Deaf, She Wrote: Mapping Deaf Women's Autobiography

BRENDA JO BRUEGGEMANN
Ohio State University, Columbus

This book is one of life's gifts. It will let me say to both deaf and hearing people what I've always held back.
—Emmanuelle Laborit, *The Cry of the Gull*

I BELIEVE, AS DID ONE OF THE GREATEST RHETORICAL scholars of the twentieth century (or probably any century), Kenneth Burke, that "[t]he human animal, as we know it, *emerges into personality* by first mastering whatever tribal speech happens to be its particular symbolic environment" (1346). Applying Burke's idea, I am interested in mapping the emergent personality of deaf women writers as they master the tribal speech (and sign too) of their particular region, nation, or era as well as the tribal speech of gender overlaid with the tribal speech of deafness, disability, "normalcy," and difference.

I am suggesting at the outset of this initial mapmaking—for no one has yet studied deaf women's writing, and this project too is preliminary—that there is typically more than one "tribe" for deaf women to master, more than one path and personality to emerge into and from, more than one symbolic environment for them to enter and exist in. Each one of the seemingly simple single-syllable words in my title stands potent with rhetorical and triangular possibilities for these authors (and their audiences):

- *Deaf*. At the very least, we (and she) will no doubt seek an understanding about who is (and isn't) deaf, how she can be deaf, why she is deaf, and in what ways she can enact, experience, construct, and perform "deaf."
- *She*. We (and, again, she) will likely work to understand her experience as opposed to, and yet always in relation to, *him*; we will also want to consider the she who is one (individual, unique) as well as the she who might be many (common, representative).
- *Wrote*. We will ask her (and ourselves) just as she will ask herself (and us): Why did she write? How did she write? What literate practices and processes are available to her—and then used by her? (What remains unavailable and unused?) What writing will (most likely) be read—and how will it be read? Should she (and how can she then?) "write" in sign? Or should she write in print English (or another dominant discourse)? And, too, what happens in the path and process from *writing* to *wrote*—from doing to having done?

In approaching the construction of identity in deaf women's autobiography with these three terms marking some of my boundaries, I will not use some angles. My exploration of deaf women's autobiography is not, for example, a comparison and contrast with nondeaf (i.e., hearing) women's autobiography, nor is it a comparison and contrast with deaf men's autobiography.

I couldn't care less, really, about how it "stacks up" against those others. I was compared and contrasted, stacked up and down enough by audiologists, speech pathologists, and school counselors in my earlier years, with regards to what, comparatively, I could, should, or would *not* do, to know the straitjacket of that kind of analysis. Typically, they make a chart—and then you go somewhere on the grid. I'm more interested in the constructed knowing and rhetorical acts that arise from the thing itself. Let her write, I say. We'll read and follow from what, deaf, she wrote.

A longer version of this essay appears in Literacy and Deaf People: Cultural and Contextual Perspectives, *ed. Brenda Jo Brueggemann (Washington: Gallaudet UP, 2004) 73–87.* *Copyright 2004 by Gallaudet University. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.*

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812900167926 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Let us read, then, how an award-winning French actress, Emmanuelle Laborit, builds this rhetorical triangle. In a 1998 memoir, Laborit explains her reasons for *writing* her life story so far (she is only twenty-two at this time). Deaf, she wrote:

> I need other people, dialog, a community. I couldn't live without the hearing and I couldn't live without the deaf, either. Communicating is a passion of mine. . . .
>
> A while back, when I began the difficult task of writing this book, it made me tremble with apprehension. But I wanted to do it because writing is important to me. It's a form of communication that I hadn't attempted with any degree of seriousness yet.
>
> Hearing people write books about the deaf. . . . I don't know of any books written by deaf people in France, or Europe for that matter. Some people told me I wouldn't be able to do it. But I wanted to make it happen with all my heart, as much to speak to myself as to deaf and hearing people. I wanted to give the most candid account possible of my life so far.
>
> I especially wanted to do it in your native language. The language of my parents. My adopted language.
>
> The seagull has grown up and flies with her own wings.
>
> I see just as I might hear.
>
> My eyes are my ears.
>
> I can write as well as sign.
>
> My hands speak two languages.
>
> I offer my difference to you.
>
> My heart is deaf to nothing in this double world.
>
> It's very hard for me to leave you. (146–47)

Of course, in writing her memoir—in your/our language, not in her own, and, further, at the unconventional autobiographical age of twenty-two—Emmanuelle has done anything but leave us. She has etched herself pretty strongly in my memory, at least. Feeling "apprehension" over using "your native language" and "the language of my parents" (written French)—a language that is shot through with the contradiction of being not her own but, rather, her "adopted language"—Laborit manages to emerge, as Leigh Gilmore theorizes (42), "within the technologies of autobiography" (using printed words in both prose and poetry forms) and to make "writing itself as constitutive" of her identity: "because writing is important to me" and "I can write as well as sign," she assures us. She dwells (and writes) in resistance—"some people told me I wouldn't be able to do it"—and also in contradictions: "My hands speak two languages. / I offer my difference to you."

Laborit also connects "word to body," as Gilmore claims is common for autobiographics, when she ends (and also begins) her book by recounting the name given to her as a young deaf child whose shrill cries startled everyone. In her second chapter, she writes, "They called me their little seagull. But the French words for 'seagull' and 'mute' look and sound practically the same: *mouette/muette*. So which was I?" (5). And she returns to that self-invented word/body representation of herself in her closing lines: "The seagull has grown up and flies with her own wings." With embodied words, she also writes, "My hands speak two languages," and "My eyes are my ears."

In the "mirror talk" function of identity crisis that is expressed in much contemporary autobiography (Egan), Laborit makes herself most visible when she steps forward, almost right off the page, to sign/write a poem for us in the end. Just at the point of her almost absence, she makes herself powerfully present: "It's very hard for me to leave you." Appropriately enough, the cover image for the book also positions Laborit looking into or through a window frame (see p. 579), so that we, the readers, see only her profile—while her reflection is mirrored back to us as a full face. In a frame that also invites us to look in on her experience (and self-invention) in several different ways, Laborit "foregrounds the plurality and process of identity" in this closing passage (and elsewhere throughout the memoir) and "provide[s] activities of interpretation, in

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812900167926 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Front of the jacket of *The Cry of the Gull*.

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812900167926 Published online by Cambridge University Press

which the reader is compelled to join" (Egan 226). "I need other people, dialog, a community," Laborit writes with rhetorical sensitivity, as she compels both deaf and hearing readers to join her in her own "recovery of understanding" (Egan 226): "I couldn't live without the hearing and I couldn't live without the deaf, either . . . as much to speak to myself as to deaf and hearing people." Uncannily, it is almost as if Laborit were in dialogue (trialogue?) with Egan and Gilmore, autobiographical critics on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean who are writing about feminist theories of self-representation almost at the same time that Laborit herself is writing within them.

She has also, uncannily enough, answered the direct charge of another French writer eighteen years before her time. Laborit was four when Hélène Cixous wrote her feminist text "The Laugh of the Medusa" and spurred us with:

> And why don't you write? Write! Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours, take it. I know why you haven't written. . . . Because writing is at once too high, too great for you, it's reserved for the great—that is, for "great men"; and it's "silly." Besides, you've written a little, but in secret. And it wasn't good, because it was in secret, and because you punished yourself for writing, because you didn't go all the way; or because you wrote, irresistibly, as when you would masturbate in secret, not to go further, but to attenuate the tension a bit, just enough to take the edge off. And then as soon as we come, we go and make ourselves feel guilty. (1525)

Even in the way the young author, Laborit, must explain, rationalize, justify, prove, and reprove herself for writing what she has just capably written for 146 pages, "trembl[ing] with apprehension," you can almost hear the whisper of Cixous in Laborit's ears. *We go and make ourselves feel guilty. . . and why don't you write?*

This guilty whisper is also heard in another "cry of the gull" kind of text that I take as my pivot point for a rhetorical mapping of deaf women's autobiography. Teresa de Cartagena was a Castilian converso nun who wrote a remarkable "consolatory treatise" (as it has been figured) around the year 1452. In this text, *Groves of the Infirm*, Teresa sought to console herself over her deafness. She was also seeking, I am convinced, to use her deafness to cloak her gender, to call attention to her disability in order to be able to pass as an author at a time when no woman of the church could author-ize. She is writing, as Cixous suggests women often do, in secret. This is important. Not her deafness so much (although it is clearly the consolatory impetus) but the act of authorizing herself through and with her deafness. Teresa's text stands near many other candidates for "first autobiography," Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich chief among them. Even the critical introduction claims that "its theme is the spiritual benefits of illness, and Teresa's own deafness serves as autobiographical exemplum" and further that it "is the only extant *consolatio* written from a woman's position" (Seidenspinner-Núñez 1–2).

In authoring her (deaf) consolation, Teresa also engaged in self-invention that, as Gilmore claims, "emerge[d] within the technologies of autobiography—namely those legalistic, literary, social and ecclesiastical discourses of truth and identity through which the subject of autobiography is produced" (42). Bound by legal, literary, social, and ecclesiastical discourses that dictate her inability to author, or to "hear" the word of God, or to interpret text, Teresa's text is a triumph of resistance and contradiction, a tale of interruption and eruption. Within her *Groves of the Infirm*, Teresa stands quite firm as "writing itself [becomes] constitutive of [her] autobiographical identity" (Gilmore 42).

Ironically, however, even while she was carving out a firm disability identity in this text, she was also trying to downplay her gendered identity. In this fifty-page treatise and

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812900167926 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the one that followed it, *Wonder at the Works of God* (which she wrote as a defense two or three years later, apparently in answer to the detractors and doubters who read *Groves of the Infirm* and either scorned her as an author or did not even believe that she did, or could, write such a text), we read Teresa de Cartagena doing what both Gilmore and Egan explain in scholarship on contemporary autobiography. For example, Teresa engages self-invention through the "technology" of ecclesiastical discourses of truth and identity, and she also composes herself (twice over) with and through interruptions and eruptions as her first text is received with what she calls "malicious wonder" (103). Teresa must also use resistance and contradiction as strategies of self-representation when she negotiates what she knows is an audience that doubts her ability to author (and here she is more "infirm" in her gender than she is in her deafness). Part of the original intent (the rhetorical thrust) of *Groves of the Infirm* emphasizes writing itself as constitutive of her autobiographical identity as she explores the connection of word and body—when she writes, for example, that "since my suffering is of such a treacherous nature that it prevents me from hearing good as well as bad counsel, . . . I must recur to my books, which have wonderful graftings from healthful groves" (23–24).

Autobiography is always rhetorical, as much about audience as it is about self. In the particularly rhetorical response of *Wonder at the Works of God*, Teresa compels us to join her in her own map of interpretation, especially as she cleverly defends her first text from the "malicious wonder" aimed at her authorship:

> People marvel at what I wrote in the treatise and I marvel at what, in fact, I kept quiet, but I do not marvel doubting nor do I insist on my wonder. For my experience makes me sure, and God of truth knows that I had no other master nor consulted with any other learned authority nor translated from other books, as some people with malicious wonder are wont to say. . . . (102–03)

And Teresa feels guilty about writing it all down too. Deaf, she wrote:

> [F]or according to the nature of my suffering, if you look closely, you will see me more alone in the company of many than when I retreat to my cell all by myself.
>
> This is the reason why: when I am alone, I am accompanied by myself and by this poor sense I have, but when I find myself in the company of others, I am completely forsaken, for I cannot profit from the joy of companionship nor from the speech of those around me nor from myself. . . . And where hearing fails, what good is speech? One is left dead and completely isolated. Thus, for these reasons, and because my experience lends them credence, you can well believe how very lonely I am; and since I cannot rid myself of this unsparing and lasting loneliness, I want to combat my idleness by busying myself with this little treatise, which one might well say is neither good nor even ordinary, but rather completely bad. (25)

Here you can almost imagine Teresa as a modern-day scholar: "It's only a draft . . . I know it's not very good." The problem seems to have been, however, that it was very good. And her readers weren't fooled by the ruse of her deafness as a mask for her *real* disability at the time—her gender. Much as Helen Keller was accused of plagiarism at age eleven, there was apparently some "wondering" about Teresa's "wonder" and her ability to write such a text. So she had to go back and defend her authorship—and do so as a woman this time. She hardly mentions her deafness in the second text except—and this is important—to continue to cite it as the source of her seeking consolation in the first place and turning, as it were, to the wonder in the works of God.

"Autobiography," writes Gilmore, "provokes fantasies of the real" (16). Teresa's wonder, her coming to the groves of the infirm

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812900167926 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and finding consolation there, as well as the wonder with which her audience receives her "little treatise," proves the provocative and real fantasy of writing (as) *deaf*, writing (as) *she*. Moreover, both author wonder and audience wonder in Teresa's case are paradoxically wondrous. First, they are constructively wondrous, since they draw her toward what Egan calls "mirror talk," bringing her into being as a "constructed knower" (Belenky et al. 131)—making meaning, mapping identity, becoming visible, recovering understanding of herself in the world. Yet the wonder is also, as Teresa herself calls it, "malicious," for "although it is said that their wonder is flattering, to me it seems offensive and clear that they offer me scathing insults and not empty praise. . . . [T]his can ruin the substance of my writing and undermines greatly the benefit and grace that God wrought for me" (88).

In this passage, as she encounters the inherent oppression in her reader's "wonder," Teresa is beginning to understand the power—and paradox—of writing. Plato worried a great deal about this power and paradox. As Jacques Derrida describes the Platonic distrust of writing: "A written sign is proffered in the absence of the receiver. How to style this absence?" (1479).

How to style the absence of an audience for a deaf woman autobiographer? This is most certainly a problem Teresa was grappling with. And perhaps we can authorize an understanding of that absence by chalking it up to "the times" in 1452. But 550 years later another deaf woman autobiographer, Emmanuelle Laborit, finds herself wrestling with much the same problem as she writes across and through several languages and potential audiences.

The linguistic and rhetorical possibilities—and stakes—are numerous as well for another, more recent "consolatory treatise" by another deaf woman, Anne Bolander. Her "as told to" autobiography, *I Was Number 87*, was published in 2000. (And Bolander's authoring this book through the hand of another, Adair Renning, is surely an interruption and eruption worth noting.) *I Was Number 87* is a story, as the subtitle declares, of "a deaf woman's ordeal of misdiagnosis, institutionalization, and abuse" multiple times over. It begins with Bolander's early placement into a startlingly abusive institution for determined mental retardation (she is, in fact, deaf), the Stoutamyre School of Special Education.

Cixous was apparently buzzing in Bolander's ear as well: *Why don't you write*? Near the end of the book, Bolander (writing through/with Adair Renning) confesses from her own groves of the infirm:

> As I began to share the story of my life with the doctors, I also started to reconstruct the journal I had kept in high school, which Linda had destroyed. The doctors provided me with loose-leaf paper and a ballpoint pen, and I began by writing my earliest memories. The medications I was taking helped to keep me calm during the writing but I often had flashbacks at night. Now, instead of banging my head against the wall, I wrote. I wrote about Margie, Warren, Pat, St. Mary's, Ruth, Glenn, and Anna. I wrote about my mother—how angry I was that she had left me with no mother, that it was her fault that nobody taught me all the things that she was supposed to have taught me as a child. And as I filled the pages, I could see the book that I had used to threaten Nora Stoutamyre. . . .
>
> Later I wrote a letter to each of my brothers telling them that our father had raped me. I put each letter in an envelope, and addressed and stamped them. Then I put them in my safe deposit box, waiting for the right time. I told myself that the next time I got mad at my father I'd mail them. But I could never bring myself to do it; something inside me told me to let go of those feelings. Eventually I cleaned the box out and threw the letters away. (168, 171)

Yet in telling the untold, in rewriting, as it were, the absent letters, Bolander's book has now also been cleaned out and thrown away. Anne Bolander's book is currently absent;

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812900167926 Published online by Cambridge University Press

thus, styling the absence of the receiver is an even bigger problem here. This text, erupted, has now been interrupted: *I Was Number 87* has been pulled from print because of questions and allegations regarding the "truth" of some of Bolander's experiences. Her brothers, who had money and lawyers, demanded that.

I do not know all the story surrounding Bolander's autobiographical appearance and disappearance, but I do know that, indeed, it seems that "autobiographies [can] provoke fantasies of the real." For regardless of whether her accused father can tell the truth (which is, I might emphasize, only *his* truth) through the sons seeking to protect his name, and regardless of whether Anne's story is "true"—and she makes troubling confessions in her book about her tendencies to seek attention in various ways—the censorship and styled absence of her text is very real at this point. Teresa at least had a chance to answer her detractors, to come at the story another way, to counter wonder for wonder. Teresa's absent receiver becomes actually quite present for her, and so she rises to the rhetorical occasion and writes again. Perhaps Anne Bolander will rise and write again too—this time in a book titled with a name, not a number. I, for one, will be present to receive that.

For when we attend to deaf women's autobiography rhetorically, the audience matters. If, deaf, she wrote . . . who then will read, and how? Who will answer back? And how? Will they censor, or ensure, her textual performance? When she offers her difference, what will come back? To understand, read, receive, and critically map a deaf woman's autobiography, we need to understand her audiences—those she imagined and aimed to write for, those who read it anyway, and those who wondered, in both affirming and malicious ways, at her ability to master the tribal speech and "get a life" (Smith and Watson) in the literate act of autobiography.

Works Cited

Belenky, Mary Field, et al. *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind*. New York: Basic, 1986.

Bizzell, Patricia, and Bruce Herzberg, eds. *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*. Boston: Bedford, 2001.

Bolander, Anne, and Adair N. Renning. *I Was Number 87: A Deaf Woman's Ordeal of Misdiagnosis, Institutionalization, and Abuse*. Washington: Gallaudet UP, 2000.

Burke, Kenneth. "From *Language as Symbolic Action*." Bizzell and Herzberg 1340–47.

Cixous, Hélène. "The Laugh of the Medusa." Bizzell and Herzberg 1524–36.

Derrida, Jacques. "Signature Event Context." Bizzell and Herzberg 1475–90.

Egan, Susanna. *Mirror Talk: Genres of Crisis in Contemporary Autobiography*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2000.

Gilmore, Leigh. *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994.

Laborit, Emmanuelle. *The Cry of the Gull*. Trans. Constantina Mitchell and P. R. Côté. Washington: Gallaudet UP, 1988.

Seidenspinner-Núñez, Dayle. Introduction. Teresa de Cartagena 1–21.

Smith, Sidone, and Julia Watson, eds. *Getting a Life: Everyday Uses of Autobiography*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996.

Teresa de Cartagena. *The Writings of Teresa de Cartagena*. Trans. Dayle Seidenspinner-Núñez. Cambridge: Brewer, 1998.

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812900167926 Published online by Cambridge University Press