

September 2020

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### Recommended Citation

Kegl, Judy (2020) "Assimilating and Differentiating Societies and Their Relationship to Genetic Patterning: Does It Take a “Them” to Make an “Us”?," *Society for American Sign Language Journal*: Vol. 4 : No. 2 , Article 5.

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A commentary on Lane's et al.'s (2000) article, "Origins of the American Deaf World"

## Assimilating and Differentiating Societies and Their Relationship to Genetic Patterning: Does It Take a "Them" to Make an "Us"?

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In their article "Origins of the American Deaf World," Lane and colleagues dig into primary sources available in our scattered historical record in the way that Lane made his personal scientific trademark. This time, the authors build a picture of the emergence of a thriving deaf community in New England and, by extension, to the United States as a whole. But that's not all there is to it. The authors look in a more nuanced way at three communities that constituted considerable input to this deaf community—families of deaf people from the Henniker, New Hampshire area; from Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts; and from the Sandy River area of Maine, who relocated from the Vineyard after the American Revolution.

Lane et al.'s account of the emergence of an organized social community and identity on regional and national levels is more complex than the general account that typically attributes the emergence of the American Deaf Community to the founding of the American Asylum for the Deaf in Hartford, Connecticut (1817), and to the creolization of multiple preexisting signed languages, including Martha's Vineyard Sign Language, among others, with the sign language<sup>1</sup> brought to the school by Laurent Clerc and Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet to form what we now know as American Sign Language (ASL). To get a perspective on the communicative milieu in Hartford in those early years, we need to look more closely at the social contexts from which the students at that first American Asylum for the Deaf came. Lane et al. look at the cultural as well as the genetic underpinnings of three communities that contributed to the emergence of the deaf community in New England and find them to be very different in nature—different in a way that speaks to the nature of emergent communities in general.

I am honored to be able to discuss this paper. I was already living and working in Maine when Lane contacted me for help in finding individuals who could do the leg work in the Sandy River area to turn up documents related to the deaf population from the Vineyard who had settled there. Two of our local interpreters who lived in the area, Shannon Locke and her mother, Sherry Walrath, took on the task. It was fascinating to see this side of the project. It is also worth looking back on the formidable task that the authors of this article undertook. I was at Northeastern with Lane when he was writing *When the Mind Hears* (1989) and recall the huge filing cabinets filled with the historical artifacts in French as well as in English that he amassed and drew upon to pull together that major opus—everything from dictionaries and historical treatises to census reports, birth and death records, clippings from newspaper articles, diaries, and personal letters. Each one required legwork to seek out and acquire. In preparation for this commentary, I talked with Locke about her work for this project. She described finding those times between her day job as an educational interpreter to drive sometimes hours to libraries, newspaper archives, churches, and town halls to track down any and all snippets of documented commentary on or by deaf individuals during those times that could indicate whether they were seen as and saw themselves as a distinct "class" or self-identified cultural community. Compare this with today: I was able to use this article to build for myself a family tree in Ancestry.com. With each individual's name, within days I was able to verify the pedigrees presented in this article and expand upon them. With each new entry to the tree came a leaf, Ancestry.com's symbol for "ancestry hints," offering potential other family members or records related to that individual. While I could expand the pedigree, I found no inaccuracies in terms of heritage and deaf family members from what Lane et al. had acquired.

1 Notice that I do not say LSF (langue de signes française) here, because what was implemented at that first school in Hartford was initially more of an Anglicized version of signed French adapted to use in an English setting (see Kegl, 2008)—hence, our persisting initialized signs for SEE (*voir*), LOOK-AT (*chercher*), TOILET (toilet), and so forth that are not found in LSF. Nonetheless, LSF came to Hartford in the person of Clerc and others who followed him and certainly played a major role in the emergence of ASL.

While I knew quite a bit about the Martha's Vineyard case, having participated with Joan Cottle Poole-Nash and the New England Sign Language Society in the initial interviews<sup>2</sup> with her great-grandmother (in her 90s), grandfather (in his 70s), and his friends who had been fishermen/lobstermen in the Chilmark community, I knew little about the contribution made by the community in Henniker and even less about the community closer to home in Sandy River. Insight into these communities is a critical piece that had been missing from our understanding of the origins of our American deaf world. Whether deaf people in contact do or do not cohere into a distinct deaf community within the larger social is critical to understanding the origins of signed languages.

Some catalyst appears to be needed to lead deaf individuals to cohere as a separate class within a wider community. In 1986, I was invited to submit a paper to a special session at a conference in Cardiff, Wales, on the sociolinguistics of signed languages. My paper was called "Alienation as an Impetus for Social Cohesion: What if Everyone Here Really Didn't Speak Sign Language?" It was triggered by observations made by Poole-Nash in her research on Martha's Vineyard, my own study of the precursor contact gesturing that served as the input to the emergence of Nicaraguan Sign Language, and my experience doing a pedigree with Romy Spitz on the culture of deaf individuals on Corn Island in Nicaragua, where a walk down the airport runway, a large social gathering place on the island, would allow one to see hearing and deaf lobstermen apparently "signing" to each other with ease. I challenged the notion that this "signing" was a fully fledged signed language and raised the possibility that the majority of these utopian situations where everyone signed involved something closer to bumping up a home sign system<sup>3</sup> to the community level—a possibility that I believe should be considered for many of the village signed languages that have been termed, perhaps prematurely, "young languages."

In my first contact with the vocational school for the deaf in Villa Libertad in Managua (1986), it was striking that the students (all in their late teens) and faculty would to the untrained eye appear to be "signing." Among the population was a high proportion of hearing students diagnosed as having dyslexia. When I first arrived at the vocational school, all the students (both hearing and deaf) interacted with each other silently, using an elaborate gesturing system that, while highly communicative, evaded systematic linguistic description. The teachers tended to speak with some gestural support and taught vocational skills through demonstration and copying. The communication was more of a trade jargon between contact gesturing systems. Sign choices were variable, even among an individual's own signing. There were multisign utterances and some conventionality, but individuals would sign actions by using their whole bodies as agent/actor, and the action gestures (while combinable in an utterance) tended to have a single participant role expressed for each (Kegl et al., 1999). As I read about "young, village sign[ed] languages," similar characteristics seem to be mentioned.

As reported for Martha's Vineyard (Poole-Nash, 2014), individuals in this vocational school community were not singled out as deaf versus hearing, nor did they identify as such. It truly appeared to be an elaborated communication system and social network akin to home sign bumped up to a community level. Rather than lumping village signed languages or the school-based blended hearing and deaf communities, as in Villa Libertad, into the pool of languages in general, they need to be distinguished from both family-based home-sign systems and family-based signed languages. They are deserving of special attention in their own right and may be a key to understanding the process of language emergence. In this article, Lane et al. are focusing our field on exactly this critical enterprise in their discussion of "assimilative and differentiating societies," bringing to the table genetic, genealogical, historical, and sociolinguistic evidence. Some of their genetic findings are complemented by a variety of studies on how assimilative communities with a recessive gene for deafness function to maintain the use of signing and may actually indicate a marriage preference for signing as opposed to hearing status (Gialluisi et al., 2013). The nature of that signing is the question.

Despite decades of intermarriage on the Vineyard among populations carrying a recessive gene for deafness that yielded high proportions of deaf members of the Chilmark community, marriages of deaf people between other deaf people (assortive mating) or even deaf children of deaf parents (vertical transmission) were rare. As a result, while at any time deaf individuals lived in the community at large, successive generations of deaf family members were rare. Diaries and letters of the era refer to deaf members of the community in no way that singles them out as a unique social class within that island community. I saw a similar lack of differentiation when studying the members of the culture on Corn Island in Nicaragua. When first discovered, deaf individuals living literally blocks from one another would make no effort to seek each other out.

2 These were not actually the *initial* interviews done in a research capacity. Interestingly, while William Labov was on the Vineyard in 1961 doing his master's degree research for study of a socially motivated vowel change among on-islanders and off-islanders, among his subjects was Donald Lamar Poole, a native member of the Menemsha/Chilmark fishing community and Poole-Nash's grandfather. While we were videotaping him, eliciting any signs and information that he could remember, he noted that this felt much like when that strange little man decades before was asking him and his fishermen friends how they pronounced different words and collected stories from him. He noted that Labov had asked about the signs as well. Sadly, when I contacted Labov about this, he said that he had indeed taken copious notes on the subject at the time but never ended up writing about it. The data were in his filing cabinet and, sadly, destroyed in a flood.

3 For an extensive review of home sign and the richness of communication that it can convey, see Morford (1996).

In contrast, in the Henniker community, a dominant genetic trait was expressed, and nearly every generation had deaf children of deaf parents. Not only did many deaf-deaf marriages occur; comments in the social media of the time also indicate a deaf identity and community. The *Gazette's* report about a large birthday party for Nahum Brown comments, almost apologetically, that while Thomas Brown's new wife, Sophia Sumner Curtis from Maine, was hearing, she knew sign language,<sup>4</sup> and that one of the storytellers, although hearing, was a very good sign-maker. The public records all speak to a strong deaf community and deaf identity. This presence of a deaf identity and coherence as a deaf community is reinforced by the deaf organizations established by Brown and others in this community. The American Asylum for the Deaf in Hartford clearly contributed to this coherence, exporting deaf teachers to deaf schools throughout the country, but initially those individuals appear almost overwhelmingly to have come from these genetically dominant family groups with successive generations of deaf family members. And when members of the Martha's Vineyard and Sandy River, Maine, communities intermarried with members of the Henniker community, they typically relocated to that culturally deaf center in Henniker or to the area surrounding the American Asylum for the Deaf in Hartford.

The community least explored in this article is the one in Maine, including 30 towns established by the Vineyard families carrying the recessive GJB2 gene, who resettled there shortly after the American Revolution crippled the whaling industry and free land was offered (Poole, 1976), as well as by four independent deaf family groups of different genetic heritage, including that of Brown's second wife, Curtis. I am inspired by this article and the new resources available for online genealogical research to pick up the gauntlet, and I have convinced Locke to join me. I encourage any and all to do so as well both here and with the many village signed languages and emergent languages throughout the world.

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4 With five deaf siblings, one would expect that she would.