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# 1001 Small Victories: Deaf Academics and Impostor Syndrome

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## Introduction

This chapter represents the voices of eight deaf (we use *deaf* to represent members of both deaf and hard of hearing communities) scholars from the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK), Belgium, and Germany. We come from different disciplines: linguistics, policy, sociology, history, education, Deaf Studies, and engineering. Our being deaf and use of sign languages bring us together in reflecting upon our experiences in the academy. These reflections are complicated by experiences of gender, race, ethnicity, indigenity, sexuality, class, religion, and immigration status. Our experiences as deaf academics are influenced and meditated by being transgender, women, Jewish, queer, immigrant, black, Asian ethnic minorities within the US, and/or disabled. Social categories within our respective local, national, and global contexts shape our individual experiences as deaf academics and cannot be excavated as separate from our lived experiences as deaf people. Some of us are scholar-activists working on questions of language endangerment, revitalization, and deprivation while others strive for representation of excellence as scholars within the larger academy despite or because of our deafness. We represent diverse voices who have earned terminal degrees in our respective fields. Existing as deaf academics in an environment hostile to disabled people positions is to experience severe impostor syndrome in spite of our individual achievements.

We present a collaborative authoethnography on our experiences in the academy as former and current graduate students, and early-career researchers. Collaborative authoethnographic approaches have been used to examine complex topics from multiple viewpoints (Chua, et, al., 2017; O'Connell, 2017, 2016, 2014). Together, we describe our experiences as deaf academics as testimony to both the successes and failures of disability rights legislation, efforts at disability inclusion, and the ways in which we have inhabited, translated, negotiated, and resisted impostor syndrome in pursuing our intellectual passions and efforts to create a better world for deaf people. We center personal narratives because this is characteristic of deaf cultural ways of being. Deaf people have long engaged in oral traditions of sharing stories across generations and amongst each other as acts of resistance and survival (Bahan, 2006). While our experiences are collective, often we will highlight one of us by using their last name to distinguish their voice, allowing us to shift between individual and shared experiences.

Our goal is to support deaf scholars who come after us. We want them to know they are not alone in experiencing impostor syndrome. We hope our narratives urge nondeaf readers to act in solidarity to make the academy a less ableist and exclusionary space for all people. Disability is often absent from conversations on social justice and inclusion. Our goals can be seen through the lens of deaf gain (Bauman and Murray, 2014), by which we mean we use the shared cultural values of deaf communities of information sharing and mutual support to make the academy accessible for all. As we work toward dismantling impostor syndrome and making the academy less exclusionary, we cannot forget disability as a critical site of power and thus interrogation.

**How did we get *Here*?**

As Millennials (a generation born roughly between 1981 and 1996), we benefited from social, institutional, and political changes that allowed privileged deaf people to participate in higher education. The changes, specifically between 2010 - 2019, created a surge of deaf academics, many tenure-track, who work in post-secondary, predominantly nondeaf educational institutions (Smith and Andrews, 2015).

A combination of post-World War II rehabilitation policies in Europe and the US that expanded the social participation of disabled people afforded these changes. The field of sign language interpreters also professionalized in the 1960s in the US and Western Europe (Quigley and Youngs, 1965). Disability rights legislation in the 1970s, 1990s, and 2000s helped secure the right to access higher education via signed language interpretation and real time transcription services. More recently, developments in access technologies opened the doors of academe for deaf students (Lawson and Gooding, 2005; Scotch, 2001; Stiker, 1999; Stone, 1986). Our expanded participation was also made possible by legacies of activism and policies that secured access for women, Jewish people, and nonwhite people in higher education. Our work and contemporary successes also rests upon the legacy and shared wisdom of feminist, Jewish, immigrant, nonwhite, deaf-disabled, and working-class activism.

The emergence of Deaf Studies and sign language research as fields of inquiry also expanded opportunities for deaf scholars; first as members of research teams as cultural guides or language models for nondeaf academics or as research assistants (O'Brien and Emery, 2014). Yet, despite advances in accessibility, technology, and growing numbers of deaf academics, the power relationship between deaf and nondeaf academics remains out of balance in favor of nondeaf academics even within Deaf Studies and sign language research

(O'Brien and Emery, 2014).

**Do We Belong in the Academy?**

Impostor syndrome has been used to describe the phenomena of marginalized individuals (e.g., women) who *felt* they did not belong in the academy. They experienced persistent feelings of 'intellectual phoniness' despite being high-achieving (Clance and Imes, 1978). Among deaf academics, impostor syndrome is manifested via workplace isolation, working with sign language interpreters, and the emotional labour extracted by nondeaf abled peers. Our action in navigating, resisting, and reworking impostor syndrome is informed by positive relationships with our deafness.

The answer to the question of whether deaf people belong in the academy is heavily meditated by access and the monetary and emotional cost of it. As graduate students, our access needs -- sign language interpreters, notetakers, and captionists -- are largely met and we are able to complete our coursework and dissertation/thesis. In the US, public and private entities foot the bill for access services. In the UK and Europe, most costs are covered by the government and local research councils.

Accordingly, deaf students may have greater protections and guarantees for the right to access compared to postgraduate roles. Deaf researchers and faculty have different access needs than deaf students. Many institutions have disability services specially designed to serve deaf undergraduate and graduate students, but not deaf faculty (Campbell, Rohan, and Woodcock, 2008). In Germany, deaf job candidates are generally expected to secure funding for interpreting services before they can accept faculty positions. Limited understanding of accommodations can cause problems for all deaf scholars regardless of status. 'Being 'deaf' entails an increasingly complex set of identities and language practices.' which has profound implications for how communication and 'access' are experienced by different deaf people' (De Meulder and Haualand, 2019).

In the US, deaf academics confront limits on access despite federal disability legislation mandating reasonable accommodations. Higher education institutions quibble over the definition of qualified interpreters, the meaning of reasonable accommodations, or offering classes that require significant usage of interpreters (Robinson and Henner, 2018).

Robinson and Henner teach courses using ASL with interpretation into spoken English. A last minute question about which departmental unit would pay for interpreters nearly cancelled their classes. Robinson's successful appeal involved reframing access as being for students. This critique involved illustrating the disconnect between the popularity of sign language classes (for nondeaf students) and the treatment of deaf faculty. Classes on a

minoritized but popular language are widely available but the deaf faculty who teach them face systemic access barriers to campus events and activities.

For deaf academics, there is often an additional burden placed upon them to organise their own communication access. Such organisation includes sourcing, booking, and prepping interpreters before meetings, teaching, or presentations, and then organising payment for the interpreters afterwards. For many of us, extra administrative tasks place a heavy compulsive time burden (Lefebvre, 2000 [1971]: 45; O'Brien, 2020a). Thus, they are not only expected to fulfill the conditions of their academic contract (for all intents and purposes, identical to those of their nondeaf colleagues), but also manage all the access requirements they need in order to fulfil their contract which eats into their work time (Stapleton, 2015; Woodcock, et, al. 2007). The burden for inclusion falls to the academics who embody this diversity in satisfying university goals in improving diversity.

The constant negotiation over access costs, defending the value of our presence, research, and instruction, citing disability legislation protecting our rights accumulates a toll. After all, much of our work in obtaining access is emphasizing what we cannot do and feeling powerless when there is no-to-little legal remedy to challenge rejections of accommodations. Deaf scholars spend so much time and energy just getting access to the academy; is it any wonder that many question if they have a right to be there? Deaf scholars compete with the nondeaf who do not do equivalent work for access. This in turn can trigger feelings of inadequacy, fueling pre-existing imposter syndrome (Hutchins and Rainbolt, 2017). Unrealistic standards for deaf academics create feelings of failure (Parkman, 2016). Such feelings might resonate with with other underrepresented minorities in higher education. We recognize the pitfalls of this labor given the history of the disproportionate labor that Black and minority ethnic women are burdened with in addressing racism and sexism in the academy (Ahmed, 2012), though we should be careful in casually drawing comparsions.

**The Hidden and Visible Costs of Access and Deafness in the Academy**

The presence of deaf academics in higher education is still largely within the realm of sign language instruction and affiliated fields. Henner was the only deaf faculty member for several years and often the most visibly disabled faculty member. In spite of any ostensible status associated with being tenure track faculty, the overall university community persisted in seeing him as a *signing deaf person* first, and a scholar second. Robinson and Henner (2018) described how deaf scholars were valued mostly for their ability to teach American Sign Language (ASL) to nondeaf people. Accordingly, deaf people exist as facilitators for a

language seen as a novelty and as cash cows for the university. This could, for some, be seen as a negative aspect of the deaf gain approach. Teaching sign languages can be a way into the academy for many deaf people, where their experience of visual spatial languages and deaf communities are an advantage over nondeaf faculty.

Other common experiences in the academy -- attending conferences and submitting work for publication -- further compound feelings of inadequacy. De Meulder once gave a presentation on the legal recognition of sign languages. The first question posed to her was from a language policy scholar who asked 'are sign languages real languages? Aren't they universal?' Journal reviewers sometimes do not understand why sign languages are relevant topics of study for the field of multimodal communication at all. Deaf scholars often get the feeling that their research is not seen as valid because of perceived 'bias' – the idea that deaf scholars (or scholars from other marginalized groups) are not capable of doing research on something that is seen as 'too close' to us (see Annamma, Ferri, and Connor, 2018). In Deaf Studies publications, it is common practice to write about one's own positionality. Deaf scholars have to do this while nondeaf scholars do not because being nondeaf remains unmarked. Expectations for reflexivity vary for different researchers (see Adkins, 2002). Most nondeaf scholars do not appear to feel the need or are not expected to 'come out' this way. This goes back to the above mentioned point about perceived 'bias' – deaf scholars are expected to be open about their position while many aspects of dominant researchers doing research (whiteness, abledness, etc.) remain unmarked.

Moreover, while sign languages like ASL are seen as profitable for the university, studying them is seen as a novelty (Hochesgang, 2019). The discrepancy between the two perspectives is likely because deaf scholars are not visible, or because deaf scholars need to do more invisible labour to increase their own visibility (Hochgesang, 2019). Additionally, representatives from the media may be uncomfortable working through interpreters, or they may prefer to talk to scholars directly over the phone. Part of the issue may be how other faculty members view deafness or disability (Goodley and Moore, 2000). In many departments, even in Special Education where the focus is typically on disabled people, disability itself is seen as *otherness*. The population of deaf and disabled people exist as a 'research topic' and group to be served and helped rather than as people who deserve equitable input.

Another issue is that many people still do not consider modalities other than speech to be true languages (Hall, Hall, and Caselli, 2019) despite the contributions that research on sign languages has made in the field of linguistics and the understanding of language more

generally (Petitto, 2014). Speech centered ideologies are made manifest in common phrases such as ‘speech and language’, and by calling disabled people who communicate in methods other than speech ‘non-verbal’ (e.g. Wan, et, al., 2011). Disregarding the natural continuum of human languages in favor of speech based ones is reflective of ableism centered linguicism (elevating some languages over others based on political/cultural context; see Phillipson, 1992 for a discussion of linguicism and linguistic imperialism), where speech is prioritized and favored because it appears to be the *natural* form of communication and therefore the best one. If you are a scholar of sign languages, you are a scholar of languages best reserved for hearing babies, curious undergraduates, and disabled people who do not have sufficient ability to use speech. Academics who use the languages of these groups are often perceived as similarly infantile, curious, and incapable of speech. Here we pivot to questions of legitimacy as scholars. What does it mean for scholars who must exist in an environment where people question their ability to *be* an academic?

There is prejudice against deaf people who do not speak, or whose written language skills do not match the academic norm. This prejudice ignores that deaf people’s first language and modality may be a sign language, and the written language they work in (often English) may not be their first language or modality. Working with colleagues or in an institution which does not value plurilingual and plurimodal abilities, or characterizes such language behaviours as a weakness or lack of fluency can have detrimental effects on deaf academics’ sense of belonging. This can also appear in teaching, where students may seize upon such language use, or even outright audism, and negatively evaluate deaf faculty who do not embody what they believe an academic should be. Deaf academics are often very aware of their language repertoires, and perceived weaknesses in their English and so may be particularly sensitive to criticisms of their competence in English. Perceived and actual discrimination while already feeling out of place and undervalued can exacerbate feelings of imposterism (Cokley, et, al., 2017; Bernaer, et, al., 2017).

**Critical Corridor Talk and Managing Interpreters**

Using sign language interpreters is a significant source of impostor syndrome for deaf academics because once we move beyond the costs of access, we confront questions about our voices being mediated by interpreters who often are not sufficiently trained, lack content-area expertise, have not developed sufficient linguistic fluency to interpret the register of language used in the academy, and/or are not familiar with the individuals and terminology particular to our home institution. Working with interpreters makes us hyper-visible and

makes it difficult for us to sneak out of a meeting to teach or attend another meeting just as nondeaf faculty often do, without drawing attention to ourselves. We are visible when interpreters interrupt the speaker for clarification, because they did not understand all of the technical jargon, or they did not catch something, or they did not know how to fingerspell a word. But we are rendered invisible when discussions become heated and nondeaf individuals talk over one another. Not only does that leave deaf participants without equivalent access to nondeaf academics, it makes it impossible to interject timely contributions to the conversation.

Blankmeyer Burke (2016) states that deaf consumers' preferences are often overlooked and dismissed when booking interpreters, even though interpreters working in these contexts have to be able to work with specialized academic vocabulary (see Hauser, et, al., 2008; Blankmeyer Burke and Nicodemus, 2013). Even deaf faculty do not always handpick their own interpreters to represent them. One recurring point for us has been how deaf voices and expert authority is mediated by the interpreter's speaking voice. Those concerns were a common theme at the 2017 International Deaf Academics Conference.

Deaf academics also have to deal with limited availability of interpreters and managing the emotional labour of dealing with our interpreters' insecurities about their ability to interpret well. For example, Kubus, Henner, and Hou work in universities in smaller cities with limited pools of available interpreters. Often suitable accommodations cannot be found in time for participation in departmental meetings, training courses, or administrative or continuing professional development responsibilities. In these cases, deaf academics are often under pressure to excuse themselves from responsibilities rather than insist that the meetings or training is postponed. Repeated and accumulated postponements can leave the deaf academic questioning if meetings and courses can continue without their presence and their direct input (Bothello and Roulet, 2018). This can feed into any pre-existing feelings of insecurity or inadequacy, reinforcing their beliefs that they may not belong to the academia and do not deserve to work there (Leonard and Harvey, 2008).

Beyond availability of qualified interpreters, deaf academics also contend with emotional labour of working with professional and designated sign language interpreters. *Emotional labour* in academia has been traditionally conceptualized as a gendered and racialised activity in which a professor adopts certain prescriptions or 'feeling rules' and manages their emotions through interactions with students, colleagues, administrators, and other persons in a professional demeanor in return for rewards that would count toward their tenure or promotion (Bellas, 1999; Tunguz, 2016). The concept of emotional labour has been

re-interpreted in the frameworks of critical race theory and critical race feminism for examining the emotional labour of women of colour faculty who must negotiate with multiple social issues such as racism and sexism that arise in their reality (Harlow, 2003; DeCuir-Gunby, Long-Mitchell, and Grant, 2009; Moore, et, al., 2010). Given the enormous diversity of the backgrounds and status of the authors, emotional labour is conceptualized here as an intersectionally shaped/contoured experience, in which one's labour not only stems from their deafness, but as well stems from the intersection of their deafness and language, race and ethnicity, gender, sexuality, nationality, and other disabilities (Hill, 2020). Furthermore, emotional labour is also re-conceptualized to include physical labour as part of training interpreters and managing and negotiating the relationship with them, a fundamental element of the relationship that has been overlooked in existing literature.

Many institutions have not encountered tenure-track and tenured deaf faculty and may not even be familiar with deafness. The novelty of deaf academics places them in a precarious position in which they encounter challenges in securing accommodations for access and carving out spaces to thrive. They must invest time, energy, and resources in self-advocacy. If they get professional or even designated interpreters (Hauser and Hauser, 2008), they have to train them for the job. The training has to compensate for differences in the knowledge base between the deaf academic and the interpreters, of which the latter almost always does not have any knowledge. They also invest time in collaboration to cultivate working professional relationships, as they work from situation to situation, which constantly shifts and ranges in context (see De Meulder, Napier, and Stone, 2018).

The emotional labour in cultivating the relationship between the deaf academic and the interpreters involves managing and negotiating different but interrelated 'tensions' or issues of the relationship that Burke and Nicodemus (2013) identified: *vulnerability, intimacy,* and *autonomy*. Each issue demands labour. Vulnerability emerges from the exposure of one's deafness from the evident visibility of signed and interpreted communication, the corollaries of the deaf academic's reduced access to auditory information, and their reliance on the interpreters for access to communication. The deaf academic must get accustomed to an inordinate amount of interpretation and to the feeling of not having complete control over the dynamics of communication, especially when there is animated discussion between colleagues. Furthermore, deaf academics are constantly vulnerable to physical and mental fatigue from diligently watching the interpreters and processing the influx of 'live' information.

Simultaneously, deaf academics have to participate in interactions with their nondeaf

colleagues and navigate and negotiate the complexity of social dynamics of their interactions. The dynamics are shaped by the intersectionality of multiple privileges and oppressions of everyone involved in the interactions. Deaf academics, especially those who identify as members of multiple underrepresented minority groups and thus experience reality very differently, are attuned to these dynamics. Often, the sensitivity is not shared by the interpreter, who may be coming from a more privileged position (apart from being nondeaf but also being white and a cis-woman, for example) and have to learn how to approach social situations more critically.

The gap in experiences and worldviews can hinder the interpreter's ability to represent deaf academics, potentially misrepresenting the deaf academic and creating misunderstandings among colleagues, students, administrators, and other persons and even offending them. Deaf academics have to do the extra labour of assessing the social dynamics of the interaction and work with the interpreters about approaching them appropriately. Some examples are the appropriate usage of pronouns and names, appropriate pronunciations of specialized terminology, appropriate ways of phrasing utterances, and filling in the blanks for background information. How an audience reacts to the deaf academic is not just contingent on how the interpreter presents information but as well as whatever perceptions, including implicit bias, the audience holds toward both of them. Such reactions are generally beyond an individual's control, but deaf academics are doubly disadvantaged at not having complete access to auditory information that would reveal the complex nuances of social dynamics of the interaction.

Intimacy, the second issue, emerges from the bond formed between deaf academics and interpreters due to constant communication such as the influx of emails, text messages, video chats and substantial periods of working together over time. Deaf academics and interpreters, particularly designated interpreters, must trust each other to sustain rapport (Campbell, et, al., 2008). Not only does trust require intimacy from the deaf academic, but also vulnerability, because these elements facilitate open communication about expectations, boundaries, and strategies for teamwork; the same level of vulnerability is not required of the interpreter. Intimacy can benefit deaf academics, as it allows the interpreters to understand them as not just researchers but also as people and thus can represent them better in interpretation. However, intimacy comes at a high cost: the emotional labour of developing and maintaining a close professional relationship with healthy boundaries.

The final issue, autonomy, pertains to the deaf academic's authority to make informed decisions themselves. This is somewhat of a paradox, because one can only gain autonomy

from depending on the interpreters for access to information and using it to decide in how to react in a situation (Blankmeyer Burke and Nicodemus, 2013). The deaf academic must figure out whether they have sufficient information or understand enough to make a decision. In such cases, they would have to resolve this by explicitly asking for elaboration or for clarification from the interpreters and/or the nondeaf colleagues involved in the interaction. Again, this course of action relates to vulnerability, as the deaf academic risks exposing themselves to their colleagues and appearing as incompetent. Nondeaf colleagues, who are often in a position to take access for granted, may not fully understand the source of such requests, and may have ambivalent or negative reactions to them, which can misguide their impression of their deaf colleague. Such ill-formed impressions can hurt the deaf academics' chances of securing tenure. Deaf academics thus find themselves under pressure to work to socialize with their nondeaf colleagues to form a positive impression and maintain it.

**A Shaky Path to Tenure**

All of the self-advocacy, training, management, collaboration, and socialization translate to emotional labour, which robs the deaf academic of energy and time away from research. This poses a problem for tenure portfolios, especially at universities with strong research activity, where tenure is contingent on research productivity. The consumption of labour from working with interpreters does not count as credit for tenure and may go unacknowledged unless this can be framed as department and/or university service. Consequently, deaf academics experience an array of negative feelings, from self-doubt to guilt to resentment, that exacerbates imposter syndrome feelings and may not have the resources to address these feelings, especially in their space of mainstream academia, where they may not have an immediate support system in place yet. For example, competitions for research funds are ruthless. Inability to secure research funds can break someone's career. When belonging to the academy is often measured by number of grants received and number of presentations and publications, deaf faculty are further disadvantaged and pushed to the margins as a direct result of limited networking opportunities that creates relationships where our funding requests are more likely to be granted. When communication is inaccessible, deaf faculty may be without navigational capital (Yosso, 2006) to pursue their research agendas and to continue advocating for a place in the academy.

Service is also something that can be problematic for deaf academics. Sometimes serving on committees, review boards and other voluntary posts are not covered by communication support agreements which are funded either by government (in the case of

the UK) or by the academics' own host institution. Service is often considered a vital part of the academic role, and sometimes is an essential requirement for promotion and esteem within the field. If the support agreement does not cover these extra voluntary hours, then deaf academics are prevented from undertaking these duties. While this could have a direct effect on their career progression, it can also have a more insidious effect on their sense of belonging in their HEI, or in academia as a whole. Deaf academics are also involved in service to their (local or national) deaf communities (e.g. through voluntary work, sitting on local committees, sitting as school governors, provide access to deaf people by e.g. translating letters) but this often goes unrecognized by universities. This sort of engagement can create disillusionment with academic life.

All of this combines to create a barrier between deaf academics and their colleagues in such a way that fosters the growth of impostor syndrome. They may well have all the requisite types and forms of academic capital to make their mark and contribute to the academy in various ways, but this may not be recognized by their colleagues or the academy at large. We have to balance performing competence and educating people about access needs while pursuing our scholarly agendas and performing incompetence to establish accommodations.

**1001 Small Victories**

In our complicity, we have found ways to resist. Deaf scholars have created an international network, holding our first meeting in Texas in 1999. Since then, we have held international biennial meetings. In the age of social media, much of our conversations have transitioned to a loosely formed global network of deaf scholars who connect to each other despite disparate research interests.

Deaf scholars organize reading groups and writing retreats that attracts deaf scholars from across the globe and at all levels of the writing process from graduate students completing their theses to senior scholars completing manuscripts for publication. Those reading groups and writing retreats are organized by deaf scholars, who offer guidance and support to junior and early-career researchers.

In addition to self-organized spaces, deaf scholars have also found niches within institutions like the now-defunct Centre for Deaf Studies at the University of Bristol, the Deaf Mobilities research group at Heriot Watt University, and Bridges to the Doctorate in Rochester, New York, a collaboration between the University of Rochester and Rochester Institute of Technology. We also undertake scholarly studies on deaf eco-systems and

workplace changes (O'Brien, 2020b). Our public intellectual and public service work comes in many different forms. Some of us are active tweeters, some of us share content of our presentations on e.g. our personal websites, we established refereed academic journals and websites like *Journal of American Sign Languages and Literatures* and http://acadeafic.org/ to share sign language and Deaf Studies research, contribute to research impact, and to do so (also) in signed languages. Finally, some of us are leveraging our growing and constant existence to dismantle and transform the current infrastructure of the academe and calling for our tenured and nondeaf and more privileged faculty to make it more accessible, inclusive, and just for everyone.

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