

## Reflections on the Development of the Field of Deaf Studies

Black Deaf Studies Symposium Proceedings

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### **Abstract**

Dr. Bahan's presentation reflects on the evolution of Deaf Studies over the past 43 years, from its roots in sign language linguistics to its institutionalization as an academic discipline. It examines how methodologies from linguistics and anthropology shaped early frameworks, often privileging native signers and decontextualizing language from the body. The speaker critiques historical exclusions, particularly of Black Deaf experiences, and calls for renewed attention to oral histories, gesture studies, and culturally inclusive methodologies. Highlighting the emergence of Black Deaf Studies and contemporary efforts to redefine key concepts such as "Deaf culture," the presentation envisions a more expansive, equitable future for the field.

### **Keywords**

Black Deaf Studies, Culture, Deaf Studies, Gestures, Identity, Inclusion, Linguistics, Oral History

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### **Presentation Transcript**

Good morning, everyone. I really appreciate each of the discourse pieces that have gone before me. And I would like to see if there are ways to connect the dots in my presentation.

[Slide 1]

I am going to reflect on the field of Deaf studies and situate that reflection on the first program that was established, the 43 years that followed, how we got started, and what made us get started once we did.

[Slide 2]

Before I go into how we got started, I want to share a bit about the background. There are Deaf people everywhere, in every culture, in every ethnicity, in every geographic location, in every part of the world across the various groups that we have seen. There have been Deaf people who were Asian, Black, white and European. We're not limited to one particular area. But we are present throughout the world. And that was one thing that made us unique.

There are many people who are born Deaf. But there are many more who become Deaf later in the lifespan. And this spectrum and variety of ways to be Deaf add to the complexity of our field. This field has historically focused on people who became Deaf early in life, and not so much on those who became Deaf later in life.

So, there have been observations of Deaf people from early times. Specifically analyzing Deaf people and their use of signs and gestures, which have been documented. These observations date back even to Greek times. The focus was on linking the use of gestures and signs to the experiences of Deaf people in various parts of the world. And that's a bit of our background that we have from the 18th century. With the establishment of schools and the ability to bring all these people together and sign languages from their homes into a common space, the result has been an explosion of knowledge about Deaf people.

At that time, sign language was not considered equivalent to spoken language. Sign language was viewed as menial gestures, while spoken language had linguistic status. Now, we're going to fast forward to the 1960s to Stokoe and the group he was working with, including Casterline and Cronenberg. They conducted rigorous research to prove that there is an underlying linguistic structure [to sign languages]. And this shifted the paradigm for everyone to one that recognized sign language as an actual language and that language could be both spoken and signed. And it was a mind-blowing experience that set the tone for everyone. Stokoe died in 2000. But before he did, I had an opportunity to interview him in 1999. I asked if back then, he knew that he was starting something to this magnitude. He said it didn't occur to him. He just started noticing that

sign language was different and started analyzing it and applied a methodology and learned some methodologies from the academic field of linguistics and brought that to the study of sign language, which then ignited everything that followed. But he said he regretted having done that. And he wished that he had started looking at gestures as the foundation. Rather than analyzing spoken language and its phonological system and applying it to sign language because of what it ultimately sprang forth. That was a regret that he had. Which I thought was very interesting. So now let's go back to our field and explore our beginnings.

[Slide 3]

Linguistics is where we learned this applied methodology. The linguistic approach when conducting research and studies, for example, on a new language, is to seek out that language and identify informants.

They tended to seek out native signers who used that language as their primary language. However, the complexities with Deaf people were that many were at home with parents who were hearing. When hearing people are born into hearing families, their native language is predetermined and at the ready and everyone has those preset conditions to their native language from birth. That is not the case with all Deaf people. The number of those Deaf who have Deaf parents is so small and difficult to capture. And those were the people that would be interviewed and studied and brought into labs to be able to document and formulate an understanding of the linguistic structure of that language. The issue was funding and science.

We know science has a role, of course, because it holds status. Determinations such as what research was funded, who those native Deaf sign language users were, and who was excluded, such as those who grew up using sign language but whose parents were not Deaf. Though that was not explicitly stated, that was the attitude of that time. Yet, if someone was identified as a native signer, they were studied intensely. Then, the considerations of how to report these findings and explain what was going on to the scientific institutions. The result was to document the language in English in what

became known as gloss with codes. This was a process of removing the language from the physical body. It was taken away from the physical body and then put on a piece of paper to try to analyze it for the sake of discourse, which decontextualized it to the disregard of the body that produced it.

For example, we see “Know P-A-T recent buy car”. And you see all of this linear process on screen. It’s a process, again, of decontextualizing the language from the body. This was happening from the very beginning. We aren’t criticizing, it was just a fact of nature and what happened at the time.

So, as the linguistic findings were emerging, there was also a growth in people becoming interested in learning sign language and colleges began to offer sign language classes. In the 1980s, there was an explosion of sign language classes with the release of two different books: “The ABC, a Basic Course in American Sign Language” by Padden and Humphries and the green book “American Sign Language” by Baker-Shenk. As a result of that, there was the establishment of the National Symposium on Sign Language Research and Teaching, NSSLRT. This led to an exchange of information about sign language between researchers and those who were teaching the language. And for a while, it was a fruitful exchange until after the 1980s, when researchers began to feel like they were being “pulled down” by teachers and having to take the time to explain all their findings. So, they parted ways with researchers developing their own groups and teachers creating the ASLTA. This resulted in the fields of sign language linguistics and of ASL teaching and colleges wanted more of these fields. This is when the consideration of providing degrees in these fields came into play.

[Slide 4]

In 1991, Boston University established a degree program in Deaf studies where people could come, study, and receive a Bachelor’s degree in Deaf studies. I actually taught at Boston University. It’s not where I started. I didn’t start with them originally, but I joined two years later. One of my former students is actually here, Laura. She was there in the

early part of the program. And I learned a lot from her. While I was in the throes of teaching, she taught me about Black Deaf people, Black history, and introduced me to a variety of things. Even in our early years, we started modeling Deaf culture and the connection between culture and language, and that language has culture. We were looking at other academic disciplines and borrowing from them to know what culture was and what history was to design Deaf Studies. And these were some of the courses we taught at the time.

[Slide 5]

For teaching Deaf culture, at the time, we looked at cultural anthropology and the matrix that existed with that, the values that were there. Discussing food and all of the different aspects. We realized food wasn't necessarily something we could include. So, we created our matrix based on the traditions found within Deaf culture. We started looking at the traditions of native signers. Aspects that were common but maybe not necessarily universal to all signers. We considered the values of people who were native signers, such as eye contact and communication with one another, and other aspects. We created narratives about these to design the matrix.

And this continued to become a social phenomenon where it was almost like an indoctrination wherein people would use this matrix as a measure for observing Deaf people's behaviors and deciding what was culture and what was not. And people started deciding that you're Deaf and you're Deaf based on your behavior. It became a way of indoctrinating people through academics because it was viewed as an authoritative position, and it had influence. This continued for about 20 years until we had, I think, an NAD conference in 2002 where Tom Humphries posed a deep yet simple consideration. He said, "We have been talking culture. Now let culture talk". From there, we can observe what products and performances are exhibited there. That will be our data, rather than us talking about what culture is.

For 20 years, the field has been built on this concept of talking culture. With Deaf Studies programs being established throughout the country under that framework.

[Slide 7]

Deaf history became another field as well. Historians would follow the research methods used by historians, wanting primary sources such as publications, books, articles, the data that was available, photographs, and any other available primary sources. And this was all created by white Deaf people. The LPF, Little People Family, was all written and produced by white Deaf people.

I want us to recognize that these were specifically white Deaf people who could read and write, to the exclusion of white Deaf people who could not read or write. The stories of people who weren't literate were not included. But the educated Deaf people, those who could read and write, were what became archived and studied and later became the cultural artifacts.

Later in the 1990s, John Schuchman, who was a professor here, brought the necessity of doing oral history to the conversation; interviewing people and documenting from them. And I can see what Glenn did with his interviews. That's oral history. And that's powerful. Because we are lacking in documents and artifacts for Black Deaf people. So, these oral histories are very important. We can find photographs where people are able to identify and interview people who were included and gather and build this body of knowledge that we will then use in studies.

Schuchman did this in the 90s, but technology wasn't what it is now. Today, we have better technology to support this type of work and even disseminate it on the internet. So, we are seeing more recognition of oral histories. Current Deaf historians are doing more and more oral histories. So, we are seeing more application of what fits our communities. Deaf historians are realizing that their background has traditionally been in writing and publishing.

Let's talk about Overlea. Actually, can you go back? The Overlea School was a Black Deaf school here in Maryland. It was a segregated school. When the Maryland School

for the Deaf was established in Frederick, they had a museum there. If you go to the museum, I looked there and I looked around to try to find the history of the Black Deaf people from Overlea. And I realized that it was missing.

So, I decided to send someone to look for the information in Overlea. Overlea became a school for the blind. It was a Black Deaf school -- the school for the Black Deaf and Blind. Someone asked if they had Black Deaf artifacts there. They said they thought they did somewhere in a box in an attic. And we were able to find them. I don't know how many there were, but we were able to find information, names, and other documents that we were able to then bring to the museum in Frederick. But the problem is that they even had to ask for it and then be sent to look for it. We have to bother to find the information that exists beyond what we have, and make the effort. We need more of that.

[Slide 8] Next slide.

So, when we talk about "Deaf", what do we mean? So, if I saw Deaf enter a store. What is Deaf? When we look at "Deaf", what does this mean? What does Deaf look like?

If you look at the second sentence, Deaf gossip, talking about you. Deaf. And in our analysis of the language, if you recall, we have separated the body from the actual language. And in history, when we look at Deaf history, where is the body in Deaf history? The physical body? We have decontextualized the language from the body. And in Deaf history, we are responsible. We are also guilty of separating the body from "Deaf". Obviously, when we look at a Deaf person, to me, to be honest, I thought it broadly meant everyone. But I have learned others disagree. I have been told you think that because you're white and you're looking at it through your lens. And I didn't realize that. And I accept that perspective.

But I realize there's a lot of ambiguity there. We have to disambiguate what we mean when we say Deaf. And I think we will be wrestling with that as we progress in the field. That's why I'm excited about the creation of the Black Deaf Studies field to really help us

revisit these questions about what it means to be Deaf and \_\_\_\_.

I thought it included everyone, all people, all cultures, the whole world, and Deaf could be anyone. But why do we need the other label, like Black Deaf? That's something that we are going to have to untangle and unpack with one another.

Deaf culture. What does that mean? What does Deaf history mean? And again, these are questions for us to reflect upon as we progress and look back on the field.

[Slide 9] Next slide.

I can clearly see distinctions among the fields and their ways of doing research and their methodologies, which have in turn influenced how we approach our methodologies. Following their research approaches and applying them. If they placed importance on informants and primary sources and native signers, so did we. We have taken the methods of various fields and applied them to our own. However, we need to engage in self-analysis and decide what our methods are. What is our way of doing things?

Looking at the difference, we have to consider whether the difference was scorned. Our field is currently going through a shift. And at one point, literature was produced and disseminated, things became -- this became what we defined -- how we defined Deafness. But we need to re-evaluate that and challenge this. And potentially change. We need to explore a new way of looking at things.

[Slide 10] Next slide.

I present to you a challenge. We have this word culture, specifically Deaf culture. Are we talking about one universal Deaf culture encompassing all? What is Deaf culture? And the problem with the word Deaf is that there are other cultures that can be added to it. There may be a better way to use it. There may be a better way of recognizing Deaf ways of being. When we define Deaf culture, we say that Deaf people will wave to get attention or will stomp on the floor. We define it through behavior. But if I go to a



different place in the world or culture, if I go to an Asian culture and see an Asian Deaf person signing or waving across the room at someone, is that Deaf culture? Or are these simply ways of being? And we have to think through this and ask ourselves if we have been conflating these concepts and if we need to provide more clarity.

There's a new publication that came out fairly recently. It's in Deaf Studies that is raising a lot of challenging and modern-day questions about where our field needs to go. And I can see the promise of a future where we will expand our research and become more global, and more studies can happen on a larger scale all over the world.

Erin Moriarty and Octavian recently received a grant with the goal of revamping Deaf Studies. And the goal is to revitalize it in practice and theory. So, I see a generation of researchers confronting the challenges of the old mindsets and paradigms.

And it's very exciting. And now that we have the Center for Black Deaf Studies established, there are questions and challenges that are being brought here, such as What does ASL mean? And we are re-evaluating and thinking again.

And we also have established our gesture lab. And the reason I added this here is not because I'm involved, but because now we are beginning to answer the question that Stokoe raised, that he wished he had started with looking at gestures. Now we are looking at gestures, and I can see the promise of that. And it's exciting, and I am excited about the future.

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