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H-Dirksen Bauman  
*Gallaudet University*

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## *Listening to Phonocentrism with Deaf Eyes: Derrida's Mute Philosophy of (Sign) Language*

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Legacies are difficult to forecast, for who knows what sorts of multiple and unpredictable lives they will lead. Once the body goes, we have little say in the matter. One aspect of Derrida's legacies he probably did not predict is his influence on the field of Deaf Studies. This may seem an obscure legacy, especially for someone who never engaged issues of deafness, sign language, or Deaf cultural life. However, Derrida's critique of phonocentrism lends a powerful voice to a fundamental critique from the emerging field of Deaf Studies—that the primacy of speech and phonetic writing in language is not a 'natural' human attribute, but the result of a metaphysical and historical prejudice, what Derrida refers to as “the most original and powerful ethnocentrism” (Derrida 1976, 3). In fact, in *Of Grammatology*, Derrida articulates this fundamental critique of Deaf Studies so well that he seems to gesture toward a *deaf-mute philosophy*.<sup>1</sup>

Though the term *deaf-mute* is currently offensive, it was not always so. Throughout the 19th century, deaf-mutes were proud of the term, which showed they were a social group that existed without recourse to speech. As Derrida's grammatological project is an exploration of a mute language outside of speech, part of his legacy will live on in the hands of Deaf studies scholars, without recourse to voice or phonetic writing. Yet, while Derrida may have given voice to a deaf-mute philosophy, he nevertheless remained deaf to issues of signed languages and their communities. He opted instead to use the voices of others—Leibniz, Saussure and Rousseau—to speculate on the implications of deaf people and their languages, resulting in a strange sort of ventriloquism on the subject. Clearly, not every philosopher is obligated to speak on the issue of signed languages and Deaf communities, yet Derrida delved so deeply into the implications of the voice-as-presence created through the system of “hearing-oneself-speak,” that at some point, it seems likely he would have directly confronted what is arguably the most profound disruption of that system—audiological deafness, signed languages, and the Deaf cultural phenomenon. One cannot help but wonder why would he inquire in such an extended and elegant fashion on blindness in *Memoirs on the Blind*, and not explore the host of issues in the nexus of deafness, Deaf culture and the ontology of language? Part of Derrida's legacy, therefore, is appropriately left to speculation and indeterminacy.

This paper builds on previous discussions of Derrida and Deaf Studies (Bauman, 2006a; 2006b; Nelson 2006) by demonstrating his legacy to Deaf Studies, and also, of Deaf Studies' relevance to his project of grammatology. Just as Derrida lends his voice to a critique of the phonocentrism, Deaf Studies provides what is perhaps the farthest reaching historical examples of the violence of phonocentrism as it becomes institutionalized in medical and educational discourses designed to

normalize Deaf people. In this regard, Deaf Studies buttresses the historical, institutional site of Derrida's grammatological project while Derrida extends Deaf Studies' critique to the metaphysical site, deepening the field's awareness of the implications that Deaf cultures and sign language poetics have on a project of countering a logocentric and phonocentric orientation. We may see through a combination of Deaf and Derridean lens what Derrida himself did not see—the invisible trace of gesture which runs through the constructions of language and presence in the western ontological tradition.

### Deaf Studies and Derrida

First, a few words about Deaf studies are in order, as most academics remain unaware of this emerging field. As an academic field, Deaf Studies began to form in the 1970s and 1980s, in the wake of the validation of signed languages as fully human languages. Before the 1960s, prevailing wisdom considered signed languages to be mere supplements to spoken languages, rudimentary ideographic systems, and collections of primitive gestures. As a result, deaf people were conceived as intellectually inferior and in dire need of acquiring speech and lip-reading skills. A seismic shift in the understanding of human language came about when William Stokoe and colleagues unearthed deeper structural patterns in signed languages that in which meaningless phonological-like components—handshapes, movement paths, and signing location—combined according to predictable morphological principles, and then were let loose to do everything any language can through a complex syntactical patterning.<sup>2</sup> From this revelation in the 1960s, no longer could language and speech be confused as one and the same thing. Now we know that infants may just as easily develop a manual as a spoken language, and that the same part of the brain used for speech processing is also responsible for sign language processing. Language is now more characterized by neuronal plasticity than speech proper. Neurons, it seems, are not choosy—whether goaded into action from visual or auditory stimuli, they still ignite into consciousness.

This revelation has had a profound impact on Deaf peoples' identities. Suddenly a capital D, Deaf culture emerged out of a lowercase, audiological, medicalized “deaf”, and out of that: the field of Deaf Studies. Like other minority studies, Deaf Studies began first by celebrating its lost history—reifying leaders, sports heroes, and Deaf people's contributions. Yet, as it develops into a field of critical inquiry around constructions of language, identity, and the body, it has begun to develop its point of critiques. Whereas Women studies critiques patriarchy, and African American studies critiques white supremacy, Deaf Studies critiques what has been called *audism*, which, as we shall see, may be understood more fully as a consequence of phonocentrism.

The term “audism” was originally coined in 1975 in an unpublished essay by a young deaf scholar, Tom Humphries. Based on *audire*, audism, as defined by Humphries is the “notion that one is superior based on one's ability to hear or behave in the manner of those who hear.” (n.p). As articulated by Humphries in this widely circulated, though unpublished thought-paper, the term largely points toward *individual audism*, describing it as a “notion” or “attitude” or “belief.” It would not be for another seventeen years that the word would appear in print and be expanded to include institutional forms of oppression. In *The Mask of Benevolence*, Harlan Lane defined audism as “the corporate institution for dealing with deaf people. . . . [It] is the hearing way of dominating, restructuring, and exercising authority over the deaf community” (43). Lane and others have directed their critiques at the historical pathologization of the deaf body and the normalizing

practices of institutions designed to “help restore the deaf to humanity.” Together, these perspectives on individual and institutional audism help to explain much about the politics of identity development and institutionalized oppression. However, important questions remain: where do these institutions derive their orientation. Clearly, behind their benevolent masks, lurks a deeper orientation. What is its magnetic north? Is it merely an economic question, that deaf people would be more able to work and live more productive lives? Or is something else at work?

How does one explain, after all, that for most of the 20th century, the predominant mode of teaching Deaf people was oralism, a medico-pedagogy which forbids the use of sign language so that pupils rely exclusively on speaking, reading lips, auditory training? To put this into perspective, imagine teaching blind students by forbidding any use of speech, instead insisting on the use of signed language and visual training. Clearly this is preposterous, but for some reason, the reverse practice in deaf education is still widely promoted today under the guise of humane education.

How does one explain, after all, why it has taken us thousands of years to recognize that signed languages are members of the family of human languages, even after Augustine declared that, “For what does it matter, as [a person] grows up, whether he speaks or makes gestures, since both these pertain to the soul?” (qtd. in Van Cleve, 6). Why was it not until the 1960s and 70s that we begin to see how discrete visual parts add up to create a fully developed language?

How does one also explain the common reaction of parents when they learn their baby is deaf: “I will never be able to hear my baby say the words, *‘I love you’*”? Indeed, we must pause here to consider how normal and how strange this comment is. What is the difference between hearing the words ‘I love you’, and seeing the signs, “I love you”? Obviously, there must be a profound difference, because this was one of the primary reasons in the testimony of one mother, explaining why she put her six-month old infant under brain surgery to instill an implant in the child’s ear to simulate sound.

The only explanation for such an orientation is a nearly maniacal obsession with the voice. As a consequence of being deaf in such a world, Deaf Studies naturally finds itself lodging a critique of the primacy of the voice in the Western tradition. This is clearly a David and Goliath situation here: a tiny percentage of the population is deaf, and an even smaller number are scholars in the field of Deaf studies, and add in a few hearing allies, and you have a very small cohort of scholars wishing to lodge a decisive blow to the privileging of the voice and phonetic writing in the Western tradition. It is as if these scholars set out on an offensive against a mighty fortress, only to arrive and see that it has already been under serious attack by a French philosopher by the name of Jacques Derrida and legions of followers.

The voice, Derrida believes is more than a means of communicating—it is the source for Western ideas of truth, being, and presence. “The system of hearing-oneself-speak, through the phonic substance . . .’ Derrida contends, “has necessarily dominated the history of the world during an entire epoch and has even produced the idea of the world, the idea of world-origin” (8). According to Derrida, it is the “absolute proximity of voice and being, of voice and the meaning of being, of voice and the ideality of meaning” (12) that has governed our ontological tradition. When Derrida writes that the voice and the insistence on phonetic writing is “the most original and powerful ethnocentrism” (3) no one grasps this more clearly than Deaf people whose history is like a tableau

reenactment of phonocentrism. Deaf history is the where phonocentrism begets institutional arrangements, especially in medicalized educational practices bent on normalizing deaf bodies.

In short, Derrida's legacy to Deaf Studies is to bring out in the open what has been closest to us all along-- *relation of the voice and being*. No small gift, that is. While Deaf studies scholars investigate the historical conditions and institutional forms of oppression—education, medicine, Derrida's critique introduces the metaphysical backdrop, the ontological orientation that sets up the conditions for institutions to enforce speech as the human norm. The notion of *phonocentrism* is beginning to enter the critical consciousness of Deaf Studies, placing it as wider orientation that would beget *audism* (Bauman 2004).

### Saussure, Derrida and Signed Languages

One of the prime promoters of an audist orientation toward language—though clearly unintentional with respect to deaf people--has been Ferdinand de Saussure whose *Course on General Linguistics* set the course of 20th century thought on language, grounding it firmly as a sound-based phenomenon. Saussure asserts that the only bond between signifier and signified can be “the natural bond” of sound—the “the only true bond, the bond of sound” (25). “This natural bond,” Derrida writes, “of the signified (concept or sense) to the phonic signifier would condition the natural relationship subordinating writing (visible image) to speech” (35). Now we must read the subordination of signed languages along side that of writing. This exclusion of sign is rendered complete in Saussurean linguistics as sound and speech create the very principles that govern the nature of the linguistic sign—the principles of a) *arbitrariness* and b) *linearity of the signifier*

This crucial alignment of sound/arbitrariness has lead to deleterious presumptions about visual, non-phonetic linguistic signs—namely, that they are limited to concrete phenomenon and incapable of expressing abstract concepts. Such assumptions have relegated signed languages—which are more highly iconic than spoken languages to the status of ideographic language capable of the most basic thoughts, akin to mime. A consequence of such an orientation can be found in the influential writings of a leading “expert” on Deaf people, American psychologist, Helmer Myklebust, who writes in his 1957 *Psychology of Deafness*:

The manual language used by the deaf is an ideographic language . . . it is more pictorial, less symbolic. . . .Ideographic language systems, in comparison with verbal symbol systems, lack precision, subtlety, and flexibility. It is likely that man cannot achieve his ultimate potential through an Ideographic language. . . . The manual sign must be viewed as inferior to the verbal as a language. (241-2)

While we now see how skewed this outdated perspective is, it lingers perniciously in deaf education and hearing-centered ‘folk wisdom’ regarding the nature of language. In retrospect, we may see this as an instance of what I have referred to elsewhere as the “*disconstruction of language*,” in which the category has been formed within a fundamental lack of awareness of the full human potential for language (Bauman, 2007). Such disconstruction creates a pattern of disorientation that can be read as an archeology of phonocentrism.



Even after the validation of signed languages as human languages in the 1960s and 1970s, the principle of arbitrariness held sway as sign language linguists went to elaborate lengths to downplay or even deny ASL's iconic properties so that it would conform to the principle of arbitrariness. (Frishberg 1975; Wilbur, 1987; Klima and Bellugi, 1979). It was not until much later that linguists began to challenge the very premises of Saussure's principles. Rather than a negative property, Scott Liddell writes, "iconicity is desirable in either type of language [signed or spoken], but the potential for onomatopoeia in spoken languages is limited by the auditory modality" (Liddell, 65; see also Taub, 2001). Sign languages, on the other hand, are rich in iconicity as they derive their spatial grammar and lexicon from the blending of the visual/kinetic structures of the world and the mental space of the mind. As a result, the data from sign language linguistics have fundamentally altered the 'nature' of what we call language.

Iconicity in language may now be seen as a positive value that sign languages are particularly adept at exploiting, often for very abstract purposes. Consider, for example, how one of my students at Gallaudet University explained the process of reading Foucault. He first signed that it was difficult to read, with his left hand representing the book, open and facing him, and his right hand was in a V shape, the two finger tips representing his practice of reading, re-reading, and then finally, his fingers got closer to the book, and finally, made contact; at this point, the eyes of the V-shape then became a digging apparatus, digging deeper into the text. He then reached in between the lines of the page, now signified by the open fingers of the left hand, and began to pull ideas and new meanings from underneath the text. The notion of reading between the lines gained flesh, as the hands literally grasped for buried meanings. The result of reading Foucault, he said, changed his thinking forever, inspiring him to invent a name-sign for Foucault. The sign he invented began with the signed letter "F" at the side of the forehead, and then twisting outward, showing the brain undergoing a radical reorientation. In a concise image, the philosophy of Foucault is given an iconic shape that is not one of mere mime—for it would be unintelligible to a non-signing audience—but imbued with the metaphorical iconic performance of the ramifications of studying Foucault. The point here is that the bias toward arbitrariness is a result of phonocentric thinking and does not pertain to a general rule in linguistics.

In order to demonstrate Saussure's bias, David Armstrong engages in an anti-phonocentric thought experiment, supposing that, for whatever reason, humans became signers as opposed to speakers. In this world, it would be the blind, not the deaf who would be cut off from language, and whose alternative form of language, speech would be seen through the lens of inferiority. In such a world, a leading psychologist would write:

The oral language used by the blind is an Arbitrary language. . . . it is less pictorial, more symbolic. . . . Arbitrary language systems, in comparison with visual signed systems, lack precision, subtlety, and flexibility. It is likely that Man cannot achieve his ultimate potential through an Arbitrary language. . . . The oral language must be viewed as inferior to the visual language. (74)

By thinking of the world through an alternative framework of signed languages, we can bring the traces of phonocentrism into relief so that we may see before us the very structure of our thinking. While sign language linguistics have already lodged a critique at Saussure's principles, Derrida links these principles to a metaphysics of presence, deepening the implications of abandoning the principles of arbitrariness, for he links voice, arbitrariness, and linearity to metaphysics and the

historical ontology of the West.

If one considers the now recognized fragility of the notions of pictogram, ideograph etc., and the uncertainty of the frontiers between so-called pictographic, ideographic, and phonetic scripts, one realized not only the unwisdom of the Saussurean limitation but the need for general linguistics to abandon an entire family of concepts inherited from metaphysics . . . and clustering around the concept of arbitrariness. (33)

Together, Derrida and Deaf Studies may conspire to launch an irrevocable blow, toppling the notion that arbitrariness is the hallmark for all language, thus creating new understandings of nature of naming and the naming of nature.

The second principle that results from the natural bond of sound is the principle of linearity. “The signifier, *being auditory* is unfolded solely in time from which it gets the following characteristics; a) it represents a span, and b) the span is measurable in a *single dimension; it is a line* (70). Again we see the internal workings of the voice determining the very structure of what constitutes the object of linguistics. Any non-linear, pluri-dimensional writing is simply disregarded. One may think here of the considerable diversity in writing found in the Mesoamericans and other non-western cultures. The Incan *quipu*, for example, represents a three-dimensional form of writing, not read in a simple left to right fashion (Boone and Mignolo, 1994). “We have seen that the traditional concept of time,” writes Derrida, “an entire organization of the world and of language, was bound up with it. Writing in the narrow sense—and phonetic writing above all—is rooted in a past of nonlinear writing” (85). In order to understand this past, “we must de-sediment ‘four thousand years of linear writing’ (86). The fossils of writing found in this arche-logical dig are the relics from a war against pluri-dimensional writing. “A war was declared,” Derrida writes, “and a suppression of all that resisted linearization was installed” (85). In this war, by far the most vicious battles are still being fought against sign languages. While Derrida and others have looked to ancient scripts and archeological findings, such as Leroi-Gourhan’s ‘mythograms’, there have more obvious examples of spatialized languages in their midst. As Oliver Sacks describes the spatial nature of signed languages:

We see then, in Sign, at every level—lexical, grammatical, syntactic—a *linguistic* use of space: a use that is amazingly complex, for much of what occurs linearly, sequentially, temporally in speech, becomes simultaneous, concurrent, multileveled in Sign. The ‘surface’ of Sign may appear simple to the eye, like that of gesture or mime, but one soon finds that this is an illusion, and that what looks so simple is extraordinarily complex and consists of innumerable spatial patterns nested, three dimensionally, in each other. (88)

The significance of the spatiality of signed languages becomes especially pronounced as one realizes that the notion of the line, like that of arbitrariness, is not an intrinsic, natural property, but a particular orientation toward the voice.

The ‘line’ represents only a particular model, whatever might be its privilege. This model *has become* a model and, as a model, it remains inaccessible. If one allows that the linearity of language entails this vulgar and mundane concept of temporality (homogeneous, dominated by the form of the now and the ideal of continuous movement,

straight or circular) which Heidegger shows to be the intrinsic determining concept of all ontology from Aristotle to Hegel, the meditation upon writing and the deconstruction of the history of philosophy become inseparable. (85)

This linearist concept, derived from speech and phonetic writing, then, has profound implications on the Western ontological tradition, involving the very construction of time. Indeed, what would time have been in a world without speech? What would *space* have been? Would we have measured differently? One student of mine, Robert Arnold speculates on how units of measurement might have been different in a signing world. He suggests that the basic unit of area would not be measured in squares—a foreign shape in sign language, and might have instead been circular. Such speculation is not idle, for we already have strong indications that a Deaf-centered architecture would be designed differently.<sup>3</sup> The world would have fewer walls, more windows, and circular and curvilinear rooms. The shape of a Deaf architectural environment would serve as an imprint, a Deaf Writing into the landscape etching a visual-tactile orientation within the world. If the very architecture of Deaf ways of being bears a different stamp, then we may surmise that there exist untapped alternative structures of knowing. At this point, however, this remains speculative. Less speculative, unfortunately, is the way in which Deaf history dramatizes Derrida's notion of the violence of phonocentrism.

### Writing, Sign Language, and the Violence of Phonocentrism

One of the most enduring results of phonocentric orientation, Derrida contends, is the denigration of writing to an outsider, banished to the outer limits of language. “Why does a project of general linguistics, concerning the *internal system in general of language in general*, outline the limits of the field by excluding, as *exteriority in general, a particular system of writing*, however important it might be, even were it to be in fact *universal*” (original italics 39). Such a false limiting of language to speech is, for Derrida, a matter of grave consequences. Yet, while Derrida writes of the exclusion of writing, we now must rewrite and reread the exclusion of signed languages as part of the same phonocentric gesture. “Then one realizes that what was chased off limits, the wandering outcast of linguistics, has indeed never ceased to haunt language as its primary and most intimate possibility” (44). While Derrida describes writing as the “wandering outcast” of linguistics, sign-language would have been lucky to be an outcast, for its fate was more like that of the prisoner, locked up, shielded from view these past few millennia. The figure of Sign as the prisoner is also more fitting because it has been imprisoned within the very house of language, still haunting from within. In reading Derrida with an eye on Deaf history and signed languages, we are more able to see, through an enlarged historic tableau, Derrida's insistence on the violent nature of phonocentrism. One may begin to add [Sign] alongside writing and have the same historical significance.

Declaration of principle, pious wish and *historical violence of a speech dreaming its full self-presence*, living itself as its own resumption; self-proclaimed language, auto-production of a speech declared alive, capable, Socrates said, of helping itself, a logos which believes itself to be its own father, being lifted thus above written [signed] discourse, . . . self proclaimed language but actually speech, deluded into believing itself completely alive, and violent, for it is not ‘capable of protect[ing] or defend[ing] [itself] . . . except through expelling the other, and especially *its own* other, throwing it *outside* and



*below*, under the name of writing [sign]” (39)

Such strong language may be hard to envision in relation to the banishment of writing, but suddenly becomes clearly validated when one looks at the violent suppression of signed languages.

Here I suggest that Derrida may have been able to buttress his arguments through the most dramatic form of historical enactment of the enforcement of phonocentrism--audism. While he could have made many relevant connections between phonocentrism and oralist educational practices, Derrida instead labels the condemnation of Leibniz's desire for a nonphonetic, universal script as “the most energetic eighteenth century *reaction* organizing the defense of phonologism and of logocentric metaphysics” (99). I propose, instead, that the history of deaf education, as it is marked by violent oppression of sign and the subjugation of Deaf persons is a more “energetic reaction” to phonocentrism. It is where phonocentrism meets social and educational policy. It is hard to find a more potent instance of voice-as-presence than in the writings of educators who insist on oral training for deaf pupils. Consider, for example, the words of Johan Conrad Amman, written in 1700: “The breath of life resides in the voice. . . .The voice is a living emanation of that spirit that God breathed into man when he created him a living soul . . . What stupidity we find in most of these unfortunate deaf . . . How little they differ from animals” (qtd in Lane, 107). Indeed, the metaphors of signing as animality—which bespeaks the lack of presence through the human voice—would continue throughout the centuries. Lewis Dudley, the founder of the Clarke school for the Deaf in Massachusetts writes, described his pupils as “young creatures human in shape, but only half human in attributes.” (qtd in Baynton 52). Dudley then contrasted these signers from a young deaf girl who had recently learned to speak: “the radiant face and the beaming eye showed a consciousness of elevation in the scale of being. It was a real elevation” (52). Users of sign language then are placed a few rungs down the evolutionary scale, akin to primitives and animals.

Yet, these metaphors went beyond ink and paper, but aligned themselves with a set of practices that took physical control of the deaf pupil's body, to the point of physical abuse. At the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century, experiments were carried out on the collections of deaf children in residential schools. This is the real violence of phonocentrism—the application of electricity, leeches, and blistering agents, caustic soda, and finally, hammers and white hot metal buttons (Lane 212-3). Such barbaric medical treatments punctuated students lives who otherwise spent countless hours during a lifetime of training to parse the differences between ‘d’ and ‘t,’ between ‘p’ and ‘b.’ And worse: when pupils were caught signing on the playground, they often had their hands beaten for doing so. Moreover, if the assault on the Deaf body was not a severe enough example, then came the eugenically-minded campaign to isolate deaf children with the goal of eradicating, in Alexander Graham Bell's words, the “formation of a deaf variety of the human race” (Bell, 1884). In the wake of the oralist agenda, deaf educators were forcibly removed from their jobs as they could not speak, leaving generations of deaf children educated via the ear.

To this day, there is an all out campaign to “cure” deafness and to instill speech as the norm for deaf communication, including the rise of surgical practices like cochlear implants which are now given as early as six-months. Parents can screen out deafness through in vitro fertilization, and if the deaf gene is in a fetus, that fetus may be aborted. On the horizon is the technology of using stem cells to implant into the ears of deaf children, making them not *like* hearing people, but *making them hearing*. The forces of bio-power are alive and well, and they are driven according to the deep logic of phonocentrism. Nobody knows this better than the Australian sign language

community which faces a future of potential extinction and death of Australian Sign Language (Auslan) (Johnston, 2006).

This is where Deaf Studies may usefully complement Derrida's critique of voice as presense with Foucauldian analysis. Foucault's work may be enormously beneficial to Deaf studies, even though he also overlooks the phenomenon of signed languages and their communities. In fact, the discursive "birth of deafness" is so closely allied to the births of the asylum, the clinic and prisons, it is quite surprising to find no mention of deaf people in Foucault's writing. The same years that witnessed the rise of Philippe Pinel's asylums for the insane witnessed his methods of observation and classification deployed by his student Jean-Marc Itard within the newly founded "Asylums for the Deaf the Dumb"; Pinel was no stranger to the Deaf school in Paris on Rue St. Jacques during his observations of the wild boy of Aveyron. When the medical gaze penetrated the surface of the body in the age of Bichat, otologists probed the workings of the inner ear; when *ecoles normales* produced disciplinary pedagogies, oralist teachers, developed pedagogies to discipline the deaf body into normative language practices, In short, the asylums for the deaf and dumb served as a point of convergence of discourses which, as Foucault demonstrates, all work toward the same goal: to separate the normal from the abnormal, the hearing from the deaf, in order to normalize the transgressive Other, to eradicate all differences—while ironically exacerbating them, perpetuating the subjugation of the abnormal body.

### Sign Language, Presence and Supplementarity

In addition to dramatizing the violence of phonocentrism, what else do we see when we read Derrida through a Deaf lens? For example, how does the relation of voice and being take on a different resonance in the Deaf world? How could one describe the relation between Sign and being. Consider the example of one of my students at Gallaudet University, who went to bed one night hearing and woke up deaf. His first sensation had less to do with the loss of hearing as with a loss of self. "I felt like a ghost," he said. "Like I wasn't even there. I had to keep touching myself to make sure I was there." Without the auto-affection of the voice, this student had to seek other means to confirm his existence. Yet, now this student has become a fluent user of American Sign Language; he has married a deaf woman and is the father of a newly born deaf child. He no longer doubts his existence, but readily acknowledges that it is, indeed, a different existence than before. It is an existence outside of the auto-affection of the voice. He has emigrated from the hearing world to a Deaf world, and that has made all the *differance*.

One has to speculate on what Derrida would think of such a world. At least theoretically, if non-phonetic writing interrupts the primacy of the voice, then deafness signifies a consummate moment of disruption. Deafness, then, might be said to occupy an important moment in the deconstruction of Western ontology. Further, deafness does more than disrupt the system of 'hearing oneself speak.' It coaxes sign language out of our neurons—and, significantly, sign language, unlike speech, is not fully present to itself, not fully interior. When signing, it is impossible to fully "see oneself sign," leaving traces of nonpresence in the system of signing. One wonders, then, if Derrida had engaged the notions of deafness and signed language further, might he have expanded the term "sign" or "gesture" as he did 'writing' to signify *differance*.

Indeed, discussion of signed languages does arise at crucial moments in the discussion of the origin of language. This should not be surprising, as signed languages and gesture have been a part of the

philosophical discourse of the origin of language, a especially as elaborated by Rousseau, Condillac and Diderot, setting the stage for the late 18th century fascination with gesture, sign language, deaf communities. (Rosenfeld 2001; Davis, 1995) Not surprisingly, Rousseau's treatment of signed languages in relation to gesture, speech (*parole*) and language (*langue*) is, like most topics in the *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, deeply contradictory. To untangle the knots relating to signed language and gesture would take more time and space than this paper allows for. Think of how many more pages Derrida wrote about Rousseau's *Essay on the Origin of Languages* than were in this diminutive text. For our current purposes, though, attention must be paid to the Rousseau's dream of a society based on signed language. In such a society, Rousseau writes,

we would fully express our meanings by the language of gesture alone. We would have been able to establish societies little different from those we have, or such as would have been better able to achieve their goals. We would have been able to institute laws, to choose leaders, to invent arts, to establish commerce, and to do, in a word almost as many things as we do with the help of speech . . . The mutes of great nobles understand each other, and understand everything that is said to them by means of signs, just as well as one can understand anything in discourse. (Essay, p. 9).

This observation leads Rousseau to muse that “the art of communicating our ideas depends less upon the organs we use in such communication that it does upon a power proper to man, according to which he uses his organs in this way, and which, if he lacked these, would lead him to use others to the same end” (10). Derrida seizes on this nonphonocentric moment in Rousseau to destabilize the primacy of the voice in Western philosophy. “It is once again the power of substituting one organ for another,” Derrida writes, “of articulating space and time, sign and voice, hand and spirit, it is this faculty of supplementarity which is the true origin—or nonorigin—of languages” (241). As I have written elsewhere, “As the condition leading toward the supplement, deafness could read, ironically, as that which makes the origin of language possible. Deafness summons up the visual-spatial dimension of language to supplant the voice from within. It sets *differance* in motion” (“Toward a Poetics” 357).

In a deaf reading of Derrida, then, signed language comes out of hiding and needs to be read alongside the ideas of writing, supplementarity, and trace. In the Derridean sense, signed languages, of course are forms of writing. But could one be so bold as to say as well, that writing was a form of Sign<sup>4</sup>—and that gesture is at heart “making meaning through movement.” In this respect, speech is clearly a form of gesture, only we can't see it, all covered up by the mouth. A basic condition of gesture is displacement, spacing. Writing is simply the fossils of gestures, the traces left behind. As a further project remains to entertain such ideas in greater depth, Derrida's legacy may be transformed through a Deaf reading of his work.

### **Conclusion: Resistance and American Sign Language Poetics**

In the deconstruction of the hegemony of voice as presence, voice as being, there is the dawn of a post phonocentric awareness: “This night begins to lighten a little at the moment when linearity—which is not loss or absence but the *repression of pluri-dimensional* symbolic thought, relaxes its oppression . . . “ (86). Counter to the hegemony of the principle of arbitrariness, Derrida notes, there have been poetic forms which seek to crawl out from under the heavy weight of a

phonocentric, logocentric history.

It was normal that the breakthrough was more secure and more penetrating on the side of literature and poetic writing: normal also that it, like Nietzsche, at first destroyed and caused to vacillate the transcendental authority and dominant category of the episteme: being. This is the meaning of the work of Fenollosa [sic] whose influence upon Ezra Pound and his poetics is well known: this irreducibly graphic poetics was, with that of Mallarme, the first break in the most entrenched Western tradition. The fascination that the Chinese ideogram exercised on Pound's writing may thus be given all its historical significance. (92)

This reference to Fenollosa is significant here, for Fenollosa's fascination with the ideogram is precisely based on a form of written language that stands in contrast to the spoken word where "there is no natural connection between thing and sign: all depends on sheer convention" (8). But, Fenollosa explains, "Chinese notation is something much more than arbitrary symbols. It is based on a vivid shorthand picture of the operations of nature . . . Chinese method follows natural suggestion" (8). Thus, counter to the principle of arbitrariness, are forms of writing, which suggest the natural processes of the world, its energy. The writings of Fenollosa have been deeply influential on modern and postmodern poetics; they also could be read as a manifesto of sign language poetics, only substituting the Chinese character, for signed language. Clearly, there is no other linguistic medium that "speaks at once with the vividness of painting, and with the mobility of sounds" (9) than signed languages, which operate much like film (Bauman 2003, Bauman 2006, Bahan 2006).

Just as Fenollosa's influence may be given its historical significance, we can look to the emerging body poetry in American Sign Language and other signed languages. They are poetic expressions from a culture outside the voice. To what extent these poetics destabilize a logocentric metaphysics is a topic worth deep inquiry. Clearly, the deaf community has been deeply tainted by logocentrism, and it would be unreal to anticipate a body of anti-logocentric poetics. However, there are certain moments of radical inspiration in poetics that may be taken as a sign, gesturing to alternative ways of being in the world. Take, for example, Joseph Castronovo's brilliant ending to his poem, "Paris' Silent Sleep." He signs VOICE with the "2" or "V" handshape moving up and out from the throat, only to return to the throat, which is the sign for STUCK. He then repeats the same VOICE-STUCK, only this time, transposing the sign from the throat to the wrist, signifying the voice of signed languages and the history of their being silenced. The hand and wrist then fall down, with the palm facing upward, conjuring the sign DEATH. The "2" handshape from STUCK now transforms into a walking figure—the two fingers symbolizing walking legs—who walks over the length of the hand. The poem ends as the figure turns to smoke. While this ending evokes the terrifying ending of bodily repression through a theme of eugenics present throughout the poem, the sheer eloquence ironically conveys that there are new possibilities of a theory of the voice no longer beholden to sound, but to the gesturing body that may speak outside the reach of phonocentrism. Indeed, the 'end of the book' is the 'beginning of writing,'; the end of the narrow definition of voice is the beginning of a new relation between being and language.

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## Notes

1. Ben Bahan originally offered the idea of reviving the concept of mute as a strategic means of calling attention to the refusal to speak. It is used here with a similar political intention.
2. While Stokoe originally identified three parameters, two others have been added to the study of

ASL phonology—“palm orientation” and “non-manual signals” such as facial expressions.

3. The concept of a visu-centric Deaf architecture has been explored at Gallaudet University, beginning with the designs for the Sorenson Language and Communication Center and continuing with a three year project between the Department of ASL and Deaf Studies with Hansel Bauman, architect and planner to explore the nature of a Deaf architectural aesthetic. More information can be found at: <http://slcc.gallaudet.edu/deafspace/>.

4. The capital here is necessary to distinguish Sign from the many other uses of the word, to refer specifically to the human capacity for signed- language, a modality to be placed on equal footing with speech and writing.