Introduction

The traditional way of writing about Deaf people is to focus on the fact of their condition—that they do not hear—and to interpret all other aspects of their lives as consequences of this fact. Our goal in this book is to write about Deaf people in a new and different way. In contrast to the long history of writings that treat them as medical cases, or as people with "disabilities," who "compensate" for their deafness by using sign language, we want to portray the lives they live, their art and performances, their everyday talk, their shared myths, and the lessons they teach one another. We have always felt that the attention given to the physical condition of not hearing has obscured far more interesting facets of Deaf people's lives.

Our exploration is partly a personal one: the lives of Deaf people include our own. Carol was born deaf in a Deaf family. Her parents and her older brother are Deaf, as are a set of grandparents and some other relatives. Tom, in contrast, became deaf as a child and did not meet other Deaf people until he entered a college for Deaf students.

Our professional interests over the last ten years have also led us to this topic. We have both participated in a new generation of research on signed language. Carol has written technical descriptions of the structure of American Sign Language, and Tom has written about approaches to teaching English to Deaf people that recognize signed language as a central instrument. With our colleagues, we have uncovered significant details about signed

languages that had never been thought about before, let alone described. The sum of this research is that signed languages are far from the primitive gestural systems they had been assumed to be. Instead they are rich systems with complex structures that reflect their long histories. Thinking about the linguistic richness uncovered in our work has made us realize that the language has developed through the generations as part of an equally rich cultural heritage. It is this heritage—the culture of Deaf people—that we want to begin to portray in this book.

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Before beginning our journey through the imagery and patterns of meaning that constitute Deaf people's lives, we must identify the community of "Deaf" people with which we are concerned. Following a convention proposed by James Woodward (1972), we use the lowercase *deaf* when referring to the audiological condition of not hearing, and the uppercase *Deaf* when referring to a particular group of deaf people who share a language—American Sign Language (ASL)—and a culture. The members of this group reside in the United States and Canada, have inherited their sign language, use it as a primary means of communication among themselves, and hold a set of beliefs about themselves and their connection to the larger society. We distinguish them from, for example, those who find themselves losing their hearing because of illness, trauma or age; although these people share the condition of not hearing, they do not have access to the knowledge, beliefs, and practices that make up the culture of Deaf people. As we will emphasize in subsequent chapters, this knowledge of Deaf people is not simply a camaraderie with others who have a similar physical condition, but is, like many other cultures in the traditional sense of the term, historically created and actively transmitted across generations.

Woodward's distinction, while useful, is not an entirely clear-cut one. For example, consider deaf children from hearing families who encounter Deaf people and their culture outside the

family. At what point are they said to have adopted the conventions of the culture and become Deaf? This question also applies to the acculturation processes of deaf adults who, after spending many years apart from Deaf people, come to join the community at later ages. Markowicz and Woodward (1978) have suggested that self-identification with the group and skill in ASL should be important diagnostic factors in deciding who is Deaf. But 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. We explore these complexities in more detail in Chapter 3, including the cases of two groups who pose special problems for the culture: newly arrived deaf persons who have yet to learn the full range of skills required for the culture, and hearing children from Deaf families. A newly arrived deaf person is often given one of several borderline labels, such as "hard of hearing," recognizing his or her past affiliation with those who speak. Hearing children of Deaf parents represent an ongoing contradiction in the culture: they display the knowledge of their parents—skill in the language and social conduct—but the culture finds subtle ways to give them an unusual and separate status.

Also following Woodward, we use the term *Deaf* in this book to refer to other cultures of people who do not hear and who use sign languages other than ASL. In Quebec, for example, Deaf French Canadians use a different sign language, Langue des Signes Québecois. Nova Scotia has a community of Deaf people whose sign language is related to British Sign Language but not to ASL. In fact, in nearly every nation in the world there are several distinct groups of Deaf people, their differences marked by political, historical, or geographical separation.

Although we recognize that there are many cultures of Deaf people, without detailed ethnographies of various groups we cannot offer generalizations about them or about the relationship

between the condition of not hearing and the formation of a culture. This book is about the Deaf culture we know best, our own.

Even within the population of Deaf people who use ASL, not surprisingly, there is enormous diversity. Large communities of Deaf people in Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Edmonton, Alberta, to give a few examples, have their own distinctive identities. Within these local communities there are smaller groups organized by class, profession, ethnicity, or race, each of which has yet another set of distinct characteristics. Until about 1970, racial segregation in the larger society dictated that white and black deaf children in the southern states should attend separate schools. Although teachers in black deaf schools knew the white variety of ASL, the segregation led to the development of a distinct black variety, which is still used by black Deaf adults in certain regions of the South, although many also know the white variety (Woodward 1976; Maxwell and Smith-Todd 1986). Cities like Washington, D.C., and New York have large black Deaf clubs that are active centers for their communities. But all these subgroups of the category of Deaf people have in common the use of some variety of ASL.

There are no reliable figures on the number of Deaf people in the United States and Canada. Health statistics lead to an estimate of the occurrence of "hearing impairment" in the general population at 9 percent (U.S. National Center for Health Statistics 1987). But teasing out the smaller number of Deaf people from such estimates is difficult at best.

One reason for this difficulty is that, as we have said, the fact of not hearing is not itself a determinant of group identity. Although the term "deaf" is the group's official label for itself, people who are Deaf can have a range of hearing abilities from "hard of hearing" to "profoundly deaf," and, conversely, there are people with severe or profound hearing impairment who do not participate in the community of Deaf people. Another reason is that there are no figures on the number of users of signed language in the United States and Canada. Based on estimates of

numbers of people who attended schools where they were extensively exposed to Deaf people and signed language, and on the number of Deaf people known to social service agencies, there are estimates of the Deaf population in the neighborhood of a few hundred thousand.

The unique pattern of cultural transmission within the group compounds the problem of estimating its numbers. Although somewhere between 11 and 30 percent of deaf schoolchildren inherit their deafness, fewer than 10 percent are born to parents who are also Deaf. Consequently, in contrast to the situation in most cultures, the great majority of individuals within the community of Deaf people do not join it at birth.

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This unique pattern of transmission lies at the heart of the culture. As will be seen in some of the stories in later chapters, one of its consequences is the central role the school plays in the community. Many of these stories refer to "residential schools," the type of schools most of today's Deaf adults attended. These are boarding schools, usually state-funded, specifically for deaf children from as young as preschool through high school. Almost every state and province in the United States and Canada funded at least one "school for the deaf" between 1817, the year the first public school for deaf children was founded, and 1980 (Schildroth 1980; Gannon 1981). Children attending these boarding schools typically return home only for weekends and holidays. Many older Deaf people spent large portions of their early lives at these schools, going home only at Christmas or during summers.

Although there are some "oral" residential schools, which officially disallow the use of signed language, most residential schools are "manual" schools, in which signed language is allowed in classrooms. Even in these schools, however, educational policy typically emphasizes speech and the English language; sign language and other practices of Deaf people are rarely given a central part in school policies. As some of the stories we have collected suggest, in subtle ways deaf children manage to circum-

vent the will of "obstructionist" adults to teach one another the knowledge of Deaf people.

In many of these schools, deaf children spend years of their lives among Deaf people—children from Deaf families and Deaf adults who work at the school. Many schools are staffed to some extent by Deaf people who graduated from the same school or another one like it. For these deaf children, the most significant aspect of residential life is the dormitory. In the dormitories, away from the structured control of the classroom, deaf children are introduced to the social life of Deaf people. In the informal dormitory environment children learn not only sign language but the content of the culture. In this way, the schools become hubs of the communities that surround them, preserving for the next generation the culture of earlier generations.

The residential school is not the only avenue for introduction to the community. Some deaf children do not leave home to attend residential schools but, like both of us, stay home and go to public school with "the others," as hearing people are called. Tom remained among his hearing neighbors and relatives, and in various ways adapted to the demands of his school. Only later, as an adult, did he meet other Deaf people. In Carol's case, her Deaf parents and older brother attended residential schools, but because she is "hard of hearing" she was judged to be more likely to withstand the demands of a "speaking environment" and went to public school instead. Each way of entering the community carries its own issues of identity and shared knowledge; we discuss these further in a later chapter.

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As we have said, one of the primary identifying characteristics of the group is its language. The history of the education of deaf children in America is marked by almost total ignorance about the place of signed languages in the family of human languages, ignorance that has been translated in tragic ways into social and educational policy. But despite these pressures, American Sign

Language has had a durable history. Its origins can be traced to the emergence of a large community of deaf people centered around the first public school for deaf children in France, founded about 1761; the language that arose in this community is still being used in France today. In 1817, a Deaf teacher from this school helped establish the first public school for deaf children in the United States. Although his language was incorporated into the early curriculum, the children's own gestural systems mingled with the official signed language, resulting in a new form that was no longer identifiable as French Sign Language. Some signs and structures in ASL today still reflect their French Sign Language origins, although the two languages are distinct.

According to the common misconceptions about ASL, it is either a collection of individual gestures or a code on the hands for spoken English. But in fact, although ASL does use gesture, as English uses sound, it is not made up merely of gestures any more than English is made up merely of noises. Individual signs are themselves structured grammatical units, which are placed in slots within sentences according to grammatical rules. Signs are not a form of "fingerspelling," a manual system in which a hand configuration is used to represent a letter of the alphabet. Although signers may fingerspell an English term or a name, the bulk of their signed communication is made up not of fingerspelling but of signs, which are structured according to an entirely independent set of rules.

To give just one example, ASL verbs can be divided into three major classes (Padden 1988b). Verbs in one class can inflect for person and number of both the subject and the object; these include GIVE, SEND, TAKE, CATCH.[1] Those in another class do not inflect for person and number at all; they include LEARN,

1. Signs are represented by English translations in small capital letters. If more than one English word is needed to translate a sign, the words are joined by hyphens. Small capital letters joined by hyphens represent fingerspelled words or abbreviations. These translations, of course, can only be approximate, and often do not express the full range of meaning of the sign.

LIKE, VISIT, TELEPHONE. Verbs in the third class also cannot inflect for person and number, but can take an extremely rich range of affixes.[2]

These verb forms, which demonstrate that ASL is far more complex than a mere system of gestures, also form one small part of a large body of evidence that it is not based on English. The set of rules for word formation—that is, the morphology—of ASL verbs does not resemble that of English verbs. English verbs inflect only for person and number of the *subject.* Not all ASL verbs inflect for person and number, as we have said, but the ones that do largely inflect for person and number of the subject *and the object.* Compared to other spoken languages, English has comparatively impoverished verb morphology; in contrast, some ASL verbs are as rich as those in spoken languages with complex verb morphology, such as Navajo and Southern Tiwa (Padden 1988b; Supalla 1985; Klima et al. 1979).

Another piece of evidence that ASL is independent of English can be found in its sentence structure. For example, in English it is correct to say either "I gave the book to him" or "I gave him the book." But in ASL only the second structure, called the dative, is possible. The signed sequence I-GIVE-HIM MAN BOOK ("I gave a man a book") is correct, but I-GIVE-HIM BOOK MAN is ungrammatical (Padden 1988b). In this particular way ASL resembles not English but languages unrelated to English, such as the Mayan language, Tzotzil (Aissen 1983), which permit only dative structures.

Evidence like this is used by linguists to demonstrate that although signed languages and spoken languages differ in their forms, they do not differ in their sets of possible structures. ASL

2. For short reviews of signed language structure see Padden (1986, 1988a), Wilbur (1986), and Siple (1982); for more extensive reviews see texts by Wilbur (1979, 1987), Kyle and Woll (1983), Lane and Grosjean (1980), Bellugi and Studdert-Kennedy (1980), Baker (1980), Baker and Battison (1980), Klima et al. (1979), and Siple (1978). These sources provide more extensive arguments supporting structures proposed for specific signed languages.

is unlike English in sentence structure, but its structures resemble those of other natural languages.

The mistaken belief that ASL is a set of simple gestures with no internal structure has led to the tragic misconception that the relationship of Deaf people to their sign language is a casual one that can be easily severed and replaced. This misconception more than any other has driven educational policy. Generations of schoolchildren have been forbidden to use signs and compelled to speak. Other children have been urged to use artifically modified signs in place of vocabulary from their natural sign language.

This misconception has also found its way into the culture, as can be seen in the ways Deaf people talk about their language. Even though they talk of ASL as something highly valued, almost in the same breath they may reason that if ASL does not qualify as a language, it follows that, for their own good, deaf children should give it up in favor of a "real" language, specifically a spoken one, or at least a form of signing "based" on a spoken language. Despite the misconceptions, for Deaf people, their sign language is a creation of their history and is what allows them to fulfill the potential for which evolution has prepared them—to attain full human communication as makers and users of symbols.

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A large population, established patterns of cultural transmission, and a common language: these are all basic ingredients for a rich and inventive culture. Yet in looking at written descriptions of Deaf people, we could find little about their cultural life. We could remember being profoundly moved by signed performances, but we found little analysis of the kinds of performances we had seen. We would listen to anecdotes told by our friends and feel a powerful resonance with our own lives, but we rarely saw anything about these experiences or these feelings in print.

As many before us have observed, most descriptive materials about Deaf people's lives center around the condition of not

hearing. In a summary of papers on the subject written between 1975 and 1982, James Woodward (1982) documents the existence of a widespread and powerful interpretation of Deaf people as "pathological" and "fundamentally deficient." This ideology has led students of the Deaf community to describe in detail the facts of hearing impairment, and to classify Deaf people in terms of the degree of their impairment. Other facts about them, notably those about their social and cultural lives, are then interpreted as consequences of these classifications.

A classic example of this approach can be found in a survey of "hearing impaired school leavers," or graduates from British schools for deaf children. Rodda (1970) categorized each hearing-impaired leaver according to hearing type, then correlated hearing type with a long list of social characteristics such as having a savings account, pursuing certain hobbies, attending church, and having friends who were "similarly afflicted." The last description in particular makes clear the focus on the pathological: hearing children who choose hearing playmates are not described as preferring "similarly afflicted" friends. The thrust of Rodda's research is that a physical condition, rather than other determining factors such as socioeconomic class or group affiliation, underlies all choices Deaf people make in their lives.

In introductory texts on educating deaf children, to give another example, the first few chapters are obligatorily devoted to hearing loss, and then the fact of this loss is incorporated into discussions of the task of education. As Erting (1985a, 1985b) and others have pointed out, the focus in deaf education is on the audiological. For the writers of such textbooks, the most compelling fact about deaf children is their inability to hear, which in turn requires that they receive special training in speaking and hearing. In contrast, the textbooks rarely explore ways to introduce the resources of Deaf culture to young deaf children who have not been exposed to it.

In our work, we adopt an approach that begins not with hearing loss but with the cultural world. Using theories from the study of human cultures, we focus not on a direct relationship

between people's physical features and their behavior but on an examination of the place of these features and behavior in their larger cultural life. In a variety of ways, Deaf people have accumulated a set of knowledge about themselves in the face of the larger society's understanding—or misunderstanding—of them. They have found ways to define and express themselves through their rituals, tales, performances, and everyday social encounters. The richness of their sign language affords them the possibilities of insight, invention, and irony. In exploring this culture, we have collected an array of materials that suggest a new way to order information about what it means to be Deaf. Using these materials, we have tried to present the culture from the inside—to discover how Deaf people describe themselves, what sorts of symbols they surround themselves with, and how they think about their lives.