

Intersecting Reflections

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I grew up in conservative Muslim Northern Nigeria during the 1970s and 1980s when there were very few civil rights or disability rights organizations. In the northern part of the country during my childhood, there were regular epidemics: measles, meningitis, and even polio. Education rates in the North trailed those in the South, and girls generally received less education than boys. In some ways, Northern Nigeria was a very feudal society with strict lines of social order. The emirs of Northern towns and the Sokoto Caliphate (the capital of Northern Nigeria) strictly followed a theocratic and legal system of government, which made it difficult to challenge social norms. This meant that any rights-based groups, such as those advocating women's rights, disability rights, or even religious rights (for the Christian minority Northerners), were all frowned upon because they suggested that the current social order was wrong. This certainly contributed to the limited number of disability rights organizations in my early years in Northern Nigeria.

At the same time, there were many disabled people around due to the periodic outbreaks of diseases. It was common to encounter blind and deaf individuals, as well as those with mobility impairments, in public. Cultural practices and beliefs strongly shaped what it meant to be disabled. For example, charity is one of the five pillars of Islam, and so Muslim societies like Nigeria emphasize this as a key practice between people. Consequently, many disabled people begged for a living and often made quite a good living of it. This dynamic reveals what many scholars have

argued, that disability is socially constructed and imbued with meaning through human interaction. In my home country, I observed a deeply reciprocal economic and cultural relationship between disabled and non-disabled people. Having disabled individuals around enabled those who were not disabled to fulfill their obligations to their religion, which required that they share their wealth. It was common lore—although I do not know for certain—that recipients generally were able to feed themselves and their families, to attend school, and otherwise have some kind of independence outside of this cultural/economic exchange. I could imagine scenarios where this might be true, as well as situations where this view probably served to appease the donors rather than reflect reality. Outside researchers would justifiably assert that disabled people in Nigeria were seen as objects of pity, not as people who were capable of working. The underlying theme of charity is that its recipients always have to be taken care of.

Looking back on this, I understand these dynamics more clearly, but also am aware that common people may not have experienced the charity/pity model of disability in such strictly academic terms. I still remember my mom leaving the house every morning with her coins at the ready to hand out to all the beggars she would meet on the way. For her and for my family, this was just a common aspect of our daily lives. I don't recall my parents ever comparing me to the disabled people they met on the streets. It's possible that they made some kind of connection between my deafness and other people's disabilities, but they also clearly felt that education would be the way out of that for me and that I would always be a productive citizen if given a chance.

My own experience as a deaf person both reflected and bucked these models. When I was ten, I was able to begin attending a residential school in Ibadan (a large city in Southern Nigeria), which had been established by African American missionaries in the 1960s. As did many of my deaf peers in the United States, I gained a new cultural identity in school, a deaf cultural membership. My friends and I acquired proficiency in American Sign Language, and through this language we learned our deaf Nigerian history and folklore. Tight kinship networks grew out of the school and so I did not experience the types of isolation and stigma that people with disabilities commonly describe in their memoirs and scholarly works.

At the same time, my life experience teaches me that Western notions of deaf cultural identity don't apply universally. I think that being deaf in Africa is primarily about survival. There is an immediate concern with economic issues and making it in a climate and culture that is not always friendly toward disability. In the United States, most deaf people have moved beyond this basic challenge; in short, most deaf Americans can afford to focus on "higher order" issues, almost like Maslow's hierarchy of needs: You first focus on meeting your basic needs, then you reach for more self-affirming ones. Deaf people in Africa are at the bottom of this pyramid of needs, while North American deaf people generally seem to be closer to the top of the pyramid. There are deaf people who still beg for a living in Nigeria. Many more are making a subsistence living. However, there are plenty of exceptions, primarily those educated to the high school level and beyond, and thankfully this number is increasing. These deaf people work in the professional sector, drive their own cars, even own houses. Still, compared to the vast majority, I'd say from my own observations and from working with people in Nigeria that the proportions are still fewer than you find in the U.S.

In very practical ways, this need to address basic survival issues historically has pushed deaf Nigerians to try to assimilate to hearing (nondisabled) norms rather than to stand aside and create their own communities. For example, most deaf people spoke orally or tried to learn to speak. The majority languages in Nigeria emphasized speech, so if individuals wanted to communicate with others or get a job to earn a living, spoken language skills were necessary. Those who were unable to speak orally definitely faced disadvantages. In more recent years people in my country of origin have celebrated "deaf awareness days" and "deaf pride" type events, but these have not been as radical as in the U.S. There's no rejecting the majority hearing culture, for instance. The closest analogy I can think of is the historic racial hierarchy in America. For generations, black people with lighter skin generally fared better, because they more closely resembled the white ideal. For deaf Nigerians, advantages have been bestowed on those who are more hard of hearing than deaf, on those who possessed oral speech abilities over those who do not.

In this non-Western context especially, being deaf and having a disability were inextricably linked. Deafness was, by definition, a disability: the inabil-

ity to use one of the five basic senses (hearing). Scholars and activists have argued passionately that deaf is strictly a cultural phenomenon, but I would say that is *in addition* to the disability, not separate from it. I don't view these identities and conditions as in conflict with one another: Being deaf is a disability *and*, because of language issues, it is a culture at the same time. For people in developing countries, it simply has not been possible to fully separate disability from culture, or culture from disability. Our societies viewed (and still view) deaf people as disabled, and while some may prefer to ignore this, the situation is similar even in the United States. Invoking disability status in recent decades, for example, has benefitted American deaf people, who can demand accommodations through the Americans with Disabilities Act, receive preferential status during hiring searches, and pay less money for various services, such as metro fares and video phone use. Gaining the *medical* label of deaf or hard of hearing has allowed deaf people in America and beyond to attend specialized primary and secondary schools and to attend Gallaudet University for free or very nearly so.

Race also plays an important part in identity, although those pursuing Deaf and Disability Studies have not fully recognized this. When I lived in Nigeria my racial identity was virtually invisible because everyone with whom I came into contact was black. In 1986 I moved to Washington, DC, to attend Gallaudet University. In this new context, race took on completely different meaning. For example, when I shared stories of activities with others from the deaf community, my African American deaf friends would regularly ask me to clarify whether my compatriots were white or black. This confused me at first and I often found that I hadn't registered other people's race. Living in America, I gained a different kind of deaf cultural identity: a racialized one, in which I was in the minority.

The profound ways race infuses the American sense of self became even more clear to me after a recent family trip back to Nigeria. My American-born and raised children were repeatedly struck by race. "EVERYONE IS BLACK!" was the first thing my daughter said, followed by a question, "Where are all the white people?" The expectation of being a minority, of being "othered" to a certain degree, is a pervasive part of being a person of color in the United States. When contexts shift, however, so do identities. After a while, my children became accustomed to life in Nigeria, and their Americanized racial expectations receded. I think even within America the

meaning of race has been malleable. In 2008, the people elected a black President, and he has since selected cabinet members of color, potentially changing stereotypes about what national figures look like; migrations of peoples over the years mean that we encounter diverse races and ethnicities at the intersections of cities on a daily basis. In many ways the impact of globalization has blurred the lines of identity, complicating the notion and experience of race—and deaf and disability—as national boundaries become more porous.

That blurring of lines has personal meaning to me. Often, Western Deaf Studies scholars emphasize the linguistic part of deaf culture, which can sometimes seem to advocate using sign language over all other languages. Living in Nigeria and America, I have acquired facility in multiple languages, which has been a boon to me. I wouldn't be who I am without that ability. For example, my parents came from two different linguistic groups (i.e., tribes) so their families spoke different languages. In my family we spoke both languages plus English, right from our earliest days. Admittedly, I haven't spoken my father's heritage language, Hausa, since my father died when I was fifteen, and I did not return to the North, where others communicated in his language. My mother moved back to her Southern homeland twenty years ago and now lives with me, and so I communicate with her primarily in her language, Yoruba. My mother can speak English but we both feel more comfortable using Yoruba. If I couldn't speak that language, my ability to talk with my own mother would be severely limited.

Having facility in multiple languages—signed and spoken—enables me to interact better when I meet new people, too. Code switching—shifting languages—has proven to be especially valuable when I visit other countries. Exposure to multiple languages has made me open to new languages and new experiences, helping me communicate with people in some way and on some level, whether I actually speak their language or not. For example, in 1987, a couple of friends and I traveled through Europe. None of us had command of any of the local languages, but we got along perfectly fine with all the people we met along the way who spoke French, Dutch, Italian, or German. We managed to make ourselves understood through gestures, sign, and by picking up a few local words. I think that, sadly, most Americans (deaf and hearing) don't possess that openness to others' languages. It always seems to be “you speak English or else!” or, here on the Gallaudet campus,

“you sign or else!” as if there’s no other choice. In reality, there’s a rich world of linguistic diversity out there that we could all enjoy, if only we were willing to step a bit outside of our comfort zones. I think speaking different languages also helps with perceiving different modes of thought, because every language has some concepts that are almost impossible to translate into other languages. Those of us who use American Sign Language have faced scenarios where it is literally impossible to translate a specific sign into spoken English, and I’m sure this is true of virtually all languages. My multicultural and multilingual background has sensitized me to the ways that we limit ourselves when we don’t learn other languages. From my worldview, seeking facility in multiple languages is simply part of being an educated person in the broadest sense of the word.

The politics of spoken languages versus signed languages and the desire for some American deaf people to shun some forms of communication seem especially “Western” and “privileged” to me. In Third World countries, the basic need to survive eliminates many language choices for deaf people. This certainly can result in oppression, especially for those who cannot acquire the most advantageous forms of communication. Yet the push to learn multiple languages is not in itself punitive. This is something that many national deaf communities outside the United States understand. The powerful role America plays in shaping global deaf identities and experiences (and the world in general) may undermine some of the rich, alternative perspectives on human society. Communication is essential for human relations, and—for me—seeking an expansive approach to using every communication option possible holds real potential for empowering all people, deaf and hearing, disabled and nondisabled.

I have been asked how issues of gender, race, and national/cultural identity have influenced what it means to be deaf and/or disabled, and I struggle to find an adequate response. To date, scholars have wrestled with one or two of these factors, but often exclude the multitude of features that shape who we are as individuals and communities. Very few researchers have crossed the national divide to investigate populations outside of their (Western) countries and cultures. This highlights the disconnect between academic study and lived experiences. When I try to imagine ways of answering how gender, race, and culture shape the meaning of being deaf and/or disabled, I find myself returning to the one source I know: my own

lived experience. I know that I think differently from African Americans born deaf (and hearing), in part because the weight of history and culture is different for me. This is probably why many Americans have told me I do not have the “minority mentality.” Similarly, I do not embody a fully (Western) minority model understanding of being deaf and black. That I am unable to apply existing categories and interpretive models easily to my own life perhaps serves as a reminder that our identities are fluid and deeply individual, and possibly points to new areas of research and theoretical development. What would Deaf or Disability Studies look like if they took my experiences seriously as a starting point for analysis?

One example of how this complexity plays out in my own life involves technology. I recently decided to have a cochlear implant (CI). This may have surprised some people. After all, I represent a “truly successful American deaf person”: I have earned advanced degrees, hold a professorship at Gallaudet University, enjoy close ties to the deaf cultural world, and am married to a deaf person who also signs. I ultimately chose to have the implant surgery because, as I have said, being deaf is primarily a disability in my everyday life, even though my work environment is deaf-centric. However, outside that cocoon (and it is one), there’s a whole wide world, and it’s hard for me to fit in. I did it for my (hearing) kids, because I want to be able to fit into their world, to enjoy the music they do, to be able to converse with other soccer/fencing/football parents, to volunteer in their schools and not feel like I need an interpreter every time. Even though I have a CI, I’m still deaf and I would be the last to deny that. Most of my friends are deaf, I enjoy being in the deaf world, and I enjoy and love sign language. I don’t see having a CI as denying my deafness; it simply enhances my ability to interact better with the broader world. I understand it as another tool, akin to my facility with multiple languages. In this sense it reflects my long-held desire to reduce barriers between myself and others.

The evolution of CI technology also reflects an important—but understudied—part of deaf history. Centuries ago there were hearing trumpets, which gave way to cumbersome hearing aids until digital aids were invented. Many deaf people, including those who identify as culturally deaf, have made use of these and other assistive technologies. For me, availing myself of technologies, including closed captioning, email, and cochlear implants, opens avenues for experiences but does not fundamentally alter

my identity as a deaf person. I find it interesting that choosing to have laser surgery, which has improved my eyesight, draws little or no attention from others, deaf or disabled, but other procedures, such as a CI, are viewed by some as altering who I am at the core. I have found that both of these medical procedures enhance my abilities and potential but do not change my cultural identity.

Although identities are fluid and people's ideas and self-representations may evolve over time, I do not feel that my beliefs about being deaf and disabled have changed much. I think I have always had the sense that deaf and disability are the same, although, because deafness is "invisible," it may appear different or be experienced differently from other disabilities. Still, that doesn't make it any less real, and one could argue that each experience of disability is unique, yet all of us who have disabilities share certain ties. Now that I have kids and my implant, I see more vividly how much I really was missing before I had the procedure. Perhaps in this sense I have adopted a more disability-framed understanding of the world rather than just a cultural view of deafness. This is especially true when I deal with hearing people. But the fluidity of identity, and my natural connection to multiple cultures, makes it very natural for me to claim a culturally deaf identity as well.

My hope is that scholars in both Deaf and Disability Studies will attend to the very individual and richly diverse nature of lived experience. My own life story has taught me that a person's background—whether one comes from a hearing or a deaf family, whether a person attended a school for the deaf or mainstream programs, and even where one grew up—strongly shapes the meaning of identity terms like *deaf* or *disabled*. Some of us from developing countries, for example, may have a different view on bodily and mental conditions than people from Western countries. I say this having lived in both, and having attended World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) conferences in the past.

I remember a WFD Congress in Spain in 2007 in which my and another person's presentations were the only two that examined economic issues—helping deaf people become economically self-sufficient. All the other papers were about the higher-order needs, such as passing legislation on language rights and self-fulfillment. I found myself thinking "no wonder so few deaf people from developing countries attend those conferences!"

I don't mean to be highly critical of the WFD. They do the best they can, and I understand that they sponsor two or more people from each poor member country to attend the conferences, so they are making efforts to reduce disparities. At the same time, international conferences and organizations usually are inherently inaccessible to many deaf (and disabled) people. The financial cost to participate is prohibitive, and often the topics presented don't interest or resonate with people who are not from privileged backgrounds. I know this is the case because I have asked about this, and many people mentioned how disappointed they were that more of the things that concerned them were not discussed or debated.

Attending to the needs of a wider population of deaf people, to tailoring the material discussed to topics that could actually be useful to these kinds of attendees, is vital for scholars, activists, and for the common individual. Admittedly, my background in economic development and political economy especially draws me to consider global dimensions and issues. But my experiences in America, Africa, and elsewhere in the world also have taught me that the *absence* of people from discussions—academic, political, and community—profoundly shapes our choices and paths, perhaps even more than the presence of those who have the power and opportunity to participate. Striving for greater inclusion and justice (goals commonly sought by deaf and disability studies scholars as well as deaf and disabled people) then must remain the engine that drives our movements and our studies.

The metaphor of intersections is particularly apt for my experiences and perhaps also for a broader approach to deaf/disability work. At the intersections, multiple and sometimes messy factors collide, fuse, move in parallel fashion. Living within the intersections has presented challenges but also rich possibilities for me, including connections to others around the globe and across the spectrum of human diversity.