

The Disabled Academy: The Experiences of Deaf Faculty at Predominantly Hearing Institutions

By Lissa Stapleton

I approach the topic of Deaf faculty as a critical scholar-practitioner who possesses both dominant and subordinate identities that have influenced my journey through the academy and my understanding of what it means to be a faculty member. It is not my race, gender, or sexual orientation that brings me to this topic, but my ability to hear. Because of personal and professional experiences with Deaf communities, my mistakes as a hearing person, the mistakes of others that I have witnessed, and empathizing with the frustrated feelings of Deaf colleagues, this paper was given life.¹ Issues of oppression are experienced on individual, institutional, and systemic levels. Because of my vantage point and experience, I choose here to interrogate the academy as a space that is guilty of perpetuating systemic oppression on an institutional level against faculty who are Deaf.

Scholars have begun to see space as more than just an empty vessel that is randomly filled, but as an intentional environment affected by past and present people, thoughts, values, and cultures.² “There is an important relationship between identity and space,” Razack notes, and he challenges us to examine how space is racialized.³ Similarly, I ask us to also see how space is disabling, particularly in the academy. “Stories are just data with a soul,” Brené Brown stated during a TED Talk, and so my narrative, along with the voices of Deaf faculty, will be weaved together with theory in this paper.⁴ My purpose is not only to shine light on an

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often invisible population within the academy, but to ignite a dialogue about issues of hearing privilege. I start the conversation with three questions: What experiences are Deaf faculty having at predominantly hearing institutions? How can spatial theory help us understand the experiences of Deaf faculty? What does this mean for higher education?

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THE DEAF COMMUNITY

Deaf communities are diverse, complex, and have various cultural nuances. This diversity includes range of hearing loss, cultural connections, methods used to interact with the dominant hearing world, and how Deaf community members identify in regard to their hearing loss. Yet there also is a common history of oppression and discrimination

against all who have or are experiencing hearing loss, particularly within education.⁵ Although oppressive behaviors and systems have not been fully eradicated, through protest, grassroots efforts, and laws, there has been an increasing number of Deaf students navigating the educational pipeline and attending our colleges and universities.⁶ In 1993, the National Center on Education Statistics reported 25,000 Deaf and hard-of-hearing students attending U.S. colleges and universities, mostly public institutions.⁷ A decade later, Schroedel, Watson, and Ashmore estimated the number had reached 468,000, a nearly 20-fold increase.⁸ At the same time, however, there has not been an increase in Deaf and hard-of-hearing faculty.⁹

Because of a minoritized status in our society, historically and currently, hearing people have held power over Deaf and hard-of-hearing people's lives on an individual, group, and systemic level. Oppression against Deaf people is called audism and is "a complex weave of micro, meso, and macro-aggressions that leads to a system of overprivilege for those that can hear and speak and underprivilege for those who are deaf [sic]."¹⁰ Deaf people can experience audism within their families (where the vast majority of Deaf children are born to two hearing parents), throughout the educational pipeline, including within Deaf institutions,

and in everyday life.¹¹ While many Deaf people do not identify as having a disability, instead seeing themselves as part of a linguistic minority, some hearing people believe that being Deaf is a human deficiency that needs to be fixed.¹² Unaware of hearing privilege, or "...advantages or entitlements that are enjoyed by people who can hear which are denied to those who are Deaf," hearing people often create and perpetuate negative and exclusive behavior within our society and institutions, and in this case the academy.¹³ *Deaf Echo*, a blog written by and for Deaf people, featured an article titled "Exploring Hearing Privilege," in which several examples of hearing privilege were listed, including:

- Hearing privilege means colleges and employers don't wonder if you are capable because of your hearing status.
- Hearing privilege is always having teachers who are also hearing and who speak your first language fluently.
- Hearing privilege is being able to make mistakes in written English without people assuming you are not capable of proper English.
- Hearing privilege is representing yourself. Knowing your exact choice of words are used. You do not have to wait for an interpreter. You do not have to wonder if the interpreter will be skilled or qualified.¹⁴

These examples and other forms of hearing privilege have created many hearing-dominant spaces, including the academy that not only affect Deaf faculty, but also faculty who become deaf or hard of hearing later in their career.

INSIDE THE ACADEMY: DEAF FACULTY

Deaf graduate students face many obstacles as they make it to the professoriate: finding a committee without negative attitudes toward deafness, negotiating communication within their research process, finding a mentor willing to socialize them into the profession, and more.¹⁵ Then, once these obstacles are conquered, graduates must find jobs, and

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navigate the daily climate of the academy as a professional. Most of their hearing colleagues will be unaware of the many challenges faced by Deaf faculty, specifically accommodations issues, the need for cultural recovery, and barriers with colleagues.

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Accommodations

Higher education should be a diverse and accessible place for people with a wide variety of abilities, particularly those who hold the knowledge to educate the next generation — that is faculty. When it comes to accommodating faculty's individual needs, there can be financial factors such as the cost of hiring interpreters or real time captionists. Many Deaf faculty must convince future employers that they can do

the job and have the ability to work their way up the tenure ladder.¹⁶ With budgetary issues constraining many institutions, even the most open-minded departments have a hard time advocating for a faculty member who comes with extra expenses and needs.¹⁷ Then, even if a department agrees that providing an American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter is a reasonable accommodation, many Deaf faculty have a hard time finding appropriate interpreters, especially the more highly skilled interpreters needed by individuals in specialized fields.¹⁸ For example, I once designed and co-taught a course with a Deaf faculty member, an experience that went so well we were asked to present our innovative ideas at a campus-wide program. We had two interpreters who both received background information about our presentation. Unfortunately, during my colleague's presentation, the interpreter stumbled, used a lot of "ums," missed important details and big concepts, and relied on a very limited vocabulary. Because of the interpreter's lack of skill, my highly intelligent colleague came across as a nervous, unclear, and unskilled presenter who could not accurately articulate ideas. It was quite frustrating, and my Deaf colleague did not realize what had happened. After the presentation, I debriefed with different interpreters, and they said this problem occurs often because interpreters' skills are not always at a level that matches a faculty member.

Cultural Recovery

Navigating hearing spaces, including departments or academic programs, can take a tremendous amount of energy, time, and patience. There are occasions when there is only one Deaf faculty member in a department and there is a need to culturally "recover" from the hearing world.¹⁹ Sometimes, Deaf faculty members will travel or try to fill their lives with other Deaf people to reconnect and have less restricted communication.²⁰ In a study about Deaf academics in a hybrid (Deaf and hearing) Deaf Studies department, one Deaf faculty said this about her desire to culturally recover from the hearing world, "I needed to go out and be involved and meet Deaf people and share our experiences...Then I'd go home on Sunday night and back to work on Monday morning. When I go back to work I feel good [and] I know that when it's Friday then I'll be off again. It's like recharging a battery. It's very very important for Deaf people to share, to help each other to mix socially."²¹ As members of a linguistic minoritized group and similar to other minoritized people (e.g., people of color, women, gays and lesbians), Deaf people must advocate and educate dominant (i.e., hearing) populations about their cultural differences and needs.

Within the academy, Deaf faculty often spend time educating their chair, colleagues, and students about Deaf culture.²² Yet, despite their efforts, even educated people do not always advocate for or change the various barriers Deaf people encounter on a daily basis.²³ For example, as a person who worked with Deaf faculty and interpreters on a regular basis, I still sometimes would forget to reserve interpreters for an event or would stand in front of the interpreters during group meetings. Because of my hearing privilege and lack of awareness as a hearing person, I was not always conscious of how my actions affected my Deaf colleagues. In addition, Deaf faculty may feel a need to defend their intelligence. Brueggemann, a hard-of-hearing faculty member, wrote about the discomfort and fear that she has felt, believing at times "that students per-

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ceived [her] as incompetent, the echo of ‘deaf and dumb’ ringing in their heads.”²⁴ In a space where faculty members are expected to hold authority and expert knowledge, it can be exhausting and psychologically challenging to continuously defend yourself.

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Barriers to Collegiality

Breivik discussed the “sense of being ‘at home among strangers,’” or the ability to connect both formally and informally with coworkers.²⁵ However, spontaneous and informal meetings, last minute oral instructions for tasks, and a lack of appropriate ASL interpreter support can hinder Deaf faculty members in connecting with colleagues.²⁶ Another Deaf faculty member from the Trowler and Turner study of a

hybrid Deaf Studies department said, “I don’t feel that Deaf colleagues are actually involved in this university culture. We don’t have that network... [hearing people] have an advantage because [they] can actually listen to what people are saying, background information, bits of new information just through informal discussions.”²⁷ Setting up an environment that is not accessible to all faculty’s communication needs is discriminatory. But sometimes colleagues may resent a Deaf faculty member who is getting “special” treatment or more funds than others in the department. Woodcock, Rohan, and Campbell stated, “Receptivity towards the Deaf person may be more related to cost and perceptions of cost than attitude or prejudice.”²⁸ Negative attitudes, lack of understanding of diverse communication needs, and the perception of favoritism must be addressed in departments for Deaf faculty to be successful. Depending on the openness of a Deaf faculty member’s department and university, a faculty member can spend more time managing their “disability” than actually doing academic work. Some Deaf faculty have noted that the extra time it takes to manage their “disability” (e.g., lining up interpreters, explaining Deaf culture, making others comfortable, organizing lectures for interpreters) should be counted as service to the university in their tenure package.²⁹

SO WHAT’S INFLUENCING THESE EXPERIENCES?

Until recently, there has been little understanding of disability as a category of analysis and knowledge.³⁰ Gender and race are more typically the identities of difference that are recognized as dynamic, complex, and multi-dimensional.³¹ The Deaf community may not collectively identify as disabled, but within the context of higher education — a very hearing-dominated space — this label has been placed on them. However, we cannot make faculty with hearing loss the central problem. As Deaf faculty members engage the academic environment, they must grow, change, and adapt; but the environment also should adapt, change, and accommodate faculty members. Unfortunately, this adaptation often does not happen or it happens very slowly, making the academy a “static structure that makes no allowance for the evolving processes of interaction.”³² It is no longer the individual who is disabled, but the environment itself that is stuck and needs help adjusting to more diverse users. One-way to understand what happens to that environment is through spatial theory.

Spatial theory suggests that space or an environment does not evolve or exist prior to or separate from the people who create and use it.³³ For example, one way an institution can be labeled successful is through the reputation and work of its faculty.³⁴ Historically, the academy defined faculty as hearing white men.³⁵ Therefore, hearing white men entered the academy and began “creating, reproducing, and reinforcing one set of values and practices and excluding others. This type of power shapes what is important;” thus, hearing spaces and privileges are unspoken and seem natural.³⁶ There is a myth that space is empty of culture or value; consequently, creating an illusion of innocence.³⁷ However, the academy cannot say it is blameless in the continuing challenges experienced by faculty with hearing loss. The academy is a breeding ground for phonocentrism, the inherent belief that hearing and listening are central features of being human, a phenomenon that puts Deaf faculty

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in a vulnerable position.³⁸ Spatial theory is particularly salient within Deaf culture because Deaf people have a visual and spatial language, are visually centered, and their identity is intertwined with place.³⁹ Within spatial theory, there are three different types of social spaces: (1) perceived, (2) conceived, and (3) lived space.⁴⁰

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Perceived Space

Perceived space focuses on the daily routines and experiences that create a specific space.⁴¹ In the life of a faculty member those experiences might include informal and spontaneous faculty meetings, teaching classes, student advising, people randomly stopping by your office, or working on a research project. Although this space seems neutral, Bahan and Bauman observe,

“Language and culture influence how we perceive and imagine space.”⁴² Thus, in an academic world where the verbal or “heard” language is privileged over visual language, hearing people have an advantage. For example, spontaneous and informal meetings do not allow a Deaf faculty member to schedule an interpreter, and nor are informal hallway conversations and interactions necessarily accessible. Teaching classes requires more planning for Deaf faculty members to make the environment accessible for all, including themselves.⁴³ Those who are not a part of the dominant hearing group can experience this seemingly neutral, inclusive environment very differently.⁴⁴ The point is not that Deaf faculty should or should not have to complete these tasks, as they are a part of the job, but rather that having an environment where hearing privilege can be discussed, where accommodations are the responsibility of everyone, and where the environment can be adjusted (e.g., office practices and department policies) is important to the process of deconstructing perceived space.⁴⁵

Conceived Space

Conceived space is the vision the planner or builder originally had for the space.⁴⁶ For example, the academy was originally a place for white, hearing, male ministers to instill the morals of Christian doctrine to wealthy,

young, hearing, white men.⁴⁷ How this history influences Deaf faculty is that the academy and faculty spaces were never designed with Deaf architecture (e.g., mindfulness around appealing to the senses, openness, natural and artificial lights, building vibrations).⁴⁸ To integrate faculty with hearing loss into our understanding of the academy, we must push beyond those original conceptions of the academy and challenge the hearing norms that are maintained through tradition, power, privilege, and status.⁴⁹

Power dynamics between Deaf and hearing people are almost always unequal. Consider our typical lecture rooms that have extra walls and pillars that often make it difficult for Deaf people to see presenters, interpreters, and each other. Additionally, as student enrollment increases, it becomes more difficult

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to rearrange small classrooms into configurations that allow students to see others (e.g., seats in horse-shaped or full circle arrangements). Old buildings with dim lighting also can be a challenge for people who rely on nonverbal cues and lip reading for communication. Hearing people do not think about how space in the academy has been designed to make communication and life easier for them, thus giving them the privilege to exist in that space with ease while others struggle to adapt.⁵⁰ The concept of educational spaces being accessible to all is not a new idea. Universal Design (UD), a term coined in the 1970s by Ron Mace, has been used within educational settings to help create accessible instructional settings, including classrooms and campus environments. Through technology and developing diverse teaching and programming methods all students and faculty should benefit. However, structural changes can be expensive and understanding UD and consciously putting UD into daily practice are not the same things.⁵¹

Lived Space

Lived space refers to the ways in which people interpret the meaning of perceived and conceived space, and how they use the space based on that interpretation.⁵² As it relates to higher education, the

pipeline into an academic career is narrow with only 1.2 percent of the U.S. population holding a doctoral degree.⁵³ Deaf faculty have navigated the academy by working at specific institutions, teaching in Deaf-friendly disciplines, and trying to fit into the majority-hearing world. There is a larger concentration of Deaf faculty at institutions that

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serve larger numbers of Deaf students. Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C., the primary Deaf-serving institution in the U.S., serves approximately 1,994 Deaf and hard of hearing students, and employs nearly 500 Deaf and hard-of-hearing faculty and staff spread among their university, secondary, and elementary schools.⁵⁴ The National Technical Institute for the Deaf in Rochester, New York, serves nearly 1,500 Deaf

and hard-of-hearing students and as of 2012, employed 111 Deaf and hard-of-hearing faculty and staff.⁵⁵ In addition, many Deaf faculty are concentrated within specific disciplines and programs such as Deaf Studies or Deaf Education.⁵⁶ These behaviors and career decisions allow Deaf faculty to stay within an academic space that more broadly was not perceived or conceived with them in mind. However, this is problematic because Deaf college students are going to school for a variety of disciplines, and they should have the opportunity and option to teach, research, and thrive in any discipline of their choosing.

There is a historical legacy of exclusion that makes it challenging to create accessible environments, even in the academy.⁵⁷ When hearing-dominant ways and values have created the traditions, as well as how the space is perceived, conceived, and lived, then barriers are created to Deaf faculty's success. Furthermore, when current faculty and administrators in the academy refuse to examine their own prejudiced attitudes and practices, it is nearly impossible to commit to institutional transformation.⁵⁸ The academy, as space, did not create phonocentrism (the belief that sounds and speech are inherently superior to, or more primary than, written language), but the dominant (i.e., hearing) group who created and continue to interpret that space did.⁵⁹ It will take the support of faculty

and administrators to change the culture and values of a "disabled" academy. It will not be until the disabled academy itself is addressed that the academy will be able to adapt, grow, and accommodate, not only Deaf faculty but all students, staff, and administrators who are differently abled.

THE IMPACT ON HIGHER EDUCATION

Faculty are the heart and soul of a healthy institution, and providing an inclusive environment for research, teaching, and service is imperative to faculty and to the success of students.⁶⁰ Making the academy a more accessible space is an asset to everyone. The goal is not to privilege a few, but rather to create a space that does not favor one way of seeing and negotiat-

ing the world.⁶¹ Exploring more adaptive methods of communication promotes a community of equity. For example, "conveying important notifications in writing, speaking one at a time during meetings, and expressing one's views without a mouth full of pens, fingers or food benefits everyone."⁶² There are professional development opportunities and room for growth when others' ideas and ways of doing things are considered. For example, Deaf academics usually are aware of communication requirements and limitations, and are therefore quite skilled and creative in teaching various concepts to diverse audiences.⁶³ There is much we can learn from each other.

An institution cannot be excellent without diversity, and with an increasingly diverse student population, diverse faculty are needed to serve as role models.⁶⁴ A more accessible space could also lead to a more academically efficient space. Perhaps there could be fewer meetings or the meetings could be more productive if side conversations, which are not accessible to all faculty, were not happening. Navigating, embracing, and understanding a diverse environment can take considerable time, energy, and work, but it must be done if our institutions are to be successful. Institutions should be in the business of eradicating all the "isms" (e.g., racism, sexism, ageism, heterosexism). If higher education is to continue

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to be relevant then the academy and those who perpetuate historically exclusive spaces, both consciously and unconsciously, need to be challenged to think outside themselves.⁶⁵ [nea](#)

END NOTES

1. The word Deaf with a “D” includes individuals that see themselves as a linguistic minority and not disabled. They connect with the culture and cultural practices of the Deaf community and use American Sign Language (ASL) as their main form of communication. See Woodcock et al., “Equitable Representation of Deaf People in Mainstream Academia: Why Not?” pp. 359-79.
2. See Razack, “When Place Becomes Race,” pp. 1-20; and Bahan and Bauman, “The Power of Place: The Evolution of Kendall Green,” pp. 154-61.
3. Razack, *op cit.*, p. 5.
4. Brown, “The Power of Vulnerability.”
5. Scotch, “Nothing About Us Without Us: Disability Rights in America,” pp. 17-22.
6. Gappa, et al., *Rethinking Faculty Work: Higher Education’s Strategic Imperative*; Scotch, *op cit.*; Woodcock, et al., *op cit.*
7. National Center for Education Statistics. “Deaf and hard of hearing students in postsecondary education.”
8. Schroedel, et al., “A National Research Agenda for the Postsecondary Education of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students: A Road Map for the Future,” pp. 67-73.
9. Woodcock, et al., *op cit.*
10. Garrow, et al., “Uncovering macro- and micro-aggressions against the Deaf community and how the Deaf community uses community cultural wealth,” p. 4.
11. For more about children born to hearing parents, see Holcomb, *Introduction to American Deaf Culture*. Trowler and Turner examine the educational pipeline in “Exploring the Hermeneutic Foundations of University Life: Deaf Academics in a Hybrid Community of Practice,” pp. 227-56.
12. Woodcock and Campbell discuss the idea of linguistic minorities in “Equitable Representation of Deaf people,” p. 362. The idea that deafness is a deficiency requiring a remedy is explored in Breivik, “Vulnerable but Strong: Deaf People Challenge Established Understandings of Deafness,” pp. 18-23.
13. Tuccoli, “Hearing privileges at Gallaudet?” p. 23.
14. Aubrecht and Furda, “Deaf Echo » Writing for and by Deaf People » Exploring Hearing Privilege,” paragraphs 10, 20, 35, and 42.
15. Bieber and Worley, “Conceptualizing the Academic Life: Graduate Students’ Perspectives,” pp. 1009-35; Woodcock, et al., *op cit.*
16. Woodcock et al., *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*
19. Trowler and Turner, *op cit.*
20. *Ibid.*, and Breivik, *op cit.*
21. Trowler and Turner, *op cit.*
22. *Ibid.*
23. Woodcock and Campbell, *op cit.*
24. Brueggemann and Modellmog, “Coming-Out Pedagogy: Risking Identity in Language and Literature Classrooms,” pp. 209-23.
25. Breivik, *op cit.*, p. 22.
26. Woodcock, et al., *op cit.*
27. Trowler and Turner, *op cit.*, p. 251.
28. Woodcock, et al., *op cit.*
29. *Ibid.*
30. Garland-Thomson, “Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory,” pp. 1-32.
31. *Ibid.*
32. Dey and Hurtado, “College Students in Changing Context,” pp. 315-39.
33. Razack, *op cit.*
34. Gappa, et al., *op cit.*
35. Altbach, “Harsh Realities.”
36. Trowler and Turner, *op cit.*, p. 250; Maher and Thompson-Tetreault, “Frameworks of Analysis: Histories and Theories of Privilege,” pp. 1-29.
37. Razack, *op cit.*
38. Breivik, *op cit.*
39. Bahan and Bauman, *op cit.*, p. 155
40. Razack, *op cit.*
41. *Ibid.*
42. Bahan and Bauman, *op cit.*, p. 155.
43. Woodcock, et al., *op cit.*
44. Dey and Hurtado, *op cit.*
45. Woodcock, et al., *op cit.*, p. 362.
46. Razack, *op cit.*
47. Geiger, “The Ten Generations of American Higher Education,” pp. 38-70.
48. Bahan and Bauman, *op cit.*, p. 155.
49. Garland-Thomson, *op cit.*
50. Razack, *op cit.*
51. Steinfeld and Maisel, *Universal Design Creating Inclusive Environments*.
52. Razack, *op cit.*
53. Ryan and Siebens, “Educational Attainment in the United States.”
54. Gallaudet University, “Fast Facts.”
55. Walter and Dirmyer, “Number of Persons who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing.”
56. Trowler and Turner, *op cit.*
57. Dey and Hurtado, *op cit.*
58. *Ibid.*
59. Breivik, *op cit.*; Razack, *op cit.*
60. Gappa, et al., *op cit.*
61. Garland-Thomson, *op cit.*
62. Woodcock, et al., *op cit.*, p. 371.
63. *Ibid.*
64. Maher and Tetreault, *op cit.*
65. *Ibid.*, and Razack, *op cit.*

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