Dysconscious Audism

An Analysis of Deaf Identities

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Personal identities are an integral aspect of the human experience. Humans, all born with different individual and communal traits, naturally gravitate towards those who are like them and naturally reject those who are different. Psychologically, this occurs because people ultimately seek comfort, and comfort resides in what is familiar. This need for familiarity, coupled with the fact that some groups have been given a higher power over others, has created in society a monstrous presence of discrimination and abuse. Discrimination has embedded itself into all aspects of society over the course of thousands of years. Historic artifacts and documentation have proven that violent discrimination has occurred in all parts of the world since the beginning of civilization. With the societal and technological advancements of the twenty-first century, the question must be asked: Why is discrimination still occurring so predominantly?

The answer lies in the idea of intersectionality. Discrimination is not black and white; people possess multiple identities that work together to shape their lived experience. For example, a dark-skinned black Hispanic woman will face a much different, and much harsher, reality than that of a light-skinned black American man. Both individuals receive negative prejudices and unfair treatment because they are not white (the group in power), but the man receives more opportunities because he is a man (another group in power), lighter skinned, and American. Because discrimination possesses so many different levels and nuances and has been present since the dawn of time, it is impossible to eradicate in an entire society.

Deaf individuals are faced with these levels of oppression, on top of the marginalization that occurs from the hearing world. In fact, descrimination of Deaf people by hearing people (the group in power in this case) is so marked that only in the

last forty years have real efforts been made to understand and bring awareness to this oppression. The term “audism” finally put a name to something Deaf people have experienced for the thousands of years they have occupied the earth: marginalization and oppression of Deaf people by the hearing world due to the false belief deafness is an abnormality. Audism, like racism or sexism, manifests itself in many different ways, yet the sentiment is clear in each case. In this essay, I will examine the existence of dysconscious audism - the acceptance of hearing individuals and their customs as superior and the “standard” as opposed to Deaf culture and norms - and its effects on various Deaf authors’ lived experiences as well as the shaping of their internal identities.

The first author I will examine is Jennifer Avril Hertneky (pseudonym: Avril Hertneky). Avril Hertneky is an Assyrian/Chaldean-Iraqi-Canadian woman, and she is Deaf. In her book, *From Rejection to Love*, she shares her experiences as a Deaf woman of color throughout her childhood to her adult years. Her upbringing was one of violence, unacceptance, and cruelty all due to the fact that she was born deaf. Her parents, both hearing, moved to Canada before she was born, but they upheld traditional Iraqi cultural values. Not only was Jennifer born deaf, but she also was born with fairer skin, freckles, and red hair. This difference in appearance as well her deafness instantly marked a divide between herself and the rest of her family. Her first experience of dysconscious audism came from her parents, the individuals who were supposed to support and love her the most, and eventually spread to everyone she interacted with outside of her family, as well.

When she was born, she states that the nurse looked at her parents with a “sorrowful” face and said, “I am so sorry, she is deaf.” (Hertneky, pg. 5) From the

beginning, her Deafness made her a disappointment to her parents, and their disapproval did not lessen over the years. She emphasizes that her parents never bothered to learn American Sign Language to communicate with her; instead they opted for abusive tactics, which we often see in relationships between hearing parents with Deaf children. She was severely beaten on a specific instance when her father called to her repeatedly from a different room, and she did not hear him. He said, “I called you several times! You must hear me when I call you! You must hear me!” (Hertneky, pg. 17) When Child Protective Services came to her house to examine the abuse that had been reported, there was no ASL interpreting services provided. Because of this, Jennifer was completely unable to communicate the problems she was experiencing at home; thus, she did not receive any help. In the church, she and her siblings were forced to attend Sunday School where the teachers made no effort to accomodate to Jennifer’s deafness. They did not stop to make sure she was understanding the lessons, they made no effort to sign, and they did not properly communicate with Jennifer what was expected of her. In their minds, “they didn’t ask to have to educate a Deaf child. Why should that be their responsibility?” (Hertneky, pg. 9) In another case of a lack of ASL interpreting services, she was taken to a mental hospital after confronting the police about the abuse she was experiencing by her mother and siblings and was unable to properly communicate.

As an adult, she continued to experience the effects of dysconscious audism that exist through the systems of society. In one instance, she was speaking to a nurse using VRS about her baby. Jennifer repeatedly told the nurse that the baby was perfectly healthy, but because she was Deaf, the nurse did not trust her as a parent.

She forced her to take the baby to the doctor, where it was confirmed that the baby was fine.

All of these experiences work together to confirm to the Deaf individual that their Deafness makes them “inferior” somehow. Growing up being shown over and over again that your Deafness is a liability and that you are lesser than your hearing peers has a tremendous impact on the individual’s identity. This was certainly the case with Jennifer. As a child, she believed that God had placed a “curse” on her; the curse being Deafness. She believed that she was incapable of being loved and that she was essentially completely useless and worthless. One important event in the story occurred when she was a young child, and she ran away from home. She fled to her Aunt Maggie’s house, where she completely opened up about her father’s abuse. She pleaded for her aunt’s help, and her aunt agreed not to let him hurt her anymore. However, she immediately called Jennifer’s father to which he came to the house and severely beat her. This instance confirmed to Jennifer that nobody loved her, cared about her, or viewed her as someone worth saving.

As Jennifer got older and surrounded herself with more Deaf people and Deaf events, she began to accept her Deafness much more. She went to Deaf schools, Deaf churches, befriended Deaf people, and attended Deaf political activist rallies. She learned more about the Deaf community and found a purpose in working towards changing Canadian government policies to better accommodate to Deaf people. As a child she was never allowed to embrace her Deafness, but she learned to do that as she grew. However, while these changes to her identity were crucial in preserving her Deaf identity, the descrimination never stopped. Not only was she continuing to face

audism from the hearing world, but even within the Deaf community, she experienced racism and xenophobia due to her Iraqi identity. She states at the beginning of the book that “even as a 28-year-old woman, [she’s] still going through an identity crisis.” (Hertneky, pg. 2) She asks herself if she is proud to be Canadian, proud to be Iraqi, or proud to be Deaf.

Identities change based on the experiences we have with other people; in Jennifer’s case, her experiences with various forms of descrimination has forced her to evaluate different aspects of her identity for her entire life. Her experiences with Deaf people both affirmed her Deaf identity while suppressing her Iraqi identity, and her experiences with hearing suppressed both of those identities. Through this book, she attempts to show her audience that intersectionality shapes an individual’s lived experience; different systems of oppression work together to hinder a marginalized person’s identity. In her case, it was audism, racism, xenophobia, and sexism. Some aspects of intersectional oppression - for Deaf people, it is audism - manifest themselves more broadly, while the other aspects manifest more subtly. Every aspect is equally oppressive and harmful.

Learning to Be Deaf Without Losing Your Hearing by Kim Harrell and S. Lea paints dysconscious audism in a different, more subtle light. The subject of the book, Kim, experienced a vastly different childhood than Jennifer Hertneky. Kim grew up Deaf in a hearing family, just like Jennifer, but the love she received from her parents and siblings gave her a much different outlook on herself. When her parents started noticing their baby’s lack of verbal communication, they took her to the doctor to see “not what was wrong, but what was up.” (Harrell, Lea pg. 31) When they found out she was Deaf,

they gave her hearing aids and worked with her on sound recognition in order to help her adjust to the hearing world. They never signed, as Kim was able to hear and read facial expressions enough that signing was not necessary. Kim's doctor recommended sending her to a Deaf residential school, but her parents refused. Although they kept her immersed in a hearing world, they both made efforts to speak to Kim's teachers about making accommodations for her. They truly loved their daughter and wanted her to succeed, but the success they wanted for her was success in a hearing society. This is a shining example that dysconscious audism forms itself in many different ways. As a little girl, her siblings would take her to meet their friends and make points to introduce her as Deaf, "enjoying how impressed people were" (Harrell, Lea pg. 40) with her oral abilities.

Kim grew up in hearing classrooms with hearing students and hearing customs, having to take speech therapy and lessons to improve her sound recognition. Even when she transferred to a public high school where she had other Deaf classmates, her connections to Deaf culture were nearly nonexistent. Nobody at her school treated her differently for being Deaf; she was completely immersed in a hearing society. However, she was reminded of her Deafness when a student at the school mocked her for being Deaf, an experience that elicited a "lack of comfort and confidence about who she was for the first time in her life." (Harrell, Lea pg. 64)

Dysconscious audism, even in cases like this where there is no intent to harm, still impacts the Deaf individual in a very serious way. Growing up with loving, supportive parents who encouraged a much more oral pathway for their Deaf daughter led to questions of her identity later in life. She felt very comfortable in hearing spaces, in fact

she felt more comfortable in hearing spaces than completely Deaf spaces, and this caused a barrier between herself and her Deaf peers.

When she attended Gallaudet University, she quickly realized that her lack of knowledge in American Sign Language and of Deaf culture separated her in harmful ways. She had to quickly catch up in ASL, while eradicating her oral habits. She thought that being in a school with majority Deaf students and a Deaf curriculum would be a wonderful adventure, but it quickly forced her to come to terms with her own personal identity. She often felt alienated by the Deaf community at Gallaudet because of her hearing customs. In her first semester, she accidentally spoke in class and some students signed, “What’s wrong with you?” - the author states that “this was the first time in her life she was put down for who she was.” (Harrell, Lea pg. 78) Her classmates felt that her tendency to speak and sign in English were proponents of a belief that she was “better than them.” Because of her upbringing, she was not accepted by many Deaf individuals due to her “hearing” habits. This is how raising a Deaf child to be hearing, an act of dysconscious audism, can cause major identity problems when the child reaches adulthood.

Although her experiences with Deaf people at Gallaudet caused much emotional turmoil, she did not completely reject her Deaf identity. She instead transferred to Western Oregon University, where “although there was a robust program for Deaf students, there was no distinction made between Deaf or hearing students.” (Harrell, Lea pg. 90) Here she was able to take Deaf classes, enhance her Deaf studies, surround herself with other Deaf students, while also being able to speak if she wanted to and to hold onto her hearing roots. This experience showed her that a balance

between the two cultures was what she needed, rather than an immersion into one or the other. She learned to love Deaf culture and her own Deafness while still being comfortable in hearing settings. Her identity changed depending on who she was surrounded with in educational settings, and it finally adjusted to a bicultural identity. The author emphasizes that no two Deaf people are the same, and each Deaf experience is different. Some prefer a total immersion of Deaf culture, growing up in Deaf schools or with Deaf families exclusively using ASL to communicate, and some prefer to reject Deaf culture altogether, growing up in completely hearing environments. In Kim's case, she embraced hearing devices and oral habits as well as embracing ASL and her Deaf identity.

Haben: The Deafblind Woman who Conquered Harvard Law is a memoir about Haben Girma, a disability rights lawyer, author, and public speaker, who grew up Deafblind. Her story, focusing more on the blind aspect rather than the Deaf aspect, encourages a different view into personal identities and intersectional oppression. Her parents being from Ethiopia and growing up Eritrean during the Eritrean war for independence shaped her identity as well as her Deafblindness. Her mother explains one instance where she was forced to comply with Ethiopian soldiers and deny her Eritrean identity in order to survive. She said that "Ethiopians controlled the schools. [She] had to speak Amharic in school. But at home, [she] spoke Tigrinya and called ourselves Eritreans." (Girma pg. 17) Her mother's personal identity was rejected for her, yet she still remains a proud Eritrean, despite the oppression she faced. This is similar to Haben's experience and identity as a Deafblind woman.

Throughout her life, Haben faced oppression and acts of discrimination in the form of inaccessible services. In one instance at school, she was informed by her teacher that she had missing assignments. Knowing she did all the assignments, she knew this instance was occurring due to a lack of communication. Her teacher, Mr. Smith, had assigned the homework by saying it at his desk in the back of the room, rather than being sure to either write the homework on the board or say it at the front of the classroom like he had been instructed to do in order to accommodate Haben's needs. Because of this, she could not hear him and was unaware that she was supposed to do the homework. When confronting Mr. Smith about the issue, he told her to either ask him or another student after class for the homework assignments. He ended the conversation by asking Haben, “Why don’t you use hearing aids?” (Girma pg. 11) This is an example of dysconscious audism that Haben experienced. Mr. Smith assumed that because she could hear a minimal amount, she should automatically get devices to enhance her hearing even more, essentially eradicating her Deafness.

Haben’s view of herself changed after this conversation. She claimed that “assuming teachers will always give me the information I need leads to failure. If I want to succeed, I’ll have to work to gain access to every visual detail and every spoken word. Every single time.” (Girma pg. 12) She also stated about her schooling experience that “It’s a sighted, hearing classroom, in a sighted, hearing school, in a sighted, hearing society. They designed this environment for people who can see and hear. In this environment, I’m disabled. They place the burden on me to step out of my world and reach into theirs.” (Girma pg. 14)

From a young age, she was forced to view herself as “disabled” and a “burden” due to the refusal of hearing people to accommodate their systems to her needs. She speaks about an instance in college where the school’s dining hall did not provide access to the menus for blind, Deafblind, and non sighted students. The menus were hung up in the dining hall with no braille, so Haben was unable to view the food she was eating. As a vegetarian, this was especially harmful. She politely asked Claude, a member of the dining services, to offer the menus in braille, or to at least email the menus to her so that she could read them from her computer’s speaker translation services, considering she could not read them in the dining halls and would not be able to hear them in the noisy cafeteria if they were spoken to her. When the emails became less and less frequent, she reached out to Claude again. His response included the words, “it is not reasonable to have an expectation of us that we are not required to do, and it is also unreasonable to expect that this assistance will come seamlessly.” (Girma pg. 158) This is yet another example of hearing, sighted systems blatantly disregarding the existence of blind and Deafblind individuals.

Haben’s identity of being disabled and a burden shifted when she joined the LCB program to promote a positive view of blindness. “Here at LCB,” she states, “I’m surrounded by people who understand that blindness is just limited eyesight. With the right tools and training, blind people can compete as equals with sighted peers.” (Girma pg. 129) This positive view of herself continued to manifest itself as she grew more involved with the law and promoting legal assistance to those classified as having disabilities. By surrounding herself with supportive peers and embracing her identity as

a Deafblind woman, she conquered the world of law and received many astounding and notable awards.

Sounds Like Home: Growing Up Black and Deaf in the South tells the story of Mary Herring Wright, a black Deaf woman from rural North Carolina. It speaks on the experience of Deafness as well as the experience of being black in America at the height of Jim Crow laws. Mary grew up in a small town in Southeastern North Carolina in the early to mid 1930's. The town overall was very poor; nearly all the white people and black people made a living by farming, or working for farmers. Although there wasn't a clear economical divide, there was a clear racial divide. Segregation was predominant, as was almost every Southern American city at that time. Mary mentions that the doctors in town separated white individuals from black individuals, and white people often worked in different areas of town than black people did.

Mary was born hearing and remained hearing for the first nine years of her life. Eventually she fell ill and the disease spread to her ears, which took her hearing. It was a gradual hearing loss, and Mary was "terrified at the thought of being deaf." (Wright pg. 74) She claimed that she'd "just as soon be dead" (Wright pg. 74) than to live in a silent world. Her family was hearing, her school was hearing, her identity had been hearing up until this point. She was angry that she was losing her hearing and refused to be Deaf. "I decided I was not going to be deaf," she states, "and started trying to always face whoever was talking to make sure I saw their lips move." (Wright pg. 74) She claims that the other students in school either "shunned or pitied" her when they learned of her hearing loss. Her mother prayed over her relentlessly for God to bring her hearing back. The teachers at her school gave her a part in the play, only to have another student

come on stage to read Mary lines for her. All of these are examples of dysconscious audism and further reinstated the idea to Mary that her newfound Deafness was something inherently horrible.

Eventually, Mary was sent to the North Carolina School for the Deaf and Blind (for black children) in Raleigh, North Carolina. She dreaded attending the school because her life was at home. She had no desire to surround herself with more Deafness. The North Carolina School for the Deaf and Blind could hold three hundred children. Also in town was the school for White blind children; the school for White Deaf children was in western North Carolina. This shows a larger allocation of resources for white Deaf and blind children, who each had their own respective schools, as opposed to the Black Deaf and blind children who were all thrown into one school. Both schools in town operated under a white superintendent.

It took years for Mary to learn to love her new school; she still yearned for her old life. However, the longer she stayed at school and the more friends and connections she made, the more she learned to appreciate it. She also grew to accept her Deafness as something that was now a part of her, and the experiences she had at the school for the Deaf and blind helped her to reach this point in her identity confirmation. She learned more about what it means to be Deaf in a hearing world, noting that the children at school “felt a kinship for each other because of their deafness. They had a distrust of hearing people, even family. Some even looked forward to school opening so they could be with people who understood them when they talked and didn’t giggle and make fun.” (Wright pg. 199) Although she grew to be more accepting of her Deafness, there still was a part of her that rejected the idea of full immersion into the Deaf community. For

instance, when the school received a new principal and he signed to Mary asking, “Who are you?” She responded by speaking her name out loud, as opposed to signing.

When the time came for her to graduate, she had “realized that [she’d] grown to think of [the school] not as a prison but as a second safe home, and the people in it as sort of another family.” (Wright pg. 229) After graduation, she came back to the school as a teacher - a far cry from those earlier years of despising everything about the school. This symbolizes her growing appreciation and acceptance of her Deaf identity. We see this acceptance blossom entirely when she states, in response to others’ trepidation of her being able to work and contribute to the WW2 efforts considering her Deafness, “I was leaving and would prove to the world that I could be independent do things just as well as they could, deaf or not. I’d show them.” (Wright pg 277)

All four of these books and their authors showcase the complex systems of intersectional oppression, and how various aspects of an individual’s identity can elicit levels of descrimination. The authors wrote about their own lived experiences and how their Deafness shaped their experiences in a hearing world. Dysconscious audism showcased itself in every story, in different ways. In some cases, it was blatant and violent; in other cases, it was more subtle but equally harmful. These instances are direct reflections of dysconscious audism that occurs worldwide on a daily basis, to Deaf individuals of all regions and ethnicities. The notion that hearing customs and the hearing way of life is the standard and should be imposed onto Deaf people completely eradicates the rich culture that Deaf communities have built and sustained, despite being told that they are inferior. Creating a society that rejects the marginalization of these groups based on Deafness, socioeconomic status, race, sex, religion, sexual

identity, etc. requires all individuals in the society to work towards better education of these issues as well as undoing the prejudices that have marked themselves so profoundly. It is a constant battle that will continue to be fought rigorously, so long as the groups in power remain in power.

References

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