15. Where Is Deaf HIstory?

ARLENE BLUM
NIHAI KELLY

One of the most effective ways in which dominant groups maintain their power is by depriving the people they dominate of the knowledge of their own history. This is well understood by Frantz Fanon, a leader of the Algerian resistance against the French in the 1950s, who wrote in his Wretched of the Earth that "colonialism is not satisfied with merely holding a people in its grip ... but by a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of an oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it." Members of oppressed communities are frequently deprived from appreciating their own historical experiences and the glory of the actions of their own people. Because of this lack of appreciation, the colonized are kept powerless. Instead this glory should come alive to those living in the present and future in order to reduce the dominance of the others.

Women have long understood this deprivation. In 1404, Christine de Pizan, chronicler of great women, wrote to bring her readers "out of the ignorance which so blinds your own intellect." Philosophers also have long trivialized women. Christine de Pizan suggested that women who did not know their history were like a field without a defense. On the other hand, knowing their historical experiences allowed women to become like a strongly constructed city wall.

In the mid-nineteenth century, American women began to archive their history. Most notable was Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony's six volumes of History of Woman Suffrage completed in 1881. Meant to be an arsenal of facts for the next generation of scholars, these volumes were unfortunately largely ignored. In 1933, historian Mary Beard wrote that an accurate understanding of the past required an analysis of women's experiences and this analysis needed to be conducted with as much attention as historians devote to the experience of men.

Five decades later, historian Gerda Lerner suggested four stages in writing women's history, each stage more complex than the last. The first stage is known as "compensation history" in which historians seek stories about women who succeeded in their actions. Examples are Amelia Earhart, the solo airplane pilot in the 1930s demonstrating courage, and Zora Neale Hurston, an African American folklorist who brought life to independent black women. The next stage is "contribution history" in which women's contributions to topics, issues, and themes of the day are described. For example, the women behind the 1960s Chicago House project in Chicago aided in promoting Progressive reforms of the day. The third stage of writing women's history moves to understanding what actually happened, thus prompting us to rewrite our own history. For example, we were taught in school to believe that American slaves were given adequate
The Feminist Standpoint

The field of Women’s Studies has been concerned with both methodology and epistemology since its inception. Debates were plentiful. One of the debates led to a key point known as the feminist standpoint. Feminist theorist Nancy C. M. Hartscock offered that this standpoint, while not simply an interested or informed position, posits a duality of levels of reality reflecting the relations of humans among each other and with the natural world. Consciousness plays a major role in developing a standpoint. Having knowledge produces awareness. For example, in 1848 Marx and Engels published a treatise in which they proposed equality across various social classes. Differences in wealth and property should not, they argued, separate people. Instead, people of all social stations in life should be treated equally. This concept of equality across class was later understood as Marxism. Picking up on this Marxist thread, Hartscock develops the feminist and women standpoints, which are invariably presented in introductory Women’s Studies courses:

The “feminist standpoint” is a self-conscious perspective on self and society that arises out of a class or gender grouping’s critical awareness of itself and its relation to the system it lives in. The “women’s standpoint” is that the perspective arises out of a class or gender’s received and unanalyzed engagement with its material environment, as seen through the worldviews of the dominant group.

This suggests that when women analyze their position in the society, in the world, they become aware of their existence as an oppressed population. This consciousness, or awareness, allows them to explore their historical experiences of oppression. They see how and by whom they were and are discriminated against. Due to these enlightened women’s position within the sexual division of labor and sexist oppression, they then have greater insights as researchers of other women. These women then assume a feminist standpoint. They see through a different lens in rewriting women’s history. On the other hand, there are women who, by virtue of not knowing their own history, do not realize that they are being oppressed or discriminated against. They accept their lot, thus assuming the women’s standpoint as described by Hartscock.

The feminist standpoint is further characterized by philosopher of science Sandra Harding. She argues that objectivity is maximized not by excluding social factors from the production of knowledge—as the Western scientific method has purported to do—but precisely by “starting” the process of inquiry from an explicitly social location: the lived experience of those persons who have traditionally been excluded from knowledge production (for example, women). By exploring women’s experiences as a starting point, rather than as a foundation, standpoint epistemology seeks to produce a more generally useful body of knowledge.

Like most women, or more specifically feminists, many Deaf people assume duality in their lives. As both women and Deaf people live and study and work within the mainstream culture, both groups also possess a certain sense of affinity amongst themselves, a sense of survivorship, to succeed in life. While socioeconomic status and ethnic backgrounds in each of the two cultures vary tremendously, there is a common group identity. For women, their commonality is tied to their gender. For Deaf people, the commonality lies in language rather than in the inability to hear. For example, most Deaf people prefer the company of their Deaf friends over their own hearing blood relatives on account of communication accessibility.

Another dual experience shared between these two groups is a history of social discrimination based on presumptions held by the mainstream society, such as lower intellectual skills. Inability to perform on the job, as imagined by the mainstream society, was also seen as an obstacle for both women and Deaf people. For example, the female informants in my ethnographic research remembered being dismissed from their places of employment or being denied a salary raise simply because they were Deaf, not because they were women. Personally, while working as a backroom clerk at the Tucson Public Library, I was passed over for promotion to the front desk clerking several times. According to the interviewers, this happened because of my inability to use the telephone. Thus being deaf was an obstacle for my promotional opportunities.

The Deaf standpoint may need to be established and defined in order to answer research questions in the field of Deaf Studies. One of the primary concerns is a body of knowledge of and a sense of understanding about Deaf history. Does this knowledge exist for many Deaf people? If so, how is this achieved? In schools? From watching storytellers? How do these storytellers know Deaf history? Can we begin to say that the Deaf standpoint is a perspective on self and society that arises out of a minority language group’s critical awareness of itself, of its language, of its history, and its relation...
to the system in which it lives? And in contrast, is the deaf standpoint a perspective based on unanalyzed passivity? Is having a standpoint truly essential? We may, however, want to explore aspects of Deaf epistemologies before establishing and defining the Deaf woman standpoint. What constitutes the duality of being Deaf and female? It then becomes useful to look at epistemology and methodology, which can assist with our exploration here. Additionally, the field of Deaf Studies should also be concerned with the production of accountable Deaf knowledge.

Epistemology and Methodology

Hartsock urges the study of epistemology and methodology in order to establish a standpoint.21 In addition, Sandra Harding, as cited in Liz Stanley’s “Methodology Matters,” suggests that epistemology is concerned with investigating and presenting facts away from other social influences such as masculine assumptions and ways of working.22 Social scientists Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln define epistemology as a way of exploring how we know the world, and the relationship between the inquirer and the known.23 In general, it is a subdiscipline of philosophy concerned with the validation of knowledge.24 For example, in cultural anthropology, epistemology helps justify factual knowledge gleaned from fieldwork, historical reconstruction, and comparative studies on human cultures. In short, epistemology allows us to look at knowledge and how much power it can engender for those being researched.

Methodology, on the other hand, focuses on how we gain knowledge about the world.25 It is more concerned with goals and procedures of inquiring and gaining knowledge.26 In other words, it is a path to achieving an understanding of goals. British sociologist Liz Stanley encourages asking questions such as “what makes an idea ‘feminist’ or not?” “how can the field be taken more seriously within the academy?” “why is ‘gender’ a concept so difficult to understand?” and “why are some ideas feminist, and others not feminist?” Methodology then becomes important because it enables asking questions and answering these questions.27 Methodology also enables the production of a body of knowledge. Methodology deals with knowledge rather than opinions and feelings.28 For example, it determines how our research should proceed and what the goals of inquiry are. Method implies systematization of procedure leading to the goal of clarity.29 Selecting a method to answer epistemological questions can defamiliarize the anthropologist of the culture being studied. Instead a new lens, or a new perspective, develops.

Epistemological and methodological concerns are common in social and behavioral sciences, and the humanities. Ethnography is a popular methodology in cultural anthropology. Participation and observation, interviews and fieldnotes play crucial roles in gaining knowledge about other cultures. Often reflexive, these lead the researcher to understand her own research as well as allowing an introspective look at the researcher as she explores the researched. Both the researcher and researched become informed of issues revealed in the process. Being informed can further enlighten the society at large. On the other hand, in sociology, symbolic interactionism links meanings to social positions or problems, explores how people negotiate their social positions. In the activities of daily production, views the society in terms of processes rather than structures, and

sees how people carve out areas of autonomy.30 Women’s Studies scholars often prefer ethnography as one of the methodologies.

How do epistemology and methodology work for the field of Deaf Studies? How do these two create a standpoint? This field is interdisciplinary in nature, embracing but not limited to linguistics, history, sociology, anthropology, and literature. Each of the mentioned disciplines has its own epistemology and methodology, or at least a specific basis. Thus, what is epistemology for Deaf Studies? What about methodology? Can this field adopt one? Or should it be as flexible as its interdisciplinary nature? Should Deaf Studies scholars adopt whichever method fits their specific needs? How important are epistemology and methodology for this field? If so, for whom? How about a Deaf, or a Deaf woman, standpoint? Do we need to develop a Deaf standpoint before we can proceed with a Deaf woman standpoint?

In addition, we need to address how the role of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at most institutions of higher education can either hinder or boost the field of Deaf Studies. The sole purpose of the IRB is to protect both the researcher and the researched, and that is commendable. Yet we need to explore how their procedures are formulated. Traditionally, most IRB-approved research is not geared to cultural research. Examples are psychology and audiology, to name a few. While historians and sociologists are often required to submit to IRB regulations, the questions in IRB application forms ask about possible harmful consequences to the subject(s). Why aren't IRB concerns more cultural? Perhaps it is time for a paradigm shift in this arena so that we can begin to have a Deaf epistemology and Deaf methodology, thus a Deaf (and Deaf woman) standpoint. Yet I have one more area of concern omission of Deaf people in historical texts—that needs attention.

Marginalization in Historical Texts

Rarely do we find mention of Deaf people, specifically Deaf women, in generic history texts. We need to now look at how marginalized people are overlooked in such texts. Black Studies scholar Maulana Karenga says that “History is the struggle and record of humans in the process of humanizing the world, i.e., shaping it in their own image and interests.”31 Historically, members of minority groups are overlooked in mainstream historical texts. Karenga says that society often imposes limitations on the defense and development of human life at various historical points.32 Typically the historical approach includes dredging up old records; providing objective, not interpretive, descriptions of events and/or persons; and overlooking the catalysts behind events. There are tendencies not to have a personal contact(s) with the biographee, and to focus on the "white," excluding members of diverse cultures. Thus because history tends to be written by "men of wealth and leisure," the historical approach is usually from "the white gaze," for example, imposing the white subjectivity on the history of African Americans.33

Most American history texts discuss slavery from the white male perspective, or less. Rarely do these texts reveal exactly how life was for the slaves. Occasionally, slaves are presented as passive dummies living in harmony with their white owners. We do not read about their lives, their hardships, their being at the mercy of the slave
owners. In time, Black Americans, inspired by the civil rights movement in the 1960s, sought to bring their own lives and interests into their history.

Likewise, the role of women is given minimal attention in most historical texts. They are often relegated to the background in the roles of daughters, sisters, wives, or mothers. Their names often appear as an afterthought. Hardly do we know about their lives.

Archival holdings of many famous women are often listed under their husbands’ names. In the early 1970s, two Women’s Studies professors, Sherrill Gluck and Daphne Patai, were frustrated by the glaring absence of women in generic historical texts and began to record using the oral history methodology. The research in the field of Women’s Studies then became “research by, for and with women.”

This new consciousness brought forth an explosion of literature on women.

But not all was rosy even then. Women’s history focused on the Caucasian population. Classism was clearly at work here then. Feminists Andre Lorde, bell hooks, Angela Davis, and Patricia Hill Collins, however, lamented the absence of their black sisters in this field of Women’s Studies, historically and theoretically. Their laments, presented in lectures and essays, moved some women including Carol Berkin and Leslie Horowitz, Linda Kerber and Sharon De Hart, and Sandra Ospolicky to write inclusive historical accounts. It would be fair to also say that such inclusiveness is not always evident even in the twenty-first century. For example, cultural historian Marilyn Yalom failed to include Asian and African women in her research on wives.

How can the role of historical studies help with the development of epistemology and methodology? As mentioned earlier, there is a dearth of mention of Dead people in history texts. But for Dead women, the dearth is even greater. Come to think of this have you ever encountered Dead people in history texts? I have not, not in mainstream academic historical textbooks. Unless you can prove me wrong. But seriously, there have been many famous people who were Dead and made significant contributions to the society: music composer Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827), Texan spy Erastus Dead Smith (1787-1837), sociologist Harriet Martineau (1802-76), inventor Thomas Alva Edison (1847-1931), astronaut Annie Jump Cannon (1863-1941), anthropologist Ruth Fulton Benedict (1887-1948), Girl Scout founder Juliette Gordon Low (1860-1927), to name a few. They were not exactly members of the Dead community, but they were audiologically Dead. For example, Benedict, a classmate and colleague and possibly lover of Margaret Mead, studied various Native American tribes and taught at Columbia University. Oftentimes, their being Dead is not even mentioned.

How about other significant Dead people: educator Laureat Clerc (1785-1869), poet John Carlin (1813-91), writer Laura Redden Searing (1840-1923), professional baseball player William Hoy (1862-1961), publisher Robert Palmetto McGregor (1849-1926), activist Fred Schreiber (1901-85), among many others? These were culturally Dead people who, at one time in their lives, attended state residential schools for the Dead and made significant social contributions. For example, Searing, a former student at the Missouri School for the Dead, was sent to cover Washington, D.C., during the Civil War, and interviewed and befriended many politicians including President Abraham Lincoln and General Ulysses S. Grant.

Can the field of Dead Studies benefit from the insights shared by Lorde, hooks, Davis, Collins? What can we learn to do about this absence of Dead people in history texts? Why is this the case? What are the implications of this absence? What are the implications of this absence for the study of Dead women? If we do know these standpoints, how do these overlap (or not)? We now explore the challenges posed by the omission of Dead women in historical texts and materials.

Deaf HERstory?

When I began to teach the Deaf Women’s Studies course in 1997, I already knew of the great dearth of reading materials by, about, and for Deaf women. But I took up this challenge, not for myself but for students to become aware of this omission. What I had found in the way of reading materials barely scratched the surface, in comparison with the wealth of materials available in Women’s Studies. Ingenuity was the name of the game. It then became logical to require my students to purchase several books when we would read just one chapter from each book. For the first two course offerings, I compiled some articles from journals and books into a notebook that was made available in reserve in the university library. Unfortunately, most of these readings were outdated.

In addition to this challenge was the fact that oftentimes most of the students were rarely knowledgeable about Women’s History. This compelled me to focus the first month of the course with an overview on Women’s History, starting with the 1948 Seneca Falls Convention. We ended this unit with a tour of the Sewall-Belmont House, which was the headquarters of Alice Paul’s National Woman’s Party. Having done this, we moved to explore the social role of Dead women. This again required creativity on account of scant sources. For the last two course offerings, a new addition made to the Deaf Women’s Studies curriculum, the students were required to select a book written either by or about a Deaf woman, read it, review it, and discuss it in class. Their reviews were then showcased in a book display case at the university library, encouraging the students to want to read other books as reviewed by their peers.

To date, there is only one book about the history of Deaf American women by two Dead women. While I do praise this effort, this is less than satisfactory attempt because it is an archival work listing Deaf women with data such as birth/death dates, achievements, and anecdotes. It sorely lacks a theoretical framework. A more recent development had emerged from Canada, which again is an archival listing with personal anecdotes.

In 2001, upon invitation to Kentucky’s Gallaudet University Alumni Association chapter’s annual Ballad/Clerc Day celebration, I was asked to speak about Thomas H. Gallaudet and Laurent Clerc. Instead I decided to shift the focus to six influential Dead women of the nineteenth century, those who lived during the Gallaudet/Clerc era. However, I faced many obstacles in preparing my presentation about Alice Cogswell (1805-30), Eliza Joorndom Clerc (1792-1900), Sophia Fowler Gallaudet (1798-1877), Mina Loyd (1809-1012), Maria Martin (1809-1888), and Agatha Tisgel Hanson (1872-1909). I was already well aware that there are very scant historical documents on Alice prior to her graduation from the Connecticut Asylum for the Education and
Instruction of Deaf and Dumb Persons (CAEHP) and none between her graduation and early death. All we know of Alice is her childhood, her few years at the Asylum, and her early death. Nothing is known of her six years after graduation. In addition, there are no photographs of Alice, but a silhouette that has appeared in many texts. Furthermore, we do not know much about Mrs. Cogswell, Alice's mother, who is relegated to the background.

In developing this presentation, I realized that I was guilty of an archival compilation of birth and death dates, and one or two lines of achievements. Most of the information came from Holcomb and Wood's *Deaf Women.* In an attempt to improve the presentation, I went to the Gallaudet University Archives to seek more information about these six women's achievements. Along with the three archivists there, we could find only their obituaries. Not much was said about their achievements beyond being students. For example, Elizabeth and Sophia were mentioned among the earliest students at CAEPPD. Additionally, the three archivists and I already knew that in 1890 May Martin suggested that Gallaudet University establish a student-run newspaper known as *The Buff and Blue.* Although her brainstorm, she was not selected as the editor-in-chief. Instead a man was chosen. This factual information was not even in the May Martin file, but in the *Buff and Blue* file.

Because of such scantiness in this presentation, I fleshed it out with the history of the 1887 admittance of women to the college. This first group of women included Eliza E Black (Indiana), Georgianna Elliott (Illinois), Anna L. Kurz (Indiana), Hattie A. Leffler (Pennsylvania), Alice May Lowman (Maryland), and Margaret Ellen Rudd (Nebraska). Again, the archivists and I dug into files, coming up with some empty-handed except that Lowman was honored as the first female graduate of the college. Nevertheless, the presentation was quite a bit in Kentucky, prompting the audience into thinking about their deaf foremothers who may have made social achievements or contributions. I also hope that there has been some action since, perhaps in the way of school or class projects, searching the Kentucky School for the Deaf library and archives, as well as interviewing their deaf retired employees and graduates.

Few other published works about Deaf women tend to focus on the management of motherhood in terms of language acquisition. These pieces emerged from research projects studying how Deaf mothers, regardless of the hearing status of their offspring, can be linguistic and cultural role models for hearing parents with deaf infants. For example, my 1995 chapter described how a Deaf mother used signspelling with her daughter from five weeks old to four years old. Other journal articles and dissertations about Deaf women address educational, employment, and social issues. In addition, it is interesting to note that only three authors mentioned in this endnote are Deaf themselves: Kelly, Jauregui, and Singleton.

While there are several dissertations with Deaf women at their centerpieces, there are only two known ethnographic dissertations that explore directly the meaning of the term "gender" among Deaf women. Both Doe and I set out to interview a small pool of Deaf women to learn how they construct the social meaning of gendered terms such as "gender," "sex," "feminism," and "patriarchy." Doe's informants were Canadians who attended Deaf residential schools. My ASL teacher informants had various educational experiences, ranging from being the only Deaf student in a public school to attending an oral program to having lived their entire childhood in a state residential school. One of the commonalities among all of my informants was exploring from Gallaudet College. Yet, in spite of the eight years' gap in Doe's and my work and the distant locations of research, we both reached the same conclusion: gender, sex, feminism, and patriarchy were not actively part of their vocabularies. Does this linguistic omission indicate a lack of historical knowledge? In addition, both groups of women identified themselves primarily as Deaf persons rather than Deaf women.

Additionally, not only are Deaf women or Deaf people often overlooked in mainstream publications, but literature about them also tends to be "degendered." That is, Deaf women are rarely given significant space. Pedagogical research in the education of deaf children rarely separates the sexes. We do not know, for example, if there are different learning strategies for deaf girls and boys, whereas we know this difference from research conducted on hearing adolescents. It would be interesting if researchers would take upon themselves to explore if there are any significant differences between deaf girls and deaf boys. In spite of its attention to issues of marginalization and oppression by the dominant hearing culture, the field of Deaf Studies has yet to include the study of the Deaf female experience.

New Directions?

The Deaf women's view of themselves as Deaf persons rather than as Deaf women leads me to wonder if the serious absence of Deaf women, or even Deaf people, in generic historical texts is responsible for this perception. Had they been aware of achievements made by other Deaf women, especially in the late nineteenth century, would they have had a different self-perception? How do we bring forth this awareness?

With apologies to my colleagues Lane, Hoffmeister, and Bahan who coauthored together, I profess much disappointment that their 1996 Journey Into the Deaf World has only one paragraph on page 162 discussing Deaf women. Historians Van Cleve and Couch have written a widely read and popular historical account of the development of the American Deaf community. I have yet to meet a Deaf Studies scholar who has not read this text. Still, this text was written from a hearing white male perspective. More recently is Wayne Coffey, which is indeed a fascinating read, however, written by a hearing white man. As I look at my own bookshelves at home, I find so few books written by culturally Deaf women: Padden, Holcomb and Wood, Jankowski, Bruegmann. Most Deaf-related historical texts on my shelves are written by hearing men: Battison, Winfield, Schuchman, Sacks, Schein, Lane, Preston, Baynton, Wrigley, Armstrong, Stokoe, among other books that focus on Deaf Culture as well. Some of the ASL teachers I formants interviewed for my dissertation also lamented the high number of hearing people writing our histories.

In teaching the Deaf Women's Studies course, I am always faced with the dilemma of a lack of substantial reading materials on Deaf women. How do we improve this sorry lacking state of literature on the Deaf female body? One idea is to encourage Deaf women to donate, or sell, their written materials, photographs, and artwork, especially
journals, to the Gallaudet University Archives or their state residential school for the Deaf. This would encourage young Deaf Studies scholars to research and to publish in expand the repertoire of historical texts to be available to future generations to come.

Furthermore, curricula for most of the Introduction to Deaf Studies and Deaf Culture courses seem to be based on a white male construction. An exploration of current materials shows a glaring omission of the Deaf female experience. Not only is that missing, but also the diversity within the Deaf community, such as Black people, Hispanics, Asians, Gay/Lesbians, Native Americans, and now women. Why this omission? In other words, why should white hearing people, or men, care about us? Write about us? Include us in historical texts? How have the others been writing about us? Why are they doing that? What new directions should we undertake, to encourage the inclusion of the Deaf female experience, the Deaf experience even, in generic historical texts?

In writing this essay, I realize that I posed more questions than answers. But then I hope these questions bring forth more food for thought for you.

Notes
8. While the beginnings of the women’s movement in America can be traced to 1848 when Stanton and Anthony organized the first Woman’s Rights convention in Seneca Falls, it took over a century for Women’s Studies to emerge. Women began to reconsider their social roles during the Vietnam War era. Student radicals then organized “teach-ins,” rallies, and marches and closed down college campuses. Women were active participants in these activities; however, many felt dismissed by their male colleagues: Sandra Olyck, The Routledge Historical Atlas of Women in America (New York: Routledge, 2004). Women typed and filed while men made public statements; women offered suggestions and men made policy; women cooked and cleaned and attended offices. The women’s movement and Women’s Studies then emerged in San Diego in 1970, setting the stage for a new paradigm in cultural studies programs: B. Luebke and M. E. Reilly, Women’s Studies Graduates: The First Generation (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997).
12. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Manifesto of the Communist Party (New York: International Press, 1980). It is interesting to note that the first woman convention in Seneca Falls was held in 1848, the same year that the Manifesto of the Communist Party appeared. Note that the Manifesto came out in 1848, but it was not for another 100 years that it became available in English.
18. This phenomenon is discussed in various texts but not limited to the following: Carol Padden and Tom Humphries, Deaf America: Voices from a Culture (Cambridge: Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990); Parasnis, Cultural and Language Diversity and the Deaf Experience: Harlan Lane, Robert Hoffmeister, and Ben Bahan, A Journey into the Deaf-World (San Diego: DawnSignPress, 1996); Arlene Blumenthal Kelly, “How Deaf Women Construct Teaching, Language and Culture, and Gender: An Ethnographic Study of ASL Teachers” (PhD diss., American Studies, University of Maryland, College Park, 2001).
28. Ibid.
32. Ibid., 71.
35. These sentences were raised in the following works: Andi Locito, "The Master’s Tools Will Never