Farsi, Urdu, Hindi, English, Spanish, French, Mandarin, Greek, Japanese, Italian and German are also spoken by members of the class.

From the first moments of class, our teacher, establishes the classroom as Deaf space. He is profoundly deaf and in common with approximately 90% of deaf children, he was born to an predominantly hearing family, in a majority hearing world. He first learned S.E.E. (or Signing English exactly) before learning ASL and pursuing a Masters degree at Gallaudet University, the only university expressly for the Deaf in North America. Combining formal sign, gesture and humour he is able to communicate this life history, as well as the firm point that *this is immersion* in the first few minutes of class: open your eyes and get ready for a new relationship with your body, the bodies of others, and the location from which, and *in which*, you speak.

My interest in Deaf Culture began a couple of years before the class. Douglas College, where I have a regular faculty appointment in the Department of Anthropology is also home to the largest and oldest Sign Language Interpreter training program in BC. As a result it is not uncommon to see people discussing in sign in the hallways, or to have sign language interpretation at college events,

or even live interpretation as you teach (though transcription is more common). A happenstance reading of Andrew Solomon's book *Far From the Tree* which addresses the gap between deaf children and their hearing parents spurred on my interest in Deaf Cultures and signed language peoples.

I started to incorporate material on signed languages and Deaf Culture into my Intro Anthropology classes about three years ago. I positioned this material in our units on linguistic anthropology attempting holism with nods to biological, historical, and cultural influences on the composition of Deaf Cultures. Students were introduced to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis — which, so far as I have read, is uncontested in Deaf Studies literature—and are asked to step outside the predominant audistic deafness-as-disability paradigm.

In these classes we would talk about the range of global signed languages and history of deaf education in Canada and the US including the role of A.G. Bell in the oralist movement that forcibly deprived many deaf people of language in the name of normalization and assimilation. I would then screen portions of the documentary *Sound and Fury* that chronicles the struggle of an extended family with deaf and hearing members to come to terms with the promises and threats presented to Deaf Culture by the cochlear implant. These classes opened up whole new worlds to me as more and more students began to approach me to talk about their experiences of being-in-the-world as deaf or hard of hearing, or the experiences of family members. “Nobody talks about this outside of our community” I was told.

On account of this work I was invited to give a lecture on *Audism, Deaf Culture and Anthropology* for an interdisciplinary humanities course. Starting to feel like a bit of an anthropological imposter under the dictate of “nothing about us without us” I arranged for the production of a roundtable discussion style film with colleagues: Nigel Howard, an instructor in the sign language interpretation program who has been profoundly deaf from birth, and who now communicates in seven sign languages; Bill Angelbeck, a Cultural Archaeologist who grew up with ASL as a first language; Tyler Churchman a professional ASL interpreter; and Dwayne Thornhill, our college's all purpose film and sound man. The film—which I am happy to share with anyone who is interested after the conference—contains a segmented conversation about anthropological theories on the place of signed languages in the evolution of language; debunking audism and linguisticism—audism is the pervasive belief that communicating and fitting in with the norms of the hearing is best or simply; linguisticism is the idea that some languages are superior to others, and includes the false belief that ASL contributes to difficulties in learning English—; we also talk about the impacts of technological change upon Deaf Culture concentrating upon the bio-ethical and cultural politics of cochlear implants; affinities between the subordinated histories and languages of SLP's and

Indigenous peoples; and the rise of interest in ASL in queer youth culture. *Yes, all this before I could finger spell my name.*

So, having internalized, as a student, and repeated, ad nauseam, as an instructor, the cultural anthropology gospel that cultural knowledge will always be incomplete in translation, here I was in ASL intro attempting to gain some competence: trying and failing to finger spell. I am embarrassed to admit how elated I am, when, in the second week of class (which runs five hours/day five days a week) fingerspelling is banned excepting proper nouns for which there exist no independent signs. After all, fingerspelling is a tool for communicating with native English speakers: a blunt English pidgin tool, not sign. Relieved of the burden of trying to simultaneously spell in English and learn sign, I am soon thrust more totally into another challenge: deciphering the difference between generating and reading garbled sign with my classmates and reading and *being read* by them - in the Ru Paul sense of the word.

In Vancouver at least, Queer ASL classes are proliferating. These classes contain a basic introduction to ASL with a more expansive vocabulary for gender and sexuality terminology than most introductory language courses. Safe space for LGBTQ2S students is fostered over the duration of these courses. This is both a part of an active effort to attract more queer folk into sign language interpretation and as a recognition of a solidarity: audism is to deaf peoples as heterosexism is to Queer communities. At least in the Vancouver deaf community “are you straight or gay?” is asked with the same nonchalance as “what is your name?” This is the real world of intersectional politics and the questions come fast and furious. Meanwhile, in ASL, I am stumbling through: “what is your name?” “What are your hobbies?” “Where do you live?” And other basics of intro language. I have always considered myself fairly proficient at reading body language (perhaps a curse more often than a blessing), but now I have to figure out how to shut that visual stimulus off to focus on the grammar of ASL that demands a more controlled embodiment, where my eyebrows ask questions and I always need to know where I am in space and place in order to communicate.

Paddy Ladd, has argued that the languages of Sign Language Peoples (SLP's), like the languages of many indigenous peoples, are decidedly spatial and vital to the maintenance of a thriving Deaf Community. Ladd is a well-known Deaf Studies activist who has fostered the Deafhood and Deaf Gain movements that emphasize the unique insights into the human condition offered by Deaf ontologies and the defence of the rights of the deaf to define their own educational and technological destinies. Further, these movements seek broadspread recognition of, and support for, Deaf Culture outside the disability paradigm. Ladd alongside geographer Mike Gulliver and linguist Sarah Batterbury, have even gone so far as to argue, that SLP's might be beneficially considered as First Peoples under the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. While I am unconvinced by the argument for UNDRIP inclusion, I was nonetheless drawn into the parallels

and gaps traced by the authors: contrary to the audistic norms of society and much of the normalization drive of cochlear implant proponents, Deaf Pride, Deaf Gain and Deafhood activists insist that deafness not be seen as deprivation and upon the right *to not be implanted*; contrary to the settler-colonial norms of Canadian society and the assimilationist drive of residential schools, enfranchisement under the Indian Act, and forced extraction led economic modernization, indigenous peoples across Canada fight for the right to self-determination and the recognition of dual sovereignty.

While experiences of boarding/residential schools have been dramatically different for deaf and indigenous children, the choices forced upon parents to pursue either a fully colonial education, an enclaved cultural and linguistic “traditional” education, or bi-lingual/bi-cultural education (where possible/available) has been a longstanding fraught terrain. Historically, the dominant experience of both SLP’s and First Nations in Canada of educational mainstreaming has been a colonial one (Ladd et al 2007:2904). Negotiating complex allegiances to multiple communities both as a part of personal and familial identity and interdependence is a common experience for both SLP’s and many indigenous peoples in Canada.

However, this is not just a parallel between two solitudes: the banning and/or interruption of transmission of signed languages has also been a colonial instrument in indigenous communities, a means of curtailing the power of people fluent in indigenous signed languages of Turtle Island. Plains Sign Language (PSL), developed by deaf and hearing Dakota, Cree and Blackfoot once stretched in use from the North Saskatchewan River in Canada to the Rio Grande in Mexico; Plateau Sign Language was developed as a mother tongue to Deaf indigenous peoples of the Northwest Plateau including Central and Southeastern British Columbia and was used by Salish, Sa-hap-tin , Ktunaxa (tu-na-Ha) and other plateau peoples in trade and contact; and finally Inuit Sign Language has been in use for centuries, though it is currently considered threatened by the spread of ASL and LSQ amongst Deaf Inuit. According to University of Calgary linguist Darin Flynn, it is currently a mother tongue to fewer than 40 Deaf and 80 hearing Inuit who are widely dispersed across Inuit territories but is gradually being displaced by ASL and LSQ. To complicate matters further, we should also consider the role of vocational signed languages that were crucial to the operations of many settler-colonial industries, such as canneries, where sign pidgins were employed by working classes including Salishan, Cantonese, Japanese and English speakers to coordinate labour.

At it’s most compelling points to me, the work of Ladd, Batterbury and Gulliver asserts that the spatial assumptions of disability-based geographies presently completely fail to perceive the visio-spatial-tactile, historical, culturo-linguistic nature of SLPs (2007: 2899) and all that they share in common with the colonial experiences of indigenous peoples. English and other spoken colonial

languages are presented as blunt de-territorialized linguistic tools, while signed and indigenous languages are the very foundation of culture and grounded community connection. “Deaf narratives share the same vocabulary, speaking of: ‘nativeness’, ‘genocide’, ‘Deaf Nations’, ‘lost generations’, ‘cultural holism’, and ‘linguistic and cultural ownership’” (Ladd, 2003). Moreover in signed languages place bound vocabulary proliferates.

So, to conclude— what is the saying about the tough problems being like cold baths: “its good to get in out as quickly as possible”—I have tried to map here some historical and emergent intersectional solidarities between indigenous, Deaf and queer communities that I think should be of interest to anthropologists, linguistic, and otherwise. But take this all with a grain of salt, I might have it all wrong, it is, after all, coming from the shittiest finger-speller in class. (Sign thank you).

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