

# To Hear the Deaf

by Jessica Guo

*I usually start writing with an outline detailing every argument and supporting evidence that I'm going to use, while also trying to be flexible as I write, following the natural flow of thoughts. By the time I submitted my 2nd draft of this essay, I had already gained a clear understanding of the story I wanted to tell. There was only one thing that I was unsure about: how to end it. I brought it to a Tandon EWP faculty member, but she started to criticize my work without even fully examining it. Frustrated, I brought it back to Prof. Edwards before the final revision and he not only provided helpful feedback on how to construct an ending but also gave me the confidence to follow the established path of my argument. I think that's an important lesson for everyone. Don't be intimidated by others' comments because, at the end of the day, you are the most authentic reader of your work. Be brave, be bold.*

*Last semester was also a transition period for me as I started to take more advanced Social & Cultural Analysis courses that deal with the more subtle intersections between race, gender, sexuality, and (dis)ability in our everyday lives. It was a refreshing experience being introduced to Disability Studies as an able-bodied person. Everyone lives in this world as a cultural being and I consider it my responsibility to challenge certain cultural hierarchies that we follow, consciously or subconsciously. I'm glad that I used this progression as an opportunity to challenge the way that many people, myself included, used to (and still do) think about (dis)ability.*

—Jessica Guo

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It was a Monday morning. The flag climbed up the pole as we sang the national anthem. When the music stopped, a girl appeared on the stage to deliver a speech. I can't remember the topic now; all I remember is the way she spoke—like an accent, but not quite. The students started murmuring, asking why this person was giving a speech. Five minutes later, the vice principal appeared on the stage. He thanked the girl and explained to the student body that she was deaf, and wore a cochlear implant and a hearing aid. Now it all made sense; on the way back to the classroom, we nodded and continued about our school day as if the morning's assembly never happened.

It was not until years later, when I began to learn about the field of Disability Studies and watched the documentary *Sound and Fury*, that I came to appreciate the strong social fabric of Deaf culture and the profound implications behind the implant the girl in my middle school

wore. The film, directed by Josh Aronson, centers around Peter Artinian and his brother Chris. Peter, his wife Nita, and all of their children are deaf, while Chris and his wife Mari are both hearing. When one of their twins is born deaf, hearing parents Chris and Mari decide to get their infant son a cochlear implant, while deaf parents Peter and Nita reject this idea for their daughter Heather, who is also deaf. During the film, Peter and Nita move away from their extended family to live in a community in Maryland that is more supportive of Deaf culture.

When they decide not to get a cochlear implant for Heather, Peter and Nita are accused of “abusive behavior” by their family. Peter responds bitterly, “My mother thinks it’s tragic that Heather can’t speak like a hearing person and I know that some people think that deaf people not implanting their children is abusive. But you know what? It’s the same thing with hearing people. They automatically implant their children and they don’t know anything at all about deafness and I say that’s abusive” (*Sound and Fury*, 00:51:15-00:51:37). The question naturally arises, what is it about deafness and Deaf culture that hearing people fail to understand?

In her article “*Sound and Fury*; or Much Ado about Nothing? Cochlear Implants in Historical Perspective,” R. A. R. Edwards writes: “one can be deaf without necessarily being Deaf” (894). The difference between being “deaf” and “culturally Deaf” corresponds directly to the Artinian family’s different understandings of deafness, and centers on the question of Deaf culture. In her detailed historical account, Edwards articulates not only what it means to participate in Deaf culture but also the historical context that led to the Deaf community’s rejection of technological methods to “cure” deafness, including hearing aids and cochlear implants. The key to understanding “deafness” on its own terms, Edwards suggests, is recognizing that Deaf culture has “a different center” (Padden and Humpries, qtd. in Edwards 894). For hearing people, deafness is seen as a medical condition, as something that needs to be cured. But for deaf people, especially culturally Deaf people, not being able to hear does not undermine their ability to function, and is therefore not a “disability” in the common understanding of the word. Just as hearing people are native users of various oral languages, deaf people are native users of sign language. The notion of a “cure” suggests that an ailment exists in the first place—a notion the Deaf community rejects.

Eunjung Kim offers a more rigorous definition in her book *Curative Violence*. She writes, “I approach cure in two ways: first, as a crossing of times and categories through metamorphosis, and second, as a transaction of gains and negotiation that involves various effects, including the uncertainty of gains and the possibility of harms—caused by what I call ‘curative violence’—as well as what are considered benefits” (10). Within the Artinian family, the “cure” is a cochlear implant that enhances hearing ability. Peter was concerned that if his deaf daughter Heather received an implant, she would never find her way in the Deaf community, and would therefore lose her connection to her deaf family. To Peter, the cochlear implant represents a cultural crossing through a bodily transition. Not only is the procedure itself “invasive,” Peter argues, when weighed against the loss of emotional and cultural connection, the potential gains of hearing do not seem to be balanced or even guaranteed (00:08:20-00:08:21). The Artinian grandparents’ continuous pressure on Peter and Nita reflects Kim’s concept of curative violence influenced by the greater social landscape.

Without using the term exactly, Edwards applies this “curative violence” concept to the Deaf culture context. She starts the argument by introducing how the concept of Oralism, which “was never merely a pedagogy,” that emphasizes lip-reading and speech therapy and forbids all forms of signed language, “drew deeply from another late nineteenth-century strain of thought, namely, eugenics” (901). Oralism, Edwards argues, aims to eliminate the Deaf community because of “its foreignness and difference” (902). Of course, the Deaf community rejects this framing and fights back fiercely with different strategies. Edwards reminds us that when the hearing aid was invented in the twentieth century, “the timing of its introduction and the taint imparted by its early adoption in oral classrooms almost guaranteed that many in the Deaf community . . . would see it as both eugenic and oralist in its implications” (902). Deaf Americans have responded similarly to cochlear implants today.

But this does not simply mean that the Deaf community rejects technological advancements as a whole; rather, as Edwards explains, the “Deaf community [supported] a technological development that respected deafness, that tried to change deaf people’s lives, not their bodies”: the teletypewriter (TTY), which allowed deaf people to send print messages along phone lines (905). While deafness is often pathologized by the hearing world and portrayed as a disadvantage, the Deaf community consciously and actively selects technologies that aid in communication and daily functioning without attempting to erase their deafness. This deliberate selection reflects the Deaf community’s insistence that they have the capacity and the right to choose what’s truly beneficial for them. Despite this repeated call for bodily autonomy, specifically when it comes to implanting deaf toddlers, Deaf adults are often excluded from conversations regarding medical decisions for deaf children of hearing parents. In 1957, the *Silent Worker*, a magazine for the deaf, published an editorial titled “To Whom Is Speech of Significant Concern?” which argued, “the only people who are usually asked this question, are ‘the psychologists, the psychiatrist, . . . , the orator, [and] the teacher’ What about deaf adults?” the editorial wondered. “Isn’t their opinion worthy of consideration?” (qtd. in Edwards 907).

Deaf activism was born in this context, due to the exclusion of deaf adults from policy-making and the portrayal of deafness in everyday life. In the late twentieth century, deaf activists were often inspired by the Civil Rights Movement and the Gay Rights Movement, adopting slogans like “Deaf Pride” (Edwards 908). As one of the activists’ deaf son states, “I want to be an original deaf person—not an artificial deaf person” (qtd. in Edwards 908). Activists and scholars also introduced the concept of audism, discrimination based on hearing ability, arguing that audist’s attempts at “disciplining Deaf bodies into becoming closer to normal hearing bodies” reflect a deeply problematic logic: “*Speech is language; language is human; therefore, deaf people are inhuman, and deafness is a problem*” (qtd. in Edwards 908). Deaf activists push back against the social mainstream that fails to recognize their humanity.

In an effort to challenge the framing of Deafness as an ailment, some in the Deaf community point to the gay community’s struggle toward acceptance. Not so long ago homosexuality was pathologized by the medical community in a way that seems unthinkable today. Journalist David Firestone writes, “Twenty-five years ago, the arguments for curing gayness seemed as unarguable as the arguments for curing the deaf seem to be now,” (68). As this logic goes, if views on homosexuality evolved thanks to the work of activists, so might our thinking about

Deafness. However, this parallel is imperfect and perhaps even problematic. Although the gay and deaf communities are marginalized in similar ways, so-called gay conversion therapy is proven to have harmful effects, while the supposed “cure” for Deafness—an implant—is FDA approved. Indeed, an implant may be a viable option for some, but as Edwards reminds us hearing people tend to assume that “there is only one possible cultural meaning to being unable to hear” (918). In spite of the many strides made by Deaf activists, Edwards takes a more pessimistic view of the future than Firestone: “Though Deaf people value their Deafness and have been saying so for over one hundred years in the United States, most of the hearing community has yet to hear them ” (918).

Aronson revisited the Artinian family in a follow-up documentary, *Sound and Fury: Six Years Later*. After eventually receiving a cochlear implant at the age of 9, three years after the initial documentary, Heather had developed her speaking and hearing ability and assimilated well in a hearing school. The family moved back to New York and all the kids have received the implants—even Heather’s mother Nita got an implant to show support. The family appears to have overcome their initial worries and seems happy, as Peter puts it, to see “that Heather is now part of both the Deaf and the hearing worlds. Before she was only in the Deaf world, but now she has the opportunity to be in both” (*Sound and Fury: Six Years Later*, 00:17:28-00:17:38).

It is important to notice that the major sponsor of Aronson’s second film is the Cochlear Americas Corporation. This suggests that the narrative that Aronson chose to portray might not have captured all of the gains and losses along the journey. The language on Cochlear Americas’ website still resembles the dominant, problematic narrative. “Time To Get Back What You’ve Been Missing,” it says, casting deafness as a weakness to be cured, and the implant as a medical miracle. Advocates for the Deaf community, however, argue that such thinking threatens to eliminate Deaf identity and history. The struggle of the Deaf community has never ended—it is a perpetual ongoing war.

I keep wondering what the experience of the girl in my middle school was like—did she know how to sign? When did she get implanted? Were her parents deaf or hearing? Did she consider herself culturally Deaf? Had she been given the chance to make the choice herself? All these questions remain unanswered because I never talked to her then, and because the Deaf conversation has only relatively recently entered mainstream public discourse. This is not to say that the Deaf activists haven’t done enough. Rather, it is the hearing majority who choose not to listen to the Deaf community’s message. The Deaf community and its culture persisted and survived the age of hearing aids, and maybe we can speculate a similar result in the age of the cochlear implant. But at the same time, no one really knows. When we think about the fact that 90% of deaf children are born to hearing parents, we realize the Deaf conversation cannot be a conversation limited to its own community. Shifting the power dynamic will require extra work on hearing people’s part to listen.

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