

CODA/HEARING/DEAF: TELLING STORIES IN THE BORDERLANDS

AUTHOR'S NAME

Sammy Jo Johnson

Supervisor's Name: Prof. nancy viva davis halifax

Advisor's Name: Prof. Kristin Snodden

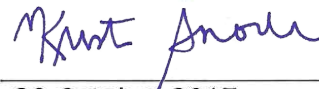
Supervisor's Signature:



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This is a project centered on stories and storytelling. This is not a project centered on stories one may want to hear, stories that make us feel good, or tell us about love and adventure. Instead they are everyday stories, the bits and pieces of myself I often overlook and are consistently overlooked by those around me. While this is a project centered on mundane stories, the process of telling these stories has become quite an adventure. Telling the stories we have, remember, and feel can teach us a lot about who we are. “The truth about stories is”, after all, as Thomas King tells us in his book *The Truth About Stories*, “that that’s all we are” (2). I am the stories I tell. By telling these stories I am telling about myself, who I am (who I am not), and what makes me this way.

Taking guidance from King’s storytelling, disability scholar Danielle Peers reminds us that the stories we are told about disability (and able-bodiedness) shape what we are and what we can be. In her article “Interrogating Disability: The (De)Composition of a Recovering Paralympian,” Peers tells multiple creation stories. These stories create Peers as able-bodied, disabled, supercrip, and sick. By telling these stories Peers shows King’s claim to be true – we are our stories – or, as Peers puts it, “we, quite literally, compose others and ourselves through dominant disability (...) narratives” (186). Luckily, as Peers suggests, analyzing dominant narratives and telling different stories may offer “creative ways of de-composing the seemingly coherent narratives and identities that serve to constrain ourselves and others” (186).

Here I tell several small stories, including stories about telling stories. None of the narratives are separate from the others, each one is connected to the last as part of a larger story. This larger story is my story as a Child of Deaf Adults (Coda). It is a Coda story set someplace between compulsory able-bodiedness and desiring deafness. What has brought me here, to the place where I tell this story, is yet another story (once I began looking for them I have found

stories everywhere). I tell this story now as I have recently, almost exactly one year ago, moved away from my home. This is important to the storyline as I have moved from Edmonton to Toronto, thousands of miles from my deaf parents, my deaf home, and my deaf community.

This story, one of physical distance from the things that make me Coda, has brought me here, to the place where I tell the story. In this place I feel a sense of urgency. I feel that the time to tell this story is running out, that soon this will not be mine to tell. But if we remember King's view of stories – that they are all we are – how can a story no longer be my own? I feel I am becoming distanced from these stories, maybe what I am is changing.

Stories are all that we are – if my story disappears what happens to me? As I tell these stories I realize that part of the haste I feel is in response of a lifetime of being expected to disappear. Creating this project and telling these stories has given me the opportunity to reappear. When I say 'disappear' I mean become a hearer, no longer Coda but just hearing. When I say 'become' I am not sure what I mean. How can I become something the world tells me I already am?

This is a project centered on stories and storytelling. It is a journey and a process and I do not claim to offer any answers. In this process I hope to uncover and challenge parts of my Coda story and versions of myself I have been questioning for years. This journey has raised many questions but at its heart lies one central question: what is it that makes me hearing? By asking myself this question I have responded with stories, more specifically I have used the method of autoethnography. I tell personal narratives not to provide answers but to give others and myself a glimpse into what makes me hearing and, at the same time, what makes me not hearing.

Telling stories as a method to explore what makes me hearing has meant telling about what disability and queer studies scholar Robert McRuer calls a system of compulsory able-

bodiedness. This system is wide reaching yet hard to see. Many of my stories are so mundane because they support the demands of this system, one that places ability as natural, superior, and desirable, and in opposition to disability. A story that rejects these demands is likely to be anything but mundane. To continue comfortably contained in this system is to support the logics of compulsory able-bodiedness; the logics that say I have no place in the deaf community, that legitimize spoken language over signing, and that work hard to unquestionably categorize me as hearing. Telling personal, everyday stories about my Codaness can expose this system of compulsory able-bodiedness and help me to understand (and challenge) what it is that makes me hearing.

Methodology – telling stories

What makes me hearing? To ask myself this question, a question that has buzzed around my mind and heart for as long as I can remember, I have turned to the method of autoethnography. After researching and using this method I find it is difficult to contain in a single definition. Autoethnography is shifty, it takes many forms, and it is never complete. In this project autoethnography involves telling stories about identity, embodiment, compulsory able-bodiedness, and my connections to the deaf and hearing worlds. It also involves analyzing these stories, telling more stories during the analysis, and even the occasional bit of critical analysis during the story. If that was not enough, I have also come to use autoethnography to talk about doing autoethnography, that is I tell stories about the process of telling stories.

Carolyn Ellis, whose work has been an incredible help to my foray into autoethnography, tells many stories about, with, and through autoethnography. In “Autoethnography: An Overview” authors Carolyn Ellis, Tony Adams, and Arthur Bochner define autoethnography as “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy)

personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience” (273). But it is not that simple. Autoethnography can take many forms, often involving a story, sometimes a story that offers analysis and sometimes alongside analysis, that is both about the personal and the cultural.

In this project I use the type of autoethnography best characterized as personal narrative. Ellis et al define personal narratives as “stories about authors who view themselves as the phenomenon and write evocative narratives specifically focused on their academic, research, and personal lives” (279). But telling stories is not all there is to it. Autoethnography also requires that as researchers we “analyze these experiences” (Ellis et al 276).

While doing autoethnography I have found that storytelling and analysis are not separate. Even as I frame each story with a small image of three circles (to represent the three worlds of my stories: the hearing world, the deaf world, and the borderland/Coda world) and have separate “analysis” sections, the stories spill over into the analysis just as analysis is already occurring in the story. Storytelling and analysis are entangled, and to make things even messier I include sections where I tell stories about the process of telling stories. In this way I offer a double autoethnography – an autoethnography about doing autoethnography.

The process of doing autoethnography can take several forms including the use of reflections, memories, and journaling. For my own autoethnographic journey I have relied almost exclusively on memories. The stories that I tell here are common, everyday exchanges. They have been ingrained into my memory by repetition. Some of the stories I analyze I did write about in my journal, but the stories live much more vividly in my memory and body, often bringing with them specific emotions. The stories I tell about here did not happen one time at a specific place on a single date in the past. Rather the stories I tell here are versions of exchanges

I have experienced many times, with pieces taken from several (often dozens) of similar interactions. How, then, are these narratives true?

There is no single answer or accepted guideline for how to present a truthful narrative in autoethnographic research. There is no single way to present truthful research using any method, according to feminist poststructuralist research. In her article, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” Donna Haraway questions what comes to “count as knowledge” (580). Haraway critiques the notion of objective, universal, all-seeing, and complete knowledge and research. In place of such traditional epistemologies Haraway offers “an argument for situated embodied knowledge” (583). That is, a way of knowing that stems “from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring and structured body, verses the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity” (589).

Taking guidance from Haraway, my use of autoethnography offers a way of knowing that is never objective nor complete – the stories I tell are shifting, partial, and felt. Under situated and embodied knowledge, what counts as ‘truth’ is also complex and contradictory. Stories always have more than one side, I am not sure if ‘the entire story’ can ever be told, let alone in a single telling. This is in part because how stories live in our bodies and how we come to tell them are constantly shifting. When telling my own stories truthfulness does not mean presenting the facts exactly as they occurred; instead it is an embodied interrogation of what representation matches and portrays the emotions associated with the story I am telling in the moments I tell it.

Ellis too interrogates notions of truth. My understanding of truth as embodied and felt stems from Ellis’ exploration of these issues. In another article, “Evocative Autoethnography: Writing Emotionally About Our Lives,” Ellis discusses writing from the heart. Writing about her own writing process when using autoethnography to tell about the death of a loved one, Ellis informs

us that in her revision process she “moved closer to telling an evocative and dramatic story and farther away from trying to get all the ethnographic details ‘right’” (“Evocative” 127). In her writing process truthfulness came to be more about describing “the feelings that seemed to apply in each situation” rather than describing the exact sequence of events (Ellis “Evocative” 128).

Ellis’ autoethnographic journey shows us that what counts as a truthful narrative can have different meanings. Like Ellis I have focused less on telling a story exactly as I remember it unfolding and more on what feelings I have connected to each story. In order to offer such a truthful account Ellis uses a specific storytelling practice. When writing about the death of a loved one Ellis would position herself “back into situations, conjuring up details until [she] was immersed in the event emotionally” (“Evocative” 130).

When writing about my hearingness and my Codaness I too have used this practice. This has been relatively easy because I have been experiencing and writing about interactions and events almost simultaneously. On several occasions I have written a story about an event or interaction only to experience another version of that very story several hours or days later. However, the emotions I feel when recalling these stories are always shifting and never the same as when I experienced the event the first time. In this way the truth of the stories I tell is shifting. Like Ellis I have focused on the emotions in my heart and stomach when writing (“Evocative” 130). The final shape each story takes is that which best exposes the emotions I have associated with the narrative, often emotions I am embarrassed to have and work hard to ignore.

Truth is tricky not only because how I remember and feel each story is always changing, but also because each story I tell is a combination of many smaller experiences with many different people. While one such interaction on may be more fresh in my memory, none of the stories are about any single event or any single person. The stories I tell are based on several encounters I

have had with multiple different people, both strangers and close friends, in both the hearing and deaf worlds.

Using narrative techniques, the memories that form the basis of each story have transformed to be more like fictional stories. Characters, other than myself, do not have faces or names. They are a blend of fiction and reality; they do not live as any single person outside of these stories. This has involved a process of through reading and revising to remove personal characteristics and blend as many memories of a similar event or scenario as possible into one story. These are not truthful accounts because I remember experiencing them exactly as I describe here. They are truthful because truth has come to be more about what feelings each story evokes in my own body and accurately capturing those in written and sign language formats.

Just as autoethnography requires we rethink how ways of knowing are embodied and partial, this method also demands that as researchers we critically question what ethical autoethnographic work looks like. As Galie S. Cannella and Yvonna S. Lincoln tell us, research ethics oversight has “most often been influenced by traditional, positivist orientations” (81). Doing autoethnography ethically means rethinking research ethics. One ethical issue autoethnography often raises is the risk that those who are “characters” in our stories may be recognized outside of the story (Ellis “Telling Secrets” 14).

During the process of experiencing, journaling, remembering, writing and rewriting each story I am reminded again and again of the simple fact that no story is completely my own. Instead, each story is also a story shared with those around me. In another article, “Telling Secrets, Revealing Lives: Relational Ethics in Research With Intimate Others,” Ellis and her stories make clear that when we tell about our own lives we are also telling about others around us (14). In this article Ellis considers the autoethnographers’ “responsibilities to intimate others

who are characters in the stories we tell about our lives” (“Telling Secrets” 14). Ellis asks an important question, one I must engage with throughout my own research: “What are our ethical responsibilities toward intimate others who are implicated in the stories we write about ourselves” (“Telling Secrets” 5)? To navigate such ethical questions in autoethnographic work, Ellis suggests obtaining informal consent, when possible, from those who influence our narratives (“Telling Secrets” 24).

After much consideration¹ I decided to follow Ellis’ suggestion and ask those who are undeniably significant characters in my Coda story – those who are often by my side during the interactions/events I tell about – for their consent informally. When asking for consent I presented the project as one that would tell about my experience being Coda and focus on general stories, and made clear that they would not become central or specific characters in the stories I tell. This process has meant not including some of the stories of my Codaness that I have shared with those around me. Respecting the wishes of these individuals has meant remembering and telling other stories, stories no less grounded in my Codaness.

Methodology – signing stories

During the process of doing autoethnography I have realized that it is not only my stories that are shared with those around me but also the process of storytelling. In order to tell these stories I have relied upon the help of several of my closest companions. These people (and animals) have given me the encouragement and confidence to tell stories, a process during which I become vulnerable and exposed. The support reaches further than this to enabling me to tell my stories in the ways that I do. In this project I tell some of my stories in two languages: English and American Sign Language (ASL). Including ASL videos would not have been possible

¹ For more on this process and internal debate concerning consent and ethics, see Appendix A.

without my parents' advice and correction. They were the best editors I could have asked for, always patient with my questions and gentle to point out errors.

Once I decided to use autoethnography it seemed important to create signed video narratives. The process of signing stories reveals parts of my hearing and Coda narratives that remain hidden or excluded when I tell these stories in one language (English) only. In her article "Evocative Autoethnography" Ellis writes about her writing process, doing what I call a double autoethnography. During this time she "kept notes on the writing process in the same way [she] had written fieldnotes on the actual relationship and illness" (Ellis "Evocative" 127). Similar to Ellis, I have kept notes on the filming process. This process includes my preparation for each video, deciding where to film, and prepping each video. The story of doing autoethnography is no less important than the other stories I tell.

I decided to include signed videos not only because they would better allow me to explore my research question, but also because of a personal commitment to accessibility. When researching and reading for this project I have been struck by the irony of accessibility: the many books written on deaf culture and deaf identity available to me would be extremely inaccessible to many of the deaf individuals I know due to low English literacy levels.² And while ASL is not used by all members of the deaf community, ASL versions of written work would make such work vastly more accessible to many in my personal deaf community.

While deaf studies, a field concerned with topics such as "human language, communication, and cultural formations" (Bauman 3), has developed over the past forty years, there remains little space for ASL in academia. The hearing based university uses written

² Difficulty reading and writing English is a shared experience in my Deaf community. While literacy levels vary, many in the community are aware of this problem, particularly as it connects to sign language oppression and inadequate education for deaf students. Deaf scholar Brenda Jo Brueggemann describes the experience of one introductory English class of deaf university students at Gallaudet as a "struggle" that is "volatile, if not violent" ("On (Almost) Passing" 648).

language (English) often with few accommodations available for this heavy reliance on the written word – accommodations that may support the linguistic needs of many in the deaf community. In my own story ASL is a language I use in my home and my personal community while English remains the language I use in academia.

Here, thankfully, we are preoccupied with telling stories and storytelling, and stories and storytelling do not have a single format. As Ruth Garbutt argues, when scholarly work is made accessible it can “involve a more creative approach to producing articles and books” (370), enabling us to tell stories in more ways. The creative approach I use is really not very creative, just more of my everyday Coda story – it involves producing parts of this project in ASL. Telling some of my stories in both English and ASL increases the number of people who have access to my work. This project is no longer accessible to only one of the worlds I belong to, but both.

In the introduction to the collection *Open Your Eyes: Deaf Studies Talking* author H-Dirksen Bauman argues that “increased opportunities to publish sign language on the Web will broadcast sign languages as never before, something akin to advancements of the printing press and the dissemination of print. *American Sign Language literacy will rise with increased publication of academic ASL*” (emphasis mine, 19). While I do not know where these stories will go in the future I find hope in Bauman’s words. I have hope that these stories and the bilingual format used will encourage the production of work in both English and ASL in hearing universities and all levels of schooling.

Not only can such work potentially increase ASL literacy in others, it already has increased my own ASL literacy by providing me a new stage on which to sign and a new audience to sign for. Instead of signing only for my parents where casual and informal sign is accepted, signing my stories here has meant signing for an academic setting. It has encouraged

me to practice signs I do not use on a regular basis and to think about how I could produce work in ASL fit for publication or a deaf academic audience. Best of all this project has given me the opportunity to sign when my sign use has been dwindling. In sum, it has brought my Codaness to the hearing space of the university.

Parts of the whole

It is hard to start this story, to lay the scene, introduce characters, and develop the plot. I do not know if this counts as a story, it feels more like a *part* of a story. It is not remarkable enough to deserve any grand storytelling strategies – no “you’ll never believe what happened” introductions even though most people have a hard time believing it initially. Nor do I think it is likely to captivate an audience. The series of exchanges, always between myself and at least one other person, that I am hesitant to call a story are just so ordinary. They are happening all the time, could happen anywhere, and always end without any sort of change or transformation. There is no character development, no epiphany. The story does not take us anywhere.

Not really a story on its own I consider these exchanges an important part of telling a story about my hearingness and about my Codaness. For whatever such an exchange is – a story, a chapter, a part – I know it well. It is one I have encountered countless times. This part of my story is about telling others of my Codaness: saying the words “my parents are deaf, so I am a child of deaf adults” to close friends, strangers, and anybody in-between.

If I was going to tell this as a story there are hundreds of such encounters I could choose from, yet each is essentially the same. Always set within the hearing world, two (or more) characters, all comfortable members of this world, find themselves in some sort of scenario – any scenario will do. Then comes the twist, the climax: my Codaness is revealed. The other characters have extravagant reactions – this is big news, this is almost unbelievable news. But in

the end we are left where we started with all the characters neatly contained on the 'able' side of the able/disabled binary. Maybe this is why it is so hard to tell this story, because in the end nothing changes: my Codaness is revealed and again made invisible.

If I was going to tell such an interaction as a story I would start by setting the scene. I would describe a world that values only certain bodies, that says you are either disabled or able, and that has very specific narratives about each.

I would introduce the main character and describe this character as fitting very easily into the narratives of able-bodiedness. From gender performance, to skin colour, to class, this character would fit such narratives neatly indeed.

If I was to tell this as a story I would give our main character a name: 'Sammy Jo' seems to fit well. I would not give the other characters names, even though any name would do. This would not be a story of any one person, instead it would be a story of a certain (hearing) world. If I was going to tell this as a story I would call these other characters something to add dramatic flair: 'Hearers' seems to fit well.

I would describe the story of Sammy Jo and the Hearers. It would not matter which of these stories I told for they are all the same.

Maybe I would tell a story about how Sammy Jo and the Hearers (not always distinguishable) were goofing off at the back of the eighth grade science classroom. This would be a story where my Codaness is disclosed, debated, and dismissed.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wJZx0-ch4r0>

What I say - part 1

It's 9:00 AM on Wednesday morning, this means our class, the 'gifted' class, has science. The bell has rung, we all heard it but pretend we didn't.

One group in the back is particularly distracted and distracting. In a loud whisper I hear a fellow student call for another student in the room several times. When there is no response the hearer, abandoning any attempt at a whisper calls once more, adding "what are you, deaf" to the student's name.

In an equally loud and obnoxious voice I shout back, "Don't use 'deaf' like that. He isn't deaf, but my parents are".



Maybe I would tell a story about how Sammy Jo and the Hearers (not always distinguishable) met at an ordinary coffee shop on an ordinary day asking each other ordinary questions. This would be a story where my Codaness is disclosed, debated, and dismissed.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=spHIFIWS56I>

What I say - part 2

I'm working on this project in my favourite coffee shop. No longer writing I have somehow become drawn into conversation with the hearer next to me. Nothing about our conversation is remarkable, we are asking one

another the usual: “What do you do,” “What are you studying,” and “What are you writing about”.

“I am writing about my experience moving between the deaf and hearing worlds. My parents are deaf, so I am a child of deaf adults, a Coda.”



If I was going to tell this as a story I would focus on my favourite part, the reactions of the hearers. This is where I think the story would get interesting. The best part of the story – the responses – I would have so many to choose from! They almost make a story on their own.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YUxy7x3NOW8>

What hearing people say

“I’m so sorry.”

“That’s so sad.”

“But you’re so normal”.

“Were they born like that?”

“You can sign then?”

“But you and your brother can talk...”

“Wow, I never would have guessed!”

“So you communicate with your hands!” *Moves hands nonsensically*

“How can you hear?”

“Sign something for me!”

“How did you learn to speak?”

“No way! That is so cool, so different!”

“Deaf? Like totally deaf? No, you’re kidding. You’re lying!”



If I was going to tell any of these interactions as a story I probably wouldn't. This is primarily because it would be a story without an ending. Once my Codaness (or is it my parents' deafness?) is marveled at the story is pretty much over. Somehow, after all the excitement and surprise, my hearingness remains, steady as ever. Maybe my Codaness is forgotten or maybe it is easier not to think about it. Maybe Sammy Jo and the Hearers go separate ways, into separate worlds, or maybe the conversation topic simply changes. Whatever the ending, after this story there is no change: in the hearing world I am a hearer.

Analysis

Deaf studies scholar and Coda Robert Hoffmeister describes Codas as “living on the ‘border’” between the deaf and hearing worlds (189). In his article “Border Crossings by Hearing Children of Deaf Parents” Hoffmeister explores this borderland position, how Codas move across and between both worlds, and the many contradictions we may experience as these worlds rub against one another. Hoffmeister's own Coda narrative informs much of his work, thus our investigations into this borderland position, while similar in some ways, are different as our personal stories are different. What Hoffmeister's analysis tells me about my own story is that exploring the betweenness of Coda can challenge and help rethink what it means to be deaf, hearing, and the deaf/hearing binary.

Hoffmeister tells us,

It is possible that the contribution Codas can make is to help clarify the definition of culturally Deaf or the word 'deaf.' By investigating the question of whether Codas are deaf or hearing we become clearer on what it means to be Deaf. The binary relationship we have established by the terms of Deaf and Hearing must be depolarized. Codas present a problem to that binary relationship (193).

We are a problem, squeezed somewhere between the hearing/deaf (able-bodied/disabled) binary.

I am a problem. But where am I a problem? What are the solutions offered to this problem? How can we continue to cause problems? And can the problem caused by Codas also tell us more about what it means to be hearing?

If my Codaness is a problem to the deaf/hearing (disabled/able) binary, how is it so easily resolved and dismissed? Do I present much of a problem when Codaness is so easily and readily forgotten while hearingness remains?

There are three central components to the not-quite-story told above: my unquestioned hearingness at the beginning, the statement of my parents' deafness along with my Codaness, and my unquestioned hearingness to conclude the story. These moments, pieces, and parts of my story show that in the hearing world my Codaness is often met with shock. My parents' deafness and my Codaness (maybe one or the other, maybe both) do not fit into the narrative I was assumed to have. Somehow, before this story even began, I am already always firmly categorized as hearing (able-bodied) and, even after a slight hiccup where my Codaness is revealed, I remain there.

If I were to tell about any of these interactions as a story it would also be a story of compulsory able-bodiedness.

In his book *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*, Robert McRuer analyzes "a system of compulsory able-bodiedness that...emanates from everywhere and

nowhere” (*Crip Theory* 8). “A system of compulsory able-bodiedness,” McRuer argues, “repeatedly demands that people with disabilities embody for others an affirmative answer to the unspoken question, ‘Yes, but in the end, wouldn’t you rather be more like me?’” (*Crip Theory* 9). Under this system able-bodiedness is natural, normal, and best. Under this system my hearingness is natural, my parents’ deafness is both unnatural and natural, and the two (deaf/hearing, my parents/me) are distinct and any combination or blend can only be described as abnormal.

Telling and engaging with a story of compulsory able-bodiedness has led me to Adrienne Rich’s critical feminist work, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence”. Rich critiques feminist work for suggesting, “despite profound emotional impulses and complementarities drawing women toward women, there is a mystical/biological heterosexual inclination, a ‘preference’ or ‘choice’ which draws women toward men” (637). Rich examines this seemingly natural ‘preference’ and argues, “heterosexuality...needs to be recognized and studied as a *political institution*” (637). When I read Rich’s article I cannot help but think about the connections between compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory able-bodiedness. Perhaps this is because I first read McRuer’s book *Crip Theory* and disability scholar Alison Kafer’s article “Compulsory Bodies: Reflection on Heterosexuality and Able-bodiedness,” where both authors explore the temptation to take up Rich’s idea of compulsory heterosexuality to think about compulsory able-bodiedness.

For my own storytelling and analysis, engaging with Rich’s work makes possible an analysis of the normal and natural. I don’t know what is more normal or natural than my hearingness. But the same could be said of my Codaness.

Taking guidance from Rich's work, McRuer and Kafer ask important questions about the political institution of compulsory able-bodiedness. As Kafer points out, Rich's work is useful for thinking of ability and disability as both are viewed as "natural phenomenon," not "social or political" ("Compulsory" 79). Thinking with these three authors can we ask how and why my own hearingness is seen as a natural phenomenon? How can storytelling show it to be relational? For whom is deafness natural? And why is my Codaness (deafness?) deemed so unnatural?

If I was going to tell about the interactions described above as a story, perhaps I could make it a more interesting one. Maybe I would tell a story where Sammy Jo refuses to answer the audist questions that tumble out of the Hearer's mouths. Maybe I would tell a story where Sammy Jo keeps talking about her Codaness until the hearing world starts to listen.



What I want to say

"C'mon, you can catch on. This story really isn't that hard to follow."

"I should be the one who is surprised! Surprised by your shock, surprised you've never heard of us, of Coda, of deaf parents, of the deaf community that I know."

"What about this story is so surprising? Is it my parents' deafness? Or my hearingness? "

"I am a Coda. Why have you never heard of us?"

"I am a Coda. Please remember that."

“I am a Coda. Why do you never expect that?”



A Story I wish I did not have - from the outside

Three people are seated around a table, absorbed in conversation but still aware of the busy scene around them. They talk leisurely. It is clear they have known each other a long time, comfortable characters in each other's stories.

Minutes pass by, the conversation flows sometimes quick and sometimes with the occasional pause of stillness.

Smiles tug at the corner of all three mouths. This wave of conversation brings with it a soft chuckle.

A fourth individual enters the room and, finding an unoccupied chair, joins the table.

There is no big change. The room still feels comfortable and the smiles still faintly appear.

But there is a big change for one of the individuals who has turned away from the other two conversation partners and speaks only with the

person who recently entered the room. The room is split but no one seems surprised. One conversation switches to two.



A story about methodology - part 1

Telling this story is difficult. In order to start I speak in the third person, as if I am telling someone else's story and not my own. This is a story I wish I did not have and wish I did not have to share. Writing from the third person has made it possible to start telling this story. I do not use the third person to remove myself from the story and play the role of unattached, unbiased researcher. Rather, it is a technique I have found necessary to begin the telling. It allows me to feel a little bit separate, a little bit less like a traitor. I can pretend I am telling a story about anyone before telling my own experience of the story.



A story I wish I did not have - from the inside

Without thinking I have stopped signing. Without noticing I have switched to English.

Without effort I join the spoken conversation, abandoning the signed one, but I do even not realize this.

My hands have stopped moving, maybe mid-sign. Like a switch was flicked - from 'Coda to 'hearing' - from 'signer' to 'speaker' and I do not hesitate and I do not think about the others in this conversation.

A few minutes pass, I catch myself. I see both conversations. I see the room is split. I tell myself I should be signing: "You are excluding mom, dad, family friend, church pastor, aunt, uncle. Just start signing".

It is a loud scene inside my head.

"Just sign already."

I can feel the conversations growing farther apart. Out of the corner of my eye I follow the signed one, all the while listening to the spoken one. I make excuses. "It's too late, we are too far into the conversation."

My hands feel heavy. The switch has been flicked, I can't go back now.

It's funny because I easily can. I am always switching between

languages. But this is an old joke so no one laughs. We all knew this

was going to happen and know that this is what happens.

Analysis

Hoffmeister asks what I think is a very important question about us Codas, a question that struck me when I first read it: “Where do they go and why do they disappear?” (191). While Hoffmeister works to tease out the often contradictory and complex bi-cultural/two-world position of Codas, he also recognizes that for all our confusing betweenness, we often disappear from the deaf world as adults. Where are Codas going when they disappear, where are we disappearing from and why?

In order to disappear we must have had to appear in the first place. Do we appear only as *children* of deaf adults? What does it mean to live in a borderland position that disappears as we age? In what world(s) do we appear?

Through living, telling, and analyzing my Coda story I am beginning to question if I ever appear as a Coda in the hearing world. Perhaps this is why I can only make sense of Hoffmeister’s question, and can only imagine asking it, in deaf spaces – outside of deaf spaces little about my Codaness makes sense.

Do I ever appear Coda in hearing spaces? The reactions of others tell me I do not. The shock and disbelief tell me I do not. My Codaness is not taken up in hearing spaces, my hearingness is. I always end where I started, a hearer, but now I am just one who happens to have deaf parents.

Hoffmeister presents two different answers to his question. On the one hand Hoffmeister describes the disassociation of Codas from the deaf world as a “conscious decision” (195). This is a response, according to Hoffmeister, offered by Codas to the identity conflicting messages that abound in the borderland space between the hearing and deaf worlds (200). The deaf world tells Codas that the hearing community is harmful to a deaf way of life, while the hearing world

tells us deafness is the real danger to be avoided (Hoffmeister 200). Hoffmeister reveals that in response to this conflict many Codas “remove themselves from the Deaf world” (201). On the other signing hand Hoffmeister also describes this process of disappearing – the transition from Coda to indistinguishable in the hearing world (a hearer if you will) – as less of a conscious decision and more of an inevitable path placed before Codas. Hoffmeister reveals that the transition/disappearance into the hearing world is not simply a choice; as hearing children, a total transfer into the hearing world often becomes our only possible destiny.³

Hoffmeister focuses on the forces within the *deaf world* that position the hearing world as the future space for all Codas. Drawing on his own Coda story, Hoffmeister tells us that as Codas “[w]e learn as we grow that we will be expected to ‘leave’ this [the deaf] community. In fact, we are groomed for it. As adults there is no official membership for Codas in any of the Deaf organizations, the cultural events, or the social processes” (201).

Hoffmeister reveals that the disappearance of Codas from the deaf world is connected to lack of recognition of Codas as adults within deaf cultural organizations and events. But are there ways we are also groomed for this transition by the *hearing world*? How does the multi-world system of compulsory able-bodiedness demand I disappear? While the deaf world grooms us for our departure, in some ways pushing us out, I can feel the hearing world pulling me in. Why, even though I have done it thousands of times, is it difficult for me to sign and speak simultaneously around hearers? Or to interpret what I have said? And, importantly, why do I stop signing and why it so hard to start signing again?

My stories point again and again to the ways in which my hearingness is made compulsory by the hearing world. These stories reveal what Kafer calls “the most basic

³³³ Hoffmeister recognizes that some Codas do not fully disappear into the hearing world, instead they become interpreters (202). Hoffmeister describes this occupation as the only “role for Codas in the Deaf world” once reaching adulthood – the only other response to this hearing destiny (202).

manifestation” of a system of compulsory able-bodiedness (“Compulsory” 80). In her article “Compulsory Bodies” Kafer calls attention to this foundational component of compulsory able-bodiedness: “the cultural presumption of able-bodiedness. Unless someone identifies herself as disabled, or is visually marked as disabled (for example, using a wheelchair or other mobility aid; carrying a white cane or accompanied by a service dog; or a missing limb or other body part), she is assumed not to be disabled” (Kafer “Compulsory” 80).

Before I tell others of my Codaness (as well as during the telling and after the telling) I am taken up as able-bodied. I do not have any of the markers of disability, any of the classic signs of the disability narrative this system tells us about. This system simultaneously naturalizes my able-bodiedness and my parents’ deafness.

Kafer describes how this basic feature of compulsory able-bodiedness impacts individuals who can and do pass as able-bodied. The automatic assumption of able-bodiedness often prevents “access to needed services, denies [one] the support of friends and family, and hinders [one’s] inclusion within disability communities” (Kafer “Compulsory” 80). Kafer shows us that this feature has very real impacts on people with invisible and visible disabilities. This system does not only impact disabled people, both those who are judged as fitting into the stereotypical narratives of disability this system of compulsory able-bodiedness relies on, and those who are judged as not fitting such narratives. It also impacts able-bodied people. It tells disabled and able-bodied folks alike the world we belong to, how to move through this world, and what to desire and imagine for the future.

I am assumed to be able-bodied unless proven otherwise. This feature not only positions me as hearing early on in most of my stories, but it also determines what I can be as each story develops. Hoffmeister recognizes that Codas’ transition into the hearing world is often

unavoidable: “Once you left the house you know that you had to ‘become’ Hearing in all ways” (193). Once in hearing spaces I become hearing. Once it is established that only my parents cannot hear but I can, I remain hearing. Once I can use the language of the hearing world I use the language of the hearing world. I know this is what I am supposed to do. I am assumed to be able-bodied, so the stories I do and live should be (and often are) able-bodied stories.

In my story compulsory able-bodiedness also relies upon another basic feature: the able/disabled (hearing/deaf) binary. Not only does compulsory able-bodiedness always automatically assume ability when there are no visible signs of disability, it situates ability and disability as distinct and opposite. Not only am I assumed to be hearing but this assumption also means I cannot be deaf. This feature ensures that the system of compulsory able-bodiedness does not have room for Cudas or the stories of Cudas. Does it have any more room for deaf stories or for stories by those who are late deafened, hard-of-hearing, or any of the others who fall in-between this binary?

I tell myself it is too late to start signing. I am not sure what I am ‘too late’ for. It has only been a few minutes, maybe only a few sentences have been shared. It is not too late to quickly relay the conversation.

It is too late because now I am involved in a spoken conversation.

It is too late because hearing people do not sign.

If we go back to the stories we can see that sometimes disappearing gives me power. In all the small stories and parts of stories that make up my Coda story my constant disappearance occurs simultaneously to (or perhaps allows) my hearing privilege. This disappearance means that my story can be a story free of physical force and constant surveillance to ensure my use of spoken English and disuse of ASL. This disappearance means that my story can be a story where

I have access to language as an infant and receive an education in a language accessible to me. This disappearance means that I can choose to start conversations and end them, decide who speaks and when, and that I have stable access to two conversations, languages, and worlds.

My story, as Hoffmeister acknowledges of Codas as a group, is a story of disappearing. It is also a story of appearing hearing, and in my case, appearing with hearing privilege. I wonder if there is anything in-between. Are there ways Codas do not fully disappear into the hearing world?



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KTYyQdhkF0A>

A story of methodology - part 2

Creating this project has allowed me to appear in whole new ways. Using autoethnography enables me to show my Codaness on paper and to my committee. But the best way this project has allowed me to appear is through the videos I have created.

Making these videos has meant signing in public, more specifically in public hearing spaces. I filmed these videos in locations around my Toronto home that I frequent as a hearer. I had never before signed in these spaces.

Making these videos gave me an excuse to sign. It felt easier to sign in these spaces when I knew I was doing it for this project. While I am used to switching to hearing ways of being when in the hearing

world, this project gave me an excuse not to flip that switch. It gave me a reason not to switch fully into the hearing world when I would have otherwise.



A not deaf story

Lost in conversation I am oblivious to my surroundings. I'm at home, snuggled on the couch, petting the dog. I'm at a disability event, appreciative for the opportunity to be signing in Toronto. I am on the street on the way to the bank, to school, to the grocery store, in Edmonton or Toronto, talking with a member of my deaf community whom I have known for years, talking with someone who is a part of a community I do not yet know.

The story I am listening to is what matters.

In many ways it is a story I know. It is a story that reminds me of home. It is in part the story my parents tell me about their youth, about their time at Gallaudet University, a story that starts with the introduction "When I was in school...".

It does not have to be a story about Gallaudet; it is first and foremost a story of community. It is also a story of friendship, language, and love.

You know that feeling when you hear a happy story? Like some of the happiness spills over from the story and you feel it rest in spot where your stomach and heart almost meet? At least that's how hearing this story, and ones like it, makes me feel.

This is a story of accessibility, of many different signing bodies, and of acceptance.

Like most good stories it brings with it an image. On the couch, at the disability event, in the middle of the street - I picture a world where it is okay to not hear and where spoken language is no better than signed language.

Maybe it is a story filled with memories of protesting during Deaf President Now. Maybe it is a story about someone stepping foot into a deaf club for the first time. Either way, it is a story of community.

Like after eating a big piece of cake I feel full. Freshly absorbed the story sits between heart and stomach, reminding me that it is there and that I have heard it.

Looking at the storyteller I can see that telling the story has had a similar effect.

We smile; the community, the friendship, the language, and the love are not contained inside the story.

But right when I think the story is over I get pulled back in.

I think the story we are engaging with is still a happy one, but it does not feel the same.

Before I was simply an observer of the story, following it as it went along. Now I am brought into the story, or maybe the story is brought to me.

It's such a happy story, why wouldn't I want to participate in it?

The story has been told but we are not done talking about it. We are, hesitant to let it go. The story comes alive in a different way as we begin to discuss it, add to it, question it, and imagine it with different endings or not ending at all. I hesitate to join in.

What if I have nothing to say?

This is not my story, is it?

Then out of nowhere, yet perhaps I should have been expecting it, the storyteller asks me, "Isn't sign language an amazing language? Even though there are many different sign languages deaf people can navigate these linguistic obstacles. For example I have found my familiarity with sign language allows me to express myself across languages and across the world".

I nod but I don't respond. My stomach is sinking. I can't form a response. I can feel the story falling off of me; it no longer feels comfortable.

Like most stories that make us uncomfortable it brings with it an image - I picture a hot day in Spain or a video on international sign languages I recently watched or a conversation I shared with a hearing friend who knew some British Sign Language. Feelings of inadequacy push my stomach lower, just like that day in Madrid, just like when watching that video, just like when my British friend showed me some signs. I picture my failure, my failure to comprehend a single word beyond 'hello,' my wasted attempts at conversation, my inability to communicate even the

simplest of messages; messages like my name, my home country, or my Codaness.

I try to push these thoughts out of mind. I search for the happy feelings, isn't this a happy story? But I can't get into the story. Instead I feel too hearing.



I already know how this story goes

I know my knowledge of ASL is cool, the hearers tell me this all the time. Eyes wide with awe: "I wish I knew sign language" they tell me, proudly forming an 'A' shape: "I know the alphabet" they tell me.

Almost exactly one year ago I moved from Edmonton to Toronto. Almost exactly one year ago I stopped signing on a daily basis. During the occasional Skype call or visit home I feel rusty and slow. During all the moments in-between the occasional Skype call and visit home I feel forgetful. During all of this I feel very far from my home.

Since moving to Toronto a handful of people, after learning about my Codaness, have asked for ASL lessons. I've heard this many times before

but have rarely found a committed student willing to learn the language once they discover it is not only 'cool' but complex and detailed.

But that is only part of the story. While I have heard this request for help learning ASL many times before, I have also rarely been committed to using and immersing myself in the language with a non-signing hearer.

Usually the story goes something like this:

A close friend, loved one, fellow hearer asks me to practice signing more often - whenever we think of it we should sign instead of speak. I only half listen, I have heard this request many times before. But something is different this time. I want to sign more too. I have no one to sign with now.

I sign my response: "Sure, let's go ahead and practice."

It may be the next sentence. It may be minutes later. But soon enough someone somewhere is going to be calling me faker. I think it is coming from my own head. Yes, I can hear it now.

"Faker."

"You're hearing."

“Faker.”

The voice is especially loud if we are in a public space. If we are in a public space I can feel eyes watching. I know they are mostly the eyes of hearers who don't know if we are deaf or if we are hearing. But what if they are the eyes of the members of the deaf community here I do not yet know? We look so foolish. We are not using the language properly.

Soon enough the voice, the feelings of being an imposter, will win. I stop signing back instead I start speaking. I feel sad I could not stay in the signed conversation longer.

Analysis

I am hearing because I am not deaf in the right ways. But what is 'deaf'? To whom and in what spaces? What are the stories of I know about deafness from the hearing world and from the deaf world?

In recent decades the field of deaf studies, and, for much longer, deaf communities themselves have been reimagining what it means to be deaf. The stories about deafness I know from my deaf community are very different from the stories about deafness I am told by the hearing world. The notion of 'deaf culture' is crucial to these counter narratives of deafness. Deaf culture enables a different framework for thinking about deafness, one that encourages resistance to the mainstream view that positions deaf people as “medical cases” (Padden & Humphries *Deaf in America* 1). In their influential book *A Journey Into the DEAF-WORLD*

authors Harlan Lane, Robert Hoffmeister, and Ben Bahan tell a detailed story about deaf culture. In this book Lane et al describe what is significant under a cultural approach to deafness. Lane et al reveal that, under a cultural framework,

the extent of a person's hearing is not the central issue in deciding membership in the DEAF-WORLD. Conversely, there are many Deaf people who hear well enough to use a telephone and speak well enough to be understood, but choose to live in the DEAF-WORLD" (*A Journey* 6).

What makes me hearing, what makes me Coda, what makes me not deaf, and what makes others (like my parents) deaf in my stories is unclear and definitely not static. Like Lane et al point out, deaf world membership does not rely only on not hearing, just as I do not think my hearing world membership relies only on my hearing.

As a group Codas are very confusing and slippery, as Hoffmeister puts it, we are problematic. Belonging to two worlds – yet with questionable and regularly questioned membership – the space where these two worlds meet is often rendered invisible. It is also tricky to talk about Codas because we are all so different. Hoffmeister reminds us that Codas' stories will often vary; while some "Codas do grow up in the Deaf world, exposed to many other Deaf adults, Deaf clubs, Deaf meetings, etc....many Codas also grow up separated from this exposure" (191).

Whether raised inside a cultural framework of deafness or not, categorizing Codas remains tricky. As my Coda story has transitioned from one grounded in a deaf home to one searching for a similar home in academia, specifically deaf and disability studies, I have noticed that Codas are referenced in deaf studies under a common trend. The problem of Codas arises often as a tool to question and challenge existing frameworks and definitions of deafness. One scholar who follows this trend is Douglas Baynton. In his article "Beyond Culture: Deaf Studies and the Deaf Body" Baynton draws on the in-between position of Coda to support his argument

that deaf culture is an inadequate concept for describing the experiences of the deaf when it is separated from discussions of the body (294). Baynton recognizes that Codas

may be as fluent in ASL, cognizant of Deaf cultural beliefs and etiquette, familiar with Deaf folklore, and involved in the social life of the Deaf community as any Deaf person. They may be accepted, respected, well liked, included in the community ‘as if’ they were Deaf, and they may even be referred to as ‘Deaf’ in certain circumstances. Yet they are recognized as not *really* Deaf (294).

According to Baynton, while Coda may have all the culture we are still hearing, at least in some ways, and that is why we need to consider the body alongside culture.

Davis’ similarly takes up Codas as an identity group to question who is considered deaf and how we make such decisions. In his article “Postdeafness” Davis’ points out that us Codas do not make a lot of sense under a linguistic model of deafness. As Davis outlines it, this model defines deafness “as a minority language group [that] has, by definition, to rule out all non-ASL (...) users as ‘other’” (320). But this model is not perfect and, according to Davis, Codas can help show us that. Davis argues that one “flaw in the model is that signing Codas should be defined as deaf, but those who follow the minority model often do not see Codas in this light” (320). Not only does Davis bring Codas into the conversation to question the linguistic model, he also does so to challenge the “ethnic group model” (310). According to Davis our presence often disrupts kinship systems and generational ties necessary to claim ethnicity (314).⁴ Again Codas are taken up in deaf studies to question who is included and excluded by such models. We are an annoying problem that most models and definitions do not seem to account for.

Not only can Codas trouble categories of deafness, but I also think my own (and Hoffmeister’s) stories can trouble categories of hearingness. Maybe we can also cause problems

⁴ Davis’ article has been critiqued as authors in deaf studies continue to question ideas of deaf identity and minority-majority relations between the deaf and hearing worlds. Richard Clark Eckert presents a much more “adaptive” and active argument of deaf ethnicity (329), made up of several moving parts rather than “a static list of characteristics to be checked off or not checked off” (328). Such a theory deaf ethnicity can adjust more easily to the problems raised by Coda.

in the hearing world, as Hoffmeister points out, “[i]t doesn’t matter which side of the border you are on, you are not ‘one of them’” (197). One of the foundational demands of compulsory able-bodiedness is that able and disabled exist as a binary – if you are one you cannot be the other and if you are not one then you must be the other. Maybe then the problem Coda can cause is that we are neither. Yet, I still do not feel like a problem in this (hearing) world. It really is lucky for the system of compulsory able-bodiedness that my Codaness is so easily and quickly dismissed and forgotten about. It is a lucky solution to the Coda problem.

But does it really not matter ‘which side of the border I am on’ for either way I am not hearing or deaf? It feels like it does matter. It feels like one side of the border is actually willing to embrace (read erase) my Codaness and make me ‘one of them’. You might think that is the side of the deaf world for this is the side that knows my Codaness and knows people like me exist. But it is on the side of the hearing world that I do, in fact, feel like ‘one of them’. Now that I think about it, the hearing world is really good at making sure I am ‘one of them’.

Hoffmeister describes the disappearance of Coda into hearer. While I am still unsure where Coda ends and hearer begins, Hoffmeister describes this disappearance as inevitable and sustained. In Hoffmeister’s analysis we can see that travelling through and occupying space in one world versus the other is not always a choice. As Hoffmeister describes it, “[o]nce you left the house you knew that you had to ‘become’ Hearing in all ways” (193). What happens to us if we do not ‘become hearing in all ways’? What would it look like if we did not ‘become hearing in all ways’? What tells me I must become hearing?

I don’t know what I am supposedly faking. I don’t know why it feels false to sign with hearers. The message – ‘faker’ – rings internally. In hearing spaces with hearing people, I somehow feel I am doing it wrong. Am I doing hearing wrong? Or am I doing deaf wrong?

Under a system of compulsory able-bodiedness there are ways to do hearing right and signing is not one of them. But from my own story I know there is no single way to do deaf right. Then why does it feel like I am doing it wrong?

Bringing my story to the library, to the field of deaf studies, I ask what feels ‘true’ versus ‘false’, what is ‘Deaf’ versus ‘deaf’? In the process of familiarizing myself with deaf studies literature I have come across the d/Deaf distinction much more frequently than in my everyday story as a Coda and member of my deaf community. In his introduction to deaf studies in *Open Your Eyes: Deaf Studies Talking*, H-Dirksen L. Bauman summarizes the intention behind this divide: “Rewriting deaf to Deaf is about disowning an imposed medicalized identity and developing an empowered identity rooted in a community and culture of others who share similar experiences and outlooks on the world” (9). While this practice has become popular in deaf studies its use is never perfect and the divide is always murky. In their early discussion of deaf culture Carol Padden and Tom Humphries recognize that “the bounded distinction between the terms *Deaf* and *deaf* represents only part of the dynamic of how Deaf people talk about themselves. Deaf people are both Deaf and deaf, and their discussions, even arguments, over issues of identity show that these two categories are often interrelated in complex ways” (*Deaf in America* 3).

Similarly, in their introduction to the collection *Innovations in Deaf Studies: The Role of Deaf Scholars*, Annelies Kusters, Maartje De Meulder, and Dai O’Brien point out that this “dichotomy is in fact an *oversimplification* of what is an increasingly complex set of identities and language practices” (14). The d/Deaf distinction is too simple, too direct, too clear-cut. The stories I tell here are not ‘deaf’ or ‘Deaf’ stories; they are something else, something more than just one or the other, something in-between.

Reliance on this binary is shifting. Brenda Jo Brueggemann is one scholar who questions the use of this distinction and this questioning is inseparable from her own hard-of-hearing position somewhere between the slashes and hyphens. In her article “Think-Between: A Deaf Studies Commonplace Book” Brueggemann imagines more, she asks about what might happen if we fit more between ‘deaf’ and ‘Deaf,’ or if we “create a new geometry, a new space for ‘deaf’ (and thus ‘Deaf’ as well) to be in” (180).

Writing about her own story Brueggemann demonstrates that it is impossible for her to always be living on one side of this binary. Through narrative, in her article “On (Almost) Passing,” Brueggemann writes about passing as deaf and passing as hearing. In this article Brueggemann reveals that to pass as living on either side of the binary is a struggle.

Brueggemann tells stories about how she almost passes as hearing and how she works to pass as d/Deaf.

Discussing her experience immersing herself in deaf culture at Gallaudet University Brueggemann writes:

The differences between ‘Deaf’ and ‘deaf,’ between ‘Hearing’ and ‘hearing’ concerned me far more personally and powerfully than just as markers distinguishing cultural deafness (with an upper-case ‘D’) from medical/audiological hearing loss (with a lower-case ‘d’). At any one moment, I was trying to pass as any and all of them (“On (Almost) Passing” 647-648).

In my story the d/Deaf distinction also concerns me more personally and powerfully. Is it because I am not ‘deaf’ or not ‘Deaf’ that I feel like a faker when I sign in hearing spaces with hearing people? What am I faking – deafness or Deafness? Does that make my hearingness true?

Brueggemann's story took her from (almost) passing in the hearing world to one of the hubs of deaf culture, Gallaudet University. Unlike (but also like) some of the students she met, who excelled in the deaf world but found themselves battling “to pass at basic English literacy”, Brueggemann found herself battling “to pass in basic ‘D/deaf’ literacy” (“On (Almost) Passing”

648). Talking about her experience Brueggemann reveals: “I don’t think I ever got it right. Almost, but not quite. I couldn’t be ‘deaf’ any more than I could be ‘hearing’. I was hard-of-hearing’; and I was confused and displaced, in either ‘Deaf’ or ‘Hearing’ culture, as this multiply hyphenated term indicates” (“On (Almost) Passing” 648).

I don’t feel confused or displaced. Rather I feel too placed, too firmly located in the hearing world, too far to always easily move back or across to the deaf world that I know and love. It is easier for me to do hearingness. I can be hearing. Unlike Brueggemann I do not have to struggle, I do not even have to try. Compulsory able-bodiedness makes it so easy for me. It makes any other way of being unnatural.



A bragger’s story

I can feel the excitement in my stomach. It bubbles up in sync with the dancing icon on my laptop screen. Skype is ringing, home is calling.

Is it excitement or is it pride?

Skype is ringing, home is calling. I am in a coffee shop working on this paper, thousands of miles from home. I come here weekly, sit near an outlet, and try to write this story. The people here know me - they know me as the girl with the dog, the girl who always asks what food is vegan - an ordinary hearer. They don’t really know me.

Skype is ringing, home is calling. I know something you don't know.

There's something about me you don't know. No one here is expecting it;

I know they are not because they tell me all the time that they never expected it.



A story of wanting

I am in a trendy Toronto restaurant. My butt is squishing into the fake leather seats and my elbow is pressing onto the tabletop.

I listen to the conversation, for once not needing to constantly be talking.

My eyes start to wander; it is easy to listen and look around, it is easy to get distracted.

I sit lazily in the booth with arms relaxed on the table and hands lifeless besides the occasional unintentional fidgeting of fingers. My ears do all the hard work of hearing for me. Every few sentences my voice effortlessly adds to the buzz of the bar, becoming part of the hum.

The conversation really only needs my hearing ears, little else is held to the table. I feel warm and weightless. My gaze drifts to the other tables.

Glancing to the table next to us, just across the narrow aisle. Wait. My gaze stops, no longer distracted.

I'm now aware of where I am, no longer weightless but very heavy and very stuck. Stuck in the far end of the booth, right shoulder pressed against the wall, wooden table pressing into my forearms. But I still look. I do not take my eyes off the other table. I watch as two women, close to my own age, sign to one another. I feel a flicker in my heart (is it desire? Is it homesickness?).

I know I am staring too much. "Look away" I tell myself. My cheeks feel warm as I think about what (who) I must look like. I quickly glance around. I look like all the other hearers who stare and stare. That is a stare I know well. It is a stare under which I feel comfortable, uncomfortable, proud, and frustrated. It is never a stare I want to be doing.

I look back to my table. "Ok, now you don't look like one of them" I tell myself. But it doesn't last long. I cave. I want to see the signs. I want to be signing. I look back, but this time I shift the muscles in my

face ever so slightly. I am trying to look more deaf - or maybe less hearing.

Relaxing my eyebrows, there can be no look of awe or wonder. Willing a glimmer of intelligence to show in my eyes, I need them to show that I understand. I need to look casual, comfortable - like I could be at their table and fit right in. Instead of saying "hearer" this face says "I know". It isn't working.

Now I do feel homesickness. I have not signed in so long. The more I watch the more I am sure they are deaf. They sign with ease - I want to sign with ease. I want to sign at all.

Maybe I should approach their table. Then they will know that I am not simply another hearer. But I already know I will not. I will not be that hearing person right now; the one who butts in, who makes the conversation theirs, about their signing ability, about their success learning the ASL alphabet.

I am at this table following the conversation at the other table.

Oh wait...I hear my name. I turn back to my table and get back to listening.



Analysis

Rich tells us that compulsory heterosexuality works on two levels, one being “physical force” and the other being “control of consciousness” (640). Kafer, taking up Rich’s work, argues that compulsory able-bodiedness also works in these two ways (“Compulsory” 79). My story of Codaness (read hearingness) has ensured I have not had to experience physical force or violence to satisfy the demands of compulsory able-bodiedness. Control of consciousness allows this system to be “instituted and maintained through less physical – although no less coercive means” (Kafer “Compulsory” 80). Control of consciousness is deployed no less effectively. After all, I am hearing, there’s no question about that, right?

Kafer discusses how this element, control of consciousness, functions in a system of compulsory able-bodiedness. Kafer gives words to one of the most basic expectations of this control, a question that has only one possible answer: “why would you identify as disabled if you can pass as an able-bodied person” (“Compulsory” 80)? How we think about disability, what we deem natural and unnatural is not natural. The stories this system tells us present any desire to identify as disabled as “problematic, suggesting that a disability identity is to be avoided at all costs” (Kafer “Compulsory” 80). If we remember the question this system demands of disabled people that McRuer gives words to (“Yes, but in the end, wouldn’t you rather be more like me?”), we can see that desiring disability, for able-bodied and disabled folks alike, is out of the question.

But the stories I tell are often, at least in part, stories of desire. It is a desire that is often unnoticed. It is a desire that my hearingness has no room for. Kafer's question ("why would you identify as disabled if you can pass as an able-bodied person?") does not ever need to be asked in my story. While it may not be a desire to identify 'as' but 'with' or 'alongside' or 'as a part of,' the control of consciousness is so strong that such desire, even when I openly express it, cannot be comprehended by those around me.



A story of methodology - part 3

Doing this research has given me the most easily accepted and legitimate excuse to talk about my Codaness in the hearing world. I've never talked about it so much. I just can't shut up about it.

On nearly a weekly basis since beginning this project I have had people - hearing friends, hearing family, and hearing co-workers - ask me what I am writing about. I am glad for the excuse to talk about it, but after a few months of telling this story nothing seems to have changed.

The first part of this telling is a bit tedious. When my Codaness is revealed the hearers say the same things: "I'm so sorry," "Who taught you how to talk," "That is so cool".

You might think that once we get past these initial reactions the story gets more interesting. If you did, you would be wrong.

I usually say something like “I am writing about my experience inside of two worlds, the deaf and hearing one. And how I am expected to be hearing and accepted as hearing but want to imagine other ways of being”.

Or sometimes I talk about the videos I created for the project. I say something along the lines of wanting to make the work accessible to the very community it comes from and to have conversations about both ASL and my Codaness in academia.

When my desire to stay connected to the deaf community, to create new connections, to not only be hearing is revealed the hearers say the same things:

“Videos? Very cool. So you can showcase your skill as a signer right?”

“Good for you. It’s sad that deaf people have such an excluded world.”

“It is really cool you are focusing on deaf people, good for you for doing this kind of work.”

Perhaps I am not speaking loudly or clearly enough.



As I read, write, and even experience these stories I am not sure what it is I desire. Is it deaf culture? ASL? Maybe I desire a connection to my deaf community or any deaf community? There is no one version or single experience of any of these components. Analyzing these stories makes clear to me that I do not know where the lines between deafness, deaf culture, sign language, and deaf community lie.

In my Coda story I have never known deafness or the deaf world outside of a cultural framework. But what is this deaf culture under which I feel both comfortable and uncomfortable? While my hearingness ensures my interactions with deaf culture are often uncomfortable (not necessarily a bad thing), perhaps other aspects of my identity ease this discomfort.

How does my whiteness intersect with my Codaness? Is deaf culture white deaf culture? Thinking with Chris Bell's critique of disability studies, offered in the article "Is Disability Studies Actually White Disability Studies?," what happens when we ask to what extent does deaf culture and deaf studies engage with anti-racist and decolonial thought?

Deaf culture (and deafness, the deaf community, and sign language each with various forms and multiple stories) is often seen as thriving in several key locations within the deaf world. These include Gallaudet University, schools for the deaf, deaf clubs, and increasingly so the internet and online groups. In their remarkable book, *Unspeakable: The Story of Junius Wilson*, that takes seriously the intersection of race and deafness in the life of a black deaf man, authors Susan Burch and Hannah Joyner write:

Since the early 1800s, deaf residential schools represented the birthplace of deaf culture. In these environments young deaf people and adults, primarily white, shared a codified language of signs: American Sign Language, or ASL. From this intergenerational

linguistic experience, a culture flourished. By the 1900s, black deaf children in the South rarely had such adult deaf role models of a consistent means to transmit a codified sign language (23).

Deaf culture (and deafness, the deaf community, and sign language) is also embodied, and again is inseparable from my whiteness. When we talk about deaf culture as something embodied, what are we talking about and where does race come into the conversation? As Burch and Joyner argue, Junius Wilson's "deafness...made him less able to play by the rules established in the hearing community. Wilson's touching or holding people, stamping feet and waving arms (all common, acceptable, and meaningful interpersonal behaviours in the deaf world) were foreign and threatening to his hearing neighbours in [his home]" (33). Who can embody deaf culture/deafness/sign language? What embodiments and expressions are recognized as deaf culture, as 'Deaf' rather than 'deaf' or 'hearing'? While my Codaness (read hearingness) pushes me away from deafness (deaf culture/sign language/the deaf community), my whiteness helps me to move through the deaf (and hearing) world more easily. My whiteness is part of the story of why and how I can travel across both worlds, and whiteness is part of the story of what has come to be called ASL and deaf culture.

Nevertheless the hearing world still does not leave space for my Codaness. Whatever it is I desire the hearing world does not recognize it. This is why I hope that in future chapters and in the stories to come this desire can function as a crip practice. In his book *Crip Theory*, Robert McRuer tells stories of radical, queer and crip practices that resist, turn upside-down, and shatter the system of compulsory able-bodiedness. In an interview with Danielle Peers and Melisa Brittain, McRuer describes what he thinks crip theory is:

I would say that in many ways it is something that's very much about excess. Compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory able-bodiedness generate sites of containment, where disability and queerness are managed, contained, kept quiet, kept

silent. And crip cultural production has been about saying ‘we’re not going to stand for that,’ so to speak” (Peers et al “Crip Excess” 148-149).

Crip theory and crip practice “questions – or takes a sledgehammer to – that which has been concretized” (McRuer *Crip Theory* 8). Crip is about refusing and challenging the system that automatically assumes my able-bodiedness, that says as able-bodied I cannot be anything disabled, that refuses to consider the possibility that disability is desirable. There is no single way to do crip or to crip something. According to McRuer crip is about “generat[ing] visions of the body and desire and community that are in excess of attempts to contain and manage us” (Peers et al “Crip Excess” 149). My hearingness, the world I will live in (especially as I enter adulthood more fully), and what embodiments I desire are managed and contained. Can we imagine the practice of telling different stories, telling Coda stories and deaf stories as crip practices? Is deaf studies doing crip theory?

Deaf culture (and deafness, sign language, and the deaf community) and the many stories this culture tells offers a strong response to the demands of compulsory able-bodiedness. Deaf culture and the deaf community tell counternarratives about deafness. Such stories are one example of stories that can provide “new ways to understand and to create ourselves and our worlds” (Peers 178). When this system asks “Yes, but in the end, wouldn’t you rather be more like me?” I can imagine deaf culture offering an answer that this system would not like. I can imagine the members of my deaf community firmly signing “No,” or “No, not all of us”.

Thinking about crip practices and crip theory is probably never easy. Thinking about crip practices and crip theory in the context of my story is certainly not easy. What does it mean to say “No” to compulsory able-bodiedness, specifically compulsory hearingness, but actively reject a disability label? If the d/Deaf and hearing/disabled binaries were not enough, the deaf/disabled binary is one that also personally and powerfully intersects with my story.

I do not know what it is I desire – deaf culture, deafness, to sign, connection to a deaf community – largely because each of these components is deeply interconnected to the last. Is this desire not a desiring of disability? While I can imagine members of my community saying “No we do not want to be hearing” I can also imagine them/us saying “Yes we do not want to be disabled”. In their book *Deaf and Disability Studies: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* Susan Burch and Alison Kafer bring together deaf and disability studies and multiple expressions of crip practices. Burch and Kafer argue that the reliance on the d/Deaf binary “is, at least in part, an attempt to move away from notions of impairment” (xxi). By desiring deaf culture/deafness/community what do I still not desire?

My story is so deeply entrenched in the system of compulsory able-bodiedness that it is hard to make sense of what I desire. I do know that telling these stories and more like them, exposing and refusing the demands of compulsory hearingness can help us to imagine more and different Coda, deaf, and signing futures.

What if we imagine stories where I don't disappear? Where I appear more? Where the hearers actually hear about my (crip an Coda) desire?

Rich tells us that “[o]ne of the many means of enforcement,” deployed by compulsory heterosexuality, “is, of course, the rendering invisible of the lesbian possibility” (647). Compulsory able-bodiedness too renders invisible the possibility of *living* disabled. What would it look like to appear instead of disappear?

In her book *Feminist, Queer, Crip* Alison Kafer seriously engages with this aspect of compulsory able-bodiedness. Kafer takes up the narratives of compulsory able-bodiedness, the control of consciousness that says “any future that includes disability can only be a future to be avoided” (*Feminist, Queer, Crip* 2). Dominant stories of disability and deafness tell us they have

no place in the future. Under this system there is no possibility that deafness exists as a source of community, joy, and strength; disability is not desirable. As Kafer points out, “[h]ow one understands disability in the present determines how one imagines disability in the future” (*Feminist, Queer, Crip* 2). Because deafness, whether it be my parents’ or my own, is not only dichotomous to my hearingness but inferior, there can be no room for it in my future.

Kafer discusses the backlash against Sharon Duchesneau and Candace McCullough, two deaf lesbians, who decided to have artificial insemination using sperm from a deaf friend. Kafer’s analysis of this story tells us about the futures imagined and valued by compulsory able-bodiedness. Kafer’s analysis of the reactions to the couple’s decision reveals the dominant (compulsory?) assumption “that everyone, both hearing and Deaf, disabled and nondisabled, will and should prefer a nondisabled, hearing child” (*Feminist, Queer, Crip* 82). By telling this story Kafer works to “suggest that the stories of Deaf lesbians intentionally striving for Deaf babies be read as counternarratives to mainstream stories about the necessity of a cure for deafness and disability, about the dangers of nonnormative queer parents having children” (*Feminist, Queer, Crip* 84). This is even as these stories desire only certain disabilities (deafness in place of other disabilities) and abilities (deafness in place of Codaness). Crip comes in many forms and crip stories are often complex and contradictory.

As Rich writes about lesbian existence she writes about what compulsory heterosexuality works to make invisible. “Heterosexuality has been forcibly and subliminally imposed on women, yet everywhere women have resisted it, often at the cost of physical torture, imprisonment, psychosurgery, social ostracism, and extreme poverty” (Rich 653). Sharon Duchesneau and Candace McCullough story is one of resistance – resisting hearingness as it is imposed on them, their children, and their futures. How do my stories and the stories of other

Codas resist and/or crip this system as it works to contain and manage us in the present and future?



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GN9Wdt5DyEA>

A story of methodology - part 4

Creating this project has connected me to the stories of other Coda in a new way. I grew up alongside Codas. Other Codas were my closest friends in early childhood, but as my story seems to, I have largely grown apart from these friends and the community we once shared. I do not attend deaf cultural events frequently (and to my knowledge neither do they). Not only did we age out of the deaf world but out of our friendships.

Since working on this project I have come to know bits and pieces of the stories of other Codas. While there is not much written on us, reading similar stories, ones that sound and feel like my own, has been exhilarating. In our stories we appear.



Paul Preston, who is also a Coda, interviewed one hundred and fifty Codas across the United States. His research was one way to allow Codas to tell their stories and explore our “shared histories” (Preston 5). One of the common themes that emerged in Preston’s project was

a feeling of being both Deaf/deaf and hearing, a sensation that one belongs both inside and outside the Deaf world (Preston 37). Using interviews Preston's work gives voice and visibility to the murky and borderland position of Codas. Preston and his participants present Coda as "part-Hearing, part-Deaf" (65). Yet some of the participants expressed feelings of belonging less and less to the deaf world in adulthood (Preston 92).

The participants in Preston's study reveal that deafness and hearingness are not distinct and one cannot always fall into just one of these categories. True to our baffling nature, "despite their apparent assimilation into the Hearing world, many informants confessed that it was within the world of the Deaf that they were most at home" (Preston 93). Not only did many claim to feel at home in the deaf world, sign language was often used in the interviews and participants expressed a deep and lasting connection to the language. As Preston writes, a "number of informants felt that, even as adults, signing remained a better option of expression; through signing, they revealed more of themselves" (136). What can we reveal through sign? Signing may allow one way to exist and express oneself outside of the constraints of compulsory hearingness. While this system makes me hearing that is not the whole story.

Preston found that many of the participants "rarely identified themselves as Hearing" (195). One participant's response to the question if he "considered himself Hearing or Deaf" (Preston 195) tells us that what makes us hearing is complex and not easily defined. My hearingness may seem obvious to some but my stories show otherwise. Like this participant I would say, "Well, I can hear. Of course! But, well, I don't know that I'd say that I'm a quote 'hearing' person. That's different" (Preston 195).

What makes me hearing is slippery. It is the reactions of others, the assumption of my hearingness, the language I feel I am supposed to use, the way the world(s) tell me I am

supposed to move, and the spaces I am expected to inhabit. What makes me hearing makes me hearing now and in the future. The hearing world is my future. It should be the only imaginable future – but it isn't. Thanks to the many ways my deaf community and my deaf parents have taken a sledgehammer to this system I can imagine and desire other futures.

I imagine a future where I can sign in more spaces. I imagine a future (and work towards this future) where I can sign regularly in my academic journey. Where scholarly work is widely produced in sign language and I can see, interact with, and produce such work in many formats. In this story adulthood would no longer bring with it a disappearance, or the same disappearance, from the deaf community.

I imagine a future where Codas, strong in number, demand such use of sign language. Where sign language is used by more bodies, where spoken language is not valued over signed language. This would be a story where the line between deaf and hearing is unclear but where the increased use of sign language and larger deaf community would benefit deaf and hearing alike, in similar and different ways.

Hoffmeister describes Coda as “One Generation Thick (OGT)” (191). We are OGT because we “assimilate into the Hearing world so rapidly” (Hoffmeister 191). The deaf culture of our parents and our youth lasts only one generation (Hoffmeister 191). But if what makes us hearing isn't the whole story, then must we be only one generation thick (or thin)? Can we imagine a story where Codas and their children and their children's children continue to inhabit a space in the borderlands, where a transition into the hearing world is never final or inevitable? In such a story could we imagine the demands, rights, and needs of our parent's communities becoming our demands, rights, and needs?

I do not know what my future story will look like but I know it is not over. I have not disappeared yet, and maybe, story by story, I will appear a little more (Coda? Not hearing? Deaf?). Telling stories about what makes me hearing means telling stories about what makes me not hearing. As Preston's writes:

Hearing children of deaf parents are not only in the margin of one culture or the other; they are also at the center. This is the paradox not merely of these informants' lives, but of that enigmatic framework we call 'culture'. We are different *and* we are also the same. We are not deaf. We are not hearing. We are neither deaf nor hearing. We are both deaf and hearing (263).



Parts of my whole

It is hard to start this story: to lay the scene, introduce characters, and develop the plot. I do not know if this counts as a story, it feels more like a *part* of a story. The series of exchanges, always between myself and at least one other person, that I am hesitant to call a story, are ordinary and extraordinary. They are ordinary because they are happening all the time and could happen anywhere. They are extraordinary to me because the outcome is so very different from when the same series of events happens in the hearing world. When this story occurs in the hearing world it ends without any sort of change or transformation. When this story occurs in the deaf world there is character development and the story takes us places – it takes me up as something more than compulsory able-bodiedness makes me to be.

Not really a story on its own I consider these exchanges an important part of telling a story about my hearingness and about my Codaness. For whatever such an exchange is – a story, a chapter, a part – I know it well. It is one I have encountered countless times. This part of my story is about telling others of my Codaness: saying the words “my parents are deaf, so I am a child of deaf adults” to close friends, strangers, and anybody in-between.

If I was going to tell this as a story there are hundreds of such encounters I could choose from, yet each is essentially the same. Set within the deaf world, or with members of the deaf world as we move about the hearing one, two (or more) characters find themselves in some sort of scenario – any scenario will do. There is no twist this time, no extravagant reactions. But this story takes us somewhere, somewhere in-between the hearing/deaf binary. Maybe this is why I enjoy telling this story, because the ending is much more exciting. In the end my Codaness is taken up and remains visible.

If I was going to tell this as a story I would introduce two characters – it would be a story of their first meeting. Maybe it would be set inside a school, an eighth grade classroom perhaps, a deaf club, an ordinary coffee shop, or a bar in Madrid. The story would start when the main character, Sammy Jo, explained her Codaness. She would probably say, “My mom and dad are deaf”.

If I was going to tell about any of these interactions as a story I would focus on my favourite part: the reactions. This would be a part of a story where my Codaness is disclosed and accepted.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B12iGxbJWQY>

What deaf people say

“Oh yes, you are a Coda.”



Appendix A

Starting this project I debated what ethical practice would work best: following Ellis' advice or obtaining formal consent from those who become characters in my story. The thing is, the characters in my stories could be many people. They are based off of various individuals I have met, both briefly and those who influence my life daily, during my lifetime as a Coda. These are stories set in both the hearing and deaf worlds, worlds I have a lifetime of experience (and experiences) moving through. Each story I tell is a combination of many similar experiences with many different people. While one such interaction may be more fresh in my memory, none of the stories are about any single event or any single person from the real world. Thus, as I contemplated asking those closest to me, who share these stories with me (my parents, my closest friends) for formal written consent, something felt wrong.

As I drew up a draft consent form nothing seemed to fit. How autoethnography is used in this project has meant that there are no participants. It would not make sense to ask my parents, brother, and closest friends for consent but not the hearing stranger I met on the street last week who was amazed by my Coda childhood. The characters in my stories are not based on any

specific people. Instead they are based on many encounters I have had with many people in the hearing and deaf worlds.

What convinced me that formal consent was not the solution in this case was that while I felt I had a reason to ask permission to tell our shared stories, to explore what makes me hearing, I felt I was not actually telling these stories. If I was asking for consent to include their stories then I should be including and telling their stories. Thomas King tells us that “[s]tories are wondrous things. And they are dangerous” (9). I do not want to take stories and storytelling too lightly. Not only do I have an ethical responsibility to those who inform the characters of my stories, if claiming to tell the stories of others, I have an ethical responsibility to do so. Telling stories is also a wondrous but dangerous thing. I felt it was dangerous and harmful to claim to be telling the stories of those around me and then leaving those very people out as unidentifiable, generalized characters.

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