

Annual Review of Anthropology
Deaf Anthropology

Michele Friedner¹ and Annelies Kusters²

¹Department of Comparative Human Development, University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois 60637, USA; email: michelefriedner@uchicago.edu

²Department of Languages and Intercultural Studies, School of Social Sciences, Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh EH14 4AS, Scotland, United Kingdom; email: a.kusters@hw.ac.uk

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Abstract

Deaf anthropology is a field that exists in conversation with but is not reducible to the interdisciplinary field of deaf studies. Deaf anthropology is predicated upon a commitment to understanding deafnesses across time and space while holding on to “deaf” as a category that does something socially, politically, morally, and methodologically. In doing so, deaf anthropology moves beyond compartmentalizing the body, the senses, and disciplinary boundaries. We analyze the close relationship between anthropology writ large and deaf studies: Deaf studies scholars have found analytics and categories from anthropology, such as the concept of culture, to be productive in analyzing deaf peoples’ experiences and the sociocultural meanings of deafness. As we note, however, scholarship on deaf peoples’ experiences is increasingly variegated. This review is arranged into four overlapping sections titled Socialities and Similitudes; Mobilities, Spaces, and Networks; Modalities and the Sensorium; and Technologies and Futures.

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INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS DEAF ANTHROPOLOGY?

In this *Annual Review* article, we identify an emerging field of deaf anthropology that exists in conversation with but is not reducible to the interdisciplinary field of deaf studies.¹ Deaf anthropology, parallel to disability anthropology (Ginsburg & Rapp 2013, Hartblay 2020),² calls on anthropologists to explore what it means to see, hear, listen, communicate, and inhabit the world through differential sensory configurations. Drawing from Hartblay's (2020) argument about disability anthropology's orientations, we believe that deaf anthropology "is work that engages the distinctive theoretical concerns and methodological approaches of transdisciplinary [deaf] studies, enacted through a citational politics that foregrounds [deaf] studies texts and scholars." Deaf anthropology is predicated on a commitment to understanding "deafnesses" (Mills 2015) across time and space while holding on to "deaf" as a category that does something socially, politically, morally, and methodologically. In doing so, deaf anthropology moves beyond compartmentalizing the body, the senses, and disciplinary boundaries (Burch & Kafer 2010, Friedner & Block 2017, Friedner & Helmreich 2012).

In the first *Annual Review of Anthropology* article devoted to deafness, Senghas & Monaghan (2002, p. 69) succinctly wrote, "Deafness is not merely the absence of hearing[.]" and they argued for disassociating deaf peoples' experiences from being seen (solely) through a lens of lack and deficiency. Further complicating the category, Mills (2015) argued for a "deaf spectrum" or for deafnesses in the plural to give nuance to a diversity of deaf experiences that are made up of different cultural, social, and (bio)medical components. We consider it important to track the many meanings and articulations of "deaf," "Deaf," "deafness," and "deafnesses" as concepts in different fields. Even within the discipline of anthropology, medical anthropologists and linguistic anthropologists often approach deafness with varying methodological and theoretical lenses. We also note that "deafness" has been rejected in favor of "deaf" by many deaf studies scholars because of the former category's association with medicalized/deficit perspectives. Avoiding a debate about suffixes, we focus on "deaf" and not "deafness." We also draw from Woodward & Horejes (2016), who argued that a sharp split between deafness as impairment (deaf) and deafness as identity and linguistic category (Deaf) was not the original intention in making a distinction between deaf and Deaf; we thus follow increasing common conventions and do not capitalize "deaf."

There have historically been productive overlaps between anthropology and deaf studies, an international and transdisciplinary field with roots in the emergence of sign language linguistics in the 1950s and 1960s in the United States and European countries (Murray 2017). Deaf studies scholars have found analytics and categories from anthropology productive in analyzing deaf peoples' experiences and the sociocultural meanings of deafness. Indeed, deaf studies' foundational concept "Deaf culture" (Padden 1980) derived from an engagement with one of anthropology's most important contributions and has been instrumental in carving out deaf peoples' often described "sense of difference" (Ginsburg & Rapp 2013, p. 59). "Deaf culture" has been used as an umbrella term for sign language use, collectivity and identity, deaf values, deaf behavior, deaf uses of technology, and deaf arts and aesthetics. However, just as anthropologists have cautioned about the use of "culture" as an analytic, scholars have asked important questions about what "culture" does analytically and experientially for understanding deafness (Baynton 2008, Bechter 2008, Humphries 2008, Kusters 2015b, Kusters et al. 2017a, Turner 1994). Humphries (2008)

¹We write "scholars" rather than "anthropologists" when we refer to scholarship from outside of anthropology.

²Deaf anthropology and disability anthropology share overlaps, and anthropologists working on deafness often attend the Disability Research Interest Group of the Society for Medical Anthropology. This is not the case, however, with deaf studies and disability studies, and tensions remain between the two fields (Burch & Kafer 2010).

argued that deaf studies scholars must spend less time talking about culture and more time studying discourses of culture, with which we concur. We think “Deaf culture” overdetermines deaf difference from hearing people and assumes similitude between diverse deaf people (Friedner & Kusters 2015).

Scholarship on deaf peoples’ experiences is increasingly variegated, and categories and binaries are blurred: One needs only to consider the proliferation, critique, and pragmatic, ambivalent, and/or enthusiastic embrace of technologies such as cochlear implants (Blume 2009, Mauldin 2016, Mills 2010, Valente 2011; S. Lloyd & C. Bonventre, submitted manuscript, “When the Artificial Is Natural: Reconsidering What Bionics and Sensoria Do”). Recent scholarship has also attended to deaf peoples’ multimodal language use and linguistic repertoires that do and do not include national sign languages (De Meulder et al. 2019a), as well as usage of modes of signed communication that do not fall neatly into the category of a conventional national or local sign language, such as “family homesign” or “family sign language” (Haviland 2013), “family sign languages” (Hou 2016), “natural sign” and “local sign” (Green 2014b), International Sign (Green 2014a), and “cross-signing” (Zeshan 2015), among other developments. These scholarly interventions complicate what we mean when we say “a deaf person,” “a disabled deaf person,” “a deaf native signer,” a “deaf person who hears” or even a “sign(ed) language.” Thinking through these categories also denaturalizes the concept of “a hearing person” and a “spoken language” (Haviland 2008). These are all analytic categories to be expanded upon.

The number of deaf scholars in the field of deaf anthropology is increasing. This growth is resulting in experimentation with diverse modes of anthropological analysis and dissemination such as video blogs, documentary films, and sign-based academic discussion platforms.³ Additionally, there is much scholarly interest in International Sign, discussed below, as a means of academic engagement and dissemination, as well as an object of inquiry. We do not argue that only deaf people can “do” deaf anthropology. Indeed, deaf anthropology avoids trafficking in essentialist ideas of deaf and hearing people’s biological and sensory practices, arguably often found in deaf studies works. Scholars engaging in deaf anthropology negotiate the tenuous ground of supporting deaf studies’ and deaf activist claims of deaf exceptionalism while also critically engaging and recognizing that deaf people are like everyone else: They are multilevel marketing business participants (Friedner 2015), backpackers (Moriarty Harrelson 2015), commuters (Kusters 2017), churchgoers (Monaghan 2012), entrepreneurs (Cooper 2017), and cafe workers (Hoffman-Dilloway 2016). Discourses of deaf exceptionalism are discourses to be taken seriously and to be analyzed, like other descriptive and prescriptive discourses on what it means to be deaf.

This review is arranged into four overlapping sections, and many of the works included are from deaf studies, applied linguistics, and communication studies, in addition to anthropology. These works, regardless of disciplinary background, engage key anthropological questions around the subjects of each of the four sections: Socialities and Similitudes; Mobilities, Spaces, and Networks; Modalities and the Sensorium; and Technologies and Futures.

SOCIALITIES AND SIMILITUDES

Early social science work on deafness examined the relationship between deaf and hearing people (as distinct identity and sensory categories of people) to develop theories about what binds deaf people to each other and how deaf people have negotiated difference in relation to hearing

³Bechter (2008, p. 69) notes that “Deaf Studies faces a discursive landscape that was not designed for it” and points out that the spoken and written platforms available for research dissemination are at odds with how many deaf people exercise voice.

people. Higgins (1980, pp. 5–6) argued that membership in deaf communities is not ascribed but must be achieved through identification with other deaf people and participation in deaf community events. Whereas Higgins foregrounded that deaf people are “outsiders in a hearing world” and writes of “deaf community,” Padden (1980) and Padden & Humphries (1988) ushered in a “cultural turn.” Padden (1980, p. 93) defined deaf culture as such: “Members of the Deaf culture behave as Deaf people do, use the language of Deaf people, and share the beliefs of Deaf people towards themselves and other people who are not Deaf.” What is interesting is how people acquire these “learned behaviors,” especially in the absence of intergenerational deaf families and/or a low density of deaf people in a location. How do people come to identify as or to be Deaf? Scholarship has taken up this question, and both formal and informal education settings have become critical sites for anthropological research on deaf experiences.

Also considering deaf and hearing relations, Becker (1983) argued that deaf senior citizens adapt better to entering senior housing institutions because of their previous childhood experiences of being removed from hearing families and placed in deaf schools. Preston (1994) shifted the anthropological lens from deaf people themselves to hearing family members, namely hearing children of deaf adults (CODAs), who he argued exist between and negotiate deaf and hearing cultures. Preston analyzed whether hearing people can belong to deaf communities and cultures, something still debated. These earlier foundational studies and the concepts of deaf community and deaf culture paved the way for further analysis of deaf peoples’ experiences as being apart from and existing alongside and overlapping with those of hearing people.

These studies focused largely on social experiences and deaf peoples’ negotiation of and adaptation to social barriers during a time when there was no comprehensive disability legislation. One exception is Groce’s (1985) historical study of Martha’s Vineyard, where deaf people ostensibly used Martha’s Vineyard Sign Language with each other and with hearing people. Groce argued that in a world where “everyone . . . spoke sign language,” deaf people are not disadvantaged.⁴ Whereas Groce’s work on Martha’s Vineyard can be considered an analysis of disability studies scholars’ theorizing of the social model (Shakespeare 2006) in action, Ladd (2003) proposed a “culturo-linguistic model” that stresses the importance of culture and language for understanding deaf experiences. Issues of language—and language endangerment, language ideologies, and language education—loom large in thinking about the creation and maintenance of deaf social practices and communities. It is impossible to disentangle discussions of deaf sociality from discussions of (sign) language.

In 2003, the groundbreaking *Many Ways to Be Deaf* (Monaghan et al. 2003) foregrounded research on specific deaf communities and sign languages around the world and the ways that deafness articulates with and in specific contexts. Essays also attended to the role of international nongovernmental programs working on development issues relating to deafness and the codification and spread of national sign languages; deafness increasingly became a “development issue” around the world. The volume by Monaghan et al. and subsequent work analyzed how deaf socialities exist in specific times and places and are influenced by (post- and neo-) colonial encounters and international development funding and discourses. More recently, there has been an emphasis among anthropologists and deaf studies scholars on studying deaf experiences in places in what might be glossed as the Global South (Friedner 2017).⁵ The categories of Global South and Global

⁴Groce’s historical anthropological work raises productive questions about whose perspectives are foregrounded in the absence of deaf interlocutors, since the island’s deaf inhabitants had died or moved out.

⁵Much of this work does not explicitly address the etiology of deafness (but see Kisch 2008 on intergenerational deafness among the Al-Sayyid Bedouins and Kusters 2015b on folk discussions of causes of deafness) or the use of technology such as hearing aids.

North both have purchase and are problematic when analyzing deaf worlds that feature significant mobility of people and ideas and exist in relation to distinct political economic structures.

Scholarship has grappled with how (not) to apply analytics and theories developed in relation to deaf experiences in the Global North to deaf experiences in the South (Moriarty Harrelson 2017). To remedy this situation, scholars have utilized emic concepts for deaf and hearing, deaf social practices, and language development. For example, Friedner (2015) discusses emic concepts such as “sign butter” and “deaf development.” Green (2014b) discusses two different “hearing” ways of calling someone deaf in Nepal—*laato* and *babaara*—and the stakes of using these terms: *laato* is associated with being senseless and not having the capability to engage in meaning-making, whereas *babaara* does not have these connotations. These concepts create worlds of their own. Emic concepts reveal what deafness means in specific places and how deafness articulates with other categories of being in the world. Researchers thus attend to what Paul & Moores (2012) have titled deaf epistemologies and how specific ways of knowing the world as a deaf person—and knowing deafness itself—emerge in context. One might also worry, however, about valorization of the local and the refusal to attend to (global) flows, circulations, and mobilities of people, languages, and concepts (Friedner & Kusters 2015).

A recent analytic move is to consider “deaf ontologies” or “deaf ways of being” (Kusters et al. 2017a, p. 1) and how being a deaf researcher enables (or does not enable) access to deaf research interlocutors and situations. In thinking through epistemology and ontology, deaf studies researchers have proposed new concepts for understanding deaf experiences, such as Deafhood (Ladd 2003), Deaf Gain (Bauman & Murray 2014), Deafnicity (Eckert 2010), deaf space (Bauman 2014, Gulliver & Kitzel 2016, Kusters 2015a, Mathews 2007), deaf socialities (Friedner 2015), deaf sensory orientations (Bahan 2014, Dye 2014), deaf society (Green 2014b), and deaf citizenship (Cooper & Rashid 2015, Emery 2009). These concepts are meant either as a replacement or as a friendly amendment or addition to the deaf studies concepts of Deaf world and Deaf culture (Lane et al. 1996), which promote holism and root deaf experiences in secular and liberal realms (Friedner 2019). This proliferation of analytics demonstrates that much is at stake for scholars theorizing deaf similitude (or DEAF SAME,⁶ as signed) within and across national boundaries and borders.⁷ In response to a focus on similitude, scholars have turned to considering intersectionality (sometimes without explicitly using the term intersectionality) (Ahmad et al. 2002, Brueggemann & Burch 2006, Chapple 2019, David & Cruz 2018, Dunn 2008, Foster & Kinuthia 2003, James & Woll 2004, Kusters 2019, Leigh 2009, Leigh & O’Brien 2019, Moges 2017, Moreman & Briones 2018, Morgan 2008, Morgan & Kaneko 2017, Ruiz-Williams et al. 2015). Some of this explicitly intersectional work is meant as a corrective to earlier deaf studies scholarship that did not explicitly attend to race, gender, sexuality, ability, ethnicity, and sign language exposure (Fernandes & Myers 2010). Nakamura (2006, p. 11), for example, argues that “[b]eing deaf is a hybrid and intersectional identity” and carefully traces how this identity changes over time in Japan for deaf people of different ages and educational backgrounds.

MOBILITIES, SPACES, AND NETWORKS

The study of deaf social and communicative practices has been explicitly spatialized in the past few years. Scholars analyzed how mobile deaf signers seek out and produce deaf spaces in diverse places

⁶Capitalization is how American Sign Language, and sign language in general, is “glossed”; see Senghas (2016) on the fraught issues of translation between signed and written languages.

⁷Anthropologists should study how these disciplinary concepts have found traction in everyday deaf lives, even if they do not use said concepts analytically. “Deaf culture” and “Deaf world” are widely used in many contexts internationally.

to engage in deaf sociality and signed communication. The concept of “deaf space” emerged in the 2000s, around the time that a spatial turn was initiated in the social sciences in general, and at first scholars used the concept largely independently of one another (e.g., Kusters 2015a, Mathews 2007, Valentine & Skelton 2008). These scholars paid attention to the spatial formation of deaf socialities, the material surrounds or locations where they take place, and how they are related to and encapsulated within mobilities. Mobilities include deaf urban mobilities (Friedner 2015, Kusters 2019); mobilities within a country, including rural–urban migration (Graif 2018, Green 2014b, Hoffmann-Dilloway 2016, Moriarty Harrelson 2017); international mobilities (Breivik et al. 2002, Friedner & Kusters 2015); forced mobility (Beckmann 2020); and the relationship between literacies and mobilities (İlkbasaran 2015). Some of this work exists at an intersection between a deaf anthropology that attends explicitly to space and a new field called deaf geographies (Gulliver & Fekete 2017, Gulliver & Kitzel 2016).

Deaf spaces are conceptualized as institutional, (semi)public, and virtual spaces (discussed below in the section titled Technologies and Futures). Institutional deaf spaces are most notably deaf (residential) schools and deaf clubs, but also organizations and events, forming the foci of earlier works in deaf studies (Ladd 2003, Van Cleve & Crouch 1992). As mentioned above, early deaf studies and deaf anthropology approached traditional deaf spaces as if they constituted a separate “world” (Lane et al. 1996). Institutional deaf spaces have declined with the closure of deaf schools, deaf clubs, and deaf organizations (Padden & Humphries 2005); such closures are the source of nostalgia and mourning (O’Brien et al. 2017). This decline is often blamed on educational mainstreaming and technological advances (see the section titled Technologies and Futures), although this notion has been nuanced by Padden (2008) who argued that increasing diversity of deaf peoples’ class backgrounds and employment opportunities led to fragmentation before these developments. Also related to demographic shifts and the decline in deaf communities, Moges (2017) and Monaghan (2020) consider the impact of HIV/AIDS on the US deaf community in the 1980s and 1990s.

In attending to the production of deaf spaces in (semi)public places such as parks, pubs, tea stalls, and public transit, as examples, scholars rejected the trend of analyzing deaf people as existing in a bounded deaf world. For example, in Mumbai, deaf people produce deaf space by boarding specific compartments on particular commuter trains (Kusters 2019); and in Adamorobe, Ghana, deaf people gather on paths in front of each other’s homes (Kusters 2015a). Deaf people intentionally seek out deaf experiences when traveling (Moriarty Harrelson 2015) and in refugee camps and reception centers (Sivunen 2019). These recent works on deaf space production demonstrate that deaf people are strategic in deciding which spaces they move through, in modifying and adapting material environments to accommodate deaf spaces, and in approaching people; this work also attends to communication strategies in various contexts (see the section titled Modalities and the Sensorium). And as these spaces are (semi)public, they involve being seen by hearing people. Deaf uses of space have implications for how deaf people are seen in public (Breivik et al. 2002).

In addition to deaf space as a concept, there is the DeafSpace movement, headquartered at Gallaudet University (Bauman 2014, Edwards 2018, Pérez Liebergesell et al. 2019, Sirvage 2015), which has been instrumental in envisioning infrastructure modeled on deaf peoples’ social, moral, political, and economic practices. This project is concerned with a desire to create more liveable worlds for deaf and deafblind people; and a central goal in these worlds is to maximize opportunities to communicate in sign languages. Extending beyond architecture and the built environment (here within and surrounding Gallaudet’s campus in Washington, DC), attention to deaf space also means attention to the affordances of everyday objects, such as deaf peoples’ problems in navigating the two-dimensionality of a standard government intake form necessary to receive state benefits (versus the three-dimensionality of deaf peoples’ sign language practices)

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(Fagan Robinson 2019). The DeafSpace project is not concerned with disability or deaf “access” but rather with deaf “being”; it is a moral project.

Deaf spaces and mobilities are connected to national and international networks and institutions. Scholarly work on deaf transnationalism was catalyzed by a multisited ethnographic project in which Breivik et al. (2002) studied international deaf conferences and sporting events (such as the Deaflympics). They argued that deaf signers often see themselves as part of a transnational deaf community before they identify with their national or familial communities (see also Breivik 2005). The term pilgrimage has been used to describe deaf signers’ participation in these “sacred occasions,” in which signers temporarily constitute a majority (Haualand 2007). Similarly, Gallaudet University, the only liberal arts university in the world for deaf people, is regarded as a “deaf Mecca” (Lane et al. 1996). Deaf travelers experience such places as inspiring and recharging (De Clerck 2007). These studies resonate with historical work on deaf transnationalism (Gulliver 2015, Murray 2008) and set the stage for the study of contemporary deaf transnationalism in an age of increased funding opportunities for deaf development initiatives and increased deaf mobility (Friedner & Kusters 2015). An important factor in the globalization of deaf space is the ability to communicate through International Sign and/or American Sign Language. Additionally, during longer-term stays abroad, deaf signers learn other sign languages typically in a short time span (see the section titled Modalities and the Sensorium).

In addition to analyzing deaf mobilities and networks, scholars have asked whether the emergence of deaf communities results from a lack of integration in wider surrounding spatially demarcated communities. Communities such as Martha’s Vineyard (Groce 1985) are appealing to researchers, lay deaf people, and tourists (Kusters 2010). Kisch (2008) calls these communities “shared signing communities” (p. 284); they are villages, islands, towns, or groups where, because of the historical presence of a hereditary form of deafness that exists because of endogamous marriages, a relatively high number of deaf people have lived together with hearing people for decades or even centuries. Shared signing communities appear to exist mostly in the Global South and initially attracted linguists and geneticists; however, in the past ten years, they also received considerable attention from anthropologists. Examples include the Al-Sayyid Bedouin in Israel (Kisch 2008, 2012), Ban Khor in Thailand (Nonaka 2009, 2014), Bengkala (aka Desa Kolok) in Bali (Marsaja 2008), and Adamorobe in Ghana (Kusters 2015a). Over the years, communication within the dense sociocultural networks of these communities has led to the emergence of local sign languages, called “shared sign languages” by Nyst (2012), used by both deaf and hearing people. Anthropologists have disproved linguists’ earlier claims that deaf people are perfectly integrated (or even assimilated) in these communities simply because hearing people can sign (cf. Groce 1985). They demonstrated that deaf people are excluded in certain contexts; sometimes produce deaf-only or deaf-centered social spaces in these communities; connect to people outside the community by using a different (national rather than shared) sign language with them; and experience the often significant impact of “outsiders” (such as tourists, charities, and researchers) on social patterns in these locations.

MODALITIES AND THE SENSORIUM

Sign languages exist in linguistically diverse environments where deaf people may not only interact with one or more sign languages, but also encounter and use one or more spoken and written language(s). Linguistic anthropologists and other linguistic ethnographers have provided fine-grained explorations of deaf peoples’ everyday language practices, as well as insights into language emergence, language socialization, language contact, language shift, and language ideologies (Green 2014b; Haviland 2016; Horton 2018; Hou 2016; Keating & Mirus 2003a,b; Pfister 2017).

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IP: 3.135.189.122 www.annualreviews.org • Deaf Anthropology 37

On: Thu, 25 Apr 2024 05:23:57

As with other themes in this article where schools are central sites of exploration and theorizing, educational settings are also important sites of research on modalities (Bagga-Gupta 1999, Hayashi & Tobin 2015, Holmström et al. 2015, Holmström & Schönström 2018, Tapio 2019, Valente 2016). This focus on schools is unsurprising, given that education, whether in mainstreamed schools without interpreters, in separate residential schools for deaf children, or in higher education, is a critical node for deaf activism, hearing-controlled policies, and competing visions of a good deaf life. Yet, research by linguistic ethnographers and linguistic anthropologists has gone beyond the context of the school and the home, focusing on the unique ways in which different forms of signed communication, gesture, writing, and mouthing are used and combined by deaf or deafblind signers when they communicate with other deaf or deafblind signers or with hearing signers and nonsigners. They also analyzed how different forms of signed communication are produced in various language ecologies (Horton 2018, Reed 2020), documenting how people experience the affordances and limitations of these forms of communication (Edwards 2015, Hoffman-Dilloway 2016, Keating & Mirus 2003b). By focusing on naturally occurring communication in different sociolinguistic contexts, linguistic ethnography and linguistic anthropology expanded understandings of the actual diversity of deaf communicative practices in everyday sociolinguistic and sociocultural contexts (Hou & Kusters 2020). In addition, scholars have focused on languaging in contexts of international mobility which frequently entail (sign) language learning or translanguaging, multilingual sign interactions, International Sign, and gesture-based interactions.

Linguistic ethnographers, linguistic anthropologists, and other scholars have questioned neat divides between “sign language” and “not sign language” (sometimes glossed as gesture) (Green 2014b, Hou 2016, Kusters & Sahasrabudhe 2018). Some sign linguists have organized different forms of signing on a developmental cline: gesture—homesign—communal/rural/family homesign—village/rural/shared sign language—national/urban sign language (Meir et al. 2010, de Vos & Zeshan 2012). A distinction is thus made between sign and/or gesture as “system” and “sign *language*,” with gesture and International Sign often put in the category of “not language” (Goldin-Meadow & Brentari 2017). These categories are political as much as they are empirical (Coppola & Senghas 2017).

Anthropologists have investigated what it means linguistically and communicatively for deaf people to be immobile, particularly in locales that are not sites of “deaf communities,” such as remote rural locations. They and other scholars have addressed the question of what it means to have language, the difference that having language makes, and how important it is both to acknowledge the power of shared language and to investigate practices and experiences of people who do not communicate in conventional (signed or spoken) languages or who learn to do so later in life. National sign language users may consider it a moral imperative to try to bring such deaf people into “deaf society” (Green 2014b). In this respect, there is a tension between work in psycholinguistics and linguistics arguing persuasively that there are critical and often measurable consequences to learning a conventional sign language early in life (Humphries et al. 2014, Mayberry 2007) and the abovementioned work by anthropologists and anthropologically oriented linguists arguing compellingly for recognizing the competence, creativity, and even artistry of deaf people who do not acquire a conventional sign language early on (or ever) (Green 2014b, Hou 2016, Moriarty Harrelson 2019, Reed 2020). What is at stake is whether analysts focus on cognition or interaction. We argue that research must balance attention to both vulnerabilities and competencies.

Recent linguistic anthropology scholarship has also demonstrated the importance of thinking about how people understand each other in and across modalities not only in relation to knowledge or even familiarity with the modality and/or specific language(s), but also in relation to moralities, affect, desire, willingness, and commitment (or lack thereof) to communication and its

very possibility (Graif 2018; Green 2014a,b, 2015). There is growing attention to how language practices and the related desires and commitments shape and are shaped by language ideologies (Kusters et al. 2020). This work demonstrates that sign languages are a complex terrain on and in which different interests and agendas are produced and negotiated. Ideological frictions can be found for example between deaf and hearing people, sighted deaf and deafblind people, different generations of deaf persons (Kisch 2012, Kusters 2020, Nakamura 2006), people in villages or in towns (Hou 2016, Kusters 2020), or within a single family that comprises its own micro community of signers (Haviland 2016). Scholars have described responses to the use of different sign languages, which are hierarchized by their users. For example, Schmalting (2003), Cooper (2015), Moges (2015), and Parks (2014) identified conflicts where imported sign languages such as American Sign Language were not ideally suited to local contexts in the Global South. Hofer & Sagli (2017) analyzed how Tibetan and Mongolian deaf children are forced to learn written and spoken Chinese under China's "civilizing project"; deaf concerns can articulate (or not) with nationalist projects (Cooper 2017).

The use of different modalities in deaf communication is inextricably linked to the senses. One of deaf studies' central projects has been to foreground visibility. Consider, for example, the titles of the books *Open Your Eyes: Deaf Studies Talking* (Bauman 2008) and *The People of the Eye: Deaf Ethnicity and Ancestry* (Lane et al. 2011). According to these texts, the eyes discern important sound-based information and are crucial to engage language that is produced with the face and hands and to savor deaf art forms such as signed poetry; additionally, the themes of light, transparency, and visibility are prominent in deaf art forms (Bahan 2014). This foregrounding of vision has been empowering in backgrounding the paradigm of deaf people as deficient because of their lack of hearing⁸ and was central in conceptualizing "Deaf Gain" (Bauman & Murray 2014). Bauman & Murray (2014, p. xv) want the concept of Deaf Gain "to counter the frame of hearing loss as it refers to the unique cognitive, creative, and cultural gains manifested through deaf ways of being in the world."

In this focus on vision, there has been a tendency by deaf studies scholars to ignore or, at best, sideline diverse deaf experiences such as those of deafblind people, including those involved in the protactile movement. Edwards (2015, 2018) has argued that the unmarked phrases "sign language" or "sign" almost always refer to visual signed communication. To assume that sign languages are necessarily visual is as problematic as the (hopefully extinct) assumption that languages are necessarily spoken—something that was explicitly theorized as recently as 1960. This work also shows that the use of a specific channel (here, tactile) for the exchange of linguistic signs is not sufficient for building a life-world and that a shift in the kinds of social roles and social norms inhabited within that channel—e.g., roles of authority, the possibility of overhearing by touching people who continue to sign rather than freezing awkwardly—is necessary. Although tactile reception of ASL signs existed prior to the protactile movement, it is only since the protactile movement that a distinct protactile language is emerging. A focus on the eyes and visible language also sidelines the central importance of touch, vibration, and sound in deaf communication (Friedner & Helmreich 2012, Kusters 2017, Mills 2015, Napoli 2014).

Related to the deaf experience of the sensorium, linguistic anthropologists have studied how sign languages are experienced and described in qualic ways, or the feeling of doing language. One

⁸It is ironic that anthropologists continue to advance the view of deafness as deficiency through metaphoric practices of writing of "deaf ears" or "so and so was deaf to X" to indicate that someone is not listening or paying attention. Deafness has nothing to do with lack of attention or not listening. Similarly, phrases such as "silent world" or "a silent life" do not resonate with deaf people, either because many deaf people do access sound in some way or because they experience their lives as "visual," "tactile," or "gestural" ones rather than "silent" ones.

example is SignWriting, a system of writing sign languages, drawing symbols that represent the perspective of the signer rather than of the receiver, i.e., the expressive rather than the receptive viewpoint (Hoffman-Dilloway 2018). Another example is deaf signers describing particular registers as “strong,” “hard,” or “soft” (Kusters 2020). Edwards (2018) has paid attention to protactile people’s observations that alignment and integration of language with tactile modes of orientation to the environment motivate language, making it capable of conjuring tactile experience in ways that feel immediate.

TECHNOLOGIES AND FUTURES

In *Deaf Gain: Raising the Stakes for Human Diversity*, Bauman & Murray (2014) argued that deaf people and sign languages have much to contribute to the world. Notably, award-winning author Andrew Solomon wrote the book’s foreword in which he discussed how unique and valuable deaf communities and sign languages are. However, Solomon (2012, p. 114) elsewhere argued that deafness will eventually disappear as a result of technological developments such as cochlear implants and that deaf people who refuse such advances are similar to the Amish. To be sure, deaf people have had long engagements with technology and have been involved in technological developments such as the emergence of the modern telephone (Mills 2010), often only to be denied access to the same product after it was completed. More recently, and directly related to the disabling effects of telephone technology, scholars have examined how innovations such as an Internet connection and Internet-based video calling, as well as other platforms such as Skype, have impacted both social and language practices (Hjølstad 2016, İlkbaşıran 2015, Keating & Mirus 2003a, Valentine & Skelton 2008). Haualand (2014) examined video interpreting, when a sign language interpreter interprets conversations between sign language users and nonsigners by way of a videophone, an Internet-based platform, and a regular phone in the United States, Sweden, and Norway to think about new inclusions and exclusions brought about by technology even when providing so-called access. The frame of access, however, is one ambivalently accepted and negotiated in many deaf worlds because “direct communication” is preferred (Edwards 2018, Green 2014a).

Although sign language interpreters are not explicitly considered a technology, anthropologists have recently analyzed their role in creating conditions of possibility for deaf peoples’ inclusion and participation via technologies of signed and spoken voice. Scholars have examined the personal and professional roles that interpreters play and how they negotiate interdependence on and with deaf people as well as their roles within deaf communities (Marie 2019). The labor of both deaf people and interpreters in intersubjectively working together is increasingly a topic of research, as are deaf peoples’ preferences for different kinds of designated and preferred interpreters (Burke 2017, Feyne 2018). Deaf and deafblind people also work as informal interpreters for and with each other (Green 2015), brokering language in order to maximize participation and understanding.

There is a difference between technology that assists in providing access and accommodation and technology that seeks to remediate deafness itself: This tension is at the heart of what Mills (2010) called “deaf futurism.” As Valente (2011) noted, “cyborgization” through cochlear implants is often perceived as a threat to deaf communities and ways of life; elsewhere, Valente et al. (2002, p. 246) located debates over cochlear implants within the terrain of sensory politics, which they argue “looks at the intersection of biological perception and cultural mediation and interpretation within a field of power.” Unfortunately, the concept of the cyborg (here turned into a trope) has not done much to actively engage with deaf peoples’ creative practices with cochlear implants and other technologies (cf. Mills 2010). More studies on deaf peoples’ ambivalent, excited, and chosen trajectories of working with and through hearing technology are needed. Today’s implanted babies and children, and their families, are pioneers on uncharted paths.

It is not only the implanted individual who has something at stake but also the family: Mauldin (2016) explored how US-based parents make decisions to implant their children and engage in processes of “ambivalent medicalization” and the role that mothers play after implantation as part of the habilitation process. Friedner (2018) discussed what happens when educators and medical professionals frame sign language as a virus and cochlear implants as presumed cures and then wonders what the vaccine might be. The figure of the deaf infant and child looms large in these discussions about what kinds of sensory and linguistic futures are available (Bosteels & Blume 2014, Fjord 1999, Kafer 2013). These debates around deaf futures have recently been formulated in terms of language deprivation in the case of deaf children (Hall et al. 2019) and the ability of parents to actively choose sign languages. Snoddon (2014) identified a paradox in that hearing babies in Western countries are taught baby sign, whereas deaf babies are encouraged not to sign.

In an attempt to remedy negative ideologies around sign languages, deaf studies scholars and anthropologists have labored to demonstrate that flourishing (De Clerck 2017) occurs and that value (albeit sometimes ambivalent) (Friedner 2015) can be found in deaf worlds. To this end, scholars have imagined futures that include sign language recognition on various scales (De Meulder et al. 2019b), co-equality with hearing people (Murray 2008), deaf citizenship and belonging (Hiddinga & De Langen 2019, Emery 2009), and the possibility of biologically bringing deaf people into the world in light of increasing genetic screening and editing (Emery et al. 2010, Johnston 2006). Concerns over deaf futures attend not only to hearing and listening status but also to communication and language paths, and even the right to exist.

We argue for a future for deaf anthropology in close conversation with anthropology writ large. By placing “deaf” central in explorations of socialities, mobilities, modalities, and technologies, a deaf anthropology that exists in partial overlap with the transdisciplinary field of deaf studies has illuminated different ways of being deaf. Deaf anthropology offers up diverse analyses of what it means to be a sensing, communicating, and social person in the world. It also argues for deafnesses as providing ontologies and epistemologies that are valuable and worth preserving.

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