

Title page

Title: Deconstructing of the human: self – identity and other

Module code: ADAA7001/C

Course name: Coexistent Perspectives

Student name: Cerian Haf Lloyd

Student number :2203901

Word count: 4080

Abstract

This essay looks at how Deafness challenges common ideas about what it means to be human, particularly ideas about identity, communication, and belonging. It argues that hearing and speech are often treated as natural or necessary parts of being human, which can place Deaf people in a position of difference or exclusion. Writing from the perspective of a Deaf artist, the essay draws on lived experience alongside critical writing to explore how identity is shaped through visual, embodied, and relational ways of knowing. The work of artists Christine Sun Kim and Riva Lehrer is used to show how art can make these experiences visible and question hearing-centred and able-bodied assumptions. Overall, the essay suggests that Deaf and disabled experiences offer alternative ways of understanding humanity that are not based on sound, independence, or fixed ideas of normality.

Table on contents

- Introduction
- Chapter 1
- Chapter 2
- Chapter 3
- Conclusion
- Biblogrphy

List of illustrations

Fig. 1. Christine Sun Kim, degrees of deaf rage in the United Stats (2018)

Fig.2. Riva Lehrer, Riva and Zora in middle age (2006)

Introduction

This essay is a response to essay question two, deconstructing the human, by looking into how deafness challenges dominant constructions of the human subject and destabilises fixed notions of self-identity and otherness. Drawing on deconstructive theory, disability studies, and deaf culture learning, the essay argues that the human is not a neutral or universal category but once a structured around ableist and phonocentric norms that privilege speech and hearing.

Using Jacques Derrida's concept of deconstruction alongside Rosemarie Garland Thomson's critique of normativity and Paddy Ladds articulation of deaf hood, the essay positions deafness as a site of epistemological difference rather than a deficit. Through an auto- ethnographic lens, this discussion explores how lived deaf experience reveals the limits of dominant humanists' frameworks and how contemporise artistic practice becomes a space in which these frameworks and how contemporise artistic practice becomes a space in which these frameworks can be questioned, disrupted and reconfigured.

Art is examined as a critical site of resistance, where visibility, gesture, and embodied communication challenge auditory-centric models of meaning. In doing so, the essay demonstrates how Deaf artistic practice deconstructs self-identity as a fixed category and proposes alternative, plural understandings of what it means to be human within contemporary culture.

Dominant western ideas of the human subject are shaped by assumptions that have historically been grounded in assumptions of speech, hearing and able-bodiedness . In dominant philosophical, social, and cultural frameworks the capacity to speak and

hear is frequently treated as a defining marker of intelligence, agency and personhood. These assumptions often remain invisible, operating as unmarked norms which all bodies and modes of communication are measured. As a result the category of the “human” appears stable and universal while those who do not conform to its implicit standards are positioned as marginal or deficient. Questioning these assumptions requires a critical examination of how self-identity is constructed through processes of inclusion and exclusion.

Within these normative constructions of the human, deafness is frequently framed through narratives of lack, absence, or impairment. Rather than being understood as a difference in perception and communication, deafness is positioned as a deviation from the assumed hearing subject. This positioning reflects broader processes of Othering, in which identities are defined relationally through what they are not. Deaf individuals are thus constituted as the “Other” against which hearing identity is stabilised, reinforcing hierarchies of normality and difference. Examining Deafness in this way reveals how self-identity is not inherent or fixed, but produced through cultural, social, and political power structures.

This essay adopts an auto-ethnographic approach, situated lived deaf experience as a form of critical knowledge rather than subjective anecdotes. Writing from within deafness allows for an examination of how identity is shaped by embodied, visual, and spatial ways of knowing that are often marginalised within dominant theoretical discourse. By foregrounding Deaf experience, the essay challenges the authority of hearing-centred frameworks and repositions Deaf perception as an epistemological resource. This approach aligns with contemporary critical practices that recognise situated knowledge as essential to interrogating normative assumptions about the human subject.

As a Deaf artist, this essay approaches these questions from a situated, embodied perspective, employing an auto-ethnographic methodology that situates lived experience as a critical lens rather than subjective testimony. This approach enables an examination of how Deaf identity is shaped through embodied, visual, and spatial forms of communication that resists dominant hearing-centric constructions of self-identity.

Chapter 1: Deconstructing the human theory, otherness and normativity

To examine how Deafness deconstructs self-identity and challenges dominant constructions of the human, it is first necessary to establish a theoretical framework that addresses identity, Otherness, and normativity.

The concept of the human subject has been extensively examined within philosophy, cultural theory and critical disability studies, particularly in relation to how identity is constructed through difference and exclusion. Theoretical frameworks concerned with deconstruction. Otherness and normativity provide essential tools for interrogation the assumptions that underpin hearing- centred definitions of selfhood. Drawing from these perspectives, it becomes possible to examine how deafness has been positioned as other and how this positioning sustains dominant ideas of what it means to be human. This section outlines the key theoretical concepts that inform the analysis, establishing a foundation for the discussion of deaf identity and artistic practice that follows.

Jacques Derrida's conception of deconstruction offers a critical framework for understanding identity as unstable and relational rather than fixed or essential. Derrida argues that meaning is produced through difference, structured by binary oppositions in which one term is privileged over another. Within Western thought, binaries such as speech and writing, presence and absence, and normal and abnormal shape dominant understandings of the human subject. Applying deconstruction to constructions of the human reveals how hearing and speech are positioned as central markers of selfhood, while Deafness is framed as a lack of absence.

Central to Derrida's critique is the concept of *phono centrism*, which describes the privileging of speech as the primary site of meaning, truth, and presence. Within phonocentric frameworks, speech is positioned as authentic and immediate, while other forms of communication are treated as secondary or derivative. This privileging of speech has significant implications for how the human subject is defined, as the ability to speak and hear becomes implicitly associated with agency, intelligence, and full personhood. When examined through a deconstructive lens, these assumptions reveal how hearing-centred models of communication underpin dominant constructions of self-identity, rendering non-auditory forms of expression marginal or invisible.

Derrida's critique is particularly significant in relation to the construction of self-identity, as it challenges the idea that identity is grounded in a stable inner essence. Instead, identity is understood as produced through systems of representation, difference, and exclusion (Derrida, 1967). When applied to constructions of the human, this perspective reveals how hearing and speech operate not merely as functional abilities, but as symbolic markers of legitimacy and belonging. Deafness therefore does not exist outside the category of the human; rather, it exposes the fragility of the assumptions upon which that category depends. By unsettling the privileging of speech and auditory presence, Deaf experience foregrounds alternative modes of meaning-making that disrupt dominant hierarchies of communication and selfhood.

From a deconstructive perspective, Deafness exposes the instability of phonocentric definitions of the human by revealing how meaning, identity, and relationality exist

beyond speech and sound. Rather than representing an absence of communication, Deaf experience challenges the hierarchy that privileges hearing as the dominant mode of human interaction. In this sense, Deafness functions as a site of deconstruction, unsettling, fixed notions of self-identity and revealing the contingent nature of the human subject. This framework provides a critical foundation for examining how Deaf identity is constructed through processes of Othering, and how these constructions are resisted through cultural and artistic practices.

Processes of othering play a central role in the constant construction of identity, as the self is often defined in relation to what it is not. Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that one is not born but rather a becoming the other highlights how marginal identities are socially and culturally produced rather than inherently different. Within dominant frameworks, the other is positioned as deviant or deficient, reinforcing the stability and authority of the normal subject. This relation is constructed by the identity that reveals how difference is mobilised to maintain hierarchies of power, shaping who is recognised as fully human and who is rendered peripheral.

Disability theorist Rosemarie Garland-Thomson expands this understanding by examining how normativity functions through the figure of the appearance of the unmarked, assumed body against which all others are measured (Garland-Thomson, 1997). Normativity operates invisibly, presenting certain bodies, sensory capacities, and modes of communication as natural and universal, while positioning difference as abnormal. This framework exposes how the human subject is implicitly constructed as able-bodied and hearing, with deviations from this standard framed as problems to be corrected or managed. Normativity therefore plays a crucial role in sustaining Othering by naturalising exclusion.

When considered together, theories of Othering and normativity provide a critical framework for understanding how Deafness is positioned within dominant constructions of the human. Deaf bodies and modes of communication are not marginalised because they lack meaning or agency, but because they disrupt the assumptions that underpin hearing-centred norms. This positioning situates Deafness as Other within humanist frameworks, reinforcing deficit-based narratives while obscuring alternative ways of being and knowing. The following section builds on this framework by examining Deafness and identity more directly, with particular attention to cultural, linguistic, and embodied dimensions of Deaf experience.

Chapter 2: Deafness, identity and cultural difference

Building on the theoretical frameworks of deconstruction, Otherness, and normativity outlined in the previous section, this section examines Deafness and identity as socially and culturally constructed rather than medically defined. Deafness has historically been framed within dominant hearing-centred narratives as a deficit or impairment, positioning Deaf individuals as marginal in relation to normative conceptions of the human. However, Deaf Studies scholarship challenges this framing by foregrounding Deafness as a cultural and linguistic identity with its own values, modes of communication, and forms of belonging (Lane, 1992; Ladd, 2003).

A key tension within discussions of Deaf identity exists between medical and cultural models of Deafness. The medical model conceptualises Deafness primarily in terms of loss, emphasising diagnosis, intervention, and rehabilitation. Within this framework, Deaf bodies are treated as problems to be corrected, reinforcing deficit-based understandings of self-identity (Davis, 1995). In contrast, the cultural-linguistic model understands Deafness as a difference rather than a lack, situating Deaf identity within shared language, history, and social practices. This model resists the assumption that hearing is a prerequisite for full human participation, instead asserting Deaf ways of being as valid and meaningful.

Language plays a central role in the formation of Deaf identity. Sign languages are not merely substitutes for spoken language, but fully developed linguistic systems that shape cognition, social interaction, and selfhood. The privileging of speech within dominant cultural frameworks reflects the phonocentric assumptions discussed earlier, positioning spoken language as the primary marker of intelligence and agency. Deaf communities challenge this hierarchy by asserting visual-gestural communication as equally complex and expressive, thereby disrupting hearing-centred constructions of identity and belonging.

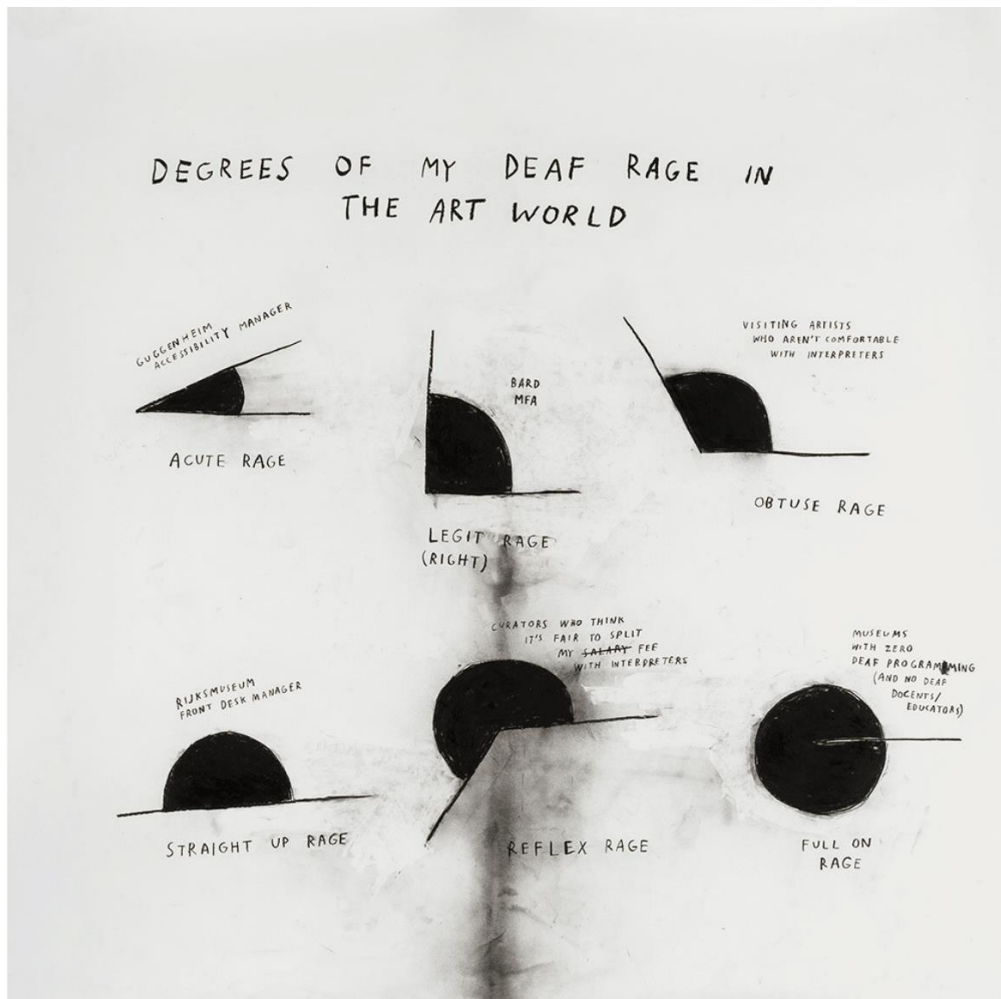
From an embodied perspective, Deaf identity is experienced through the body as a site of perception, communication, and meaning making. Visual attention, spatial awareness, and gesture form integral components of Deaf ways of knowing, offering alternative modes of engagement with the world. These embodied practices challenge normative assumptions about how the self is formed and expressed, reinforcing the argument that identity is not fixed, but produced through lived experience and relational contexts.

From my position as a Deaf artist, these cultural and linguistic frameworks inform not only my understanding of identity, but also the ways in which I navigate creative practice and representation.

Chapter 3: Art as a site of Deconstruction

Deaf artist Christine Sun Kim's art practice offers critical intervention into hearing centered constructions of sound, communication and authority. Working across drawing, performing and installation, Kim visualises sound as a social and political force rather than a auditory phenomenon. Work directly challenges phonocentric assumptions by foregrounding deaf experience as a legitimate and authoritative mode of perception. In doing so Kim reframes deafness not as absence but as a site of conceptual and aesthetic innovation.

Fig. 1. Christine Sun Kim, *Degrees of Deaf Rage in the United States*, 2018.



In *Degrees of deaf rage in the United States* (2018), Kim translates emotional responses to systemic exclusion into a visual, quantitative scale. Mapping deaf rage as something that can be measured, shared and publicly displays, the work shows how institutional barriers and social ignorance forms over times. Rather than presenting emotion as a subjective or irrational, Kim frames deaf affect as a rational response to exclusionary systems. The approach aligns with deconstructive critiques of normativity by revealing how hearing- centred structures produce marginalisation while remaining largely invisible to those who may benefit.

From my perspective as a Deaf artist, Kim's visualisation of Deaf rage feels recognisable and grounded in everyday experience. The work captures the quiet accumulation of frustration that emerges from repeatedly negotiating access in hearing-centred environments. By making this experience visible, Kim draws attention to forms of emotional labour that are often overlooked within cultural frameworks that privilege restraint, neutrality, and spoken communication as markers of authority.

This approach aligns with deconstructive critiques of normativity by exposing how hearing-centred structures operate as invisible standards within social and institutional contexts (Derrida, 1967; Garland-Thomson, 1997). Hearing is positioned as the unmarked norm, while Deaf bodies are required to adapt, explain, or justify their needs, resulting in cumulative emotional labour. By making Deaf rage visible and legible, Kim's work destabilises these normative hierarchies, reframing Deaf experience as a site of critical knowledge rather than deficit. In doing so, *Degrees of Deaf Rage* functions not only as a personal expression, but as a political critique of the systems that construct Deafness as Other within dominant definitions of the human (Davis, 1995).

Art occupies a critical position within Deaf expression because it operates beyond the constraints of spoken language and auditory dependence that structure dominant constructions of the human subject. Within hearing-centred cultural frameworks, speech is often treated as the primary marker of intelligence, agency, and legitimacy, reinforcing phonocentric assumptions about how meaning is produced and communicated. For Deaf individuals, however, meaning is frequently articulated through visual, embodied, and spatial forms of communication. Artistic practice therefore provides a space in which these modes of knowing are not marginalised but centred, allowing Deaf experience to be expressed on its own terms rather than translated into hearing norms.

In this sense, Deaf artistic practice functions as a deconstructive intervention into dominant definitions of the human. By privileging visibility, gesture, and embodied communication, Deaf art exposes how hearing has been naturalised as an unmarked condition of humanity. This aligns with Derrida's critique of binary oppositions, in which one term is positioned as dominant while the other is rendered secondary or deficient. Within phonocentric hierarchies, speech is privileged over other forms of expression, positioning Deafness as absence rather than difference. Deaf art disrupts this hierarchy by demonstrating that communication, identity, and relationality exist beyond sound, thereby destabilising fixed notions of self-identity and Otherness.

Rather than seeking inclusion within existing humanist frameworks, Deaf artistic practice challenges the assumptions upon which those frameworks are built. By making visible the sensory and communicative norms that often go unquestioned, Deaf art reveals the constructed nature of the human subject itself. The hearing subject is no

longer positioned as neutral or universal, but as one identity among many, shaped by specific cultural and sensory conditions. Through this process, art becomes a site in which the boundaries between self and Other are unsettled, opening space for more plural and inclusive understandings of humanity.

Christine Sun Kim's practice exemplifies how Deaf art operates not only as self-expression, but as a form of critical resistance. Her work foregrounds Deaf experience as a site of knowledge production, exposing the power structures that determine whose voices are valued and whose are marginalised. By translating Deaf affect, labour, and exclusion into visual form, Kim demonstrates how artistic practice can make audible—through visibility—the otherwise invisible operations of hearing-centred normativity. This understanding of art as both a deconstructive and political tool informs the broader discussion of Deaf identity and artistic practice, and provides a foundation for examining how my own work engages with similar questions of visibility, access, and selfhood.

Deaf artistic practice operates as a critical challenge to normative constructions of the human by making visible the sensory assumptions that underpin dominant cultural frameworks. As disability theorist Lennard J. Davis argues, normativity functions through the establishment of an imagined average body and mind, against which all others are measured and often found lacking (Davis, 1995). Within this framework, hearing is positioned as a default human capacity, rendering Deafness as deviation rather than difference. Deaf art disrupts this logic by refusing to centre auditory experience and instead asserting visual and embodied modes of perception as equally valid forms of human expression.

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson further explains that normativity operates most powerfully when it remains invisible, presenting certain bodies and capacities as natural while marking others as abnormal (Garland-Thomson, 1997). Deaf artists challenge this invisibility by foregrounding the labour, adaptation, and exclusion required to navigate hearing-centred environments. In doing so, their work exposes how the category of the human is not neutral or universal but structured around ableist and phonocentric assumptions. Artistic practice thus becomes a site where these assumptions can be interrogated and dismantled.

From a deconstructive perspective, Deaf art unsettles binary oppositions that structure dominant understandings of identity, such as speech/silence, presence/absence, and normal/abnormal. Derrida's critique of phonocentrism highlights how speech has historically been privileged as the primary site of meaning and truth within Western thought (Derrida, 1967). Deaf art challenges this hierarchy by demonstrating that meaning is not dependent on sound, but emerges through visuality, gesture, and relational engagement. In this way, Deaf artistic practice deconstructs self-identity as

something stable and internally coherent, revealing it instead as relational and contingent.

Importantly, Deaf art does not merely seek representation within existing humanist frameworks but questions the foundations upon which those frameworks are built. By centring Deaf ways of knowing, artists resist the positioning of Deafness as Other and instead assert it as a site of epistemological difference. This shift reframes Deaf identity from deficit to agency, challenging the notion that full humanity is contingent upon conformity to hearing norms. Art therefore functions not only as a mode of expression, but as a critical methodology for reimagining the boundaries of the human.

Fig 2: Riva and Zora in middle age (2006)



Alongside Deaf artists such as Christine Sun Kim, disability-led artistic practices further expose how dominant constructions of the human rely upon normative assumptions about the body, perception, and communication. Artist Riva Lehrer's portrait practice offers a critical intervention into how disabled bodies are represented and understood within visual culture. Lehrer's work resists medicalised and corrective narratives of disability, instead foregrounding disabled subjects as complex, autonomous, and self-defining individuals. This approach aligns with disability studies critiques of normativity, which argue that the human subject is often implicitly defined through able-bodied standards (Garland-Thomson, 1997; Davis, 1995).

Lehrer's portraits challenge the viewer to confront their own assumptions about normality and difference. Rather than concealing impairment or framing disability as tragic, her work centres disability as an integral aspect of identity. In doing so, Lehrer destabilises the binary between normal and abnormal bodies, revealing identity as

relational and socially constructed rather than biologically fixed. This resonates with deconstructive perspectives that emphasise how meaning and identity are produced through systems of difference and exclusion (Derrida, 1967).

Although Lehrer's practice does not specifically address Deafness, it operates within a shared critical framework that challenges ableist constructions of the human. By asserting disabled bodies as sites of knowledge rather than deficiency, Lehrer's work complements Deaf artistic practices that resist phonocentric definitions of selfhood. Together, these approaches demonstrate how art functions as a space in which marginalised identities can reclaim authorship over their representation, disrupting dominant narratives that position difference as Other. By including her service dog within the portrait, Lehrer challenges dominant ideas of autonomous, self-sufficient human subject presenting identity as relational and interdependent. With her work reframing assistance not as deficiency, but as a lived embodiment, destabilising normative assumptions about independence indicating of full humanity.

When considered alongside Christine Sun Kim's work, Lehrer's practice reinforces the argument that artistic representation plays a crucial role in deconstructing normative definitions of humanity. Both artists reveal how institutional and cultural frameworks shape whose bodies and modes of communication are valued, and whose are marginalised. Through visual strategies that foreground embodiment, agency, and difference, their work contributes to more plural and inclusive understandings of self-identity and the human subject.

Together, the works of Christine Sun Kim and Riva Lehrer demonstrate how artistic practice functions as a critical site for deconstructing dominant constructions of the human subject. While Kim's work challenges phonocentric assumptions that position sound and speech as central to selfhood, Lehrer's self-portrait disrupts ableist ideals of autonomy, independence, and bodily normativity. Both artists expose how these norms operate as unmarked standards that define who is recognised as fully human and who is positioned as Other. By foregrounding Deaf and disabled ways of knowing, their practices reveal self-identity as relational, contingent, and shaped by systems of power rather than innate essence. In doing so, their work collectively destabilises fixed notions of self and Other, proposing more plural understandings of humanity that resist hearing-centred and able-bodied frameworks.

Conclusion

This essay has explored how Deafness challenges dominant constructions of the human subject by unsettling, fixed ideas of self-identity and Otherness. Drawing on deconstructive theory, disability studies, Deaf cultural scholarship, and contemporary artistic practice, it has argued that the category of the “human” is not neutral or universal. Instead, it is shaped by ableist and phonocentric norms that privilege hearing, speech, and bodily independence. Examining Deaf experience makes these assumptions visible, revealing how narrow definitions of humanity are produced and maintained through systems of inclusion and exclusion.

Using Derrida’s concept of deconstruction, the essay has shown how identity is structured through unstable binaries such as speech and silence, presence and absence, and normal and abnormal. Within these frameworks, hearing and speech are treated as markers of legitimacy and personhood, while Deafness is framed as lack. Deaf experience disrupts these hierarchies by demonstrating that meaning, communication, and relationality do not depend on sound. Rather than existing outside the category of the human, Deafness exposes how contingent and constructed that category is.

The discussion of Othering and normativity further highlights how Deaf identities are marginalised within dominant cultural frameworks. As Garland-Thomson and Davis argue, normativity operates most powerfully when it remains invisible, presenting the hearing, able-bodied subject as natural and universal. Deaf bodies and modes of communication are not positioned as Other because they lack value, but because they challenge these unspoken norms. Recognising this shifts the focus away from deficit and toward the social and cultural structures that shape identity and belonging.

By engaging with Deaf Studies perspectives, particularly cultural and linguistic models of Deafness, the essay has resisted medicalised narratives that frame Deaf identity in terms of impairment and correction. Instead, Deafness has been examined as a lived, social, and embodied identity shaped through language, community, and visual modes of communication. Sign language, spatial awareness, and gesture emerge not as alternatives to speech, but as central ways in which Deaf identity is formed and expressed.

Artistic practice has played a key role in making these ideas visible. Through the work of Christine Sun Kim and Riva Lehrer, the essay has shown how art can function as a form of resistance to hearing-centred and ableist definitions of the human. Kim’s work exposes the emotional labour produced by systemic exclusion, while Lehrer’s portraits challenge assumptions about autonomy and independence by presenting identity as

relational. Together, their practices demonstrate how art can unsettle normative frameworks and open space for more inclusive understandings of selfhood.

From my position as a Deaf artist, these issues are not theoretical but embedded in everyday experience. Access, visibility, and communication are continually negotiated within hearing-centred environments. Situating lived Deaf experience as a form of knowledge allows for a more grounded critique of dominant humanist frameworks. Deaf artistic practice provides a space in which identity can be articulated on its own terms, without being translated into hearing norms.

Ultimately, this essay argues that to deconstruct the human is to recognise that humanity is not singular or fixed. Deafness does not challenge the idea of the human by falling outside it, but by expanding what it can mean. Attending to Deaf and disabled ways of being invites a more plural, relational understanding of identity—one that acknowledges difference not as deficiency, but as a vital part of human diversity.

Bibliography

Kim, C. S. (2018) *Degrees of Deaf Rage in the United States*. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art.

Derrida, J. (1967) *Of Grammatology*. Trans. G. C. Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Garland-Thomson, R. (1997) *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Davis, L. J. (1995) *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body*. London: Verso.

Kuppers, P. (2014). *Studying Disability Arts and Culture*.

Lehrer, R. (2006). *Self-Portrait*.