

Identity Politics Gone Wild  
 The Deaf culture wars at Gallaudet University.  
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Last September and October it was the 1960s all over again at Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C. All the elements were present from that bygone era of militant campus radicalism: the student protesters with their linked arms and picket signs, the hunger strike, the sprawling, slovenly tent city where students camped out instead of sleeping in their dorms, the occupation of buildings, the invasion of administrators' offices, the cessation of classes, the shutdown of university business, the campus lockout that included chained gates and a denial of entry to all except those who supported the protesters. Finally, on October 13, there were mass arrests of gone-limp demonstrators--133 in all--that made presumed martyrs out of those who suffered minor injuries in the scuffles. All that was missing from this 2006 version of those heady days of 40 years ago was Mark Rudd and his famous bullhorn. That would have been unnecessary, however, for Gallaudet is a university for the deaf, founded by an act of Congress in 1864, the nation's only liberal-arts college with the specific mission of providing higher education for students who cannot hear or are hard of hearing. Gallaudet, named after the famous 19th-century deaf-educator Thomas Gallaudet, is structured as a private institution, with about 1,800 students (1,200 of whom are full-time undergraduates), but U.S. taxpayers provide almost three-quarters of its annual budget, about \$108 million a year.

Although the Gallaudet campus was completely shut down for only three days, classes were effectively canceled for at least two weeks, partly because some protest-supporting Gallaudet professors refused to teach as a way of expressing solidarity with their students, and partly because the protesters themselves both barred non-protesting professors from their classrooms (literally locking them out by blockading the gates of the iron fence that surrounds the campus), and, according to observers, threatened non-protesting students into staying away as well. Reports of the poisonous atmosphere at Gallaudet during the demonstrations were so alarming that in early January a team from the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, the regional accrediting agency for colleges in the Mid-Atlantic area, visited Gallaudet and issued a report warning of "dire consequences in terms of accreditation" if the events of September and October 2006 were to be repeated.

"[C]losing an institution through protest, preventing or intimidating students from attending class, or precluding the open exchange of ideas brings the institution out of compliance with Middle States' accreditation standards," the January 12 report stated. Gallaudet is already in serious trouble for other reasons. A 2005 report from the U.S. Department of Education rated the university "ineffective," citing declining enrollments, a chronically low graduation rate (signaling that many students who are admitted cannot handle college work and drop out), and the inability of more than 30 percent of Gallaudet graduates to find jobs within a year of graduation. In January the department raised Gallaudet's rating to "adequate," which is an improvement if not exactly a recommendation.

Part of the problem is that academically talented deaf students have many other options besides Gallaudet these days; they can go to Harvard, or to a good state school, many of which offer programs geared specifically to the deaf. Advances in medical technology, chiefly cochlear implants, have enabled the brains of many deaf young people to process sounds more easily, and they thus have an easier time in mainstream education. Another part of the problem, though, is the peculiar campus culture that flourishes at Gallaudet, a culture fostered by radical students and faculty members that has bred those 1960s-style confrontations and that--as both enrollment and application numbers at Gallaudet clearly show--turns off many young people who want only to obtain good educations and prepare for careers.

In a further parallel to the academic upheavals of the 1960s, the upshot of the Gallaudet disruptions last fall was exactly the same as what transpired at several prominent American universities 40 years ago: the ouster of the president. Clark Kerr, president of the University of California system, left office in 1967 after several years of violent upheavals on UC campuses. The noted political scientist Grayson Kirk resigned after 15 years as president of Columbia during the summer of 1968 following a month and a half of picket lines, boycotted classes, occupied buildings, and arrests. Harvard's president Nathan Pusey followed suit by tendering his resignation in a cloud of police tear gas in 1970, after two successive springs devoted to student rioting that had included broken windows, canceled classes and final exams, taking over the dean's office, and a campus lockout, in this case of Harvard Yard.

And so it went at Gallaudet, where 50-year-old Jane K. Fernandes, a deaf woman who had been unanimously selected by the board of trustees from a field of 24 applicants to be Gallaudet's president starting this January, when her predecessor I. King Jordan retired, had her contract summarily revoked by the trustees on October 29. In fact, getting rid of Fernandes, who had served as provost at Gallaudet from 2000 to 2006, was the very aim of the Gallaudet strike. The university is now

operating under an interim president with a two-year contract, 74-year-old Robert Davila, a Gallaudet graduate (class of 1953), until a permanent president can be found.

Davila, a veteran administrator at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (a unit of the Rochester Institute of Technology created by Congress in 1969) and the Education Department under President George H.W. Bush, is regarded by his former colleagues as a deft political maneuverer who may well succeed in bringing peace and restoring academic standards to Gallaudet, but who plays his cards close to the vest. "All I know about the protests is what I learned in the media," he said in a recent interview at his campus office. "There are a lot of outstanding programs on this campus," he added. "The instructors take pride in their work, they're professionals, they have expectations of their students. There has always been a diverse group of people here."

Back in the sixties, it was difficult for most outsiders to figure out why so many U.S. college campuses--Harvard, Columbia, the University of California, and numerous others, their students basking in post-World War II comfort, prosperity, and unprecedented educational opportunity--exploded in conflagration for what now seem the most tangential of reasons: the draft? Vietnam? ROTC on campus?

The same went for Fernandes, whose precipitous removal after weeks of disruption that brought the Gallaudet campus to a standstill left many outside observers puzzled. She was supposed to be "not deaf enough" to satisfy her opponents because she had grown up using her voice and had not learned American Sign Language (ASL) until age 23--even though she had been deaf from birth, had a deaf mother and brother, and boasted a career devoted to deaf education, including the promotion of ASL.

Or maybe--as a new argument went after the "not deaf enough" argument seemed to fall on deaf ears among outsiders, so to speak, and was quickly shelved--Fernandes wasn't nice enough. In the fall of 2005 when she was provost, after Gallaudet students first destroyed the football goal-posts in a fit of post-game exuberance and then ran amok during a homecoming party at Washington's Hyatt Regency Hotel, chasing each other down halls, waking guests, pulling fire alarms, and causing some \$15,000 worth of damage, Fernandes issued a stern reprimand to the entire student body that did not go down well.

Some students later complained to news reporters that Fernandes was too "strict." She had confiscated the school yearbook in 2001 because, among other things, it included a photo taken without permission of a female student sitting on the toilet and jokingly suggested that another female student who wanted to be a middle-school teacher was sexually interested in young boys. (In an email, Fernandes said that parents of both students had complained, and she was concerned about the potential invasions of privacy and the yearbook's all-around poor taste.) Fernandes was said by her opponents to lack the charm and extroversion of Jordan. "She Doesn't Say Hi," read a student picket during the first round of protests in May. Other students told reporters that Fernandes didn't smile enough. Those were reasons to shut down the campus? That the students didn't *like* Fernandes? That Jordan, who had promoted her to provost in 2000, did? (Jordan had not consulted the Gallaudet faculty before promoting Fernandes seven years ago, and that violation of protocol had made her unpopular with many professors, who charged Jordan with favoritism.)

Again, head-scratching seemed in order. There can scarcely be a college campus in America whose provost isn't looked on as the disciplinary heavy and whose president isn't seen as an expensive-suited glad-hander who gets to live in a fancy mansion. Perhaps Fernandes did indeed lack the ideal personality for navigating the rocky shoals of clashing faculty, student, and alumni interests that is the life of a university president. Yet she had a solid scholarly publication record and a strong résumé as administrator of deaf primary and secondary schools in Hawaii and on the Gallaudet campus before becoming provost. She had beat out stiff competition for her job, and last May she had garnered the overwhelming support of the trustees who named her the next president. On most other university campuses, Fernandes would at least have been given a chance to prove herself.

The campaign of vituperation against Fernandes, and ultimately against Jordan (Fernandes's opponents accused him of pressuring the trustees to make her president, a charge Jordan denied), was extraordinary. Those who participated in the protest composed a group that extended well beyond the Gallaudet student body to include faculty members, administrators, alumni who regularly visited the campus to join in, and the 127-year-old National Association of the Deaf. It started the very day the trustees announced their selection of Fernandes, May 1, 2006, when protesting students donned T-shirts bearing her silk-screened photograph and the words "Know Your Enemy." It ended October 29, when she was burned in effigy on campus in celebration of her dismissal.

A list of demands issued by the Gallaudet University Faculty, Staff, Students and Alumni (FSSA), an organization specifically formed to oppose Fernandes's presidency, included not only a demand that Fernandes be fired but also that she be barred from ever setting foot on the Gallaudet campus again. Jordan was to be stripped of the title President Emeritus, and no campus building was ever to bear his name or that of his wife, Linda (that was a dig at a campus art gallery named after Linda Jordan, a potter who taught ceramics classes on campus). A blog titled Buck Naked Bison (a play of words on Gallaudet's school colors, buff and blue, and its mascot, the bison) launched by Brendan Stern, a 2006 graduate of Gallaudet, featured in its logo a photoshopped montage of Jordan and Fernandes frolicking together, the former clad only in his skivvies. Other blogs mocked Fernandes's hairstyle and the pounds she had gained during the years since she was named Miss Deaf Iowa in 1983 as a graduate student at the University of Iowa, where she obtained her doctorate in comparative literature.

A flyer distributed during last fall's protest listed a seemingly random--and bizarrely personal--grab bag of objections to Fernandes: "Does not sign ASL well . . . Mother and brother are deaf and oralists [a pejorative term for deaf people who speak] . . . Is not a people-person . . . Does not get along with many faculty and students . . . Is under I. King Jordan's control." In its oddest allegation, the flyer implied that during her career as a Gallaudet administrator before becoming provost, Fernandes "fell in love" with her hearing husband-to-be, James Fernandes, a now-retired communications professor at Gallaudet with whom she has two teenage children, in order to win a coveted post as head of the university's department of sign communications. The flyer also hinted that James Fernandes was the power behind his wife's throne and had pulled strings with Jordan in order to secure his wife's selection as Jordan's successor. Some of this language in the flyer--"not a people person," "fell in love," strings-pulling husband--sounded, well, sexist. But even though Fernandes had been selected from a large pool of mostly male competitors to be one of only a few dozen women presidents of U.S. universities, not a single feminist organization, deaf or hearing, supported her during her ordeal.

As for Jordan, the institution's first deaf president, he had once been a revered figure at Gallaudet. His own selection had come about via a student protest (titled Deaf President Now), although of a somewhat less personal and confrontational nature than that surrounding Fernandes, after the trustees bypassed him in 1988 in favor of a hearing woman, Elizabeth Zinser. Zinser tendered her resignation after just three days in office, whereupon the trustees selected Jordan. Most observers agreed that Gallaudet's having a deaf president for the first time in its century-long history was a good thing, yet there were a few--such as a prescient editorial writer for the *Washington Times*--who wondered whether the university had set a bad precedent by essentially allowing the students themselves to select the president, a prerogative that is supposed to be solely the trustees'.

Although Gallaudet's academic reputation faltered, Jordan carried out his duties with energy and verve, building the university's endowment from \$5 million to more than \$175 million during his 18-year tenure and adding numerous new buildings and programs to the once-sleepy Victorian-era campus, which, while park-like and meticulously manicured, has the misfortune of being located in a semi-industrial inner-city backwater of northeast Washington, where the two main sources of gainful employment outside the university gates are food-wholesaling and drug-dealing. In gratitude for his raising Gallaudet's profile and that of deaf people in general, Gallaudet students often compared their president to Martin Luther King Jr.

During the Fernandes debacle, however, Jordan's stock plummeted as fast as a sub-prime mortgage security. On the anti-Fernandes blogs that proliferated during the protest, the once-iconic "Dr. Jordan" sometimes became "Irving" (his first name), just as King Louis XVI of France became "Louis Capet" in the tumbrel. It was suddenly remembered that Jordan was perhaps not "deaf enough" to suit many students, either, for he had lost his hearing only at age 21 (in a motorcycle accident), used his voice fluently, and like Fernandes, was said to be not quite up on his ASL. Angel Ramirez, a 1997 Gallaudet graduate, put it this way on his blog *Triumph of the Spirit*:

This was an unspoken truth that was talked about within the inner confines of the Deaf community but not to the general public. For the past 18 years, the Deaf community has played a façade of accepting Dr. Jordan as one of their own, when in reality he was not. He was simply a caretaker until the appointment of a true Deaf individual as president. Then, and only then, would the movement for a Deaf President Now that began in 1988 be complete.

Ramirez here gets to the heart of the matter. The Gallaudet campus exploded not because Fernandes lacked a sufficiently engaging personality. Her opponents obsessively focused on American Sign Language proficiency and what it meant to be a "true Deaf individual" (even Davila, as he jokingly admitted during his interview, is probably "not deaf enough," for he lost his hearing in early childhood instead of being born deaf and thus is not a "native" user of ASL, and like Jordan and Fernandes, he uses his voice, a marker of political incorrectness) because of yet another phenomenon forged during the 1960s and belatedly recapitulated last fall at Gallaudet: the mixture of anger, self-pity, and clannish exclusiveness that is radical identity politics.

Deaf activists have followed in the footsteps of racial activists, redefining themselves not as people with auditory handicaps but as members of a linguistic minority that had been oppressed and marginalized by the speaking majority because they used sign language to communicate instead of speech. Just as black activists a generation ago began calling themselves Black with a capital B, deaf activists began calling themselves Deaf with a capital D. The National Association of the Deaf, a leading deaf-rights advocacy group based in Washington, sternly reprimands those hapless souls who use the genteel term "hearing-impaired" to refer to the deaf: "Deaf and hard of hearing people believe that there is nothing wrong with them, and that their culture, language, and community are just as fulfilling as the ones experienced by the mainstream society."

In 1994 deaf activist M.J. Bienvenu, a onetime administrator at Gallaudet, told *New York Times* magazine writer Andrew Solomon that deafness was "no more a disability than being Japanese would be." Deaf activists are not unique in their efforts to redefine themselves as merely different from--and victimized by--the mainstream. Over the past few years, advocates for the autistic and even the chronically obese have argued that society ought to regard them as members of discriminated-against minority groups rather than as people with physiological problems.

It is understandable that deaf people who are competent in every way except for their inability to hear would not care to be defined as defective and thus, as they suggest, somehow less than fully human. It is also uncontested that deaf people have been, and continue to be, subject to overt and subtle discrimination by a misunderstanding mainstream. The fact remains, however, that the mammalian brain is structured to perceive sound via the auditory nerve, and that people who

cannot hear speech--or music or the honking of horns or the chirping of birds--lack something useful that most other people possess. Furthermore, although the National Association of the Deaf strenuously argues that deafness is not a disability, the organization at the same time pushes for maximum enforcement of the Americans with Disabilities Act with respect to its members.

The result is a strange irony in which it is politically impermissible for deaf people to wish that they could hear. In 2002, reporter Liza Mundy wrote an article for the *Washington Post* magazine about two deaf lesbians, both with degrees from Gallaudet, who had sought out a congenitally deaf sperm donor for the two children they were raising. A deaf employee of the National Association of the Deaf made the mistake of telling Mundy, "I felt, just for a fleeting second, bad that my children were deaf." Although the employee, Nancy Rarus, had emphasized that she was merely expressing her own personal opinion, the organization rushed out a press release dissociating itself from any "misperceptions" she might have fostered concerning deaf people's view of themselves.

Central to the fashioning of Deaf (in contrast to deaf) identity politics is the privileged status of American Sign Language. Although ASL is sometimes described by deaf activists as "the language of the deaf" and the third most-used language in the United States after English and Spanish, a 2006 article published in *Sign Language Studies* by three researchers at Gallaudet contends that the latter proposition is almost certainly untrue (and always was, in immigrant-filled America) and the first proposition may be dubious as well. Out of the approximately 1 million Americans who are functionally deaf, according to statistics cited at Gallaudet, well over half became deaf past the age of 65, use their voices fluently, and perceive no particular need for a sign language. As for the remaining half-million or so, no one really knows how prevalent ASL use is in their homes, although estimates of the number of its users have ranged from 360,000 to 517,000--a substantial but not enormous figure in a country of 300 million.

Furthermore, ASL is only one of several sign languages used in the United States by deaf people and those who communicate with them. It is the only one, however, that is not based in some way upon English or other spoken languages. It is a gestural lingua franca that originated among deaf people for use by them alone, and for decades it was used only by deaf people among themselves, transmitted from deaf parent to deaf child at home and from deaf child to deaf child at school. Even at Gallaudet, whose namesake, Thomas Gallaudet, and his son Edward Gallaudet, the university's first president, were strong proponents of instruction for the deaf in sign language--bucking the prevailing 19th- and early 20th-century theory that deaf people should be taught to speak and read lips at all costs (something many people born deaf never can master)--the form of sign language used in class was essentially a manual version of English spelling, phonics, and syntax, designed with the express purpose of helping students learn to read and write in English. Outside of class, Gallaudet students communicated with each other in their own language that became known as ASL.

The language also flourished at the deaf social clubs that used to exist in many cities, as well as on the playgrounds and in the dormitories of the state-run residential schools for the deaf that were, until recently, the only places that deaf children could obtain a primary and secondary education. If those youngsters wished to attend college after graduation, there was only one choice for them: Gallaudet (that is no longer true, what with the National Technical Institute and a host of recent federal laws mandating interpreters and other services for deaf students on mainstream college campuses). For postgraduate studies, deaf students used to be entirely on their own. Davila described his struggles to maintain his straight-A average through graduate school in classes whose professors he could not hear.

In 1960 a scholar named William Stokoe published a study showing that ASL, contrary to what had been generally believed in the hearing world, was not crude pantomime but a complete visual language with its own grammar and structure. That turnabout led to ASL's becoming the language of deaf instruction (in contrast to the earlier English-based signing) at Gallaudet and elsewhere. During the 1960s, '70s, and '80s, ASL-fluent hearing teachers and interpreters were trained for classrooms, in the high hopes that systematic exposure of deaf young people to the complexities of ASL would better prepare them to master the complexities of English literacy, which has historically been difficult for those who have never heard a phonetics-based language. Everyone interviewed for this article, deaf and hearing alike, agreed that ASL is a language of amazing beauty, richness, and suppleness that has generated expressive poetry and drama. Nonetheless, ASL is so radically different from English in word-order and syntax that its claims to help deaf young people learn English have been the subject of debate, with some--including Jane Fernandes--advising hearing parents to learn ASL themselves and teach it to their deaf infants so as to give them a language (instructional materials exist for this purpose), while others, including many deaf people, deem ASL fine for deaf socializing but useless as an English teaching tool. The debate is something like that waged over bilingual education of Hispanic children in the hearing world. Here is an example of an English sentence and its ASL translation, sent by email from a deaf woman:

English: When I was a little girl, I used to love to go to downtown looking in stores for something good for me to enjoy playing with at home.

ASL: ME LITTLE FOND GO TOWN STORE FIND GOOD PLAY FOR HOME ENJOY.

The ASL sentence is not primitive, as it looks on paper, for other gestures supply the missing morphology and subordination. Yet it is easy to see that ASL is as different from English as, say, Chinese. Furthermore, ASL is useful only for communicating with *American* deaf people (along with some Canadians); the sign language used by many British deaf, for example, is alphabet-based and incomprehensible to most ASL users. Finally, ASL is unusually fragile, because its very nature cannot be captured in written form.

Furthermore, after at least three decades of ASL ascendancy in deaf schools, the English literacy of deaf people--essential for success in the hearing job world--remains distressingly low, with half of deaf 17-year-olds still reading at the fourth-grade level or below. So it is not surprising that many parents, even deaf parents such as Fernandes's mother, have opted to train their deaf children to learn voiced speech and lip-reading if they can, or to use something called Signed Exact English, an ASL hybrid that follows English syntactical rules. Added to that is the fact that ASL is relatively difficult to learn as a latecomer, even for older deaf children and deaf adults (it typically takes two years to become proficient), so many hearing parents never bother, either cobbling together their own sign systems for their deaf children or using Cued Speech, an easy-to-learn mode of phonetic signing as one talks.

The fact that ASL use was officially discouraged for many decades in deaf schools has made it an ideal underdog "victim" issue around which deaf activists could build their vision of Deaf culture. It is now possible to major as an undergraduate and obtain a graduate degree in Deaf Studies, a field in which the courses, imbued these days with postmodernist denunciations of capitalism and patriarchy, teach the students that the deaf are a "colonized minority" (the language comes from the course catalogue at Fernandes's alma mater, the University of Iowa). Fluency in ASL--along with the appropriate ideological disdain for the hearing majority ("hearies" in Deaf lingo)--is the chief marker of how Deaf one actually is. The most fluent ASL users of all, of course, are the fewer than 5 percent of deaf people who are children of deaf adults (CODAs, they call themselves) and thus have likely been exposed to ASL since birth, attended state deaf schools where they honed their skills, and gone to Gallaudet for college. These multigenerationally deaf people sometimes refer to themselves as True Deaf (hence the language in Ramirez's blog) or Deaf of Deaf and are at the apex of the Deaf social pyramid. Later learners, the Muggles of Deafness who may use ASL more haltingly or with "accents" that betray their non-native status, or who (worst of all, in the eyes of many Deaf activists) combine signing with voiced speech, rank somewhat lower. If deaf people are indeed an oppressed minority, they are the only oppressed minority with its own hereditary aristocracy.

The role of bloodlines and pedigree in defining Deafness, along with the relatively small number of deaf people in the United States to begin with, helps explain the unusually active and even incestuous part that Gallaudet alumni, deaf parents, and even supposedly neutral organizations such as the National Association of the Deaf played in the battle against Fernandes. Gallaudet alumnus Brendan Stern, for example, the founder of the anti-Fernandes blog Buck Naked Bison, was frequently seen on campus during the protest and is also the son of Gallaudet graduate and deaf-school administrator Ron Stern, a finalist for the Gallaudet presidency who was strongly favored by the protesters. Another contender for Fernandes's job was Rosalyn Rosen, director of the National Center on Deafness at California State University's Northridge campus and Fernandes's predecessor as provost at Gallaudet. Rosen's two children, Jeff Rosen and Suzy Rosen Singleton, both lawyers and "third generation deaf," as Jeff puts it, served as legal advisers for the demonstrators. Rosalyn Rosen and Ron Stern were favorites among deaf activists, because, as protest leader Ryan Commerson, a 2001 graduate of Gallaudet who is now a graduate student in Deaf Studies there, explained on the FSSA website, the two "share . . . the same vision of language as a human right"--code for promotion of ASL as the sole politically permissible mode of deaf communication. Rosalyn Rosen was also president of the National Association of the Deaf from 1990 to 1993. That organization issued at least seven position papers last fall supporting the protest and arguing against Fernandes's presidency.

Those who style themselves as Deaf can often seem obsessed with genealogy, and also with other deaf people's (as well as hearing people's) fluency in ASL. During the height of the Gallaudet protest last fall, Ridor Live, a blog operated by Gallaudet graduate Ricky Taylor, listed detailed analyses of the ASL abilities of every member of the university's board of trustees, some of whom are hearing. The Gallaudet board chair, Brenda Brueggemann, a deaf woman who heads the ASL department at Ohio State University, received a somewhat low rating from Taylor, possibly because she spoke the commencement speech she delivered at Gallaudet in 2006. Her home was picketed during the protest, and she had to call campus security to remove six Gallaudet students who invaded her Ohio State office accompanied by a guide dog and refused to leave. Brueggemann and another Gallaudet trustee, Arizona Republican Sen. John McCain, resigned from the board to protest Fernandes's ouster. (McCain wrote to Jordan: "I cannot in good conscience continue to serve the board after its decision to terminate her appointment, which I believe was unfair and not in the best interests of the University.") Brueggemann's predecessor, Celia May Baldwin, had resigned after the May protests.

Other recent Gallaudet alumni recall that in the student cafeteria, fluent ASL-users ate only with each other, relegating deaf and hard-of-hearing students with other communications styles to their own beta tables. Some deaf activists refer to English as their "second language" and attribute whatever problems they might have with English proficiency to that fact. Like black underclass youngsters who diss their more studious classmates as "acting white," some deaf activists denigrate deaf people who use eloquent English as unacceptably "hearing." Mike McConnell, a 1991 Gallaudet graduate and active in the nearly oxymoronic (given the bent of Deaf culture) Deaf Republicans, posted this email he received from a deaf activist on his blog Kokonut Pundits: "Deaf Republicans website is not written by deaf people. its language is too hearing and it is written by Republican party." Marlee Matlin, the deaf actress who won an Academy Award in 1986 for her performance in *Children of a Lesser God*, is a non-person among the Deaf because she sometimes uses her voice in acting roles. So is Heather Whitestone McCallum, who became the first deaf Miss America in 1995 but is not regarded by activists as a sufficiently proficient signer; she compounded the crime by getting a cochlear implant in 2002.

As for cochlear implants, they are perennial hate-objects among deaf activists, who argue that they are instruments devised by a conspiracy of hearing-world manufacturers, pediatricians, and audiologists to "fix" the deaf and thereby deny their full humanity. Some deaf people who can otherwise afford to do so refuse to provide the implants to their deaf children, while others have threatened, in a kind of joking retaliation, to have any hearing children born to them surgically

deafened (so far, no one seems to have put this threat into practice). Granted, the implants are expensive, they do not work perfectly, and not all deaf people benefit from them. Still, the anti-cochlear rhetoric is distressingly shrill, with the words "Nazis" (with reference to hearing parents who have their children implanted) and "cultural genocide" tossed around indiscriminately. Even Matthew S. Moore, publisher of *Deaf Life* magazine and an otherwise unusually hearing-world-friendly deaf activist, had this to say about implants in an email: "When parents learn their baby is deaf, they sometimes feel that the child they knew has died, replaced by a stranger." To mothers and fathers who love their deaf children dearly and invest substantial time researching whether cochlear implants are best for them, such a characterization sounds cold. Nonetheless, it seems common for those immersed in Deaf culture to regard their own hearing parents as their worst enemies. One of the women in Liza Mundy's *Washington Post* story delivered a resentful tongue-lashing in ASL to her hearing father for having given her a speech-based education as a child--right in front of reporter Mundy.

Along with bloodlines and ASL proficiency ratings, another focus of Deaf activism has been to gain recognition of ASL not only as a legitimate language for instruction of the deaf (a battle long since won; Gallaudet, for example, is now officially "bilingual/bicultural," offering ASL-orientation classes for non-users, requiring the use of sign as a courtesy in all on-campus communication, and weighing ASL proficiency in tenure decisions for professors), but as the sole legitimate language for instruction of the deaf. Over the last two decades a protracted and bitter battle against "oralism"--efforts of any kind to teach deaf people to speak--and perceived "audism" (the Deaf version of racism, in which hearing is supposedly privileged over sign) has been waged on the campuses of the state deaf schools and at Gallaudet itself. The main bone of contention, fastened upon by the anti-Fernandes protesters last fall, is the philosophy currently prevailing at Gallaudet known as Total Communication: the idea that deaf students and their professors ought to be free to use whatever mode of communication mutually works best for them.

That sounds sensible enough--many deaf young people simply do not know ASL very well, because they grew up lip-reading and speaking at home, or because, as members of the 95 percent of deaf people born to hearing parents, they do not sign with the facility of the Deaf of Deaf. Furthermore, many students at Gallaudet are not even functionally deaf but simply hard of hearing--unable to perceive sound without a hearing aid (a category that encompasses 8 million Americans), and an increasing number of Gallaudet students have cochlear implants. Neither group really needs ASL. Indeed, the Gallaudet course catalogue, while enshrining ASL and encouraging all students to learn the language, promises at the same time to "respect the sign language style of every individual and use whatever is necessary to communicate in a given situation." Practically speaking, for many hearing professors, as well as for deaf professors who use their voices, that means teaching in spoken English while simultaneously signing, not in perfect ASL because the syntax is so different from that of English, but in what is called Pidgin Signed English, a rougher version of ASL that gets the point across but follows English word order. Practically speaking also, the Pidgin Sign compromise allows both fluent and novice ASL-users among students to understand their professors and participate in class. As Fernandes wrote in an email interview, "As [Gallaudet is] a federally funded university . . . I strongly believe that every deaf, hard of hearing or deaf-blind child in the United States, regardless of schooling, family background, language or communication choices . . . or other differences, has a rightful place at Gallaudet."

Therein lies the very kindling wood for the rage that burned against Fernandes--and ultimately Jordan--for months on end at Gallaudet. Although many students undoubtedly disliked her personally and found her haughty and uncompromising as an administrator, the ideology behind the anger flowed out of the palpable and blistering antagonism of deaf radicals toward the Total Communication philosophy and Pidgin Sign--not to mention Signed Exact English and Cued Speech (which they deem "artificial" languages). Deaf activists denounce simultaneous signing and speaking (which they call "Simultaneous Communication" or, more derisively, "Sim-Com") as audism, oralism, and disrespect for the linguistic purity of ASL. What the activists want is for their own definition of bilingual education to prevail on campus, which calls for never using English and ASL at the same time. Practically speaking, because it would be enormously expensive to hire an ASL interpreter to shadow every professor and administrator, such a policy would effectively ban all modes of communication besides ASL from the Gallaudet campus--which is exactly the point.

Student-protest leader Ryan Commerson wrote on the FSSA website in criticism of Gallaudet's current communication policy: "Gallaudet University is the Grand Audist of all audists." He also castigated I. King Jordan: "From his very first day in office, Irving has never once given any indication that he respects ASL. Such is apparent in his pervasive use of Simultaneous Communication as his mode of communication." Last fall, Commerson used the FSSA website to call for the resignation of all non-proficient ASL-users among Gallaudet's trustees and their replacement by "those who are fluent in ASL," presumably in order to ensure the appointment of a Deaf-activist president. Commerson, as it happens, was the editor of the yearbook that Fernandes confiscated in 2001; before returning to Gallaudet last fall, he went on an eight-day hunger strike to try to force the Michigan School for the Deaf, where he was teaching, to adopt an ASL-only policy.

Although it is technically against Gallaudet rules, many younger and more radical professors, including a substantial contingent of hearing professors, have already put Commerson's ASL-only recommendations into effect in their classrooms, causing consternation among students who are novices at ASL when their hearing professors refuse to use their voices to answer their questions. In a letter to the *Washington Post* after Fernandes's removal, Kathleen Wood, a hearing Gallaudet English professor who participated in the protest, labeled those students who objected to an ASL-only policy as "resisters," and stated that Gallaudet ought to be reserved for "users and seekers of Deaf culture and ASL skills." Other faculty members and students at Gallaudet have from time to time launched unofficial "turn off our voices" campaigns for classrooms, the library, the cafeteria, and other public places, aiming to encourage or intimidate their fellows into using only ASL.

The net effect of all this, especially Fernandes's termination, has undoubtedly been to make the well-entrenched deaf-activist contingent inside and outside Gallaudet feel better. However, many deaf and hard-of-hearing young people do not care to think of themselves as victims and are increasingly availing themselves of mainstream educational opportunities made accessible to them by anti-discrimination laws. (Indeed, several states are considering shutting down their now-poorly subscribed residential deaf schools, which alarms the activists who view the schools as incubators of Deaf culture.) This new generation has also grown up with technological innovation--whether cochlear implants or vastly improved hearing aids or an array of text-based computer interfaces--that blur the lines between the deaf and hearing worlds. They are simply voting with their feet not to join, or else to abandon quickly, what they must perceive as a bizarre, obsolete, and self-marginalizing campus culture at Gallaudet.

The 2005 Education Department report that called Gallaudet "ineffective" noted that enrollment has been drifting downward, from more than 2,000 students in 1999 to today's 1,800 or so (which means that every year it costs the U.S. government more per capita to educate a Gallaudet student), while the number of deaf and hard-of-hearing college students overall has remained stable. That means Gallaudet is gradually losing deaf market share as well as absolute numbers of students. Furthermore, the department estimated that Gallaudet is now the institution of choice for only 13 percent of U.S. deaf and hard-of-hearing high-school graduates who enroll in four-year colleges. The 42 percent graduation rate that Gallaudet reported to the Education Department sounds bad, but that figure, based on counting heads at graduation and comparing that total with the number of freshmen four years earlier, is actually vastly inflated; the real figure, based on analyzing actual cohorts of students, according to an email from Fernandes confirmed by Gallaudet, is more like 6 percent with a mere 28 percent managing to graduate within six years.

The abysmal graduation rate, as well as Gallaudet's lackluster track record with post-college job placements (the latter has improved somewhat under an aggressive internship program promoted by Fernandes), signals a poorly qualified student body whose professors have low expectations of them. So fewer and fewer deaf high school students, let alone academically outstanding deaf high school students, even bother to send their SAT scores to Gallaudet, much less fill out an application. In 2002, 758 high school seniors applied to Gallaudet; by 2006, that number had shrunk to 539. Fernandes says that she and other administrators had been working to improve the university's appeal, tightening academic standards, setting up an honors program, and aggressively recruiting. Then the turmoil hit. The number of new Gallaudet students (freshmen and transfer students), which had reached a record 351 in the fall of 2005, fell to 281 in 2006, the first time in years it had sunk below 300. In addition, the university lost about 100 undergraduate and graduate students after the May 2006 demonstrations and another 235 after the fall disruptions.

Scrambling to satisfy an accreditation board already dissatisfied with Gallaudet's performance and an Education Department wondering whether the university's subsidy funds would be better spent elsewhere, Davila promises to do more standards-raising, more recruiting, more niche-marketing of Gallaudet's unique support services and deaf-centric teaching styles. He also promises to try to bring peace to the fractured campus--a move that some observers say he promptly undermined by awarding amnesty from university discipline for all the protesters and promoting several faculty members and administrators associated with the Faculty, Staff, Students and Alumni group to top positions, including Richard Lytle, the FSSA's media liaison, who is now one of Davila's special assistants. Some critics are openly skeptical about Gallaudet's future.

"I see Gallaudet's becoming history," says Jack Slutzky, a retired graphic-design professor at the National Technical Institute with a deaf son who has excoriated, online and elsewhere, the self-isolating, inward-turning stance of Deaf-culture advocates (a few years ago Slutzky wrote a newspaper op-ed comparing ASL to Ebonics). Strolling through Gallaudet's pristine and architecturally charming campus, all signs of the recent sixties-retro strife erased by a vigilant landscaping staff, one hopes that he is wrong. One campus landmark is a striking bronze *fin-de-siècle* sculpture of Thomas Gallaudet and Alice Cogswell, the 9 year-old deaf daughter of a neighbor to whom Gallaudet painstakingly taught sign language in 1814--in a form of which today's deaf activists would disapprove. This politically incorrect hearing man of nearly two centuries ago and the adoring little deaf girl so equally politically incorrect--what an apt symbol of all that the university founded in Thomas Gallaudet's name has turned against.

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