# 1. *Talking Culture and Culture Talking*

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That there is a discipline of Deaf Studies today is probably in large part due to the fact that there has been a lot of "talking" in the past forty years and even before that. Many of today's Deaf Studies scholars have been part of this talking, and many were among those who actually started it, or at least poured fuel on the fire to get it going. But a lot of the talking had nothing to do with scholars and researchers and had everything to do with Deaf people all over the country, and the world for that matter. The "talking" I am referring to has two forms, "culture talking" and "talking culture."

First, talking culture. Many of us have been talking Deaf Culture for quite some time. Many of us have built our careers around it, built bodies of literature and research around it. I think anyone who has been involved with Deaf people over the past four decades knows well the subject and form of this talk that has been central to a theory that connects deaf peoples all over the world to the notion of "culture." It is through those of us who could not and would not stop talking culture that there grew a rich national and world discourse in which talking about Deaf Culture is the frequent subject.

But before we talked culture, culture talked. Without mentioning the word "culture," Deaf people have historically maintained a discourse that was about themselves, their lives, their beliefs, their interpretation of the world, their needs, and their dreams. It is this internal process of "culture talking," probably one of the strongest of cultural processes, that forms the basis for both private and public expressions of what we know today as "Deaf Culture." We would not be talking culture if we had no clue as to what Deaf people think or know or what their behaviors or artifacts (such as American Sign Language [ASL]) mean. So we depend on private expressions of self or culture "going public" to be able to talk culture in relation to Deaf people.

It is this relationship between private and public expression of culture that fascinates me, this process of revealing the inner workings of Deaf people's lives that is so attractive to me both on a personal level and as a student of what Greg Urban calls "metaculture" or "culture that is about culture."[1] Thinking about culture and, subsequently, talking about culture, or talking culture, aids in the circulation of meaning and, in that way as Urban proposes, is a process of acceleration of culture. Culture talking is an unbelievably powerful trait of humans. We express to each other all the meaning and knowledge of our worlds and in doing so create kinds of "imagined communities."[2] We express a world that emanates from "me" but includes "we." We express the kind of communities that we wish to have but also reveal what we don't intend.

I view the discourse and rhetoric of the past forty years among Deaf people as a

search for "voice." Having written elsewhere about the problem of voice for Deaf people[3] I don't want to go into it here, but I do want to state the obvious: culture talking for Deaf people was not always about "culture," and we began talking culture only recently (first in the 1960s) when we began to desire to call our private world a "culture." And when we began to want our public image to be more like our private image of ourselves. Thus we needed a new way of talking about ourselves. This new voice was heavily embedded within a discourse of culture.

There were some struggles in this process. After an early "wrong" path, telling our story to hearing people and having them tell it back to us, we have been getting the "secret" out ourselves. At first, it was mostly hearing people who articulated our story in the language of culture (too many to cite here). Most early works that attempt to describe ASL and a culture of Deaf people were by hearing people reporting what they had learned from us. Predictably this did lead to some resentment and ultimately to more and more Deaf people telling our story ourselves. But first, we had to overcome the pressures from within that constrained our expression of our private world.

Those pressures were quite strong and self-suppressing. Some may remember the reluctance to teach ASL to strangers and a suspicion of hearing people's motives in wanting to learn ASL that led us to a reticence to share our language. After all, they had never expressed much interest in it before and what good could come of their learning our "secret" language? Was it a good idea to let them know it, and know us? Would that be safe?

Another pressure constraining the projection of the private into public space was the pressure to conform in our writing to a writing tradition that only allowed us space to write autobiographies in the frame of "overcoming deafness." For most of our history, when Deaf people took up the pen and decided to write in English, it was invariably about themselves and their lives. This was basically the only genre open to them. The only genre in which they would be welcomed and their writing found to be interesting and, therefore, publishable. This is not unlike the experience of other ethnic writers who found that the writing tradition of telling one's life story was a first, and sometimes only, path to public expression. This writing tradition, being the only one accessible, served as a constraint on other kinds of creative expression.

Related to the pressure to write only in a limited tradition, was the pressure to "make nice" with hearing people and not offend, the pressure to "tell stories" or little white lies about everything from our desire to have Deaf babies (we said we didn't want them) to denying that we were actually reproducing them. We wanted them but we could not say that we wanted them so we lied. Many Deaf families have stories of how they or their children became deaf due to illness or trauma. Many Deaf adults today can remember their Deaf parents telling them and others that their deafness was not genetic. Common were our attempts to reconcile our internal desires with the horror that hearing people expressed about knowingly having deaf babies. Despite these attempts to "make nice" with hearing people's demanding stance that deafness is "bad," Deaf people, of course, continued to secretly desire Deaf babies and reproduce them unabated.

In short, we silenced ourselves. We reacted to these pressures as many other ethnic minorities did. We stifled self-expression, self-pride, and our true voice. But for the past

forty years we have been constantly thinking about how we are talking. We have had to reexamine everything we say and analyze every word in light of a new idea, how to express our private world without the constraint of others' cultural bias. Our task, and the one that concerns the field of Deaf Studies so strongly at this time, has been to understand what the voice of this "new" Deaf Culture is.

Coming to voice, as I see it, is not about coming out. It is about the subsistence of individual and group sensibilities. Finding ways to talk about our selves may be a process of affirmation and confession, as coming out often is, but it is a different process, it involves developing a sustaining voice, one that sustains the individual and the group alike. For one thing, coming to voice often reaches the level of rhetoric and literature and art and is embedded in the artifacts of each of these genres. So, while talking culture may be about revealing or creating identities as some people say, it seems to me that it is as much about *processing identities* and *creating artifacts* in the process that help us to hold and circulate among us and among others those notions that we wish to project into public space.

But when we began this process of talking culture back in the late 1960s and early 1970s, we had a problem. We had little idea what to say. And it turns out, crucially, that if we were to claim that there is such a thing as "Deaf Culture" we must quickly find some artifacts of it. There must be art and literature that is "Deaf." Those of you who are Deaf may remember the near panic that we felt when we realized that we would be asked to produce these examples of our difference. And they had to be darn good examples too. Well, first we produced the best cultural artifact of all, our language, ASL. But that wasn't enough; we needed to present, for public scrutiny, a literature. A few pieces of ASL poetry would not do the trick; we needed to collect as much as we could as fast as we could.

As a result of public insistence that we produce evidence of culture, I believe, for forty years we have been "collecting ourselves."[4] We have spent all this time searching for *the* authentic literature and art of ourselves. We have been trying to assemble the material of our world that is unique to us. This has been an incredible task as most Deaf Studies scholars know.

As hard as this task has been (this simple act of trying to find and identify material representations of our cultural lives), harder has been the task of identifying what it is in our private world that we want to be consumed in the public world. In a sense this is a useless endeavor because, ultimately, we may not have any control whatsoever over what is revealed or what is seen by others. But in another sense, it is a useful and important aspect of our forty years of talking culture. If we think of our attempts to collect and catalog our art and literature (as well as interpret and analyze it) as a first step in the distribution of our culture for public consumption, then we are involved in the distribution of our private world and we ought to think about that as an important activity.

We began by identifying what we considered to be "high" examples of Deaf art and literature. The 1970s marked the emergence of the "great" ASL poets, Dorothy Miles, Ella Lentz, Clayton Valli, to mention a few. It also was a time of confusion about what constituted Deaf literature. Was poetry composed by Deaf poets who worked in English and not ASL to be considered as artifacts of a culture of Deaf people? Poets like Mervin

Garretson, Will Madsen, Robert Panara, and even Dorothy Miles in the beginning, composed their poetry in English. Since they were all Deaf people, were their English works then to be considered Deaf literature? For that matter, were Deaf authors who wrote in English in other genres to be included? Or did Deaf literature have to be ASL literature? This question still tends to be a bit problematic even today.

A problem of collection immediately arose in regard to ASL literature. With little recording of ASL literature to be found before the spread of videotape, how could one argue that a rich ASL literature existed? This was a serious issue at many colleges and universities as they began to offer ASL courses and deal with issues of whether to allow the use of ASL to meet various language and humanities requirements for graduation. Proposals to have ASL meet the language requirement of a university almost always ran head-on into a challenge: show us the literature. The few and contemporary examples of ASL literature that existed on videotape during the 1970s and even today often proved insufficient to convince traditional academicians. I remember getting frequent requests from colleges and universities around the country for help in identifying a literature of sufficient weight to convince skeptical faculty committees or, at least, for a convincing argument that would explain why more ASL literature was not readily available. A common explanation that went around was that one had to think of ASL literature in terms of an "oral tradition" or like those many other world languages that had no printed forms.

Locating such treasures as the cache of films produced for the National Association of the Deaf in 1913 including the George Veditz speech "The Preservation of the Sign Language" was probably the most significant outcome of our early efforts to collect ASL literature. Not because it contained examples of scintillating literature but because it was old. We needed to establish not just that ASL literature existed but that it had existed a long time ago. It seemed that "literature" had to be old in order for it to have cachet. We have struggled to find circumstantial and indirect evidence of the existence of ASL literate forms earlier than 1913. The best evidence that we have besides early films is the performance of our older generations and the histories told and written about community life that sometimes describe vibrant Deaf community theaters and club performance.

In the visual arts, we have tended, I think, to seek out Deaf art that explicitly promotes the notion that we can *see* the "Deaf" in the work. At the early stage of talking culture, we needed to stand up and name the artists and name their works and come up with the numbers and weight to impress those who argued there could be no Deaf Culture without a Deaf art. But what was Deaf art? Was it defined by who the artist was? How "Deaf" did an artist have to be? Did Goya qualify? As far as we know he didn't use a sign language, so what did that make his art? Or did there have to be something in the work of art itself that defined it as "Deaf." We quickly embraced the works of artists like Betty Miller, Harry Williams, Morris Broderson (he had fingerspelling in his art!), and others because we could clearly identify either themes that were considered to be Deaf themes or qualities that we could point to and say, "this symbolizes the Deaf experience, this art could only have been done by a person who is Deaf." I fear to think back to how much we stretched this categorization. But at the time we needed a very elastic defini-

tion of Deaf art because we had not yet figured out who we were and, therefore, did not know what the boundaries of Deaf art might be. Hopefully we will never completely get comfortable with the boundaries. After all, it is art, and art redefines itself every second. No, it has not been an easy task, this collecting of ourselves.

In literature and in art, we will continue to collect and catalog and analyze. However, I am hoping that we will achieve something more. In fact, I think we have to if we hope to realize an aesthetic that is something more than just appreciation of the fact of production. We all know Deaf poets that we like and don't like. We all know Deaf artists that we like and don't like. We are less sure *why,* and we are very unsure what the "why" should be. I think we are still unsure what the qualities are that constitute criticism of Deaf art and literature.

Many years ago when we still had the annual "Celebration" art festivals in Berkeley, one year a group of the attending artists stayed after the festival to spend a day together discussing art. I was asked to facilitate this meeting. I prepared an agenda, and one of the items near the end that I raised was the question of art criticism within the Deaf community. I was not prepared for the response. I think in my naïveté I expected that we would be able to talk about the contribution that art criticism could make to the development and enrichment of an entity that I then thought of as "Deaf art." I recall that I was thinking about how much I found some art I was seeing to be totally lacking in any redeeming value, while other works were compelling, and that it would be good to have a discussion about the distinction. But, unfortunately, the timing was obviously wrong. Clearly, at that early stage of the emergence of Deaf art as a genre, criticism was a luxury we would not afford. At just the point when we were starting to go public with our art, it seemed I was a bit nuts to become discriminating. We needed all we could get as fast as we could get it . . . and damn the aesthetics.

So that discussion at Celebration didn't get very far. As I recall, it quickly got to the question of how a community that is as small and intimate as the Deaf community could sustain Deaf critics of Deaf works of art. It seemed difficult to imagine how any of us could openly critique the work of Deaf artists without the risk of offending on a more personal level. Given the nature of the Deaf community, would not personal motivations rather than aesthetics color all criticism? Would not such criticism be too harmful to the ecology of artistic thought and production? No one could seem to get beyond that concern, and the sense I got is that it might be impossible.

But, I'm back today with this issue because I think it's important. A field of criticism is not yet emergent for Deaf art or literature and, inasmuch as criticism plays multiple roles in the arts—making important challenges to notions of aesthetics, influencing public consumption, and influencing production—it is not meaningfully present today.

This is troubling because the alternative to continuing without a strong critical examination of art and literature is that both will be driven by market forces. We will end up with little else on the market but what is useful for sign language students, for interpreter training, or for teachers to use in Deaf education classrooms. Because this is where consumption of Deaf art occurs most frequently. I don't believe we can afford an aesthetic driven by what is popular and marketable. Let me remind you that the most

popular piece of art collected in the United States is a painting of dogs playing poker. I think that's all I need to say to make that point. It is unfortunate to me that Deaf literature and art are still at the stage of finding and cataloging and perhaps analyzing to some extent. We need to talk culture to elevate the greatness in our art and literature, starting from within with the development of a notion and a process of art and literary criticism.

If we view art and literature as ways we express a collective consciousness, we can view both as forms of culture talking. One of the things we have to guard against (and could guard against if we had a stronger field of art criticism) is the compulsion to talk culture in our art and literature instead. If all of our art and literature is about convincing the rest of the world that we have a culture or about telling the world how much pain it has caused us, we are bound by our relationship to the other and not free. Of course, I understand that we are bound by our relationship to the other probably forever, but that should not prevent us from seeking to be more than just reactionary. We need to do more than just explain ourselves to the other in our art and literature. Culture talking is what we do, unlike talking culture, which is what we *have* to do in order to project the private into public space. As good and valuable as our art and literature has been, we need to elevate into public consciousness more than just a "liberation" art or literature.

It seems to me that the challenge we face, now that we have so successfully talked culture for forty years, is to get back to culture talking. I hear many of you talking about "what can Deaf Culture teach the world," and I have also raised that question. In fact, in my teaching, I use Deaf people and their lives to ask students to rethink language and to rethink culture. I ask them to examine notions of groups and intergroup relationships that go beyond the particular case of Deaf people that we happen to be studying. But I suggest that we also need to study what is "cultural" about Deaf people for its own sake. In other words, we need to better understand, to use Urban again, how Deaf Culture moves through the world.[5] We are nowhere near finished with this work.

We have some promising examples of emerging work that seeks to understand how Deaf Culture moves through the world in different disciplines. In education, we have a focus on what constitutes a Deaf practice in the classroom. We are talking culture in our research on classroom practice, and our focus is on how culture talks, that is, what indigenous practices find their way into the classroom when Deaf adults are the teachers? In history, we have moved beyond early studies of the "history of Deaf people in education" to study the evolution of ideas and practices within Deaf communities. In other areas of study it seems likely that the future will see studies that are more inclined to look at cultural processes rather than "the culture," an important orientation for avoiding the trap of "what is and what isn't" Deaf Culture, and thus understanding our world from the inside out.

In Deaf art and literature, we can do and should do more. To encourage contemporary artists and writers, poets and performers, we need to offer them a concept of Deaf art and literature that is not about collecting or producing art for public display for the purpose of exhibition of ourselves. We are at a point where exhibiting ourselves does not have to be all-consuming; we can afford to let culture talk about something other than ourselves and transcend our relationship with the other.

Malcolm X told his story to Alex Haley and called it an "autobiography."[6] While one can argue that it is not one, no one can doubt that it is a powerful work and no one can doubt the truths in it. When you read Haley on the work of preparing this book—feeling each other out, developing a way to talk to each other, agreeing on parameters—and read Haley's introduction on Malcolm's obvious self-consciousness about the whole process, you sense very strongly that these two men tacitly agreed to "talk race." We have tacitly agreed to talk "Deaf Culture" for forty years. Like Malcolm, we have been effective.

The best sign of this is that deaf children, actually even young deaf adults in college these days, do not seem to share our compulsion to talk culture, and perhaps that is a wonderful sign. But I think that we, and especially those of us in Deaf Studies, now need to achieve a balance between the rhetoric of talking culture that too often seeks to "prove" something and talking culture that is about the circulation and acceleration of culture. When we free ourselves in this way, our art and literature will have survived and thrived after the cathartic period of hyper self-definition we have gone through in the last half of the twentieth century. Put simply, we need to move on from "How are we different?" to "How are we being?"

## Notes

1. Greg Urban, *Metaculture: How Culture Moves through the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 3.
2. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).
3. Tom Humphries, "Of Deaf-mutes, the *Strange,* and the Modern Deaf Self," in *Culturally Affirmative Psychotherapy with Deaf Persons,* ed. Neil S. Glickman and M. Harvey (Mahwan, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1996), 99–114. Tom Humphries, "The Modern Deaf Self: Indigenous Practices and Educational Imperatives," in *Literacy and Deaf People: Cultural and Contextual Perspectives,* ed. Brenda J. Brueggemann (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 2004), 29–46. Carol Padden and Tom Humphries, *Inside Deaf Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005).
4. James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988).
5. Urban, *Metaculture.*
6. Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Ballantine, 1992).