

## **Bristol Deaf Memories: archives, nostalgia and the loss of community space in the deaf community in Bristol.**

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The deaf community in the UK has undergone major changes in recent years, which has uprooted it from its traditional foundations, the deaf club and deaf residential school. This article examines the effect of the closure of the deaf club in Bristol, a city in the South West of England, which resulted in the loss of an important community place and spaces for deaf people in the city. We discuss, with a strong focus on methodology, a community event celebrating Bristol's deaf heritage organised by the research team which utilised archive materials, including archived actuality footage. This article draws on interview data elicited from participants in that event to explore the meanings connected to space and place in both past and present by the deaf community in Bristol. Concepts of the rhizome and the smooth and striated spaces of Deleuze and Guattari were found to be useful models with which to engage with the contemporary struggles of the deaf community for community recognition and organisation. We also suggest an online mapping application which enables the practice of rhizomatic cartography could be a way forward in preserving the deaf heritage and history of the city.

Keywords: deaf; actuality footage; archive research; deaf space and place; smooth space; rhizome

## **Introduction**

The deaf community<sup>i</sup> in the UK has been undergoing major changes in recent years. These changes have, in part, come about by the changing relationships deaf people have with the traditional foundations of the deaf community – deaf clubs and deaf schools. Three factors which have played a part in causing the changing relationships with these institutions include long term social and educational policy changes (the Seebohm Report of 1968 which changed the provision of social care to deaf people, and the Education Act of 1981 which promoted mainstreaming over deaf schools, for example);<sup>ii</sup> differing relationships with technology which allow deaf people to have more freedom in arranging their own lives (see, for example, Bloom, Marschark, Vervloed and Knoors, 2014, Maiorana-Basas and Pagliaro, 2014); and recent austerity practices in the UK, which have seen funding for deaf clubs and deaf centres cut, resulting in closures (Swinbourne, 2011). One such city in which these factors have changed how deaf people utilise community spaces and places is Bristol, in which the Centre for Deaf People closed due to financial difficulties in 2012 (Ellington, 2014).

This article outlines one element of a year-long project, funded by the AHRC's Connected Communities scheme. The project aimed to explore what has happened to Bristol's deaf community in the wake of the closure of the Centre for Deaf People, seeking to better understand the relationships between deaf people and their institutions and how those relationships have changed. In unpacking this particular case study, this article aims to contribute not only to the burgeoning field of Deaf Geographies (see Gulliver and Kitzel, 2016, Harold, 2013, Mathews, 2007), but also to investigate how original research methods, including the use of archive actuality footage and digital

cartography, in combination with more traditional archive data, might help us better understand how the community reacted to a devastating closure.

The project's interdisciplinary team was made up of researchers from three universities, Dai O'Brien from York St John University, Lisa Stead from the University of Exeter, and Nick Nourse from the University of Bristol. Community partners in the project included the British Deaf Association (BDA), the national charity which represents the deaf community in the UK, and the Deaf Studies Trust (DST), a long-standing Bristol charity which has been working with the deaf community on a local and national scale for over 30 years. The project was structured around three themes, exploring the past, the present and the future of deaf spaces and places in Bristol, using a range of critical and practical approaches including film archive screening and theatre, BSL poetry, film-making, and cartography, in order to co-produce research findings with the community through unique interdisciplinary and impact-focused methodologies.

The article will focus upon the experiences of a contemporary deaf community whom, we suggest, is no longer well served by the older models of deaf communities, which were firmly rooted in the institutions of the deaf club and residential schools for deaf children as sites for transmission of cultural values and norms (see Kusters, De Meulder and O'Brien, 2017, Ladd, 2003, Lane, Hoffmeister and Bahan, 1996, Padden and Humphries, 1988). Before the closure of Bristol's deaf club, the deaf community in the city was somewhat fragmented along generational and special interest lines. Even so, the deaf club remained a symbolic, if not actual, site of unity and collectivity. Accordingly, the article frames an understanding of the Bristolian deaf community that is grounded in an analysis of social relations disconnected from the rootedness in the place of the club or school. We focus on the first core theme of the project: Bristol's

deaf past. This theme was explored through a celebration of the history of deaf people and communities in Bristol, developed in collaboration with the DST. The event, titled Bristol Deaf Memories, was held at Clifton House in Bristol on the evening of 18 July 2015. It was open and free for deaf people in Bristol to attend, and was hosted by a deaf compere in British Sign Language (BSL). The evening included interactive displays of historical and archival artefacts related to deaf spaces in the city (drawn from the Bristol Record Office, Bristol's libraries and the Centre for Deaf People's own archives); screenings of archival actuality footage documenting deaf pasts (provided by the BDA), and live performance in BSL showcasing significant moments in this history of the Bristol deaf club. The event was followed by short interviews with many of the attendees (either singly or in groups in BSL, and later translated and transcribed in English for analysis) to gather their views on Bristol's deaf past and how the social practices of the deaf community have changed over time.

A particular practical and theoretical conceptualisation of space and place underpinned our project and subsequent analyses of the loss of institutional locales. Throughout the article, we do not use the two terms interchangeably, although it must be noted that we consider that spaces and places are often intimately connected, overlaid and overlapping (Tuan, 1977). Our definition of place follows Agnew (1987), in considering place as an absolute location, with a specific material setting and to which people have an affective attachment (Withers, 2009). These places are where everyday life is situated (Merrifield, 1993), where 'basic social practices – consumption, enjoyment, tradition, self-identification, solidarity, social support and social reproduction – are lived out' (p. 522). Space, on the other hand, is seen as the product of social interactions (Thrift, 2009, p. 96), such as the temporary deaf spaces

which form when signing deaf people meet in the street or in a bar (Gulliver and Kitzel, 2016, p. 451).

First, the article begins by sketching out the coordinates of a historical account of Bristol's deaf past. We focus on outlining the challenges faced by the archival researcher looking for evidence of Bristol's deaf history, and consider the value of such primary resources in both understanding the emphasis upon place as central to historical deaf identities and communal practices, and providing a means by which to engage the contemporary deaf community in discourse surrounding the loss of deaf spaces.

Second, the article examines the nature of archival film research in illuminating and revisiting deaf pasts, discussing how such films can capture slices of social interaction and the enactment of spaces within or outside the traditional places of the deaf community. We suggest that these archival film clips and the interactions they portray are spatial in nature, not confined to specific places or locations, and consider how this impacts upon the reactions and interpretations of the contemporary deaf community in their consideration of the loss and meanings of regional deaf space.

Finally, the article moves to frame its interpretation of qualitative data gathered in the Bristol Deaf Memories event by utilising Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of the rhizome and smooth and striated space. We consider how these concepts can be used to critically interrogate the discourses that have shaped and affected notions of deaf identity and community in Bristol. Both smooth and striated space and the rhizome are ways of conceptualising how societies are structured. The more a state power has control over the space of society, the more striated that space is. Conversely, forces which resist state power smooth the space, removing structures, barriers and pathways to leave 'a space of affects, more than one of properties' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987/2013, 556). The rhizome can also be used as a concept to understand how

different communities and cultures can exist in space, how they can be organised in decentred multiplicities and networks which have ‘adapted to resist the striating forces of... the hierarchized State’ (Bonta and Protevi 2004, 136). In this section, we focus specifically upon the deaf club – an extremely significant space – to analyse the wider implications of the project for actively interrogating notions of identity and space in constructions of deaf identity.

### **Uncovering a Bristolian deaf history**

A few scattered academic sources currently exist that map out elements of Bristol’s deaf history. O’Brien’s 2005 MSc fills holes in a relatively contemporary history of the city; Outhwaite’s (1985) *A History of the Centre for the Deaf, Bristol, 1884–1984* accounts for another highly important deaf space, and Raymond Lee has uncovered rather more refined histories of, for example, a Bristolian enlisting as a Blackshirt in Oswald Mosley’s British Union of Fascists (2004, p. 89). A fuller history of Bristol’s deaf spaces — or places — has yet to be written, however, likewise a history of the city’s deaf community.<sup>iii</sup> Although such a situation is hardly unique, Bristol’s deaf history is distinct in other ways. The city was once home to the country’s first deaf school to be run by a deaf head teacher (Matthew Burns), and until recently home to the world’s first university department dedicated to Deaf Studies. But like so many other cities and their deaf spaces and communities, the picture, and many of the sources that might inform that picture, is fragmentary. How those sources have been stored, found, handled, and by whom, has contributed to this fragmentation in various ways, as the discussion of archival deaf film footage in the following section will show. The aim in this section is to begin to outline a general history of Bristol’s deaf past(s) specifically by focusing on deaf places in the city. We examine the role that archival sources and archival research

processes play in constructing our understanding of Bristol's deaf community, but also how these sources are received by the contemporary deaf community in the city in interpreting a sense of their own history and their current views on the loss of deaf spaces.

The city's archives — the Central Library and Record Office — hold a range of useful sources for building a clearer picture of a history of the places of the Bristol deaf community, including historic maps, trade directories, school records, apprentice and Freemen lists, poorhouse lists, church records and local newspaper archives.

Impediments to improving access to Bristol's deaf history begin at the library level, as illustrated by the fact that Daniel Hershon's (1991) *A History of 150 Years of Deaf Education in Bristol*, a significant resource for deaf history, only exists as a single copy held by the University of Bristol libraries. Of Bristol's records, surviving material has found its way from the archives of the Bristol Centre for the Deaf to the publicly-accessible archive of the Bristol Record Office (BRO). The implication here is that as a resource held within a deaf space as it was when housed at the Centre for the Deaf, the records may not have been readily accessible to those outside the deaf community. The BRO is an institution with a very 'hearing' culture, and so might be inaccessible to many deaf people. A sole author of a comprehensive history of Bristol's deaf community therefore seems a virtual impossibility, with different locations of pertinent records each including one but at the same time excluding another potential writer.

For many in the historical deaf community, the formalising of education of deaf or partially deaf children would have been the only time in their lives that they had seen their community highlighted and taken seriously through movements to legislate for education provision (such as the 1893 Elementary Education [Blind and Deaf Children Act], the 1944 Education Act, the 1970 Education [Handicapped Children] Act),<sup>iv</sup>

however patronising and oppressive that highlighting might have been in reality. In this regard, Bristol has a particular identity. Bristol's first school for deaf children only opened in 1841, placing the city as one of the last of the major industrial centres in the country to make such a provision. The school and, more particularly Headmaster Burns, are mentioned in many broader histories of deaf education in Britain, whilst at a wider, sociological level, the history of Bristol's deaf community is almost non-existent, save a few scattered sources. Turning to the archival records of deaf schooling and the specific records of the buildings and places used to house such schools thus offers one way to begin to develop an understanding and clearer documentation of a city-specific deaf past.

As they survive today, the Bristol deaf school record set is incomplete: the sources consist of the annual reports for the Bristol Institution for the Deaf and Dumb from 1840 to 1908, albeit with some gaps.<sup>v</sup> Records seemingly not examined by Hershon but also held at the BRO include a disparate variety of minutes and registers from the Bristol School Board, including minutes of the Blind and Deaf Children Committee (1891–1904),<sup>vi</sup> Fee Account books for the Kingsdown Deaf Institute<sup>vii</sup> (1906–1934), and letters concerning the new and purpose-built deaf school in Tyndalls Park that opened 1907.<sup>viii</sup> Other primary source material within the BRO consists of an archive catalogued as 'Notes + articles + working papers re: development and finance of the care for the blind and deaf by voluntary associations in the C19th and C20th',<sup>ix</sup> a record collected by Dora Livock, an accountant by profession but also a historian of financial records. These records are intimately linked to the running of the deaf school, the upkeep of its buildings, and some of the spatial practices (lessons, attendance and so on) enacted within. In some ways, this reflects the lives of deaf children of the time. Without the deaf school, very few deaf children would have received access to



education and so would have been excluded from the pedagogic spaces of the city (Branson and Miller, 2002, p. 189).

Of more obvious interest to the investigator of Bristol's deaf places are the three building plans that survive in the BRO archives that relate directly to the city's deaf schools at Tyndalls Park (1872 – 1907, but catalogued in these records as Elmdale Road) and Kingsdown Parade.<sup>x</sup> Tyndalls Park (1872 – 1907) was Bristol's first purpose-built deaf school, although it remained, as was the case with all previous schools for deaf children, a private school. In contrast, The Bristol School Board Kingsdown Institution for Deaf Children (1898 – 1933) was the city's first state-funded residential deaf school, and occupied what had previously been Kingsdown High School for Girls. Similarly, the first Deaf Institution in Orchard Street and many other buildings utilised by the deaf community — Park Row and the temporary schools in various church mission buildings — were conversions of existing properties. The value of the building plans to deaf history is that they include details and annotations indicating the arrangement and day-to-day use of the schools, and offer us one of the best archive sources we have for recovering information on Bristol's lost deaf places.<sup>xi</sup>

Various projects have sought to make use of these kinds of historical materials to interrogate or give focus to a contemporary deaf community identity. Recent explorations of deaf history and Bristol's deaf community, such as events held by the Bristol Deaf Culture Collective,<sup>xii</sup> show that difficult periods of the past, such as the fallout and effects of the Milan Congress in 1880<sup>xiii</sup>, are now becoming 'safe' history that can be explored with rational and objective vision. The same events have also been treated by the deaf community as a traditional means of maintaining deaf history: as/through oral tradition. Oral tradition works partly on the basis of giving-to-receive, where one person's reminiscences prompt another to fill out and expand a story

(Vansina, 1985, p. 96; Oring, 2006, p. 215 – 218). This is one way in which we can attempt to move beyond the archive as ‘perpetual and indefinite accumulation[s] of time in an immobile place’ (Foucault (1967/1984), and towards a history which engages with the spatial practices and behaviours of deaf people.

Part of the aim of the Bristol Deaf Memories event was to present this historical information about the deaf places in Bristol to the community in a collated, accessible form, facilitating direct, first-hand encounters with the archival documentation of a city-specific deaf past. Locating a deaf history through an interrogation of the use and meanings of deaf places requires other ways of not just remembering, but re-experiencing, or experiencing such spaces for the first time. In the wake of the loss of so many significant sites, archival records offer one of the clearest ways to enable a contemporary community to engage with its own past. This was achieved through presenting written extracts and copies from archival publications, reproducing pictures and floor plans, and showcasing artefacts such as flags and trophies from the Centre for Deaf People’s own archives, arranged in a series of hand-on, interactive displays. The compere’s script was also based on this collection of archived material, and included a short quiz of Bristol’s deaf history to solicit audience participation and interaction. Period costume was encouraged to try and inspire reflection in the participants about ‘the lived experience of the communal and personal past and reconsideration of the personal and communal present’ (Naumova, 2015, p. 1): many of the audience arrived in Victorian-style clothes in celebration of figures from Bristol’s deaf history.

Alongside these activities, we also conducted a series of interviews with audience members and participants. Martia Sturken, in her work on memory and cultural practice, stresses the importance of considering practices of memory rather than memory objects or sites, and the ‘active aspect’ and ‘constructed nature’ (2008, p. 74)

of memories. The Deaf Memories event was intended as one such cultural practice of memory, which ‘engages with, produces, reproduces and invests meaning’ (Sturken, 2008, p. 74) in both the personal and collective memories of deaf culture. Our intention was to provoke such production and reproduction of community meanings and capture these meanings through our interviews.

Several discussions about the importance of place came to focus on the need to consider the physical preservation of deaf heritage materials, prompted by the encounter with the physical artefacts themselves. Respondents commented on the desire for a physical place to store memories and resources:

Look at all the pictures and the history, they’re lovely. We need somewhere to put everything. (Respondent five, female, 40s)

I think we need to keep it all, it’s of so much value for the next generation [...] but we’ve got no place to keep it now. [...] if we get a new place in the future, then we can move everything there instead. But yes, we need to preserve our history and pass it on to the next generations. (Respondent one, female, 50s)

The respondents also expressed strong feelings about the importance of having a deaf place, whether this was a deaf club or other kind of building for the purposes of meeting other deaf people and community cohesion:

Having a building... well, I know people think it’s old fashioned, but I really think we need one, like a point of contact. For example, my concern is how do deaf people know where other deaf people are? Where other deaf people meet? (Respondent two, male, 30s)

The place of the deaf club was appreciated by the community members not only as an archival location, a ‘perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in an immobile place’ (Foucault, 1967/1984), but also as a place which anchored or fixed the social spaces of the deaf community in a single location. This fixity offered by the place of the deaf club made the community ‘findable’ by those who needed it: for example, those deaf people from hearing families (less than 10% of deaf children are born to deaf parents, [Lucas and Schatz 2003]), and those who need to ‘discover’ the deaf community to learn the language and culture. This will be explored in more depth later in the article.

### **Archival film and deaf spatial heritage**

Similar to the fragmentary paper sources gathered for the Deaf Memories event, archival film material related to deaf cultural history exists in relatively scattered forms across the institutions and organisations tasked as ‘custodians of visual history’ (Norris-Nicholson, 2007) within the UK. Access to documentary and non-fiction audio-visual media has increasingly been made viable within archival centres via outreach screening programmes and through a limited degree of commercial distribution. The collection of deaf heritage film materials held by the BDA utilised within the Bristol Deaf Memories event constitutes a unique historical resource and large-scale community archive: one with the potential to create new forms of access to deaf histories and a new dialogue with deaf pasts.

The BDA collection contains some 136 film reels and 498 videotapes, and represents filmed footage of deaf culture between 1931 and 2003. These materials originate from the efforts of former British Deaf and Dumb Association Hon. Secretary

and Treasurer Leslie Edwards (1885-1951)<sup>xiv</sup>, who developed an initial film library for the BDA to provide a centralised resource for deaf clubs across the country. The BDA Film Heritage project was launched in 2013 with the support of a Heritage Lottery Funding grant, backing a three-year process of collection, digitisation and exhibition, focused upon increasing visibility and access to deaf cultural history.

The BDA archives contain a wide range of material, but a substantial body of this falls into the category of what is termed ‘actuality’ footage. Actuality material constitutes the ‘primary raw material of most documentary practice’ (Swender, 2009, p. 2): it designates a genre of non-fiction filmmaking focused on real people, events and places not structured into a whole. In seeking to explore the spatial experiences and memories of Bristol deaf community members, the Lost Spaces project thus collated a range of such actuality footage from the BDA archives representative of an array of deaf cultural practices.

Whilst actuality footage ‘has an indexical connection to the real’, one which ‘provides trace evidence of the existence of some segment of reality’ (Swender, 2009, p. 2), scholarship has acknowledged its mediated status (Renov, 1986, Nichols, 2001). Like fiction film, actuality footage constructs imaginaries of spaces, mediating events and locations through the most basic of choices in framing, composition and film stock, the addition of even the briefest titles or explanatory labels, and the staging of groups and individuals for the camera. As a ‘technology [sic] of memory’ (Sturken, 2008, p. 75), actuality footage produces representations of the past through these mediations and choices. In the process, it invokes ‘personal as well as collective associations’ (Hallam and Roberts, 2011, p. 361) through its use of specific locations and individuals, as much as through its evocation of collective points of identification.

Exploration of the BDA archive revealed a scarcity of footage specifically featuring Bristol. This raised the question about the kinds of value that screenings of archival actuality footage can hold, if participants are not seeing their 'own' places and spaces directly represented on screen. As a memory media and historical resource, archival actuality footage suggests the cross-temporal and cross-geographical points of connection available for heritage audiences through shared modes of experience, and shared spatial arenas defined in less local terms. The repetition of deaf club and BDA conference spaces in archival footage from across the UK, for example, offered points of memory connection that did not require specificity of place to provoke a sense of cultural experiences that shared points of overlap. As one respondent articulated having viewed the archival footage, 'Even though I wasn't in those films, I still feel that there was an emotional connection because I went to the deaf club ever since I was 16 through to when it closed' (Respondent one, female, 50s). Memories of the deaf club, therefore, whilst initially appearing to rely upon very specific locations, in fact operated as a key point of connection in their more generic mode between generations, and between residents of different geographical locations.

The signed and performed content of the Bristol Deaf Memories event followed a narrative structure progressing from the Victorian period towards the 1960s. In contrast, the archival footage played against linearity, clustered into three thematic segments focused on children and youth, hearing people in the deaf community, and deaf community activities. Such thematic clustering allowed movement between temporal and spatial fragments in the larger timeline of twentieth century deaf histories. We used footage from the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s to show a variety of regional spaces and deaf activities, including deaf theatre, sporting events, activities and outings, BDA congress, balls and dances, cake making, competitions, schooling and crafts. The

screened material focused predominantly upon factual fragments. These showed staged tableaux of members of different regional deaf communities shot in the midst of various activities, and footage of those events in action, shot by participants moving amidst crowds and briefly profiling individuals who engage directly with camera.

Using heritage footage in this way, rather than inserting it into a more conventional documentary narrative, allowed us to focus on the affective qualities of the unstructured actuality film as a technology of memory. This might be contrasted with the way the BDA has use of the material. For example, a short promotional video for the BDA's SHARE archive featured on the BDA website explicitly narrativises deaf heritage as a journey, showing snippets of clips from the 1930s through to the 1980s in succession. The video encourages the viewer to note change – not just in amateur film technology as the clips progress from monochrome to colour, and from film stock to video tape – but in the 'characters' of a deaf history, who progress through fashions and activities in each era. This impulse towards linear documentary and away from the 'pure' state of fragmented actuality, as it might be encountered in an unordered archival collection, has clear benefits: the heritage film archive can be wielded as a tool for community awareness, cohesion and visibility. At the same time, SHARE emphasises participation, much like our own use of archive material, encouraging spectators to 'Help us tell your stories ... and bring these films to life.' In the process, the archive is simultaneously presented as unfinished: an 'incomplete site [sic] of knowledge' (Stead, 2013, p. 2) in which dispersed deaf histories are available for recollection and recontextualisation through a direct interaction with audiences.

This dual impulse – to narrativise and to refuse the closure of narrative – facilitates interplay between heritage as ordered linearity and heritage as a mode of intervention. The former offers a contemporary community a dialogue with its past and

a sense of its shared origins; the latter disrupts the myth of a cohesive and complete historical timeline, comparable to Deleuze and Guattari's concept of rhizome, a decentred multiplicity with no centralized organisation (Bonta and Protevi, 2004, p. 136-137).

To explore this potential, the Lost Spaces project focused audience responses to the archival footage. Participant's reactions showed different levels of personal connection to the material. Some participants recognised people in the films; others recognised activities or events that echoed their own experiences. Others still remarked upon the unfamiliarity of the content and activities presented. One respondent spoke of the importance of 'visual things' in engaging with 'our history' (Respondent twelve, male, 40s): another focused on the shared sense of humour across generations, commenting that: 'it was good to see all the deaf humour on display, the teasing, the jokes. It was great to see that they had that back then as well' (Respondent seven, female, 20s).

The ability to interact and engage with such 'visual things' allowed new forms of intervention within the linear narrative timeline presented by the compère. Interviews with participants revealed the way historical footage can be restructured in new ways in the act of spectatorship, where it is re-embedded within personal and communal frameworks and concerns. Interacting with archival actuality footage in this way taps into the qualities of a database, further breaking away from an ordered narrative of heritage experience. Hallam and Roberts observe that 'the open-ended, paradigmatic nature of database structures means that they always have the potential to grow by adding new elements or links to them' (2011, p. 365). Screening heritage footage in non-linear order, with loose thematic grouping focused upon shared uses of types of spaces, encourages a montage effect for an audience, who actively construct links and



contrasts out of time and out of space, while not being rooted in linear time or concrete place locations.

Many participants spoke about wider practices and deaf experiences not represented in the filmed material. The collection of fragments in the montage of archival footage in this way appeared to meet with a proliferation of personal contexts and memories, producing new connections or – to return to the concept of rhizome – new lines of flight. Several respondents reported extreme difficulty in reading the finger spelling of signing figures within the footage, for example, and reflected on how this relates to educational policies and experiences of deaf schooling (an area of deaf culture only very briefly illustrated in the archival material), for example,

At first there was lots of fingerspelling, then everyone was oral, then it changed to being more sign based again. There have been lots of changes, and it's hit me a bit at how many changes there have been. (Respondent ten, female, 50s)

Mixed footage also created opportunities for forms of intervention within temporal and geographical understandings of deaf community groupings. One respondent expressed disinterest in geographical specificity in favour of visual access to a sense of deaf past, suggesting the footage 'was just good to see, regardless of where it was from' (Respondent five, female, 40s). Another cited the challenges of responding to the footage in similar terms:

It's difficult because if you look at this, we're talking about history on a national scale, but this event was focused on Bristol, on the South West. So there was a lot of "Oh, I recognise them! Who's that?" in the audience, and different ages in the footage (Respondent twelve, male, 40s)

Any idea of a regional deaf community is necessarily constituted by longstanding community members centred in the region, but also by individuals and families that move into and out of geographical zones within different points in their working and personal lives, and may carry with them previous community affiliations. In the past, with the place of the deaf club offering a site of cohesion for the community, this did not seem to matter so much. However, with the loss of the deaf club, Bristol's current deaf community is – as the final section of this article will further suggest – a rhizomatic amalgamation of deaf pasts collated from memories and experiences that take place within and outside the region, within a multigenerational and diverse matrix of members. A respondent articulated this in asserting that 'the deaf community is a little different, because we're so widely dispersed' (Respondent six, male, 50s). Other respondents cited the specific problems in thinking concretely about a dedicated and visible Bristolian deaf community, promoted by viewing images of the past:

Respondent seven (female, 20s): Before there was a very strong regional culture, you could tell someone was from Bristol. But now that's being lost, you can't do that anymore.

Respondent eight (female, 30s): I think Bristol's deaf community has become really small.

Respondent nine (female, 40s): I think that's happening all over the UK. (Taken from group interview)

One interviewee articulated this more directly in describing their current sense of the Bristol deaf community: 'At the moment, there's deaf people, there's hard of hearing people, all these little groups that have split off' (Respondent eleven, female, 50s).

Audiences' reflections came to focus on the uses and changing nature of deaf space in a variety of ways. One respondent, fairly typical of the immediate reactions of many participants to having viewed the archival footage, spoke of their interest in seeing:

...that they used to have different things like deaf clubs, deaf sports, deaf holidays, things like that [...] It's not the same as it was before. Before there was much more togetherness [...] more contact with other deaf people. (Respondent three, female, 30s)

Archival film footage focused upon spatial practices thus offers a tool for the critique of contemporary spatial issues through the lens of nostalgia, allowing spectators to compare and contrast community-centred experiences of space in various pasts and present moments. Another respondent, for example, spoke of the ability of archival film footage to form a bridge between generations:

It's important for young people to see these films and see how deaf people lived in the past. But the problem is that nothing's been passed down to the younger generation, or the older people think that young people have forgotten their heritage. [...] Those people really need to see this, they'd really enjoy it. (Respondent twelve, male, 40s)

The language of space has a premium in these reflections, as two further respondent statements suggest, focusing on the benefits of a dedicated deaf club space and deaf community meetings:

I'd like to see more meetings like in the footage. There are a lot of deaf people out there, but where are they? It feels the deaf community has got smaller. They are out

there, but lots of them are isolated. Why? I don't know. (Respondent eleven, female, 50s)

I want to go back to the deaf club, to how things were. [...] Without the deaf club it's like there's no direction for the community. (Respondent one, female, 50s)

Spatial language is used to characterise the perceived fragmentation of community identity and a sense of loss. In the language of respondents, Bristol's deaf community is described both a decreasing mass ('really small'/'got smaller') and a scattered network whose ties have loosened ('isolated'/'split off').

Les Roberts draws on the work of Alastair Bonnett (2006, 2009) to suggest that historical film might mobilise a 'radical nostalgia', where a city's 'cinematic geographies' might play 'host to discursive spaces of critical historical reflection' (2012, p. 4). In the case of the screened BDA footage, archival material presents the opportunity for a more radical nostalgic engagement with historical uses of common deaf spaces, particularly deaf clubs, deaf congress events held in various public venues, and deaf sporting and theatrical events which utilise a range of indoor and outdoor spaces. Nostalgia in this instance is less specifically tied to the physical qualities of these spaces and more to the community uses of them, and the interactions and exchanges that they facilitate. Nostalgia's potential for mobilisation as critique is evidenced in the reactions of many of the respondents featured here. They express feelings of loss and a desire to return to the past, but also use the visual record presented by the archival footage as a means to critique both past and present practices within the deaf community, creating a discursive flow that critically reflects in both directions.

## **Smooth and striated space and rhizomes: the deaf club and the decentred community**

The feelings expressed about the deaf club by participants at the Bristol Deaf Memories event, viewing it as a central home, source, or archive of deaf people's history and community, are very different to those shown to the current decentred and fractured nature of the deaf community as a result of the closure. In this final section, we turn towards one central question of the Lost Spaces project: how can we conceptualise and analyse the nature of the deaf community, traditionally so specifically grounded in an institutional place, when that place is gone? Drawing further upon commentary and ideas expressed in interview work with audiences present at the archival film screenings, we put forward a theoretical framework for interrogating some of the initial findings of the project. This final section reflects upon the value of employing a Deleuze-Guattarian framework for understanding the ways in which deaf Bristolians have experienced the historical formulation, loss and rearticulating of spatial identity and practices.

Deleuze and Guattari's (1987/2013) concepts of smooth and striated space are particularly applicable to analysing histories of deaf space. Smooth space is a 'space of affects, more than one of properties' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987/2013, p. 557), a space which is 'defined dynamically, in terms of transformation instead of essence' (Moulthrop, 1994, p. 303). It is decentred, unstructured, defined by 'free relationships of molecular bodies in local motion' (Bonta and Protevi, 2004, p. 145). Deleuze and Guattari use the sea, or the steppes of the nomads, as physical examples of smooth space and the free market of unbridled capitalism as an example of economic smooth space (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987/2013). Striated space is space which is gridded, ordered, 'defined by the requirements of long distance vision: constancy of orientation,

invariance of distance through an interchange of inertial points of reference, interlinkage by immersion in an ambient milieu, constitution of central perspective' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987/2013, p. 574). This is the space of the state, formed by policy, by officialdom, by decisions and traditions imposed by social structures.

The deaf club has historically constituted a cornerstone of the deaf community. Deaf clubs came to striate the space of the deaf experience, to structure the everyday life experiences of the members and offer context to their lives. The sense of place, which is bound up in locations and attachment, is a powerful sensation. It not only tells us where we are, but also who we are (Anderson, 2015, p. 3). Identity is therefore intrinsically connected to the sense of belonging to or ownership over the place in question, to the systems of opening and closing (Foucault, 1967/1984) that determine who is and who is not allowed in. While the discourses of power and control within the club were rarely clear cut,<sup>xv</sup> the relationship between identity, sense of self and place (Casey, 2001) was clear in the relationships between deaf people and the deaf club. When asked about the importance of the deaf club, responses such as the following were common:

Without the deaf club it's like there's no direction for the community. We can meet up with friends, organise to get together, but it's not the same, I want more than that.

(Respondent one, female, 50s)

Even though we've all come together today, what we've seen on the screen was a much stronger community, they had regular events, regular meetings, they were tightly knit.

(Respondent twelve, male, 40s)

With the closure of the Centre for Deaf People, the deaf community in Bristol currently has no centre: individual groups exist with no overarching unification or ‘overcoding’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987/2013) beyond the fact that all members are deaf. Deaf people no longer have access to the kind of structured community that the old deaf club offered – a well-trod path mediated by governmental and social structures formally leading from deaf schools to the deaf club, and hence community membership (Ladd, 2003). With little or no access to the language of the state – spoken and written English – for deaf people, these bound and defined pathways and structures which pave the way ‘through striated space from one point to the next in its procedure’ (Holland, 2014, p.46) are largely inaccessible (although they still hold power over the parts of deaf lives which are expressly under control of the state: for example, educational and medical institutions). Those spaces, which are heavily striated from the point of view of hearing policy makers, become smooth from the point of view of deaf people. Instead, the line of flight caused by the closure of the deaf club has resulted in the community adopting a rhizomatic organisation existing in a de-striated smooth space which resists overcoding by a majority, hearing society.

Removing the place of the deaf club has meant that the spaces of deaf interaction are no longer rooted in a single location. These spaces of interaction still exist, and the interactions still occur – they are just no longer fixed in a single site. Instead, the deaf people interviewed from the Bristol community spoke of various kinds of ‘local operations’ (Casey 1998, p.305, Deleuze and Guattari 1987/2013, p.446) by which they make their way through the world. These local operations included activities such as the Deaf Memories event itself as a temporary event, which took place in a building unrelated to the deaf community. For a few hours only, it became a gathering place, a place in which deaf people congregated, but which also had

BSL/English interpreters, making the space accessible for all. Respondents picked up on this in the interviews, suggesting ways in which the community currently, and might in future, organise itself:

We can put on events anywhere really. I mean, look at tonight... events like this, in places like this, we can do this. (Respondent nine, female, 40s)

...but also on the other side of things, I feel the community has become stronger in other ways. Like, we get together more, we use different groups, different venues, different places... (Respondent five, female, 40s)

Other people mentioned similar events that they attend around the city, citing temporary spaces and local actions in which deaf people gather for sports or social events. Unlike in the past, these events were set up almost independently of one another by different fragments of the deaf community in Bristol, not linked in any way to a central location (like the deaf club) or organisation (like the Centre for Deaf People board). In this sense, the organisation of the deaf community in Bristol seems to have become essentially rhizomatic as a reaction to the loss of the structure offered by the deaf club. While some respondents felt that it was difficult to make connections between the fragments of the community, the potential for connection was still there. Individual groups and the people in them all shared the same language in BSL, the same culture and heritage. Each group represented the whole of the deaf community in a microcosm, with the potentialities, the heterogeneities and multiplicities of the whole community present, in potential, in each fragment.

Of course, loss of place can also be 'a destruction of identity' (Jones, 2015, p. 14). Without the deaf club in which to congregate and socialise, many of the



respondents worried about how to ensure that the deaf community and deaf identity would survive, not only because of the closure of the deaf club, but also the closures of the other foundation of the deaf community, the deaf schools:

I'm very concerned about the deaf schools closing because it means that all the deaf children are going to end up in mainstream schools and the identity and cultures of these people is going to be very mixed. I work a lot in the mental health sector and I think that this sector is going to have to grow massively in the future because those who haven't been able to engage with their identity, who they are, how they can express themselves in sign, I think we'll be seeing and having to support a lot more of them. I do worry. (Respondent nine, female, 40s)

The connotations of these changes are complex, and the nostalgia and discussion sparked by the heritage event and archival screenings suggested a mix of both positive and negative reactions to the loss of deaf club spaces. It is common for people who use Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of smooth and striated space to celebrate the 'smooth' and to applaud the freedom of disconnection from the striated space of the state, celebrating the 'hiding places, regions for shelter, plateaus for sustenance, high flat expanses to wander' (Roets and Goodley, 2008) that such freedom can offer. However, residing in 'smooth space' does not always offer such freedom. Almost all the participants in the interviews conducted expressed desire for the return of the deaf club and the structure that it offered. While this desire for structure may seem counter-intuitive when considering rhizomatic organisations, Deleuze and Guattari insist that such hierarchical structuring can exist within rhizomes (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987/2013 pp. 15-21), arguing that the 'tree' and 'rhizome' are not 'two opposed models', but that 'there exist tree or root structures within rhizomes'. Reasons for this

desire for structure varied. Some participants were concerned with having a central location for meeting, for example:

Having a building ... well, I know people think it's old fashioned, but I really think we need one, like a point of contact. For example, my concern is how do deaf people know where other deaf people are? Where other deaf people meet? ... But if there was a deaf club, or a building, then someone could tell you, oh, there's the deaf club over there, you can go there... A building means you have a point, somewhere you can gather, where you can join others. If you don't have that, how are you going to be able to meet anyone? (Respondent two, male, 30s)

While many have welcomed the kind of freedom that smooth spaces can offer (see, for example, Gorodetsky and Barak, 2016, Roets and Goodley, 2008, St. Pierre, 1997), this does not seem to be the case for deaf people in Bristol. The smoothing of their social space was begun by something beyond their control, the closure of their community space. More pressingly, instigating and maintaining the sort of local operations needed to make the smooth space of mainstream society navigable for deaf people requires a great deal of investment of capital, be it social, economic or cultural, to keep these local operations, groups and meetings running. The case of the deaf community in Bristol is a living testament to Deleuze and Guattari's own warning to those who might interpret smooth space as unproblematic, when they advise that one should 'never believe that a smooth space will suffice to save us' (1987/2013, p. 581).

### **Ways forward – mapping the rhizome**

A possible response to this decentring and rhizomisation of the deaf community in Bristol could be the creation of new interactive digital modes of accessing and

interpreting the spatial history of the Bristol deaf community. The Lost Spaces project began this work by mapping the principal sites of Bristol's deaf history online within the *Map Your Bristol* 'living archive' website (Bickers et al., 2015).<sup>xvi</sup> Aimed squarely at community histories, the website acts initially as a mapped repository of core data, showing, for instance, the location of Bristol's deaf schools, images of the buildings, and contextual historical information in both BSL and written English. This is the 'giving' element of the giving-to-receive principal. Within community engagement projects, giving-to-receive should be regarded as an important principal that feeds both co-production and productivity, in that the academy gives freely of its time and expertise in order to receive and share new practices, histories and insights which might otherwise remain locked within a community, or individual. With these principals in mind, *Map Your Bristol* explicitly encourages users to comment on and expand a submitted account or a story, to 'receive' an improved and illuminated history in much the same way as the online historical map and community archives of *Gwulo: Old Hong Kong* or, to a lesser extent (due to less interactivity), *KnowYourPlace*.<sup>xvii</sup>

At the time of writing, the map remains at an early stage of development. Both as a website and a mobile app, *Map Your Bristol* has always sought to exploit the seemingly universal appeal of maps, as a window into space and of our desire to locate ourselves within it (Wood, 2012, p. 280, Heffer, 2016). But rather than providing a platform that simply places a static piece of information to a point on the map, the design intention behind the site's original creation, was that mapped entries – image, text, sound or video – would encourage participant users beyond the original contributor to add new detail to the original listing. The map is divided into both historical and community layers: historic maps of the city (and a current world-wide map) provide the background layers, whilst individual community layers hold individual contributions as

points, lines or areas to which data can be attached. All data can be commented on in limitless ‘conversational’ threads.

The comparatively small scale of Bristol’s deaf community fits well with such ‘minority’ societies. The few physically surviving places currently documented on the site that were included in the Bristol Deaf Memories event — Elmfield School which remains open, and until recently, the Centre for Deaf People and the University’s Centre for Deaf Studies — indicate a relative paucity of deaf places in Bristol, and that the majority of available records point instead to the closure of Bristol’s deaf places.

Instead, the map could allow posting of Bristol’s deaf spaces, where the social interactions and meetings of deaf people can be flagged up, even if the location of these interactions is not a deaf place, per se. Cartography of these spaces upon such a digital medium which is ‘open and connectable... susceptible to constant modification’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987/2013, p. 12) allows exploration of the spaces of the deaf community in a way that truly reflects the rhizomatic nature of the community and its navigation of the smooth spaces of the city, and, like the screened actuality footage, breaks apart historical linearity to produce more radical nostalgic potential.

The platform therefore has the potential to provide an expanding source of deaf community-related history, anecdote and shared experience. Furthermore, the map allows for an ideal of cooperation and co-existence between the deaf and hearing communities, in which experiences of the same space might be discussed and challenged from two differing perspectives. This allows the cartography of Bristol’s deaf spaces to be undertaken in a way which corresponds to Deleuze and Guattari’s own concept of cartography. It does not simply trace the outline of the community, but has the potential to be a part of the rhizome of the community, to ‘foster connections between fields’, to be ‘reworked by an individual, group or social formation’ (Deleuze

and Guatarri 1987/2013 p.12). Mapping allows us to illustrate the continued existence of Bristol's deaf history, documenting the use and loss of specific purpose built and adapted venues and buildings and the development of new spaces and local actions in a platform that allow both the simultaneity of past/present and the active contribution of the deaf community continuing to build and develop the platform. Granted, at the time of writing, only limited contributions beyond the 'seed' data have been made to the map, but experience is showing — *Gwulo* and *KnowYourPlace*, for example — that only with full-time administration from either funded workers or committed volunteer input (and no such costing was available as part of the 'Lost Spaces' project), will such sites engage rapidly with the communities we aim to attract.

Use of online resources such as maps like this, or indeed, social media, to form connections or cartography of or between sections of the community in Bristol may have positive impact. At the same time, however, it illustrates one of the risks the community faces. Most older people interviewed disliked the idea of technology creeping into their lives, and indeed, blamed it for the fragmentation of their community,

We should get rid of our computers, televisions, mobiles and go back in a time warp to how it was before! (Respondent thirteen, female, 50s)

We don't seem to have the same kind of bond or togetherness any more. I think that's down to technology changing our lives. (Respondent nine, female, 40s)

While younger people may regard the virtual connections offered by the internet as a vital part of the way in which the community may be connected and organised in the future, this is not the case for all members of the deaf community in Bristol. Virtual connections are not the solution to real-world fragmentation.

## **Conclusion**

This project has begun to examine the changing face of the deaf community in Bristol after the closure of a key community place, the deaf club. We have suggested that archive footage and collaborative mapping exercises are valuable methods for exploring the new social spaces of the deaf community, and that Deleuze and Guatarri provide a theoretical framework which allows valuable insights into the nature of these spaces. We hope that others can take on these suggestions and continue to develop the field of Deaf Geographies in relation to other fields in innovative ways.

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<sup>i</sup> We use the uncapitalised deaf in this article rather than the capitalised Deaf for several reasons.

One of which is that the d/D distinction (in which the lower-case deaf is used to refer to auditory deafness, and the upper case Deaf to refer to a socio-cultural-linguistic identity) is a relatively recent phenomena, and as a historically located term, it feels slightly incongruous to use it when writing about the past. Another is that the d/D distinction is becoming increasingly problematized due to the changing nature of the deaf community (see Kusters, De Meulder and O'Brien, 2017 for more discussion on this) and can be seen as unnecessarily divisive. 'The deaf community' can also be seen as a problematic term, suggesting a homogenous, monolithic population. However, we use it in this article to refer to signing deaf people who self-identify with some level of involvement with other signing deaf people, with full awareness and recognition of the heterogeneity of a community which is united by a common physical location.

<sup>ii</sup> See Ladd 2003 for further detail on this.

<sup>iii</sup> Research has begun at the University of Bristol, led by Mike Gulliver, on transcribing the details of Bristol's deaf community as recorded in the British Census returns.

<sup>iv</sup> See Lee 2004.

<sup>v</sup> Bristol Record Office: BRO 40861.

<sup>vi</sup> BRO 21131/SC/Instit/A/1.

<sup>vii</sup> BRO 21131/SC/KDI/.

<sup>viii</sup> BRO 21131/SC/KDI/Co/1/1.

<sup>ix</sup> BRO 36771/90.

<sup>x</sup> BRO BP 44/42g; BP 45/42d -and BP 10/49c.

<sup>xi</sup> Comparisons can be drawn here with other work being conducted in the University of Bristol (Scripture, Dissent, Deaf Space) focusing on the first purpose-built church for deaf people to worship in sign language, again a place-bound archival project (Groux-Moreau 2015).

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<sup>xii</sup> ‘As Bristol Becomes More Visible, it Disappears’, The Bristol Deaf Culture Collective, M Shed, Bristol, 19 Feb 2015.

<sup>xiii</sup> The Second International Congress on Education of the Deaf declared that oral education (through speech) was superior to that of manual education (though sign language) and passed a resolution banning sign languages in schools. See Lane 1999 and Ladd 2003 for more detail.

<sup>xiv</sup> The British Deaf Association was previously called the British Deaf and Dumb Association. The name of the Association was changed in 1971.

<sup>xv</sup> See Ladd 2003 for more on this.

<sup>xvi</sup> <[www.mapyourbristol.org.uk/community/deaf-community](http://www.mapyourbristol.org.uk/community/deaf-community)>. See also <<http://knowyourbristol.org/on-the-move/>>

<sup>xvii</sup> <[gwulo.com](http://gwulo.com)> and <[maps.bristol.gov.uk/kyp](http://maps.bristol.gov.uk/kyp)>.

<sup>xviii</sup>