

Deaf and Disability Studies: Do They Tango?

Burch, S., & Kafer, A. (Eds). (2010). *Deaf and Disability Studies: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press. 310 pages. Hardcover. \$55.00.

I was introduced to Deaf Studies during a culture and disability course that emphasized the embedding of attitudes of and towards people with disabilities in their cultural environments, and that Deaf people's reality was partly different (sign language, opinion about mainstreaming) and partly similar (stigmatization, institutionalization, inaccessibility, paternalism). Later I was surprised by the indifference and even hostility with which Deaf Studies scholars distanced themselves from Disability Studies, in contrast with their interest in studies of gender, sexual identity, and ethnicity.

Although Disability Studies tried to de-stigmatize the label "disability," many Deaf Studies scholars rejected the label, and Disability Studies has largely excluded deaf people's experiences, not recognizing the centrality of language issues. The editors are applauded for trying to address the unexplored intersections through a selection of essays, organized around three themes. The section "Identities and Locations" explores deaf identity discourses in the United States, Nigeria, India, and Denmark. "Alliances and Activism" describes alliances between deaf and hearing companions and within gender and disability activism. The concluding section, titled "Boundaries and Overlaps," addresses the relationship between the two fields.

Several essays are challenging and refreshing, demonstrating how deaf people's affirmations of identity are *situated* within different moments in time and in different places around the world. Inspiring are the articles that explore how deaf people use and amend this situatedness strategically to attain successful alliances. Unfortunately, several of the essays felt off track, such as a personal story about being deaf in Africa, an article about deaf communities' responses to AIDS and an article that criticized the lack of sign

language access at UN meetings. These did not contribute to a better understanding of the intersections of Deaf and Disability Studies.

When considering the whole selection of essays, an imbalance stands out: all the contributions in the first two sections address *deaf* people's experiences, with references to the concept of "disability" as such producing a one-sided picture. The "interdisciplinary" texts in the third section largely state the obvious: that there is overlap and difference between the disciplines, hence the need to be critical, open, and cooperative. As Everelles states on p. 217: "rather than interrogate the relationship, each group borrows the other's oppressive associations in an attempt to explain its own oppression," so "intersectionality as a concept is only marginally engaged."

I believe it is necessary that a constructive and fruitful relationship between the disciplines is based on a dialectical process that starts from an in-depth study of what fundamentally constitutes the two disciplines and—also missing in this book—their newest developments. For example the "second wave" of Deaf Studies brings a new focus on embodiment, epistemologies, ontologies, geographies, and transnationalism. Only from such a solid basis, one can start exploring what the disciplines can become when they "tango," to use Brueggemann's useful metaphor.

Instead of offering one read-through to get a grasp on interdisciplinary perspectives, this book rather invites itself to be used in a selective way. Readers can choose which essays suit their interests by consulting the useful table with key words that is offered in the book.

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