Preface

This book is the result of ethnographic research with deaf communities, and the methodologies of the case studies presented herein are discussed in their respective chapters. Their central feature is the cultural practices of signed storytelling that have been intergenerationally transmitted in deaf communities around the world for as long as they have existed. These practices are at the core of an anthropology of deaf flourishing, and thus life stories have been a major resource in all my research settings. In Flanders, Uganda, and Cameroon, I have also explored creative sources of collective storytelling, such as meetings, discussion groups, citizenship platforms, dance, and performance. In conducting this research, I have adopted a community-based approach through cooperation with local, national, and international deaf organizations.

The first section of this book (Chapters 1 and 2) introduces an exploration of deaf epistemologies from a perspective based in the social and cultural sciences but that is nonetheless interdisciplinary. My objective is to contribute to the description and documentation of practices of learning, knowledge, identity, culture, sign language, storytelling, well-being, and (sustainable) development of deaf people and communities, adding to a comparative cross-cultural angle. Recognizing intertwining of axes of diversity, I also aim to contribute to a more inclusive science and to epistemological equity, both of which have the potential to support deaf people in their emancipation journeys. Chapter 1 presents vignettes from fieldwork in Cameroon, Flanders, and Uganda to introduce the discussions of deaf epistemologies, identity, and learning that are deepened in the book. It situates this exploration in the current time frame. In relation to the question "What is a good life," the chapter proposes a framework of deaf flourishing. Chapter 2 presents a theoretical framework for the dynamics of deaf identity and emancipation, which are viewed as learning processes set against the background of global-local interactions. Deaf culture, identity, and community development appear as complex, situated, and dynamic progressions, conceptualizations of the predicament of human diversity. I explore an inclusive approach, generating a culturally sensitive line in deaf studies.

In the second section of the book (Chapters 3, 4, and 5), I present empirical research through case studies of emancipation processes in Flanders, the United States (specifically at Gallaudet), and Cameroon. These three settings illuminate different phases and contexts of emancipation, highlighting various facets of the globalized phenomenon of deaf awakening. Chapter 3 covers the on-going emancipation and the politicization of deaf identities in a Western context, which started

relatively recently (in the 1990s in Flanders) and is intimately bound to the trans-national context. Chapter 4 describes a fueling of identity formation in a deaf-centered, relatively barrier-free, and more equal transnational context for international deaf people at Gallaudet. Chapter 5 explores an incipient emancipation process in a non-Western context (i.e., Cameroon), which, until 2010, had not experienced any transnational exposure.

These case studies also illuminate the creation of sign language spaces and how they expedite learning; understanding the notion of deaf identity as a learning process is a core theme of the book (also see Chapter 1). The Flemish case concentrates on the role of transnational contact in emancipatory knowledge transfer and empowerment by deaf role models in barrier-minimizing environments. Gallaudet University, a setting perceived by international deaf people as a "deaf space" (Gulliver, 2006), provides further insight into informal peer education and complex identity formation in a transnational zone of proximal development. The Cameroonian study focuses on indigenous linguistic, cultural, and learning practices and the recent awakening in a community that has not yet engaged in collective advocacy, but may be inspired by international human rights workshops and by exchange with examples of good practices in Uganda.

In this book's third section (Chapters 6, 7, and 8), findings from the case studies are integrated into a broader framework and subjected to theoretical reflection. Deaf identity is revisited in Chapter 6, which explores tensions in contemporary trajectories toward emancipation and identity that can be distilled from Flemish deaf narratives. This storytelling reveals the creation of spaces "in between" (also see Hoegaerts & De Clerck, in press; for "betweenity" see Brueggemann, 2009); and an epistemological-ontological shift toward "becoming." Arguing that cross-pollination with alternative notions of citizenship is necessary for open-ended and inclusive processes of emancipation, I introduce a stance of post-identity through the concept of "nomadic citizenship" (Braidotti, 2011). This generates affirmative power for telling fresh narratives in an alternative and dynamic approach toward the quest for deaf identity that enables multiple affiliations and forms of belonging. Telling one's story, in a dialogical mode and in interaction with deaf cultural resources, changes collective accounts of heritage and origin, opening up new and exciting pathways.

In Chapter 7, I include an autobiographical/self-ethnographic reflection as a deaf scholar on the multiple locations where I conducted the 10 years of fieldwork on deaf empowerment. Conversing with deaf peers in a Flemish deaf club and exchanging tales of "awakening" planted the seed for a project that is still going on at the time of writing. Following in their footsteps, I embarked for Gallaudet University, where the lived experiences of international deaf people, their commonalities and differences, identity, well-being, advocacy, and community development were favorite topics of discussion. Stories of awakening—and rewriting my life story through the lens of Gallaudet—inspired me to conduct research with international deaf people there on deaf empowerment. Exposure to the experiences of a Gallaudet alumnus and deaf leader from Cameroon, as well as the struggles in his young community, led me there for more research. A few years later, cooperation with a

Ugandan deaf scholar would invite me to work with the Ugandan deaf community, and to deepen my understanding of deaf awakening in Cameroon through documenting exchange between Uganda and Cameroon (see Chapter 8).

Reflecting on my position as a deaf scholar in different communities and my challenges as the first deaf person to defend a doctorate in sign language in Flanders, where deaf studies is somewhat circumscribed institutionally, I have come to understand that wisdom plays a role in deaf empowerment and that the building of this wisdom is a fascinating subject in itself. My reflection, informed in large part by interdisciplinary discussions, has resulted in refining concepts of an "anthropology of flourishing" and a "strength-centered ethnography."

How can we, as human beings, connect in deaf flourishing and nurture it sustainably? This question is discussed in Chapter 8, the final chapter, from a perspective of knowledge co-production in transnational interactions in Cameroon. These interactions include the WFD's Human Rights and Capacity Building Training in Yaounde, and the 2nd Sign Language Workshop at the 7th World Congress of African Linguistics in Buea. The chapter highlights indigenous and hybrid notions of deaf flourishing that "emerge from the wild" (i.e., occur spontaneously in daily interaction) and the epistemic processes involved in their formation. These processes reveal a complex and novel blending of indigenous, expert, individual, and collective knowledge that will need to be valorized in the fields of deaf studies, education, and development to enable deaf people to live up to their full potential.

My goal throughout this book is to look through an interdisciplinary lens to critically explore empowerment in settings of daily life, research, leadership, and community development. Through this lens, I have formulated a framework of deaf flourishing—and of connecting in deaf flourishing in particular. Entangled in the emotional geographies and trajectories of modernity and postmodernity, sign language communities can generate room for alternative worldviews and pathways toward fruitful futures.