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An Interview with Annelies Kusters on Deaf Anthropology and more

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ABSTRACT
Annelies Kusters is a prominent figure in the field of Sociolinguistics and Deaf Community Studies. She is currently a professor in the Department of Languages and Intercultural Studies at Heriot-Watt University and has been a pioneering researcher in Deaf Studies and sign language research. Originally from Belgium, she has conducted ethnographic research in Deaf communities across various regions, including Ghana, India, Suriname, and Europe. Her research interests include topics such as mobility and multimodal interaction between Deaf and hearing individuals, sign language ideologies and practices (including International Sign), and processes of translanguaging. Kuster's work is characterized by an interdisciplinary approach that integrates Anthropology, Sociolinguistics, Cultural Studies, and ethnographic filmmaking methods.

KEY WORDS
Annelies Kusters, Deaf Anthropology, Intersectionality, Deaf Studies.

UNA ENTREVISTA CON ANNELIES KUSTERS SOBRE* DEAF ANTHROPOLOGY *Y MÁS

RESUMEN
Annelies Kusters es una figura destacada en el ámbito de la sociolingüística y los estudios sobre Comunidades Sordas. Actualmente, imparte clases en el Departamento de Lenguas y Estudios Interculturales de la Heriot-Watt University y ha abierto camino en la investigación sobre *Deaf Studies* y la lengua de signos. Nacida en Bélgica, ha realizado estudios etnográficos en Comunidades Sordas de diversas regiones, como Ghana, India, Surinam y Europa. Su trabajo abarca temas como la interacción multimodal entre personas sordas y oyentes, las prácticas e ideas relacionadas con la lengua de signos (incluida la *International Sign*) y los procesos de *translenguaje*. Kusters se caracteriza por un enfoque interdisciplinario que fusiona la antropología, la sociolingüística y los estudios culturales, integrando además la filmación etnográfica como herramienta clave en su investigación.

PALABRAS CLAVE
Annelies Kusters, Deaf Anthropology, Interseccionalidad, Deaf Studies.

This interview with Professor Annelies Kusters unfolded over the course of eleven months through an ongoing exchange of emails. Since she is deaf and the interviewer is hearing and does not use sign language, a fully written format was chosen, without the involvement of an interpreter. This approach ensured direct and equitable communication, while also allowing for more thoughtful and reflective responses. It fostered a collaborative methodological process in which both parties could adjust the pace and content according to their needs. The goal was to maintain the conversational tone and spontaneity characteristic of spoken interviews. As is often the case in oral exchanges, especially when what is said becomes archived over time, some parts of the dialogue that appear early in the final version were actually conceived and placed later in the process, or vice versa. The work progressed through several stages. Initially, a proposed script outlining the interview topics was shared. After reviewing this draft, Kusters recommended reading some of her publications to avoid repetition or overlapping. This review phase lasted approximately two months. A final version of the script was then agreed upon and adjusted periodically as the conversation developed. The interview reflects an academic interest in exploring methodological approaches developed by deaf researchers, an area that remains underrepresented in Spanish-speaking academia. The decision to interview Annelies Kusters was based on her trajectory as a deaf anthropologist and the significance of her work in bringing attention to practices, epistemologies, and ontologies that have yet to gain widespread visibility in the Ibero-American academic context.

Pedro Salguero [PS]: So, what first drew you to Anthropology, and what keeps you in the field today? I'm also curious about how your journey in Anthropology unfolded — from your undergrad days to your thesis. Was there a key moment or person who really shaped your perspective, or any challenges that stood out for you? And since you've mentioned joining the Deaf Community later in life, how did that impact your identity and change the way you approach your work in Anthropology?

Annelies Kusters [AK]: Since I was a child, I was fascinated by collecting stamps from around the world. I ended up with quite a large collection, and this hobby introduced me to other countries through the artwork, themes, photos on the stamps, and postmarks on the stamps. So, from an early age, I was curious about different cultures and places. As soon as I turned 18, I started volunteering in countries like Romania, Ukraine, and Portugal during holidays. I was also a scout leader, and we traveled abroad for camps. During the year I studied at university but I

took on admin work to fund my travels. Volunteering was the most affordable way to travel and the best way to meet people and explore local areas.

Since Anthropology wasn't offered as a bachelor's degree in Flanders, where I lived, I decided to pursue it at the master's level. I needed to choose a different subject for my BA, so I opted for Philosophy. I enjoyed Philosophy immensely, and it laid an excellent foundation for my later studies in Anthropology.

My interest in deaf cultures developed later. Initially, it was through Anthropology, as deaf culture was one of the dissertation topics we could choose. I got interested and I read several of the foundational texts in Deaf Studies, recommended to me by my professor, Patrick Devlieger, who specialized in the Anthropology of Disability. Although he wasn't an expert in Deaf Studies, he pointed me in the right direction. These texts were eye-opening, especially in how they revealed the depth and richness of deaf culture.

Those books helped me understand the broader context of deaf history, oralism as a form of oppression, and the experiences of deaf people who started signing later in life, just as I did. This reframed how I saw my own past. It helped me feel more connected to the Deaf Community. Before, I had hard of hearing friends, a deaf sister and a deaf cousin who all spoke and went to mainstream hearing schools just like me. However, I also knew of one mainstreamed deaf person who had become a signer in his twenties, so I understood it was not too late to learn a sign language, which influenced my own decision to embrace signing.

For my MA dissertation, I chose to study deaf culture in Surinam, partly because it's a Dutch-speaking country —I was not comfortable with English yet, back then. I had received funding for students who wanted to do their dissertations abroad, and Surinam seemed like the perfect fit. The Anthropology course I was in was a two-year master's program with many courses and a significant dissertation component. Students did not have to do their dissertation abroad, but I was immensely hungry for travel and learning about different cultures.

I spent three months in Surinam in 2004, living near a residential school for deaf children and adults, which also housed the alumni deaf association. I went to the school daily and began learning the sign language used there. I learned Dutch Sign Language, which had been imported, but I also picked up local Surinamese signs. My dissertation focused on the deaf community's emancipation and the legacy of Dutch colonialism in the deaf school and community.

After Surinam, I immersed myself in the Flemish deaf community and joined a youth deaf club in Flanders. I attended every event, weekend camp, and activity. That's where I started learning Flemish Sign Language.

In 2006, towards the end of my Anthropology studies, I volunteered in a deaf school in Ghana for three months through a Dutch organization —and learned some Ghanaian Sign Language in the process. I completed my Anthropology course in three years instead of two, because of my time in Surinam and Ghana.

In my last year of Anthropology, I applied for funding to pursue a MSc in Deaf Studies at Bristol University, which I was fortunate enough to receive. I was very eager to continue to learn about deaf cultures. I immensely enjoyed the MSc in Deaf Studies, which was based in a Centre where British Sign Language was the language of communication.

The fact that I came from an Anthropology background also meant that I could see what perspectives were missing in Deaf Studies. Deaf Studies itself is interdisciplinary, but when I entered the field in 2006, it was heavily focused on the UK and USA. The landscape has since changed significantly, although the publications on the Global South are still predominantly authored by white people from the Global North.

At that time, I saw it as my mission to push towards opening up Deaf Studies with perspectives from all over the world. For my MSc in Deaf Studies dissertation, I conducted fieldwork in India. Earlier in the year, I had attended a conference there and was very interested in how deaf people navigated the city of Mumbai when they led me around. So, I basically did anthropological fieldwork again, but now with more of a Deaf Studies framework in my written dissertation. My dissertation focused on the Mumbai trains, where I observed how deaf people used the space for social interactions.

I then applied for a PhD in Deaf Studies at the same university, with research based in Ghana. I received funding from the university to start my PhD and cobbled together the funding for fieldwork from various other funding sources. Through my work in Surinam and during my literature studies, I had developed a strong interest in rural communities where deaf people use a locally emerged sign language. I was aware of such communities in Surinam and through the literature I learned about such a community in Ghana. Since I had already spent a few months in the country interacting with deaf people, I could envision myself returning. This became the focus of my PhD. I spent nine months in Adamorobe village across three visits. In between I lived in Bristol and returned to India several times, as I had met my future husband there, who is from India.

During the last year of my PhD, I moved to India while writing my thesis. Shortly after submitting my dissertation, our first baby was born. I didn't have a paid job for about two years after submitting the PhD. During that time, I published my PhD in articles, applied many times for postdoc funding, and also pursued another research project as it itched to do research —continuing the Mumbai train study that I had started five years earlier.

In 2013, finally secured a postdoctoral position in a research centre in Goettingen dedicated to studying diversity: The Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity. This interdisciplinary environment —anthropologists, political scientists, sociologists— was incredibly stimulating. The center focused on various forms of diversity — social, cultural, religious, and linguistic. My boss asked me to focus on linguistic diversity and sent me to international sociolinguistics meetings funded by a project for internationalisation, a smallish workshop group that got together regularly, and where most scholars used the translanguaging framework. That's where I truly found my place, which is why I now identify more as a sociolinguist. He also suggested that I make a film, as several projects in the institute at the time were producing ethnographic documentary films. So, it's thanks to him —Professor Steven Vertovec— that I was able to find my path into Sociolinguistics and ethnographic filmmaking.

At this research center, I conducted linguistic ethnography, doing a study about gesture-based communication between deaf and hearing people in India, and creating my first film —Ishaare: Gestures and Signs in Mumbai[1]. My previous research had touched on language ideologies, but it wasn't the central focus. Through this project though, I became more attuned to the nuances of linguistic behavior and language ideologies. Attending Sociolinguistic and Applied Linguistic events and conferences from 2013 onwards further cemented these interests. These fields bring together people from diverse disciplines, and Linguistic Ethnography serves as a bridge between linguists interested in everyday behaviors and anthropologists or other social scientists interested in language.

The UK and Europe don't have the same tradition of Linguistic Anthropology as the US does. In the UK, people with those interests tend to gravitate toward Sociolinguistics and Applied Linguistics. So that is how I came to disassociate from Anthropology. Also, many of the scholars that I met in the fields of applied Linguistics and Sociolinguistics were

1. Film available at https://www.mmg.mpg.de/1124257/ishaare-gestures-and-signs-in-mumbai.

highly interested in sign languages, as we examine similar issues —language ideologies, power dynamics in language use, multimodal communication. The parallels are easy to draw, and we learn much from each other's work.

In 2017, I came to the UK with ERC[2] Starting Grant funding for the MobileDeaf project. During my postdoc at the institute in Germany, I had been applying for assistant professor positions as well as major grants to establish myself as a scholar. When I received the ERC Starting Grant, I was offered a permanent position at Heriot-Watt University. Heriot-Watt was an emerging institution for sign language and Deaf Studies research, and now, after the MobileDeaf project and other projects led by deaf scholars, it has become an important hub for Deaf Studies in the UK. I am based in the Department of Languages and Intercultural Studies, which focuses on interpretation, translation, multilingualism, and related areas. Several researchers in the department also concentrate on cultural studies themes like migration or theatre and museum studies. When I became a full professor in 2023, I chose to settle on the title of Professor of Sociolinguistics, as I felt it better encapsulated my expertise than either Anthropology or Deaf Studies alone, and it is short and sweet.

Even though I identify more with Sociolinguistics and Applied Linguistics now, my roots in Anthropology remain cherished. Ethnography is still my core approach to research, even though I now combine it with other approaches and have worked on projects that didn't involve ethnography. For example, I co-conducted not only the MobileDeaf project, but also a study on Small World, a deaf TV series akin to Friends, a project on family language policy, and a project on deaf people's TV watching habits. In all these projects, I worked with a range of visual methods, including methods that involve film. So, I have expanded my methodological toolkit, but ethnography remains at the heart of my work.

In recent years, I have published in Anthropology, Human Geography, Sociolinguistics and Applied Linguistics journals, although the latter two have become much more dominant. When I attend Anthropology workshops or lectures, I find that while my work is appreciated, the synergy and enthusiasm I experience in Applied Linguistics and Sociolinguistics spaces are unmatched.

[PS]: You've highlighted the potential conflict between political projects involving deaf researchers and academic success, despite the vital role they play in building deaf capital. Could you share how many projects

2. European Research Council.

you're currently engaged in and discuss how you navigate maintaining a prolific academic career alongside your political activism?

[AK]: I'm not sure what you mean by my political activism. What you might call activism, I would describe as capacity building for deaf academics and creating space for them within academia.

For example, with the MobileDeaf project, I was able to bring in four other deaf scholars — two postdocs and two PhD candidates — and later, another PhD candidate joined. I've also worked on two other research projects that explicitly included capacity building for deaf researches, where they received training in filmmaking, interviewing, and focus group facilitation. Additionally, I support potential deaf PhD students at the university, helping them prepare to apply for a PhD, as applications in the UK typically require a well-developed proposal. I now supervise nine deaf PhD students, seven at my university and two at universities. I have mentored several deaf postdocs and early career colleagues. I'm also involved in various training efforts, such as workshops for deaf people at conferences, including the *Dr. Deaf* initiative which organises 5-day residential workshops for deaf academics twice every year.

[PS]: I can imagine balancing work with family life must be a challenge —how do you manage it?

[AK]: While living in India, I stayed home with our first child while my husband worked as a sign language teacher, and I worked a few hours each day at my in-laws' house while they looked after the baby. When we moved to Germany, I worked while my husband stayed home with the children. Our second child was born in Germany, and I stayed home for a year, working while the baby slept. Neither child attended childcare during their first three years, and I breastfed both for three years each, which required careful planning when I had to travel. Balancing work and travel became most challenging during the MobileDeaf project with fieldwork in several countries, especially as we had no family in the UK. My Belgian family occasionally helped when both Sujit and I were doing international research together, and when we returned to India for four months to make a film, my Indian in-laws helped with childcare in Mumbai. My husband returned to work when our second child started primary school. Now that the children are almost 10 and 13, life is a bit easier. Currently, I'm at Gallaudet on a Fulbright, and the family joined me, so we get to spend more time together.

[PS]: How does it feel to be the first deaf scholar to attain full professor status in Deaf Studies and Sign Language Studies in the UK?

[AK]: To be honest it is overdue as there are 10-15 hearing people in the UK who are full professor in these fields. Deaf Studies and sign language research took off in the UK in the late 1970s! I was educated by deaf lecturers in Bristol in 2006 and a deaf scholar — Dr. Paddy Ladd — supervised my PhD at the University of Bristol. It's a surreal realization that I've reached a position that many of my deaf peers, and those who directly mentored me, haven't. Despite my achievements, I'm constantly reminded of the privileges I've been granted, not to mention the added dimension that I'm originally from Belgium, not the UK. This particular detail further accentuates the UK's reputation, especially my university, as a beacon attracting deaf scholars globally. I remain optimistic about the future. I'm certain we'll witness more deaf individuals achieving full professorship in the coming years in the UK, as some deaf scholars are currently associate professor. Truly, any one of them could have very well been in this pioneering position.

[PS]: Why is it important for deaf scholars to hold top positions in academia?

[AK]: The importance of having deaf scholars in top academic positions extends beyond representation. Academia has traditionally been phono— and logocentric, largely centered on spoken language and the written word. This entrenched perspective often overlooks the rich, complex structures and worldviews embedded in sign languages and the experiences of deaf people. Sign languages are not merely manual versions of spoken languages; they have their own unique syntax, pragmatics, and semantics, offering different insights into cognition and society.

Deaf perspectives contribute significantly to academia by challenging and expanding conventional understandings of the human experience. For instance, like other disabled scholars, deaf and deafblind scholars bring attention to the connection with one's body in social interaction. Unlike phonocentric modes of interaction, sign languages are visuospatial and tactile, using signers' bodies to communicate concepts and experiences. Not all deaf scholars sign, but all have different experiences of embodied communication than hearing people. Research conducted by deaf and deafblind scholars can illuminate how diverse sensory orientations shape languages, social interactions, cultural products and their impact on humanity.

Moreover, the contributions of deaf scholars have paved the way for a stronger focus on multimodality and visual methods in research. Deaf scholars' uses of such methods align with communication preferences of deaf research participants and deaf students but also enrich academic disciplines. The ethnographic films created by deaf scholars, for instance, differ from those made by hearing people (explored in https://vimeo.com/142241532 and https://mobiledeaf.org.uk/film/birthing/). They centralise visual communication by filming it and through particular editing styles.

However, most deaf scholars in Deaf Studies who are employed at British universities are teaching in sign language programmes. There is a need for academic structures to provide more opportunities for deaf scholars to explore their interests beyond their roles in teaching sign languages and training sign language interpreters. Greater support for postdoctoral research and academic positions that allow deaf scholars to study different topics would significantly contribute to the diversification of research topics and methodologies in academia. This extends to fields beyond Deaf Studies; deaf scientists for example have had much to offer to the development of AI solutions.

Holding top academic positions can also be leveraged by deaf scholars to secure significant funding and resources, which are necessary to establish research teams that can explore areas aligned with their expertise and interests. With this level of control and influence, they hopefully can shape research agendas, create new academic programs, and establish research groups or centers dedicated to Deaf Studies and related fields. One groundbreaking example is the MobileDeaf project I led from 2017-2023 (https://mobiledeaf.org.uk), which was a fully deaf research team generously funded by the European Research Council. This project explored how deaf people from different countries interact with each other and adapt their signing to be understood across different sign languages and signing practices. The project is an innovative exploration of how globalization and mobility shape language practices within deaf communities.

By leading such projects, deaf scholars can not only advance disciplines with fresh perspectives but also demonstrate the value of minority-led research. Moreover, such projects serve as a beacon to inspire and encourage the next generation of deaf researchers, proving that they too can attain leadership roles and make significant contributions to academia and beyond.

Having a greater number of deaf professors and high-ranking academic professionals is also crucial for fostering interdisciplinary collabo-

ration between deaf scholars across institutions. When deaf scholars occupy senior positions, they can effectively network and form partnerships that transcend individual institutions, promoting large-scale, interdisciplinary projects. Interdisciplinary projects led by deaf scholars can integrate knowledge from technology, social sciences, health studies, education, and more, providing comprehensive solutions and creating a diverse research environment.

[PS]: Given your position in academia, how do you make sure you're not reinforcing the power dynamics that often come with hearing-centric spaces?

[AK]: Even though I have plenty more to say about this topic — but not on the record —, I am Professor in Sociolinguistics, which involves research and teaching, mostly in relation to Deaf Studies and Sign Language Studies but I also teach occasionally in some other courses. I am especially passionate about supporting other deaf scholars in their careers, by supervising deaf scholars, mentoring, supporting my deaf colleagues, participating in international deaf scholars' networks, giving trainings, and so on. Let's say I try to make space for deaf scholars.

The establishment of deaf-centric and sign-language-centric spaces within and across universities — environments dedicated to sign language and direct communication without the mediation of interpreters — is not just beneficial but fundamental. Having benefited from such spaces in Bristol, I am actively working to create such spaces within and outside of my current university, but the journey is often met with resistance especially if such gatherings require funding, as administrators are typically not willing to fund spaces they see as exclusive of hearing non-signers.

To genuinely foster the growth of deaf scholars, we need access, but we also need alternative communication spaces and signing spaces, as mentioned above.

And universities need to be proactive. They could start by allowing peer environments specifically for deaf and/or signing scholars, implementing cluster hires, and establishing an (interdisciplinary, inter-university) center of excellence in Deaf Studies that can act as hubs for research, collaboration, and support. Finally, the re-establishment of an interdisciplinary Master's programme to bring together deaf students from various fields is a must.

[PS]: As a deaf professor, how do you navigate your role in teaching and mentoring students, and what are the implications of your deafness on your pedagogical approach and the students' academic journey?

[AK]: As a deaf lecturer teaching topics such as deaf culture, history, society, and politics, I bring a wealth of personal examples — not only from my own life but also from my network of deaf relatives, in-laws, friends, students, colleagues, and from my research. Each topic, whether it's how deaf people engage with technology or navigate societal structures, is enriched by these real-life stories and insights. I can share countless examples from both personal observations and research. Now, being in middle age, I add a longer-term perspective that highlights how much has changed over the years. Deaf life today is vastly different from what it was, and this evolution informs my teaching as well. I aim to show students the real, lived impacts of deafness on everything from daily interactions to career paths, family life and identity — lessons that go well beyond what they would find in textbooks. Through these examples, I encourage students to look beyond stereotypes about deaf people and engage deeply with the complexities of deaf experiences.

[PS]: You often emphasize the importance of positionality in your research. I would like to know how your positionality operates in relation to the English university/academia as a predominantly hearing-dominant space.

[AK]: I am not only deaf, but also a woman with two children and thus caregiving responsibilities, and a migrant. These dimensions add layers to my experience of working in academia and also the image others have of me. As I climb up on the academic ladder, it becomes increasingly hard to disentangle exactly how deafness, interpreter-mediated interaction, gender, and so on, impact the way I navigate academia. Being in a multiply minoritised position while being a professor also can mean you tick many EDI[3] boxes and are easily seen as token of inclusion. But we are here in the first place *despite* challenges, not necessarily *because* academia is so accessible and welcoming. I am acutely aware that my journey has been individual and privileged and that others face barriers that I did not.

[PS]: Over the course of your career, you have drawn on Anthropology, Sociolinguistics, and Cultural Studies to examine the linguistic practices and lived experiences of Deaf communities. This interdisciplinary perspec-

3. Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion.

tive has played a pivotal role in the development of Deaf Anthropology, a field that continues to emerge within the broader anthropological landscape. So, what exactly is Deaf Anthropology, and how does it differ from mainstream Anthropology? Does it bring a new perspective or approach to the field?

[AK]: Deaf Anthropology focuses on the study of deaf people's worldmaking, conducted by both deaf and hearing scholars. In the *Annual Review of Anthropology* article on «Deaf Anthropology» authored by Michele Friedner and me[4], we treat this term essentially as shorthand for the Anthropology of deaf people or deafness.

While Deaf Anthropology aligns with broader anthropological traditions, it places particular emphasis on how deaf people navigate being both a linguistic and a disabled minority. The overlap between language and disability shapes how identity, power, and cultural belonging are understood, making this a particularly rich site for anthropological inquiry.

[PS]: At what stage is Deaf Anthropology currently situated?

[AK]: Deaf Anthropology remains niche and largely fragmented. A few researchers focus on it, but there is little collective momentum — there are very limited joint publications, focused conferences, or dedicated research hubs. Several of us work across disciplines, integrating Linguistic Anthropology, Sociolinguistics, or Disability Studies, rather than seeing Deaf Anthropology as our only field or main field.

In my own experience, Anthropology as a discipline tends to view deaf people as just one of many cultural groups it studies, rather than as a core concern. This contrasts sharply with fields like Sociolinguistics and Applied Linguistics, where sign language research is now seen as contributing directly to broader debates on multimodality, multilingualism, and language ideologies, for example. In Anthropology, there is much less cross-pollination.

[PS]: What career prospects exist for future deaf anthropologists beyond academia?

[AK]: Very few. With a couple of exceptions, Anthropology Departments are typically not interested in someone working exclusively on Deaf Anthropology — unless they are a hearing scholar who treats

4. Friedner, M., and Kusters, A. (2020). Deaf Anthropology. *Annual Review of Anthropology, 49*, 31-47.

deafness as a temporary research focus before moving on to another subpopulation. Deaf anthropologists are more likely to sustain a long-term focus on deaf communities. As a result, they are also more likely to end up where deaf scholars as a whole often do: in sign language interpreting training, Deaf Studies, or sign language teaching.

[PS]: To what extent is it possible to assess the progress and impact of Deaf Anthropology at a global or regional level?

[AK]: Rather than thinking of Deaf Anthropology as a unified global or regional field, it is more accurate to see it as a collection of studies shaped by specific contexts and academic traditions. For some researchers, research on deaf communities has been more influenced by Disability Studies, while for others, they have embedded themselves in Linguistic Anthropology or Sociocultural Anthropology. There is no single trajectory, and Deaf Anthropology is not an institutionalized field in the way that, for example, Linguistic Anthropology is. Instead, it exists through the work of individual scholars who often engage with multiple disciplines. A comparative analysis of its progress would therefore require considering these disciplinary overlaps and regional differences rather than treating it as a coherent field with a singular impact.

[PS]: What are the implications of Deaf Anthropology's challenge to a discipline historically shaped by hearing white scholars?

[AK]: While some of these scholars have produced important work, offering strong analyses and valuable frameworks, they have, almost without exception, done little to ensure that deaf scholars are hired into Anthropology Departments or even to engage in collaborative research with deaf anthropologists. Instead, they have largely treated deaf people as subjects rather than colleagues. In contrast, where deaf faculty do exist in universities, they often work to open doors for other deaf scholars whenever possible — something that has not happened organically within Anthropology.

Interestingly, many hearing anthropologists of Deaf Anthropology work in the Global South and took the time to learn a local sign language to conduct their fieldwork, yet some of them are unable to have an intellectual conversation with deaf scholars in the sign language of the country where they work — such as ASL[5] or BSL[6], and are thus unable to commu-

5. American Sign Language.
6. British Sign Language.

nicate with deaf scholars in their country. This highlights an odd disconnect: anthropologists invest in learning the language of their deaf research subjects but remain linguistically isolated from the academic networks of deaf scholars. This reflects a broader issue in Deaf Anthropology, where linguistic immersion is valued for fieldwork but not necessarily for meaningful scholarly exchange.

[PS]: What does Deaf Anthropology lose and gain when conducted by hearing scholars?

[AK]: Hearing anthropologists often emphasize different aspects of research and may have less access to deaf spaces or lack the embodied experience of being deaf. However, they do tend to have easier access to hearing people around deaf individuals — family members, educators, policymakers — whom they can interview in spoken languages. This allows them to incorporate perspectives that are often more challenging for deaf scholars to access. The most productive outcome would be a balance of deaf and hearing scholars working together in the field of Deaf Anthropology, but in practice, most if not all hearing anthropologists focusing on Deaf Anthropology work alone.

[PS]: Are new ways of development being co-constructed? Are historical power imbalances being questioned effectively?

[AK]: I'm not sure. In some cases, hearing anthropologists have built on the written work of deaf scholars. I have seen hearing researchers use the contributions of deaf scholars as a springboard — engaging with their frameworks and theories, citing them, while simultaneously positioning themselves at the cutting edge of the field. Deaf scholars have worked hard to push Deaf Studies and Deaf Anthropology forward, yet hearing researchers, including those who do not sign at all, can now enter the conversation with relative ease, benefiting from those efforts without facing the same barriers or investing the same effort in immersion.

[PS]: What drives hearing researchers to delve into Deaf Anthropology today?

[AK]: Hearing people have always been part of deaf communities — there is no real debate about that. However, some hearing anthropologists lack the contextual awareness that comes from working within deaf spaces and have no experience of working with deaf people on an equal basis. I teach sign language interpreters and professionals who

work closely with deaf communities — and key themes in my teaching are power dynamics, positionality and the ethics of their role — in contrast many hearing anthropologists enter the field with the same mindset they would apply to any other anthropological study.

[PS]: How does this reality coexist with the importance you place on deaf-led processes in research?

[AK]: Deaf-led processes are inherently interdisciplinary. At my university, I am part of a research group called Signs@HWU. This group thrives because deaf and hearing researchers who focus on deaf communities and sign languages work across disciplines, following their interests and expertise rather than conforming to a single disciplinary identity. We successfully integrate fields such as sign Language Interpreting Studies, Deaf Studies, Sociolinguistics, and Business Studies.

[PS]: Does Deaf Anthropology find genuine opportunities in mainstream academic journals?

[AK]: Deaf Anthropology exists primarily in individual articles and monographs, rather than in regular dedicated special issues of Anthropology journals or edited volumes by anthropologists.

[PS]: Is Deaf Anthropology built upon an identity politics foundation?

[AK]: Some approaches may lean that way.

[PS]: Is it a form of Activist Anthropology?

[AK]: In my eyes, Deaf Anthropology is primarily about documenting what happens, analyzing social and cultural dynamics, and engaging with theoretical frameworks rather than being explicitly activist in nature. However, that does not mean it cannot have activist implications. The very act of centering deaf experiences, exposing inequalities, and challenging dominant hearing-centered narratives can have political consequences. Some anthropologists may engage in advocacy or apply their work toward social change, but that is not an inherent feature of Deaf Anthropology itself — it depends on the approach of individual researchers.

[PS]: Considering the history of Anthropology and the characteristics of Deaf Anthropology, can Deaf Anthropology be classified as a type of Postmodern Anthropology?

[AK]: I don't think I see it that way. While Deaf Anthropology does challenge dominant epistemologies and critiques traditional anthropological approaches — especially those that have historically treated deaf people as objects of study rather than active knowledge producers — it does not necessarily align with the core principles of Postmodern Anthropology.

Postmodern Anthropology is often characterized by a rejection of grand narratives, skepticism toward objective truth, reflexivity, and an emphasis on multiple, fragmented perspectives. While some aspects of Deaf Anthropology resonate with this — such as its critique of hearing hegemony and its emphasis on deaf epistemologies — it is not inherently postmodern.

Instead, Deaf Anthropology remains deeply engaged with material realities, power structures, and the lived experiences of deaf people, rather than fully embracing postmodern relativism. It also often constructs alternative epistemologies rather than just deconstructing existing ones. So, while there may be overlaps, I would not categorize Deaf Anthropology strictly as Postmodern Anthropology.

[PS]: Is the specific use of methodologies in Deaf Anthropology that «subvert» anthropological purism also a way to exercise the political aspect of your Anthropology (such as the use of video, involvement of interpreters in fieldwork, going to the Global South without considering «the exotic,» etc.)?

[AK]: I don't think these methodologies necessarily subvert anthropology, at least not in a way that makes Deaf Anthropology fundamentally distinct from other subfields of Anthropology. For example, there is already a strong tradition of Visual Anthropology, and many anthropologists — not just those working in Deaf Anthropology — incorporate film, photography, and multimedia in their research.

Likewise, the move away from exoticization is not exclusive to Deaf Anthropology but part of a broader disciplinary shift toward reflexivity, ethical engagement, and decolonizing methodologies. Many contemporary anthropologists actively work against othering their subjects, focusing instead on collaborative, community-centered research.

However, these methodological choices do carry political weight, particularly in how they challenge hearing-dominant research norms. The use of video, for instance, foregrounds signed languages as primary data, making deaf epistemologies more visible and resisting the idea that knowledge must always be written or spoken.

So, while these methods are not inherently political or subversive in themselves, their implementation within Deaf Anthropology does push against certain hegemonic norms, particularly the ways in which Anthropology has historically privileged spoken/written language and hearing-centered perspectives. In that sense, they contribute to a broader critique of disciplinary purism but do not constitute a radical break from Anthropology as a whole.

[PS]: Why is intersectionality so important for you and your work?

[AK]: Because moving beyond deaf-first politics is crucial. An intersectional lens is necessary to truly understand privilege, power relations, and the broader dynamics shaping deaf lives.

[PS]: Intersectionality can sometimes be employed without explicitly acknowledging its use as an analytical tool. In this regard, how do you personally construct and utilize intersectionality, both in your research and in your role as an academic/professor?

[AK]: I always try to ask: How do gender, race, deafness, disability, sexual orientation, class, and/or other factors shape this particular situation — whether in real life or in research? Intersectionality is not about recognizing multiple identities but about analyzing how power structures interact and how different forms of marginalization or privilege shape experiences.

In my research, this means being attuned to the ways in which deafness is not a singular experience but is shaped by factors such as racialization, class, migration, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and language politics. I aim to avoid flattening deaf communities into a single narrative and instead highlight the complexities of how deaf people navigate different forms of power and exclusion.

As an academic and professor, I integrate intersectionality into my teaching by encouraging students to question assumptions about identity categories and to critically examine how professional relationships, research methodologies and knowledge production often reflect dominant

power structures. This means pushing beyond deaf-first frameworks to explore how deafness interacts with other social and political dynamics.

Rather than treating intersectionality as an abstract theory, I see it as a necessary way of thinking — one that requires continuous reflection and adjustment in response to real-world complexities.

[PS]: In this context, can intersectionality be considered a tool for overcoming the boundaries and limitations typically associated with identity politics?

[AK]: Yes, that's precisely the point. Identity politics tends to focus on singular categories of identity, often framing oppression or marginalization within fixed group boundaries. While this can be useful for political mobilization, it can also lead to essentialism, where identities are treated as stable, uniform, or isolated from other social forces.

Intersectionality, in contrast, allows for a more nuanced analysis by showing how different identity categories — such as race, gender, deafness, disability, education, class, sexual orientation, and migration status — intersect and shape lived experiences in complex ways. Rather than assuming that all deaf people, for example, experience marginalization in the same way, intersectionality examines how structures of power create different realities for different people within the same broad category.

This means that intersectionality does not reject identity politics outright but expands its scope, making it a more flexible and critical tool for understanding social inequalities. It shifts the focus from fixed identity categories to dynamic power relations, offering a framework that moves beyond the limitations of single-axis identity-based approaches.

[PS]: Deaf ways of being (ontologies) and deaf ways of knowing (epistemologies) versus the early Deaf Studies canon and Anthropology writ large: what remains to be deconstructed, further developed, or addressed more urgently today?

[AK]: Many of us are currently engaging with Disability Studies, Crip Linguistics, disabled and Deaf Bodies, Neurodivergence, Mental Health, and the Bodymind. The focus has shifted away from just Deaf ways of being and knowing toward broader, more intersectional considerations.

One significant development is the growing use of autoethnography by deaf scholars. This method allows for the articulation of deaf experiences and perspectives without the filter of an external researcher, offering firsthand accounts of deaf lived experiences.

Of course, the perspectives being put forward through autoethnography tend to be those of deaf scholars with academic access and literacies — so it does not capture the full range of deaf experiences. Still, it remains an important approach that brings new insights and shifts the emphasis in research, highlighting aspects of deaf life that might otherwise be overlooked.

[PS]: Have we surpassed the necessity for continued vigilance concerning ontological, epistemological, and methodological matters, or is it essential to persist in critically engaging with these topics?

[AK]: We are making strides, but as mentioned earlier, these very strides also enable hearing researchers to build on our work — without having had the same access or lived experiences that shaped it. Many of the topics we are writing about now — such as deaf uses of Semiotic repertoires, the Deaf Bodymind, and Crip Linguistics — would not have been identified or produced by hearing researchers without the groundwork laid by deaf scholars.

Some of this work has emerged from autoethnographic perspectives, offering insights that would not have been possible through hearing-led research. Yet, precisely because we have written about these topics, hearing scholars can now engage with them more easily.

This reinforces the need for ongoing critical engagement — not just to push forward new ideas, but also to ensure that deaf epistemologies remain centered and are not simply absorbed into hearing academic frameworks without recognition of their origins and significance.

[PS]: What advice would you give to hearing anthropologists to ensure they work collaboratively with deaf anthropologists and integrate deaf epistemologies and ontologies? Is there any researcher or research group that is doing this particularly well?

[AK]: Honestly, I don't know of hearing anthropologists who work well with deaf anthropologists in terms of doing research together, perhaps because Anthropology tends to be a solitary discipline, where individual researchers conduct fieldwork alone and write independently. Unlike fields where team-based research is more common, Anthropology has not traditionally fostered sustained collaborative partnerships between deaf and hearing scholars.

If hearing anthropologists truly want to engage with deaf epistemologies and ontologies, the focus should not be on inviting deaf scholars into

existing structures but on rethinking their own approaches to knowledge production. This means critically examining whether their frameworks, methodologies, and institutional power structures genuinely accommodate deaf scholarly perspectives on equal terms — or whether they simply extract, absorb, and repackage deaf scholars' contributions into mainstream anthropological discourse.

As I wrote above, the most meaningful work in Deaf Studies at large — and I see Deaf Anthropology as part of Deaf Studies — tends to happen in interdisciplinary spaces, where scholars engage not only with theories and frameworks from Anthropology but also with Disability Studies, Linguistics, Performance Studies, Geography, Interpreting Studies, and beyond.

In these interdisciplinary Deaf Studies spaces, deaf scholars are increasingly instrumental in shaping research agendas, rather than being positioned as contributors to hearing-led frameworks. This shift matters — not just for inclusivity but for ensuring that deaf ways of knowing and being are recognized as central to the production of knowledge, rather than as perspectives to be slotted into pre-existing categories.