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# Pioneering the Field of Deaf Women's Studies

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*It is not our differences that divide us.  
It is our inability to recognize, accept and celebrate those differences.*

Audre Lorde (1934-1992)<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This article is written by three Deaf women-scholars who pioneered Deaf Women's Studies (DWS) about thirty plus years ago: the discipline arose from the need to explore the Deaf female experience (Kelly, 2016, p. 122). Then, the 1990's was when the DWS coursework was first developed and offered in American academia. To gain a greater understanding for DWS, the article begins by reviewing the emergence of both Black Studies and Women's Studies as academic fields and how these were the impetus for DWS. A discussion about the Deaf women's experiences during different periods of American history is given in detail. A brief coverage of the history of Deaf Studies as a discipline shows how it inspired the pioneers to establish the DWS field. Gaps in curricula, resources, and corpus as they appeared at the time that DWS began are described. Finally, the article devotes substantial space to the experiences that the authors had in developing courses, its syllabi, and teaching about Deaf women. A number of current challenges and achievements point to a continued pressing strong need for DWS to gain strength through research and scholarship.

## Introduction

Thirty plus years have passed since the first Deaf Women's Studies (DWS) course was taught in a university setting, and it seems timely to go back to the 1990's and discuss the journey that the authors made as the pioneering scholars. Being Deaf women, these scholars overcame many challenges with some persisting to this day. The introduction of DWS to academia was part of a larger movement, including the emerging arena of academic cultural studies. It began with Black Studies, and then Women's Studies. Over time, other specific areas of study emerged: Deaf, Hispanic/Latinx, Asian, Jewish and Native American and Indigenous, Asian American/Pacific Islanders and Gay Studies, to name a few.

The emergence was prompted by a sense of colonization as described by anti-colonist Frantz Fanon,<sup>2</sup> social unrest, and the need to know their heritage. Prevented from appreciating the historical and the achievements of their own people, the colonized are kept powerless (Kelly, 2016, p. 122). Deaf women are not an exception to the rule as

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1 *Sister Outsider: Essays and speeches*, 1984.

2 Fanon, a leader of the Algerian resistance to French rule in the 1950s, writes that members in oppressed communities are frequently deprived from appreciating their own historical experiences and glory of the actions of their own people, thus the colonized are kept powerless (1964, p 170).

they have their needs and deserve full academic attention. Deaf people, especially Deaf women, oftentimes do not know much of their heritage, thus remain colonized as posited by Fanon (1964).

Considering that the resources in other academic cultural studies have grown exponentially, the question that begs to be asked is where DWS stands in terms of corpus. Another question to be considered in the relevance of DWS is why this discipline matters. For this, Gallaudet University<sup>3</sup>, a premier institution of higher education for deaf students located in Washington, DC, is subject to a historical review for its role and involvement in co-education. A review of different time periods in American history revives a long overlooked picture portraying what Deaf women experienced. It is not only about Deaf women as university students, but what will be discussed accounts for their roles as citizens in the Deaf community and society. This is where a brief look at Deaf Studies will be made to show a strong need for improved and critical attention to Deaf women.

Finally, the authors share their experiences in the development of DWS coursework and teaching in the university setting. The authors recount their trials, tribulations, and successes. The article closes by comparing DWS with Women's Studies in the advancement of research and scholarship. This produces some directions for Deaf women scholars to consider for the future of DWS. For this reason, it is appropriate and necessary to start the article with a review on two other cultural studies arenas as well-established academic disciplines.

### Background on Black & Women's Studies

A single word can be powerful, and this proves to be true for Women's Studies and the term "herstory". Coined in 1970 by Robin Morgan (1941-), a radical feminist activist/journalist, the word herstory was to call attention to lexical sexism (Morgan, 1970). People with feminist predilections viewed "history" to imply "his" "story." This suggests that the story belongs to the male possessive pronoun. Herstory gives special attention to the female experience.

Sexism is defined as prejudice or discrimination based on sex, but in reality, it really functioned as discrimination against women. Language use reflects the people who use it and often are those in power. With that comes lexical sexism, which again perpetuates the societal attitudes that male as the significant sex is the norm, with examples such as: his-tory; wo-men; men-struation; men-opause, to name a few. With the consciousness raising within feminist movements in the early 20th century, the attention was called to language usage, in this case the term of history. Merriam-Webster Dictionary listed *herstory* as a response to history in 1932. The term, however, did not come into great use until 1970's when the next wave took place. The language is not neutral, and often reinforces the existing stereotype that is permeated by society, thus calling attention to lexical sexism is to show how women oftentimes are excluded or put in secondary roles.<sup>4</sup>

The understanding of Women's Studies is reinforced when looking at other minorities within the American population. Black communities understood this powerlessness very well from the beginnings of America with slavery, up to the civil rights movement in the mid 20th century.<sup>5</sup> Academic exploration of African-American history emerged in the late 19th century with W. E. B. Du Bois, including Dr. Carter G. Woodson who, in the early 20th century, earned the title of "father of Black history" (Greene, 1989). As Blacks struggled to achieve justice and equality, including the right to vote, social unrest in the sixties, such as the anti-Vietnam War movement, women's liberation, and the Black Power movement, led to the start of Black Studies. Its development was to study African Americans, Africans and African-descended people; to learn where Black people themselves are main agents of research, knowledge creation and cultural creativity; to counter racism and contribute to human liberation; to celebrate the Black experience; and to see themselves as precious within the universality of the human condition (Alkalimat, 2022).

The first Black Studies program was at San Francisco State College in 1968 with sociologist Dr. Nathan Hare as its coordinator. In the following year, it became a department. Today, there are a plethora of these programs or departments in American institutes of higher education (Karenga).<sup>6</sup> DATAUSA shows charts of steady growth in

3 The institution underwent several name changes: National Deaf Mute College (1865-1894); Gallaudet College (1894-1986); Gallaudet University (1986-present). (Atwood, 1964; *The 1974 Gallaudet Almanac*, 1974; *The 1864- 2014 Gallaudet Almanac*, 2020).

4 For the definition of herstory, please see <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/herstory>. Also, readers might want to read Dastagir's (2017) column on the feminist glossary in the field of Women Studies.

5 See <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/black-history-milestones> for Black history milestones.

6 Readers might want to read Rhodes (2016) regarding the struggles that the Black Studies had faced in the current society: <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/breaking/ct-african-american-studies-college-major-met-20160905-story.html>

awarding bachelor's degrees from 2012 with 1,156 to 1,172 in 2019.<sup>7</sup> Over the years, other terms have evolved such as African Studies<sup>8</sup> or African American Studies and Black Canadian Studies.

Every social movement emerging out of the Black community has had an educational component that constitutes a development of Black Studies (Alkalimat, 2022). Several major movements embodied themselves in Black Studies: the Freedom Movement, the Black Power Movement, the Black Arts Movement, The New Communist Movement, The Black Women Movement, the Black Student Movement, and most recently, Black Lives Matters which armed activists with ideological consciousness to fight against racist oppression. This in turn furthered the field of Black Studies into exploring racism, inequity, and rights as well as asserting its status as an academic discipline for ongoing dialogue, analysis, and change.

Women are also known for experiencing powerlessness for a long time in history in having a second-class citizen status. Some examples include how women were not allowed to inherit family holdings, to initiate divorce proceedings, to vote, and were expected to bear and raise children nor even the rights on how to raise their children (Lerner, 1993; Kerber et al., 2016; Opdycke, 2000). In addition, the Black women's situation was ignored, conflicting with the values held by white women and men (von Garnier, 2004; Schuller, 2021). Black feminism actually began in the 1800's with former slave Sojourner Truth and journalist-educator Ida B. Wells, moving to the Combahee River Collective in the 1970's (Schuller, 2021). In time, Black feminism theory emerged in the 1980's with writings by bell hooks, Audre Lorde and Patricia Collins, among others (Taylor, 1998).

In addition, higher education was denied to women. In the early 1800's, white women attended all-female seminaries instead. There also were women who founded such seminaries. A historical listing confirming this is as follows:

- 1814: Emma Hart Willard: Middlebury Female Seminary, Vermont<sup>9</sup>
- 1821: Emma Hart Willard: Troy Female Seminary, New York<sup>10</sup>
- 1823: Catharine Esther Beecher, Mary Mason Lyon, Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet<sup>11</sup>:  
Hartford Female Seminary, Connecticut
- 1835: Mary Mason Lyon: Wheaton Female Seminary, Massachusetts<sup>12</sup>
- 1837: Mary Mason Lyon: Mount Holyoke Seminary, Massachusetts<sup>13</sup>

A special mention must be made that Oberlin Collegiate Institute<sup>14</sup> was the first institution to be desegregated and coeducational. Founded in 1833 by two Christian abolitionists, the institute opened its door to Black students in 1835 (Waite, 2001) and to women in 1838.<sup>15</sup> Other institutions of higher education such as Harvard, Princeton and Yale, to name a few, started to accept women students, however, by the late 1960's (Malkiel, 2017).

The first wave of feminism was in the mid-19th century, when the American women's rights movement began. The impetus for women's equality and freedom in the United States began with suffrage, which was a struggle for women's voting rights in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. These white female activists strove to bring balance to the civil and political rights of men to women, and then on the suffrage issue (Tobias, 1997; von Garnier, 2004). Black women, including Ida B. Wells, challenged the white feminists to be included in the March 1913 Suffrage March, as depicted in the von Garnier film. However, along with the D.C. police chief, they were ordered to march in the back of the parade (Stiehm, 2023).

Seventy-two years after the first woman's rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York in 1848, white American women finally won the right to vote on August 26, 1920. The strength and momentum of first-wave feminism helped in having the Nineteenth Amendment approved in 1920, ensuring women the right to vote (Lerner, 1975; Lerner, 1993; Tobias, 1997; Opdycke, 2000; Kerber et al, 2016).

7 <https://datausa.io/profile/cip/african-american-black-studies#institutions>

8 Not to be confused with African Studies.

9 <https://www.emmawillard.org/about/history>

10 <https://www.nps.gov/places/willardschool.htm>

11 Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet gave an address at the Opening of the Hartford Female Seminary in 1827 (see Gallaudet, 1827).

12 <https://wheatoncollege.edu/about-wheaton-college/history-mission/founding/the-founding-of-wheaton-female-seminary/>

13 <https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/emily-dickinson/biography/special-topics/emily-dickinsons-schooling-mount-holyoke-female-seminary/>

14 It became Oberlin College in 1850: see <https://www.oberlin.edu/about-oberlin/oberlin-history#:~:text=Among%20Oberlin's%20earliest%20graduates%20were,vote%20to%20allow%20them%20entry.>

15 <https://www.historycentral.com/Ant/Oberlin.html>

It was some time before academia incorporated essential issues related to women and their rights which in turn ensued the second-wave of feminism. In 1970, San Diego State University established the first Women's Studies program (Luebke & Reilly, 1995). By 1990, the National Women's Studies Association directory<sup>16</sup> listed 621 Women's Studies programs nationwide. As of 2022, there are 20 Women's Studies doctoral programs in the United States and one in Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

The aforementioned work paved the way for a third-wave of feminism, representing a generation that began with the achievements from the second wave, while simultaneously addressing the problems that took place from the 1990's to 2012. Much like the second-wave of feminism, this represented the different and sometimes opposing objectives of feminists who worked together under the banner of women's emancipation, but this time with a desire to have a mainstream movement that addressed the issues that women of diverse colors, classes, and gender identities experienced.

And finally, the fourth wave of feminism has only been around since 2012, with a focus on achieving greater gender equality through the use of internet platforms such as action-based viral campaigns, protests, and movements like #MeToo, with the goal of shifting the focus from the margins of society to the front pages of our daily news. Body-positive, welcoming of transgender people, queer, and digitally focused is how the fourth wave has been described, with the aim of disrupting gender stereotypes further and considering intersectionality as a focal point (Adichie, 2014; Delao, 2021). Kimberle Crenshaw, a critical legal and race scholar, coined this term in 1989 that has roots in Black feminist activism, as lens that shows where power comes together and collides, where it interlocks and intersects. It is a framework that needs to be applied to all situations in which women find themselves, recognizing that all aspects of identity enrich women's lived experiences while compounding and complicating various oppressions and marginalizations that they face. Crenshaw argues that it is not possible to separate out numerous injustices because women experience them through intersectionality, as oftentimes it is not just a race issue here, and a gender issue there, then a class or LGBTQ issue there. By disregarding the intersections, it oftentimes erases what happens to people who experience all of these aforementioned oppression. So with this in mind, the fourth-wave feminists contend that white male supremacy is the issue and believe that feminism is incomplete without a knowledge of comprehensive justice, which deconstructs power structures and encompasses racial justice, as well as analyses of class, disability, and other challenges.

Gerda Lerner, a feminist historian, was instrumental in showing that women had a history (sic) by founding a doctoral program in Women's History, which in turn established the discipline in Women's History, giving voice to a group that had long been marginalized. She legitimized the field by providing the framework for the placement of women in mainstream history (Lerner, 1975). The framework embodies four stages: compensatory history, contribution history, understanding history, and challenging and redefining history, which reflects the progression and pattern towards Women's Studies. An elaboration on Lerner's four stages is as follows:

*Compensatory history* focuses on the notable women missing from history or not documented in mainstream history. It tries to fill in the gap by describing their achievements and why their contributions are noteworthy.

*Contribution history is important* as it focuses on documenting the true narrative of women, giving them a voice apart from traditional history that is deeply rooted in the patriarchal system.

*Understanding history* deals with the maturity of women's consciousness that has progressed for several decades now, and the form of inquiry has evolved where the interpretation and understanding of history is generated from the lens of feminism rather than from the perspective of male sources as it has been done in the past.

And this all leads to *challenging and redefining history* that allows for interdisciplinary approaches in questioning the previous findings by applying intersectional lenses and redefining what may have been interpreted differently or erased in the past and placing it in proper context with a feminist lens and voice.

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16 See [www.nwsa.org](http://www.nwsa.org) for more information regarding this directory.

## Co-education at National Deaf Mute College

Concerning Deaf women, Gallaudet University had a rough start with co-education. Upon the 1864 founding of National Deaf Mute College, no official statement was made in favor of or in denial of women's admittance (Parker, 2008). Annie Szymanoskie, an orphan from the Columbia Institute for the Deaf and Dumb (CIDD) and Emma Jane Speak from Maryland were admitted. The female students lasted only one year. In the next academic year, two Deaf women from the Pennsylvania School for the Deaf were enrolled: Adelaide Smith and Lydia Kennedy and again they remained briefly. The number of male students far exceeded female students at National Deaf Mute College and served as a plausible explanation for why the female students did not continue studying and graduate. The support system for female students was nominal or non-existent.

In 1868, Lydia Mitchell, an alumna from CIDD came in for two years, but left on account of inadequate housing. The female students were housed at Kendall Hall which was also the residence for students of the Columbia Institute for the Deaf and Dumb<sup>17</sup>. As a result of this arrangement, the female college students ended up tending to the younger children. This was akin to conducting domestic arts which was not the goal of these female college students. Male students were housed in the Rose Cottage, an original building on campus (Parker, 2008). It is likely that Deaf women became resentful with the housing arrangement and thought they deserved the opportunity to reside in a dormitory like their male counterparts.

There is more to herstory for Deaf women. Deaf women suffered a blow to their education when President Edward Miner Gallaudet (EMG) decided not to admit them thereafter. The negative view of women as prevailed during the nineteenth century did not help with this situation. Among the examples are that the women were best suited for domestic arts rather than academe (Kerber et al., 2016; Tobias, 1997); that the female brain weighed 5 ounces less than the male brain (e.g. Rippon, 2016); that rigorous studying would be harmful to the reproductive system (Clark, 1873 as cited in Parker, 2008, p. 86); and that women would be a distraction for the male students per prevailing attitude of the day (Carlton, 2022). The fact that the Deaf community disputed EMG's decision must be noted. A number of editorials and letters were published criticizing the banishment of women from National Deaf Mute College. Examples are shown below.

The All Male Literary Society wrote in *Silent World* in 1873:

Many ladies desire to pursue a collegiate course of study but men have placed a barrier to their progress, and are now unwilling to remove it (p. 9).

Again, in 1875, a Deaf teacher in Indiana, Laura Sheridan who received her college diploma through a correspondence school wrote:

Has the National Deaf-Mute College, whose professed object is 'to give to competent deaf-mutes and others, who by reason of deafness cannot be educated elsewhere,<sup>[18]</sup> a thorough education in the studies usually pursued in American Colleges,' opened its doors to women? (p. 248).

More protests followed. Between 1885 and 1886, two Deaf Illinois women Georgianna Elliott (Hasenstab) and Angeline Fuller (Fisher) held a letter-writing campaign (Parker, 2008). They even entertained the idea of establishing a separate college for Deaf women and raised only five dollars (equivalent to sixty dollars in 2008) for this endeavor. However this idea was abandoned for uncertain reasons (Parker, 2008).

The late nineteenth century marked a burgeoning time for female solidarity, and was an era of female political reform, resulting in the formation of clubs, organizations, and social movements (Evans, 1989). The Western Association of Collegiate Alumnae (WACA) was formed by college-educated women, promoting co-education. The turning point was when Amelia Platter, a WACA spokesperson, became involved after a

<sup>17</sup> Founded in 1857, CIDD is now known as the Kendall Demonstration Elementary School located on the same campus as Gallaudet University (Atwood, 1964).

<sup>18</sup> Underline added for emphasis.

conversation with Elliott and Fuller and wrote to EMG in August 1886 stating that the college for Deaf students is:

...a public institution. It has been built and supported almost entirely by the government...justice that our institution supported by the people's money<sup>19</sup> should admit all who need and desire its instruction. (Parker, 2008, p 94)

Flustered to have been admonished by an external entity, EMG reluctantly admitted women in 1887 as a two-year experiment to see how coeducation would fare (Atwood, 1964; Parker, 2008; Brooks, 2021). The first group consisted of:

Ella F. Black, Indiana  
Ide L. Kinney, Pennsylvania  
Anna L. Kurtz, Indiana  
Hattie A. Leffler, Pennsylvania  
Alto May Lowman, Maryland  
Margaret Ellen Rudd, Nebraska

All Deaf women listed above resided on the upper floor of the House One which was also the President's House. The college's poor record in retaining its female students persisted. It was only Lowman that continued to graduation, becoming the first to receive an associate degree. Agatha Tiegel Hanson from the next cohort was the first to receive a bachelor degree (Jankowski, 2020; Brooks, 2020)<sup>20</sup>.

There were some positive developments for Deaf women that took place at National Deaf Mute College. One example was the establishment of the women's basketball team in 1896. The men's basketball team was established later in 1904 (The Gallaudet Almanac, 1964-2014). On the national landscape, basketball was invented in 1891 by a male instructor at Springfield College in Massachusetts. In the following year, the first women's basketball team was organized at Smith College. Thus the fact that Gallaudet women established a basketball team before the men's team is noteworthy (Lewis, 2019). In addition, Gallaudet men already had football whereas women had no sports.

In addition, female students were knowledgeable about the national suffrage movement at the turn of the 20th century. Only recently did archivists at the Gallaudet University Archives find historical photographs that support this conclusion. At first, it was thought that a suffrage rally was held in 1912 at the college's Ole Jim, famed for being the heart of student life in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. However, an article in the *Deaf Mutes' Journal* revealed that suffrage was the theme for the quadrennial Leap Year Dance<sup>21</sup> which was to celebrate the fact that women could ask men for a dance or even make a marriage proposal (Nelson, 2016). While clearly a spoof on the women's part, it shows political awareness. As shown in Figure 1, the two banners on the walls state, "We want our rights" and "Votes for women."

Another set of historical photographs shown in Figure 2 depicts Deaf women from Gallaudet participating in the 1913 Suffrage Parade the day before President Woodrow Wilson's Inauguration Parade in Washington, D.C. Petra Fandrem Howard from Minnesota was part of the parade (see Burch, 2002 for further information on this student). The American Deaf community was also involved in the debate for women's voting rights. Deaf women in the community or those who attended Gallaudet submitted articles advocating suffrage and had them published in the *Deaf Mute Journal* and the *Buff and Blue*.

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19 Underline added for emphasis.

20 Gary Brooks' film titled *The Feather: The Agatha Tiegel Hanson Story* can be seen at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B\\_8MeSCSLXI&t=157s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B_8MeSCSLXI&t=157s). Also, there are reminiscences of Hanson's reflections of her years at Gallaudet in American Sign Language at the end of the film.

21 Jerrod Grill & Arlene B. Kelly; Email communicate; September 29, 2022.



Figure 1: Photographs showing banners in reference to voting rights for women at Ole Jim. Photo courtesy of Gallaudet University Archives/Kate Keeley, 1916.



Figure 2: Photographs showing the 1913 Suffrage and Inaugural Parades in Washington, DC. Photo courtesy of Gallaudet University Archives/Kate Keeley, 1916.



It should be noted that women entering the National Deaf Mute College, and later Gallaudet College, were white. However, earliest documented first graduates of minorities are the following:<sup>22</sup>

- 1903: Annie L. MacPhail (Cook), International (Ontario, Canada)  
Margaret Hutchinson (Pickard), International (Ontario, Canada)  
Margaret Hauberg (original name: Margrethe Johannesdatter Hauberg), International Norway/Minnesota)
- 1939: Lillian Hahn Skinner and Rosie Fong, Asian-American
- 1954: Dolores Ramirez Barrett; Mexican-American
- 1957: Ida Wynette Gray Hampton; Black
- 1976: Dixie Mae Vetterneck Baker, Chippewas; Indigenous People

### Deaf Women During and After the World War II

During World War II with many American men in service, women were hired at war plants across the country. Deaf women found themselves becoming part of this profound social change (Burch, 2002). Ballooning salaries, union membership and job security came as a boon (Tobias, 1997). However, by the end of the war, management, state governments and some unions drove women out of jobs that they cherished (Burch, 2002; Tobias, 1997). Although this era was when many American women were employed, it was actually a temporary acceptance in the male-dominated working world.

A return to the pre-war values ensued until Betty Friedan's 1963 *The Feminine Mystique* promoted a second wave of feminist consciousness in America, revolutionizing how women thought of themselves. From the 1960's to the 1980's, the second wave of feminism was marked by an increase in political activism and cultural prominence, concentrating on gender-based discrimination and marginalization outside of the legal and political spheres, such as sexism in the home, higher education institutions, and the media. Access to birth control and the intersecting implications of class and race were other important issues as well (Lerner, 1993; Tobias, 1997; Opdycke, 2000; Kerber et al., 2016).

"Feminine mystique" was an ideology promulgated to return women to what a male-dominated society believed to be their rightful place, such as traditional wife/mother roles and staying at home. Friedan (1963) also documented that within 15 years after World War II, the perceptions of a woman's place reverted to a norm closer to that of the Victorian period than to that of the early 20th century. For example, there were more American women, in proportion to men, graduating from college in the 1920's than in the 1950's, and more women in Congress in the 1940's than in the 1950's. The whole process was thrown in reverse.

In response to *The Feminine Mystique*, President John F. Kennedy appointed Eleanor Roosevelt to chair the Presidential Commission on the Status of Women in 1961 (Tobias, 1997) to document "prejudices and outmoded customs that act as barriers to the full realization of women's basic rights" (Anderson, 1997, p. 309). The Equal Pay Act of 1963 required that men and women receive equal pay for equal work performed under equal conditions (Andersen, 1997).<sup>23</sup> These actions prompted women to question the traditional social definition of gender roles. However, it took a major civil rights movement in this period, and later the Vietnam War and student protests, to crystalize the discontent that women felt.

Like the 19th century American feminists participating in the abolitionist movement, white women involved in the 1950's civil rights movement soon saw their own oppression to be similar to the racial injustice that they were working against (Opdycke, 2000). Their contributions were dismissed by their male colleagues. Additionally, during

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22 The authors attempted to verify the accuracy of among the earliest female Gallaudet graduates of minorities to their best. If there is a discrepancy, please inform the authors at the earliest opportunity to rectify any omissions or errors. In the case of Indigenous people, 'being first' is not part of their collective culture, however, we want to recognize this ethnic group.

23 At the time of its passage, women were earning 59 cents to every dollar that men made. Sixty years later in 2021, women continue to make less: at 82 cents to every dollar that men make. <https://nwlc.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/PFA-Factsheet-2021-1.27.21.pdf>

the Vietnam War era, women began to reconsider their roles in society. Student radicals organized antiwar “teach-ins,” rallies and marches, and closed down college campuses. While active, many women felt dismissed by their male compatriots. Women typed and filed while men made public statements; women offered suggestions and men made policies; women cooked and cleaned antiwar offices (Opdycke, 2000).

As dynamic as it may seem regarding the social occurrences and changes, especially during the post-World War II and the Vietnam War eras, the exact role that Deaf women played in these different episodes continues to be unclear. DWS research and scholarship will help verify that Deaf women share some, many, or all of the experiences as described for hearing women in the literature. Equally important for DWS is accounting for the experiences that Deaf women had within the Deaf community. The earlier discussion on the struggles Deaf women had in entering Gallaudet University serves as a good example.

### A Quick Look at Deaf Studies

Deaf Studies as a field was engendered from the social consciousness driven by the discovery of American Sign Language (ASL) as a bona fide language. Several sub-disciplines have followed that contributed to the research, publication, and corpus within the field of Deaf Studies. DWS, on the other hand, did not have the same trajectory as Women’s Studies, but was established as an afterthought once they saw it was missing from the Deaf Studies curriculum. It does show that, within the context of the social justice framework, the contribution of academia to the community is important, and on the flip side, the community informing academia allows for continued consciousness raising and future advancement.

The rise of Deaf Studies began in the 1960’s. This was when Gallaudet University’s Professor William C. Stokoe with two Deaf colleagues, Drs. Dorothy Sueko Casterline and Carl Gustav Croneberg looked for a structure in sign language, resulting in the watershed publication of *A Dictionary of American Sign Language on Linguistic Principles* (1965). This book proposed that signs can be broken down into parameters, thereby suggesting it to be comparable to spoken languages.<sup>24</sup> A new name emerged: American Sign Language, or ASL.

In this ground-breaking book, Croneberg penned an essay entitled “The Linguistic Community.” It is the earliest, if not the first, known document by a Deaf person describing Deaf people as a cultural entity. Here, he described various facets of being Deaf in terms of in-group formations, cultural characteristics, occupations and economic status, to name a few.

Later in 1975, Dr. Tom Humpries wrote an essay that remains unpublished but widely distributed. In this essay, he suggested the coinage of “audism” to describe the situation in which Deaf people feel and experience being oppressed by mainstream society. However, the coinage did not gain traction until the mid-1990’s when Deaf Studies professors introduced it in their classrooms. Two momentous events pushed the coinage even further: Gertz’s 2008 treatise on dysconscious audism, and the documentary *Audism Unveiled* film (Bauman, Montenegro and Bahan, 2008).

This cultural reportage was fueled mainly by linguistic research that happened earlier and almost in tandem resulting in a plethora of publications (Battison, 1978; Klima & Bellugi, 1979; Liddell, 1980; Padden, 1988; Valli & Lucas, 1992; Bahan, 1996), among many others. In tandem with ASL research were historical inquiries about Deaf people. As the interest continued to grow, in connection with ASL research were historical inquiries about Deaf people, engendering an awareness of social consciousness among Deaf people who then realized that they indeed do constitute a unique minority linguistic community, shaped by language, communicative modes, and familial, educational, and career experiences. With Jack Gannon’s *Deaf Heritage: A Narrative History of Deaf America* (1981) as the seminal historical text, many other historical resources have emerged since (Groce, 1985; Winefield, 1987; Schuchman, 1988; Van Cleve & Crouch, 1989; Maher, 1996; Greenwald & Van Cleve, 2008; Jankowski, 2020).

With such an enlightened consciousness, it became only logical to have Deaf Studies. Harvey J. Corson, the provost of Gallaudet University (1992, p. 8) suggests that:

.... The emergence of Deaf Studies indicates the growing acceptance of the cultural study of deaf people as a legitimate scholarly pursuit, deserving of the same recognition afforded to programs such as African-American studies or Women’s studies.

24 For further information about Stokoe, see Baker and Battison (1980), Sacks (1989), and Maher (1996).

The statement above from an administrator at Gallaudet University made a connection to Women's Studies and helped jumpstart the Deaf Studies movement. The first formal Deaf Studies program in the United States was created in 1980 by Stephen Nover and Robert Hoffmeister at Boston University (Lane et. al., 1996) as an undergraduate program for mostly hearing students examining the lives of Deaf people from a sociological and language minority perspective, including the linguistic study of ASL.<sup>25</sup> In 1983, the second Deaf Studies program was formed at the California State University, Northridge with Ray Jones and Lawrence Fleischer.<sup>26</sup>

For Gallaudet University, 1994 was the year that a Deaf Studies department was established with Dr. Yerker Andersson as its first chairperson. The program at Gallaudet is most unique in terms of having Deaf students in the majority, which is not true for the other universities. What became problematic for all universities, including Gallaudet is that there was so little attention to the Deaf women's experience. Deaf herstory was submerged, inadvertently swept under the rug along with other Deaf minority studies. These conclusions are what the authors of this article made, prompting them to roll up their sleeves to leave a mark on academia in the United States. The field of Deaf Studies is interdisciplinary, encompassing history, language, linguistics, culture, psychology, literature, arts and more pertaining to the Deaf experience, and audism, that now started to include and analyze the breadth of diverse experiences.

### **The Birth of Deaf Women's Studies**

The authors of this article emphasize that the concept of DWS was novel, if not radical during the 1990's. All three authors were not intimidated about the need for change. As part of creating DWS coursework, the pioneers did their best in putting together the resources. The first pioneer, Vicki Hurwitz taught at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf [NTID, which is part of the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT)] located in Rochester, New York. The second and third pioneers, Genie Gertz and Arlene B. Kelly were professors at California State University, Northridge (CSUN), and Gallaudet University, respectively. It should be noted that all DWS contents were presented bilingually with the professors signing in the classes to the students who know ASL as well as assigned readings. Additionally, none of the three institutions of higher education resisted the efforts in establishing a DWS course as the time was ripe for such diversity within the field of Deaf Studies. Full support was unanimously given by the administration, colleagues and especially students.

### **The Three Pioneers' Stories**

*Hurwitz:*

I was asked to teach the Deaf Heritage course for one fall quarter at NTID and was given the teaching materials, including Gannon's *Deaf Heritage* book. Since Deaf women were scarcely mentioned in the Deaf Culture courses, it became important for me to include a separate single section about them and their issues. As Development Education Specialist with the Student Life Team at NTID, I met female students who struggled with their identities, thought that they could not achieve as much as their hearing counterparts, and had low self-esteem. I also discovered through books that the accomplishments and achievements of many deaf women were not recognized. Therefore, I wanted the students to learn about them so that they could recognize their own hidden skills to strive for better goals. As part of my graduate studies at RIT, I was fortunate to develop a pilot course, a much needed curriculum for Deaf Women's Studies, the first ever globally, for NTID students in 1993.

*Gertz:*

I was raised by feminists and had an early exposure in understanding of feminism and cultural differences that had shaped my identity and instilled the value of equity and diversity. Upon joining CSUN's Deaf Studies Department, I noticed that the Deaf Studies curriculum did not have any diversity nor Deaf Women and worked to change that. The DWS course was proposed and begun in Fall 1996, as a multidisciplinary analysis of Deaf women in the Deaf community and in American society including studies of historical, social, political, educational and economic factors that influenced and impacted the role status of Deaf women. Discussions included Deaf women's

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25 Bob Hoffmeister & Arlene B. Kelly, E-mail communique, January 30, 1996.

26 In the academic 1975-76 year, the idea of a sign language program was discussed between Jones and Fleischer at CSUN, but it was not until 1983 that this was approved and established, however, using the name of Deaf Studies instead of Sign Language (E-Mail communique, Charles N. Katz and Arlene B. Kelly, March 3, 1998). Cited from Kelly, 1998.

struggles and successes, and examination of the historical segments of Deaf women within the context of the Deaf community. I also felt that to better understand the content of the course, direct connection between material and learner's experience was needed. So as a result, I had collectively established the local chapter of Deaf Women United, organized a mini-conference, seminars with guest speakers to bring theory to practice by supplementing the aforementioned activities.

*Kelly:*

From 1995 to 2000, as a doctoral student at University of Maryland's American Studies program, I took some Women's Studies courses where I noticed that none of the assigned reading materials was about Deaf women. Course literature covered white, women of color and differently-abled women, for example, in various aspects of life. Asking my professors about the omission, all replied that they were not aware of any such literature. In 1996, I met Gertz, then a doctoral student at University of California, Los Angeles who had just begun teaching CSUN's first DWS course. We compared notes regarding resources which were scant. In the following semester, a panel of Deaf women in which Gertz participated and I moderated was held at the 1997 Deaf Studies Conference at Gallaudet. While video footage of this enlightening panel was lost, the photo below shows the participants:



Figure 3: Deaf Women at 1997 Deaf Studies Conference.  
 Front row: Arlene Kelly, Marie J. Philip, Sanremi LaRue, Genie Gertz  
 Back row: Beth Benedict, Carolyn McCaskill, Melanie McKay Cody  
 Photo courtesy of Arlene B. Kelly

Because of the lack of literature on Deaf women in my doctoral studies, a dearth of resources and an enlightening panel, I was inspired to begin such a course at Gallaudet in Fall 1997, one semester after the above-mentioned Deaf Studies Conference panel.

### Deaf Women's Studies Courses

The three pioneering scholars cannot emphasize more that taking a DWS course is beneficial for all students. For example, Hurwitz had a Saudi Arabian mother in her class. Her culture did not allow female students to sit next to nor between male students, nor walk with but behind male students. However, she learned about Deaf women's lives of struggles and successes and enjoyed the course so much that her husband, also a Saudi, took the course in the following year and expressed appreciation for having taken it.

Alongside the same vein, Kelly also had a unique experience with Saudi students. Because all Deaf Studies majors were, and are, required to take the course on Deaf women, male students were enrolled. At one point, a Saudi male, after taking this course, became pretty much a feminist himself, as the class led him to re-examine his own behavior toward women in his culture and think about how to become an ally.

In the following year, this Saudi male was in a different course with a female Saudi student in which Kelly taught. This female rarely participated in the classroom discussions so Kelly decided to prompt her by asking for her viewpoints on several occasions. It was noted that she would always glance at her male Saudi counterpart before speaking up. In a private conversation, Kelly asked the male about this behavior, and he conceded that it was the norm in a mixed-gender classroom to get permission to speak. He then had a private conversation with her to encourage her to step out of the box. After that, she was comfortable to opine. What was fascinating was that in the following courses thereafter, this female Saudi would not stop sharing her opinions or experiences. She indeed blossomed.

As recently as September 2022, Kelly ran into a former male student who was in her 1997 pilot DWS class. He mentioned that he had fond memories of this class and that it was beneficial to him now that he has a wife and two daughters with whom he is empathic.

Clearly, there is a benefit for male students in taking a DWS course. This course afforded everyone, female or male or non-binary, opportunities to develop critical perspectives, understand different people and diverse viewpoints, and be challenged to be agents of change.

### **Paucity of Resources**

The three pioneering scholars want to note that locating resources related to the Deaf women experience for their respective initial DWS course offerings was difficult. Reliance on scattered documents became the norm for these scholars.

For the 1993 DWS course offering at NTID, Hurwitz relied on biographies, however scant, of famous Deaf women. Holcomb and Wood's 1989 *Deaf Women: A Parade through the Decades* further foraged her search. Hurwitz developed for her students a bibliography of books written by Deaf women and other sources that included mentions about Deaf women. Also included herewith was a list of articles, videotapes and websites to encourage student-led research on Deaf women. To discuss issues impacting Deaf women's lives, Hurwitz hosted a panel with Deaf guests to share their experiences, and this was video recorded and stored at the NTID Library (see Appendix A for Hurwitz's compiled work).

For the 1996 DWS course offering at CSUN, Gertz found it a challenge to pull resources together that exemplified the Deaf women experience. The reading list that Gertz had compiled for the course had 25 Deaf-related articles and out of this list several were not directly related to women per se but still had provided the framework on understanding the diversity of experiences. The articles were mostly from periodicals and some from scholarly journals which again reflects the slow growth of Deaf feminist scholarship, that is still true today (see Appendix B for Gertz's compiled work).

For the 1997 DWS course offering at Gallaudet, Kelly also had trouble locating resources related to the Deaf women experience. For example, the reading list had 23 articles that included general Women's Studies topics. Only 11 of them were related to the Deaf women experience specifically. On the recommended books list, there were eight books, mostly from the Women's Studies field, and only three were related to the general Deaf experience with paragraphs or chapters on the Deaf women experience (see Appendix C for Kelly's compiled work).

### **Band-Aid Solutions**

By virtue of being in Rochester, Hurwitz's course included a field trip to the Women's National Hall of Fame museum in nearby Seneca Falls, New York, the birthplace of the Women's Rights Movement.<sup>27</sup> This museum spotlights women as well as men who have transformed America for the betterment of women's lives.

In response to the dearth of DWS resources, Gertz created a course reader that included a collection of articles that were both relevant to Deaf women and those that were more broadly related to Women's Studies. Gertz also developed a monthly lecture series that also included seminars with guest speakers, providing a comprehensive, multidisciplinary, and feminist focus. The students had the opportunity to engage and interact with the speakers and further delve into the issues with a critical lens. In a similar spirit, Gertz established a one-day conference on

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27 <https://www.womenofthehall.org/>

campus in collaboration with Deaf Women of Los Angeles, a then recently established chapter of Deaf Women United, a national group that had been around for ten years at the time.<sup>28</sup> The students who were taking the DWS courses were able to partake in conference planning, partnering with Deaf Women of Los Angeles.

Examples of seminars and class speakers included:

- “Women’s Issues in Urban Planning: Fourth World Conference on Women.” by Dr. Mary Beth Welch-Orozco, Chair of Women’s Studies at CSUN, who was instrumental in getting this course off the ground by supporting the curriculum process on campus. She shared her experience in attending the World Conference on Women organized by the United Nations in Beijing, China a year before (September 1995) that focused on Women and Gender Equality. To this date it was the last conference.
- “Deaf Women, Deaf Men and Deaf Society: How Much Do We Know About Deaf Women?” by Marilyn Smith
- “A Good Look at Deaf Feminism” by Sandra Ammons
- “What Do Multiple Identities Mean to Me?” by aj granda
- “Multiple Identities: Mother Father Deaf” by Dr. Diane Morton
- “Deaf Women Create a Collective Voice for the Next Millennium,” a roundtable discussion

The all-day conference, organized by the DWS course in partnership with Deaf Women of Los Angeles, had a theme of “Communicating, Understanding, Building: Reaching Out,” (see Appendices D and E for the conference’s flyer<sup>29</sup>) focusing on the following areas tied to the conference theme:

- Conceptualization of Deaf Women’s Struggles in Today’s World
- Education, Employment, Environment: Trends, Issues, and Challenges
- Characteristically Deaf Women: Beliefs, Attitudes, and Human Affairs
- Reaching Out: Deaf Women’s Positive Affirmation During Their Everyday Lives

Speakers slated to present included Dr. Carol Billone, Dr. Laurene Simms, Kelly, Bridgetta Bourne-Firl, Nancy Popovich, amongst others. This conference provided a forum for interaction among individuals who were engaged in teaching, research, activism, and more for women’s rights, development, and opportunities. By bringing a plethora of speakers to share their experiences, they provided a platform for students to learn, reflect, document, and act on.

For Kelly’s initial DWS course, two spiral notebooks of the required articles were placed on reserve at the library. The downside of this approach was that the students had to read the materials in the library for a limited amount of time. In ensuing DWS courses, students conducted research or created films. Students also reviewed books by and/or about Deaf women and made in-class presentations.

One of the shining examples of student-driven research is Kristina Gauna’s written biography on Agatha Tiegel Hanson that was submitted to the National Women’s History Alliance (NWHHA) to be considered for its 2014 Honor Roll (Figures 4 and 5).<sup>30</sup> Also the professor at that time, Dr. Karen Christie, from NTID/RIT submitted a nomination to NWHHA for Agatha to be inducted into their Honor Roll. The consideration of both the paper and nomination was accepted and a gala celebrating all the inductees was held at the Willard Hotel with the three pioneers in attendance along with students and President Alan Hurwitz (Figure 6).

28 See <http://www.dwu.org> for Deaf Women United website.

29 A flyer announcing the theme for the Fall of 1996 in conjunction with the DWS course at CSUN that included a plan of seminars and an all-day conference. The back of a flyer outlining the plan for the Fall of 1996, in conjunction with the DWS course at CSUN that was incorporated into the theme.

30 See Agatha Tiegel Hanson as one of the 2014 Honorees for National Women’s History Alliance at <https://nationalwomenshistory-alliance.org/past-womens-history-months/2014-honorees/>



Figure 4: Kristine Gauna and the photo of the well-known Deaf feminist, Agatha Tiegel Hanson.  
Photo courtesy of Arlene B. Kelly



Figure 5: Platter given to Gallaudet University.  
Photo courtesy of Arlene B. Kelly



Figure 6: Three pioneers with students and President Alan Hurwitz.  
Front Row: Lilah Katcher; Arlene B. Kelly  
Second Row: Samantha Siedschlag, Vicki Hurwitz, Miranda Medugno, Kristine Gauna  
Back Row: Jerri Aubry; President Alan Hurwitz, Genie Gertz  
Photo credit: Matthew Vita

By virtue of being in the nation's capital, Kelly's students visited the Belmont-Paul Women's Equality National Monument<sup>31</sup> where suffragist Alice Paul and colleagues lived and worked to fight diligently to win the 1920 suffrage victory.

From 2009 to 2015, Kelly, with her DWS students, had the opportunity to document the lived college experience of 80 Gallaudet alumna from 1947 to 1997 by hosting panels during Homecoming weekends. In coordination with the Alumni Relations Office, the anticipated reunion attendees were paired off with the students who then had email correspondence to learn about them. Finally at the pre-panel gathering, the students met the alumna in person during a reception. With a student emceeing, the panels were videotaped. As a result, students created "Vooks," a combination of booklets and videos to be given to each panel participant as well as to the Alumni Relations Office, the students themselves and other supporting entities (Figures 7 and 8). Bilingual in ASL and written English, these Vooks are available at Gallaudet's Merrill Learning Center.

An opportunity to curate a Deaf Herstory exhibition at Gallaudet with a DWS alumna and DWS interns arose. It was also fortuitous that the three pioneers were on campus simultaneously and were able to support this endeavor that had a grand opening in September 2015 (see figures 9-11 for the photos of this event). This exhibit provided a historical narrative of American Deaf women, encouraging the sharing of personal accounts of educational experiences, movements and overcoming struggles (Ramiser, 2016). This is another piece of evidence that museums in general are lacking information about Deaf women.<sup>32</sup>



Figure 7: Vooks from 2009 to 2012  
Photo courtesy of Arlene B. Kelly

31 See <https://www.nps.gov/bepa/index.htm> for Belmont-Paul Women's Equality Monument website.

32 For more information about this exhibition, please refer to Peruzzi in this issue.

Also, see <https://gallaudet.edu/museum/exhibits/deaf-herstory-exhibit/deaf-herstory-exhibit-team/>  
<https://gallaudet.edu/museum/exhibits/exhibit-grand-opening-making-herstory/>





Figure 8: Vooks from 2013 to 2015  
Photo courtesy of Arlene B. Kelly



Figure 9: The Pioneers at the Deaf Herstory Exhibition  
Photo courtesy of Arlene B. Kelly



Figure 10: A packed house!  
Photo courtesy of Arlene B. Kelly



Figure 11: Interns Meagan Sietsema, '16 & G-'22 and Jennifer Mosiman, '15 & G-'18  
cut the ceremonial ribbon.  
Photo courtesy of Arlene B. Kelly

## Current State and Going Forward

At the time of writing this article three decades after DWS's inception, there is still a smattering of resources related to the experiences of Deaf women. Literature is scarce in comparison to the plethora in the Black Studies and Women's Studies. Such paucity is evidenced by the partial resources list in the Appendices as developed in 1993, 1996 and 1997, respectively.

The field of DWS is still trying to create theoretical frameworks related to Deaf women in alignment with Lerner's four stages and the current feminism wave. Mining for information continues to be challenging. The field remains in the first two stages (i.e., compensatory history and contribution history) as posited by Lerner and still experiences a dearth of resources, which hinders the ability to move forward into the third and fourth stages (i.e., understanding history and challenging and redefining history). The DWS curriculum needs to be strengthened even further with the continued expansion of corpus focusing on Deaf herstory. In general, herstory has excluded a lot who have made significant contributions to society, like Deaf women. If they are recorded and shared will the students be able to learn from their experiences, trials, and triumphs, and have these stories be part of corpus and continued analysis.

Great strides have been made. More texts and historical exhibitions, both physically and virtually, are emerging. Decolonizing Deaf women's experiences evoke appreciation, respect and pride. More strides are being made and will continue to do so. With the new minor in Black Deaf Studies at Gallaudet, the possibility of starting a Black Deaf Women's Studies is in the near future.

The importance of DWS cannot be overstated enough as the work continues in promoting further mining and publication of the corpus work. This in turn will allow for the content to be examined through intersectional and multiple lenses within the field of Deaf Studies. Such degrees of all-encompassing thorough study with the perspective and understanding of feminism can only occur by integrating the crucial element of DWS. Deaf women's herstory may and must be examined from numerous angles, and for this to happen, academia will need to support the research and scholarship involved.

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Appendix D: *Communicating, Understanding, Building: Reaching Out* conference's flyer (front).  
Photo courtesy of Genie Gertz

<b>SEPTEMBER 26</b>	<p><b>"Deaf Women, Deaf Men and Deaf Society: How Much Do We Know About Deaf Women?"</b></p> <p><b>Marilyn Smith</b></p> <p>September 26, 1996 4:30 p.m. - 6:30 p.m.</p> <p>California State University, Northridge Jeanne M. Chisholm Hall Multi-Purpose Room</p> <p><i>Admission:</i> No charge</p> <p><i>Sponsored by:</i> The Office of Graduate Studies Research and International Programs Distinguished Visiting Speakers Program</p>	<b>NOVEMBER 16</b>	<p><b>"Communicating, Understanding, Building: Reaching Out"</b></p> <p>Deaf Women of Los Angeles Conference</p> <p>November 16, 1996 9:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.</p> <p>California State University, Northridge University Student Union Grand Salon</p> <p>Admission: \$15.00 pre-registration \$20.00 at door for all</p> <p><b>"Life, Love, and Laughter...Deaf Way"</b> by Vikee Waltrip and Friends</p> <p>ENTERTAINMENT - <i>Open to All</i> CSUN Campus Theatre 8:00 p.m. - 10:00 p.m.</p> <p><i>Admission:</i> No charge</p> <p><i>Sponsored by:</i> City of Los Angeles Cultural Affairs Department</p>
<b>OCTOBER 19</b>	<p><b>"A Good Look at Deaf Feminism"</b></p> <p><b>Sandra Ammons</b></p> <p>October 19, 1996 10:00 a.m. - 1:00 p.m.</p> <p>California State University, Northridge Business Education Lecture Hall (BE #101)</p> <p><i>Admission:</i> \$5.00 pre-registration for students \$7.00 pre-registration for non-students \$10.00 at door for all</p>	<b>DECEMBER 12</b>	<p><b>"Deaf Women Create a Collective Voice For the Next Millennium"</b></p> <p>Roundtable Discussion</p> <p>December 12, 1996 5:30 p.m. - 7:30 p.m.</p> <p>California State University, Northridge Jeanne M. Chisholm Hall Multi-purpose Room</p> <p>Admission: No charge</p>

**For more information please contact the Deaf Studies Department at  
California State University, Northridge  
818-677-4973 TTY or 818-677-5116 Voice**

*Sponsored by:*  
California State University, Northridge  
◆ Deaf Studies Department ◆ National Center on Deafness ◆ Women's Studies Department ◆ DawnSignPress ◆  
◆ Greater Los Angeles Deaf Women United ◆

Appendix E: *Communicating, Understanding, Building: Reaching Out* conference's flyer (back).  
Photo courtesy of Genie Gertz