

Transcript of Interview with Steven Fedorowicz: Deaf Communities in Japan

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Mark Bookman: Hello, everyone. You're listening to *Asian Ethnology Podcast*. My name is Mark Bookman, and today, I'm joined by Steven Fedorowicz. Steven is a cultural anthropologist, visual anthropologist, and Associate Professor of Anthropology in the Asian Studies Program at Kansai Gaidai University.

He has lived and worked in Osaka, Japan, for over 20 years. Steven's interests include deaf communities, sign language, performance, globalization, multimodality, and ethnographic photography. Today, Steven's going to talk to us about an ongoing project concerning many representations of deaf people and culture in Japan. Steven, thank you so much for joining me.

Steven Fedorowicz: Hello, Mark. Hello, everybody. Thank you for having me.

Mark: It's great to have you. Can you tell me a little bit about your research project?

Steven: Mark, I'm a simple ethnographer, so this is really about providing cultural descriptions of deaf people in Japan. For this particular project and presentation, I'm thinking of doing it in two parts. Part one would be some information on deafness and sign language in Japan. The basic questions people usually ask isn't sign language universal, can't all deaf people speech read, and things like this.

As you know, there's a wide variety of deafness depending on physical and personal circumstances. All of these different circumstances make for different forms of communication and sign language abilities. I want to start out with a statement not all deaf people are deaf. I suppose you'd have to see it to get it right, so not all small d deaf people are capital D deaf.

What does this mean? I'll begin to explain this with a little discussion of heuristic academic and social welfare models of deafness. The first one I call the deficit model and it's similar to the medical or individual or illness model in disability studies here. It's treating deafness as a disability, a handicap, an abnormality, and something that needs to be cured and overcome.

These ideas go back to Aristotle. He said those born deaf become senseless and incapable of reason. The early psychological, sociological and linguistic literature perpetuated these ideas, at least until the 1970s. Broad assumptions that deafness decreases cognitive ability and increases behavioral problems and these kinds of things.

Then getting to the cultural model which treats deaf capital D deaf people as a culture or community or a linguistic minority. Nothing is necessarily lost amongst these people, rather they use a form of language that is visually based rather than speech. We could include them with other linguistic minorities in Japan, ethnic Korean. I knew Okinawan people that all suffered some prejudice or discrimination by the so-called normal Japanese majority.

There's a social movement aspect of this. This is where we get the capital D deaf ear, where capital D deaf refers to the name of a cultural group like Asian, or Asian American, or

Japanese, or whatnot. This is a cultural belonging. This is opposed to small d deaf which refers to the state of hearing loss, so not all small d deaf people are capital D deaf.

Moving beyond the models because they're simply not exclusive, they exist together in different ways for different deaf people. For example, the World Federation of the Deaf recently talked about how capital D deaf people consider themselves as a linguistic and cultural group with highly complex natural languages, but the rights of small d deaf people are, however, shared through disability policy legislation and international instruments.

We're talking about issues of intersectionality, issues of identity, and this gets us into relations of representation of deaf people in society and the media. That would bring me to part two, dealing with these issues of representation, moral rage and inspiration porn. For example, inspiration porn as the idealization of disabled people doing everyday tasks or for achievements having nothing to do with their particular disability.

This term is pretty widely used now and it's in the discourse in Japan as well. A recent article I read about outrage, non-disabled people's expressions of shock, and outrage at individual acts of ableism are in some way the flip side of inspiration porn. I found this to be interesting and using this discourse going on. In the end, though, my own work takes the shape of ethnography.

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Mark: When you say your work takes the shape of ethnography, what specific archives, or what specific communities are you engaged that I can ask?

Steven: Well, this has been my major research for over 20 years working with deaf people and communities in Japan. It started with my PhD dissertation, which included three years of fieldwork, qualitative and quantitative methods. Mostly participant observation, study of Japanese sign language, interviews, surveys, literature, reviews, analysis of deaf performance, genres. Mostly working with capital D deaf people in that.

Mark: You mentioned your training, and this kind of raises a question for me. Coming into disability studies, coming into deaf studies, these fields are, let's just say, not the most common compared to some other disciplines. Certainly, not in Japan, it's a growth area. I guess I'm just curious what brought you into this research?

Steven: Two things. I have to say that my first experience with deaf people and sign language wasn't in the United States where I was born or here in Japan where I live now, but rather in a remote village in Bali, Indonesia, known as the deaf village now. There's a large percent of genetic deafness. This is my first opportunity to meet deaf people and see and use sign language. I was a research assistant for a professor for about two months there. Deaf people in the village were not isolated or marginalized.

In fact, they played important roles in village political, economic, and ritual domains. Of course, they use sign language, but so did a good many of the hearing villagers as well. This village is full of peasant farmers and they have to work together and cooperate. If your neighbor happened to be deaf, you communicated it in sign language. It was common. My professor found that this deafness had been in the village for hundreds of years. There's the expression in the village hearing plus deaf equals the village.

This was my first experience. Then after that, returning to the United States and starting to look at some of the literature dealing with deaf people in the United States and elsewhere, I guess this is where my moral outrage came of the deficit model here because I saw this as a cultural construct, a social construct, and it really doesn't have to be this way. I really wanted to do something ethnographic and cross-cultural with deaf communities. Somehow I ended up in Japan and that's what I've been doing.

Mark: Well, it's interesting to hear you talk about your exposure to this in different cultures, whether it's working in Indonesia, or whether it's thinking about deafness in the US versus Japan. I imagine- or it's not that I'm familiar- each of these cultures, of course, has many different deaf communities inside of them. There's a different diversity inside of those internalized communities.

You mentioned intersectionality as a keyword earlier. Figuring out how to parse some of the intersectional components that make these communities unique and break into them as an ethnographer, traveling across countries, I imagine, is a very difficult process. I'm just curious, what are some of the challenges you faced as you were exploring these politics of deafness in the multiple communities, multiple countries that you were jumping back and forth between?

Steven: I have to say when I was working in Bali, I had no background in deafness or sign language, so this is all brand new to me, and I was only there for a limited amount of time. While I was in the United States, I decided that I wanted to study American Sign Language. I think I took a year of classes. I never got fluent, but I was able to make it into the language requirement for my master's degree. There were maybe seven deaf students at my university and a few interpreters that I would hang out with sometimes. Not a lot of real experience in the United States, either. It really wasn't until I got to Japan and I started meeting deaf people.

At that time, I could not speak Japanese and I certainly did not know any Japanese sign language and I knew very little about culture and history of Japan and in politics and that sort of thing. All I could do was to hang out with deaf people. As I did, I started to get the language to a certain extent. They were taking me places and really introducing to me Japanese culture through sign language from a deaf perspective and a deaf worldview.

Mark: What did you learn from this experience? Did it change you at all as a scholar?

Steven: Yes. Learning a lot from various deaf people-- It's funny. When I first started defining what Japanese sign language was, I didn't really include the aspect of having a different worldview. The more I think about it, it's definitely a different worldview. They're looking at Japanese culture in a much different light when I learned about Japan through them. I have these Japanese deaf perspectives of what I think Japan is. There are times when I'm with hearing people and it's something different that I have some problems.

My Japanese sign language is much better than my spoken Japanese. One of my Japanese teachers, who also knows Japanese sign language, noted that the mistakes you're making, you're following the grammar of Japanese sign language instead of spoken Japanese, and other things like that.

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Steven: In terms of getting to my current project, I should mention that in this podcast, I'd like to get maybe a little bit more reflexive and position myself within this research more than I'll have a chance to do in the presentation. Just some background on my influences and where I'm coming from. My biggest influences I would have to say are Hunter S. Thompson and his Gonzo journalism, and the anthropologist Clifford Geertz with his extreme sense of being there and thick description.

Some have referred to my style as a style of street-level ethnography because I literally was on the street with deaf people going here and there and learning about Japan from them. Approaching this inspiration porn, where this came from, I happened to see a commercial for a particular battery about an American football player who happened to be deaf.

They were really using that sense of being deaf to sell their product. They described him as legally deaf, small d deaf, capital D deaf, hearing impaired, hearing disabled. All of those things are very different terms in terms of representation and identity, they're all very different. I thought, well, this is kind of odd, and I wanted to look more into it. I started doing exploration on the internet and found these instances of inspiration porn. I found the excellent work of Stella Young as well.

I wanted to see how this worked in the representations of deaf people, especially on the media. There was the sign language boom on Japanese TV in the '90s and early 2000s. I remember watching these dramas and the sign language was absolutely horrible. Things that just weren't representative, weren't real, or were being presented as, "This is what deaf is and this is what sign language is."

Deaf people were very critical of these representations as well. Especially since they create strong but inaccurate images of deafness and sign language that ultimately serve to perpetuate deficit models of disability. I wanted to look more into this in the Japanese deaf context here. I had to take a break from this. This was in 2014. I had to temporarily stop working on the subject. The reason being I had some pain and problems with my legs, which led to major mobility difficulties.

Ultimately, I had to have a double hip replacement surgery. I spent a month in the hospital and many more months doing rehab. I was legally disabled in Japan for a year. The husband of a colleague of mine had a similar surgery and became permanently disabled legally. Of course, the law changed because of the aging population, the increase in acknowledged disabilities and the decreases in money to pay for it all.

My year was up and I'm no longer disabled. Here, we could definitely see that disability is a legal construct, social construct that changes. I had the *shogaisha techo* [disability certificate]. I didn't really receive so many social welfare benefits. I can't claim that I understand disability issues like someone with a long-term or permanent disability, but I learned a lot about the bureaucracy of social welfare laws and barrier-free issues.

It's made me consider things differently and influenced different approaches in my research. I don't really intend to talk about these experiences so much in the presentation, but they remain, and I think they might affect and alter my presentation in ways that I might not fully realize. In addition to my deaf research, I've been doing this for a long time. It's grown beyond research in many ways. I use Japanese sign language every day.

Most of my friends are deaf. My neighbors happened to be deaf. I serve as the interpreter for their cat when the cat is left out on the balcony and meows and they can't hear him, I send him a text message. I met my wife during this research. She's a sign language interpreter. She doesn't speak English, so our first common language is Japanese sign language.

I was able to pitch and now teach a class here at Kansai Gaidai, called Deaf World Japan, that is half deaf ethnography and half studies of Japanese sign language. I really consider this research to be really personal and important. I used to say that it was my baby before we actually had a baby.

Mark: There's so much I want to touch on there, but let me pull one thing here which is it sounds to me like whether you're talking about your research with deaf interlocutors in Japan, or you're talking about your personal experience with mobility impairment, or you're talking about the connections that you've made from your wife to your neighbors.

In each case, it's how a moment of encounter has changed the way that you think about what it means to be deaf, or how deaf communities are constructed. I imagine that exposure and that experience makes the contrast to what we're seeing in the media representation that much more severe. I imagine when you look at something like inspiration porn, for instance, it's a very curated.

It's a very precise image of deafness, for instance, that's being sold for various reasons. Whether it's to sell a product or to promote a certain ideology or what have you. I'm just imagining that each of those moments that you described earlier is just another reason why you would look at that and say, "Wait a minute, this isn't telling the full story." Would that be a fair statement?

Steven: Yes, exactly. With inspiration porn, they say you don't have to deal with the complications of the real thing, you get to skip the hard part. That's definitely the case. I see research in all of my projects really focusing on real people dealing with real-life situations. Many of the people I've known, the deaf people I've known for over 20 years, I've watched some of them grow up and get married and have children.

I've seen some of them get older, and even have grandchildren. I've seen them get sick and deal with other real-life problems. This is what I want to try to present. I'm a simple ethnographer. To do that, you have to deal with these other representations that aren't so accurate in society and the media.

Mark: Thank you for that. This gets to one final question I want to ask which is when we're talking about this disparity between the representation of deafness and the reality, if you want to put it that way, or realities plural, that gets to a message, or something that we're trying to convey. I want to know, ultimately, what do you want to convey to the listeners of this podcast and those who will hear your presentation at Kansai University in a couple of weeks?

Steven: That's a great question. I would like them to get beyond the surface level, get beyond academic theories and models. We can't blame people if they don't have any real involvement, or real interaction, or real experiences, but still, people need to know because deaf people, disabled people, oftentimes don't get to participate in the decisions that they make.

They don't give their own permission, there's a strong sense of paternalism. Again, no real understanding of what's going on out there. I may very well end my presentation with the question, how do we get people to know? Do you have to become disabled or do you have to have family or friends become disabled? Or can you get this from books and lectures?

Hopefully, from our lecture series will be helpful. I've had a lot of success with my Deaf World Japan class with the students that had never even considered these things before, really learning and understanding. Lot of my students are international students. They go back to their own countries and sometimes study sign language there as well. Whatever we can do to get people to know. Again, I'm a simple ethnographer, and that's what I'm trying to do.

Mark: I think it's an amazing mission. It's one that we're all a part of, I'd stress to all of our listeners here. We all have an opportunity to-- Even if we don't experience disability at our own lives, we have the opportunity of recognizing that, thinking about the absences that are there, and then just discussing how do we fill that void, how do we get at those perspectives, what can we do.

Steven, in his ethnographic method, has given us some ways of doing that. Hopefully, the entire series at Nanzan will give us a holistic perspective, with Steven being an integral part. Steven, I'd like to thank you again for joining me today. It's been an absolute pleasure.

Steven: All right. Thank you, Mark, and everybody else, too.

Mark: This has been Asian Ethnology Podcast. My name is Mark Bookman. Thank you for listening.

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