Endnotes

Audism: Exploring the Metaphysics of Oppression

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This article traces the development of the concept of "audism" from its inception in the mid-1970s by exploring three distinct dimensions of oppression: individual, institutional, and metaphysical. Although the first two aspects of audism have been identified, there is a deeply rooted belief system regarding language and human identity that is yet to be explored within the context of audism. This article attempts to expose how our particular historical and philosophical constructions of language and being have created what French philosopher Jacques Derrida calls *phonocentrism*. Although Derrida does not discuss audism, his deconstruction of the Western notion of language provides a lens through which we can better see the orientation that has provided fertile ground out of which individual and institutional audism has flourished.

The term *audism* has been in hiding for some time now, lurking in the silent space between *audiovisual* and *audit*, depending on your dictionary. What audism refers to—the discrimination of Deaf people—is nothing new. The word to describe it, however, is. Whether being denied rights to own property, to have children, or to drive a car, Deaf people have rarely been treated with the dignity that should come with being human. However, it was not until 1975 when a Deaf scholar, Tom Humphries, decided it was time to name the discrimination against Deaf persons and to coin a term that would be part of the currency of discussions on human rights, deaf educa-

tion, and employment (Humphries, 1975). But this newly minted term remains rarely used. The looks on peoples' faces when they see or hear this word show that it doesn't buy much in the way of recognition. But that stands to change.

In the four years since I've been teaching The Dynamics of Oppression at Gallaudet University, I have noticed much greater use of term. In 2000, only four of twenty students had seen the word before the first day of the class; in 2002, fourteen of twenty had. In the past two years at Gallaudet, there have been panel discussions, movies, workshops, performances, and articles focusing on varieties of experiences of audism. The term now appears at all levels of the Deaf Studies curriculum at Gallaudet University, from Introduction to Deaf Studies to Deaf Cultural Studies. Although Gallaudet is a relatively small community, the fact that the term *audism* is beginning to be used here is a crucial beginning, because this small group of users can disseminate it into the rapidly growing number of classrooms where American Sign Language (ASL) is taught. One of the fastest growing languages of instruction in America's high schools and universities, ASL is now being taught to tens of thousands of individuals who may most need to become acquainted with this term—hearing people who are becoming involved with the language, culture, and lives of Deaf people. Given the increased attention that the word has been and will be receiving, it will not be long before the word takes its place alongside a lexicon that names

the various faces of oppression: *racism, sexism, classism, anti-Semitism, heterosexism, and ableism*. Dictionary recognition is not the goal in itself, but it will be one of the many fruits of a maturing concept.

If simply appearing in the dictionary is not the main goal, then what is? Clearly, the long-range goal is to diminish audist beliefs and practices. To do that, we must gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics of audism. To begin, we must be able to identify it.

As a new term, *audism* gathers together what has been there all along as isolated instances, events, and experiences and unifies them into a single concept. As such, audism functions like a basket that gathers disparate experiences with one thing in common: the discrimination against individuals based on hearing ability. Once we gather these discriminatory practices in a single place, we can get a handle on the phenomenon. Theorists of audism then may have the benefit of pulling these experiences out of the basket and examining them closely. We may discuss and debate them, analyze and explore them; ultimately, we may begin to understand them, to see what underlies them all, and to locate their sources. Such increased awareness of audism may guide resistance to audist behavior on several levels, from its sources to its daily manifestations. To that end, this article will explore the roots of audism, both historical and philosophical.

Although we may have identified instances of audism above ground, once we start pulling up its roots, we see how vast and hidden are its systems. These roots run so deep and are so pervasive that they have implications not only for Deaf persons and those who work and live with them, but also for anyone interested in issues of language, human rights, and the question of human nature. To begin unearthing the roots of audism, we begin with the basic question, Just how should audism be defined?

A Brief History of Audism

In his original, still unpublished essay, Tom Humphries (1975) offers this dictionary-like definition:

Audism: (Ô·*diz·m*) n. The notion that one is superior based on one's ability to hear or behave in the manner of one who hears.

Humphries then fleshes out this definition by pointing to its common manifestations:

[Audism] appears in the form of people who continually judge deaf people's intelligence and success on the basis of their ability in the language of the hearing culture. It appears when the assumption is made that the deaf person's happiness depends on acquiring fluency in the language of the hearing culture. It appears when deaf people actively participate in the oppression of other deaf people by demanding of them the same set of standards, behavior, and values that they demand of hearing people.

As this litany of examples suggests, Humphries notes that audism manifests itself in beliefs and behaviors that assume the superiority of being hearing over being Deaf. As this position has become a part of hearing-centered "common sense," Deaf people come into contact with audist attitudes, judgments, and actions with great frequency throughout their lives. At this level of analysis, Humphries's definition of audism would be roughly analogous to the notion of "individual racism," in which an individual holds beliefs and exhibits racist behaviors ranging from jokes to hate crimes to low expectations in the classroom. This individual level is a logical place to begin the discussion of audism because we must be acquainted with its physical manifestation before it may be identified and named. But we are quickly faced with questions about this individual level of oppression. Where do so many individuals acquire their racist or audist attitudes and behaviors? What is the nearly invisible thread that weaves them together into a systematic pattern that warrants a term to describe it?

In the original essay that coined the term, Humphries (1975) also points toward larger systems of oppression as he notes that audism "appears in the class structure of the deaf culture when those at the top are those whose language is that of the hearing culture or closest to it." Such structural oppression is difficult to see because it usually veils itself behind justifications and rationalizations. Recognition of a wider structural context for audism gains further elucidation in Harlan Lane's *Mask of Benevolence* (1992), where he defines

it as "the corporate institution for dealing with deaf people. ... [It] is the hearing way of dominating, restructuring, and exercising authority over the deaf community" (p. 43). Lane draws on the work of French philosopher Michel Foucault (1975) and others to interrogate the organizations that attempt to care for the Deaf but actually perpetuate the conditions of disability. Since the beginnings of deaf education and the science of audiology, Lane demonstrates, educational and medical institutions have assumed authority over Deaf persons, claiming to act in their best interests while not allowing them to have a say in the matters that concern them the most. From the crude and tortuous methods of French doctor Jean-Marc Itard to the surgical procedure of early childhood/infant cochlear implants and from the strict oralism of Johann Conrad Amman (1873) to the current trend of mainstreaming, Deaf people have been physically and pedagogically coerced into adopting hearing norms, whether they wanted to or not.

Lane's analysis has added this important historical and systemic perspective to the notion of audism. This systemic perspective coincides with definitions of structural or systematic racism. David Wellman (1993) defines *racism* as "a system of advantage based on race" (cited in Tatum, 1997, p.7).

"This definition of racism," writes Beverly Daniel Tatum (1997), "is useful because it allows us to see that racism, like other forms of oppression, is not only a personal ideology based on racial prejudice, but a system involving cultural messages and institutional policies and practices as well as the beliefs and actions of individuals" (p. 7). The implications of this definition are far reaching. Suddenly, the notion of *privilege* comes to the fore as we realize the vast benefits allotted to white individuals within a white system of advantage. Consider such a simple act as going to a drug store to buy Band-Aids (McIntosh, 1989). White persons may walk into the store, proceed to the Band-Aid aisle, choose a "skin color" brand, and be on their way. Black persons, on the other hand, are often under surveillance as soon as they enter the store. As they peruse the shelves of Band-Aids, they will not be able to find an appropriate skin color product. This is such a minute, commonplace event that the white person would hardly be able to detect the systems of privilege that underlie this and thousands of other daily acts that add up to a lifetime of privilege. Whether intentional or not, all white people take advantage of the systems of racism.

Given the systematic nature of racism and other forms of oppression, the definition of audism needs to be expanded from the individual to the systemic level. Here we may amend Wellman's definition of racism to add a new dimension to the definition of *audism* as "a system of advantage based on hearing ability."

This definition allows us to detect the privilege allotted to hearing people. Such privilege, many would argue, makes sense. After all, Deaf individuals make up a miniscule fraction of the world's population. One can hardly expect anything but the privilege of being hearing in a world where over 99% of the world's population can hear. But what about those environments that are designed to work for the betterment of Deaf individuals? In the three Deaf schools where I have worked—the Colorado School for the Deaf and the Blind, the National Technical Institute for the Deaf, and Gallaudet University, there is no question that being hearing continues to carry immense advantage, despite a majority of Deaf people in those environments. I have yet to participate in a committee meeting at Gallaudet University, for example, that has been equally accessible to Deaf and hearing people. Because most hearing faculty members use simultaneous communication (speaking and signing at the same time), hearing persons are rendered at a distinct advantage. Spoken English comes across clearly, whereas the signs that accompany it are often scattered signifiers that do not add up to intelligible communication, let alone grammatically correct language use. For this reason, Deaf professors and staff have to ask for interpreters to guarantee access to communication. The effects of this accepted practice result in diminished access to information, decision-making processes, and power within the "only liberal arts university in the world designed exclusively for deaf and hard of hearing students" (Gallaudet Mission Statement). One would hope that specially designed institutions would be vigilant in preventing such pervasive audism; the reality, however, is quite different. Audism becomes most prevalent in the institutions that "serve" deaf populations, especially in medicine and education.

Together, Humphries and Lane's writings represent important inroads into understanding both *individual audism* and *institutional audism*. Now that both levels of audism have been named, we are in a position to ask such questions as, Where do the institutions derive their audist orientations? and How is audism possible in the first place?

Unearthing the Roots of Audism

Metaphysical Audism

Admittedly, the term, *metaphysical audism* is not pretty. It is more than a mouthful, but it need not scare anyone away. Metaphysics is not simply an abstract branch of philosophy reserved for the ivory-tower philosophers; rather, metaphysics is something we do all the time. "Whether we like it or not, we are all metaphysicians" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 348). As Aristotle (1952) opens his book, *Metaphysics*, "All men [sic] by nature desire to know" (p. 499). We are impelled to understand the world and its various inhabitants, even if for such simple reasons as the desire to know what foods are safe to eat and what tools are the best to use. Each time we ask, "What is... ?" we look for an essential character that binds a thing together. We create categories and sort the world accordingly. This is our perennial search for the nature of something, for its essence. Metaphysics, then, involves our basic desire get at the nature of life and the world, and the human place within it. Metaphysical exploration begins when we ask questions such as, What is life? What is nature? What is God? What is human?

It is the last of these questions that opens up the conditions that ultimately beget audism. What is it that binds all things human into one human *kind*? Invariably, the most divisive differences betweens human and animal is traditionally thought to be *language*. Although bees may dance and parrots talk, it is often assumed that there is a qualitative difference between these systems of communication and the highly developed grammatical systems of human languages. In itself, saying that language is a distinctly human trait does not lead to audism. Yet once language is elevated to the status of a principle defining the human characteristic, how we define language has enormous implications. As it happens, we have been operating on an incomplete definition of language for several millennia now, a fact reflected in the very word we have for *language* itself: *Langue* is Latin for "tongue." As Yves O'Neill (1980) writes:

> For centuries speech and language were confused. This muddle produced a tangled web of ideas in which philosophical premises were used to establish physiological conclusions. These struggles to understand were integral to the development of Western ideas of human beings, and at the same time they furnished a basis for more modern conceptualizations, setting problems to be solved. (p. 6)

As O'Neill suggests, this erroneous definition of language has implications for the entire Western tradition. Indeed, it would take a work of enormous length to root out our "tangled web of ideas" and the "problems to be solved" caused by the confusion that language *is* speech. For our purposes, though, a few clear problems arise. It is these problems that beget an audist orientation. Perhaps the largest problem to be solved for deaf individuals is that once speech is defined as language and vice versa, the concept of what it means to be human becomes intimately tied with speech. Brenda Brueggemann (1999) sums up the Western audist orientation:

> Language is human;
> speech is language;
> therefore deaf people are inhuman and deafness is a problem. (p. 11)

By *metaphysical audism* then, I mean simply "the orientation that links human identity and being with language defined as speech." Historically, we humans have identified ourselves as the speaking animal; if one cannot speak, then he or she is akin to human in body but to animal in mind. In this orientation, we see ourselves as becoming human *through* speech.

Now we can trace the thread of metaphysical–institutional–individual audism that has silently informed the very categories that determine the limits of our existence and draw the porous line between the human and nonhuman, between civilized and savage, and between hearing and deaf. It is within this orientation (language is human/speech is language)

that Deaf people have frequently been described as animals, especially by those who have taught them. One of the earliest practitioners of audism, Johann Conrad Amman writes in 1700 about uneducated Deaf persons: "How dull they are in general. How little do they differ from animals" (Amman, 1873, p. 2). A century and a half later, American oralist Lewis Dudley writes that the Deaf students are "human in shape, but only half-human in attributes" (Baynton, 1996, p. 52). The metaphorics of deaf-as-animal became especially widespread in the aftermath of Darwin's Theory of Evolution. For many educators of the Deaf in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Doug Baynton explains, "To be human was to speak. To sign was a step downward in the scale of being" (p. 55). Yet it was not only the oralists who constructed their Deaf pupils as animals. The esteemed Abbe Roch-Ambrose Sicard (1984) asserted even more vehemently that the Deaf were even lower than animals prior to education. He referred to the uneducated Deaf pupil as "a perfect nonentity, a living automaton. . . . The deaf person lacks even that unfailing instinct directing animals destined only to have that as their guide" (p. 84).[1]

If Deaf people are inhuman, the logical consequence is that deafness becomes a problem of immense proportions. If poor deaf creatures are to be included in the human family, they must be made to be more fully human, that is, a speaking animal. At this point, the metaphysics of audism give way to the systemic level where institutions of education, medicine, and law work to make the deaf creature a more normal, fully speaking human being.

Since the 1970s, we have discovered that all humans (whether hearing or deaf) are born with the equal capacity to receive and produce manual as well as spoken language. Indeed, if this is true of humans born today, we must assume that we have always had the potential to be the signing as well as the speaking animal. This insight, afforded by the works of ASL linguists and neurolinguists, now enables us to assert that our Western tradition has been operating on incomplete definition of language and hence of human identity. A theory of audism, then, may work toward the deconstruction of this presumed natural status of speech in the Western metaphysical heritage so that speech may be seen not as *the only* but as *one of* the modalities of human language.

Derrida and the Critique of Phonocentrism

Fortunately, such a Herculean task has been already undertaken in the work of French philosopher Jacques Derrida. It is Derrida (1974) who has brought these issues to the forefront of postmodern contemporary thought by exploring the notion of "phonocentrism," the historical assumption that speech is the most fully human form of language. Phonocentrism has such a thorough grasp on the Western tradition that we cannot see all the ways that speech has constructed the world as we know it. Early on in his *Of Grammatology* (1974), Derrida writes, "The system of 'hearing (understanding)-oneself-speak' through the phonic substance ... has necessarily dominated the history of the world during an entire epoch, and has even produced the idea of the world, the idea of world-origin" (pp. 7–8). One would have to read *Of Grammatology* to fully explore such a grandiose claim but for our purposes, it is enough to note that although speech has clearly produced the idea of what it means to be fully human, there is nothing intrinsically "more human" about nonphonetic forms of communication such as sign or writing. Throughout *Of Grammatology*, Derrida engages in radical critiques of phonocentric moments in the Western tradition when speech consolidated its power over alternative forms of language.

Perhaps most relevant to a theory of audism is Derrida's critique of the so-called father of modern linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure's assumption that sound is an internal, intrinsic element to language. According to Saussure (1959), the "nature" of the linguistic signifier is governed by two principles: the "arbitrary nature of the signifier" (p. 67) and the "linear nature of the signifier" (p. 70). Because Saussure and others were unable to see that manual signifiers could be just as arbitrary as spoken signifiers, it became assumed that only sound could be fully arbitrary and that any visual sign would be a "natural" or "iconic" sign, relegated to the study of semiology rather than linguistics. Thus Derrida (1974) notes the phonocentric move in Saussurian linguistics when he substitutes the term *sound-image* for *linguistic signifier*. As these become interchangeable, other forms of language are

cast aside, and speech governs the internal workings of linguistics. The consolidation of the power of speech in the first principle then leads to the total exclusion of other forms of language in the second, which states, "The signifier, *being auditory*, is unfolded solely in time from which it gets the following characteristics: a) it represents a span, and b) the span is measurable in a *single dimension; it is a line*" [italics added] (p. 70). Any form of language that does not unfold in a "single dimension" is not linear and therefore is not a linguistic sign per se. As a result, Derrida notes that forms of nonphonetic communication such as alternative writing systems are "chased off limits" to become the "wandering outcasts of linguistics" (p. 44).

The visual-kinetic-spatial modality of sign is obviously not included in the "nature" of the linguistic sign. As a result, sign becomes the "other" of language, helping to determine what language *is not*. Consider its role in Mario Pei's *The Story of Language* (1949), where manual languages are discussed exclusively in the first chapter, "Non-Linguistic Communication," whose purpose is to commence the story of language by saying what language is not. Linguists could not see this because their vision was occluded by the intrinsic and "natural bond" of sound to thought. Our ears got in the way of our eyes, disturbing and distorting our vision.

Although Derrida (1974) does not discuss signed languages to any great extent, he notes that phonocentrism has caused an unnecessary reverence for phonetic writing (because of its intimate relation with speech) at the exclusion of other nonphonetic forms of writing. He writes, "the metaphysics of writing (for example, the alphabet) which was fundamentally . . . nothing but the most original and powerful ethnocentrism" (p. 3). If one first wonders how something as "natural" as phonetic writing could be ethnocentric, think about the imposition of linear, phonetic writing on the Mesoamerican cultures that had already developed sophisticated economic, scientific, and literary texts without recourse to phonetic script (Boone & Mignolo, 1994). The imposition of linear writing has implications that extend beyond the political and verge into the very construction of our ideas of time and being. "We have seen that the traditional concept of time," Derrida (1974) writes, "an entire organization of the world and

of language, was bound up with it. Writing in the narrow sense—and phonetic writing above all—is rooted in a past of nonlinear writing. . . . A war was declared, and a suppression of all that resisted linearization was installed" (p. 85).

If phonocentrism led to a "suppression of all that resisted linearization," clearly sign would have been suppressed along with nonphonetic writing. Although sign takes place in time just as does speech, it also unfolds in a three-dimensional grammar that is not linear in the same way as speech and phonetic writing. The assumption that the signifier must take a linear form has led toward a whole structure of thinking that has resulted in linear constructions of time, logic, and thought. At this level, Derrida has raised the implications of phonocentrism to a level of enormous proportions. Bound up with the supremacy of speech and the repression of nonphonetic forms of communication is the very construction of *being* itself.

To right the imbalance caused by our phonocentric heritage, Derrida redefines *writing* to mean more than the physical act and product of handwriting or typewriting. Throughout *Of Grammatology*, Derrida (1974) strives to bring nonphonocentric forms of language and thinking to the fore, to recover them from the past, and to "desediment four thousand years of linear writing" (p. 86). For him, writing refers to the wider notion of recording ideas and impulses symbolically: We may use writing to refer to "all that gives rise to inscription in general, whether it is literal or not and even if what it *distributes in space is alien to the order of the voice:* cinematography, choreography, of course, but also pictorial, musical, sculptural 'writing'" [emphasis added] (p. 9). By dethroning speech, we may free ourselves to entertain alternative constructions of language and human nature.

Derrida's deconstruction of the natural supremacy of speech and phonetic writing has obvious implications for a theory of audism. Even though he does not directly discuss sign and the repression of deaf individuals, one can read Derrida through a deaf lens: This lens would often substitute Derrida's use of *writing* with *signed languages* or more succinctly, *sign*. In so doing, we see that the destabilizing of phonocentrism through recognition of sign as equal to speech has implications that critique Western constructions of

language and human identity. As a theory of audism joins in a wider critique of phonocentrism, it may gain a wider audience and recognition of the crucial role that audism, phonocentrism, and Deaf Studies play in contemporary thought. Although such lofty goals as the deconstruction of Western phonocentrism may be outside the daily experiences of audism and Deaf individuals, a theory of audism may use Derridean perspectives to assert its importance to all individuals, noting that full recognition of sign and the human rights of Deaf individuals is not simply a good thing to do but that it also gives us a more complete picture of the human potential for language and being.

Further, incorporating phonocentrism into discussions of audism allows us to see what is usually an invisible orientation within which institutions (i.e., medicine, education, psychology, governments, etc.) derive their construction of deafness-as-pathology. Although the metaphysical question of what is human may appear to be outside of the purview of audism, I contend that the ongoing debates around human identity are actually participants in the sources of audism. We may say that phonocentrism not only begets but also saturates institutional arrangements that privilege speech and phonetic writing as the norm. Educational practices such as oralism, Total Communication, and mainstreaming are the institutionalization of our phonocentric and audist metaphysical orientation; the practices of these institutions then beget individual audist attitudes through daily practices, rituals, and disciplining Deaf bodies into becoming closer to normal hearing bodies.[2] Yet if we continually remind ourselves that we now know that humans are just as equally the signing animal as the speaking animal, we may more fully delegitimize the power and authority that medical and educational institutions have over the lives of Deaf persons.

Such an ambitious project may gain momentum with the increased awareness of audism. As we explore the roots of audism, we may see ways to avoid a future of audism. Educational institutions for the Deaf, for example, may be aligned so that phonocentric orientations give way to ocularcentric paradigms where the eye and not the ear is placed as the central receptive organ for language. Imagine educational institutions from preschool to graduate school that could be bold enough to build their physical space, curriculum, assessment, and overall environment based on a Deaf, visually centered paradigm. Imagine a campus where the human voice was rendered irrelevant so that the full force of human potential for signed languages could be unleashed among hearing and Deaf individuals alike. Imagine an institution designed by and for those intimately acquainted with a Deaf epistemology. Only then could deaf education try to engage in antiaudist practices.

Conclusion

Three Faces of Audism

Having a word for the complexities of oppression of Deaf communities and their languages will help to arrive at a more Deaf-centered paradigm. One step in this long path is validation of the word *audism*. Dictionary acceptance is only one form of validation. Having that goal, however, will keep the newly coined term in currency. So we must be prepared when the time comes to arrive at the appropriate definition. Below are three possible dictionary entries.

Audism: (*Ô·diz·m*) n.

1. The notion that one is superior based on one's ability to hear or behave in the manner of one who hears.

2. A system of advantage based on hearing ability.

3. A metaphysical orientation that links human identity with speech.

The first is the initial seed planted by Tom Humphries (1975). The second is adapted from Wellman's (1993) definition of racism and is mindful of Lane's (1992) discussion of institutionalized audism. The third definition was presented at the Deaf Studies VI conference by Bahan and Bauman (2000).

A theory of audism may serve to link these particular definitions, aspects, or "sites" of audism together to see the relay from metaphysical, systemic, and individual audism. Phonocentrism provides an overriding orientation in which the systems of advantage (education and medicine) form and consolidate power by enforcing a normalcy that privileges speech over sign and hearing over deafness. As the system maintains hegemony over

the construction and representation of deafness, individuals acquire "the notion that one is superior based on one's ability to hear or behave in the manner of one who hears" (Humphries, 1975).

Because dictionary definitions are necessarily compact, the points in this article are only signposts along the theoretical journey toward understanding audism. They do not take up residence at these points for any extended period of time. The points mapped out here will require an enormous amount of attention and energy—a massive project ahead for Deaf Studies. But herein lies its promise—the recovery of a history *that might have been*, the specular history of *what if* we had not only identified ourselves as the speaking animal but also as the signing animal? How has the absence of sign shaped our ideas, categories, thinking, experience, and being? The map of audism, therefore, is not a local map to be read only by the Deaf community; it is rather the beginning of an atlas of sorts, wrapping around the whole of what it means to be human.

Notes

1. Despite these extreme words, Sicard did recognize that humans may just as easily communicate manually as orally. What he did miss, however, was the crucial insight afforded by Pierre Desloges (1989), a deaf bookbinder who was the first Deaf person to publish a book in defense of a Deaf community and its native sign language. Desloges gives us valuable insight into the Parisian Deaf community prior to the Abbe de l'Epee, which had developed its own body of knowledge, social and religious practices, and most importantly, its own fully human manual language. Sicard may have been accentuating the plight of the Deaf individual to make a cause for governmental support of his school. He had to demonstrate the dependence of the Deaf pupil on education in order to become a fully human French citizen.

2. Here is where Derrida's (1974) critique of phonocentrism may link with Michel Foucault's (1975) critique of enlightenment institutions and the rise of biopower that controls pathological bodies.

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