Introduction
The Lens of Culture

We wrote our first book, *Deaf in America: Voices from a Culture*, to explain the use of “culture” as a way of describing the lives of Deaf people. The term had long been used to describe the practices of hearing communities around the world, but it had never been widely used to describe Deaf people. In 1980, as the idea was beginning to circulate among Deaf people, we took on the task of explaining how a group of people who did not have any distinctive religion, clothing, or diet—or even inhabit a particular geographical space they called their own—could be called “cultural.”

We used a definition of culture that focused on beliefs and practices, particularly the central role of sign language in the everyday lives of the community. This characteristic, among others, distinguished Deaf people from hearing people and from other deaf and hard-of-hearing people (such as those who lost their hearing late in life) who do not use sign language but rely on different communicative adaptations. Following James Woodward’s example, we adopted the convention of using the capitalized “Deaf” to describe the cultural practices of a group within a group. We used the lowercase “deaf” to refer to the condition of deafness, or the larger group of individuals with hearing loss without reference to this particular culture. Using this distinction, Deaf people range from those who are profoundly deaf to those who hear nearly well...
enough to carry on a conversation in spoken English and use the
telephone, called hard of hearing. We retain this distinction here.1
In 1912 George Veditz, a Deaf man about whom we will say
more in a later chapter, wrote about himself and his community as
“first, last, and for all time, the people of the eye.”2 He did not yet
have a vocabulary to describe Deaf people as having a “culture,” as
we do today. But his sense that Deaf people’s lives revolve around
the visual and that they engage in practices associated with seeing
is one element of what we tried to capture as we wrote about Deaf
culture. We drew from his idea of Deaf people as guided by some
central core of “seeing,” but we stated more: Deaf people’s prac-
tices of “seeing” are not necessarily natural or logical, in the sense
that they have a heightened visual sense, but their ways of “see-
ing” follow from a long history of interacting with the world in cer-
tain ways—in cultural ways. This history involves the schools they
attended, the communities they joined after leaving school, the
jobs they had, the poetry and theater they created, and finally the
vocabulary they gave themselves for describing what they know.

As we look back at how we wrote about Deaf people in that
book, we recognize that we were writing not as anthropolo-
gists, but as agents of a changing discourse and consciousness, as we
tried to model a new vocabulary to describe the community.
Through the 1970s, we had each personally experienced a dra-
matic change in ideas about sign language. For most of our lives
until that time, we had called our language “the sign language,” as
did our family and friends at the time, but with the advent of sci-
entific studies on sign languages, our language acquired a new name,
“American Sign Language” or “ASL.” The name placed it in the
class of human languages, and commanded a different view of its
history. The redefinition also made clear that there were many dif-
ferent signed languages around the world, each with a different
structure and history, from Japanese Sign Language to Ugandan
Sign Language to Brazilian Sign Language. American Sign Lan-
guage is used in the United States and in English-speaking areas of
Canada, and is distinct from other European signed languages in-
cluding British Sign Language, whose history does not intersect
with ASL. With the new definition, we could explain why sign lan-
guages and spoken languages have different histories. British Sign
Language is not related to American Sign Language because of a
fact about schools for deaf children: the first deaf school in the
United States was founded in 1817 not by a Deaf British signer, but
by a Deaf French signer, whose influence on ASL can still be seen
today in some of the vocabulary ASL shares with the French sign
language, LSF.

In our first book, we wrote with the express purpose of re-
framing the practices and ideas of the community as “Deaf cul-
ture.” At the time, the idea of “culture” gave us a useful construct
for describing the varied ways of life of Deaf people in the United
States. We used narratives, poetry, popular stories, and other texts
to argue for the vitality of a culture embedded within the larger
population of deaf and hard-of-hearing people in the United
States. Adam Kuper observes about the word “culture” that it is
“always defined in opposition to something else.”3 For us, the term
culture allowed us to move away from what we and our colleagues
believed was a debilitating description of deaf people as having
specific behaviors or ideas about themselves or others that were
the consequence of their not being able to hear. We cringed at sci-
entific studies that tried to match degrees of hearing loss with spe-
cific social behaviors, suggesting an uncomplicated relationship
between hearing loss and behavior. We argued instead that being
Deaf, the specific and particular way of being, was shaped power-
fully by shared histories.

We had begun to write the first part of what we now understand
as “the promise of culture.” The concept of culture reframed for us
the idea of being Deaf, and allowed us to explore Deaf people’s
long tradition of language and history as a way of understanding
of talking about being Deaf and living with others. "Deaf culture" is no longer the odd phrase it once was. Indeed it has become deeply entrenched in Deaf life; we are sometimes startled to see job advertisements for teaching or social service positions that require the candidate to possess "knowledge of Deaf culture." Young Deaf people today use the term without a hint of the self-consciousness that we had when we first began to use it. What a difference twenty years can make.

From the 1980s until today, we have watched the expansion of the term "Deaf culture" into new and unexpected areas, notably in literature and websites on cochlear implants and genetic research. A recent publication in a genetics journal referred to some "culturally Deaf individuals" who reported in a survey to have strongly negative attitudes toward genetic testing. This is what we write about in this book, the second part of "the promise of culture." In this book, we explore conflicts, tensions, and contradictions in the idea of Deaf culture. This is the other side, where the idea of culture has delivered on some of its promise as evidenced by how widely it is used by Deaf and hearing people, but also has brought to the surface strains and tensions. We believe some of these tensions are quite old, as we will show in the following chapters, while others are new. With a maturity that comes from a discourse of culture that we have participated in over the past thirty years, we now feel able, as we might not have been when we wrote the first book, to examine some of the effects and consequences that came from this rapid shift in how we and other Deaf people see ourselves.

The chapters that follow are not a history of the Deaf community in the United States, but a selection of cultural moments in our history. It is not a history because it does not provide a deep description of events from the time of the founding of the first schools for deaf children in the United States to the present. Nor does it cover all the significant events of the community's history,
or even most of them. There are very good histories by others that we have relied on heavily to write our chapters, and throughout we refer our readers to these texts. What we have done in this book is to select a sequence of moments that we believe have been profoundly influential in shaping the modern Deaf community, arranged in chronological order from 1820 to the present. We chose these moments because we believe they resonate very much today, and are used by Deaf people as they navigate their path into the future.

Some of this cultural history is well-known to the community—for example, the founding of the first school for deaf children in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1817, which brought isolated groups of deaf children together into a larger community and led to the emergence of American Sign Language. But some of Deaf people’s history is less well-known. Only a few months after the third school for deaf children was founded in Philadelphia in 1820, its board of directors received a shocking allegation that their new principal had “inappropriately touched” female students. The incident, which we describe in Chapter 1, foreshadowed nearly two centuries of dominance and control of bodies by institutions established by hearing people for the care and education of Deaf children. It is a history that is silent and shameful, and full of conflict. Yet today, many Deaf people talk with respect about schools for the deaf, even as they acknowledge the sordid history of abuse in deaf schools. Others say they have been wounded by years of repression during their childhoods. For Deaf people to hold at the same time respectful and painful attitudes about deaf schools is the kind of conflict and contradiction we want to explore in this book.

In the chapters that follow, we describe moments that we believe cast a long shadow on Deaf people’s history, on the problem of deaf bodies, the problem of voice and self-expression, and the struggle for community. Deaf people’s bodies have been labeled, segregated, and controlled for most of their history, and as we will argue, this legacy is still very much present in the specter of future “advances” in cochlear implants and genetic engineering. We explore moments of great anxiety when threats to “eliminate” signed language almost took over deaf education at the turn of the twentieth century. We look at films and other texts to understand how the community valiantly argued for the continued existence of signed language. As a community made up of some individuals who do not speak and some who do, some who do not hear at all and some who hear some, and all of whom draw the label of “disabled” by the larger community. Deaf people are seen as clearly not like anyone else. This feeling of being from a small, different, and exotic group colors the lives of Deaf people. We often feel besieged, controlled, and patronized, even as our remarkable sign language is celebrated and admired in public. George Veditz worried in 1913 about the future of sign language, and still in 2004, we worry. Deaf people were then, and remain today, subjects of all kinds of investigations—sometimes with powerful consequences as in the linguistic investigation of sign languages, but also with worrisome consequences as when medical professionals advise some parents with deaf children that they shouldn’t allow their children to sign if they wish them to learn to speak.

We write about the changing work lives of Deaf people in the middle of the twentieth century and what consequences such changes had for the social and cultural lives of Deaf people toward the end of that century. We also write about moments when sea changes occurred that reshaped the ways Deaf people presented themselves to the hearing public, such as when Deaf theater added hearing actors on the stage to give voice to their performances in 1967. As we interviewed family members, friends, and colleagues about the middle of the century, we became acutely aware of the passing of a generation, of Deaf men and women who are in the twilight of their long and eventful lives. Nearly all of them attended schools for the deaf. They eagerly filled jobs left vacant by
men and women who left for the Second World War, and when the war was over and soldiers returned, many had to find other jobs. Some became active in Deaf clubs and associations, building a foundation for the Deaf community's advocacy efforts today. Their stories are rich with sentiment and sometimes irony, but always return to similar themes of independence, self-sufficiency, and self-determination. This book is in part a way to remember a generation whose stories can still be told, but not for much longer.

We purposely left out our personal histories in our first book because we were uncomfortable with descriptions of deafness and deaf people that focused intensely and, we believed, too voyeuristically on the deaf experience. It seemed to us that there were, on the one hand, scientific books about deafness and hearing loss, and on the other, personal stories about deaf people born deaf or losing their hearing, overcoming their deafness, and becoming successful despite their handicap. One side was cool and professional, the other emotional and occasionally, maudlin. We were suspicious of a tradition of writing about Deaf people as objects of description, but not as masters of their own description. As we described the pursuit of understanding culture in general and Deaf culture in particular, we carefully left our personal lives out of the picture, even as we made brief references to our backgrounds—Tom lost his hearing at age six and spent his childhood as the only deaf person in a small rural town in South Carolina, and Carol grew up in a Deaf family in the Washington, D.C., area.

We understand now that our personal lives are intertwined in the very same history we describe in this book and that we too are implicated in "the promise of culture." Jim Clifford, an anthropologist, describes this kind of conflict as "the state of being in culture while looking at culture." We write about the very thing that we live every day of our lives, and "culture" is not merely an abstraction for us. In the last chapter we describe some of our experiences and trace how we have been affected by the changes our community has experienced.

As we mentioned earlier, we could have selected many important moments for this book, but we believe the ones we chose illustrate the common experiences of the American Deaf community since it first came into being over two centuries ago. We are interested in issues of power and dominance in the relationships between groups of people, in part because of our own academic interests, but also because as a very small community living within a much larger country of hearing people, these issues are unavoidable. Deaf and hard-of-hearing people who use ASL as a primary language in the United States and in English-speaking areas of Canada have been variously estimated at between 100,000 to 300,000 individuals. This makes Deaf people in the United States more numerous than primarily French-speaking people in this country (that is, those who use French at home rather than English), but certainly less numerous than other minority language communities such as the Spanish-speaking community. Like other language communities, Deaf people battle for language rights, and like other disabled people, Deaf people dislike being viewed only as medical objects in need of treatment. Battling against dominance and control is a primary theme in modern Deaf life, and it is one we write about in this book.

As we write about the history of Deaf people's ideas of themselves as they confront the powerful ideas of others, we are mindful of this legacy as we look to the future. We write to offer some context for how to think about Deaf people's future especially while science is making plans for our future as well. As classes in ASL reach even higher levels of popularity in the United States, new discoveries are being made about the genetic bases of deafness. Cochlear implants are no longer experimental, but are routinely offered to parents of deaf children. We exist in a time of re-
spect and celebration for difference, yet there is an unending drive to repair and replace. In 1913, George Veditz worried about a rising drumbeat of intolerance for sign language and urged us to preserve the language “for coming generations of Deaf people.” Deaf people carried out his mission and preserved the sign language for a century more. Indeed, we have brought to the language an unprecedented level of respect. Somewhere in our present, among the details of our lives and our history, there must be a way to the future.