Karen Nakamura

DEAF IN JAPAN

SIGNING AND THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY

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This book is dedicated to my mother and father,
who probably never dreamed that their child
would follow in their footsteps.

Note on Transliterations and Translations

I have romanized Japanese words using a modified Hepburn system, and given local terms in the text in italics when clarification is useful: *rōa* (deaf) or *shuwa* (signing). For names and words that have entered common use in the United States, the English spelling is used: Tokyo, Showa.

Japanese names are given in the culturally appropriate order, family name first, except when I am discussing a person who has published in English or is otherwise known to Americans: for example, Suzuki Tarō and Yamada Hanako, but Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone. When referring to informants who are not public figures, I use the –san honorific as a sign of respect. Politicians, movement leaders, authors, and other public figures are referred to by family name only, as is standard in academic practice.

All translations are mine unless otherwise identified. Japanese Sign translations were verified with native signers where possible. Names of government ministries are those used prior to the January 6, 2001, reorganization. The former names of current political parties (for example, Japanese Socialist Party) are also used, reflecting the time period in which the research was conducted.

In accord with customary Deaf Studies transliteration practice in the United States, signing is glossed in UPPER CASE. The reader should note that while signers often use grammatical markers such as facial movements or speed or direction of signs, these are not included in glosses. A gloss such as CAR-BUY can seem ungrammatical, but the subject–object relationship is indicated in sign through placement of the

CAR noun and direction of the BUY verb hand movement. Depending on these factors, CAR-BUY could be: I bought a car; she bought my car; he bought many cars; or he bought her car. I avoid glosses except where they are absolutely necessary to clarify meaning or when they have entered colloquial usage.

Preface

After a long day of rather boring meetings, the dinner party was a welcome affair. The Tochigi Prefectural Deaf Association had rented one of the larger banquet halls at a hotel in the Kinugawa hot springs resort northeast of Tokyo, where they were hosting the regional deaf conference. A short table for the five honored guests was at the front of the room with two long tables extended down the center, seating about fifty people. The conference participants sat quietly during the formal speeches, but as soon as the food and drinks were brought in, the room exploded with laughter and sound. People chatted in sign. One by one, the various conference members shuffled to the front of the room with large sake bottles to honor and fill the cups of the dignitaries, who were slowly but surely becoming very, very drunk. The man next to me was trying to teach me the signs for some words that I would not normally encounter in polite conversation. We were constantly interrupted by a steady stream of table banging, hand waving, and shouts of "oi, oi!" (hey! hey!) around us, as people tried to get the attention of their friends across the room. Someone was at the front of the room, doing a sign improvisation skit.

I FIRST began studying Japanese deaf identity, politics, and sign language in the mid-nineties. Although I am hearing, I was attracted to this topic for two reasons. The first was the intellectual challenge. We do not think of Japan as a hotbed of minority identity, yet deaf groups there are vibrant and politically active. As an anthropologist, I had been interested in minority politics and social mobilization, and studying the deaf seemed to present a novel case.

I was also attracted to the deaf for personal reasons. Their liminal position in Japanese society mirrors my own experiences as a "returnee Japanese" (*kikokushijo*), a Japanese national who was raised abroad as a child and returned in late adolescence. Many returnees face social discrimination because of their linguistic and cultural difference from the mainstream (cf. Goodman 1990). Like returnees, the deaf men and women in this book are Japanese by birth and blood, but are a marginalized minority. Deaf people are linguistically different, culturally different, and politically different from the mainstream, and yet, unlike many other excluded minority groups in Japan, they have managed to argue for a place in Japan *as* Japanese. I had a vested interest in understanding what it was about the deaf community that allowed it to succeed in such a hostile climate.

THE common impression that hearing people have of the existence of the deaf is that of the "silent world," a world bereft of all sound, thankfully void of TV commercials and cars honking, but also lacking laughter, the sound of music, or your mother's voice. This image of silence, an absence of sound, is perhaps the one that is least apt for describing the deaf, either from an external, "objective" hearing person's standpoint or from the perspective of deaf persons themselves.

Gatherings of deaf people are rarely silent. The deaf parties that I attended were just as raucous as any hearing gathering of Japanese people. Their only saving grace was the absence of drunken renditions of country music songs on the *karaoke*, but there were often impromptu comic acts and storytelling instead. Deaf people often vocalize while signing; when they laugh or cry or express feeling, they use their vocal cords as well as their hands. Foot stomping and table banging are common ways to get someone's attention. While it is possible to sign in absolute silence, many doing so find it about as comfortable as a hearing person would trying to speak without using his hands or facial gestures for embellishment. Some amount of sound is part of normal signing, from claps of the hands or snaps of the fingers to vocalizing words or exclamations.

From a deaf person's perspective, the world is hardly silent either. Very few have total hearing loss; most will pick up some degree of environmental sounds even if speech is unintelligible or only moderately intelligible with a very powerful hearing aid. Some have tinnitus or ringing in the ears. Even for those who are profoundly deaf, the world is a noisy place in terms of vibrations. There is a story of a student at Gallaudet University in Washington, DC (the only four-year college for the

deaf in the world), who could not study in her dorm room because the vibrations of people running up and down her hallway always made her want to poke her head out to see what was going on. While deaf people do not gain a "sixth sense," they often pay more attention to things that hearing people ignore or that are washed away in the rush of other senses, such as vibrations and movement in their peripheral vision.

Given the perceptual and cultural gulf between hearing and deaf people, what does it mean to be a hearing anthropologist working with deaf communities? Although ethnographic writing attempts to get into the shoes (or sandals) of native informants, there are limitations to even the deepest of ethnographies or thickest of descriptions. Can one really understand what it means to be in a different culture, to grow up with a different language and belief system, or to occupy a different type of body? As both authors and readers of ethnographies, we are limited by our language, culture, gender, age, religion, and, in my own case, my status as hearing (or, more accurately, not-deaf).

Given this, do I personally know what it is like to be deaf? After a decade of working on the topic of deafness in Japan, I have an inkling of some aspects, mostly the positive social ones. For example, I have sensed what it means to be part of the community, to share a common language among friends, but I do not know how itchy hearing aids get in the humid summers or how annoying they can be when they feedback. Although I have on occasion traveled in Southeast Asia where I did not understand the local language, this experience pales in comparison with the experiences of my deaf friends in their own country. As a native English and Japanese speaker and listener, I rest on centuries of linguistic colonialism and a "rational" biomedical view of the body that sees impairment as loss. When communication breaks down in a foreign country, I can blame the Other in a way that deaf people in their own country cannot, since they themselves are constructed as not only biologically lacking, but also as intellectually inferior owing to the perception that they lack (spoken) language.

Outside the disability community, able-bodied persons' temporary experiences with disability—a week where they had to use crutches, or visual sensitivity from a migraine—might lead many to believe that surely anyone would leap at any technology, any innovation, any chance to become "normal." Disability for the non-disabled often means loss. For the most part, though, people who were born with physical impairments do not talk about their lives in terms of loss, and those in the deaf community in Japan are no different.

Instead of the ways that their bodies have betrayed them, deaf people talk about the different opportunities their life courses have given them, the friendships made, the loves won and lost. Some people talk about their deafness as a gift or opportunity and would not want it taken away. If there is a sense of loss and frustration, it is directed toward those who are able-bodied but closed-minded: the parents who did not learn how to sign, the schoolteachers who could not communicate well enough to convey a full education, or the media that remain inaccessible. For in their conception, disability is a social issue—it is society that disables them, not their bodies. They might emphasize the cultural aspects of the deaf community—the development of sign language and deaf culture. However, there is considerable variation in attitudes and opinions within the deaf community, and some would disagree with this cultural framing of deafness and focus more on the politics of hearing impairment.

Intertwined in this book are many stories and one story. At its heart, it is a biography of a community going through generational changes. Deaf identities as well as the way people sign have changed in Japan over the last one hundred years. By tracing archival records, life histories, and institutional politics, I give several accounts of how the deaf community has been able to achieve important political gains and positive social acceptance when other minorities have not. Although I have tried to show multiple perspectives, ultimately this book is also one story, woven by one researcher. American Deaf readers may find that this book leans too much to the side of assimilation, social welfare, and disability politics while hearing readers may find my advocacy for vibrant cultural deafness to be slanted in the opposite direction. I hope this will mean that I have struck the right balance as well as opened space for further discussion of the issues involved.

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Portions of chapter 11 appear in a forthcoming article titled "Creating and Contesting Signs in Contemporary Japan: Language Ideologies, Identity, and Community in Flux" in the journal *Sign Language Studies*.

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