Response and Q&A

Mark Bookman: One of the most important concepts out of your talk today is this idea of "assistive erasure." I think it's such an important concept about how we see deaf or disabled experiences being removed from the narrative, of how different types of technologies, different types of corporations, develop over time. It seems, to me, that the way that corporate practices shift and the way that technologies develop, itself, not only changes, but the narrative will be retold at different points in history, depending on what the perceived relationship between technology, business development, and disability or deafness was at any particular moment.

My question is what's going on today to make it so that these companies do not narrate their stories around deafness or assistive technology? What is the connection between the contemporary moment and the historical work that you're doing? If I can just ask you to speak a little bit about that. What do you see as the reason why the assistive erasure is occurring in corporate settings right now?

Frank Mondelli: Thank you, Mark. I think that's a really interesting and very relevant point. I want to turn towards the 1960s, when there was a fever outbreak in Okinawa, for example. You end up with a lot of deaf children by the late 1960s and 70s. Around that time, a lot of corporations, like Sony, which had already been moving away from hearing aid stuff, they briefly flashed back in, to participate in charity drives and things like that.

Clearly there's was, and is, a PR thing going on, here. But, you know, I think, to go back to your general question, well, one thing, of course, is that as you very much

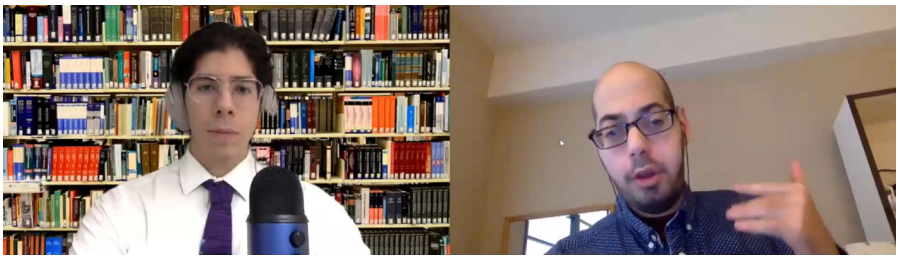

Figure 4: Comments from Bookman to Mondelli (Screenshot from webinar; 11 December 2020)

know, from your research, in many other disability studies, what researchers would be familiar with is that there is a non-negligible amount of shame that goes into the idea of disability impairment. This seems especially so in cases like Sony or TTK, as they were called back then, which were really explicitly ambitious—from the get-go—in terms of trying to take advantage of the kind of postwar confusion and postwar environment to create the largest corporate monopoly they possibly could. Hearing aids and the deaf community only seem to have amounted to nothing more than a cynical steppingstone in that idea of progress. If you were to ask Sony, "Were you involved in hearing aid stuff?", it's not like they would deny it. What I'm arguing for is not a conspiracy, where history has alternative facts, or anything like that, but, rather, that, if they don't have to highlight it, why would they, right? Like there's no real public pressure to do so. As long as public knowledge of this kind of thing is fairly obscure, wouldn't they rather talk about, say, the PlayStation, or maybe, "Hey, we're making PlayStation more accessible for gamers," right?

I think there's the PR element and the simple market element. In addition, there's institutional memory issues going on, as well. I mean, especially, nowadays, very few people working at Sony , if anybody, would really have been alive during this founding time. And so, you're not going to run into this kind of thing, unless, say, you're looking for it.

Mark Bookman: There's two points that I want to pick up on. You hit on some of the key elements—institutional memory and contemporary marketing—I think these are the two significant ones for me. I agree with you. I think there's definitely institutional memory problems. We see sources just not being available, in terms of disability, because, at the time, these sources were generated in the postwar period, more broadly. So, disability tended not to be a point of major policy or corporate focus, even though we do see technologies being produced for disabled or deaf audiences, to some extent.

Taking aside the moment of what records exist, I'm interested in your characterization. At the moment, you think there's not a lot of pressure. I would say

that, with the Olympics, with the aging population problem, with the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2014, which, by the way, Japan is up for its five-year assessment this coming spring (2022), there's a lot of pressure for companies to showcase accessibility and showcase their connection to disabled or deaf communities.

We've actually seen—in my work in disability studies, anyway—a lot of companies trying to pull out these hidden histories to showcase them at this moment, to say, you know, "Look how accessible we are. Come buy our products." I'm just wondering, in your contemporary work, if you've seen companies trying to recover this history, or if it's still something that you think, on the whole, is being ignored.

Frank Mondelli: I think you're absolutely on point. We've seen so many kinds of conventions on assistive technology. There are a number of them. I guess, what I meant to say was that, there was a lack of pressure, or something like that. I think, specifically, in regard to corporate history, it disappears. In many ways, I think, why would you talk about older technology when you can, instead, focus on the newer, shinier stuff? Whether we're talking about caregiving robots, which of course is its own very interesting category to talk about. Or, like I mentioned earlier, Sony is very much involved in PR regarding accessibility for their entertainment devices.

One thing, at least, I haven't come across, which would be really interesting to check it out, is if you go back to even just a few years ago, Sony had a major anniversary and a large exhibit in central Tokyo, where you could look at old Sony devices. There was a picture I showed in this presentation, which was of the small green radios and that's the 1955 transistor radio that, in most narratives, is what really made Sony famous. What really put them on the map, so to speak. So, at this exhibition, there was a very detailed history of the Walkman. However, you did not find various iterations of transistor hearing aids, even from just a few years ago.

Now, maybe, the next major anniversary might be different. Maybe, they'll bring some of that stuff out, too. But it will be interesting to see what things look like, going forward, especially here, during COVID, and what's might happen to the proliferation of assistive technology. I'll also look out for relations to hearing aid

firms, like Rion, which are still going very strong, today. A lot of these companies still have samples of their older products. However, a lot of times, they're don't work, they have incomplete records, or, especially, for say, corporate internal strategic history, like the PR tour I talked about earlier, if you go and ask them, "Hey, can I see the records you have?" A lot of times, the answer you're going to get is, "We don't have them," or "We don't know where they are."

I agree with your point. Increasingly, there is momentous domestic and international pressure to emphasize accessibility. But I think the two most interesting questions are, "As a result of that discussion, what gets brought out?" and "In which direction do they intend to go?"

Mark Bookman: I think our questions are starting to populate. I don't want to take up too much time. I'm going to ask one more question if I may. You talk a lot about the future. I'm very much interested in the future of accessibility. I'm curious, do you see this work as an appeal to some of these corporations to try and recover history?

Do you see it as a way of informing deaf studies, disability studies, science and technology studies, in general, about the type of histories we ought to look out for? You kind of touched on a little bit of this in your final slide. But I hope you could flesh out, a little bit, the different types of contributions you're putting forward, so we can work towards a future that you're imagining as the sort of ideal path.

Frank Mondelli: I'll address the various different audiences you just brought up. When it comes to corporate employees, in my work in Japan, I've spoken with a number of people from various corporations. Oftentimes, people are very surprised when I tell them the kinds of things I've uncovered, either about their own corporations or about their field in general. If anything, I would say there is an intellectual curiosity for this kind of thing.

How did that translate into public-facing work, like new exhibitions on creating histories of assistive technologies? I'm not sure, but I think, why not. That would be great, especially, if you can craft books, which they often do for these kinds of corporate exhibitions. They usually publish books with nice pictures and

narratives of each technology on display. Absolutely, it would definitely appeal to uncover that kind of thing. There can only really be good coming from more public information becoming available. But, of course, I know you and other people, like myself, who consider ourselves activists and advocates for access to this information and then, well, we've got to do something with that. As much as we can, I think this hits on another part of your question, which relate to historical contingencies, or what we can learn from examining this history.

In terms of, for this talk, first and foremost, what I described as the "regime of rhythm," hasn't gone away. It's more like it's transmuted into new ideals of AI and automatic sound recognition. Today, if you go to deaf schools, you'll find rhythm exercises and rhythm bands and, nowadays, sign language groups and performances. However, that's a whole separate question, as to who makes those songs and what sort of audience sign language songs are really made for in Japan, and elsewhere. I've spoken about the corporate appeal and, I think, in terms of say, the media, media studies, I think we're getting a lot of great researchers, in the West and in Japan—Jonathan Sterne, Mara Mills, Elizabeth Ellcessor—doing tons of really interesting media studies research, arguing for the fact that we need to pay attention to disability, disability experience, and disability history.

If you go and you look in classic media studies texts, like those written by Marshall McLuhan, and, you know, Heidegger, if you want to go back that far, you're going to find medical words on, you know, crippled bodies and all kinds of stuff.

Without getting too deep into it, I think, if anything, this project would argue for paying deeper and closer attention to different bodily experiences, in terms of

Figure 5: Mondelli and Dorman (Screenshot from webinar; 11 December 2020)

enriching our understanding of mediation in today's world.

Mark Bookman: Thank you so much for that. The historian and activist in me obviously has a lot of resonances, but it looks like we have a ton of other questions. Ben, if I can turn back to you for guiding the Q&A.

Benjamin Dorman: Our first question is from Michelle Henault Morrone: "Fascinating talk, thank you. It seems that much of the impetus to address deafness has come from the private business sector; can you comment on what historically public commitment has occurred for schools, in particular? And did they, or do they presently, collaborate with companies to supply students with such technology, etc.? How are issues of equity addressed?"

Frank Mondelli: In this talk, I emphasized the "private" business aspect, the most, in terms of the narrative. But one thing that really pops out, when you dive into the archive, is that these really are multilateral coalitions. This is, in a lot of cases, that businesses were driving discussions and that they know they need to engageme with educators and public servants, as well.

Obviously, a primary motivator of the hearing aid manufacturer might be, "Well, we need to survive. We have to sell a product. We have to stay afloat." That's going to differ from a deaf schoolteacher in Ishikawa Prefecture, who doesn't have any personal or group hearing aids and needs to appeal to society for help. They'll tell you, however, that the local government is understaffed and underfunded, and that they're not responding. This ties into what Ben was saying earlier, in terms of why we're interested in the Helen Keller Committee. You often turn towards NGO's and other kinds of charitable organizations. Those organizations are interested in advocating for a particular public agenda, driving either policy-making discussions or just social discussions as well.

What I'm trying to emphasize is that you have so many different players with different motivations, but, nonetheless, they all kind of spearhead into, "We need to get a giant group of hearing aids into the ears of deaf children." To comment, on the rest of your question, do they presently collaborate with companies to supply students with such technology? Absolutely, that continues. But group

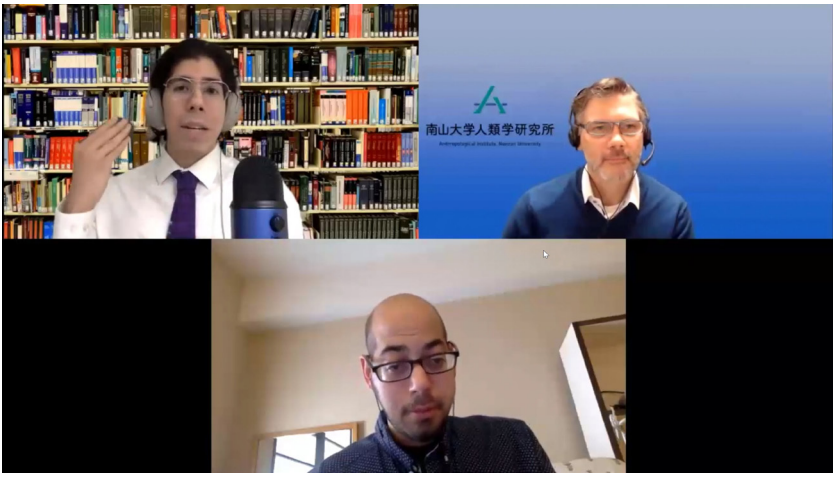

Figure 6: (from the left) Mondelli, Dorman, and Bookman
(Screenshot from webinar ; 11 December 2020)

hearing aids are no longer going to be called that, anymore. They are generally called "loop systems "or similar terminology. They're no longer giant boxes. They're small devices. Sometimes an antenna goes around a room. They're similar to wireless transmissions of FM units in the West or the United States and Europe. But, absolutely, those partnerships continue. In terms of how issues of equity are addressed, certainly, in this time period, that was not really a part of the discussion. The discussion really was about, say, on Rion's part, at least, they only had enough material to make so many group hearing aids and they needed to sell them all, "Who will take them? We have to give them to whoever wants them." Equity's not really part of the discussion. In terms of, nowadays, a lot of talk on how to make things "barrier-free" is the commonly used terminology in Japan. What does that translate to in practice is a separate discussion.

Benjamin Dorman: Our second question is from Will Gardner, who asks, "Do you see a connection between the 'Listening to Sounds' type of event that you're discussing and the interest in capturing and appreciating ambient sounds in Japanese sound culture, more broadly?"

Frank Mondelli: That's a really interesting question. One thing I was really interested in, when, on the ground in Japan, was that I really wanted to find, for

lack of a better word, a "track list" of exactly what was played at these concerts. Unfortunately, I never was able to procure one. But you do find some descriptions of what was played. One thing that you find in the early to mid-1950s is that there was lot of emphasis on folk music (*minyō*), however, as time progressed, the term, *kurashikku-poppus* (classical pop), appeared, referring to a kind popular classical music.

These events were really about music—as traditional conceptualizations—being used in this social way. In terms of listening to ambient noise, certainly, for hearing aid manufacturers, they—in the beginning, they actually didn't care what noise was being amplified, it was more of a question of, "Does the thing conduct electricity better?" and "Does it get the sounds as loud as possible?" Then, their ideas of hearing aids got a little more sophisticated toward the end of the 1950s, where they began to only boost sounds in the range of the human voice. Oftentimes, what counted as the human voice was the voice of the researchers, themselves, which is a separate, but, nonetheless, very interesting discussion. I can't say for sure, but I would imagine that it was not about ambient sound, in-and-of-itself. Instead, it was more about an imagined idea of "Here's sound!" and "Here's what it can do for your deaf child!" or "Here's what it can do for your deaf ears!" It seems that it was more about getting sound in (to impaired ears) and then, a little later, get some music in. However, there was never much intention for hearing aids to have the dual purpose of "hearing" and "listening to music," as they did not actually help one listen to music, all that well. I hope that addresses the question.

Benjamin Dorman: We have another question from Steven Fedorowicz: "It seems the development of hearing aids led to business growth and making money; would you say that the business of selling hearing aids to deaf schools reinforced and promoted oral education, at the expense of sign language use, and time for teaching academic skills/knowledge in the classroom?" And, in parentheses, he has written, "So much time is spent on teaching speech, reading, and pronunciation that deaf children fall behind academically compared to hearing children."

Frank Mondelli: Would I say that the business of selling hearing aids reinforced and promoted oral education at the expense of sign language? 100%. Without question. It was an explicitly stated goal. If you go back and read some public and private correspondence, as they aged, some of these students recollect that JSL, Japanese Sign Language, use was discouraged, at best, and kind of metaphorically criminalized, at worst. But one thing that is important not to forget is that just because, say, educators, oralist educators, oralism, this kind of pedagogy, that emphasizes spoken language, at the expense, or at the marginalization of signed languages, one thing that we shouldn't forget is that, even though these oralist educators were trying very hard to suppress sign language, people are going to use sign language. They used sign language when teachers weren't (or aren't) looking. They used it in more private situation. But that is also, not to say, that it wasn't very hard—it was very difficult for a lot of these people. You've done work—that's what you do, you work with deaf communities and sign language.

But for other people listening, it might be great to check out Karen Nakamura's book, *Deaf in Japan* (2006). That'll give you a lot of great background into various generations of JSL users and some of the more social and political background, up until the 1870s and 2000s, of what was going on with JSL and its place in Japanese society and Japanese deaf communities.

Benjamin Dorman: Mark, have you got any further points you'd like to address?

Mark Bookman: I've got a couple questions in mind. So, one of them is about the periodization of your project and the importance of historical contingency and geopolitical circumstance. Your project starts in the postwar, but you mention, early on, or at some point, in your talk, that there were hearing aids before the start of your project, right? I'm wondering why is this particular periodization important? Why do we have to focus on the postwar moment, in your mind, as the start of this dialogue?

Frank Mondelli: When I arrived in Japan, for my dissertation and research, I had this idea that I'm would start at the Meiji Restoration, from the 1860s onward. If anything, because Meiji just was a kind of nice period to start and maybe I'll adjust

it as I go along. And, absolutely, there are, obviously, hearing aids in Japan. You can go far back in history, if you want, to trace the "Beginning" of that, if you can find it.

One thing that informed my decision to start in the 1940s was that, up until then, it's kind of a different ballgame, in terms of how hearing aids proliferated in Japan. So, up until the 1940s, with a few rare exceptions, it was, by far, but, by and large, a lot of importation of hearing aids from European nations and from the United States. That's very interesting, but it does not facilitate the start of these larger coalitions, these socio-technical, multilateral coalitions that I brought up in this talk. It was not going to encourage the couple of domestic hearing aid manufacturers, which were just so small and could hardly afford to sell hearing aids outside their own cities. There was no postwar kind of political environment that you would have worked on, Mark, which would have facilitated, or encouraged, manufacturers to expand their reach, in the first place.

The 1940s is a good time to start talking about various actors that coalesced around the same thing. It is really interesting, because you can talk about the same thing in 2020, the historical circumstances are, of course, different, but there are a lot of older patterns permutating in different forms.

I do think there is a separate project, out there, for older hearing aid history and one thing that might be an interesting kind of sequel to this project, might be the 1930s, where you're looking more closely at militaristic research, because you do get a couple of very interesting, if short lived, domestic hearing aid products, from that time like, the Hoshinofone, which was a kind of artificial ear for fighter pilots. Then the inventor realized, "I can actually turn this into a bone conduction hearing aid!" I think that's a very interesting project, but even then, you're not going to get the kind of larger groups, which coalesced around particular material and ideological forms similar to this periodization, which continues to the present day.

Mark Bookman: It's really the transition to an international, from a domestic market, which coalesced roughly around the same time. You mention the law for the welfare of physically disabled persons in your talk, *Shintai shōgaisha fukushi hō* (1949, Law for the Welfare of Physically Disabled Persons), which I've written

about, as you know. That law created the concept of disability (*shōgai*) in Japan, allowing for a lot of this discourse to grow. At least, that's my understanding. It's really interesting to see how that looks from that perspective. Really, really enlightening.

Benjamin Dorman: I have two questions. I was interested in, broadly, the role of Helen Keller, herself, in Japan, in the understandings of, not just deafness, but disability and the Helen Keller Committee.

And the other question was about contemporary media representations of deaf people. I don't know if you'd be able to slip this in, but I'm just generally interested in why you're looking at this work. What led you to this path?

Frank Mondelli: Truth be told, honestly, if you want to learn about Helen Keller in Japan, I highly recommend speaking with Mark, who has written more extensively on Helen Keller's two visits to Japan and the various coalitions that formed. Sorry, Mark, three, the various correlations that formed around the potential for her and what she could do for Japanese infrastructure.

In the case of my talk, what's really interesting is, if you read Japan's deaf newspapers and Japanese deaf publications, Helen Keller shows up quite a bit. Maybe that's not too surprising, but the extent of which she showed up in newspaper article after newspaper article, it's not necessarily about anything she was doing or had done, it's more about things like deaf people or interviews with deaf people saying, either, "I want to be like Helen Keller!" or "I'm practicing piano, so that the next time Helen Keller comes to Japan, I can play for her." So, she was a figure, that is, a force, to be reckoned with during this time. I think there's definitely another project in terms of Helen Keller, specifically about the deaf community, because, Mark, correct me if I'm wrong, you especially focus on Helen Keller with the blind community, correct?

Mark Bookman: She was invited to Japan each time by Iwahashi Takeo, who was a blind activist. If you want to know why she was connected to blind organizations, at least, more in name, than deaf organizations, you can check out my work.

Frank Mondelli: In terms of other question, about representation to deaf people, and what led me to this work. Boy, I wish we had another hour to talk about that, because there's a lot going on there. There was prior scholarship in English and, of course, in Japanese, as well, about representations of deaf people in Japanese pop culture and, especially, in television dramas. There was some older scholarship on that, which I'd be happy to send around. And, of course, the most recent work, I could think of dealing with, that, if only, in each factor, is Yoshiko Okuyama's new work, the title, "Reframing... reframing..."

Mark Bookman: "Reframing Disability in Manga."

Frank Mondelli: There is a very good chapter on deaf manga, which might be interesting to check out. By and large, in terms of broad observations, a lot of deaf protagonists are women. There's a certain femininity associated with deafness. A certain kind of helplessness associated with it. A lot of these are domestic dramas, where a deaf person, usually the woman, faces significant hardship and then a hearing man, ultimately, ends up, either learning sign language or engaging with her in some way. The most recent twist on this would be found in the very popular movie "A Silent Voice" (*Koe no katachi*), which started off as a manga. It's more or less the same formula to what I just described. I think there's still a lot you can write about that. I'm actually writing a dissertation chapter on the Samuragochi Mamoru case, which, for those of you here, if you're unfamiliar with it, deals with a composer who was deaf, or dubbed, by some outlets like NHK, to be "Japan's Beethoven." However, it turns out that he had a ghost writer and that he's not fully deaf.

I'm very interested in representations of that scandal, both before and after, so, stay tuned for my next work on that. In terms of what brought me to this—personal disclosure: I'm hearing impaired myself, I'm deaf in my right ear and hearing impaired in my left—I'm not wearing my hearing aids, right now, because I have my headphones on. But, you know, I've spent a lot of my life thinking, well, why were these hearing aids made like this? Who informed these decisions? I think there's a lot of work, full scholarly and public, that can be done. Japan,

especially, as I alluded to a couple times in this talk, is certainly a "major player." Let's put it like that, in terms of sound cultures around the world. When I was in the archives and I discovered, actually, there's a lot of connections between later sound cultures of, I don't know, bands like The Doors, or something like that and these hearing aid coalitions, I think that's a story that's really interesting and that really needs to be told.

Benjamin Dorman: I really want to thank Frank for your fascinating talk. Very stimulating. It would be great if we could go on for hours. Obviously there's a lot of things we could talk about. But this has really been wonderful. And Mark, thank you so much for all of your work, for getting this project off the ground.

Sources

Podcast episodes

1. Interview with Mark Bookman: Introduction to the new series "Disability and Japan in the Digital Age" (https://asianethnology.org/page/podcastbookmanseries)
2. Interview with Frank Mondelli: Hearing Aids, Assistive Technologies, and Accessibility in Japan (https://asianethnology.org/page/podcastmondelli)
3. Interview with Yoshiko Okuyama: Reframing Disability in Manga (https: //asianethnology.org/page/podcastokuyama)
4. Interview with Steven Fedorowicz: Deaf Communities in Japan (https: //asianethnology.org/page/podcastfedorowicz)

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