'Deafscapes: The landscape and heritage of the Deaf world', paper presented at Forum UNESCO conference, Newcastle University, UK, 11–16 April 2005.

I'm pleased to be following Dr Beverley Butler. The information that I'm going to present not only adds weight to her assertions about the alternative heritage-forms, but gains a measure of authority from her arguments. So I'm grateful to her for perhaps unwittingly setting the scene so well.

This paper, therefore, concentrates on the nature of the Heritage-making process. Not the mechanics of applications for grants or the management of heritage projects but rather the invisible gate-keeping discourses that govern what we find acceptable as a target for heritage attention.

I would like to begin this paper by presenting two different versions of Deaf history, and then using each one to construct a corresponding landscape. By comparing the two I will then be able to take a more critical look at the implicit principles of *heritage-making* and raise some questions which, although initially uncomfortable, represent very exciting implications for the field.

Traditional history

The first is straightforward and begins with small numbers of isolated deaf individuals scattered thinly across a pre-industrial landscape in which they cope as best they can through ad-hoc communication. This situation continues until just after the Enlightenment where we see hot-spots of education gradually appearing all over Europe particularly in France where a large school in Paris, founded just after the revolution, becomes continental Europe's premier centre for Deaf education, spawning other schools throughout Europe and America.

The education offered by these schools at the time is varied. However, it includes one element not found in other educational projects which is communication training in order to allow Deaf children to access information. In some schools, lip reading and speech is promoted. In others, formal sign languages are invented and taught to the children. Over time, as pedagogical discourses change, we see the rise of medical and technological interventions and the emphasis of this communication teaching shifts away from the need to teach information and towards the more urgently felt need to integrate Deaf people into society. Clearly, sign language does little to achieve this and it is gradually replaced by medical intervention, speech training and lip-reading. In the 20th century, improvements in hearing-aid technology medical therapies enable the situation of Deaf people to come full circle integrating them back into society. However, this time with effective communication.

Traditional history and heritage

How would we approach this presentation of history from a heritage point of view? Clearly, the key story here is the efforts required to overcome deafness and the isolation that it causes for Deaf people. Therefore, we might want to recognise the people involved and their actions, or the key places that are implicated. Or we could consider the changes in use of these places, the name changes from asylum to hospital to school and the accompanying changes in society that made these necessary or possible. If we wanted to focus on the Deaf people themselves, we could examine their path through the processes of historical 'othering' and their gradual reintroduction into mainstream culture, or we could take an aspect of this such as technological aids and use this to move into an exploration of disability landscapes based on tensions between, for example nature and technology. All of these would be appropriate, if more or less daring interpretations of cultural landscapes or heritage activities.

Deaf history of Deaf

However, there is an alternative deaf history that is utterly different.

This history begins with an indication that whilst isolation might have been the fate of some Deaf people, fully developed communities of Deaf people existed over 2000 years ago who used sign language for all parts of everyday life including philosophical argument, technical explanation, teaching and business. Given that only 1 in 1000 people are actually born Deaf it is hard to see how sign languages that sophisticated might have evolved. However, the factor that is often forgotten is the case of Deaf families, some of which show over 200 years of uninterrupted Deafness. There is no doubt at all that these families represent the heartland in which sign language communities originally developed, drawing in other Deaf people, and even sometimes hearing people.

It is this crucial ability of the Deaf community to pass on sign language and culture to subsequent generations which allows the development of what we find. Instead of isolated Deaf individuals, we actually find extensive networks of Deaf communities which have little to do with the hearing world, but are constructed according to factors from the Deaf world. Resembling more a series of interconnected nodes, more like a synaptic map of the brain than a modern territorial map, this landscape exists, not as the hearing world simply 'replicated in sign language' but as an entirely separate layer of reality in which Deaf people live, dipping into a foreign hearing world only when they chose. It is this that I am calling the *Deafscape*.

In a pre-industrial world, this Deafscape consisted of a tissue of communities stretched over Europe, the middle East, North America (and would certainly have extended into other areas of the world although research has not confirmed this). Concentrated around indigenous sign languages and the ease of travel, its distribution and communication resembles that of the hearing communities that produced the language continua that we still find; for example across the dialects of the Mediterranean. Developing in a non-nationalist context, its boundaries are very different from those of the hearing world. In Britain, for example, a large community based in Kent had links to communities as far apart as London and the East coast of America. In France, on the other hand, the Paris and Lyon communities developed along different lines based on different indigenous sign languages.

The nature of the Deafscape

It is worth pausing for a moment to consider the nature of this Deafscape and how it might fit into our understanding of cultural landscapes.

Deaf views on the Deafscape

Firstly, we need to consider how Deaf people themselves saw the Deafscape. For them, it was not merely an optional form of social organisation, but the inevitable consequence of their being part of an entirely different order of nature with a vastly different metaphysics. This included an interpretation of deafness itself which was not based on a ‘loss’ model but rather on the way that it transformed them into a ‘visual’ people with a distinct cognitive development based on visual and spatial thinking.

An important element of this distinctive thinking is sign language. Not as a simple communication tool, but in a way which is reminiscent of aboriginal community discourses concerning their relationship with the land. Again, strongly metaphysical, the relationship that Deaf people describe between themselves and sign language is symbiotic and creative with each being responsible for the creation and well-being of the other.

This relationship of co-creation applies, not only to the symbiotic relationship but also to the conditions that allow this to occur. This is Deaf space. Not simply a physical container for events, but an interactive space that is called into existence any time Deaf people come together and are allowed to interact. Deaf spaces are constantly evolving and may either erupt when Deaf people

meet spontaneously or they may have some sense of permanence such as in the Deaf families that we mentioned earlier.

All of this proceeds under the umbrella of naturalness. Naturalness, is not a reference to some external order of creation, but rather a measure of the extent to which sign language, Deaf space and Deaf people are able to enter into this symbiotic co-creative relationship without interference from non-Deaf forces. If the development of elements within the Deafscape is natural, then it will continue to define Deaf nature, sign language and Deaf people themselves in a way that preserves the health of each.

The lived-in contours of the Deafscape; strong centres of Deaf-space, peripheral members, empty spaces where no deaf communities exist, historical backgrounds, agreed reputations, physical and linguistic boundaries and pathways of communication. All of this is built on the foundation of these metaphysics and then provides the Deaf-centred epistemological basis with which Deaf people look out upon the world.

The Deafscape through Deaf education

Knowing what we now know about the nature of the Deafscape, it is clear that the spaces into which the Deaf schools were established were far from empty. Their creation had an effect rather like placing a magnet under a tray of iron filings, exerting a magnetic attraction upon the Deafscape, pulling young Deaf people from multiple communities into a relatively few specific centres and connecting them, and their extant community connections to each other.

To begin with, the effects of this were tremendously exciting. With little teacher control outside of the classroom Deaf people were free to craft these schools into extraordinarily strong Deaf spaces. Within a few years the Deafscape experienced its Agrarian, Industrial and Urban revolutions rolled into one. The schools became virtual capital cities of the Deafscape with strong, educated Deaf populations, established Deaf spaces, centralised sign languages, and ready connections along established communication networks. Deaf discourses were made explicit, developments in art, philosophy and politics were matched by increased influence in government and national life.

However, there was a catch. Firstly, the centralised nature of this new-look Deafscape made it reliant on a few crucially important locations. Secondly, the apparently Deaf-centred nature of these schools hid the fact that the discursive systems through which they had been set up were not those of Deaf naturalness, but rather those of a hearing society which was increasingly perceiving Deaf people as a target for medical and pedagogical intervention. As these policies were applied with increasing force, the areas of the Deafscape that had twisted themselves around the schools were most heavily impacted. Everything was done to eradicate deafness. Sign languages were banned, Deaf spaces were controlled and watched. In a direct reversal of earlier developments, the schools became wastelands as many of the people trapped in them lost the ability to belong to the Deafscape and dropped out of it completely instead becoming disabled hearing people.

The Deafscape, however impoverished it may have become, did not disappear. Instead it returned to its previous invisibility, either in the secret Deaf spaces of Deaf families or behind the closed doors of Deaf clubs, or in other areas of the world unaffected by medicalisation and normalisation. In fact, in the last few years we have begun to see a resurgence in the Deafscape population as space provided by the academic recognition of sign language and the civil rights movements of the 1970's have allowed Deaf people to come out from behind closed doors and begin the long process of rebuilding.

The Deafscape, a cultural landscape?

It is here, with this rebuilding, that our historical presentation stops and our challenge begins, to

assess the Deafscape from the point of view of a cultural landscape. We will do this by examining a few elements drawn from the guidelines of this conference.

Memory
Its non-materiality means that the Deafscape is intricately constructed in memory: linguistic and cultural, and must be performed to exist. These performances are either engineered remembering; for example, within celebrations that involve the telling of histories, stories and other folklore, or are simply lived out on a daily basis as Deaf people embody the Deafscape itself.

Indigenousness
We have already seen aspects of the Deafscape that resemble those of indigenous communities. Perhaps this is not surprising given the distribution of the Deaf community. However, the Deafscape is unique in belonging to a people who are diasporically scattered, but at the same time emerge directly from within the communities that surround them. Potentially, they are the only community of indigenously diasporic people in existence.

Language
If Deaf space is the necessarily temporary space of interactive contact, Sign languages represent the principle cultural artefact that landforms the Deafscape and the principle medium for its transmission from one generation to the next. Language in the Deafscape represents both local identity, over-arching trans-group unity and the lifeblood of the Deafscape itself.

Cultural commodification
In addition to these elements inherent to the Deafscape itself. Attitudes surrounding the culture show that the Deafscape is already being treated as a de facto cultural landscape. The numbers of fascinated tourists eager to explore the exotic world of Deaf people grows each year. Cultural elements such as sign language are stripped out and used by performance artists, teachers, churches and professional academics for their own ends. Cultural representation by outsiders replaces Deaf representations through picture postcard worlds of alternating tragedy or utopia. Development agencies each approach the Deafscape with their own vision of how best to improve it.

Considering the Deafscape
So. Is the Deafscape a cultural landscape? For me, unequivocally the answer have to be yes. Is it a valid target for heritage attention? Again, because of its unique nature and what it tells us about who we are as human beings and because Deaf people are already engaged in its preservation, yes.

However, it is in seeking to make peace with this final conclusion that we stumble, as it were, at the last fence. The reason for this is that, in our modern minds, no matter how we stack the evidence, the Deafscape must always carry the stigma of disability and therefore is something which most of us would prefer to see eradicated rather than preserved. This leads us into an uncomfortable no-man's land in which we suggests that perhaps the Deafscape is nothing more than a coping strategy, perhaps sign language is nothing more than an imperfect form of communication, perhaps we could preserve aspects of the creative Deafscape without the preservation of deafness, and so on. However, the counter arguments must remain present; perhaps all culture is a form of coping strategy, perhaps all language fails to perfectly communicate thought, and perhaps all cultures have elements that are more appealing than others.

However, we position it, we cannot dismiss the Deafscape as an imperfect, or incomplete cultural landscape that we can somehow disqualify unless it is by reference to discourses larger than those of the heritage field. This is a bitter pill to swallow for those of us who are in the business of heritage and cultural protection. It takes us out of the rather warm and fuzzy role that we have as guardians of cultural difference by reminding us that our frameworks for cultural recognition are only as big as the discourses in which they are set.

What then should we do with the Deafscape? Accept the evidence from Deaf people and join the growing number of Deaf people that oppose medical intervention as cultural genocide and call for the reintroduction of segregated schooling. Or do we join their opponents who would rather see Deaf culture lost for ever if it means the end of physical and social disability. Is there a middle road?