When not hearing becomes unruly: navigating Ambiguity and Authenticity[1]

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Abstract

This article delves into the dynamic of 'Deafhood', to examine its disruptive potential to challenge traditional norms and negotiating complex identities in political settings. Drawing from khanna's (2016) understanding of Ambiguity and Gilroy's (1993) conceptualisation of Authenticity, this theoretical analysis aims to explore the tense interplay between personal positionalities and formal collective politics within Deaf communities' resistance movements. By building on these theoretical foundations, this article seeks to shed light on how 'Deafhood' challenge existing power structures and norms by prefiguring new ways of existing as a deaf person. Moreover, this exploration hopes to contribute to our understanding of the intricate dynamics that shape the identities and actions of d/Deaf individual within larger sociopolitical frameworks.

Key words: Unruly politics; Identity politics; Deafhood; Authenticity; Ambiguity.

Resumen

Este artículo profundiza en la dinámica de "Sordedad", para examinar su potencial disruptivo de desafiar las normas tradicionales y negociar identidades complejas en contextos políticos. Basándose en la noción de la Ambigüedad de khanna (2016) y la conceptualización de Autenticidad de Gilroy (1993), este análisis teórico tiene como objetivo explorar la compleja interacción entre posiciones personales y políticas colectivas formales en el seno de los movimientos de resistencia de las comunidades Sordas. Al construir sobre estas bases teóricas, este artículo resaltar sobre cómo la "Sordedad" desafía las estructuras de poder y las normas existentes al prefigurar nuevas formas de existir como persona sorda. Además, esta exploración pretende contribuir a nuestra comprensión de las dinámicas intrincadas que dan forma a las identidades y acciones de individuos Sordos dentro de marcos sociopolíticos más amplios.

Palabras claves: Políticas rebeldes, Políticas identitarias, Sordedad, Autenticidad, Ambigüedad

Introduction

Have you ever wondered what happens when the reality you embody do not align with the formal politics that shape the way you are supposed to exist? It is within this realm of paradox and possibility that Deaf people navigate, both personally and politically, between the notions of ambiguity and authenticity proposed by khanna (2016) and Gilroy (1993) respectively.

By examining 'Deafhood' through unruly lenses, this essay explores how deaf communities challenge traditional notions of normalcy, navigate multiple worlds, and open political spaces by offering alternative ways to engage with deafness. Through those lenses, and drawing on khanna's and Gilroy's ideas, I aspire to highlight not only the possibilities Deafhood offers to imagine or shape a diverse society, but also its nuances and limits.

Deafhood, as proposed by the deaf academic Paddy Ladd (1999, 2005, 2011), is a term born in opposition to 'deafness', the medical model that understands the absence of sound as a medical impairment in need of prevention and reparation. By acknowledging the existence of a cultural and linguistic dimension to deafness, it moves beyond a simple shift to a social understanding of disability; it provides a framework for understanding Deaf experiences, perspectives, and collective identity beyond either its medical aspects or the societal barriers regarding individual accessibility.

Before I layout my arguments, I would like to acknowledge my positionality as a researcher approaching this topic. As a hard-of-hearing woman, I bring my own experiences and perspectives to the discussion of these concepts. Thus, my arguments, critiques, and examples here will centre around the experiences of what is like to constantly navigate a 'hearing'- 'deaf' binary, drawing from both my personal life and the experiences of individuals I have encountered within Deaf collectives in Colombia.

Seeing Deafhood trough unruly lenses: challenging hearing-centric perspectives of our existence.

Who says I need to be cured? Who gets to choose if I should speak or sign[3]? Who decided I should want to intervene my body and change who I am to hear? The need I've had to constantly address these questions throughout my life, underscores the significance 'Deafhood' has, not only to challenge but also offer an alternative to the dominant hearing-centric perspectives that constantly hovers over our bodies.

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3   Use sign language.

This term, coined by Ladd as a Deaf epistemology, focusses on redefining the life experiences of non-hearing people by framing it not as a loss or as a failure to be normal, but rather a gain of a language, a culture capital, and community ethos. It also argues that deafness –unlike other disabilities– is the only physical difference capable of generating its own language and thus of transmitting knowledge with memory of the historical defence of the different ways of experiencing being deaf. From this perspective, for example, cochlear implants are considering a harmful and unethical[4] medical practice of erasure of the deaf community (see **figure 1**). These forms of violence not only jeopardize the continuity of the community but also violate the rights of deaf children by preventing them from understanding and embracing alternative ways of thinking, feeling, and experiencing their bodies.

Because deafhood highlights the diversity of Deaf experiences, I argue this notion fosters unruliness by celebrating rebelling against audist[5] definitions and narrow interpretations of deafness, echoing the fluidity and political contestation of queerness. Drawing from khanna's (2012) proposal, I'll understand unruliness here as a perspective that challenge existing power structures and norms by enabling individuals and communities to question what is imposed upon and expected of them. As this author explains, unruly politics are those that generate new modalities to traditional systems, encouraging people to engage with power structures on their own terms.

In this sense, Deafhood challenge rigid notions of normalcy and promote alternatives of self-determination and cultural affirmation. Is both a celebration of the defiance of hearing norms and expectations upon our bodies, and a collective response to a topic that is treated as if it was only an individual problem. Through deafhood, we have the chance to embark on a journey to envision a society that see us as diversity rather than deficiency, and consequently to questions the

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4   To understand this debate more in depth, I recommend reading Palma-García (2021) where the author traces and compiles some of the arguments. Some argue that the medicalization of deaf bodies is part of a larger effort to suppress or control sign language. Cochlear implant surgeries often occur before the age of two, denying the child the opportunity to decide about their own body. Supporters emphasize the potential benefits, while critics highlight the risks of paralysis, loss of residual hearing, and restrictions on everyday activities that doctors often don't mention to the parents. Instead of focusing on early knowledge acquisition through sign language, a child's early years are often dedicated to speech therapy, pressuring their bodies to conform to a hearing ideal imposed upon them from early life. Deaf communities view this as a violation of bodily autonomy and a missed opportunity for learning a language that is inherent to deafness. Additionally, it prevents the child from connecting with others who share their experiences.
On the other hand, supporters of cochlear implants argue that denying a child the opportunity to hear and be "normal" should be considered child abuse and negligence. In response, the Deaf community response using the opposite example to highlight the ethical concerns and implications of forcibly altering a child's hearing status without their consent just to fit their family's ideal of normalcy: What would the response be if deaf parents, who had a hearing child, decided to use surgery to make them deaf like themselves?

5   Audism is a system of discrimination based on the belief that hearing and the ability to use spoken language are superior compared to the use of sign language.

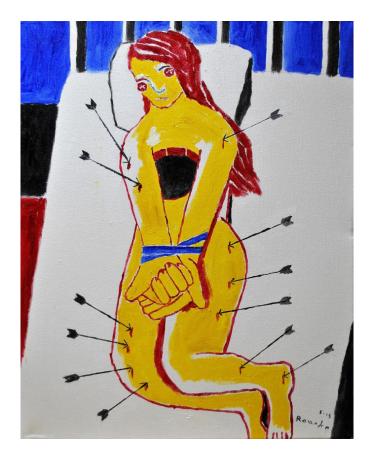very assumptions of what inclusion is or should be for us.

Figure 1. *'Right to be Deaf – Oppression' by Nancy Rourke (2015). On the description of the painting, this deaf artist explains is a representation of deaf culture slowly dying when kids are striped away of their identities and sign language from an early age. She writes "our whole being is taken away".*

Unruly Identities: negotiating dichotomies.

As khanna (2016) points out while exploring queerness, embracing ambiguity has a transformative power as it can make other people question the absurdity of their own normativeness. It has the potential to make visible the inarticulable boundaries of societal norms by exploring the possibilities such fluidity offers. In the case of deaf people, we constantly move between the deaf and the hearing worlds. At its core, deafhood encompasses these principles of ambiguity by creating new frameworks of identity to exist beyond disability. However, there is a complex relationship between these two worlds that force us to move –both internally and externally– within the existing normative system rather than simply breaking it.

While khanna's reading captures the internal joy of embracing ambiguity and the external struggles to create new paths to live their authentic selves and fit into societal norms, deafhood contains an additional layer of internal struggle: deaf people often face the challenge of navigating and reconciling our identities in different contexts, like our hearing families and our deaf communities (see **figure 2**). Is important to mention that in this essay, rather than seeing identity as a fixed and singular construct, drawing on Stuart Hall (2010) I see it as a dynamic and complex interplay of various factors, encompassing one's internal sense of self, including values, beliefs, and lived experiences, but also recognising the effect of external variables such as societal standards, cultural practises, and community expectations.

Figure 2. *'Like a river' by Nancy Rourke (2014). This paint shows the live of a girl who was implanted at 21 months old, being raised and socialized as hearing. The river represents her struggle to find her own identity, having in one side the world she grew in, and sign language in the other. Upstream you can read the word audism.*

We live in a constant dance of wondering which identity to prioritize in order to connect with those around us. Is an internal and challenging process of deciding who we need to be, to be. Is a dance that sometimes take us to adopt 'hearing' ways of existing to be able to be in the space we want or need to be. I recall a conversation with a friend who expressed feeling caught between not feeling deaf enough, hearing enough, nor black enough. They felt forced to constantly choose between continue wearing hearing aids to engage with their hearing (not signing) family and learn about their ethnic community or stop wearing them (as they preferred) to embrace their deaf identity and language fully. They find themselves, daily, having to let go of one part of who they are to fully connect with the other.

This complex internal battle of intricate self-negotiations captures that ambiguity transcends the external challenges mentioned by khanna. It shows the constant need of shifting between the hearing world and Deaf spaces, adapting to different communication methods, corporalities, and accommodating the expectations of both communities we are part of. By highlighting this dimension of internal ambiguity, I'm emphasizing the multifaceted nature of deafhood, as it challenges us to question and reposition ourselves both in an individual and collective manner. By this I mean it reflects an interplay between the self, the familial and community dynamics, the cultural affiliation, and the societal expectations.

What happens when this dance enters the political arena? Nowadays in Colombia, and similar to the trend that the deaf movements in the UK are following, deaf people find themselves continuously navigating the dichotomy of self-identifying within various state agencies and institutional contexts either as disabled or as a linguistic minority to gain access to certain rights[6]. By choosing intentionally where to align in each situation, we find ways to speak the same language of the system to access it. Echoing the notion of strategic essentialism by Spivak (1994), I see here a conscious choice to use the existing and dominant discourse and categories –visible in the legal framework– as a mean to an end. As a mean to gain access to differential rights and a platform to get recognition in a society that often fails to recognise the spectrum of deaf experiences.

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6   In Colombia, due to the multicultural constitution different legal frameworks offer different rights and protections for different population. The legislation concerning disability primarily focuses on issues of accessibility and reasonable accommodations. On the other hand, the category of linguistic minority allows the state to officially recognize sign language. This recognition has significant implications, particularly in the realm of education, as it leads to changes in language planning laws, ensuring that education is in line with linguistic models rooted in the deaf community.

While this negotiation may appear to conform the system, I resonate Spivak's reading of this as cleverness to use the existing framework to gain visibility and recognition, as a way of challenging power dynamics from within. In context where the dominant structures have systematically excluded certain groups, this strategy serve as a tool of subversion to assert visibility, recognition, and resources withing that system. Similar to what khanna explain for queerness, the unruliness does not lie only in acts of disruption, but also in the constant negotiation of identity that led us to reclaim space in the system.

Authenticity and cultural resistance:

Is important to also notice this negotiation does not occur without tension. To further develop this argument I'll draw upon Gilroy's (1993) exploration of music as a political tool of authenticity and resistance to argue that sign language plays a similar role in shaping the deaf community and collective identity. Like black music, sign language serves as the expressive medium through which this community challenges the dominant culture's norms and asserts their authenticity. It carries with it a rich legacy of cultural production, innovation, and subversion. The signs we have today in different countries and cities, each with their own unique characteristics, carry the imprints of historical struggles and a collective memory. These signs emerged as acts of resistance and survival in spaces of oppression (see **figure 3**), like medical rehabilitation schools and other institutions that attempted "to control, separate, and deny the very existence of the community, language, and its cultural practices"(Skliar, 1997, p. 6). Their creation, shaping, and transmission are rooted in collective practices; if you take a sign, chances are you can trace a historical construction of its meaning, like the reason it was decided to gesture that word in that specific way, and the ways it has change through time, generations and places.

Figure 3. *'Respect ASL' by Nancy Rourke (2015).*

Sign language don't only have a role within the deaf community, it also plays a pivotal role in society at large. It has become the face of deafhood as is the key to claim and assert the existence of a cultural identity and challenge narrow definitions of disability within the existing system. In a way, is the embodiment of the unique experiences of deafness of this community, conveying stories of both marginalization and collective expression. As a tool of resistance, is constantly challenging the notion that spoken language is the sole valid form of communication, acting as a counterforce to medical discourses of reparation that tender towards assimilation, and reaffirming the right of deaf people to exist on their own terms.

Nevertheless, as I mentioned at the beginning of this section, this does not happen without tension. As mentioned before, strategic essentialism allows marginalizes groups to perform or use identity as a mean of political mobilisation, which can lead to oversimplify complex and ambiguous identities, in other words, certain aspects of a collective identity can be strategically employed even though they may not accurately represent the full complexity and diversity of a particular identity or group.

While is true that this strategy has been use bad subaltern groups as a tool of resistance and subversion, there is a risk of perpetuating new fixed and exclusionary narratives that ends up reinforcing the existing structures, both internally and externally. For example, it is possible to observe a stratification of status within members of a Deaf collective based on their background and degree of deafness. This is exemplified by the concept of 'sordos puros'[7] which refers to individuals with profound deafness, born into generations of deaf families, who have never used hearing aids and have sign language as their first language. These individuals often serve as linguistic models within the community and are associated with the purity of language, as their signing has not been influenced by hearing interpreters or the grammatical structures of spoken languages.

Another example of how this impacts the public arena, is that it narrows down an idealized notion of what it means to be truly deaf. This narrow perspective can be exclusionary for those who embody the ambiguity between the deaf and hearing worlds more strongly. Those like me, with varying degrees of hearing loss, who use hearing aids or primarily use a spoken language, are constantly questioned by both deaf/hearing peers or public institutions regarding weather we are truly deaf and deserving of a service or right.

In short, my point is that while using authenticity as a tool is useful to disrupt dominant narratives and create spaces for recognition, dialogue and negotiation, it can also create in the long run a exclusionary binary distinction between those "fully deaf" and the rest whose ambiguity is more visible.

Conclusion:

Throughout the essay, I explored how does the concept of "Deafhood" challenge traditional notions of normalcy, offer alternative ways to engage with deafness, and influence how deaf individuals navigate and reconcile their identities in different contexts. Using unruly lenses to explore the possibilities and limits of deafhood, allowed me not only to recognise the different ways this deaf epistemology is challenging existing norms by inviting us to imagine new and more fluid possibilities of deaf existence, but also the potential issues of idealising one aspect of a collective identity to carve out a space of authenticity and political resistance in the pre-existing power structures.

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7   Pure deaf

To explore the main question, I acknowledge the transformative power of what Khanna (2016) calls Ambiguity, as it enable individuals and communities to question what is imposed upon them and, thus, challenge power structures. Nevertheless, I aim to expand this argument by highlighting an internal struggle that is part of the complex process deaf people go through daily by negotiating different aspects of their identities in different contexts, such as within hearing families and deaf communities. I argue that this intricate self-negotiation that is tight to cultural affirmation and self-determination is also part of the ambiguity of deafness.

I also based my argument on Gilroy's (1993) argument of the power of cultural practices and expression to challenge dominant narratives by asserting counternarratives of authenticity. However, I argue this can be problematise by exploring the tensions that can arise in the pursuit of the recognition of such authenticity. Thus, I emphasize in the importance of embracing a nuanced perspective that acknowledges the interplay of the self, the familial and community dynamics, political engagement, and societal expectations.

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