Introduction

The mid-July heat made it nearly impossible to breathe in the National Nicaraguan Association of the Deaf's (ANSNIC) small office without air conditioning. Because both audio and video were being recorded, it had been necessary to close the outside windows to shut out the traffic noise from the street, but the blare of television and laughter from the adjoining room meant the inside door leading to the rest of the building also had to be shut. In this oven-like atmosphere, Natalia Galo, a deaf woman a few years over thirty, had been responding for about an hour to questions about her experiences growing up and her present life. But now we were all exhausted, and I moved to bring the interview to a close.

"Just one last question before I turn off the camera," I told Yolanda Mendieta, the Nicaraguan Sign Language (NSL) interpreter with whom I was working. Looking at Natalia, I asked in Spanish: "What is it like to be deaf?" Yolanda's hands went immediately to work, translating my words, and after gravely following Yolanda's motions, Natalia turned to me and signed her reply.

"I am content. I feel contented to be deaf."

Curious, I continued: "If you could change anything, what would you change?"

"I'm deaf, that's all," Natalia answered. "I would be fine always being this way, being deaf. I feel like myself. I don't know what to say, but I would be deaf, even if I could be born again, I would be born deaf the second time. It is what I am meant to be. It is the same as for you, being hearing."

I persisted. "But what if you would be reborn the only deaf person in Nicaragua—everyone else would be hearing—would you still choose to be born deaf?"

"Me the only deaf one? No way. I remember being little, and how lonesome I felt, and it wasn't until I went to school that I felt happy. I met other deaf children. What a wonderful surprise! It's true that they didn't use the sign language we have now; at that time, it was just gestures. But I was so happy to find myself with other deaf people. If I were the only deaf person, I just know I would have no hearing friends. I wouldn't be able to understand them!"

Feeling that there was something more here, I asked, "And what if you could be reborn and there would be many, many deaf people—thousands and thousands—but there was no sign language? What if there were deaf people all over the place, but all of them only spoke with their mouths, orally, and none ever used their hands? Would you still choose to be born deaf?"

"No, no, not that way. If there was sign language, yes, I would still choose to be deaf. It is impossible to understand only through speaking. With writing, you can get a little, but it is only so-so. But with sign language you can learn so much."

In 1968, when Natalia was born in Nicaragua, there was no deaf community nor any commonly accepted form of sign language used by groups of deaf persons in that country. Until she went to school, Natalia believed she was the only deaf person in the world, and the only one shut out from understanding the mouth movements that served her parents, relatives, and neighbors so well. The realization that first school day, that others like her existed, was so profound for her, that even twenty-five years later, as she told of starting school, the joy of her discovery was palpable.

Still, until she was a teenager, Natalia's prognosis for participation in society depended on her ability to master oral communication—a skill with which she, like many other persons born with profound congenital hearing loss, has never had any success. In her teenage years, however, Natalia began to participate actively in what would become Nicaragua's present deaf association, a group that used a language modality that was completely accessible to her—sign language.

Participation in the deaf community opened a new world for her—one of unhindered communication and full participation as a social actor. Today, Natalia at times helps to support her family by sewing in the assembly plants in the free trade zone.[1] She lives with her husband, who is also deaf, and her two hearing daughters. Because she signed to her oldest daughter at the same time that the child learned spoken Spanish, Natalia is now able to attend Mass, and, with her daughter interpreting, understand what is happening. The ritual, she says, used to be a complete mystery to her. Natalia's immediate family regularly participates in activities at ANSNIC, and maintains social contacts with other deaf families. Because her family has a refrigerator with a freezer compartment, she sells ice and popsicles to the neighbors to make a little extra money. The one

bleak spot that Natalia mentions is that her own mother has refused to learn any sign language, so face-to-face communication with her parents is fragmentary and labored. We can see, then, that Natalia is an active social player in Nicaraguan society, just like any other thirty-year-old woman in that country. The only difference is that she prefers to participate using a non-oral language.

In 1968, there was no deaf community in Nicaragua; but in 1997, when I did my dissertation fieldwork, there was. The role of deaf persons in the greater Nicaraguan society started to change about sixty years ago, and it shifted dramatically in the past twenty-five years when a deaf community formed. This evolution took place within such recent memory that ethnographic and historical information about the period before the community existed can still be collected. The main actors involved in the community's formation are still available to be interviewed. The Nicaraguan experience, then, offers a fascinating focus for examination of how deaf communities form, as well as a wonderful opportunity to think about why they form.

HUMAN ACTORS constantly produce and reproduce the structure we know as society. They do it by using language. Lack of access to a society's language is a serious obstacle to social participation, and thus, to ever being an active member of society. Deafness has been an obstacle to this social agency, because language has historically been so closely tied to orality (the assumption that language, at its core, is produced by vocal means, and that communication via non-oral means is nonlinguistic). But, when other modalities can be tapped for language use, the range of possible social actors is widened.

For long periods in human history, because deaf persons do not naturally acquire oral language, the wider society has considered it impossible for deaf people to play active social roles. Deaf people were expected to exist in a protected environment (in which they might be well-treated or mistreated) but never participate independently and actively in society. Without oral communication, they were cut off, isolated, and marginalized. With the advent of special education procedures designed to teach oral language skills to deaf persons (we have written documentation of such methods from

the seventeenth century), access to social agency within the oral society became a possibility, and deaf people could then set as a goal being able to speak intelligibly. Unfortunately, oral competency has been an elusive quest for many.

But in social groupings in which the preeminence of orality was not accepted, and in which language was shifted to an alternate modality—in deaf communities using sign language—full access as social actors has been available for those previously disenfranchised. Deaf communities provide a vehicle for deaf persons to participate as social agents in society. While deaf communities have been studied and described (Erting 1994; Higgins 1980; Higgins and Nash 1982; Padden and Humphries 1988; Prillwitz and Vollhaber 1990; Schein and Delk 1974; Van Cleve and Crouch 1984), the history and formation of these groups has been harder to document, although this area has received more attention in the past fifteen years (Fisher and Lane 1993; Gerner de Garcia 1990; Monaghan 2004).

This is probably a result of the fact that, until the 1960s, signed languages were not considered to be independent languages, but rather systems of mimicry and gestures or a manual reproduction of an oral language. While not common today in the United States, I have met a few deaf people who were educated before linguists took much interest in signed languages, and who go out of their way to sign in English word order because they consider American Sign Language (ASL) to be "bad English." William Stokoe's monograph, *Sign Language Structure: An Outline of the Visual Communication Systems of the American Deaf,* published in 1960, discussed how signed languages could be rule-driven, were not a reflection of the majority oral language, and, in fact, (because they use a spacial/visual modality rather than an oral/auditory modality) have some grammatical constructions with no equivalent in oral languages (Maher 1996). Since signed languages were considered to be either nonlinguistic (gestures only) or a poor imitation of the majority language, naturally, there was little interest in, or study of, the groups who formed around signed languages.

Deaf communities were regarded as a social deviancy, because hearing society assumed that deaf people congregated in communities, not through choice, but because they lacked other options (Goffman 1963). Having no access to "normal" social structures, deaf communities were considered "last resorts"; hearing researchers assumed that deaf people would form such

groups out of a shared sense of stigma, and that anyone who could fit even minimally into a mainstream group would naturally prefer to do so. This attitude resulted in a paternalistic, depreciating view of deaf communities, and I found no study of this type (e.g., Best 1943; Upshall 1929), which looked carefully at how or why the group formed at the beginning.

In fact, most of the information we have about the existence of the earliest known deaf communities is in the form of co-incidental allusions, when the author's main point lay elsewhere. Pierre Desloges was refuting the assertion that the Abbé de l'Epée was the founder of the sign language used in Paris in the late eighteenth century when he mentioned that there was a well-established deaf community and language long before the Abbé appeared. Because the Abbé's role, not the community, was his focal point, he gave no details about what the deaf community was like, or when or why it might have formed.

Likewise, thirty-six years after the American Asylum of the Deaf was founded in 1817, the New England Gallaudet Society was organized in 1853. Since the earliest reports from the group (published in the *American Annals of the Deaf*) describe it as a "regional" group with each state represented on the board of managers, the existence of multiple, smaller, preexisting deaf communities is implied. But the founders of the society never included in their reports to the *Annals* any history of either state or local groups, so we really do not know how any local groups had emerged, or what their characteristics were (*American Annals of the Deaf* 1857).

The society of Martha's Vineyard, from the 1600s to the 1800s, when it was isolated from the mainland, appears to have accommodated to the fact that it was composed of both hearing and deaf, by the group expectation that everyone would learn the sign language, not just deaf persons. Nora Groce, interestingly, describes an area in which a deaf community did *not* form, even though there was a high rate of congenital deafness (Groce 1985).

As you read about the Nicaraguan deaf community in the following chapters, it is important to keep the Martha Vineyard's society in mind. Because sign language was not limited for use by only deaf persons, lack of oral competency was not an impediment to social participation. For the period in which the island was isolated, at least, it appears that the deaf members of the society had opportunities equal to (or nearly equal to)

their hearing peers to become full social actors, and thus, never had any need to form a separate group.

THE NICARAGUAN deaf community offers us an excellent opportunity to examine the events of the past sixty (but especially the past twenty-five) years to discover what elements and catalysts seem to be important to produce a deaf community. The formation of deaf communities is linked closely to the societal roles that deaf persons are allowed to play. Where deafness is construed as incompatible with any type of social agency—where deaf persons are prohibited or strongly encouraged not to leave their birth homes, and thus, remain isolated from one another—no deaf community will form. Where social agency is considered to be possible only through oral proficiency, a certain number of deaf persons will strive to attain such agency, and a few will succeed. The others will consider their inability to acquire oral fluency to be a personal failing within a legitimate status quo and will participate marginally, if at all, in society outside of their families.

But at the point where a sufficient number of deaf persons find that not only is social agency through oral means *not* the only avenue, but that an alternate language form could do just as well, a deaf community will form and its members will become social agents within that group. They will use the group as a bridge to wider active social participation. At the periphery of the deaf community, a subset of bilingual individuals will form and become intermediaries for individual deaf members with the society of the oral majority. Thus, participation in the deaf community will offer these individuals ample opportunities to be social actors within the subculture, and through the subset of bilingual individuals, participation as a social agent in the wider society will also be possible.

My interest in Nicaragua dates from 1987 when I spent the year as a volunteer with the group, Witness for Peace. Afterwards, I was an audiologist in Yakima, Washington, for five years before entering the doctoral program in language and culture at the University of Texas at Austin, which, at that time, was hosted, in part, by the Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders. Because of my interest in the function of the ear and my experience with Central America, I was especially curious about the lives of persons with atypical hearing (i.e., hearing loss or deafness) in eco-

nomically less-developed countries. I wanted my dissertation to envelope both themes. As the second poorest country in the Americas, Nicaragua certainly qualified as less-developed, and my previous residence in the country gave me leads about which groups worked with persons having atypical hearing. As I was preparing for my first research trip in 1994, my adviser, Madeline Maxwell, told me that Nicaragua was on the map in the world of linguistics because Judy Kegl had publicized the existence in Nicaragua of a distinct sign language that, according to Kegl, had been devised by deaf children first brought together by the Sandinista Revolution. I contacted Kegl who graciously recommended additional sources I should seek out in Nicaragua.

When I returned in January 1997 for a year of field study, I expected to be examining how children with atypical hearing are prepared and transitioned into the regular education system (which is the Ministry of Education's official goal for those in the classrooms for hard of hearing or deaf children in the special education schools). Naturally, I wanted to learn the sign language I had seen children using at school. I was told that the best way to do that, in addition to observing the children at school, would be to take language lessons at the deaf association and observe the language use there as much as possible. I followed that advice, dividing my time between the special education school, the deaf association, and observation at the hearing and speech clinic operated by the Parents of Disabled Children group (known as Los Pipitos).[2]

In addition to private and group lessons in NSL, my observations at the deaf association included regular attendance at Wednesday literacy classes for young adults and Saturday afternoon social hours when older deaf adults were likely to appear. My curiosity about ANSNIC's history ultimately piqued a wider study of the historical view of deafness in Nicaragua. I had arrived assuming, in accordance with what I had been told that, prior to the 1979 Sandinista Revolution, no attention had been paid to children or adults with deafness. And I also believed that the sign language had arisen quickly and spontaneously after the Revolution when elementary-age children were first brought together for schooling (Kegl 1994). Over the course of 1997, I learned that history was not that simple. I began to interview anyone who had ever been involved with education of deaf children and to ask the older deaf adults about what they remembered.

For one thing, there *had* been education available for deaf children since the 1940s in Nicaragua. And the story of how the sign language grew was also more complicated. Even the date of the deaf association's founding (April 22, 1986) was not as unambiguous as I had thought. The conclusion I drew from further research was that the story, as I had first accepted it, seriously underestimated the adolescent contribution to the formation of a deaf community and its language. I focused my time in Nicaragua to reconstruct the history of education for deaf children there, especially the events surrounding the foundation in 1981 of a vocational center accepting deaf adolescents and young adults. I also sought to document the history of any Nicaraguan organizations of deaf adults. (Ultimately, I only found one.) I hypothesized that if more of the history of what happened in Nicaragua were known, it would shed light on our wider understanding of how any deaf community and its sign language had/could/would emerge. In part because deaf people in Nicaragua have historically not been considered worthy of much note, and thus, are not much remembered, but also because doing any kind of historical research in Nicaragua is exasperating, finding the history of the deaf community in Nicaragua turned out to be more labor-intensive and time-consuming process than I had ever expected. But now that the parts I have found are gathered in one place, I hope it will be both a contribution to other researchers working on NSL and its precursors (e.g., Senghas and Coppola 2001; Senghas, Senghas, and Pyers 2004, etc.) as well as provide deaf Nicaraguans with a written version of their history.

When I asked Nicaraguans (both hearing and deaf) to remember deaf people in their neighborhoods from thirty to fifty years ago, many had difficulty. Typical Nicaraguans could not remember any, or at most, one or two. They were never identified by name, for no one could remember their names. They were simply identified in the neighborhood as "the deaf-mutes," and no one could tell me any details about them other than perhaps the kind of work that they performed in relationship to a family business. None could remember any of them as married, having children, or even working at a job except under the supervision of family members. They did not have their own households.

The deaf persons remembered by typical Nicaraguans were isolated, language-less, and lived in lifelong dependence. In fact, my inquiries sug-

gesting that a deaf person fifty years ago might have been a responsible parent or homeowner seemed ridiculous to most with whom I spoke. The one exception was a man, remembered by the last name of Perezalonzo, who came from a wealthy family, who sent him to Spain for education, and who, then, evidently helped him set up a business. When he was remembered, it was *because* he was such an incongruity—a person who was deaf and yet who earned a living independently.[3]

I had a little more luck when talking with the eight people I could find who had worked in education for deaf children during the 1946–1976 period. Considering that we are talking about a thirty-year time span, it is interesting that they, collectively, could come up with only about twenty names (often only the first names), and no one could tell me how to contact any of them. About half (usually those whose last names were remembered) were said to have emigrated at the time of the Sandinista Revolution. The others were lost to time, and my inquiries about how I might proceed to locate their past students were met with a simple "I have no idea."

Emigration of important informants has been a serious difficulty for this research. Instability in the pre-revolutionary period (from 1977 to 1979) encouraged many Nicaraguans to leave the country and settle elsewhere. The drastic governmental changes resulting from the success of the Sandinista Revolution (in July 1979) meant a massive outflux of Nicaraguans in the early 1980s. The Contra War, which resulted in a universal military draft in Nicaragua, encouraged outflow during the rest of the decade. Today, the emigration trend continues, but for the past fifteen years, the major cause has been the poor state of the domestic economy. While there are pockets of emigrated Nicaraguans living in Canada, Europe, or South America, the vast majority have settled in the United States, especially in Florida and California. It seems that every Nicaraguan family has multiple members living abroad, and the resources they send back are an important source of income for many (Marenco 1997). Thus, various persons who were important actors in the history of education for deaf children or the formation of the Nicaraguan deaf community now live abroad, and, it is impossible to locate most of them with precision.

Several of the younger members of ANSNIC thought my question, about who the deaf members fifty years and older were, was ludicrous. Everybody knew that the oldest deaf persons who participated in ANSNIC

events were a little over forty, so how could any older deaf person exist? When I asked them why they thought deafness had only begun to appear in Nicaragua around 1960, they admitted that there probably had been some deaf people born before that time, but they didn't know any personally. The question, in fact, started them thinking and questioning: "If we are this many now, then there should have been a reasonable number fifty years ago. Why don't we know who they are?"

The deaf association has a list of those who, over the years, have registered as members since the group was founded in 1986. By copying that list, transferring the information to a database, and ordering the list by birth date, Yolanda Mendieta and I had a record of the oldest registered deaf association members.[4] It was excruciatingly rare that anyone born before 1960 attended deaf association events, and it was not common to see those born before 1970 there either. Yolanda and I set out to find their homes and interview as many of those born before 1965 as possible.[5] These were the persons likely to have been present in the 1983–1989 period when the deaf association was being organized, and the ones likely to remember what life was like for deaf persons before the association existed.

One hundred and six registered members of the ANSNIC (30% of the total registered members) were born before 1966. Through sheer persistence, some amount of luck, and Yolanda's connections, we were able to find and interview thirty-six of them (33% of the 106). The eldest subgroup consisted of the twenty-four registered members born before 1959 (6% of the total registered membership and 21% of our interview target group). We found eight of them (33%) and received information on the possible whereabouts of four others, but twelve of those twenty-four (50%) were impossible to trace. No one, deaf or hearing, knew where they might be. We also found approximately one-third of the registered members with birth years between 1959 and 1965, but we did get hints on the possible whereabouts of another 33% (but were unable to physically locate them, typically because they had left Nicaragua). For the whereabouts of this younger subgroup (birth years 1959–1965), only 33% were completely unknown.

I only interviewed two deaf persons not on the association's rolls at all, but Yolanda and I heard references to more (but never with enough details to actually find them). We witnessed a definite linguistic divide between those who had either never had schooling or had left the educational

system by 1972, and those who had continued or started their education after that year.

This book is based fundamentally upon interviews with these older members of the deaf association, hearing individuals who were involved in providing education to deaf children in the 1946–2003 period, hearing people who had deaf relatives, and the many members ranging from age fifteen to forty who participate in activities at the ANSNIC clubhouse in Managua, the capital. A list of those interviewed is included as an appendix, and I thank them all. In working on this topic from 1994 to 2004, I have been fortunate to be able to talk with hundreds of people, and many have become personal friends. I emphasize that the story gleaned from these many individuals is the basis for this work, because although I combed all the libraries and archives I could find, it has been most difficult to find contemporary written records to corroborate interviewees' memories.

Nicaragua is a country that has destroyed or lost the archival portion of its collective memory more than once during this century. Devastating earthquakes in 1931 and again in 1972 destroyed all the country's major libraries, so all repositories of governmental and institutional records were lost forever. Internal warfare played havoc with record-keeping early in the century, and had an even worse effect in the turmoil of the 1970s, which resulted in the Sandinista Revolution in 1979. Political bickering and machinations have meant that at each transition of government power (e.g., 1979, 1990, 1996), more records were destroyed or "lost" because each new government chose to begin with a clean slate. I searched as assiduously as I could, but many documents that would be most helpful to substantiate the history this book recounts simply no longer exist or are unofficially stored where I could not reach them.[6] I was unable, for example, to find any of the pre-revolutionary planning documents or reports from the Junta Nacional de Asistencia y Prevención Social (JNAPS) about the administration of the Centro Nacional de Educación Especial (the special education school in Managua now renamed the Centro de Educación Especial Melania Morales), and likewise, the post-revolutionary official special education pupil counts prior to 1988 have been "lost."

In 1994 and 1995, with the help of the Scott Haug Foundation, the Austin (Texas) Sertoma club, and the Pan-American Roundtables, I made preliminary summer field trips to Nicaragua to identify the groups that

worked with persons who have hearing loss. The Ministry of Education, the Association of Parents of Disabled Children (Los Pipitos), and ANSNIC graciously answered my multitudes of questions. In 1997, with the help of scholarships from the Fulbright Foundation and the Pan-American Roundtables, I spent a year in Nicaragua regularly attending deaf association activities and classes and visiting the Melania Morales School in Managua. I was also, during that year, able to visit all (at that time) twenty special education schools with one or more classrooms for deaf pupils, which were located outside of the capital. With my scholarship money, I funded a survey of more than 225 deaf persons about their backgrounds and present living conditions.[7] I have twice surveyed (1997 and 2000) all of the teachers in classrooms for deaf children about their educational backgrounds and knowledge of deaf persons. In one- or two-month visits to Nicaragua in 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, and 2003, I was able to interview more people, search the National Archives, and, with the help of Yolanda Mendieta, make a concerted effort to locate the oldest members of the deaf association.[8]

This book discusses the conclusions that I came to on the basis of my nine-year investigation. I found that the use of a "standardized" sign language in Nicaragua did not emerge as an independent entity until there was a community of users meeting on a regular basis and *beyond childhood*. The adoption and molding of NSL did not happen suddenly, but was a process that took many years and was fed by multiple influences. Adolescents have a profound urge to seek a community in order to assert and attain their social agency in a society, but to do so, they have to be in contact with each other on a regular basis. For deaf adolescents in Nicaragua now, community is found in ANSNIC.[9] Once social circles and sign language have been established, the central organization becomes less important, being a crucial focus during young adulthood, but of less importance later on. The larger Nicaraguan society only began to recognize that non-oral deaf persons could be social actors after an organized deaf association formed. And finally, although I will illustrate the tremendous changes that the past sixty years have produced, the fact remains that the work of asserting full social agency for deaf persons in Nicaragua is not complete. It has only begun.