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Deaf Geographies

Deaf Geographies exist at the meeting point between Deaf Studies and Human Geography. They describe how society and social knowledge are built up as embodied humans encounter their environment and each other, produce interactive spaces through which they socialise and create/share knowledge, and then begin to shape those spaces into their environment. Deaf Geographies treat all spaces as equal, and so represents a powerful critical tool that Deaf Studies can use to validate Deaf realities, and explore the underlying power dynamics that shape environmental, social, cultural and physical norms.

For over 200 years, commentators have been writing about Deaf people's unique relationship with space and each other by using geographical parallels. These have ranged from wondering what a Deaf *country* might look like, through describing Deaf people as a *nation* in their own right, or as *foreigners* in the hearing world, to the idea that Deaf people might find a *homeland* in the semi-permanent spaces of Deaf schools and long-term Deaf families.

For a long time, these were simply metaphors for a Deaf reality. Recently, however, these geographical parallels have been taken up by a group of academics working between Deaf Studies and the academic discipline of Human Geography. The result has been the emergence of a new sub-discipline; Deaf Geographies. Deaf Geographies not only represent a powerful critical tool that Deaf Studies can use to explore and explain Deaf realities, but also provide a bridge across which Deaf Studies and researchers with the Deaf community might travel to establish the unique value of Deaf Studies within more mainstream academic fields.

Until about 30 years ago, the idea of exploring a separate, but equally valid, Deaf geography wouldn't have been possible within Human Geography. Until that time, geographers saw the world as something fixed; a container containing 'people', living in 'places', with different 'cultures'. Between those people and places was a lot of empty 'space'. Geographers' jobs, as they saw it, was to explore, measure, map and describe that world, and to work to make it as accessible as possible to everyone.

In the 1970s, however, geographers began to realise that people don't live in empty space. Instead they live in a constant, rich interaction with their environment; harnessing it to their needs, shaping it through their actions, and being shaped by it. Not only that, but they live with other people who are doing the same, and who are both affected by them, and affect them in turn. This interactive 'production of spaces' has been going on for as long as humanity has been in existence, gradually shaping societies and cultures, and creating things that are taken for granted, like buildings, and cities, and countries, and nations.

Most importantly, what this new human geography began to do was to establish the understanding that there could no longer only be *one* reality. After all, geographers argued, if the starting point for people's experience of their world is their own experience of their surroundings, then since every individual inhabits a body that is at least slightly different from everyone else's body, and has experiences that differ from other people's, then everyone will—effectively—inhabit a *different world*.

It was the idea that realities emerge from embodied experience of the environment and ongoing social interaction that established the validity of a Deaf reality, and opened the door to Deaf Geographies.

Deaf Geographies describe how, by the simple expedient of living out their lives from within visual bodies, rather than hearing ones, *Deaf people produce Deaf spaces.* These Deaf spaces might be small and temporary, like the signing space that exists between some Deaf friends who meet by chance in the street. They might be large but temporary, like a regular Deaf pub gathering. They might be small and more permanent, like the home of a Deaf family. Or as large and as permanent as a Deaf university. But they all have a number of things in common, and in common with hearing spaces.

Firstly, Deaf spaces *exist in time*. The chat in the street may only last for a few seconds, the pub meet longer, the family home longer still, and a university well over a century. But, along with hearing spaces, they exist as events that weave together to form the ongoing activity of humanity in the world.

Second, Deaf spaces *harness a neutral physical world*. It's easy to assume that the world is primarily a 'hearing space' and that Deaf spaces appear in it like little 'Deaf bubbles'. Geographers, however, would say that there is nothing inherent in the world that makes it 'hearing' or 'Deaf' and that it is the actions of people 'being in the world' that makes a space

appear. For example, it is only as a Deaf family produce the spaces of a Deaf family, that the building they live in becomes a Deaf family home. This definition of space means that Deaf and hearing communities have equal rights to harness their environment, and use it to produce their own geographies.

Third, Deaf spaces *progressively shape the physical world*. Even though the physical world isn't inherently 'hearing', those who shape it typically are. This doesn't have to be the case, however. The Deaf chat in the street is unlikely to have any impact on the physical architecture of the street, and the Deaf pub gathering probably only moves around furniture. But the longer a Deaf space goes on, the more likely the space is to establish itself in a physical form. In the case of the Deaf family home, this may only emerge as an adaptation of an otherwise standard 'hearing' house. In the case of a long-term space like the Deaf university, however, control over the environment may be total leading to Deaf-designed buildings.

Finally, Deaf spaces *leave traces in the mind*. The chat in the street may only last a moment but it is remembered by those who took part in it, and also by others who saw it. If the Deaf pub meet becomes a regular occurrence, then it becomes a Deaf 'tradition'. Neighbours of the Deaf family may continue to watch out for Deaf children playing long after the Deaf family has moved out of the street. The international Deaf community may celebrate the Deaf university as a landmark in their global Deaf geography.

Just like their hearing equivalents, Deaf spaces exist in time, harness the physical environment, and gradually create representations in both the physical and mental realms. Unlike their hearing equivalents, however, Deaf spaces are often ignored, or treated as either non-existent, or invalid by the hearing world. Deaf Geographers explore these power-dynamics, through a number of areas of research which validate Deaf spaces and places.

The first of these areas is *embodiment*, and the idea that the starting point for any person's spaces is the way that their body senses and harnesses the environment. Geographers of embodiment describe how the body shapes the spaces that we produce, and how changes in the body might also either affect, or be made to affect our production of space. Because bodies differ, and even those judged to be 'deaf' or 'hearing' show variety, and can show variety from one moment to the next, Deaf Geographers are interested in how terms like 'deaf' and 'hearing' are created as agreed ranges on a continuum of physical ability, and how free Deaf people are to choose to use their body to produce their being-in-the-world in ways that enable, or disable them.

The second area that Deaf Geographers work in broadens the scope of exploration to look at how people work with others to produce *social geographies*. Deaf Geographers explore Deaf people's unique social position as those who live and produce their lives as spaces in both the DEAF-WORLD, and the (sometimes more dominant) HEARING-WORLD. Deaf

Geography is particularly interested in what and where Deaf social geographies emerge and what they look like when they do, in how Deaf spaces are (or are not) accessible to other D/deaf and hearing, and in what happens when Deaf spaces meet hearing-world spaces and begin to describe, explore and/or regulate each other.

The third area of Deaf Geography looks at the development of knowledge that emerges between those who share particular productions of social space. These knowledges might include things as simple as ways of communicating: in Deaf people's case, natural sign languages. But they may also include other heritage: folklore, poetry, art forms, shared social icons and so on. They might, even, include shared representations and value judgements about the space itself; or about how to view that space from inside or outside.

Deaf cultural geographers, then, are interested in how Deaf culture emerges and where it comes from and goes to. They ask questions about how 'porous' spaces are, and how well information and knowledge can flow into and out of Deaf space from the hearing world. They are interested in those who may act as gatekeepers of spaces, or intermediaries between spaces. And they are interested in how Deaf and hearing people represent each other (and each other's spaces) within culture: for example, in film or literature.

While some of those working in Deaf Geographies focus primarily on one or more of these areas, others combine all three to focus on particular fields. For example:

- Historical Deaf Geographies focus on specific historical situations of Deaf space, chart longer-term Deaf spaces and networks, examine the way that Deaf places are authored with meaning, and look at how Deaf spaces have been affected by wider historical events. Some of the earliest works in this area mapped Deaf schools and communities. More recent work has explored the spaces of historical Deaf communities and individuals in more depth.

- Urban Deaf Geographies focus on Deaf people's experience of the city and explore the way in which Deaf people navigate through, or challenge the assumption that the 'normal' inhabitants of a city are hearing.

- Deaf geographies of the built environment study the way in which buildings and other environmental factors in, for example, schools for Deaf children, impact upon the spaces produced there by Deaf staff and students. Related to this is work on 'Deafspace' architectural design, which takes Deaf people's own spaces as a starting point for exploring the notion of a more universal environmental design.

In addition to these more traditional geographical areas of exploration, Deaf people's own unique spatial nature has led to work on:

- The uniquely spatial nature of sign language (paralleling communication geography work)

- International and transnational Deaf networks, gatherings and communication (paralleling nationalist geographies)

- Marginal Deaf identities, and Deaf people as sharing features of indigenous and/or Diasporic groups (paralleling other geographical work on gender, ethnicity, and indigeneity)

- Deaf people's spaces of resistance and repurposing of spaces provided in support of them (paralleling work on geographies of dissent).

In all of these fields, the flow of knowledge is two-way. Deaf Geographers draw on geographical thinking to inform their understanding of the DEAF-WORLD, and contribute back DEAF-GAIN evidence from the Deaf community to develop the wider discipline of Geography.

Further reading:

Batterbury, Sarah., Ladd, Paddy., Gulliver, Mike (2007) Sign Language Peoples as indigenous minorities: implications for research and policy. Environment and Planning A 2007, volume 39, pages 2899 – 2915

Gulliver, M. "The Deafscape; landscape and heritage of the Deaf world", paper presented at the Institute of British Geographers, Royal Geographical Society Annual Conference: London, Sept 2nd 2005. (link – http://mikegulliver.files.wordpress.com/2013/03/deafscapes-ibg-sept-2005.pdf)

Mathews, Elizabeth. S. (2007) «Place, Space and Identity – Using Geography in Deaf Studies». In Deaf Studies Today! 2006: Simply Complex (Conference Proceedings) (Oram, Utah, Utah Valley University.

Valentine, G. & Skelton, T. (2003) Living on the edge: the marginalisation and 'resistance' of D/deaf youth. Environment and Planning A, vol. 35, p. 301-321.

A collection of other papers can be downloaded from http://deafgeographies.wordpress.com/resources/

See Also: *Deaf Studies: Disability Studies Perspective & Controversy, Deaf Studies: Universal Design and Deaf Space, Identity: Deaf Gain, Identity: Transnationalism, Social Patterns: Signing Communities (e.g., Commonwealth, Laurent Clerc Town, Martha's Vineyard)*