

## 19. Postdeafness

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ARE DEAF PEOPLE HANDICAPPED? Impaired? Disabled? A race? An ethnic group? A minority? These are questions posed in an ongoing way by both Deaf people themselves and by the hearing world. A brief history of the context of these labels might be in order. Before the eighteenth century, prelingually deaf people were widely regarded in a category that included madmen, lunatics, and idiots—that is, people who were seen as having lost their senses or wits. In this sense, particularly as “mute” people, they had the status of children or animals. In Catholic countries they were thus treated as people who could not receive the sacraments and legally as people who were not responsible for their actions. In this sense, they were constructed as lesser people, childlike, and without the full rights of citizens.

In the eighteenth century, schools for the deaf began to flourish and with the attempt to universalize local sign language dialects into national and transnational languages, deaf people were able to participate in the public and civil sphere. With the notion of universal rights endowed by a creator, deaf people were increasingly allowed by a hearing majority to partake in citizenship and the rights that it conveyed and in religion. Education could lead to that goal or end, so a project to humanely educate the deaf, along with curing the insane and helping educate people with mental retardation, was begun.

With the advent of the “scientific” eugenic study of humans in the nineteenth century, and with the accompanying attempt to improve the human race through such studies, deaf people moved from being seen as childlike or mentally deficient to being seen as diseased and degenerate beings, less highly evolved than their normalized counterparts in the hearing world. Of course, deaf people were not alone in this construction. Anyone who was not in the dominant group, which tended to define itself as the norm, was seen as abnormal. Such people included in this abnormal status were the working classes, criminals, people with disabilities, people with mental and cognitive disabilities, people of short stature, people from Africa, India, Southern Europe, Ireland, the Middle East, and Asia, among others. The program here was not necessarily to create a class of people to be discriminated against, although that did happen, but to improve the human race by decreasing the occurrence of disease and degeneracy. Linked to this program was another related endeavor that aimed to classify and study human variety; so anthropology, sociology, comparative anatomy, and psychology, what have been called “disciplines”—in both senses of the word—of the human sciences, came about as specializations in this project.

Inherent in this movement was the idea that desirable and undesirable traits were inherited in groups in ways that were called “racial.” Although the mechanism of this inheritance was not understood, animal breeding had allowed a rough understanding of the process by which traits could be inherited and in which that inheritance could be shaped by selective mating. Linked to this idea was Charles Darwin’s discovery of evolution, which implied that species (and by extension races within species) could evolve or degenerate. Gregor Mendel, at the end of the century, came up with mathematical models for inheritance that included the distribution results of dominant and recessive traits, although he did not understand or explain the mechanism of this transmission of traits.

This scientific study aimed at description, diagnosis, and remediation or cure. Deaf people, like these other groups, were assembled into entities in schools and institutions, subjected to statistical studies, and were part of a project to educate them into oral language, whose lack was seen as a deficit. This institutionalization had its negative impacts, but in the case of deaf people, it helped to form a culture and a community with a common (although subversive at this point) language. Just as prosthetics became a major industry following the Civil War, oral education was seen as a prosthetic device that would make people who were lacking a part of their human body whole.

During this time, the deaf began to be called a “race,” particularly in the by-now infamous proposal of Alexander Bell to avoid the creation of a deaf race. Deaf people were seen as a race along with many other races because of the idea of inherited traits. Indeed the nineteenth-century researchers had developed many more races than we now usually think of when we speak of race. Proposals for separating the deaf from the hearing races came from within the Deaf community as well with the idea for a separate state or nation for Deaf people encouraged by diverse Deaf people in the nineteenth century.

The general project of eugenics, that is, good breeding, was a successful one for many years, most notably in England and the United States, where it was pushed quite aggressively, concentrating on “positive” eugenics—that is, the encouragement of breeding between members of “fitter families.” And notions of racial categories and of degenerative races held fast until the Nazi era. The Nazis’ project, borrowed quite late from the Anglo-American project, employed “negative” eugenic measures that emphasized the active elimination from the gene pool of degenerate races through sterilization and mass executions. We are only too aware of the consequences of that endeavor. In keeping with the discussion here, it is important to point out that before the mass execution of Jews and Gypsies, seen as diseased and degenerate races, the T-4 program killed tens of thousands of people with disabilities, deaf people, people with mental illnesses, and homosexuals. It is important to recall that these were also considered “racial” killings since deaf people and the other groups were all seen as people carrying inherited and inheritable traits.

The defeat of Nazi Germany had two effects for the purposes of this discussion: it eliminated eugenics as a viable intellectual and social pursuit and it gave a bad name to the concept of “race.” In addition, the abolition of slavery in the United States and the incipient development of a civil rights movement also contributed to an avoidance of the concept of race. Eugenics morphed into genetics, and race morphed into eth-

nicity. The general position on race in contemporary research is clearly stated by one analyst:

Genetic surveys and the analyses of DNA . . . show that human races are not distinct lineages . . . human "races" are not and never were "pure." Instead human evolution has been and is characterized by many locally differentiated populations coexisting at any given time, but with sufficient genetic contact to make all of humanity a single lineage sharing a common evolutionary fate.<sup>1</sup>

To offset the negative side of racial categories, the idea of ethnicity was invented. Ethnicity would do double duty by allowing the categorizing of human populations while seeming to avoid the absolute biology of race. Ethnicity allowed the inclusion of cultural, socioeconomic, religious, and political qualities, language, diet, dress, customs, kinship systems, and historical or territorial identity. But ethnicity has also been used "as a surrogate for biological difference"<sup>2</sup> in various kinds of research. A dictionary of epidemiology makes the familiar conflation in defining race: "Persons who are relatively homogenous with respect to biological inheritance (see also ethnic group)."<sup>3</sup> Despite the attempt to detach ethnicity from race, many people including academics blur the line. For example, the journal *Nature Genetics* defines "race" as "a distinct ethnic group characterized by traits that are transmitted through their offspring," and includes in its definition of "ethnicity" "A social group or category of the population that, in a larger society, is set apart and bound together by common ties of race, language, nationality or culture."<sup>4</sup> Indeed, even the U.S. government system of classifying identity mixes racial and ethnic categories. Four racial categories and two ethnic categories in the census include the racial groups American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian or Pacific Islander, black, and white. Ethnic groups are divided into two categories: "Hispanic origin" and "Not of Hispanic origin." While the government allows Hispanics to be of any racial category, many who self-define ethnically as Hispanic check "Other" when responding to the race question, indicating widespread confusion about the meaning of such terms as race and ethnicity.<sup>5</sup> That confusion is inherent in the idea of ethnicity, which itself seems fraught with the inherited baggage of racial categorization.

Using the concept of a minority is an alternative to ethnicity. It would seem that minority groups were coined as a way of avoiding the idea of ethnic groups. And identity groups were developed to move away from the idea of minority status since, for example, women or whites are not minority groups.

I have given this brief and by definition limited history as a way of placing the discussion about the status of Deaf Studies and by extension the role of Deaf people and their social construction. Harlan Lane, for one, has suggested that we consider Deaf people as an ethnic group; others have proposed that Deaf people be thought of as a linguistic minority. While these proposals are attractive in many ways, most particularly in removing the biological stigma of defining a group by its supposed lack or inability or association with disease (i.e., Deaf people *can't* hear; Deaf people *can't* speak; they can be cured by medical means). With the minority or ethnic model, as opposed to the "handicapped," "disabled," or "medical" models, Deaf people and community get to be a sociological

group like any other—African American, Armenian, Jewish, etc.—although it is unclear if all those groups are races, ethnicities, or minorities.

The idea of ethnic group or even minority is so tinged with the history of racial politics that one wonders if that stream of categorical consciousness is the best one to choose as a model. Indeed, with the recent reexamination of identity politics under way in the United States, and with the concomitant rethinking of the category of identity, is the best choice to go with a model that is increasingly antiquated and outmoded?

When we talk about identity, we do speak of social identities, but the bedrock identities of this culture—racial, gendered, sexual, and so on—seem to have been, at least historically, defined by the fact that they, like disability, have been necessarily rooted in the body. Race and gender have been the strongest component of these body-centered identities. How tightly linked to the essence of the body these identities have remained is an interesting question. Historically, gender and race before and through the eighteenth century was often thought of as a product of the environment's effects on the body. Phenotypical traits were believed to be produced by harsh sun, diet, and custom. Likewise, gender characteristics were thought to be assigned by birth, but subject to change throughout life, as Tom Lacquer and others have argued.<sup>6</sup> From the nineteenth century on, with the rise of medicine and science, identity became founded on the bedrock of inherited traits. While these traits could be inherited by various unclearly explored mechanisms—whether "blood" or "germs"—what was clear was that the overriding theory was essentially a eugenic and Darwinian one. Indeed, many if not all medical theories of the nineteenth century coalesced around identities—physiological, mental, sexual, etc.—which became the basis for theories of improvement of the human race and produced various kinds of oppression in the process. After Mendel, genes have most clearly been seen as the originating points of such transmitted traits.

The point is that, historically, the era of identity is connected fundamentally to a notion of inherited traits linked to groups of people who carry such traits. That is, race, sexual orientation, gender, ethnicity, national origin, along with deafness, were pinpointed for improvement and correction (and likewise discrimination) from the mid-nineteenth century on in the name of eugenics and later genetics. Thus, there has been since that time an intimate connection between disease and identity—with each stigmatized group seen as the repository of bad blood, bad genes, disease, and qualities that were a product of or could lead to the degeneration of the human race.

In that sense identity has remained fairly fixed in the body until the advent of postmodernism. The only scientific refinement has been in identifying more clearly the mechanism of transmission of inherited traits. Postmodernism has sought to destabilize grand categories and metanarratives. Philosophers like Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, Judith Butler, and others have chipped away at the idea that you could in fact ever describe in words anything in its fundamental essence. Likewise, the idea of a complete and coherent narrative was made to seem impossible. And the same with any notions of universal ideas or tenets, as we have heard from philosophers like Richard Rorty and critics like Stanley Fish. As postmodernist ideas began to interpenetrate ideas of identity, a kind of crisis has arisen.

The first target of this deconstructing of identity was the critique of "essentialism."

In effect, the notion of a human body with inherited and inherent traits tied to identity was put under scrutiny. Feminist critics like Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick put forth the notion that the gendered body was a social construction or a performance—likewise identity. In this notion, one is not essentially a female, for example, but one performs femininity. The onus is then placed on a social construction argument rather than any innate sense of “being” feminine that would be tied to hormones, genitalia, secondary sexual characteristics, and so on. In race studies, ideas like passing, signifying, and so on gave a subtlety, and also perhaps a lack of clarity, to older notions of identity based on phenotype or “blood.” Postmodernism also included a cultural idea of pastiche or kitsch in which icons of race, nation, and ethnicity became all mixed up. You had African American kids wearing Hilfiger as a sign of being down, and white kids wearing Hilfiger and listening to hip-hop while Korean kids were eating McDonalds and listening to hip-hop. Universal symbols of particular “races” or “genders” got all mixed up. The old advertisement used to say “You don’t have to be Jewish to love Levy’s Rye Bread.” Now, you’d have to say “You don’t have to eat rye bread to be Jewish.”

Dovetailing with notions of performativity and constructionism were various scientific and medical “discoveries.” Thus far, no one has been able to identify a person as belonging to a specific “race” through DNA analysis. In fact, DNA analysis has let us understand that the category of race is one that does not exist in physiological terms. Further, since difference in skin color, often the basis of racial thinking, developed rather late in human development, a mere one hundred thousand years ago, it turns out there is ten times more genetic variation within a group we have called a race than within the entire human gene pool. So, for example, a Chinese person may have less in common genetically with another Asian than with a German. Indeed, no one is even able to tell us how many races there are, and fine distinctions between phenotypes tend to dissolve even more actively any notion of categorical racial identities.

In some cases of deafness, a genetic component is involved. For example, the so-called Connexin 26 gene is responsible for some kinds of inherited deafness. In this sense, one could try to define deaf people as a race, but this would work only if people with two copies of this specific gene were so defined. However, it is obvious that so many more people than just the genetically deaf are included in the concept of Deafness that this racial view cannot really be said to be relevant.

The Human Genome Project offered up the possibility of mapping with certainty the complete sequence of approximately 3.2 billion pairs of nucleotides that make us human. But the project has left us with more questions than it has answered. For example, scientists are puzzling over the relatively low count of genes in the human genome. It had been estimated that humans would have approximately one hundred thousand genes, but the study yielded a paucity of thirty thousand, putting *Homo sapiens* on a par with the mustard cress plant (twenty-five thousand genes) for genetic complexity.<sup>7</sup> More annoying, and less known, is the fact that the two groups who analyzed the genome, the privately owned Celera group and the government-financed consortium of academic centers, have come up with only fifteen thousand that they jointly agree on. Fifteen thousand more genes do not overlap in either analysis.<sup>8</sup> Considerable doubt exists as to whether these genes found are “real.”

The issue of race is complicated too by the use of in vitro fertilization. In a recent case of “scrambled eggs,” a fertility doctor implanted in a woman’s womb not only her own fertilized embryo but that of another couple as well. The resulting birth was of fraternal twins, one white and the other black.<sup>9</sup> Such complications of reproductive technologies will certainly lead to other kinds of choices being made by parents and physicians, intentional as well as unintentional, with the effect of rendering even more complex racial or even gender identity.<sup>10</sup> We are also familiar with attempts, most recently of a Deaf lesbian couple, of Deaf people to try to have deaf children. Questions will have to be asked about whether such attempts are radical ways of fighting against oppression by dominant groups or technological fixes in the service of a conservative, essentialist agenda. Finally, the patrolled area of “mixed race” is being interrogated. The fact that multiracial identifications have been prohibited on national censuses is now being challenged. The reasons for keeping single-race check-off boxes is itself a highly politicized and tactical arena in which, understandably, oppressed groups have gained redress and power by creating a unified subject. Where censuses allow a mixed-race check-off box, the statistical stronghold of race may well become weakened with questionable results. The fact is that some 1.5 million Americans are in mixed-race marriages, and that number is doubling every decade. About 40 percent of Asian Americans and 6 percent of African Americans have married whites in recent years.<sup>11</sup>

One can legitimately ask if race has anything to do with Deafness, considering the emphasis that Deaf activists and scholars have put on notions of culture and shared history. While we don’t tend to think of the Deaf as a race anymore, that label would have been applied not just by Alexander Graham Bell but also by anyone interested in eugenics. Their notions of race were far more expandable than our current ones are. But the use of ethnicity, with its idea of culture and world, has to become suspect since it relies on an essentially racial model, as I am arguing.

In the area of gender, we are also seeing confusions in otherwise fixed categories. A culture of transgendered peoples is now being more widely permitted, and the right to be transgendered is being actively fought for. The neat binaries of male and female are being complicated by volition, surgery, and the use of pharmaceuticals. Intersexuals, formerly known as hermaphrodites, were routinely operated upon at birth to assign them a specific gender. That move is now being contested by groups of adult intersexuals. Some feel they were assigned the wrong gender, and others feel that they would have liked to remain indeterminate. Transsexuals now routinely occupy various locations along a gender continuum demarcating their place by clothing and other style-related choices, surgical corrections, and hormonal therapy. Even on the genetic level, both females who are genetically male and males who are genetically female are a naturally occurring phenomenon. The gender determination is suppressed or enhanced in these cases of what are called “Turner’s syndrome” and “Klinefelter’s syndrome” so that the genetic markers do not express the expected sexual phenotypes.<sup>12</sup>

What we have called “nature” is not universal but can be modified in fundamental ways through biotechnology, prosthetics, genetic manipulation, hormone treatments, and so on. Thus the ground—the bedrock—of the “body” began to seem as if it were less reliable.

The very idea of a singular, unproblematic identity is crumbling. The response by various sides has varied. Some theorists have adopted a more global, cosmopolitan sense of identity, allowing hybridity and mixed categories some play. Others have barricaded the classic idea of identity and fought from or against those unitary ramparts.

So, given these complexities and attacks on identity, why should Deaf people now choose to see themselves as fitting into the kind of identity politics now being reexamined by society at large? The big problem related to trying to make Deafness into a socially constructed ethnic or minority group is that in order to shore up the concept, certain kinds of very unpostmodern moves need to happen. The firewall between Deaf and non-Deaf has to be patrolled in very serious ways. Let us examine how.

First, the linguistic model presented in which Deafness is defined as a minority language group has, by definition, to rule out all non-ASL (American Sign Language) users as "other." This model, while helping to include Deafness in the minority language model, has the effect of excluding or at least marginalizing Deaf people who are orally trained or who never had the chance to learn sign language. One can imagine many people who grew up in non-ASL settings in the 1950s and 1960s thinking of themselves, quite happily, as Deaf until they were informed that since they were non-ASL users they were not Deaf. Likewise, it includes hard-of-hearing people who have learned ASL but expels those who have not. Ironically, the model punishes the victims of oral education rather than including them into the society of Deafness. The other flaw in the model is that signing Codas should be defined as being Deaf, but those who follow the minority model often do not see Codas in this light. To be true to its intention, the minority language model would have to say that signing Codas were fully fledged, strongly Deaf people. One can argue that Codas aren't Deaf because they can hear and aren't actively discriminated against by the hearing world; but if one takes that tack, then one has to abandon the idea that language is the defining term in Deaf.<sup>13</sup> If you let language go, then you are back to hearing loss, that is, either some kind of phenomenological model or the more prevalent and insidious audiological/medical model.

As for the ethnic group model, while the argument about a shared common history, language, social customs, and organizations had been historically true, with the advent of the Internet, mainstreaming, the decline of residential schooling, and the demise of the Deaf club it is harder to make this argument. And, of course, one of the key notions of an ethnic group is ethnic cuisine, often the last thing to go in assimilation, according to Steven Steinberg.<sup>14</sup> Alas, there is no Deaf cuisine—unless we consider replication of residential-school menus as filling that bill.

The ethnic argument sets up a model of the true or "pure" Deaf person, in imitation of the worst aspects of racially defining a people. In this ethnic group model, there is an in-group and an out-group. Those most "in" are Deaf of Deaf people, that very small percentage (only perhaps 5 percent of all congenitally born deaf) who come from a Deaf family and who often make up the elite of the Deaf world. Those "in" include people lucky enough to have gone to Gallaudet, National Technical Institute for the Deaf, and other Deaf schools. Excluded are hard-of-hearing, oral, Codas, urban poor or third-world rural poor who never had a chance to learn sign language, and deaf people with limb impairments or spinal injuries that affect their limb and digit mobility. Further-

more, Deaf people on the Internet or using pagers, while obviously talking about subjects that are of common interest, may not appear dramatically different in their language usage than any other ESL group with its own specialized jargon and idioms. And if a Deaf person doesn't choose to talk the talk or walk the walk, does that exclude that person from the ethnic group? This same question could be asked about African Americans who speak standard English and do not code switch.

The ethnic model is also dubious because of the association now between ethnic groups and violence. In the old days of the 1960s and 1970s, nationalism used to be considered the bad thing and ethnicity the good thing. But since the growth of what Hardt and Negri call "empire,"<sup>15</sup> and with the weakening of some national entities, regionalism, tribalism, and ethnicity have led to interethnic warfare like that found in Uganda, Rwanda, Bosnia, Serbia, Croatia, and Afghanistan, and between the ethnic Kurds and the Turks or Iraqis. While it may be true that some ethnic groups have managed to refrain from this kind of violence, although I can't think of any at the moment, we might want to wonder if the model of ethnic pride is something so desirable as opposed to a more cosmopolitan internationalism. Are the kinds of distinctions ethnic groups make between self and other necessarily the models that we want to follow in defining Deafness?

One of the key notions in an *ethnos*, a people, is the idea of an extended kinship system. People within an ethnic group are related not only by language, history, and culture but also by a family structure that passes along a genetic inheritance. But the vast majority of Deaf people do not come from Deaf families. According to often-cited statistics, over 90 percent of Deaf people are born to hearing families. The Deaf, Codas, people with disabilities, and queer folk are, as Robert Hoffmeister has said of Codas, only "one generation thick." In this sense, these four groups have more in common with each other than with any ethnic group. Indeed, one could argue that without the extended kinship system, you can't have an ethnic group. Even large groups, like Americans, may have shared cultural, linguistic, historical, geographical, and other characteristics but are not, properly speaking, an ethnic group. So how can the Deaf make a claim with less than 10 percent of Deaf people being born into Deaf families? Given the laws of Mendelian distribution in relatively new mutations like Connexin 26, the mathematical model will continue to insure that even a second or third generation of deafness within the same family is unlikely. Thus, although there are a small percentage of deaf families that pass on deafness, no significant familial system exists with any significant similarity to the absolute regularity of family based on consanguineous, multigenerational kinship of other ethnic groups. One can always emphasize that Deaf people pass along their culture by a nonkinship system, but then you are talking about a rather different kind of social organization than an ethnic group.

The other problem with the ethnic or minority group model is that usually being part of an ethnic group defines one in a totalizing way. You usually can't be Jewish, for example, and be Japanese. If you happen to be of mixed ethnicity, then each ethnic category is diluted. So one can be Jewish and black, but you'd be 50 percent of each. Deaf people can and do belong to some other ethnic group. But, as we know, Deaf people don't feel that their Deafness is diluted by their ethnicity, which means that being Deaf

isn't really like being Jewish. One doesn't feel 50 percent Deaf and 50 percent Jewish but rather all Deaf and all Jewish. This shows us that the attempt to make Deafness an ethnic group doesn't work because the category doesn't operate in the same way as does ethnicity.

The problem with ethnic or minority status is that in having that status a group is letting a dominant majority make the definition of what you are or should be. It is true that such groups then take the victimization and turn it into a kind of cultural resistance, but at base the terms are still defined by the oppressor. In adopting the language of race, a language of victimization, various groups have been able to build pride and power into their social organization, but given the choice, should Deaf people begin to call themselves an *ethnos* when that idea includes the idea of minority (including the sense of marginal, minoritized) status and the adoption of the language of the oppressor? Indeed, one could say that all the racial and some ethnic categories were defined by those who wished to rid the world of those categories. The social construction of various human populations performed by those who were dominant often aimed at creating categories of inferiority for the purposes of exploitation, institutionalization, remediation, or elimination.

Related to this point is a strategic question. Are the protections built into the law for ethnic groups effective? Does one want to choose the category of ethnic group as the regnant defining term and then seek protection or redress under the law under that status? Or is it better to allow protections and rights under the law to apply under the statutes that cover disability? Would you rather be protected by the Americans with Disability Act, Section 504, and other protections built into the law, or will you take your chances with affirmative action, hate-crime legislation, and so on?

The concept of DEAF-WORLD OR DEAF-CULTURE has been used by many Deaf people, and there is something attractive about the concept. It does not have any associations with medical imperatives or racialized discourses. The problem with the terms is that they are perhaps too general and elastic. If you start defining what you mean by either, you immediately fall back into categorical generalizations of the kind we have been discussing. Who is Deaf? Who belongs in the DEAF-WORLD? How do you get into it? Who are the gatekeepers? As for DEAF-CULTURE, you again have to define what makes it different from any other culture. What if we were to substitute "WHITE WORLD," "BLACK WORLD," "JEWISH WORLD," or "NON-JEWISH WORLD"? Would one be happy to celebrate and analyze the meaning of those terms? What if we said "ASL-ONLY USERS WORLD"? Or "40 PERCENT-100 PERCENT HEARING LOSS WORLD"? The problem with such concepts is that they tend to fall back into the older categories designed to exclude people, reduce their rights, and create marginalized communities. It's just a question of who gets to set up the barriers and checkpoints. In the past, it was the hearing people who did; now it is segments of the Deaf community. Of course, no group of people can exist without some kind of cultural and social distinctions. But in thinking through, in the best theoretical sense, new directions for Deafness, we have to look at the problems and the solutions with a high degree of rigor.

This last point brings me to the issue of disability. Deaf people are not alone in this reconsideration. They do not have to build the house of theory around identity alone.

As I mentioned earlier, what brings together all the social injustices of the past two hundred years is the idea that people with various bodily traits have been discriminated against because of those traits. This is not a medical model, but rather a model based on biopower analysis along the lines of the founding work done by Michel Foucault and others. The extension of this work is the postmodern assault on identity that has critiqued the fundamental assumptions of that kind of discrimination by saying that you can't base identity on these putative bodily traits because you can't justify the existence of these markers anymore. The grand categories of race, gender, etc. have no validity as categories with rigid firewalls. I've also pointed out that Deafness, too, is subject to this critique. You can only create the category of Deafness if you build these rigid firewalls; otherwise you've got a continuum of hearing-impaired, hard-of-hearing, partially deafened, profoundly deaf, and so on. You've also got a range of people with oral abilities, and a range of ASL abilities, including a range of ASL usage among Codas. The concept of Deafness can get very messy unless you perform a kind of "commonsense" purifying of the category that may work, but it has the pitfalls of the "common sense" of racial categories, for example. Common sense, in reality, is actually socially constructed truisms that are never really common at all.

The argument then is why use the outdated, outmoded, and potentially dangerous categories of ethnicity, minority status, nationhood (including "world" and "culture") when one might do better to use the category of "one-generation" identities to redefine the nature of social identity. Rather than trying to force the foot into the glass slipper, why not make a new shoe that actually fits?

In this scenario, people with disabilities, Deaf people, gay people, and Codas can say "we represent the way out of the identity politics dead end." We are social groups that are not defined solely by bodily capabilities. We are not a group that has been defined in advance by an oppressor, but we choose to unite ourselves together for new purposes. We are not defined by genetic qualities or inherited traits. We are, precisely, not an ethnic group or a minority but something new and different emerging from the smoke of identity politics and rising like a phoenix of the postmodern age.

Disability is one way of talking about this kind of postmodern identity. At this point, there is a fairly elaborated theory of disability emerging. Queer Studies also offers various approaches to identity that do not have to imitate the identity categories of the past. The key to both is that identity is part of a continuum. It is malleable and not grounded in the traditional medicalized or essentialized views of the body. It does not have to rub shoulders with racialized ways of thinking or divisive views of what it is to be human based on tribal or parochial points of view.

Deaf people have argued that disability doesn't fit their experience of being Deaf. Many Deaf people have said, "I'm not disabled like a crippled person or a mentally retarded person." But the problem with that refutation is that it uses ableist concepts. It implies that each Deaf person would be diminished if they considered themselves disabled. This position, in my opinion, does not allow for the fullest sense of disability that has been elaborated in disability theory. The point has always been that people with disabilities are not disabled by their impairments but that the society surrounding them creates the disability when it denies or impedes accommodation. There is

nothing diminished or disabled about a person with a disability where there is access and accommodation. Likewise, there is nothing disabled about a Deaf person who is surrounded by people who are in their language community or when interpreters are freely provided in other public and private venues.

I have come to see the position made by some Deaf people that disability is not a desirable umbrella under which to group Deaf people at this point. That may be the case, but I also think that minority status, ethnicity, or exclusive worlds don't work either. If disability and ethnicity are rejected, what is left? I would hope that Deaf Studies would develop a theory of Deafness, an explanation of Deaf identity, that had its own inherent and internal cohesion in some kind of connection with other minoritized people. But I would caution that the errors of previous identity politics not be repeated. The simple attempt to adopt linguistic minority status, as has been done, or ethnic status, or exclusionary worldviews will be antiquated by contemporary thinking and will appear in the long run as making Deaf people be wannabes in an outmoded game. Further, the attempt to rigidify Deafness by making rules—must be Deaf, must be ASL user, must participate in Deaf Culture, must adopt Deaf ways, and so on—will create a system of microenforcements and identity requirements that will seem parochial, oppressive, and unbending. Tellingly, Gallaudet University itself accepts students who run the gamut from hearing to Deaf. A better course for Deaf Studies would be to examine the situation in identity politics now, learn from the past, think about the beyond-identity issues floating in the public sphere, come up with flexible and nonhierarchical models of being, and lead the way out of the dead end of identity thinking. As African Americans and feminists took the lead in the past to help the larger society to theorize subjecthood in the 1970s and 1980s, so can the Deaf, the disabled, and queer folk help postmodern society to imagine what subjectivity looks like in a postidentity period. This process is necessarily collective and situational, and it would be presumptive of me to suggest how that discussion should go. Those discussions are proceeding even now, and they will benefit from an awareness of the regnant issues and ideas that are disturbing and intriguing all identity groups not only in the United States but throughout the world.

## Notes

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5. Judith C. Barker, "Cultural Diversity: Changing the Context of Medical Practice," *Western Journal of Medicine* 157 (1992): 248.
6. Thomas Lacquer, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990). See also Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).
7. Let us not even consider the further problem that in order to locate a gene, we have to cordon off "good" DNA from "junk" DNA. Now, with the advent of relatively low numbers of genes for

humans, scientists are beginning to posit that so-called junk DNA may have a role to play in "influencing" the good DNA. Thus the exact science of genetics begins to resemble other explanatory systems requiring influence such as earlier models based on humors, astrological causes, and so on. Indeed, many human traits are polygenic, involving several different genes working in coordination with each other and with other processes.

8. *New York Times*, August 24, 2001, A13. Also note that in a *New York Times* article from March 5, 2002, we see a report that a new paper written by Robert Waterston of Washington University, Eric Lander of MIT, and John Sulston of the Wellcome Trust Sanger Institute claim that Celera's decoding "incorporated key sequences already developed by the public effort to complete their map" (A18). If this is the case, then the fifteen thousand that supposedly overlap actually do not since some of that number is from the international public consortium. The study, published in the National Academy of Science's proceedings states that "Celera did not produce an independent draft of the genome as it had claimed."
9. *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, March 25, 2001.
10. Although as Dorothy Roberts has pointed out, prenatal technology is still very much a site of racial discrimination. See "Race and the New Reproduction," *Hastings Law Journal* 47, no. 4 (1996): 935.
11. Nicholas D. Kristof, "Love and Race," *New York Times*, December 6, 2002, A35.
12. For more on this subject, see Feinberg's *Transgender Warriors*. Also see Bob Beale, "New Insights into the X and Y Chromosomes," *The Scientist* 15, no. 15 (2001): 18.
13. The story of Christy Smith is telling. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* of March 22 reports that Ms. Smith, currently on the television program *Survivor*, is Deaf but not using sign language on the program. The Deaf community is described as "split" between pride about her being on the program and disappointment or outrage about her not using ASL. Regardless of the merits, the issue is this: if you define Deafness as about ASL then she must use ASL, otherwise she is not Deaf. This position creates a dilemma for people like Ms. Smith who are pressured to act in a particular way in all situations whether or not the situation itself warrants it.
14. Steven Steinberg, *The Ethnic Myth: Race, Ethnicity and Class in America* (Boston: Beacon, 2001).
15. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000).