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Sign Language Peoples as indigenous minorities: implications for research and policy†

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Abstract. **In this paper we draw strong parallels between Sign Language Peoples (SLPs) and First Nation peoples. We argue that SLPs (communities defining themselves by shared membership in physical and metaphysical aspects of language, culture, epistemology, and ontology) can be considered indigenous groups in need of legal protection in respect of educational, linguistic, and cultural rights accorded to other First Nation indigenous communities. We challenge the assumption that SLPs should be primarily categorised within concepts of disability. The disability label denies the unique spatial culturolinguistic phenomenon of SLP collectivist identity by replicating traditional colonialist perspectives, and actively contributing to their ongoing oppression. Rather, SLPs are defined spatially as a locus for performing, building, and reproducing a collective topography expressed through a common language and a shared culture and history.**

> "[T]he experiences of sign-language-using communities can be seen to have far more in common with Black or 'First Nation' minority cultures."
>
> Ladd (2003, page 18)

Introduction

In this paper, we argue that there are significant parallels between the life experiences of, and patterns of oppression experienced by, the Deaf communities (hereafter referred to as 'Sign Language Peoples', and abbreviated as SLPs) and those of First Nation peoples. We prepare the ground for further research to demonstrate the extent to which SLPs (who define themselves through shared experience of, and membership in, physical and metaphysical aspects of language, culture, epistemology, and ontology) are indigenous groups qualifying for the educational and linguistic rights, and cultural protection, offered to other First Nation indigenous communities.

The paper begins by challenging the current hegemonic discursive system's belief that SLPs should be categorised and administered solely within the disability model. This model denies the distinctive spatial culturolinguistic phenomenon of SLP identity; even the social model of disability offers only a partial explanation of the SLPs' situation. By insisting on biological primacy for the construction of the category of persons with disabilities, issues such as culturolinguistic dynamics and rights are ignored in favour of an individual rights approach to social policy. SLPs are defined

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spatially as culturolinguistic minorities shaped by spaces of natural, visual, sign language interaction. Their communities are the loci for performing, building, and reproducing a collective topography expressed though a common language and a shared culture and history, one very different from that understood and performed by hearing peoples, disabled and able-bodied alike. Consequently, a misapplication of the disability paradigm has led to ongoing oppression of SLPs' communities and languages.

The paper then explains a different way of thinking and being which forms the core of SLPs' spatial landscape from their own perspectives, drawing on hitherto unpublished insights. Analogies between the SLP experience and that of other indigenous peoples are then examined. The paper concludes by examining the policy implications of accepting that SLPs are indigenous minorities, whose rights, while often paternalistic in orientation and failing to rectify issues of marginalisation (May, 2001, page 274), are nevertheless significant when compared with the even more limited rights available to SLPs.

The paper emerges from the different experiences and specialisms of the three authors, all academics, who bring and combine both Deaf and hearing points of view: the first as a partial-participant in the SLP community; the second as an SLP insider; and the third as a geography scholar working in an SLP-oriented environment. The paper represents our attempts to reconcile the authoring of conceived spaces by disability or ethnographical theories within the SLP community, the perceived spaces of the SLP community itself, and the lived spaces produced by the SLPs' performance of their everyday lives (Lefebvre, 1991). This collaboration of participatory ethnographies provides the basis for a fusion of both etic and emic views on the day-to-day phenomenon of oppression and the SLP experience.

A brief introduction to SLPs

In order to assist readers with unpacking their received notions of 'deafness', we have utilised the phrase SLP for the communities under examination. However, there will still be times when the term 'Deaf' must be used. The word 'Deaf' is capitalised as is the norm in Deaf studies, signifying communities of SLPs who share a common national sign language, culture, and identity (Woodward, 1972). The uncapitalised form 'deaf' traditionally indicates audiological status, and constitutes hard of hearing and late-deafened individuals who do not belong to SLPs, and who are not the focus of this paper.

The paper focuses on the SLP of the UK, whose members share British Sign Language (BSL) and a common, collective British Deaf culture. The desire to use BSL, to operate from the cultural norms of the UK SLP, and to be actively committed to the development of that community is a prerequisite for membership (Bahan, 1989; 1994; Carmel, 1987; Kannapell, 1989; 1993; Ladd, 2003). The community also shares a common experience of linguistic oppression; however, this does not itself define community membership.

Although the grammars of different spoken languages show tremendous variation in the ways that they map deep pragmatic and semantic concepts into the actual syntax of a speech act, those of different sign languages are remarkably similar, to the extent of being, by comparison, almost identical. This is not surprising when we consider that visuo-gestural languages literally embody almost biologically determined requirements, constraints, and expansionary principles. Many non-Deaf people appear to be subconsciously aware of this, as evidenced by the surprise that they express on learning that there is not a single 'international sign language'. However, they are correct inasmuch as those syntactic similarities mean that SLPs have the unique ability to communicate immediately and easily across international borders (and thus to see themselves as a global entity) via the constant creation and re-creation of pidgin contact languages.

Recent sociopolitical changes have accelerated hybridity within the traditional model of SLPs. Positive changes include the increased number of non-Deaf (and even deaf) persons learning to sign. Negative examples include the policies of cultural assimilation, known as mainstreaming, which are resulting in many people who would in the past have been central members of SLPs growing up with little or no contact with the SLP communities and their languages and cultures. Increasing numbers, however, are seeking out and locating their roots—'coming home' to what they term their 'Deaf family' (DEX, 2004). An equivalent hybrid identity is also found in numerous First Nation peoples, rooted in similar educational policies designed to remove those languages and cultures (Beresford and Omaji, 1998; Churchill, 1994). Another example of hybridity is the non-Deaf children of SLPs who grow up within those communities, but who go on to attempt to create their place in majority societies. Since this paper has much ground to cover in order to represent traditional SLPs to a new audience, it can do no more than acknowledge these hybridities. As it presently stands, SLPs themselves are engaged in serious debate about the status of these hybridities within their communities.

Social 'classes' already exist within traditional SLPs. Differences are found between those who are descended from as many as nine generations of SLPs, and those born to non-Deaf families. All were educated in 'Deaf schools'. However, given the century-long policies of 'Oralism', which banned sign languages and removed Deaf teachers and the sign language community from the schools (we will explore this later), further social classes have been formed according to the extent to which individuals acquiesce in, or resist, this oppression. An individual's skill with, and attitude towards, BSL is a major determinant of status within the community, often having a much greater significance than other factors such as ethnic background, class, or sexuality. SLP from multigenerational SLP families have a high status within the communities for several reasons.

They are recognised as the primary carriers of the language and culture from generation to generation (surreptitiously during school years, and overtly thereafter). There is acknowledgment by those from non-Deaf families that SLP from multigenerational Deaf families suffered for this during Oralism; their assistance with enculturation meant that they are singled out for especial punishment. Finally, as they are raised with BSL as their first language, their higher academic results and emotional maturity (Conrad, 1979) make it easier for them to become community leaders. With the reintroduction of BSL as a cornerstone of a new version of bilingual education, it is expected that children from non-SLP families will become more prominent.

Geography: territorial inertia, problems past and present

In writing this paper, we face the challenge of achieving something that our predecessors have largely been unable to do: to communicate the nature of SLPs to an academic audience not steeped in Deaf cultural knowledge. There is a long-term pattern of 'introductory' works from Deaf studies academics being unable to significantly impact the hegemonic knowledge of their targeted disciplines (Conrad, 1979; Griggs, 1998; Kyle, 1989; Kyle and Woll, 1985; Lane, 1984; 1999). Thus, as we are faced with this task, this time directed towards a geographical readership, our fears parallel those expressed by Irigaray (1984): that the vastness and familiarity of the representation we seek to challenge may be so large as to render our truth apparently ridiculous before it is even fully enunciated. The paper therefore makes an explicit request: that the reader lay aside preconceived ideas of Deaf people or deafness itself and embrace the subsequently uncomfortable and tempestuous deterritorialisation (Deleuze and Guatarri, 1987) for long enough to feel at least slightly lost and windswept.

One of the reasons for such a request is the extent of geography's involvement with disability theory. This has operated both through more traditional geographical mappings of disability and illness (Foster, 1988) and through specifically geographical theory exploring society's production of disabled spaces and the experiences of disabled people within them (Gleeson, 1998). This latter strand has developed more recently as geographers have followed currents within disability theory that seek to address the spatial 'othering' of disabled people in comparison with other marginalised groups (Valentine and Skelton, 2003) or by dissolving the biological–social dialectic of disabled people's inner spaces (Imrie, 2000).

Indeed, within this disability context, geographical studies of some Deaf people are emerging: Valentine and Skelton's recent work examining the marginalisation of gay and Deaf young people (Skelton and Valentine, 2003; Valentine and Skelton, 2003), Kelly's (2003) doctoral thesis on the hybrid physicality of the deaf subject, and ongoing research examining the access offered to Deaf and hard of hearing people by new technology (Leeds, 2005). However, the very pervasiveness of disability theory still obfuscates geographical views of SLPs.

Consequently, the first challenge here is in asserting that the spatial assumptions of disability-based geographies presently completely fail to perceive the visuo-spatial-tactile, historical, culturolinguistic nature of SLPs. A foundational assumption of disability theory is the ultimate dissolution of the difference between disabled spaces and the spaces of the majority, at either a physical or a representational level. This accurately captures the situation of those commonly referred to as 'deaf', but is appropriate only for those whose primary sources for identity, community, language, and affirmation are drawn from the 'mainstream' spaces of majority societies. To continue to ascribe this to SLPs is to ignore the very different life experiences and characteristics indicated above.

SLPs do not look to majority societies for their identity and affirmation, but locate themselves instead within the spaces of linguistic and cultural SLP 'territories', which draw sustenance from more than 2000 years of SLP history. Shielded by sensory impasse from the communicative flow of spoken languages, these interactive spaces initially emerged as a self-sustaining ecosystem of language and belonging which land-formed within the interactive spaces of multigenerational SLP families and their associative relationships. These 'SLP spaces' developed into a network that was not merely the hearing world replicated in sign language, but a separate, SLP-authored reality within which they lived and died—an autochthonous space in which the communities and sign languages were symbiotically reliant upon each other for the well-being of all their members.

Given their starting position outside of these linguistically bounded SLP spaces, it is understandable that disability geographers might have failed to comprehend them. Indeed, it is questionable whether they might ever be able to do so through a disability lens. It is here that the paper presents its second challenge: to mediate that which is offered by a heterotopic Deaf space in contesting the authoring and hegemony of the spaces in which we live and in and through which we constitute 'others' (Foucault, 1994 [1967]). Our research leads us to believe that geography is, in fact, uniquely able to explore the nature of SLPs and their spaces, but not through a disability approach. Instead, we utilise theories drawn from postcolonial and indigenous spaces.

Once this shift takes place, the demarcation between the spaces of disabled people, deaf people, and SLPs comes into bold relief. Whereas disabled people applaud the journey that integration allows them to make from marginal spaces into spaces of the mainstream, SLPs' narratives are altogether different. Whilst they identify with

similar concerns over the need to access majority society as bilingual citizens when they so choose, an enforced normalisation, based on the integration of the disabled person as an individual, removes them from their 'native' territory and floats them in isolated bubbles of silence within the mainstream.

Clearly, this is not a difference based on the physical ability to hear; some SLP have more physical hearing than those who consider themselves as deaf. Nor is it a question of a single identity; SLPs and deaf persons also navigate through performances of other more or less essentialised identities inside and outside of the Deaf world. It is much more an issue of collective group well-being (Griggs, 1998), paralleling the discourses of indigenous and autochthonous people groups and their struggles to validate their own spaces in the face of linear, neocolonial imaginings of 'progress'. As in indigenous discourses, this cuts both ways, both challenging the need to adopt the spaces and practices of the hegemon in order to be heard (Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999) and, in turn, resisting the encroachment of the mainstream upon native spaces, identities, and knowledges. Deaf narratives share the same vocabulary, speaking of: 'nativeness', 'genocide', 'Deaf Nations', 'lost generations', 'cultural holism', and 'linguistic and cultural ownership' (Ladd, 2003) and the need to protect SLPs' territory—the internal metaphysics and the external boundaries of the delicate metalinguistic ecosystems which ensure the well-being of the SLP individual and thus the quality of life of SLP communities (Gulliver, 2003a).

It is in this parallel between SLPs and indigenous spaces that the truly challenging nature of heterotopic SLP spaces emerges. There is, we submit, little difference between Deaf and indigenous theorisations of territory except in the immediately physical referent of indigenous cultural landscapes and in the explicitly nonphysical, inherently diasporic (Wrigley, 1996), and linguistically embodied Deafscape (Gulliver, 2005). However, its potential contribution to debates on territoriality, place, categorical and performed identities, and the spatialisation of alternative knowledges has not yet been realised by geographers and postcolonial theorists alike. Instead, it is the traditional reliance on classifying SLPs with disability and on classifying First Nation peoples with territory, that prevents SLPs' admittance to the forums in which they might be of most value and mutual benefit.

Our correspondence with an academic demonstrates this at work:

> "Thank you for your interest in our Indigenous ... project ... your work is very exciting—but unfortunately we don't think it is a good fit with what we are trying to do. Basically, we are concerned with those indigenous nations who were dispossessed by settler colonists and who now exist as Fourth World peoples within the bounded territories of super-imposed nation-states. The position of such peoples is fundamentally different from that of other minority groups" (e-mail correspondence 2003).

The writer's instinctive rejection of SLPs has striking similarities with Minh-Ha's observation of (1995) colonist discourse:

> "When they confront the challenge 'in the flesh' they naturally do not recognise it as a challenge. Do not hear, do not see. They promptly reject it as they assign it to their one-place-fits-all 'other' category and either warily explain that it is 'not quite what we are looking for' and that they are not the right people for it; or they kindly refer it to other, 'more adequate' whereabouts such as 'counter-culture', 'smaller independent', 'experimental' margins" (page 215).

We now move on to clarify the relationship between SLPs and postcolonial theory.

Postcolonialism and SLPs

The imposition of labels and inaccurate theories on groups of people has strong political implications—it has been used throughout history to sanction violent acts ranging from colonialism to eugenic practices. Historical records increasingly reveal the shocking story of oppression and denial of full citizenship to SLPs through centuries of varying hegemonic discourse constructed around notions of SLPs' essential biological inferiority, and, more recently, disability constructions. Definitions are consequently an important political tool and, indeed, a key battleground for any cultural group (Said, 2003, page 334).

Over the past 300 years or so, SLPs have been described by professionals as: primitive, savage, feebleminded, retarded, subhuman, incapable of abstract thought, lacking in language, and animal like (Branson and Miller, 2002; Van Cleve and Crouch, 1989). These constructions reflect the various hegemonic discourses of their day. However, there is evidence that numbers of 'lay people' and, indeed, other prestigious persons, ranging from Enlightenment philosophers (Mirzoeff, 1995) to Ottoman potentates (Miles, 2000), did not share these views, although those voices were expunged from history during the past 'Oralist century'. Moreover, evidence is mounting that the cognitive effects of embracing sign language and visual learning support SLPs' repeated statements that they embody a visually oriented 'intelligence' and geography, thereby providing support for their claims to an inalienable and valuable physical embodiment of cultural difference (Alker in Gulliver, 2003a).

Systemic, as opposed to ad hoc, oppression of SLPs has its roots in the formation (or, rather, the mutation of purpose via Oralism) of Deaf schools and the establishment of charity and welfare organisations. These processes have been described by Ladd (2003), Lane (1999), and Wrigley (1996) as colonialist practices, inasmuch as Deaf schools were designed to remove the language and culture of SLPs from SLP children, and the charity and welfare organisations were designed to contain SLP adults within stringently administered 'reservations' (Branson and Miller, 2002).

Deaf schools were founded from 1760 onwards and for more than a century were key sites for the development of SLPs' language and culture. The (sign) languages were used as the mode of instruction, and Deaf teachers were an integral part of cultural transmission and moral guidance—indeed, numerous schools were established by SLPs themselves.

However, from the late 19th century, Deaf teachers and sign languages were progressively prohibited, and speech therapy was prioritised over genuine education and learning for Deaf children. Under Oralist colonialism, the use of sign language resulted in severe, daily punishment. When the appalling academic and emotional consequences were finally researched (Conrad, 1979), sign language returned to the education system and during the 1980s a 'Deaf resurgence' (Ladd, 2003) began.

However, in the 1970s, Oralism moved into the first of three neocolonialist waves, mainstreaming SLP children to prevent them from accessing their peers, their language, and their cultural heritage, even though this left many unable to integrate with the non-Deaf children in whose midst they were submerged. In effect, mainstreaming is a form of exclusion—not 'inclusion' (DEX, 2004). There are significant parallels with education policies enacted on many First Nation peoples, which were utilised once it was seen that simply confining them to 'reservations' failed to remove their languages and culture (Beresford and Omaji, 1998; Churchill, 1994).

The other two waves—cochlear implant experimentation and the gene therapy movement, both technological attempts to 'remove deafness' (read 'SLPs')—have a long history (Ladd, in press). These range from 19th-century 'quackery' (Lane, 1984) through to the eugenics movement spearheaded by Alexander Graham Bell

(Lane, 1984; Mowl, 1996), which culminated in the eugenic assaults of Nazi Germany (Ryan and Schuchman, 2002). The speed at which these three waves are being pursued has led numerous Deaf writers to characterise them as "Oralism's Final Solution" (Ladd, 2003).

Throughout this period, and across the world, from 1880 onwards, official organisations of SLPs have resisted all these forms of colonialism, attempting to reach into many domains to draw attention to these continuing breaches of collective human rights (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2004). Once the discipline of Deaf studies was founded in the 1990s, it became possible for SLPs to begin dialogue with other academic domains, as exemplified by this paper. Although significant progress has been made within linguistics (compare Sutton-Spence and Woll, 1999), the gates of most social and physical sciences have not yet been breached. Disability theory has unwittingly perpetuated these diminished views, and overlooks the existence of a Deaf landscape and collective topography.

The narratives of SLPs

Feminist and postcolonial writers have suggested that oppressed groups have epistemic privilege (Mohanty, 2003), and this gives added importance to understanding SLPs' perspectives concerning their existence as communities and their place in the external world.

The colonisation of SLPs has led not only to sign languages themselves being damaged but also to the additional loss of many historically rooted narratives, cultures, traditions, and folk forms. Just as other colonised groups during their liberation stages sought to reidentify and recentre themselves around cultural features in existence prior to colonisation, so too must we look to evidence of SLP narratives and beliefs which predate the colonial era.

Sign languages, like almost all other languages of indigenous people, are 'oral'—that is, not committed to a writing system. Moreover, the means to physically record them—by videotaping—has evolved only in the last twenty-five years, compared with the many decades of spoken language recording technology. Thus, evidence of precolonial Deaf thought can be located only in accounts deposited in the written languages of that time or place, and must therefore be treated cautiously.

The main documentation available emerges from the French SLP community from 1779 onwards, and it is this which will be drawn on here. In that year, Desloges produced the first known book written by a Deaf person (1984 [1779)]. The second text details the responses of the first two Deaf teachers, Jean Massieu and Laurent Clerc, on their 1815 visit to England, where they gave extensive examples of their thoughts and beliefs to gatherings of the nobility. Questions such as 'What differences are there between mind and intellect?' were translated through the medium of English to French to LSF (*la Langue des Signes Française*). Massieu and Clerc gave their responses in written French, which were then copied down by the scribe, de Ladebat, who travelled with them, and published later that year (de Ladebat, 1815). The third set of examples comes from the Parisian banquets of 1834 onwards, where 'speeches' given in LSF were translated into French and circulated widely (Mottez, 1993).

It is also important to note that these works were informed by SLPs' active participation in the French Revolution and engagement with the ideas engendered there (Lane, 1984; Mirzoeff, 1995). The authors' involvement over several decades in both the Deaf education system and the Parisian SLP community gave them the time and space to theorise upon the 'meaning' of SLPs' existence in the world, and on the nature and particular significance of their languages. The contrasts they drew between the experience of prior isolation within the non-Deaf world and the sophistication

of the new 'Deaf civilisations' enabled them to specify important epistemological and even ontological similarities and differences between themselves and the French-speaking people who surrounded them. Moreover, each text indicates that they were not talking solely about their own thoughts but representing beliefs held in common by SLPs.

Indeed, the raison d'être of these texts was to inform the world that SLPs were actually capable of philosophising through the medium of sign language, leading to recognition of the SLP contribution to human knowledge via what was then seen as the 'highest' form of Western civilisation—philosophical thought.

Ladd identifies seven philosophical tenets within these texts, which he terms the "seven principles of Deafhood" (2003, page 111). These beliefs are summarised as:

1. Sign languages have a unique nature and power and can express things that spoken languages cannot.
2. There is a greater ease of international communication between sign languages than between spoken languages.
3. Consequently, SLPs offer the world a model of global citizenship.
4. SLPs' existence on Earth is intentional, whether enacted by 'God' or 'nature', for the purpose of modeling these principles.
5. Non-Deaf people can be regarded as 'sign-impaired', rather than SLPs being seen as 'hearing-impaired'.
6. Sign languages are offered as a gift which can benefit non-Deaf peoples.
7. There should be a commitment to the betterment of all SLPs, as opposed to an educated elite.

Thus, when Massieu is asked to explain the differences between 'natural and artificial languages' (a formidable question for anyone to have to answer in public!), he replies:

> "Natural language is the language which the deaf and dumb, savages ... make use of to communicate to one another their ideas and feelings. It is the language of nature, the natural representation of objects: such as gestures, physiognomy, the expression of the face and the eyes. Artificial language is a language invented by the union of several persons which is called society; a conventional language, a language which is either written or spoken.' (de Ladebat, 1815, page 137).

Although we now know that this is a false distinction, epistemic privilege requires that we read this on its own terms. The ready association between SLPs and indigenous peoples recurs throughout the texts—it is clear that many felt no sense of shame in being placed with the '*sauvages*'. Given the contemporary worldview around 'savages', we are thus compelled to consider further how this position arose. The key issue is the ready acceptance of the association of SLPs with the natural—that is, with 'Nature'.

Upon being asked by 'an English lady' about the differences between French and English women, Clerc replies so frankly that the lady asks him about his frankness itself. His proud reply "It is the privilege of a man of Nature" (de Ladebat, 1815, page 11) indicates his belief that frankness (and thus honesty) stems from membership of 'natural' as opposed to 'convention-bound' societies. Numerous other references associating SLPs with Nature are found across continents throughout the 19th century, suggesting this to be a widely held belief, at least amongst the Deaf intelligentsia.

This belief is based on the unique 'existential' reality of SLPs' 'human condition'. All non-Deaf people are physically able to learn to speak another language, so that even if they are totally colonised (and their culture destroyed) they are still able to vocalise in a language, albeit that of the colonisers. SLPs, however, if denied access to sign language, not only do not truly develop another first language but are at risk of having no language whatsoever [as research into Oralism has, indeed, confirmed

(Conrad, 1979)] and thus of becoming less than human. In the sense that sign language emerges from the body, hand, eye, and face, as if it is existentially designed to do so when hearing is absent, it is, indeed, a 'natural' language. Moreover, that language cannot itself exist without other SLPs coming together to develop, share, and refine it. In that very tangible sense, then, SLPs are 'naturally bound' to each other at a deeper level than that which non-Deaf people can easily conceive of. The slippery slope back down to the isolated 'wild child' was all too visible in those times when comparatively few Deaf children were educated. Indeed, such isolation still exists today with estimates that 80% [World Federation of the Deaf (WFD), 2005, no page] of the world's Deaf children do not attend schools where they might be more able to join SLPs through contact with other Deaf people.

Moreover, SLPs' beliefs throughout these texts employ ontological frames of reference to explain their existence as a global geographical community, whereby the unique syntactic flexibility of a single global 'metalanguage' enabled each national and local sign language to develop its own vocabulary within its own particular geographical locality. Further, they associated this naturalness with a conscious spiritual source, a perspective which combined elements of the Christian monotheistic God with an *ur-Gaian* view of Nature—the idea that they had grown from out of the earth in the same way that other indigenous peoples and other life-forms had. We need not infer a religious intentionality—though it is important to note that these writers did just that—but to accept their assertion of an earth-rooted, natural culture, which could exist and be nurtured only by the coming together, in 'tribal' form, of SLPs.

Few of these seven philosophical tenets survived the colonisation process of Oralism intact. However, in the 'Deaf resurgence' of the last twenty years, all seven tenets have been reasserted in one form or another. These include the sign language poetry of Dorothy Miles (1983), the Deaf cultural research of Padden and Humphries (1988), the visual art of Alexandr Martianov, and the Blue Ribbon Ceremony of the WFD (1999).

It is crucial to note that SLPs' existence is located at the interstices of two conflicting cultural discourses, which exist not only within colonised SLPs themselves but also within the non-Deaf individual. Within Western peoples, this internal conflict has been identified by some indigenous writers as originating in tensions existing between Western concepts of the 'natural' and the 'civilised' self. As the Native American writer Churchill (1994, page 234) noted, the white man had first to "colonise himself"—in other words, to sever the relationship between the earth and himself before he could colonise others. Some writers trace this severance to the Christian attempts to remove Western pantheistic knowledge through the centuries-long witch burnings, noting the connections between such knowledge and the recently resurgent 'alternative' or 'complementary' medicine (Levack, 1992). Others cite the enclosure of common land and the industrial revolution as marking the severance between the natural and the 'scientific' (eg Branson and Miller, 2002). Similar discourses can be found in Afro-Caribbean writings where colonisation is seen as the triumph of an alienated individualism over holistic, collectivist First Nation cultures (Fanon, 1968; Karenga, 1993; Rodney, 1982).

Consequently, although lay people may consider it natural that Deaf children be educated in sign language and by Deaf teachers, and are shocked whenever they find out that this is not the case, they remain in thrall to a discursive system which denigrates the 'natural' whilst promoting scientism—the belief that medicine and technology can somehow 'cure' or 'remove' the deafness, and latterly, with the advent of genetics, remove the Deaf child or person altogether.

Further parallels between SLPs and First Nations

This section focuses on two sets of parallels: 'internal' parallels in cultural patternings, and 'external' parallels in the forms of oppression and Fourth World status which characterise both SLP and First Nation economic geography. Studies of diasporas, indigenous people, and postcolonial theory provide insights which accord well with SLP experience (Ashcroft et al, 1995; Fee, 1995; Minh-Ha, 1995; Mohanty, 2003; Mudrooroo, 1995; Radhakrishnan, 2003; Said, 2003) but the boundaries of these theories need to be redrawn to accept that vision.

Towards a definition of indigenous peoples

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) developed a definition of indigenous peoples in 1989. This is cited more fully in May (2001, page 275), where indigenous peoples are described as:

> "a) Tribal peoples in independent countries whose social, cultural and economic conditions distinguish them from other sections of the national community, whose status is regulated wholly or partially by their own customs or traditions or by special laws or regulations.
>
> b) ... [R]egarded as indigenous on account of their descent from the populations which inhabited the country, or geographical region to which the country belongs, at the time of conquest or colonisation" (Article 1.1, ILO Convention 169).

It is not clear from these definitions whether other linguistic (European) minorities such as Catalonians are appropriately described by the term 'tribal peoples', and thus where they belong in this schema. However, we posit that SLPs are included in (a) by virtue of the existence of their own 'culture, customs, and traditions'. For their inclusion in (b), we assert that the long-standing existence of sign communities within each country is indicative of their indigeneity. This Deaf cultural belief can be found in documents published by SLP organisations as part of their political campaigns towards native sign language recognition, which assert that, for example, "BSL is one of the four indigenous languages of the UK" (British Deaf Association, 1987). Likewise, 'descent' is perceived as existing through the multigenerational history and kinship structure of SLP families themselves (NUD, 1982).

May (2001) outlines a number of the key characteristics of indigenous people when he notes:

> "indigenous groups have in nearly all cases a long history of colonisation which has seen such groups faced with systematic disadvantage, marginalisation and/or alienation in their own historic territories. As a result, they have been undermined economically, culturally and politically, with ongoing, often disturbing, consequences for their individual and collective life chances. At the same time, indigenous peoples have been viewed extremely pejoratively in relation to modernisation—i.e., as 'primitive' or pre-modern. Consequently, they have been subjected in many cases to forced assimilation, on the misplaced assumption that this was the only viable option for their social and cultural survival and/ or advancement .... Thus indigenous peoples have not had access, in many instances, to even the most basic rights ostensibly attributable to all citizens in the modern nation-state" (pages 273 – 274).

This description is an exact fit with the SLP experience. Other writers identify additional characteristics such as dispossession, settlement of indigenous territories and spaces, and their Fourth World First Nation status (Ashcroft et al, 1995; Mudrooroo, 1995). For Mudrooroo, indigenous peoples are described as being "submerged in a surrounding majority and governed by them" (1995, page 231).

The concept of indigeneity is undoubtedly problematic; it is not easy to identify the boundaries between what is indigenous and what is not. These criteria may include many more populations than current indigenous theorists would be prepared to accept, including perhaps Roma and Jewish peoples pre-1948 as well as SLPs. To exclude groups merely on the basis of having a different spatial configuration and diasporic dimension may well reflect the territorial struggles of historically driven contestations between academic disciplines.

Ancestry and lineage

As we have noted, SLPs share linguistic and cultural parallels with other indigenous groups. However, as noted also, SLP families extending back to at least nine generations (which is when records actually begin) perceive themselves as a physical channel responsible for perpetuating the 'cores' of their communities: passing on their languages and cultures to their own children and to sign language users from hearing families through Deaf schools and Deaf clubs which are as much as 200 years old. The assertion that groups must have a genetic lineage to be 'a people' is challenged by the SLP experience, which demonstrates that behavioural, experiential linguistic, and biological as well as genetic characteristics can induce the emergence and perpetuation of rich, performed culturolinguistic communities.

In SLP communities, the trope of 'family' is repeatedly used to symbolise such multigenerational lineage, and whilst only up to 10% of Deaf children are born to SLP families, the other 90% describe the communities as "their surrogate family" (Hall, 1989, page 92). This concept is immensely challenging for non-Deaf people (but not for the gay and lesbian community), as Wrigley observes:

> "[the fact] that children can be born into families unconnected with their 'native' identity disrupts the fixedness of the identity and baby. It disrupts notions of what it means to be native, as well as notions of what—or where—it is one can be native to" (1996, page 14).

This is further supported by the importance attached by SLPs to their visual geographies (Alker in Gulliver, 2003b), suggesting that they see their ancestry and lineage as also continuing through the development of a distinct cognitive process and epistemology which is inalienably embodied and 'native' to SLPs.

Other cultural parallels

Culture is a key aspect of the SLP experience, and their cultures are fundamentally different from Western majority cultures. However, there are numerous parallels and commonalities (as well as differences) with other indigenous cultures. These include: the community-centred, collectivist ethos and reciprocity, differences in conception and use of time, context dependency in language, past orientation, and the high priority accorded to sharing information and communication (Mindess, 1999). Other parallels include the maintenance of an oral (that is, unwritten) tradition including features such as folklore (Lane et al, 1996; Padden and Humphries 1988) and storytelling, a strong daily feature of SLP cultural discourse, which embodies and transmits beliefs, narratives, living history, and mythologies.

Ladd (2003) also suggests the category of 'minority cultures' by identifying numerous cultural features held in common between SLPs and other colonised peoples, which arise from the process of colonial oppression itself. These include several binary patterns such as 'resistance versus compliance', the trope of 'pressure', Du Bois's (1989) 'double consciousness' concept, and the emergence of comprador classes who have internalised feelings of inferiority and worthlessness, which contend with a covert belief in many aspects of a positive Deafhood. Gulliver (2003a) suggests that it is the

continued 'infolding' of these tensions which may create the minority-imbued habitus which is at the heart of minority-hood.

Significant ontological parallels between the beliefs of SLPs and indigenous peoples concern notions of ownership and belonging, as the Deaf historian Raymond Lee explains:

> "Sign languages are far better than Deaf people themselves; they live on after individuals die. When those old people signed, whew! Ghosts danced on their hands!" (in Ladd, 2003, page 373).

This belief represents a virtual physical actuality, since one special characteristic of sign languages is their ability to bodily mimic, and thus render visible, other people, both living and dead.

This assertion of one's language having primacy over oneself might be said to apply to all languages, although we do not know how many societies on earth are consciously aware of this cultural characteristic, and which ones—which 'types'—specifically choose to emphasise it. What we might say, however, is that speakers of majority languages give less emphasis to this sense of membership of an ongoing language than do speakers of some minority languages. However, the directionality of Lee's statement is crucial. It operates not from the individual outwards (as in 'I speak English/English belongs to me') but from the 'outside' inwards (as in 'I belong to sign language').

It is just this directionality which characterises most known indigenous peoples: instead of saying, as the coloniser does, 'this land belongs to me', indigenous people emphasise that 'I belong to the land'. In this construction, indigenous peoples exist within a holistic frame of reference, where they live in harmony with the specific physical environment that nurtures them, which lives on after they die and that must therefore be preserved. In emphasising a similar directionality, Lee espouses a belief which can be traced right back to those early Deaf writers and their own stated parallels between SLPs and other 'peoples of Nature'.

Indeed, it was the very naturalness of sign languages which drove Oralism's assertion that, if Deaf children were permitted any contact with SLPs and sign language, they would 'naturally' continue to use it and thus remain in an 'uncivilised' state of being. This belief gained hegemony for several reasons, one of which was the development of Social Darwinism, which, significantly, provided the ideological underpinning for the growth and maintenance of colonialism itself though the trope of 'progress'.

In respect of the above, we should also note the intriguing parallel in the remarkable number of indigenous populations who used (or still use) a sophisticated sign language in their own daily lives, such as Native Americans and Aborigines (Kendon, 1988), Central and South American tribes (Johnson, 1994), Africans (Kisch, 2001; Schmaling, 2000), and Indonesians (Branson et al, 1996). Although these situations have not yet been collectively analysed, their existence, together with the continuing emergence of further examples, is worthy of contemplation in respect of the deeper ontological parallels described above.

Territoriality, environment, and negotiated geographies

The key issue of indigenous people's cultural relationship with the environment is currently being played out in respect of land rights. SLPs are also concerned with land rights to what they consider their own spaces and places, such as Deaf schools and clubs. We should also note that SLP cultural geographies are differently shaped to those of majority cultures. There is a keen awareness of national and international SLP dimensions and much more travel in those dimensions than for the majority of non-Deaf people, whose communities and interactions are much more localised. This has led to the concept of a 'Deaf Nation' (Ladd, 2002), which is not, in fact, a nationalistic

concept so much as a global Deaf Nation with communities in each country of the world. This has its own parallels with First Nation movements.

We should also note that a key issue for Deaf people is the interweaving of their own geographies and those of a majority society known as the 'hearing world'. SLPs' perception of the interactive environment differs radically from that of hearing people particularly with regards to the transmission of information: compare, for example, the 'visually silent' spaces of spoken information exchange—often caricaturised by Deaf people by mouth movements accompanied by otherwise utter physical stillness—and the 'visually loud' communicative spaces of SLPs in which interactive spaces are animated through busy, physical movement (Gulliver, forthcoming). This, together with the inability of most hearing people to read sign languages, means that private (yet visible) Deaf spaces can be created in the middle of 'hearing world spaces' (Ladd and West, forthcoming).

Oralism and neocolonialism have also had a serious effect on SLPs' access to the spaces of information and power. Stone has observed that the shift from power though landownership to power through access to information has hit SLPs especially hard. He writes:

> "while historically the power associated with land ownership was attained through physical force, the power of today which is associated with information control requires literacy as a necessary if not sufficient force ... . And for language minority groups literacy has been an elusive dream" (1996, page 174).

The linguistic situation of SLPs enables them to exist as a group apart without the need for constant boundary maintenance, suggesting a centre-based understanding of SLP community, located around the language (Gulliver, 2003a). This stands in contrast to boundary-defined communities like some national minorities whose survival as a distinct group depends on bolstering their difference. As Bahan observes:

> "It is apparent that the Deaf World was formed out of the need for sameness rather than the need to create an 'us vs. them' dichotomy" (1994, page 244).

This spatial-environmental characteristic resonates with other indigenous groups who view land, nature, or language as agents with their own independent existence, able to give birth to cultures and beliefs (and even to rebirth them should they die) (Amery, 2000). This language-centred, spontaneous ethnogenesis suggests an understanding of SLP communities located around natural, visual language and shared cultural linguistic commonality. It is important to understand in respect of hybridity that, within many SLP communities, dimensions of difference such as race, sexuality, gender, and class are not as central to community membership, compared with competence in sign languages and cultural norms.

Decolonisation praxis

One of the more striking sets of parallels between SLPs and indigenous peoples concerns the challenges and strategies faced by both in achieving decolonisation, and the relative resources they have available to them following colonisation. This is best illustrated by reference to Ladd et al (2003). They delineate three broad groups of linguistic and cultural oppression:

(i) European minority languages with substantial professional classes and resources.

(ii) Certain colonised languages with reasonably sized professional classes and a substantial underclass (eg African-American, South Africa).

(iii) Other colonised languages with a minimal professional class where the native language and culture have been brought close to extinction, and where few members have escaped dependency relationships (eg Native Americans and Aborigines).

It is plain that the liberation agendas for each group will be radically different. SLPs obviously fall somewhere between (ii) and (iii). Although their languages and

cultures have not yet approached extinction, this is clearly the goal of the three neocolonialist waves described earlier. In any case, the languages and cultures have been severely damaged, and research indicates that the incidence of 'acquired' (not congenital) mental illness among SLPs is around 50%, double that of the majority society populations (Hindley and Kitson, 2000). In this respect, there are particularly striking parallels with group (iii) (Duran and Duran, 1995).

For both groups (ii) and (iii), colonisation has severely damaged their abilities to think and reason in their native tongues in a harmonious relationship with their own traditional culture. Thus, the opportunities to define themselves in holistic terms are profoundly disrupted, and redefining themselves according to the majority language and culture is highly problematic.

Thus, for both groups, the internal reconstruction of their communities is a major priority. Whilst external reconstruction—that is, achieving self-government, the ownership of their own languages, cultural artefacts, and territories, and even reparations—remains the ultimate goal, this cannot be achieved without the revivification of their languages and cultures (inevitably adapted to take account of majority society developments and contemporary political exigencies). In this reconstruction, control of the education of one's children is of the greatest importance, and it is no coincidence that this is the longest standing battle that SLPs have fought (Lane, 1984).

Subsequently, without a substantial professional class, self-rule cannot be actualised in praxis, and this in turn requires considerable repair to the psyche of both individual and group (compare Duran and Duran, 1995), as well as to cultural organisms such as the arts and media. In effect, they are all engaged in what Ladd (2003) terms 'national reconstruction', such as that which takes place after a prolonged war.

Conclusions: implications for SLPs and the policy world

If we can accept that there is a high degree of consistency between the experiences of First Nation peoples and SLPs then there is a case to be made for extending indigenous rights to SLPs, in the two areas where this has most direct impact on SLP lives: education and self-determination.

Education is a battlefield for all minority groups, since it is here that culture, history, and language are transmitted to new generations. May (2001) discusses the rights given to indigenous people in the area of education in the (1993) Draft Declaration of Indigenous Peoples. These state that:

> "indigenous people have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, ... all indigenous peoples ... have ... the right to establish and control their education systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning" (May, 2001, page 284, articles 14 and 15).

Recognition of these rights for SLPs could help end the devastating impact of Oralism and help prevent the present three neocolonialist waves discussed earlier.

In respect of self-determination, SLPs have explicitly challenged the colonialist hegemony of well-known charities or bodies who have established themselves as advisors to governments and funding sources but who continue to represent SLPs and hard of hearing people as forming one single group in need of audiological and social aid (Alker, 2000), and who claim, despite SLP protests, to speak on their behalf. Instead, SLPs are increasingly campaigning for recognition through their own representative organisations, such as the British Deaf Association, the European Union of the Deaf, and the World Federation of the Deaf (Alker, 2000; Ladd, 2003).

However, there is also great concern that government and commercial resources available for SLPs to rebuild are miniscule compared with the huge medico-technological financial investment in cochlear implant experimentation and gene therapy (Lane, 1999). These immense disparities are especially noticeable in the academic domain, where funding for medico-technological research exceeds funding for all other SLP research by hundreds of millions of pounds (Komesaroff, 2007).

Nevertheless, there is strength to be drawn from solidarity. A number of bodies exist such as the World Council of Indigenous Peoples and the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations. These could (but currently do not) provide fora for the sharing of experiences and formulation of strategies for achieving rights currently ignored for SLPs. This relationship could also be mutually beneficial in that the inclusion of SLPs would substantially increase the size of these campaigning groups.

Finally, such policy changes would be of benefit to majority societies themselves across a range of domains. The 'new' knowledge emerging from the recognition of SLPs as a viable and valuable part of human diversity, in academic, arts and media, and social domains, could also help us to question further our internal and external relationships with 'nature' and thus with the technology which increasingly threatens it. The Green movement was born from knowledge gained during the 1960s concerning the link between indigenous peoples and nature. The time is right, we submit, for attention to be focused nearer home on another group whose relationship with the 'natural' challenges many of our unconscious, hidden assumptions about our very biological existence.

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