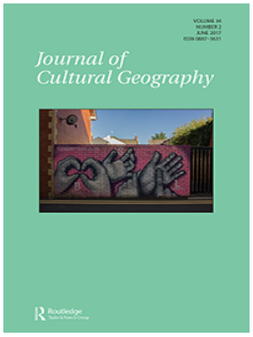

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INTRODUCTION

Themed section: Deaf geographies – an emerging field

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Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, social commentators frequently wrote about the unique relationship Deaf sign language users have with space. However, scholarly work in geography did little to address the distinct perspectives that are opened through engagement with the D/deaf. Earliest works in geography that incorporated D/deaf perspectives were largely unpublished graduate theses that focused on community building and development among D/deaf individuals (for a compiled list of resources, see https://deafgeographies.com/resources/). Initial instances of geographers publishing on the topic followed suit, with Skelton's and Valentine's seminal 2003 work leading the way for an exploration of D/deaf identity in the literature.

As geography began exploring space in relational terms, the discipline accepted the notion of spaces as produced by unique actors. The idea that geographical spaces are derived from different aspects of embodiment, and, in turn, that embodiment and performance are ways of experiencing the world, opened the door to Deaf geographies as a subfield that extends beyond notions of identity politics. Research in Deaf geographies has recently emerged as an exciting and developing area of cultural geography. Because of these changing theoretical trends, the field of Deaf geographies has developed far beyond its origins in disability geography and educational practices.

Deaf users of sign languages inhabit a world that is different than their Hearing counterparts due to their uniquely visual method of communication. This world often exists on the fringes of mainstream society and has frequently been ignored in research by more conventional academic disciplines. Knowing more about the Deaf community, as producers of uniquely Deaf spaces, provides a means of considering the production of space in visual terms as defined by the lived experiences of a linguistic minority group. Drawing together theoretical ideas such as embodiment, performance, communication and sensescapes, and viewing these through the eyes of a

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community who perform their cultural and social geographies in the visual, Deaf geographies offer the same potential as do feminist or other critical geographies to challenge the taken-for-granted notions of the "normal", and critically transform our understanding of "being" and "humanness".

Deaf geographies, a field in rapid emergence

Looking back, it is easy to see how the centrality of "space" to both deaf people's lives, and to the field of geography, meant that the coming together of the two rapidly moved the sum of the parts from a spark to a flame. Indeed, we need only to look at the gradual growth of papers and sessions on Deaf Geographies at international meetings like the American Association of Geographers (AAG) conferences to see how the field has grown and evolved. From almost nothing prior to 2007, that year's AAG meeting featured two papers. The first, by Elizabeth Matthews, echoed a disability geographies approach and explored the provision of mainstream education for deaf people in Ireland. The second, by Tracey Skelton, Gill Valentine and Phillipa Levy, took a more cultural/social geography approach, unpacking questions of "Identity, Space and Language" in D/deaf people's use of the Internet. Matthews' paper was the first of four that she would present in consecutive years. Her continuous presence at the conference from 2007 in San Francisco, to 2010 in Washington, D.C., would provide a platform for future growth.

Matthew's perseverance would also serve as something of a bridge spanning the first real emergence, in the writing of the authors of the second paper – Tracey Skelton, Gill Valentine and Phillipa Levy, of a more social/cultural geographical approach to the spaces of sign language and of the Deaf community. Valentine and Skelton's work, in particular, had – since the early 2000s, and in particular in their 2003 exploration into the politics of a D/deaf identity that disrupted the notion of deafness as disability while embracing an identity centred on language use – presaged the emergence of a more completely geographically informed exploration into the "spaces" of sign language and of the Deaf community (Valentine and Skelton 2003a, 2003b). Their 2007 papers, an investigation into the entanglements of "Identity, Space and Language" in Deaf people's use of the Internet, were the last in their body of work on Deaf space (Valentine and Skelton 2007a, 2007b).

If 2007, then, represented something of a hand-over year, subsequent years saw the emergence of an energetic new field. To Mathews continued papers (in 2007, 2011) on Deaf educational geographies, were added Gill Harold's work on Deaf urban geographies (2013), Kitzel's (2014) historical geographies of the linguistic geographies of the American Deaf community, Fekete's (2010) work on the syntactic spaces of American Sign Language, and Katherine Koppel's interrogation of the entangled visual/auditory-

world geographies of the hearing children of deaf adults (CODAs). The work of two of these academics is represented in this themed section.

By 2011, there were too many individual papers on Deaf geographies to deny the gradual coalescence of a new field of study. The Seattle conference that year featured two complete sessions containing nine papers, including the first by academics who are, themselves, deaf and who presented in sign language: Pamela Conley, who brought a comparative study of space in sign language poetry, and Cynthia Benoit, whose work with Philippe Apparicio and Anne-Marie Séguin (2015) was the first to introduce GIS mapping to Deaf geographical analysis in Montréal. By New York, and the 2012 AAG, we had grown to three sessions, containing 12 papers on topics including deaf spatial theory, cultural and social deaf geographies, deaf design and the built environment, embodiment and deaf sensory geographies, and spaces and circulations of deaf knowledge. Moreover, with half of those 12 papers presented by hearing people in English, and half by deaf or deafblind academics in two different sign languages, the sessions themselves were becoming practical examples of the kind of unique interactive geographies discussed within them. The communicative spaces produced as hearing signers and non-signers, and deaf and deafblind people engaged in both academic debate and general discussion in a combination of signed, spoken and written language generated so much interest that between sessions two and three we had to be relocated from our fifth-floor side room to the Sheraton ballroom for lack of audience space (Figure 1).

Figure 1. A presentation at the 2012 AAG meeting given in three languages simultaneously. The presenter (standing right) used American Sign Language which was then interpreted into spoken English by hearing ASL/English interpreters (seated) and into British Sign Language by a deaf BSL/ASL interpreter (standing left). Photograph by Emily Fekete.

Mike Gulliver (one of the authors) presented his paper at the 2012 AAG before the break, in the increasingly over-cosy, fifth-floor, first session. Entitled "Deaf Geographies – Pasts, Presents, Futures", it was an overview of where we, as those involved in Deaf geographies had come from, the point we had reached, and where we might go. In an homage to New York's song-writing tradition, his presentation matched lyrics from among the city's better known songwriters to moments in the evolution of the Deaf geographical emergence:

> "Let us be lovers, we'll marry our fortunes together
> I've got some real estate here in my bag" …
> And [we] walked off to look for America.
> (Paul Simon, "America")

Our past, Gulliver suggested, had seen a fortuitous connection between two apparently unlikely bedfellows who discover, when they come together, that they – in fact – have a great deal in common. Geographers and the Deaf community (or perhaps a geography that had previously seen deaf people through a disability paradigm, and a Deaf Studies that focused not on deafness as a disability, but rather on deaf people as a linguistic and cultural minority) might not initially appear to be easy lovers. However, with work like Valentine and Skelton's to draw them together, they had discovered a common interest in the question and significance of space – space to live, to love, to be, to work, to learn.

> … a loose affiliation of millionaires
> And billionaires, and baby
> These are the days of miracles and wonder
> (Paul Simon and Forere Mothoeloa, "The Boy in the Bubble")

Our present represented what we had discovered; a veritable explosion of geographical ideas and thought that had quickly been taken up by a wide range of people, in a wide range of places, working in a wide range of roles. We were Masters students, and Ph.D. students, and postdocs. We were interpreters, designers, architects. We were deaf. We were hearing. We were American, British, Canadian, Turkish.

The following year, 2012, saw the inaugural International Conference in Deaf Geographies, run in the UK by Queen's University Canada. It was repeated the following year in Rochester, New York, 2015, then saw a further three sessions at the Chicago AAG meeting with presentations from familiar faces and new authors, Deaf and hearing alike.

This themed section suggests that we are living, still, in those days of miracles and wonder. Its four articles demonstrate something of the spread of geographical areas that is now typical of a Deaf geography "meet". Its authors are spread

globally, and embody the international and the many different geographical approaches that Deaf geographies has embraced from the academic traditions of history, geography and anthropology to focus on the depth and variety of scholarship involved in the new and emerging field of Deaf geographies.

Featured themed section papers

Fekete

Fekete's paper is a good example of a geographical exploration that only becomes possible through an engagement with deaf people. No other human community, even if we acknowledge those for whom gesture is a significant and powerful part of communication, harnesses space to the extent that their entire natural language is carried spatially; on the hands, on the body, on the face. Whether deaf and communicating visually, or deaf–blind and communicating through a combination of vision and/or touch, deaf people represent a section of humanity for whom communication *is* space, and space *is* communication. Without deaf geographies, the wider field of geography would simply be without these and other insights.

This exchange cuts both ways, however. As geography learns from the deaf community, so the deaf community also learns from geography. And not only the deaf community. As spatial ideas about language have gradually pollinated the work of those engaged in more disciplinarily specific linguistic study of sign language, a curious geocultural hybrid body of work has begun to blossom. In terms that will be familiar to geographers it is as if, provoked by the liberating ideas of space, sign language itself; its syntax, its cultural significance, its speaker-community identity, its art and performance forms, has gained agency to begin to provoke the development of spatial linguistic thinking, rather than simply be its subject.

The result is an emerging body of work that is rapidly extending analysis of sign language and of its spatiality into questions of visual communication experiences as unique affective spaces. There is a sense that by pulling apart the processes required in its translation, sign language is not *just* a linguistic system. Proposing that a simple text equivalent does little to capture the reality of sign language communication, scholars such as Pollitt (2014) and Yim and Chateauvert (2014) argue that linguistic transcriptions are simply inadequate to represent the reality of a language that not only occupies the space in which it is performed, but weaves its performer and audience together into an intricate, intimate, co-productive, four-dimensional, push and pull, zoom-in-and-out, immersive-cinematic, embodied sympathetic and synaptic responsive experience. Bringing a geographical understanding of space into these ongoing discussions adds not only to these arguments, but to geographical conversations of the production of space as well.

Fekete to Kitzel

The potential inherent in this kind of perceptive spatially informed, cultural work is clear. As it is also in the second paper by Mary Beth Kitzel. Kitzel's paper is a perceptive exploration of one of the spaces through which the British Deaf community was birthed, the historical British education system for the "Deaf and Dumb". The importance of schools to the growth and development of this community has been evidenced elsewhere; however, Kitzel takes this a step further noting not only the growth of a cultural identity, but an instance where space was actively produced as an integral part of identify formation.

Kitzel's article provides a foundation upon which future geographies of deaf origins will be written and is, again, exemplary of how geographical thinking is beginning to reshape many of the questions that are being asked in other fields about the nature and validity of deaf culture. Are deaf spaces marginal – as their asylum status in the eighteenth and nineteenth century suggests? Or are they, in fact, simply "space" produced by a visual form of humanity? Is their marginalisation inevitably a consequence of deaf people's inability to access the spaces of the wider hearing world? Or is it, in fact, a consequence of an entirely natural authoring of life in a visual medium, in the midst of a world that takes sound-saturation for granted? What could deaf spaces become, if allowed to flourish and mature beyond the boundaries of an asylum structure? Could (as one surprised commentator observed in 1803 when encountering a group of deaf people signing) deaf spaces evolve to represent an entirely valid, but radically alternative civilisation (Sicard 1803)? If the latter proposal is anywhere near possible, then deaf spaces are not inherently marginal, but have only been made so by the very asylum structures that Kitzel uncovers. Moreover, the asyla themselves are not only heterotopias that have provoked the emergence of deaf space, but have then collaborated in constraining and limiting its development.

Deaf geographies, like those explored by Kitzel, not only highlight the emergence of deaf realities, but their "dis-abling" at the hands of an unaware (or perhaps very much aware?) world. As such, they are hugely critically important. The potential for deaf spaces to not only explode from those asyla, but also to explode the very theoretical frameworks that have typically been used to define them, particularly disability, is huge.

Kitzel to Kusters

A further example of the way in which deaf spaces challenge those structures that are often assumed to be adequate to describe them, emerges from Kusters' exploration of the spaces of deaf people on the Indian train network. Providing a glimpse into a body of research that spans questions of deaf utopia, international and national deaf spaces, and that is beginning to also explore

the linguistic spaces of international and inter-sign language communication, her paper presents a fascinating picture of the interweaving of deaf and disabled identities, and of the way in which deaf individuals and groups navigate through the spaces that are attached to those identities.

Kusters' observation, that deaf people harness the provisions under notions of "disability" to produce opportunities to live out their own cultural life, combines powerfully with the insights that we drew from Kitzel's paper about the nature of disability as a framework. What is "disabled"? What is "able-bodied"? Which is free to move? And which is crammed tightly into an "able bodied" carriage? Who, labelled in what way, and understood as inhabiting what space, is more empowered, or disempowered? What does it cost to strategically adopt that identity, or to reject it, and how ready are those who are categorised by "disability" to shrug it on and off as expediency demands? These are the questions that deaf geographies bring out.

They also bring out the communicative sensescapes of the situation. How do the spaces of a railway station and carriage look to someone able to communicative visually across busy platforms, and through windows? What does the geography of a deaf railway look like? How does being "deaf"; that is, less able to hear, affect the navigation of spaces in which hearing appears, to all intents and purposes, irrelevant?

Kusters to İlkbaşaran

In the same vein as Kusters, Deniz İlkbaşaran's paper also presents an example of how deaf people seize opportunities to produce their own geographies. However, where Kusters paper focuses on the production of deaf spaces by a deaf community with relatively homogenous expectations; of sign language, of culture, of networks, of interactional type, then Ilkbasaran's paper represents a growing body of work exploring diversity within the deaf community.

Of the papers in this collection, İlkbaşaran's is probably the closest in approach to the early papers of Valentine and Skelton, juxtaposing not only the spaces of the hearing world and of deaf people, but also asking questions of the opportunities that new technologies offer. However, while she remains close in focus, her approach reveals a far wider appreciation of the diversity of those captured within the term "deaf". This increased breadth suggests a growing trend within Deaf studies itself, away from very strict and largely "defensive" definitions of who is, and who isn't "deaf", towards a framing of deaf people as a largely self-defining community.

In many ways, this is an evolution that is playing out through a question of scale. From a distance, there is little to differentiate the spaces of the deaf community of "now" from those of the 20 years ago. However, close-up, the

changes are very clear, and very evident. From a scenario in which deaf people's spaces mirrored the closed, marginalised, enclaved spaces of Kitzel's Asylum, deaf theorists are now exploring how they fit within an irrepressibly and irreducibly complex, diverse humanity through rapprochements with performative theories of identity and frameworks on indigenous identity and culture.

Concluding remarks

Days of miracle and wonder cannot, however, go on for ever. In the same 2012 AAG paper, Gulliver turned to another of New York's finest, Billy Joel, to suggest – in the words of the pilot of the "Downeaster 'Alexa'":

> … I've got bills to pay and children who need clothes …
> I've got people back on land who count on me.

What will happen, Gulliver asked, when the freedom of topic of a master's thesis, or a Ph.D. is replaced by the gritty reality of an academic research agenda, or when our numbers are whittled down by the attritional loss that typically accompanies the gradual progression from postgraduate, to postdoctoral, to permanent contracts? What will we do then, as our field cannot be sustained by the momentum of rapidly growing numbers of papers and sessions at conferences? Will we be in a position to lay real, solid, lasting groundwork that will give us a sustainable platform upon which to build into the future?

Recent years have seen the gradual evolution that Gulliver suggested must come. In 2012, all of those who presented at the AAG were either Ph.D. or master's students, or faculty in fields other than in geography. Since 2012, all of those Ph.D.s and Master's theses have been completed, and although many of those involved continue to work with geographical ideas (as these papers demonstrate) only one of their authors – Emily Fekete – has a faculty position that is formally located within a geography department.

To guard against a loss of the field, Gulliver proposed, we would need to think strategically about how to create a sustainable platform upon which we could build. As ink on paper, or words in a journal, these four papers represent a real first step in creating that platform. However, all four do more than that. They all carry a clear message that was present in 2012, that Deaf geographies is not simply there as an exploratory field, but that it has a distinct contribution to make to the wider field of geography as a whole. Although deaf geographies developed alongside disability geographies, the long-standing tension between "Deaf" as a cultural construct, and "disability" as a social one, has prevented any great interaction between the two. This is now changing. As Deaf geographies have approached the task of describing deaf people's realities not from a fixed point of "deaf" origin, but rather

through an analysis of the different spaces produced by different bodies, and as disability geographies have begun to similarly call for a foregrounding of the fullest range of embodied experiences of those considered disabled (see Imrie and Edwards 2007, for example), there is, at last, a common ground for rapprochement.

This themed section should inspire, convince and serve as a starting point for future research in Deaf geographies. Deaf spaces are not new. However, they are unique in the ways in which people and society create and negotiate space, both for the purposes of communication and the continuation of culture. We want to thank those who have been involved in the development of Deaf geographies through the past decade and a half and encourage future scholars to embrace this field of study. Lastly, we would be remiss if we did not thank, Alyson Greiner, who actively sought our community out and gave us the space to showcase our work.

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Notes on contributors

Mike Gulliver's early work focused on constructions of nationhood, and in particular the way that histories of the spaces and cultures of nations are mobilised to support political movements for self-determination. Encountering sign language for the first time in 1996, he quickly transferred his interest in nationhood to explore the history and spaces of the signing deaf community. Mike has written on the history of the spaces of both the French and British deaf communities.

Emily Fekete is Hearing and grew up in Rochester, NY. She began pursuing research in Deaf Geographies in 2009 with her MA thesis research conducted at Kent State University in Kent, Ohio. She is currently a Clinical Assistant Professor of Geography in the Department of Geography at Oklahoma State University.

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