This book was born out of the Deaf Studies Think Tank, a three-day symposium in the summer of 2002 sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities, Gallaudet University's Provost's Office, and the Gallaudet Research Institute. The Deaf Studies Think Tank convened twenty scholars to debate, discuss, and explore the issues and implications of the field of Deaf Studies. The Think Tank was scheduled in the three days preceding Deaf Way II, an international celebration of Deaf scholarship, arts, performance, advocacy, and development attended by more than nine thousand people from 121 nations.

We met in the circular Gallaudet University Board Room, designed specifically for the visual orientation of signing. Yet we would not remain in that room for the duration of the event. Just after the opening address of the Think Tank, the power went out. We hoped this was nothing more than a blink in the local power grid, but it was no blink: the local grid was asleep. The entire campus was out of power and would remain that way for the following thirty hours. So we made do. Plans changed.

We wandered in the hazy, sweltering heat to the nearby Washburn Art Building, which was bathed in afternoon light and featured a great number of works by Deaf artists from all over the world. In one work by Chuck Baird, welded pipes contorted into handshapes, resembling a language of hieroglyphic copper just out of reach of decipherment. In its own enigmatic way, Baird's work, titled fingerspelling, seemed to make sense of the blackout. These medusa-like fingers pointed in new and unexpected directions. They reminded us that taking an unexpected path may lead to new sights and new insights.

The blackout became a living symbol of the emerging field we had all convened to discuss. For one, when the power is out, the value of light increases. As Ben Bahan's chapter in this volume discusses, more than most other human cultures, Deaf Culture is keenly aware of in the value of light and vision. Light is often cited as a cultural value in itself, figuring prominently in stories, poems, and even in company names. The media production company LightKitchen, for example, takes its cue from the tendency of Deaf folk to flock to what is usually the brightest room in the house. But there were no bright rooms in the conference center. Like moths, we were drawn to any scrap of light, candles, and emergency lights. Unlike moths, we reflected on our relationship to light, to the ways that signers move through the world according to the conditions of a visual language.

Indeed, you start to see differently when the power goes out. You start to see, for
example, that the power would never be out for thirty hours in nearby Capitol Hill or Georgetown, but in northeast Washington, D.C.—in an African American and Deaf neighborhood—the sense of urgency does not seem quite the same. This local power outage was but a microcosm for the historical predicament of the Deaf world. While it might take a long time to restore light in northeast Washington, D.C., it has taken centuries for light to be shed on the lives, languages, and cultures of Deaf individuals. Deaf people have always been out of sight of the hearing majority. For centuries, deaf individuals were largely scattered across an agrarian globe without another visual language user to spark the eyes and hands into grammatical action. Not until the later eighteenth century in France and early nineteenth century in America did deaf individuals come into view as a collective group as a result of formal educational and medical establishments. Yet, even though deaf people became visible as a group, they still remained mostly out of sight. What hearing people saw, instead, was their own "projection of cultural prejudice, fear and hope, faith and ideology" on the blank screen of deaf people. Instead of trying to view deafness through the eyes of Deaf people themselves, the hearing majority has largely inferred and determined the meanings of deafness on their own. All the while, Deaf people have been living their Deaf lives, generation after generation, forming their own schools, families, churches, clubs, businesses, and national and international political organizations, as well as their own bodies of literary and artistic production—all this without speech.

The darkness often associated with deafness, then, is not the horror of hearing loss that most presume, but instead the inability or unwillingness of hearing people to actually see what goes on in the Deaf world. This oversight has not only been detrimental to members of the Deaf world, but it has also left us with a legacy of incomplete understanding about the nature of human language, ability, and cultural formations.

This collection of essays is intended to open the eyes of many to the insights in the Deaf world and Deaf Studies. The majority of authors in this volume are Deaf themselves, though others are children of Deaf parents, and others, like myself, are hearing. I was not born that way, however. I was born as a person who could hear, which is different from being born hearing. Like any identity, hearing identity is a social construction. I became hearing at the age of twenty-one, when I was hired as a dormitory supervisor for the Colorado School for the Deaf and the Blind (CSDB). Suddenly, my world changed: it was no longer my world. I was an outsider, a foreigner in my own land. My identity was constructed for me; long before I ever began working at CSDB, a whole discourse on the meanings of being hearing had evolved in the Deaf world. Growing up, the thought that I was a hearing person never crossed my mind; hearing was so normal it went unnoticed. It was just the way things were. Only after a ten-year-old Deaf boy told me that I was hearing did the realization strike me. This is more than a residential school I have wandered into; this is a profoundly different way of being in the world. Though I could pass freely through the stone and wrought-iron fence surrounding the campus, I could never fully pass through the larger epistemological and cultural border that separates the Deaf and hearing worlds.

Things appear different on either side of this border. For example, as Carol Padden and Tom Humphries have pointed out, when hearing people say that someone is "very hard of hearing," they mean that the person is almost deaf. When Deaf people refer to someone as "very hard of hearing," they mean that the person is almost hearing. After I began working at the Colorado School for the Deaf and the Blind, I found myself on the borders and began to see myself from a perspective I never imagined. This dual vision afforded me a critical perspective through which I could interrogate myself and the phonocentric ideologies in the world in which I was raised. I am now perpetually reminded, for example, of the audist ideologies that inform fundamental aspects of hearing society—its views on language, literature, culture, ability, disability, and identity.

It has been more than twenty years since I became hearing, and I am still inquiring into the meanings of hearing as well as d/Deaf identities in my role as a professor of Deaf Studies at Gallaudet University. Indicative of the different centers of the Deaf world, I often joke about being a token as the only hearing member of my department. Indeed, there is a different orientation when a white, hearing, able-bodied, straight, middle-class male brings diversity to an academic department.

I am perpetually honored and humbled to serve as the only hearing member of the Deaf Studies program at the world's only liberal arts university for Deaf and hard-of-hearing students. I owe my colleagues and students my deepest gratitude for their welcoming attitude and enlightening exchanges. In particular, I wish to thank my colleague and friend Ben Bahan for originally suggesting that I move from the English department to the Deaf Studies department to assist in creating the graduate program. I also thank my department chair, MJ Bienvenu, for her support and leadership, and my colleagues in the Department of ASL and Deaf Studies: Arlene B. Kelly, Gene Mirus, Carolyn McCaskill, Lynn Jacobowitz, Flavia Fleischer, and Mike Kemp. The Deaf Studies Think Tank would not have been possible without assistance from Will Garrow and Jennifer Clifford. The Gallaudet University Office of Sponsored Programs was helpful in securing the National Endowment for the Humanities funding, and the Gallaudet Research Institute, under the leadership of Michael Karchmer, provided support for an ongoing research project, of which the Deaf Studies Think Tank was a part. We also received generous support from Gallaudet University's Provost, Jane K. Fernandes, who was able to participate in the Think Tank and manage a university during a power outage. I also thank the anonymous reviewers of the book and my editor, Richard Morrison, for his belief in its value. Andrew Jones is also to be thanked for his significant contribution to the preparation of the manuscript. Finally, I wish to thank Nicole Salimbene for the preparation of the visual images and for her support and encouragement while I prepared this project.

Notes

1. Leonard Davis made this observation as it became evident that the power was not going to come back for some time.
