TITLE: The Deaf Cyborg: Analyzing Technoscience, Gender, and Ability

AUTHOR: Callahan E. Roan

FACULTY SPONSOR: Dr. Anthony Hatch, Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology

Introduction: In my presentation, I analyze new patterns of sexism and ableism in the deaf community that have emerged with the biotechnology called cochlear implantation. Cochlear implants are internal/external medical devices that stimulate the inner ear to aid hearing. I use feminist biologist and historian of science Donna Haraway’s cyborg theory to analyze the ways in which cochlear implantations are gendered and ableist technologies that reproduce patriarchy. Haraway’s cyborg theory argues that women have become metaphorical and literal cyborgs through the invasive technology of cochlear implantation. The figure of the cyborg provides a fitting metaphor through which to analyze the marginalization and exploitation of deaf women who receive cochlear implants, and how society dictates their cyborg identities.

Method: Cochlear activation videos feature young, attractive, white women who are oftentimes mothers. Deaf women have long been eroticized as codependent, subservient, and helpless creatures that at the same time are simultaneously considered subhuman and sexless. I will use the feminist method of discourse analysis to examine the representation of deaf women in approximately 15 implant activation videos in social media. Discourse analysis is an interpretive research method that aims to understand the meanings of images, texts, and language by situating them in their historical and political context.

Significance: The deaf community has notoriously rejected cochlear implantation, and instead embraces deafness as a difference instead of a disability, and supports the use of American Sign Language (ASL) versus spoken English. Cochlear implants are commonly viewed as a threat to their cultural legacy. Women in this culture are particularly vulnerable to sexism and ableism and are frequently exploited in popular culture. The debate over cochlear implantation is emotional and positions two irreconcilable cultures against one another: the hearing versus the deaf. The metaphor of the cyborg allows us to further explore the duality of technoscientific culture and the dissonance that exists between utilizing technological appurtenances and preserving the veneration of natural ability. This dissonance accompanies a subconscious appeal to activation videos in which viewers enjoy watching a person go from missing something to becoming “whole”. It reinforces the viewer’s normalcy and perpetuates the patriarchal suppression of differently-abled women.