

**BEING A WOMAN AND DEAF IN A HIGHER LEVEL COURSE: AUDISM AND  
GENDER IN DEBATE**

***SER MULHER E SURDA EM UM CURSO DE NÍVEL SUPERIOR: AUDISMO E  
GÊNERO EM DEBATE***

***SER MUJER Y SORDA EN UN CURSO DE NIVEL SUPERIOR: AUDISMO Y GÉNERO  
EN DEBATE***



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**How to reference this paper:**

LIMA, C. R. O. Being a woman and deaf in a higher level course: Audism and gender in debate. **Plurais - Revista Multidisciplinar**, Salvador, v. 8, n. 00, e023022, 2023. e-ISSN: 2177-5060. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.29378/plurais.v8i00.18680>



| **Submitted:** 23/09/2023  
| **Revisions required:** 27/10/2023  
| **Approved:** 28/11/2023  
| **Published:** 30/12/2023

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**ABSTRACT:** The marks of audism and gender violence, configuring themselves as forms of oppression against deaf women, are constituted in the present research, as the focus of analysis, leaning over the speech of a deaf academic from an undergraduate course at a Federal Public University to collect in its signage the representations of such violence in its formation of subjectivity. The analyses are approached through Foucauldian assumptions. It was found that the intersection between gender violence and audism is one of the possibilities for identity formation of the deaf academic. Her subjectivity is submerged in actions that place hearing as a reference for success, as a standard behavior and desire of an organized society; however, when saying about himself: “what I use most is Libras,” there are practices of deaf resistance in the midst of all these coercive apparatus.

**KEYWORDS:** Intersectionality. Gender. Audism. Deafness. College education.

**RESUMO:** *As manifestações de violência auditiva e de gênero, que se configuram como formas de opressão contra mulheres surdas, são o foco de análise na presente pesquisa. O estudo investiga o discurso de uma acadêmica surda matriculada em um curso de graduação em uma Universidade Pública Federal, visando coletar, por meio de sua comunicação gestual, as representações dessas violências em sua construção de subjetividade. As análises foram abordadas por intermédio dos pressupostos foucaultianos. Constatou-se que a intersecção entre violências de gênero e audismo são algumas das possibilidades de formação de identidade da acadêmica surda. Sua subjetividade está submersa em ações que colocam a audição como referencial de sucesso, comportamento padrão e desejo de uma sociedade oralizada, entretanto, ao dizer sobre si: “o que eu mais uso é a Libras”, encontramos práticas de resistência surda em meio a este aparato coercitivo.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *Interseccionalidade. Gênero. Audismo. Surdez. Educação Superior.*

**RESUMEN:** *Las huellas de la violencia auditista y de género, configurándose como formas de opresión contra las mujeres sordas, constituyen la presente investigación como foco de análisis, centrándose en el discurso de una académica sorda de un curso de pregrado en una Universidad Pública Federal para recoger en su señalización las representaciones de dicha violencia en su formación de subjetividad. Los análisis se abordan a través de supuestos foucaultianos. Se encontró que la intersección entre violencia de género y audismo son algunas de las posibilidades de formación de identidad de académicos sordos. Su subjetividad queda sumergida en acciones que sitúan la audición como referente de éxito, como conducta estándar y deseo de una sociedad oralizada. Sin embargo, al decir de sí mismo: “lo que más uso es Libras”, se encuentran prácticas de resistencia sorda en medio de este aparato coercitivo.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** *Interseccionalidad. Género. Audismo. Sordera. Educación universitaria.*

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## Introduction

*I am two beings.  
The first is the result of the love between João and Alice.  
The second is a creature of letters [...].  
The first is here with nails, clothes, hats, and vanities.  
The second is here in letters, syllables, phrases, and vanities.*

*Manoel de Barros*

Manoel de Barros' writing possesses a delirium as he deals with the smallness of life and with the ability to give sublime meanings to real and imaginary beings that our minds could never possibly reach. Manoel fictionalizes reality and constructs subjects. Manoel is two beings. He is many and various others. His delirium supports the construction of the identities of social subjects of our time. Therefore, because of his ramblings, I chose Manoel to accompany me in the possibilities of writing that follow, as a literary intercessor.

In this way, we can think that the construction of identities occurs in relation. The subject is constructed from their social relations, and their possibilities for identification are always multifaceted. In these fragments of our time, multiple identities are intertwined and produced by relations of knowledge and power. Therefore, understanding the subject requires recognizing that they do not exist in a finished form.

Guacira Lopes Louro (2019, p. 13, our translation) notes that: “[...] we are subjects of transitory and contingent identities.” This requires thinking that all social identities possess a “[...] fragmented, unstable, historical, and plural character” where, at times, the subject is constituted, continually altered by the culture of the place they inhabit and also influencing those around them.

Based on this principle of multifaceted construction, the present writing aims to analyze, within the discourse of a deaf academic from an undergraduate course at a Federal Public University, the marks of audist and gender violence throughout her life and academic training. Thus, in the following section, *Delimitations of the research: tin contours*, I present the methodological choices and justifications for conducting the analysis and the established approach for composing the material collected during the interview.

Next, in the section *Marks of oppression: audism practices as violence against deaf individuals*, I elaborate on the term invention, understanding it as a result of the human need to

communicate, and provide a syntactic analysis of the notion and emergence of the concept of audism.

In the section Clarice: characterization and contextualization, I introduce the academic collaborator with the research, her life journey, academic processes, her relationship with Brazilian Sign Language, and her family. Clarice is a fictitious name used to preserve the academic's identity. Subsequently, in the section *Possible problematizations concerning audist and gender violence*, I present selected excerpts from the academic's discourse to explore the intersection of audism and gender, understanding them as two forms of subordination, domination, and marginalization of certain identities.

Finally, in the concluding remarks, I understand that I am dealing with the experiences and subjectivities of a deaf academic, therefore, a singular experience and “[...] subjectivities [that] are constructed from a given deafness, in a given person, with specific conditions of possibilities that situate and define them as body, family, individual, and territory” (Vieira-Machado; Mattos, 2019, p. 30, our translation), I highlight how these daily intersections between practices of audist and gender violence converge to elect the hearing standard of experience as a model of success, making resistance a form of manifestation amidst these coercive apparatuses of representativity.

### **Research Delimitations: Tin Contours**

*If you throw a tin can on the ground as trash.  
Beggars, cooks, or poets might pick it up.  
Therefore, I find tins more sufficient,  
For instance, than ideas.*

*Manoel de Barros*

Manoel's delusions suggest that using a tin can is more productive than ideas. His justifications and linguistic disarray form an arsenal of explanations: tins are concrete objects, so if you fill them with sand and drag them through the streets, for example, you have a truck; whereas ideas, being a product of the spirit and abstract, cannot be filled with sand. Thus, for Manoel, the tin is more sufficient: ideas have created atomic bombs, not sand trucks (Barros, 2006).

Manoel's tin can, its materiality, and utility given in his writing, allows us to frame some points for our discussion: what is the material? What is the tin can of our research? What idea cannot hold sand? Which subject do we expect to fill, or to be filled, to go out into the streets performing certain conditions of existence?

Given these possibilities and the small yet complex questions posed by Manoel, I aim to outline the choices of the investigation in this section. The tin can of the research that I believe can be filled with sand (read: objective) is to analyze the discourse of a deaf academic in an undergraduate program at a Federal Public University, identifying marks of audist and gender violence throughout her life and academic formation.

The presented excerpt is part of a larger research approved by the Research Ethics Committee (CEP) at the master's level. After approval, I contacted the institution to request information about the registered deaf academics on the campus. In response, I received an Excel table containing the necessary data and information for an initial approach.

Using the email contact provided by the institution, I invited the academic to collaborate with the research. Upon her acceptance, semi-structured interviews were conducted, divided into a script with two thematic blocks. The script consisted of open-ended questions, as noted by Manzini (2012), this approach ensures greater openness for possible reconfiguration and/or adaptation of the questions to the participants' level of language.

The aforementioned data collection occurred between 2020 and 2021, during the pandemic and social isolation period, when the academic received remote assistance from the institution's Libras interpreters. Therefore, the interviews followed the same processes, conducted via the Google Meet application. Prior to the interviews, the student completed the Informed Consent Form (TCLE) and subsequently shared her narratives.

The material was analyzed through the lens of Foucault's theoretical framework. The choice of Michel Foucault as the research's theoretical reference is justified by the potential to explore the micropower relations present in the interactions between deaf and hearing individuals in the Higher Education environment. The Foucauldian perspective is also pertinent as it allows examination of how the interviewed academic constructs subjectivities within a context of linguistic diversity and overcomes various adversities throughout her academic journey.

Thus, inspired by the tin can constructs proposed by Manoel, the following section addresses the dimension of audist practices and the importance of recognizing their forms of violence.

## **Marks of Oppression: Audist Practices as Violence Against Deaf Individuals**

*A man was filled with night.  
He felt like a social rag inside.  
As if, on the outside, he wore a torn and dirty coat.  
He tried to escape his anguish. That is:  
He wanted to throw the torn and dirty coat into the trash.  
He wanted to dawn.*

*Manoel de Barros*

The fragmented man of Guacira Lopes Louro begins to wish for dawn, much like the one described by Manoel de Barros. The marks and desires that shape them relate to the observable structures of our society, aligning with Manoel's ideas about where to place sand on the inside. Thus, it is about these attempts to guide oneself and others, to govern choices (which are not solely their own), that are intertwined in a complex web of social constructions that, at this moment, I wish to identify and delineate some inventions.

The term “invention” used in this research refers to the meaning attributed to it by Ludwig Wittgenstein (1979), where things are all invented from the moment we give them materiality through language. Wittgenstein considers that “[...] naming something is like attaching a label to a thing” (Wittgenstein, 1979, p. 14, our translation), thus, the need to communicate something still “unspeakable” is a product of communicational necessity.

In this way, we invent various knowledge about those considered “others.” The knowledge generated in these fields of understanding produces possibilities to exercise power, to guide subjects, to direct their actions and choices. Knowledge and power are inseparable in this social relationship, therefore, “[...] they produce reality; they produce fields of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that can be had about him originate in this production” (Foucault, 2014, p. 189, our translation).

It is within this productive and inventive field that the term “audism” arises. According to Humphries (1977), audism is “[...] the notion that one is superior based on the ability to hear or to behave as one who hears” (p. 12, our translation). The word was invented by Tom L. Humphries, a person who grew up in rural South Carolina, USA, and became deaf at the age of six. Even after becoming deaf, Humphries grew up in an entirely hearing environment, without contact with other deaf peers; his culture, values, and behaviors remained those of a hearing person, although he physically became deaf.

Humphries (1977) communicated orally, without the intervention of American Sign Language, and felt proud every time he passed as a hearing person in daily situations. He felt validated whenever his English and discursive abilities were successful, considering himself a "hearing-deaf" person, even thinking of himself as unique, labeling himself as "exceptional" and a "success." Beyond this pride, Humphries was active in looking down on those who used sign language and could not achieve the same prestigious position he occupied.

The production of such behavior can be understood through the lens of difference when Humphries highlights in his thesis the reasons that led him to adopt this stance and perform a hearing pride that did not truly belong to him. According to his observations:

Most of my life, I spent walking in public places pretending to be hearing, trying to hide my difference. It is a lonely existence because you cannot talk to anyone so that your difference is not exposed. [...] I thought this was what is called 'overcoming your disability.' Because I thought that hiding it was 'overcoming' it, [...] this seemed to be the thought of our Society. And Society reinforced all these ideas and attitudes of mine. Society demanded that I conform, or I would be completely isolated. Society demanded that I conform and would shame me if I did not. [...] Society was perfectly willing to banish me to that twilight zone of invisibility for its secondary members, like Blacks, women, Native Americans, and the blind. Society was willing to help me hide my difference if I wanted to go that route, teaching me to ignore and suppress my difference instead of recognizing and accepting it (Humphries, 1977, p. 8, our translation).

Humphries (1977) was in a state of darkness. He felt like a "social rag" inside, wearing a dirty and torn coat branded by the hegemony of hearing. Humphries tried to throw away this coat to see the dawn. To achieve this, he approached two social movements: those of women and Black Americans. He soon realized connections in the struggles of these groups, awakening the need to understand what force was oppressing him and still lacked materiality.

Humphries (1977) managed to discard the dirty and torn coat and gave up chasing the societal promise of his time that claimed if he worked hard enough, he could "overcome" his deafness. In this context, the term "audism" emerged. According to the author, the weight of this word needed to be for the deaf what racism signifies for Black people. The term "audism" comes from the Latin *audire*, meaning "to hear." From the creation of this term, Humphries derived the word "audist" to characterize someone who practices audism. Thus, the social phenomenon against which Humphries intended to fight was measured and named.

It is important to note that the marks of audism manifest as a social practice and are not inherently actions of hearing individuals. Humphries himself recognizes that he was a participant in audist actions: "I actively participated in belittling those who used sign language,

who did not speak fluent English, who did not speak, and could not pass as hearing" (Humphries, 1977, p. 7, our translation).

Now that the analytical concept of the term has been presented and we understand that its invention materializes a way of thinking about the knowledge and power relations intertwined between deaf and hearing individuals, and even among deaf individuals themselves, I will introduce the deaf academic and her educational pathways in the following section.

### **Clarice: characterization and contextualization**

*If we throw a stone into the wind  
It doesn't even look back. [...]  
It doesn't hurt at all. [...]  
Later, they taught me that wind has no organism.  
I was shocked.*

*Manoel de Barros*

Manoel and Clarice (a fictitious name given to the deaf academic to protect her identity) share similarities. Manoel reverses the logic of words and reorganizes the meanings of sentences. Clarice follows the same train of thought, but she deliriously signs the word. She turns hand movements into a visual dictionary for those skilled in poetry. The words written by Manoel and the ones signed by Clarice are cans filled with sand and stones to throw into the wind. I felt I studied too.

The interview with the academic included her initial presentation, questions related to her linguistic acquisition process (signed), her school history, enrollment in Higher Education Institution (HEI), and her presence during the pandemic period. Clarice entered the institution in 2018, at the age of 22 at the time. Her deafness was discovered as a baby, and her linguistic acquisition began in early childhood. She attended the former State Center for Assistance to the Audio-Communication Disabled (CEADA)<sup>2</sup>, where she studied until she joined the Municipal Education Network (REME).

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<sup>2</sup> According to Albres (2005, p. 5) CEADA was “created by Decree no. 3546, of April 17, 1986”. The 1st to 5th-year activities developed at this location, such as teaching Portuguese and mathematics, were carried out in Libras, providing an educational environment favorable to deaf children’s language acquisition with their peers. Such services have not occurred since December 2016, and students have begun to be enrolled directly in the Regular Education System in compliance with the Education Guidelines and Bases Law.



In her life journey, Clarice underwent speech therapy treatments, as she expressed: "*I underwent treatment to learn to speak, with headphones, sound perception tests, and I have used hearing aids,*" however, "*what I use the most is Libras, I use spoken Portuguese much less.*" Communication normalization tactics can be understood by assessing her family environment because Clarice is the only deaf person in a hearing family who did not learn sign language. According to her account, different tactics are used to communicate with her family: her mother knows some signs; with her father, lip reading is used, and with her brother, who learns the signs but forgets, a mixture of the two forms of communication is used interchangeably or combined.

Throughout her educational journey, Clarice always had Libras interpreters. Her mother advocated for the right to linguistic access and for the presence of these professionals in the classroom. With these forms of support, Clarice reached higher education. She entered the HEI through the National High School Exam (ENEM). Her speech materializes this joy: "*It has always been my dream. [...] Because it is my dream, my gift, I went and passed. I was very happy! I can't explain my emotion to you.*"

The impact of having a deaf academic generated concerns in the course in question, and this mark appeared in Clarice's signed speech: "*[...] the class [...] was shocked when they found out that the first deaf person was going to enter the course. Everyone panicked a lot ((imitating panic)) 'My God! My God!'*"

During the pandemic period, educational activities were conducted remotely, including the services provided by Brazilian Sign Language interpreters. For Clarice, her difficulties were exacerbated: "*Now with COVID-19, I feel like I'm going to die. There's a huge amount of text, and I end up not understanding anything. For example, in class, with the explanation, I can understand and write, but online, I feel like the class becomes a summary, it's very confusing.*"

In addition to these problems, others were narrated in her signing: "*I felt a lot of anger, a lot of hatred towards the internet. I had problems with my computer, problems with my phone. Everything bothered me, and I couldn't even open my email. It was very stressful. I even had a beginning of depression.*"

The technological issue also emerges as a determining factor for the student's persistence during this period. Access to quality materials is one of the challenges Clarice faces, functioning as a factor of exclusion regarding her continuation in the course at a time when technology becomes vital in the educational process.

In the next topic, I bring up possible problematizations that dimension the audist practices and the interlocutions with the gender issue that intersect with Clarice in the spheres where she participates most: educational and familial.

### **Possible problematizations regarding audist and gender-based violence**

*None of us, in fact, had the strength of a source.  
None was the beginning of anything.  
We painted our voices on stones.  
And what gave sanctity to our words was the sight of green!*

*Manoel de Barros*

I agree with Manoel's words when he suggests that "none was the beginning of anything." Before our birth, the materialities and possibilities of our existence were already determined: our social class, culture, language, doctrine, etc. In this sense, painting voices on stones (read as counter-conducting oneself) is an act of resistance. Clarice resists amidst a mix of daily violence that challenges her in various ways.

The first acknowledgment of such practices appears in her discourse when she describes her relationship with the translation and interpretation professionals at the institution: "[...] *my greatest difficulties were with interpreters [...]. Some of the interpreters also expressed their opinions about me: 'It's better for you to go to another course!' ((pause)) I'm speechless. What do you mean? [...] 'Because your course is very difficult, it's not something easy.'*"

The materiality of such discourse carries an audist mark. Considering that Clarice is not capable of graduating from her course leads to thinking of audism as an action "[...] in the form of people who continually judge the intelligence of the deaf and their success based on their ability in the language and culture of the hearing" (Humphries, 1997, p. 13, our translation), therefore, in this thought, without the dimension of the use of the Portuguese language, the deaf individual would be destined to a secondary place.

Clarice continues her discourse about these professionals: "*There was an interpreter who told me: 'It would be amazing, sensational, for you to go to the Letras-Libras course' ((pause)). I don't have the gift. It's been a year since I've been hurt by these kinds of comments that interpreters make to me.*"

The expectation that deaf individuals must exclusively graduate in Letras-Libras because it is an area that uses sign language as a field of knowledge corresponds to a second

audist practice. Considering the Letras-Libras course as "easier" finds traces of guiding deaf bodies, implying that every deaf person, by virtue of being deaf, would be destined for the Letras-Libras course.

It is important, at this moment, to note that, according to the Code of Ethical and Professional Conduct presented by the Brazilian Federation of Associations of Professional Translators and Interpreters and Guide Interpreters of Sign Language (Febrapils), it is forbidden for TILS: "to give advice or personal opinions, except when required and with the consent of the Requester or Beneficiary" (Febrapils, 2014, p. 5, our translation).

Another form of violence recorded in her speech appears in relation to her family:

And also, now, last month, I asked my father to stop doing something that was bothering me, and he asked me 'why?,' I said I was going to study some concepts to take a certain exam. And he replied, 'Well, but you're deaf, you're not capable of that. It would be much better if you got a Cochlear Implant to start hearing. It would be much better, and it would become much easier if you could hear.' I was shocked. This quadrupled my exhaustion. I almost cried, almost gave up the course. I didn't want to go to work anymore and didn't want to live anymore.

In this family excerpt, the audist practice appears as "[...] a lack of knowledge about the well-being of deaf people that leads people to believe that happiness is not possible except in auditory modalities" (Humphries, 1977, p. 16, our translation). The words of her father, who also presents a tactic of guiding to place Clarice within the norm of hearing, "it would be much better if you got a Cochlear Implant to start hearing," reveal how her subjectivity has been shaped, leading to her desires to give up the course, work, and life itself.

The way Clarice deals with such discourses puts her in constant conflict. Her responses to questions always mark this relational problem, sometimes with interpreters, sometimes with family members, and despite all the desires that pass through her mind, the academic resists and continues to pursue her dream: to graduate from her course.

A new form of oppression appeared in Clarice's signed speech:

The same thing happened with my brother. [...] Before the end of last year, when I passed the entrance exam and was all happy, my brother said, "Wow, are you going to do this course? Impossible, you're deaf!" I was very surprised. "Aren't you happy?" I asked. "Yes, I'm happy, but this course is too difficult for you. You'd be better suited for the Esthetics course [...]."

Considering that Clarice should align herself with the Esthetics course is a form of association with historically constructed themes, assigning defined and rigid professions to

women. We are then faced with a double form of oppression: gender, because Clarice is a woman, and audist, because she is also deaf.

Thus, the intersection of these oppressions places Clarice in a subset, "deaf woman," which faces a specific issue that does not affect those women placed within the norm of hearing. The problem is not of gender, but rather how deafness is socially understood within the spaces where the academic moves.

Intersectionality<sup>3</sup>, a tool that analyzes more than one form of oppression simultaneously, embraces the complexity of discriminatory actions and specific conditions of a group of people. This perspective is supported by Kurashige (2014), who emphasizes that class, gender, and sexuality, among others, cannot be considered in isolation, as the forms of oppression of one are intrinsically related to the others. In this specific case, the analysis encompasses gender and hearing issues, which, when intersected, operate as systems of domination and oppression, relegating their identities to a marginalized status and subordinating them to others considered complete.

Such body conduct "[...] demands from them the same set of standards, behaviors, and values that they demand from hearing people" (Humphries, 1977, p. 13, our translation), meaning that by establishing the norm of hearing as a standard, desirable, and beautiful, bodies that are outside of this possibility come to occupy a secondary place in the social imaginary, and their subjectivities may become molded in a self-deprecating manner.

According to Neiva Furlin (2013), the issues involving the formation of subjectivity in Foucault can be understood as equivalent to the term agency for Butler, where the particularities of the subject "[...] are constituted through acts of resistance to codes of conduct" (Furlin, 2013, p. 397, our translation).

Thinking along these lines, Clarice, since childhood, has been subjected to ways of fitting her into the code of conduct of the norm of hearing: subjected to speech rehabilitation practices, sound perception training, and orality tactics, in addition to the use of hearing aids. Such processes resonate in her narratives; therefore, by signaling such oppressions, there is an attempt to resist.

Thus, her idiosyncrasies, marked by institutional and familial audist actions, when intersected with the marks of gender violence, may represent a (re)encounter with her past, her

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<sup>3</sup> According to Piscitelli (2008, p. 267), intersectionalities are ways of capturing the consequences of the interaction between two or more forms of subordination: sexism, racism, and patriarchalism.

cultural and social relationships. Clarice's possibilities for identity formation intersect with these daily intersections of subordination and domination.

Therefore, in the following section, I attempt to outline a conclusion for an issue that requires much analysis and scrutiny to assess the dangers that such audist and gender practices can pose in shaping the subjectivities of deaf women.

### Final considerations

According to Foucauldian analyses, every discourse is a product of power relations. These relations determine how subjects narrate, judge, and conduct themselves in the face of the oppressions their bodies endure. The audist practices and gender violence detected during the research point to the lived materialities of a deaf woman who grew up being subjected to tactics aimed at restoring her hearing.

Even after undergoing the processes of her history, she asserts: "*what I use the most is Libras.*" Clarice does not hide how deeply she is immersed in actions that place hearing as a benchmark for success, standard behavior, and the desire of an oralized society; however, in describing herself, she reports: "*what I use the most is Libras.*"

In addition to audism, which represents just one of the forms of oppression faced by the academic, the presence of deaf individuals in the institution requires support in other areas. This includes, for example, the need for accommodation regarding the particularities of deaf identity, which go beyond the issue of hearing and encompass aspects such as gender, disability, and even aesthetic and technological standards.

I understand that the experience presented by the academic cannot be considered a standard rule for all other experiences. I am dealing with a way of looking at the intersectional phenomenon of audism and gender, practices that shape deaf subjectivities. The tensions presented are capable of unveiling the institutional and familial actions that reproduce behaviors that elect the hearing standard as a reference, fabricating identifications in deaf individuals and/or ways and alternatives to fit/resist in this relational (in)exclusion, seeking to alter the reality in which they find themselves.

Admitting to using Libras more than the Portuguese language as a means of communication is a cry of resistance to the normalization practices endured throughout her life. Accepting the signed linguistic identification and affirming it is to measure that the desire of her father, her brother, and institutional sign language interpreters cannot make her abandon

her dreams. Clarice is just one, among many other Clarices, spread across educational institutions inside and outside the Brazilian context, who insist on changing the world using butterflies.

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### *CRediT Author Statement*

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**Acknowledgements:** This work was carried out with the support of the Federal University of Mato Grosso do Sul - UFMS/MEC - Brazil.

**Funding:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of interest:** There are no conflicts of interest.

**Ethical approval:** The data excerpted from the Master's thesis and presented in this text was approved by the Ethics Committee under CAAE: 30714120.7.0000.0021.

**Data and material availability:** Not applicable.

**Author's contributions:** Sole authorship.

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**Processing and editing: Editora Ibero-Americana de Educação.**  
Proofreading, formatting, normalization and translation.

