

16. *Queer as Deaf: Intersections*

MJ BIENVENU

Identity: WHAT?

CAN A DEAF PERSON IDENTIFY as Lesbian or Gay and not as Deaf? Can we be one or the other and not both? At the 2002 Gallaudet Culture and Language Colloquium panel on "Culture within Culture," black Deaf storyteller Evon Black was asked the question, "Which are you first: black or Deaf?" She responded, "I expected this question. I think it is a very stupid question. There is no point in answering that." To this, I thought, "It's about time someone answers exactly that way." I have often been asked a similar question, "Do you feel more Deaf or more Lesbian?" What does this mean exactly? Does one identity preclude the other? From my experience, it seems one is not allowed to be both in the Deaf community. Perhaps this is true for other minority communities, too. You must choose to be either Deaf or a Lesbian. At least this has been the case historically. However, the concept of Deaf L/G is beginning to emerge in the Deaf community.

In 1969, the Gay community at large engaged in a profound event that would eventually change the place of Gay men and Lesbians in society today. In New York City the Gay community was tired of oppression, mistreatment by police in the city, and unnecessary raids of the gay bars. So in 1969, they fought back in what became known as the Stonewall Riots. The L/G community now has a more recognized place in society, even though we are not always offered a place at the table. Gay men and Lesbians are still stigmatized, we are still victims of hate crime, and we are still not allowed to have the status of marriage. There is a backlash going on now with threats of a U.S. Amendment banning Lesbian/Gay marriages. But progress has been made. More and more jurisdictions include Gay men and Lesbians in antidiscrimination laws. Gay men and Lesbians receive more media attention, albeit stereotyped. And, at long last a U.S. President (Bill Clinton) could use the word "Gay" and have it not sound dirty.

What about Deaf Lesbians/Gay men? Are we welcomed to take our place at the table of the Deaf community? We do not know for sure, but I'd think, no. Deaf identity is highly valued. To clearly assert one's L/G identity *might* be to jeopardize one's Deaf identity. Consequently, Deaf Gay men and Lesbians formed their own groups. One is the Rainbow Alliance of the Deaf, founded in 1977.¹ It seems the Deaf community has been slow to make room at the table. It was not until 1997 that we finally had a Deaf Lesbian caucus at the Deaf Women United (DWU) conference. (There were workshops on Deaf Lesbians and Homophobia in previous conferences, but not a formal caucus.)

Lest you think this accomplishment came easily, let me share a story about what happened in 1993. We had a special interest group for Deaf Lesbians at the DWU conference in New Jersey. The conference organizers directed me to where the meeting was to take place. When I went there, I found the room far from all of the rooms reserved for other special interest groups, and the door was closed. I entered the room, leaving the door open, thinking it had been closed by mistake. "No, no," they told me, I had to close the door because there were some Deaf women who were curious who we were and might spread the word. For three mornings, we met and debated (often heatedly) about whether to leave the door open or not. Finally, we agreed to all sit at the same table at the closing ceremony (and here I do mean literally amongst ourselves, not at the metaphoric table). The table was, as it happened, set in the middle of the large ballroom. (There were other tables reserved for some of the special interest groups, if they wished.) Ours grew from two tables to three to four and finally, if my memory serves me well, about six tables, holding about fifty or more of us. I casually observed women as they entered the room. Many of them asked, "Who are those tables reserved for?" Receiving the answer, it was amazing to see how quickly their hands dropped, as did their eye contact. Some remarked, "That many?" We were finally out of the closet and had a place at the table!

In 1995, there were two workshops on the topic of Lesbians. One was "Celebrating Deaf Lesbians" and the other was "Homophobia." Both were standing room only and the former was closed to Lesbians only. A few questioned why non-Lesbians weren't "invited," and it was made clear to them that, because it was the first time we could discuss Deaf Lesbians, we needed to have time to ourselves and express our pride without being stigmatized. There was no resistance to that. At that time, there were about seventy Deaf Lesbians at the conference (out of 249). Then in 1997, the Deaf Lesbian caucus finally met and proceeded to organize our first Deaf Lesbian Festival in Seattle in 1999. Of course, backlash occurred, not only from straight people, but also from many Deaf Gay men. Why would we want to have a festival for Deaf Lesbians only, excluding other Deaf people? It brings up the question again. Are we permitted to be both Deaf and Lesbian (Gay, black, Hispanic, etc.)? Or must we be Deaf and then something else secondarily? Why did Deaf Gay men feel betrayed when Deaf Lesbians had a festival of their own? Was it because, after all, both groups are Deaf? Did they fear their own position would be threatened by the possibility of the community becoming smaller? Is that why straight Deaf people want us not to have our separate meetings, because it supposedly diminishes our shared Deaf identity?

The continued presence of the Deaf Lesbian caucus and the successes of numerous Deaf Lesbian Festivals show we have our own community, albeit small—and fragile. The 2003 Deaf Women United conference had no workshops nor a caucus designed for Deaf Lesbians. The Deaf Lesbian Festival 2004 received a much smaller group although it was held in Washington, D.C., which has one of the largest Deaf Lesbian communities. There is a need for recognition, respect, and a political movement to fight homophobia within the Deaf community. But is the Deaf L/G community willing to risk the threat of being labeled "less Deaf" as a result?

Rejected Identity: Deaf

Often there are questions in addition to the question asked above. It is often questioned how open the Deaf community is to Deaf LGBTs, or is it not? Many Lesbians and Gay men fear to be stigmatized in the community of Deaf people. They value their identities as Deaf people and recognize quickly reactions of straight Deaf people, as illustrated in the following story.

At one of the conferences held in Canada sometime around the early 1990s, a group of us were discussing the Deaf and L/G communities when a straight Deaf person said, "I cannot understand why Deaf Lesbians and Gay men prefer to go to a hearing bar for New Year's Eve. The Deaf club needs money and they are Deaf, but they chose the hearing world. Why?" It is not that they choose the hearing world, I told her, but the comfort of being able to be who they are. She then added, "But I am an understanding person. I have nothing against them." Another question for her: "When the clock strikes twelve and everybody kisses, how do you think Deaf people will react when the L/G couples kiss?" To that, she clenched her teeth, squinted her eyes, and shook her head. Her non-verbal response itself was the answer to her own question. And, I am sure, to many others who ask the same question.

Such responses are one form that homophobia takes; yet there are others, sometimes more violent actions. There were two murders at Gallaudet University in the academic year 2002–2003. Both victims were male and freshmen. Eric Plunkett of Minnesota was the first victim killed in September and Ben Varner of Texas was found stabbed to death in February. A third male freshman, Joseph Mesa, was arrested for the murders and is now serving a life sentence in a California prison. As much as we hate to be reminded of the murders at the university, it is important to mention a noticeable change in people's reactions between the two murders. When Eric Plunkett, a Gay man who was just elected as secretary of the campus LGBT organization, was first murdered, Deaf L/G students were terrified. They immediately suspected it was a hate crime, especially when they found their message boards defaced with anti-Gay comments. The D.C. police made a wrongful arrest in October and charged a just-out Deaf Gay man with the murder of Eric Plunkett. Gay students at Gallaudet refused to believe one of their own (a Deaf Gay man) would do it. The administrators at Gallaudet responded accordingly and called for Gay awareness and sensitivity training on campus. They made it clear that anti-Gay behavior is not acceptable on campus. In general, faculty, staff, and alumni of Gallaudet who are Lesbians and Gay men felt the administration's response was professional and appropriate. Students and others on campus had a harder time responding to the idea of a hate crime on campus. When we speculated about comparing Eric, who had just come out as a Gay man, with Matthew Shepard, many asked who the latter was. Strangely, a hate crime would not have surprised many Lesbians and Gay men on campus. When Ben Varner was murdered, many wondered aloud if Ben was Gay. When it was "determined" (by whom, I wonder) that he wasn't, right away many straight people doubted Eric's death was Gay-related. The point here is even if Ben was not Gay, Eric still could have been murdered because he was Gay. And yet the community was all too willing to brush aside the possibility that a hate

crime could be committed within the Deaf community. After all, aren't we all Deaf? Later, after Mesa was arrested and tried, he admitted that he chose his two victims because they seemed weak to him. Through L/G eyes, it was evident that Mesa could have thought Ben weak because he presumed him Gay, or vice versa. But no one (including the police) would recognize these atrocities as hate crimes because Ben wasn't Gay. It seems hard for the Deaf community to accept that there is a possibility of such hate toward another Deaf person.

Parallel Cultures

In various workshops on the topic of American Deaf Culture, speakers would compare Deaf Culture with black culture. They have their own language, they have their own values and norms, and they hold their own traditions. It often seems safe to compare Deaf Culture with black culture, although many don't agree with this. One of the common reasons is that black people acquire their values and beliefs from families, whereas only 10 percent of the Deaf population acquire them from their Deaf families. Nobody thought (or dared) to compare Deaf Culture with Gay culture until 1994. When the *New York Times Magazine* first published an article suggesting that Deaf culture might parallel with the Gay community² some Deaf people became upset. "We are not like Gay people!" said one at a Deaf bowling league. Another said, "I know, Gay was mentioned too often in that article, I worry people think Deaf people are the same as Gays." Members of both communities, Deaf and Gay, are stigmatized—and Deaf Gays are stigmatized within the Deaf community.

In 1998, I was asked to discuss the Deaf L/G community as a guest lecturer at one class meeting. Before the *New York Times Magazine* article, I had often discussed the Deaf community as it parallels to the black community. On this occasion, I decided to change the perspective and compare the Deaf community with the Gay community. This wasn't, I admit, exactly the same as discussing the Deaf L/G community, but it was a step, in my opinion, toward understanding the Deaf community through the eyes of the Gay community. This is still a preliminary work but enough to recognize the similarities between the two communities.³ As I worked on this presentation, I couldn't help but think how Deaf straight people might react to this. They had already complained to me about being quoted and pictured in the article, even though I am known in the Deaf community as a Deaf Lesbian.

Making the comparisons between Deaf and Lesbian/Gay culture is one step toward coming out for Deaf Lesbians and Gay men, and one way to fight homophobia in the Deaf community is getting out of the closet. I was asked to present the Deaf/Gay comparison at a Maryland Association of the Deaf conference in 2001, and it was interesting to see the reactions of Deaf people at the workshop. Many began with giggles and teasing each other with "YOU G-A-Y!" in American Sign Language (ASL). In addition to the comparison, I also discussed homophobia. When the topic turned, participants either became very quiet or just looked away. It is a difficult topic to discuss. When audism is brought up, Deaf people feel anger. Audism hits home, and Deaf people understand the oppression, but homophobia is just "them." Many Deaf people have argued that

we need to focus our energies on the fight against audism, without watering it down by addressing other ills. Truth be told though, homophobia makes many of them the oppressor. Not a very comfortable position, when so close to home! However, to fight homophobia and audism hand-in-hand, one needs to be educated (again and again) about both negative isms.

Codes in the Deaf Closet

The power that comes from names and naming is related directly to the power to define others—individuals, races, sexes, ethnic groups. Our identities, who and what we are, how others see us, are greatly affected by the names we are called and the words with which we are labeled. The names, labels, and phrases employed to “identify” a people may in the end determine their survival. The word “define” comes from the Latin *definire*, meaning “to limit.” Through definition, we restrict, we set boundaries, we name.⁴

Deaf, hard-of-hearing, deaf mutes, deaf and dumb, hearing impaired, those with hearing loss, those who move their hands, those poor people, hearing handicapped, dummy, monkey-like signers, apelike, Washoe.⁵

Lesbians, Gays, Queers, faggots, butch dykes, homosexuals, sissies, tomboys, fairies.

Labels also hurt. There have been discussions on how to sign LESBIAN and GAY and many found it uncomfortable. With more education and exposure, people are learning how to be politically correct when it comes to talking about Lesbians and/or Gay men.

A study was conducted on how we sign LESBIAN.⁶ The question seemed simple, “Which contact point for the sign LESBIAN is the most acceptable?” As simple as it seemed, however, it caused great discomfort among Deaf people who were interviewed. Where the sign makes contact with the chin implies a person’s attitude toward Lesbian. It is “less homophobic” if you make contact with the tip of your index finger on the chin, as opposed to a “stronger” contact on both the index finger and the thumb (see Figures 16.1 and 16.2). Choices between #GAY and the sign GAY (G on chin) were also surveyed. It seemed that the lexicalized form is the preferred choice among the Easterners, possibly because it seemed less negative.

Figure 16.1. Negative sign for LESBIAN.



Figure 16.1. Politically correct sign for LESBIAN.



There are codes used in the Gay community to indicate privately membership in the Gay community. The Deaf L/G community also has codes. Or at least we did. When I was in the closet, I saw many codes. Now that I am very out, I don’t see them anymore. We had GOLF to mean Gay, BASEBALL to mean Bi, and we had this sign where one “pulls and wiggles” her/his ear lobe to identify as a Gay person (see Figure 16.3). Also, there was the use of the term GREEN AND YELLOW, an acronym for G-A-Y in English. Often our codes were not manual, but just an eye gaze in the direction of a person, and accompanied by the yes/no question brow.

Lesbians and Gay men share numerous funny stories about straight people asking if we are L/G. One example includes a straight Deaf person fingerspelling, “A-R-E-Y-O-U?” I’m not sure why the speaker switches to English for this kind of question, but it may be to distance the topic from the language of the Deaf world. Even my own Deaf Mom asked me in exactly that form! They seem unable to fingerspell G-A-Y or sign LESBIAN.

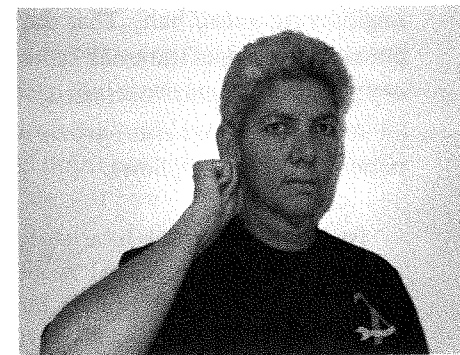


Figure 16.3. Closeted sign for GAY.

I witnessed this another time, when a Lesbian passed away at a Deaf residential school. A Deaf male staff member was telling me about the memorial service. He told me that there were about “fifty of them” in attendance. When I asked who the “them” was, he said, “You know what I mean.” Although I did, I shook my head. He looked around, put his hand close to his waist, and fingerspelled, L-E-S-B-I-A-N-S. When I signed LESBIAN, it was as if I had signed something very vulgar and not fit for public viewing. He quickly asked, “Are we allowed to use this sign?”

Rejected Identity: LGBT

Both Deaf and L/G communities do not have much power. But decisions made regarding L/G issues are made by those with more power—hearing Lesbians and Gay men. Even when Deaf and hearing work side by side toward empowerment on L/G issues, Deaf people feel like second-class citizens at Pride Days, parades, conferences, etc. It is clear that there is a power structure, or power hierarchy, at work.

Here’s another story. There were about fifty Deaf people at a D.C. Pride Day festival. The organizers got volunteer interpreters and reserved a space for Deaf Lesbians and Gay men in front of the stage. The space was—no exaggeration here—about three feet wide by nine feet long. The interpreters were not allowed to stand on the stage because “they might steal attention away from the musicians and speakers,” said the members of the Pride committee. Instead, the interpreters were located in a spot below the stage right next to a colossal loud speaker. The request by Deaf attendees to put the interpreters on stage and make their space larger was completely ignored. Letters of complaint were written to the planning committee. Lo and behold, the following year they had a Deaf person work on the committee. But when she suggested they might want to

include Deaf speakers, she was told no. After all, what would Deaf speakers have to say? And didn't they already have a disabled Gay person on the program?

You've Come a Long Way Baby—But Longer to Go . . .

When the article on Deaf Lesbian mothers "designing" their deaf baby was printed in the *Washington Post Magazine*,⁷ the overwhelming response was about the audacity of engineering a *deaf* baby. That the focus wasn't on the mothers being Lesbians was, I guess, indicative of the small strides made by the L/G community. This affirms my theory about which condition needs to be fixed, in the eyes of the general public.

In 1988 I wrote a short article for *TBC News*⁸ about the label "prelingual Deaf." One paragraph reads as follows:

For many years people have labeled me a pre-lingually deaf person because I was born deaf, meaning I was deaf before I "acquired language." I am not alone, and I am very aware of this. Those who were born hearing, but became deaf at the age of five or six or later are labeled post-lingually deaf. They are lucky: They acquired "language" before they became deaf; therefore, they are better adjusted to the world of language. If you look in the dictionary, you won't find either prelingual or postlingual, but if you look in many books on "deafness," you will find these terms. And while it is probably the case that such labels are being used less and less, they are still in the files of many Deaf people.

My "homosexual" condition was deleted from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* by the American Psychological Association, but my "deafness" condition remains to be fixed by numerous surgeons today.

Where do Deaf Lesbians and Gay men fit in? In the hearing L/G community, we've not yet gained much power. We're still relegated to the little chair at the side table for the kids. It remains to be seen whether we've been welcomed to the big table in the Deaf community. But there are many Deaf L/G leaders in the Deaf community who are also educators, artists, and activists. The most outspoken of us tend to be Deaf-of-Deaf, so I guess it means "If you are strong Deaf, you run less risk that your Deaf identity will be compromised by also being Lesbian or Gay."

Deaf Lesbian/Gay Resources

There are minimal formal studies, if any, on the Deaf L/G community. This begs the question, how do so many Deaf Lesbians/Gay men allow this? What does a formal study mean to them? Outing themselves to the world? To the Deaf world? Being stigmatized again, and this time by formal studies? Personally, I'd love to teach a course on the Deaf L/G community, but where are my resources? It will mean I need to refer to the *hearing* L/G community to bring us to a discussion on the *Deaf* L/G community. Do we want to continue to do this? Like we have done with women, with persons with disabilities, and with blacks/African Americans? It is about time to develop more resources for Deaf LGBT to help academize Deaf Studies. It is believed that there are more out Lesbians/Gay men compared to ten to twenty years ago; therefore, there might be more written

documents well suited for course work. Also, each time a course on Deaf LGBT is offered, students can do scholarly work, research, and more on that topic, which can be added to the list of references. There was, however, a reader written by Raymond Luczak in 1993 titled *Eyes of Desire: A Deaf Gay and Lesbian Reader* that can be used as a reference.⁹ Still, it is clearly not enough.

Conclusion

For many years, Deaf people were "trained" to be ashamed of being Deaf. It was not until Stokoe's work in the 1960s that proved ASL is a language that more and more Deaf people became proud of who they are. There are many stories about Deaf people deciding not to sign in public because they were ashamed and didn't want to be stared at. Some

Figure 16.4. Queer/Deaf similarities. Created by Kendra Smith and MJ Bienvenu as a class handout, Gallaudet University, 1999.

QUEER	DEAF
<i>Parents</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Few parents of Gay/Lesbian are queer • Many parents don't accept • Psychiatrist • Seek cure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only 5–10 percent of Deaf have Deaf parents • Many parents don't accept • Therapist • Seek cure
<i>Education</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Denial 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Denial
<i>Society</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Normalization • Homophobia • Epithets • Misconceptions (sex, sex, sex) • Homosexuality • Acceptance/tolerance • Resistance to public identity based on community membership • Denial of self-labeling • Lesbian/Gay Studies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hearingization • Audism • Epithets • Misconceptions ("can't" syndrome) • Deafness • Acceptance/tolerance • Resistance to existence of Deaf culture • Denial of self-labeling • Deaf Studies
<i>Culture</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Denial/silence • Coming out repeatedly • Misrepresentation (Andrew Cunanan) • "Passing" • Stereotypes (tomboys, sissies) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Denial/silence • Acknowledging repeatedly • Misrepresentation (H. Whitestone) • Speech = more desirable • Stereotypes (wild, emotional)
<i>Identity</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defined by what we <i>do</i> (sexually) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defined by speech or dB loss

QUEER	DEAF
<i>Language</i>	
• Often the language of the majority	• ASL, BSL, etc.
<i>Congress</i>	
• Barney Frank, S. Gunderson, • G. Studds	• No Deaf Representatives
<i>Media</i>	
• Recognition	• Not much after DPN, unless attention is on gaining hearing (cochlear implants)
<i>Age of onset</i>	
• Genetic • Coming-out age	• At birth
<i>Culture</i>	
• Old envy young	• Young envy old

Figure 16.5. Queer/Deaf differences. Created by Kendra Smith and MJ Bienvenu as a class handout, Gallaudet University, 1999.

parents (both Deaf and non-Deaf) would tell them to put down their hands and not to embarrass them, or not to draw attention to themselves. Most of the stories are not written. Is it to “deny” admitting these things did happen to them? It is almost embarrassing to admit that one was not allowed to sign and that s/he complied with the oppressive commands.

Lesbians and Gay men were afraid of being out of the closet, and it was worse before the 1970s. It is still difficult for some of them to come out fully. Often those who came out experienced struggles with family and friends, but many of them don't regret their decision to be out of the closet. To protect many closeted members of the community many stories and pictures were not documented and/or destroyed. This probably explains why many of their stories were not written until the 1970s.

Following is an additional story to demonstrate a final example of what it is like for some Deaf Lesbians, even in 2004.

Deaf Lesbian Festival 2004, held in Washington, D.C. (as previously discussed in this chapter), turned out to be a huge success. During the closing ceremony there was a slide show of everybody at the festival, of various events, and everybody loved it. Some Deaf Lesbians asked to make copies of the slide show and additional pictures. No one asked questions and pictures were copied. One Deaf Lesbian told the group she would select some pictures and would paste them on her Web page. Still no reaction from anyone. That night there was a flurry of e-mails asking that she didn't publicize the pictures. Reasons given were that some were working in a deaf setting (e.g., residential school for the deaf, deaf service centers) and they wouldn't want to be exposed (their word) to the public.

In reference to responses from Deaf people when the *New York Times* articles came out, Kendra Smith and I did a study. We analyzed resources on American Deaf Culture and read articles on homophobia and racism. We then proposed that Deaf people are more similar to the LGBT community and came up with parallels (Figures 16.4 and 16.5). There is a great possibility there is a crossing between the Deaf and LGBT way—and that is sharing stories and staying safe from stigma.

Notes

1. For information, go to the Web page of the Rainbow Alliance of the Deaf, <http://www.rad.org>.
2. Andrew Solomon, “Deaf is Beautiful,” *New York Times Magazine*, Section 6, August 28, 1994.
3. List of parallels in Figure 16.4.
4. Haig Bosmajian, *The Language of Oppression* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1983), 5.
5. In 1974, I was told of a poster shown at the Central Institute for the Deaf, in St. Louis, portraying Washoe, the first signing ape, with the caption “Do you want your child to be like him?” Unfortunately, I have never seen it, but fortunately I have not heard any more about it.
6. Mala Kleinfeld and Noni Warner, “Variation in the Deaf Community: Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Signs,” in *Multicultural Aspects of Sociolinguistics in Deaf Communities*, ed. Ceil Lucas (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1996), 3–35.
7. Liza Mundy, “A World of Their Own,” *Washington Post Magazine*, March 31, 2002, W22.
8. *TBC News* was a newsletter printed quarterly by The Bicultural Center, a for-profit organization founded in 1987 serving the Deaf community in areas of advocacy, bilingual education, interpretation, and ASL teaching headquartered in Riverdale, Maryland. It was closed in 1994.
9. Raymond Luscak, *Eyes of Desire: A Deaf Gay and Lesbian Reader* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1993).