



## Deaf Culture

by Tina Gianoulis

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Many hearing people view deafness as a disability, defined by impairment in the sense of hearing. However, for a large percentage of those who do not hear, deafness is not a disability but a separate culture, a linguistic subgroup of society with its own vibrant vernacular and a deep connection among its members.

This Deaf community takes great pride in a wide variety of richly developed national sign languages. "Deaf" with a capital "D" denotes this pride and solidarity, while the "small d" deafness is too often pathologized by those who do not understand Deaf culture.

### **Similarities between the Queer and Deaf Experiences**

During the mid 1990s, M.J. Bienvenu, an openly lesbian Deaf activist told *New York Times Magazine* writer Andrew Solomon, "If you are deaf, you know almost exactly what it is like to be gay, and vice versa."

This similarity between the Deaf experience and the queer experience has long been understood by those who are familiar with both cultures. Like gay men and lesbians, who are usually raised in straight environments, more than ninety percent of Deaf people are born into hearing families. As a result, they often experience isolation, loneliness, invisibility, and oppression even within their own families. In addition, both kinds of children are likely to be misunderstood--gay men and lesbians have often been considered psychologically disturbed, while deaf children have frequently been misdiagnosed as developmentally disabled.

Most painfully, both groups have traditionally been forced to try to become "normal." Well-meaning parents, determined that their children not be labeled as "different," have sent thousands of deaf children to speech pathologists and mainstream schools where they spend their youth feeling lonely, bewildered, and deficient. Likewise, many gay children are sent to psychiatrists and bullied or ridiculed into acting or pretending to be "straight."

As they have broken out of this isolation and learned to accept who they are, Deaf people, like gay men and lesbians, have sought others like them to form strong, supportive communities. Within these communities, even when ostracized by "normal" society, both gays and the Deaf have developed strong identities and built rich cultures, growing not to envy the straight or hearing world, but to value and even delight in their own separateness.

### **Intersection of the Deaf and Queer Communities**

In spite of these similarities of experience, the intersection of the Deaf and queer communities has not always been harmonious. Even though studies have shown that there are fifteen percent more queers in the Deaf community than in the hearing world, the Deaf community has traditionally been politically and socially conservative, and prejudice is common. Homophobia can even be found in old American Sign Language (ASL) signs, such as a middle finger touched to the nose, then swished up over the head to

indicate "fairy."

Similarly, the glbtq community has been slow to make the accommodations needed to include the Deaf. As recently as 2000, organizers of the Millennium March on Washington, D. C. did not provide ASL interpreters for march events. Even well-meaning hearing queers are often ignorant of the needs of the Deaf, and do not understand how to choose a qualified interpreter or do outreach in the Deaf community. Recently, however, there have been some positive attempts by groups such as the Human Rights Campaign and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force to address the needs of the Deaf community.

The consequences of the failure of the hearing queer community to communicate effectively with glbtq members of the Deaf community can be serious. For example, the failure of AIDS organizations to reach out effectively to at-risk members of the Deaf community may account for a suspected disproportionately high HIV infection rate among the Deaf.

More routinely, members of the Deaf community frequently find some of the same prejudices among gay men and lesbians as they encounter among the mainstream hearing community, including an assumption that Deaf people are less capable or intelligent than hearing people.

The special issues that arise between Deaf and hearing gays and lesbians are brilliantly illuminated in Drew Emery and Lewis Merkin's 1994 play *The Language of Love*.

### **Glbtc Deaf**

Within the Deaf community, though some queers remain closeted due to social pressure, many have not only come out, but they have also organized an international support network of glbtq Deaf people.

Indeed, some observers have argued that in general Deaf gay men and lesbians find it easier to recognize and accept their sexuality than do hearing gay men and lesbians. Explanations of this hypothesis range from the theory that Deaf children are sheltered from the most virulent expressions of societal homophobia to the idea that having already coped with deafness, gay and lesbian Deaf individuals find it less traumatic to accept other differences such as homosexuality.

As early as the 1970s, Deaf gay men and lesbians were in the forefront of the gay liberation movement. Ann Silver, a Jewish Deaf dyke, was part of the development of lesbian feminism as a political identity. She was the only Deaf member of the influential radical dyke group the Furies.

In 1973, the Rainbow Deaf Society was formed to protect the rights and interests of Deaf gays. By the early 2000s, RDS has twenty-four chapters across the U.S. and Canada. The group sponsors a semi-annual conference, along with a variety of other networking services.

There are many other Deaf gay organizations across the United States, many linked with the Rainbow Alliance for the Deaf. Regionally, Deaf Gays and Lesbians of the West (Deaf GLOW) and the Gay and Lesbian Association of the Deaf--East (GLADE) hold conferences every other year.

Many urban centers boast groups for Deaf queers. San Francisco's Deaf Gay and Lesbian Center, for example, offers counseling and advocacy services. Deaf gay men and lesbians who do not live in urban communities may access services and social connections through online organizations such as Deaf Lesbian Resources Online and the Deaf Queer Resource Center (DQRC).

DQRC is a national information center founded in 1995 by Dragonsani Renferia, a Deaf queer trans activist. Along with offering a website and resource lists, DQRC sponsors such discussion forums as DeafQueer Chat and the Point of View Café. Renferia, is also one of the major organizers behind *Coming Together Newsletter*, a national Deaf queer newspaper started in 1991, and its offshoot *FLASH*, a Deaf queer e-zine.

Deaf gay culture can also be found around the world in support groups from the Italian Silent Triangle and the Hong Kong Bauhinias Deaf Club, to the Greenbow of Ireland and the International Deaf Leather Association.

In 1993, the Deaf queer experience became more accessible to the hearing queer world with the publication of *Eyes of Desire: A Deaf Gay and Lesbian Reader*. Edited by Raymond Luczak, a prolific Deaf gay poet, playwright, and filmmaker, *Eyes of Desire* is filled with essays and memoirs written by those whose lives are the foundation of Deaf gay and lesbian culture. In 2005, Luczak began seeking submissions for another volume of *Eyes of Desire*.

Although Deaf queers face challenges--including social isolation, discrimination, and inaccessibility of information--both in the mainstream society and in the larger glbtq community, they bring to the diverse mix of queer culture a unique and valuable cultural identity.

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### **About the Author**

**Tina Gianoulis** is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.