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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 socialize and create/share knowledge, and then begin to shape those spaces into their environment. Deaf geographies treat all spaces as equal, and so represent 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 subdiscipline: 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 would not 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 them, were 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 realize that people do not 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 be only 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.

First, Deaf spaces exist in time. The chat in the street may only last for a few seconds, the pub meets 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 is 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 produces 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 is not inherently hearing, those who shape it typically are. This does not 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. Neighbors 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 nonexistent or invalid by the hearing world. Deaf geographers explore these power dynamics through a number of areas of research that validate Deaf spaces and places.

The first of these areas is embodiment, and the idea that the starting point for any person's space is the way that his or her 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 deaf people are free 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. This knowledge 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 judgments 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.

Mike Gulliver and Mary Beth Kitzel

See also Deaf Gain; Deaf Studies; Deaf Studies: Disability Studies Perspective and Controversy; Deaf Studies Programs; DeafSpace; Singing Communities; Transnationalism

Further Readings

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GROUP MEMBERSHIP AND EXCLUSION

Deaf people in the United States formally came together for the first time when schools for the deaf were founded in the 1800s. While the primary goal of these schools was to provide deaf people with educational opportunities, an accidental outcome of these congregations of deaf individuals was the creation of a vibrant Deaf community and a rich Deaf culture. With education, community, and culture, Deaf people were able to lead comfortable lives. For this reason, becoming a member of the Deaf community is considered to be a critical milestone for many Deaf individuals as it affords them an opportunity to discover a lifestyle that is well suited for people like themselves as opposed to enduring a life of possible limitations and challenges.

Although Deaf people have been called "The People of the Eye," the formation and continued existence of the Deaf community go beyond the congregation of individuals who merely share a physical trait—the inability to hear. Rather, Deaf people seek opportunities to be with others who share a similar orientation toward life, one that is visual and without communication restrictions and oppression. To this end, the Deaf community provides its members with political, athletic, social, religious, and literary outlets in a language that is most accessible to them, sign language.

As is true for many communities, language is the fabric that holds community members together. Language is the cement with which communities are built and solidified. Language is the soul of the communities. For Deaf people in the United States, American Sign Language (ASL) is the essence of the Deaf community. In this sense, the Deaf community is best seen as a linguistic community rather than a disability-based group.

Accordingly, the Deaf community revolves around the use of sign language. In this vein, there are many expectations, both explicit and subtle, associated with how sign language should be perceived and how the language is used. Consequently, these expectations have implications for how individuals are welcomed and accepted by others within the Deaf community.

To begin with, Dennis Cokely and Charlotte Baker identified four avenues toward full membership in the Deaf community. These pathways include an appropriate attitude toward and a possession of a linguistic competency in sign language, an audiological condition of being deaf, social relations with other Deaf people, and a political interest in the well-being of the Deaf community. In this sense, people must have the right attitude about what it means to be deaf in order to be fully accepted into the Deaf community. The literature is now becoming rich with descriptions of the kind of attitude that is expected of the members of the Deaf community.

Deaf Studies scholars typically cite sign language as the key element of the Deaf community membership. Thomas Holcomb explained how sign language remains a primary marker of the Deaf community even though today most deaf children attend a public school (as opposed to a residential school placement). Harlan Lane, Richard Pillard, and Ulf Hedberg discussed the communicative, cultural, and emblematic functions of sign language and concluded that they are at the core of Deaf identity. Lane, Robert Hoffmeister, and Ben Bahan described sign language as "The Language of the DEAF-WORLD." Barbara Kannapell argued that only sign language could provide deaf people with 100 percent access to communication due to its visual properties, hence its importance in the Deaf community. Carol Padden provided an additional dimension by explaining that while sign language should be considered a primary cultural marker of the Deaf community, a proper perspective on speech (or what she called a disassociation from speech) is also an important