

Monday, October 12, 2015, 8:12 pm ET

Commentary: The End of Colonialism at Gallaudet?

[Friday's announcement](#) of Bobbi Cordano as the upcoming 11th president of Gallaudet stirs the emotions and brings “hope” (to borrow a word that she used in [her presentation](#) as a finalist). Many of us are shaking our heads in wonderment at this pleasant turn of events and are wondering exactly how this happened. Is the Gallaudet University Board of Trustees truly acting independently, at long last, ten years after being dominated by I. King Jordan's machinations and usurpations? By all outward appearances, the Board of Trustees *is* truly acting independently, and has now apparently fully rejuvenated and redeemed itself (this, even with the presence of a couple of questionable holdover members from the Jordan-Kelly era).

Just around the time of the turn of the new millennium, [Paddy Ladd](#) brought the important concepts of “colonialism” and “post-colonialism” into discussions of Deaf education and sociological discussions of the Deaf experience—analyses which were insightfully presented in his book: *Understanding Deaf Culture: In Search of Deafhood*. While there is certainly much to *gain* from such discussions, talking about it and analyzing it is one thing, putting it into *practice* is another—hence Paddy's also important insight in bringing in the concept of *praxis* (a necessary corollary, the sensible consequences to be drawn from which are missing in other, related theories and constructs – if Deaf people are not allowed to comprise the fountainhead of pedagogical theory and practice by taking the helm of related academic departments (especially language and other types of culture-related, i.e., meta-cultural/reflexive, departments), then what kind of “praxis” is that?)

So the question then becomes, in light of this important framing: When did *post-colonialism* begin at Gallaudet? Surely, post-colonialism was nascent in some way as part of the beginning of the Jordan presidency, after the success of the Deaf President Now protest in 1988. Jordan's attendance at “roundtable” [discussions at the Ford Foundation](#) in the summer of 1997 seems to have been an important turning point, however, with Jordan making a turn in [the wrong direction](#). That coincided with the beginning of the Deafness Research Foundation's “[National Campaign for Hearing Health](#),” which was meant to [push for the use of cochlear implants](#) in a major way. Then in late 1999, Jordan made the unilateral decision to fire Roslyn Rosen from the provostship at Gallaudet (although he soon found out that she was protected by having tenure, so he could only demote her to a lesser deanship rather than fire her completely).

Then came Jordan's unilateral appointment of Jane Fernandes to the provostship shortly thereafter, in April 2000, along with the creation of the “Cochlear Implant Education Center” at Gallaudet and [the beginning of the Pseudoscience Era at Gallaudet](#)—a shameful chapter in our history.* Then there was the steep, five-year slide downward, toward Jordan's announcement of his retirement in September 2005

(possibly after being pushed out by power-brokers in Washington, due to [his mishandling of the Mesa situation](#)), and the descent into what could be called: "IKJ and PK's House of Horrors," that involved the IKJ/PK [duo](#) first assaulting protesters in a "plausible denial" fashion with fertilizer, then later in a blatant and extreme fashion, by having Physical Plant Department personnel and DPS officers throw pieces of plumbing pipes at protesters' tents and then scooping up the tents (without checking to see first if any protesters were inside the tents) with a front-end loader/bulldozer. Yet, somehow we survived all that, in no small measure due to the courageous actions of eight Board of Trustees members who voted to rescind the theretofore-intended 9th president's contract, and then start fresh with Dr. Davila who bravely accepted the invitation to step into the middle of that emergency situation, with no other person having the level of skills or experience to do so.

So here we stand, wondering if we should be waiting for "the other shoe to drop," or whether this is the real deal. It's easy to conjure up imaginary images of Gary O. prompting Ben to facilitate the ascendance of Heather to bring in the new prez, but if we were to entertain such fantasy, only briefly, we'd wonder: what would be the goal of such type of political prestidigitation? On the other hand, such informed speculation cannot be dismissed entirely, since Gary O., the prime mover of DPN, is the one person in Deaf history who resembles Amos Kendall more than anyone else, in the sense described by historian Donald B. Cole, who explained that Kendall, when he was involved in national politics, had "his finger in almost every pie." (Gary O.'s actions before, during and after DPN have, to-date, never been fully explained, and we await such explanation. Until then, we're entitled to speculate.)

So now Bobbi Cordano will effectively be the first woman president of Gallaudet! (among [other firsts](#)!) Elisabeth Zinser began her misbegotten term prematurely, rushing in from North Carolina to try to thwart our efforts in the middle of DPN week in March 1988. She actually never stepped foot on campus, and there appears to be only a single document(!) in her presidential "papers" ("presidential paper"? singular?) that is contemporaneous with her six-day "term," the written notes for the speech that she gave at the press conference where she announced her resignation. A university presidency which produces only *one* contemporaneous presidential paper cannot be called a presidency in any real sense.** That makes Bobbi Cordano the first woman president of Gallaudet, but she will be robbed of that distinction due to Jane Spilman's (and the other Board members') pathetic maneuverings. (Also, later, in 2006, Jane Fernandes was never actually president of Gallaudet and she never held that title. Her term was set to begin on January 2, 2007, but her contract was rescinded on October 29, 2006.)

So, while keeping a sense of "healthy skepticism" and maintaining watchful vigilance (as should always be the case), all that's left to be said now is: Let's go! Let's do this!

[*End commentary*]

*As contrasted with the research of Myklebust, for example, which was simply grounded in false premises (or: “mis-grounded” in false premises).

**It’s also possible that Zinser wrote out her resignation speech *after* her presidency ended. More research is needed to determine the precise timing. Her resignation was announced shortly after midnight on the evening of Thursday, March 10/Friday, March 11, 1988, so it’s possible that her presidency officially ended then and that she wrote out her speech (that was delivered at about 10:00 am the next morning) after that. In that case, there are *zero* contemporaneous items in the Gallaudet archives, written by her, during her six-day “presidency,” or better put: “quasi-presidency.” (We [wish her well.](#))

See:

<http://tinyurl.com/gu-cordano-acceptance-speech>

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