

2014

An Ethnographic Inquiry: Contemporary Language Ideologies of American Sign Language

Anya A. Leyhe
Scripps College

Recommended Citation

Leyhe, Anya A., "An Ethnographic Inquiry: Contemporary Language Ideologies of American Sign Language" (2014). *Scripps Senior Theses*. Paper 473.
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AN ETHNOGRAPHIC INQUIRY: CONTEMPORARY LANGUAGE IDEOLOGIES
OF AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE

by
ANYA A. LEYHE

SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

SEO YOUNG PARK, SCRIPPS COLLEGE
CLAUDIA STRAUSS, PITZER COLLEGE

APRIL 25, 2013

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INTRODUCTION

Roadmap to Linguistic Ideologies of ASL

Language has fundamentally three roles in bonding a group of speakers to one another and to their culture. It is a symbol of social identity, a medium of social interaction, and a store of cultural knowledge.

Lane, Hoffmeister, and Bahan 1996:97

A pump expands and contracts while cords vibrate in staccato and chop an even flow into audible pauses to be pulled and released. Particles vibrate, jumping and dancing, compressing into slinky piles that shove each other along, relaxing into spread out refractions. Articulators control the power of this process and make sound. In order to hear it, your ear must funnel sound waves into the inner ear, sense fluctuations in air pressure, and finally translate these oscillations into an electrical signal that your brain will understand.

On a daily basis, animals utilize their auditory senses to receive messages through waves of vibration. Humans have developed complex systems of meaning by manipulating articulators—tongue, cheek, palate, lips—to produce auditory language, assigning arbitrary sounds to particular meanings (Saussure 1916; Gentilucci et al. 2006). Manual languages, like American Sign Language (ASL), also convey complex systems of meaning through gestural signs (Frishberg 1975). This noiseless transmission of messages serves those who are hard of hearing (HOH) or deaf, which generally refers to people who do not have one hundred percent audiometric hearing because something blocks the process of receiving sound. Deafness is also a cultural construction. As I will explain in this paper, deafness through the cultural tool of a sign language becomes a positive, enriching, even defining, part of one's identity, cultural membership, and community rather than a failure or disability of the body. That said, signed languages also appeal to those with the ability to hear. Many who are motivated to learn ASL are hearing.

Since the majority of Americans are not deaf, hearing culture is an unmarked norm, a default identity one automatically earns (or is subjected to) regardless of their

membership in other subcultures. As a hearing woman who became a teacher's aid in a special education classroom for deaf students, Mary, illustrates the pervasiveness of hearing culture, expressing that she "never thought about [being hearing]. It was just normal." Robert, a professional disability advocate, refers to the way mainstream hearing America handles deafness as a medical challenge. He says, for deaf people "70% of your parents are hearing, the only person that was deaf was crazy uncle Joe. And then your babies are born deaf and you have a bunch of people sittin' around you in white coats, sayin,' 'well what do you do?'" Medicalizing deafness constructs it as a problem to be solved, rather than cultural capital to be gained. This clinical treatment stigmatizes and overshadows symbolic wealth of Deaf communities. April, a 47-year-old woman, has described herself as deaf since thirteen. From an early age, April was trained to read lips and vocalize clearly. She began learning American Sign Language two years ago. Not until then did she become incorporated into the Deaf community, what she now identifies as another indigenous or native culture. As of spring 2014, April is on track to earn a bachelor's degree in ASL *and* English.

In this introductory section, I aim to present the topic of ASL and its popularization, especially amongst hearing people. Here, I hope to ease into an eventually complex and contradictory discussion on language ideologies (ideas and objectives an individual or group holds concerning roles of language in society) surrounding ASL. This roadmap foreshadows what you will read in order to contextualize the discourse on ASL by operationalizing several key terms, introducing particularly relevant theoretical work in a selective literature review, explaining my methodological approach, and rendering transparent my positionality and limitations.

American Sign Language serves as a unique cultural asset to the Deaf community. So then what happens when hearing people attempt to learn ASL? As a beginning student of ASL myself, I endeavor to find out who is entitled to learn Sign Language, how and why, to explore the controversy I discovered concerning the way hearing Signers use ASL.

I argue that there is a general consensus that ASL has earned a certain “cool factor;” it is trending in mainstream United States English-language society, making a guest appearance as fad, relishing in an ethnolinguistic renaissance. All my interviewees agreed that hearing people learning Sign is a positive phenomenon. Hearing ASLers with whom I spoke viewed themselves as apolitical users curious about ASL and Deaf culture, motivated to express themselves creatively and build connections between communities. However, my informants, Deaf and hearing alike, persistently critiqued the motives and practice of *other* hearing Signers. They displayed concern for the status of ASL in mainstream hearing society as invisible, worrying that it is being colonized through commodification and cultural appropriation.

Hearing people learning ASL in our highly interconnected and technological society popularize the language, as do natives of the D/deaf community. However, according to ASL natives, not everyone is entitled to learn and use ASL without regard for how their engagement of Sign risks reconstituting power structures that reify a hierarchy of the mainstream hearing world as imperial over the subordinated Deaf world.

In this paper, I hope reveal the position of ASL in mainstream popular culture to show who is using sign language, what motivates them to learn and practice the language, how they use it, and what they can (or do) accomplish by signing. Specifically, it is my

goal to understand why so many hearing people are learning Sign Language. Throughout the paper, I share perspectives of many students of ASL to discover “extralinguistic realities...the social variables, attitudes about language, etc. that affect language use” of Sign (Woodward 1972:1).

Terminology

The meanings of words and phrases are not codified; they are constantly under construction and reconstruction. Meanings are not completely consistent or universal. Therefore, it is especially important for me to clarify the meanings of several words and phrases that I use before I continue with a discussion of ASLs place in hearing culture so that readers understand the ideas behind socially conscious diction I have chosen. This is a significant necessity specifically for this paper because it concerns language, language use, and people’s thoughts about language.

First, I will establish what I mean by culture. As an anthropology major, I constantly keep Clifford Geertz’ *Interpretation Of Cultures* (1973) in mind ever since I was inspired by his work in my introductory class. He defines culture as “an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and their attitudes toward life” (Geertz 1973a:89). Geertz takes inspiration from anthropologist Max Weber “that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I [Geertz] take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning” (Geertz 1973b:5). Geertz supplies an understanding of culture reminding us that it is not something that occurs privately in our

minds; “culture is public, because meaning is” (1973b:13). Eventually, this paper shows American Sign Language as an aspect of Deaf culture and hearing culture.

Throughout this paper, I use the phrases and terms American Sign Language, ASL and Sign interchangeably to refer to the general variety of signed, non-verbal, manual language native to North America. Lowercase “sign” refers to sign languages in general. Singling out ASL among the vast varieties of signed languages reminds us of the plurality of manual languages that vary regionally¹ and are not universally comprehensible (Armstrong 2012:16; Cormier et al. 2010). The movements of ASL can be thought of as a specific subset of all possible gestures, which are any body movements initiated for the purpose of communicating. Some authors refer to ASL as “a visual-gestural language” supplying readers with a thoughtful label that addresses the dated and narrow category “visual-manual” that highlights the use of the hands ignoring the fact that a Signer engages her facial features, body posture and arms as well (Shenk 1991:47). ASLers or Signers are people who are already fluent in or are students of ASL, anyone who Signs. Interpreting, in this paper, refers to translation between sign languages and vocalized speech.

Synthesizing academic work and my interlocutors’ opinions I elucidate the labels and concepts: mainstreamed, D/deaf, hard of hearing (HOH), hearing, as well as the distinction between Deaf culture and Deaf community. Oftentimes, my interviewees described people who are deaf (sometimes themselves) as “assimilated” into mainstream culture to designate deaf people who express elements of hearing identity. This type of

¹ ASL is the primary variety of signed language in the US. There are other dialects of ASL that vary regionally within the US (i.e. Gestures for numbers on the East Coast are similar but face palm outward, instead of inward like on the West Coast). Globally, there are many different varieties of signed language that are completely unique languages, like British Sign Language, South African Sign Language, etc.

assimilation is also referred to simply as “mainstreaming.” These references usually denoted deaf people who are not only performing aspects of hearing identity, but those who specifically do not perform typical customs and behaviors characteristic of deaf culture (Butler 1993).² Conversations about mainstreaming routinely arise in the context of education. For example, if a student transfers from a deaf school to a school without the specific intention of serving deaf students—in other words, the school primarily serves hearing students—they have mainstreamed.

A few interlocutors referred to a spectrum of assimilation with the pure extremes of deaf and hearing on either end. Although people may traditionally or stereotypically rest near one of the discrete categories, which interviewees often described as separate “worlds,” a deaf person can, and more often than not *does*, perform aspects of mainstream identities not necessarily native to their identity in order to pass as hearing. Sean, a nineteen-year-old college student who identifies himself as deaf, spoke of assimilation in terms of choosing or switching between worlds:

I think you can de-assimilate [from Deafness] in some ways but I don't think that means people will necessarily accept you. And I do think sometimes it is a bit of a game to see how much you can pass as, like *Deaf* deaf. Not passing as hearing, but being more Deaf than you actually are. Which of course, what is d/Deafness? Because at that point I'm not talking about hearing level, I'm talking about culturally Deaf.

Sean's example clarifies that people can, by choice, perform more qualities of one cultural identity (like deafness or hearing) over another, prioritizing different forms of cultural capital according to context. Ultimately, Sean reinforces the idea that identities are not explicitly, exclusively, consistently, or universally valued in the same way across

² This is a reference to Judith Butler's work on Performativity, which builds on JL Austin's Speech Act theory. Here the verb “perform” refers to “the reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains” (Butler, 1993). In this case the phenomena is one's identity.

cultures and communities. Closing his statement, Sean introduces an important distinction between lowercase d deaf and uppercase D Deaf that can help us understand diversity within the general subculture of deafness, and how sign fits into that relationship.

As it has become clear, ASL is not solely subsumed as a characteristic of Deaf culture, nor is D/deafness a trait of all signers. Nonetheless, deafness and ASL are deeply intertwined. Thus, it is relevant to explicate the difference between deaf and Deaf.³ April provides a commonly shared point of view on the distinction:

Capital D Deaf is...Born deaf. Fluent in ASL. Active in the Deaf community. But it doesn't have to be *born* deaf. You can become—I consider myself with a capital D Deaf because I've thrown myself into the Deaf community the Deaf culture. I'm pretty fluent in ASL, I'm not yet, but I can communicate. So it's where you accept the culture. You know the language. You know you're way around the Deaf community.

Lowercase d deaf: Maybe you lost your hearing later. Don't know ASL. You just consider yourself *hearing impaired*. We don't use the word *impaired*. And people who are deaf who say that they're hearing impaired, they're not thinking critically. They're not accepting their deafness. They're still hoping for a miracle. So how much you accept your deafness plays into it a lot. Your individuality as a deaf person and not wanting to be a person.

April refers to several key characteristics of Deafness. She begins by suggesting that a lengthy personal history of exposure to deafness, especially (but not necessarily) from

³ April describes her deafness: "I don't know [what two percent is like] because I don't know what one hundred percent is like. I hear, I can hear your voice with hearing aids, but it's sometimes like Charlie Brown teacher, wanh, wanh, wanh, wanh. If I'm closing my eyes I would have no idea what you're saying. But the sound does help because your brain memorizes different peoples' voices, like my family, my kids, I can read their lips really well because I've memorized how they move their lips. But your brain also memorizes the different tones. Distance matters. I can hear this [knocks on the table] but I probably couldn't hear it over there. I can hear dogs barking. I've learned to identify what that is most of the time, and sometimes I don't. But without them, nothing. [The hearing aids] are kind of uncomfortable. Back here[behind ears] there's a lot of pain, you want to take them off after a while because you feel the heaviness. I mean it's not like I like it. It is what it is. When I get completely fluent in ASL, I'll take them off. Right now they're a crutch for me. I haven't been able to break from them. It's all I know, I'm used to. So even though they don't really help a lot, it's worth it."

birth can earn someone membership in Deaf culture, especially if that person is not hearing themselves.⁴ April also identifies fluency in ASL, ample activity in the community, acceptance of ones' deafness and the embracement of the culture qualify Deafness.

Lowercase deafness, is almost exactly the opposite of Deafness (Tucker 1998:6). Most importantly, many interviewees believe that someone who is deaf does not accept their hearing condition and views it as an impairment or a disability, perhaps even a medical condition void of cultural context. Deafness and deafness both imply a percent of hearing loss (developed over time) or initial condition (from birth). Deafness indicates cultural gain or abjuration. I agree with Gesser, who wrote "Learning About Hearing People in the Land of the Deaf: An Ethnographic Account," that even though the line to distinguish between Deaf and deaf is blurred because it is not possible to know "at what precise point do deaf become Deaf," the distinction should be made where possible because "it mirrors a movement in the identity of Deaf people that derives from their 'ethnic revival'" (cited in Baynton 1996:12; then Baker 1999:122; Gesser 2007). Further distinctions and intersections of D/deafness, community, and culture will be elaborated on in the Chapter One section "ASLers: Who Are They?"

Theoretical Frameworks

In the spirit of operationalizing, I hope to make my disciplinary perspective clear by defining the overall theoretical conceit that will provide a foundation for my claims. My disciplinary background lies in linguistic anthropology, the study of "parole" (or

⁴ I would like to recognize that the choices I have made with my own diction, using the example of "membership" in a culture, run the risk of furthering the idea that culture is a structured institution to which a person can strictly belong to. However, membership in a culture is not bound and more about sharing general aspects of the way people go about daily life.

language as it is actually used in situ) (Saussure 1916), how it is particular to those who are using it, and (a focus) in this paper, what people believe about language and its use. This signifies a focus on how speech reflects and shapes cultural expectations, values, and beliefs.⁵ This paper is also influenced by (and influences) sociolinguistics, which focuses more on how language is used to express and change social relations, especially those of power and solidarity. I attempt to contribute to a discussion about American Sign Language at the intersection of linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics.

Academic discussions of ASL most often appear in journals and books distributed from sign language studies, Deaf studies,⁶ disability studies and Gallaudet University related publications (Mitchell et. al. 2006).⁷ Many sources address the growing popularity of ASL in U.S. colleges and Universities (Welles 2004). From my research, I gather that a large number of sources from sociology and psychology address the social issues surrounding ASL (Reagan 1995; Lucas 1990; Markowicz 1972), but there is a deficiency of anthropological information about Sign utilizing an ethnographic approach. Amassing previously existing academic literature in these disciplines and others (Sign Language Studies, Deaf Studies, Anthropology, Linguistic Anthropology, Sociology, Sociolinguistics, Linguistics, Psychology), I enrich my anthropological perspective on attitudes of and about ASLers.

⁵ I use the word speech here instead of language to because Saussure uses the word language to refer to formal language structures rather than “speech” as it is practiced. In this case, speech is not implying vocalization, but rather parole.

⁶ Most papers that I found that address the condition of ASL are approaching their research as, for example, “a brief outline of the language situation of the deaf” (Woodward 1972:1).

⁷ Gallaudet University is a well-known college in Washington DC, “with programs and services specifically designed to accommodate deaf and hard of hearing students and was established in 1864 by an Act of Congress. Its charter was signed by President Abraham Lincoln” (Fast Facts About Gallaudet 2014) Many works cited were published by Gallaudet University Press

William C. Stokoe is the founder of sign language studies (the discipline) and *Sign Language Studies*, the academic journal first published in 1973. For “many years,” this journal was the “only serious scholarly outlet for work in the nascent field of sign language linguistics” (Armstrong 2012:7). Stokoe’s more technical writings, *Sign Language Structure* (1960) and *The Dictionary of American Sign Language* (1965) were instrumental in persuading those in traditional scientific disciplines that sign language, in Stokoe’s own words, “has a structure just as any language has, and that it should not be despised or ignored as it had begin from 1880 through 1960 and beyond” (Armstrong 2012:11). Cecil Lucas, David Armstrong and Timothy Reagan all began publishing articles addressing the status of ASL in the 1980s. These works, and most of the others I encountered during research, orient the reader Deaf-centrally to understand ASL amongst Deaf culture. Therefore, understanding the hearing persons role as an ASLer involved detailed culling.

I pull from several fields of theory to find ways of talking about unique and shared experiences narrated by my informants. These conceptual frameworks provide structure and schemas to discuss the phenomena acknowledged and assumed by those I met throughout fieldwork. A variety of theories help us understand the structure and power surrounding ASL including audism, Community of Practice, Speech Community, language ideologies, and cultural appropriation.

Audism can be recognized in its multiple incarnations—audism, audiocentrism, or audiocentric—and joins the ranks of the “isms.” Just as racism is to race and sexism is to gender, audism is to D/deafness, deployed and enacted in similar patterns of discrimination. Eckert and Rowley define audism as “the bias and prejudice of hearing

people against deaf people” or in other words, “audiocentric (based on hearing and speaking) assumptions and attitudes of supremacy” (2013: 101).⁸ Relying on Humphries (1977:12-13) who coined the term, Eckert and Rowley supply the groundwork to talk about audiocentric privilege in theory and practice in the twenty-first century. It is their belief that deafness should not be problematized and pathologized. They reject the notion that “Deaf Americans are disabled by medical circumstance. [Rather the] practice of audism disables Deaf Americans” (Eckert & Rowley 2013:102). With audism as a given, presuppositions about the experience of a D/deaf community follow, namely that the Deaf American Community has been colonized⁹ as an ethnic community¹⁰. Audism provides language to explain this colonization; “dehumanization takes place every time D/deaf autonomy is diminished. Audism is more than a theory. Audism is also a dehumanizing practice.” (Eckert & Rowley 2013:108). I agree with Eckert and Rowley; discussions of audism have the potential to bridge between the insularity of Deaf Studies and other social sciences. I will explore audism in its various forms throughout the chapters, particularly concerning appropriation of ASL as an act of colonization.

Lave & Wenger 1991, Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1992, and Holmes & Meyerhoff 1999 introduce and develop the concept “Community of Practice” (CofP), which is:

⁸ The section “Note on Reflexivity” shares this relevant personal anecdote: “Amy June Rowley grew up as a child in the midst of a U.S. Supreme Court Case (Board of Education, Hendrick Hudson School District v. Rowley). The Supreme Court should have focused on the more immediate issue about her gaining access to language as a human right protected by the First Amendment of the Constitution (Siegel 2008). Still, Amy June Rowley was denied an interpreter to access communication since the court felt she could access a spoken environment sufficiently to pass with average grades. The 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution grants that every citizen have equal rights and protection. When the court did not reaffirm Amy June Rowley’s right to an interpreter, they failed to recognize or value her equal rights to communication. We share the view that denying Deaf children access to sign language is a human rights violation.” (102)

⁹ Colonialization of Deaf American Community: Ladd 2003; Lane [1992] 1999, [1984] 1989; Wrigley 1997

¹⁰ Deaf American Community as an ethnic community: Dolnick 1993; Eckert 2005, 2010; Erting 1978; Lane, 2005; Lane, Pillard, and Hedberg 2011; Markowicz and Woodward 1978

an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations in short, practices emerge in the course of this mutual endeavor. As a social construct, a CofP is different from the traditional community, primarily because it is defined simultaneously by its membership and by the practice in which that membership engages. [Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1992:464]

What differentiates CofP from other sociolinguistic research and concepts, specifically speech community or social network analysis, is the emphasis on learning to perform appropriately in a CofP as befits membership status “initially as a ‘peripheral member,’ later perhaps as a “core member” (or perhaps not—one may choose to remain a peripheral member). Like these other frameworks of analysis, the concept of CofP situates language learners in a natural acquisition environment in which they communicate face-to-face. Another distinct aspect of a Community of Practice is that it must meet regularly. Members of groups such as these inevitably involve the acquisition of “sociolinguistic competence,” (Lave & Wenger 1999:175) or communicative competence, which can strengthen or weaken depending on intimacy of membership status. This theory helps us understand the ways in which “becoming a member of a CofP interacts with the process of gaining control of the discourse appropriate to it” (Lave & Wenger 1999:175). Degree of intimacy with the culture is closely related to sociolinguistic competence and reflects on ones membership status in the ASL speech community.

In the research field, I focused on one site where a CofP met regularly once a week to practice ASL. The group fits Wenger’s three dimensions of a CofP. The criteria—mutual engagement, a joint negotiated enterprise, and a shared repertoire of negotiable resources accumulated over time—describe the ASL practice group because

they meet regularly, hold each other mutually accountable to satisfy the joint enterprise of practicing ASL learning about D/deaf culture over time, and accumulate established patterns of engagement with other members that becomes their shared repertoire (Wenger 1998:76). Other theorists provide longer lists of attributes of CoPs that are instantiated more relatively in specific contexts.¹¹

Gumperz provides the more all-encompassing notion of a “speech community,” “any human aggregate characterized by regular and frequent interaction by means of a shared body of verbal signs and set off from similar aggregates by significant differences in language use” (1968:381). This concept applies readily to the broad and nebulous ASL community because it defines members, it “forms a system...[based on] a widely shared set of social norms,” in this case, the norms of Deaf culture (1968:7). This theory allows for the acknowledgement of in-group performances of diversity. Members of the ASL speech community participate in interactions based in social and cultural norms and values that are regulated, represented, and recreated through discursive practices. Signers often operate under a shared set of local knowledge, and cannot be defined by a static location.

Woolard and Schieffelin have published quite a bit about language ideology (also known as linguistic ideology and ideology of language). Woolard (1998) wrote about language ideologies as “representations, whether explicit or implicit, that construe the intersection of language and human beings in a social world,” which is why it is of “ethnographical importance, not simply because of its ethnographic variability but because it is a mediating link between social forms and forms of talk” (3). These authors

¹¹ A good example of this would be having inside jokes, mutually defining identities, or the “absence of introductory preambles, as if conversations and interactions were merely the continuation of an ongoing process,” and the list goes on (Wenger 1998:130-131). Wenger’s alone lists 14 features.

have worked off definitions from Rumsey who defined language ideologies as “shared bodies of commonsense notions about the nature of language in the world” (1990:346), Heath who explained them as self-evident ideas and objectives a group holds concerning roles of language in the social experiences of members as they contribute to the expression of the group (1989) and Irvine, “the cultural system of ideas about social and linguistic relationships, together with their loading of moral and political interests” (1989:255).

Addressing something as quotidian as everyday conversation makes the familiar strange and the strange familiar. This conversation attempts to “denaturalize our own intellectual tradition’s compartmentalization and reification of communicative social practices” in order to understand language ideologies about Sign (Woolard 1998:4). Unpacking the word ideology “reminds analysts that cultural frames have social histories and it [the word ideology] signals a commitment to address the relevance of power relations to the nature of cultural forms and ask how essential meanings about language are socially produced as effective and powerful” (Woolard and Schieffelin 1994:58). Hence, linguistic ideologies are a fitting paradigm through which to discuss systems of power constructed around Sign.

Ziff & Rao edited the book *Cultural Appropriation: A Framework for Analysis* (1997). Their introduction begins with a broad definition of cultural appropriation: “the taking—from a culture that is not one’s own—of intellectual property, cultural expressions or artifacts, history and ways of knowledge” (1997). Right thereafter, Ziff & Rao acknowledge that the words that make up this definition are ambiguous and relative. The concepts of culture and appropriation coupled with the territorial verb

“taking” require operationalizing. The word appropriation assumes a relationship between people or groups of people based on one group assuming or performing aspects of the other group’s identity. That this appropriation is cultural in nature (based on customs, attitudes, behaviors) confirms that the “scenario is value-laden and is therefore contentious” (Ziff & Rao 1997:3). Appropriation often carries a negative connotation signaling undeserved entitlement that a group has presumed. These instances of appropriation imply a person or group can have ownership, and therefore rights, to culture as well as the existence of an authentic way to perform the original culture. Arguments of authenticity come into play in a multi-dimensional way when my interviewees speak of “real” ASL and “more” D/deafness. Their comments expose beliefs about who is entitled to Sign and why, who is entitled to appropriate (or re-appropriate) ASL.

Chapters

In Chapter One, “The Intersectional Position of ASL,” introduces the position of ASL today. Briefly delving into the language’s history establishes why a discussion of ASL in the present day is not only relevant, but crucial in understanding the current state and future of the language and its practitioners. I will then concentrate on who signs attitudes towards ASL and those who use it. In Chapter One I hope to make clear some general underlying binary themes that my interviewees repeatedly stressed: invisibility and visibility of signed languages, awareness and unawareness of the languages and the prestige (or lack thereof) of ASL in comparison to English. This practical knowledge along with these ethnographically extrapolated themes builds a foundation for

understanding the current political economy of American Sign Language through media and everyday life.

In Chapter Two, I examine ASL found in media and take an ethnographic approach on virtual expressions of language ideologies. This chapter illustrates how ASLs place (located in Chapter One) is exemplified in the media, since media is a mediating link between social forms and forms of talk. Various forms of media (television reports and shows, videos, blogs, social websites, etc.) conveniently consolidate a wide variety of representations of language users as well as their ideologies about how people use language. You will read about the presentations of ASL as provided from a variety of media sources and how that *both* positively and negatively influences the perceptions of those presentations.

This analysis will focus on contemporary depictions and discussions of the state of sign language and signers on TV shows *Switched at Birth*, *West Wing*, *CNN News*, *The Colbert Report* and online blogs because these sources exemplify contemporary linguistic ideologies and politics of ASL. I argue that *West Wing* provides a successful model of illustrating ASL while *Switched at Birth* represents a paradox of success because it leaves audiences without a successful model of hearing-D/deaf relationships, stigmatizing them as dysfunctional. I also hold that there is general indignation about the marginalization of Deaf people, as proven by Stephen Colbert's response to the international scandal of the Nelson Mandela memorial interpreter who failed to Sign correctly. This type of critique is crucial considering the severe effect of media on behavior and perceptions (in this case perceptions of ASL and associated cultures) and that these shows inspired some ASLers (specifically Mika) to learn Sign in the first place.

Finally, in Chapter Three you will become familiarized with my interviewees' personal motivations for learning American Sign and general conceptions about why others learn Sign, as well as how the learning process does (or should, in their opinions) occur. I will highlight the contradictions inherent in what people believe to be “appropriate” modes of learning and using ASL. Ultimately, Chapter Three will show that many hearing Signers are aware of a debate about acceptable and unacceptable motivations to learn ASL, and have thus become peripherally or intimately associated with Deaf community in an acceptable manner. Deaf (and attitudinally Deaf) interviewees reported pressure to choose assimilation into one world or another, which motivates these Signers to, or discourages them from, furthering their ASL skills.

Chapter Four continues to evolve the conversation towards ethics of hearing people using Sign and interpreting. This chapter addressed the controversy of ASLs place and its learners place within it. A discussion about the construction of power relations in regards to D/deafness will come round to an understanding of the aforementioned worlds as discretely associated with ASL and D/deaf culture or the hearing mainstream. Politics of assimilation and de-assimilation are salient to this conversation. My informants express concern for the marginalization of ASL and Deaf culture. Ultimately, interviewees seemed most preoccupied with two phenomenon of hearing ASLers who practice ASL in a contentious manner: 1) those who commoditize the language for egocentric capitalist purposes, or 2) those who appropriate the language and culture, viewing themselves as saviors who imperialistically “empower” those who are “incapable” of empowering themselves, thereby further colonizing an already marginalized population.

To close the paper, I will reiterate what I have done throughout the paper, synthesizing a few key take away points. I conclude with a brief discussion of technology's influence on the future of American Sign Language.

Methods

On a sunny day I exited the 15 heading south for Norco, California, Horsetown of the United States, where dirt sidewalks replace concrete to provide cushioned paths considerate of horses' joints. I passed two boys casually lounging in a red wagon pulled by a miniature horse. Ethnographic fieldwork often makes for great adventure! I'd never seen a place quite like Norco before. Neither have I met as hospitable and kind a lady as Ann. After passing several blocks of ranch style homes, I parked in front of her home. Ann's husband sawed away at his novelty wood projects in the garage as she ushered me into her comfy, carpeted home. Both she and her husband are retired and live near their many grandchildren, staying incredibly busy with all sorts of family socializing and community interest projects. Inspired by a visit with a deaf woman with (as she supposed) "special needs," Ann has spent more than a year teaching herself American Sign Language from online classes, videos, and in-person conversational practice groups. After she generously answered my questions for over an hour and a half, we chatted about her family and pets. Before I knew it, I was offered a hand-made wood guitar pick box for my brother, an all-day hiking outing with the grandkids and a future lunch date. It may not be a coincidence that my other interviewees are also incredibly kind, community-oriented people. I will introduce them shortly.

A wise dance teacher, Ronnie Brosterman who inspired me to pursue this topic, recommended that I apply my fascination of linguistic anthropology by simultaneously

exploring ASL and dance. In order to do learn how people communicate through dance and gesture, in the summer of 2013, I enrolled in an introductory American Sign Language Berkeley City College course as well as at my regular dance classes at a local studio full to the brim with academic dance nerds. My first attempts at overlapping these domains were not entirely positive, although I believe the relationship in general is worthy of inquiry (and could have been for me too had I not been afraid of my positionality as a member of dominant mainstream culture examining a historically marginalized subculture). Several people in the classroom setting reacted negatively to the introduction of my purpose. A deaf classmate explained that I was delegitimizing ASL by comparing it to dance—that it should not just be considered an aesthetically pleasing mode of expression, but is undoubtedly a full-fledged language with grammar, politics, culture, and community to go with it.

This conflict made me wonder how ASLers of different backgrounds view the popularization of the language. Is it an all-around positive phenomenon? According to whom? My comparison was admittedly weak since dance and ASL serve different means to arrive at different ends. In retrospect, I wish I had explored this tension further. Regardless, another curiosity revealed itself on the first day of ASL class. Almost everyone in the room introduced themselves as hearing.

From September 2013 to March 2014, I conducted an ethnographic inquiry in the Inland Empire of Southern California to learn about who studies and uses American Sign Language and what their motivations are to do so. I am especially curious as to why hearing people learn Sign and the place of ASL in hearing culture. During this time I mined for rich, triangulated data through participant observation at ASL class, ASL Deaf

events, and semi-structured first person interviews in an attempt to discover and share personal narratives of signers.¹² I spoke with people who communicate manually with ASL (or are learning how to) who are D/deaf, hard of hearing *and* hearing. Since my ASL skills are elementary, I was unable to conduct interviews in Sign Language and all conversations occurred orally. The two people who are deaf that I interviewed (Sean and April) both use hearing aids. April also reads lips since her hearing aids only bring her to about forty percent hearing. Throughout the process, I made a concerted effort to speak with language learners and practitioners who relate to a wide variety of identities, especially across the D/deaf/hearing spectrum because this represents the diversity of the people whom I met along the way, who share at least one thing—their interest in sign language—in common.¹³

To seek out a local community of ASL students, experts, and professionals, I did exactly what I would have done had I been a local resident of the Inland Empire attempting to learn the language. In fact, I can say that I *am* a hearing resident in this area seeking a culturally contextual education in ASL. A basic Internet search led me to the Meetup website. This site provides a platform for groups to organize public events encouraging socialization with folks who share common interests. The subtitle on the website's homepage reads: "Neighbors getting together to learn something, do something, share something" (www.meetup.com). In a matter of minutes, I found an ASL conversation practice group that specifically states all fluency levels are welcome as are

¹² I conducted 7 formal interviews, 12-15 informal interviews, and participated in many more casual conversations.

¹³ I noticed that the folks I met at events, discussion groups, and in my summer class had few overlapping identities. The majority of the groups were often female. Besides disproportion of gender representation, we all were very different. In the classroom setting especially, there appeared to be an even distribution of students across age. About one third of the students in my ASL class were between the ages of 15 and 25. The other two thirds of the class split evenly between older adults in the neighborhood of 50 to 75 years of age and those in their middle years of adulthood.

hearing, HOH, and D/deaf persons alike. I signed up for the group and was immediately notified my membership to the group's online forum would be permitted at the discretion of the group coordinator. Not only was I allowed to join the group, I received a personalized message through the site from the leader welcoming me. I have since learned that being welcoming is incorporated into many aspect of Deafness, inclusivity in conversation, for example.

After I attended the first session, I received three messages from people who were at the event saying they looked forward to meeting me at our next Meetup. This social media website spreads the word about events efficiently. I was glad to have received an email from the Meetup group leader before driving an hour to Riverside for a DeafExpo¹⁴ when I came upon an update: "I just got news that this event was shut down....so if any of you were coming later....it is shut down by the fire Marshall. I guess the building capacity was only 300 and more showed up, no one wanted to leave so they kicked everyone out!" This scenario illustrates that demand for D/deaf-centric events echoes and potentially boosts exponential interest in Sign. Well-populated Meetups, events advertised through Meetup, and external happenings passed on by word of mouth from the people I met at Meetups catalyzed my accessibility to the field of the ASL speech community enormously, multiplying opportunities for fieldwork. Sign Meetups (and associated events) make space for a diverse range of people to share the common interests in activities and cultures. At the end of an enriching interview with April, she beamed, "What time is it? Do you know? 6pm! People are going to start coming for the Meetup!" At the Meetups, I also met Mary and Ann. They are both self-taught Signers who are

¹⁴ DeafExpos are like conferences in that they bring together many groups and organizations from the Deaf community for a public celebration of their culture and to promote awareness of programs and available resources.

passionate about the language and love to learn about Deaf culture. Mary, an Inland Empire native, is a teacher's aid in a public school D/deaf classroom. Ann is a retired ASL enthusiast.

I met Robert, a CODA (Child Of Deaf Adult) who is hearing but identifies as a native member of Deaf culture, at the Deafestival under hilariously embarrassing circumstances. Attempting to introduce myself in ASL, he corrected my faux pas clarifying, "did you intend to curse me out?" After I apologized profusely, we both laughed at my guffaw. From further conversation, it became apparent that Robert holds strong opinions about who should use ASL and for what means. Mika and Sean also shared emphatic values and vivid experiences with Sign. They are both students at the Claremont Colleges. Sean describes himself as Deaf and participates in the ASL Meetup Community of Practice. With the help of hearing aids, he was taught See (a variety of sign language) and vocalization from an early age with the goal of eventual assimilation. Mika moved throughout Europe and Asia throughout her youth. She is now a ferocious hearing polyglot who spends her free time teaching herself languages. While attending high school in China, Mika attempted to teach herself ASL from Signing on TV shows. Both have grounded their passion for language based on their unique experiences in their academic experience at the Claremont Colleges.

Relevant to the conversation of and about Signers, I tap into TV programs, newspaper articles, public commentary on websites, and blogs to address the presence of the ASL community that materializes virtually on the World Wide Web. My analysis was based on independent searches (Google and YouTube) of key terms and by word of mouth, recommendations to specific articles or videos that came up in the field. I

followed hyperlink after hyperlink venturing into the annals of media that relates to ASL as well as public responses to it. Online forums provide a layer of anonymity that allows language ideologies to become more explicit, brutally honest, and frankly unabashed.

Once I consolidated and synthesized the qualitative data gathered from my generous participants and public information in media, I coded the material and divided the responses into themes that I make claims about above and in the following chapters. In effort to protect informants' privacy, I substituted any names with pseudonyms. This ethnographic approach to learning about language ideologies and motivations of ASLers addresses the personal experience of deaf and hearing folks, both of which fuel the practice of ASL. It also allows me to be reflexive about my positionality relative to my interviewees and the topic at large, which has not always been a comfortable one.

Positionality

My relation to this topic has at times been a confusing one. One interviewee asked me as she was reading through the formal written consent sheet if it seemed a little funny to me that I am doing this project when I don't know ASL beyond a rudimentary beginning and am not currently enrolled in any ASL related courses. Of course, that very question had passed through my mind before, troublingly so. This is an unmistakable limitation in my research endeavor. In authoring this paper, I have noticed at times that I have a sense of privileged hearing guilt, that perhaps I too am "using" ASL as a vehicle for ego-centric means, that I am exploiting the language and Deaf culture for personal use, not in the name of deaf rights or needs, not in the name even of contributing to linguistic anthropology—that I am hypocritically replicating the colonial actions that I

critique in the following chapters. The fact that I am focusing on the already well-studied dominant hearing culture replicates the patterns of underrepresentation of a marginalized population, D/deaf people. On the other extreme, another interviewee challenged me to consider whether I am attempting to be an advocate for ASL or for D/deaf people. Do I identify as an ally to marginalized D/deaf people, culture and or community? Do I imply disability in my Deaf interviewees by assuming their community or culture suffers in the social hierarchy, or is this reality? Both? All of the above?

My response was honest. I believe we should understand how ASL is used and how D/deaf, HOH *and* hearing people feel about the ways it is deployed with special attention paid to the binary of hearing versus deaf. Interestingly enough, Sean admitted that he was worried when I introduced my topic. He foresaw this project contributing to an ignorant outsider's hearing perspective rather than throwing it into question. Sean told me he was relieved and "oddly" (his own words) comforted by the indirect way in which I arrived at my topic, rather than an aggressive attack, firing a front line of questions about what it is like to be deaf, as if hearing people have a right to understand, and more extremely, a right to own or control his unique experience. As April reminded me, it can be productive to shed light on "offensive things other people say because it will help them understand how they're coming off." The data I collected certainly opened my own eyes to unfounded assumptions in my personal language ideologies.

Although my formal status in the field was that of a researcher, I believe my interviewees perceived me as a hearing student of Sign. I am especially interested in why hearing people learn Sign because I surprised myself by being amazed that so many hearing people enrolled in ASL. I had to pause and ask myself why I was surprised. Why

would there not be mostly hearing people in an ASL classroom? After some reflection, I assumed more people in the classroom would have a direct purpose for learning Sign. I assumed Sign is something that generally belongs to D/deaf people and that only hearing people who regularly converse with deaf people had purpose in learning Sign. What I did not think about before I became more familiar with this topic is whether hearing people have a *right* to learn the language purely for novelty, for curiosity, for fun. I began to wonder, do these seemingly light-hearted motivations delegitimize the rich culture and tradition of American Sign Language? What are the implications of the way hearing people actually use Sign?

Since I first learned about conflict resolution and processes of mediation in sixth grade, I have had a keen interest in how people communicate, why they say what they say to whom, when and how. It is not my intention to reify harmful appropriations of culture, rather to increase the visibility of sign language in anthropology and inspire readers to get interested (if they are not already) and be critical about these topics themselves. Even though I am non-native to Deaf culture, my emic perspective as a hearing person learning sign language precludes me from being a complete outsider. As Ann mentioned, “almost everyone has a commercial they’ve seen, a book they’ve read, a friend they’ve made, a family member, an actor to look up, a play to go to, a connection” and often an opinion about Sign Language and/or D/deaf culture. Although virtually everyone has a connection to Sign Language, explicit stereotypes and tacit assumptions impede accurate representations and respectful usages of ASL. Thus, another goal of mine is to clear up stereotypes by sharing hearing and deaf peoples’ attitudes towards each other, concerning the way Sign is learned and executed.

CHAPTER ONE

The Intersectional History of ASL

Like people, languages bear the responsibility of living and evolving. A language can be born and a language can die.

The oppression confronting the Deaf Community may actually have caused its members to unite more strongly together...Ironically, one aspect of this oppression, namely the negative attitudes of most educators toward ASL, may actually have encouraged Deaf people to unite even more strongly in defense of their language and their communication rights.

-Shenk 1991:59

In Chapter One, I will situate how American Sign Language came to be in its present position and explicate my perspective on what that position is. First, I will provide a brief history. Then, I will synthesize the status of the language according to my interviewees by identifying who uses ASL and exploring what language ideologies they hold about the place of Sign in American culture. The words position, status, and place refer to ASL's role in the lives of Inland Empire Signers as well as a larger issue of language hierarchy. According to the language ideologies they shared, pertinent issues concerning its place include: (in)visibility, (un)awareness, and prestige of ASL in relation to mainstream hearing culture. I argue that while ASL has become increasingly visible, as it gains awareness and prestige in the mainstream signers are still concerned by its current position, which has always had close linkages with Deaf culture.¹⁵ The ASL speech community associates with Deaf history and culture not only linguistically, but also socially and politically. This chapter will confirm that ASLers' concerned with this relationship as well as its dynamic connection to hearing culture's English-driven dominance, as illustrated by their intimacy with Deaf community.

ASLs Position from Evolution to Colonialism, and Colonialism to Nationalism

Many academics declare language originated in the form of visual-gestural communication (Gentilucci 2006). Shenk¹⁶ references evolutionary “scholars through the

¹⁵ I would like to acknowledge since the renaissance of ASL is circular (and hopefully my argument is not). As foreshadowed in the introduction, increased visibility, awareness and prestige results in a cyclical relationship with popularity of the language. In other words, as ASL becomes more popular, it becomes more visible and prestigious. As it becomes more visible and prestigious, there is more interest in ASL; it becomes more popular. This is a reciprocally causal relationship with no clear source of initiation. Interviewees concern about the status of ASL certainly plays into the cycle.

¹⁶ Shenk (with the assistance of Cokely) created a series of books best known as “The Green Books.” These books provides teachers and students of ASL with “the complete means for learning about the culture, community, and the native language of Deaf people.” Ideally I would not rely on her so exclusively

centuries [who] have argued that the first languages used in prehistoric times were gestural languages. There is even some evidence suggesting that the vocal apparatus necessary for speech did not develop until later on” (Shenk 1991:48). Assuming prehistoric humans initially generated a visual-gestural language implies that both hearing and deaf individuals could rely on a non-verbal language to communicate irrespective of capability. Regardless of this shared capability, sign languages have historically developed in concentrated groups wherever there has been necessity for the development of a visual-gestural language, wherever there were deaf people. As a result, there are hundreds, if not thousands of varieties of visual-gestural languages: Chinese Sign Language (Yau 1977), French Sign Language (Sallagoity 1975), Thai Sign Language (Reilly and Suwanarat 1980), etc.

ASL, like many other varieties of sign, was born out of colonialism. Some varieties “came from Europe or the British Isles, and others were born here...So perhaps a few deaf people in a Spanish colony used Spanish Sign Language, and others in an English colony used British Sign Language and so on” (Shenk 1991:48). Lane (1977) estimates that there were about 2,000 deaf people in America during the early 1800s. Schein & Delk (1974) report a total of 6,106 prelingually deaf people in America in 1830 according to the US Bureau of the Census.

With deaf populations growing, the demand for a school that could cater to them was clear. Mason Cogswell, a doctor and father of a deaf daughter, along with a group of concerned citizens raised funds to send Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet to Europe to learn about methods for instructing deaf people (Shenk 1991:49). In Great Britain, Gallaudet

in favor of demonstrating a dialogue between writers. However, I have found that Shenk presents a unified front of what has been said on the topic that was reviewed and verified by “a group of fifteen ASL teachers and linguists” (gupress.gallaudet.edu/2812.html).

attempted to learn the Braidwood School's 'oral method,' stressing speaking, reading, writing, and discouraging the use of signs, practiced both in Scotland and near London. Failing to procure access to these methods, Gallaudet returned to North America with Laurent Clerc, an instructor of French Sign Language, to found the Institute for Deaf-Mutes on April 15, 1817. This institution was later renamed the American Asylum at Hartford for the Education and Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb, and is known internationally today as the American School for the Deaf (<http://www.asd-1817.org/>).

While this story explains part of the introduction of visual-gestural language to the US, "common sense tells us that possibly several different signed languages were used by the 2000 or more deaf people living in this country in the early 1800s" dispelling the common belief that "deaf people in America suddenly started learning and using French signs in 1817, and that they didn't have any language before that time" (Baynton 1996:3).¹⁷ As a result, it is plausible that many forms of signing existed and conflated to create Old American Sign Language, which developed into Modern American Sign Language. ASL arose out of a compilation of imported and indigenous signing practices.

Lupton and Salmons agree; they claims that there is more opportunity for future research in considering the unique transmission of signed languages through time rather than focusing on it as a creole (1996:92). ASL has oft been declared to be a creole (Bochner and Albertini 1988, Coulter 1983, Deuchar 1986, Fischer 1978, 1994, Hoemann 1986, Woodward 1978)—a language based on the evolution of one or more pidgin languages (Lupton 1996:80). A pidgin language is one that operates based on a simplified

¹⁷ Evidence based on ASL and FSL cognates, "words or signs in one language which are historically related to words or signs in another language," prove ASL's distinctness (Shenk 1991:50). Only 60% of ASL and FSL are cognates. The remaining 40% of non-cognates is too large a proportion to assert that the origin of most ASL signs are based on FSL even considering that language changes over time.

form of grammar and lexicon often between people who do not share a common language. Knowing these two definitions, we can understand that classifying ASL as a creole delegitimizes it in a time when “linguists were trying to establish ASL as a bona fide language” (Lupton and Salmons 1996:84). Most convincingly, there is “a variety of ASL from Martha’s Vineyard that has been documented at least as far back as the 1700’s” (Groce 1985). Furthermore, due to lack of institutions for deaf and lack of ease in transportation services in America before 1817 several signed languages or types of signing were used (Shenk 1991:49).¹⁸

With improvements in infrastructure, Deaf communities could more easily travel to specialized educational institutions. Early intra-Deaf-community diversity became consolidated into ethnolinguistically homogenous culture. This merged and united subculture posed a threat to staunch nationalist politics. Battistella’s article on the status and treatment of ASL and Signers picks up with the turn of the nineteenth century.

In Edwin L. Battistella’s 2005 chapter “Bad Language—Bad Citizens” from his book *Bad Language*, we are reminded that where there is multilingualism, there are hierarchical value judgments: “in many places in the world, multilingualism gives rise to formulas and policies that have value judgments attached to them, giving preferential treatment to one language or another” (Battistella 2005:125). Since American Sign Language originated from a small, need-based, non-hearing population, the original pool of communicators who Signed were isolated within a primarily English speaking mainstream America.

The foundation was laid in the history of forced assimilation in the 1800s when

¹⁸ Read more about historical signing communities in the United States in Groce 1985 and Lane, Pillard, and French 2000.

the stark distinction between signers and speakers had consequences for ones' spiritual identity, and thereafter excluded them from the norm. Until the nineteenth century, "deafness had been viewed as an affliction that isolated the deaf from religion and prayer. But after the Civil War period, it came to be seen as a social condition, isolating groups from the nation as a whole" (Battistella 2005:128). Since religious gatherings and social life were deeply intertwined, this deviance led to paranoia of difference. Historian Douglas Baynton (who wrote the book *Forbidden Signs: American Culture and the Campaign Against Sign Language*, 1996) asserted "the ardent nationalism that followed the Civil War—the sense that the divisions or particularisms within the nation were dangerous and ought to be suppressed—provided most of the impetus for a new concern about what came to be called the 'clannishness' of deaf people" (2005:128). As a social condition, deafness was perceived to pose an anti-nationalist threat of non-conformity that could therefore be solved with assimilationist politics.

Battistella argues that signers were treated like immigrant populations who spoke a foreign language, and even cites Alexander Graham Bell in warning America of the "dangers of intermarriage of deaf adults" because they created a "separatist race of deaf people" (2005:128). In the 1800s, those who feared the dissimilarity of sign language communication because it could lead to "mysterious"—perhaps malicious—exclusivity forced assimilation and integration of deaf subculture into mainstream hearing life. Their isolated and misunderstood culture was viewed as a threat. I would add to Battistella's argument that ignorance about the language and culture underlies this conflict. Originally, "people thought that the body movements of ASL were imprecise and irregular. Now we know that the gestures found in ASL are a special set of rule-governed

behaviors” (Shenk 1991:47). The language was misunderstood, and therefore delegitimized, as much as the people.

A push for assimilating deaf people into the English speaking mainstream led to a debate between the merits of manualism versus oralism, a teaching method to train vocalization, lip-reading, and written reading of English. As established earlier, in 1817 Thomas Gallaudet founded the American Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb. His religious background and motives deserve emphasis. Gallaudet was an evangelical minister who “believed that the deaf could not acquire moral understanding without taking part in group religious exercises, which sign made possible” reflects his “somewhat religious romantic view of the deaf as in need of salvation” (Battistella 2005:128). Gallaudet spurred momentum to recognize the social nature and potential of an assumedly remote section of society. Still, he did so at the cost of subordinating people who are deaf; his audiocentric role as savior disempowered the deaf people assuming their incapability to support themselves. The next one hundred years of pro-oralism, also known as audism, greatly minimized Gallaudet’s efforts.

To counter potential threats of a strictly bound deaf in-group that creates strong community, educational institutions favored oralism (teaching with the goal of training students to speak). Baynton believes the focus on oralism was not on the individual, but as with the assimilation of Native Americans, on “national unity and social order through homogeneity in language and culture” (2006:12). A country with such fresh settler colonialism in its past fosters fear of difference amongst nationalists attempting to establish a unified national identity. But why would the deaf population pose such an unnerving threat to national security?

The assimilationist approach exemplifies social evolutionary theories present concurrently with the turn of the nineteenth century popularization of oralism. Since vocalized language evolved from signing, vocalization was rationalized as more advanced, more progressive than the primal nature of visual-gestural language. Battistella agrees, “the view that oral language had arisen from gesture was taken as evidence that sign represented an evolutionary step back” (2005:128). If spoken languages are considered more advanced, Americans must speak not only to survive, but also to be the fittest. In America’s long-lived competitive spirit, restrictions on Sign forced this hierarchical goal. The statistics illustrate the trend clearly, “by 1899 Sign was prohibited in about 40 percent of schools for the deaf and by 1920, in about 80 percent, establishing a pattern that held for the first half of the twentieth century” (Battistella 2005:128). Forced assimilation through the subordination of sign language squelched a rich aspect of deaf culture.

Since the Deaf were discouraged from learning ASL, hearing people certainly were not pursuing a Sign education either. Every decade through 1960 produced copious amounts of tests and studies confirming oralism as the most reliable pedagogical objective. Most of these sources argued “spoken language is a prime factor in social development,” delegitimizing the social benefits of visual-gestural language and ignoring the possibilities interpreting provides (Battistella2005:129). The staunch nationalism plaguing America’s diverse composition remained to be the driving force preaching assimilation through oralism until the late 60s and early 70s when new scholarship exposed the shortcomings of oralism. Stokoe began publishing work on the importance of ASL in linguistics. Research began focusing more on the unique empowerment cultivated

in lively communities of people who are deaf. Academic work began to recognize Deaf culture—identification with a community of deaf individuals. This spurred the shift from political audiocentric fear of difference to the embracement of visual-gestural languages like ASL. The ASL ethnolinguistic renaissance that would take off by the end of the twentieth century was born.

Signers, Who Are they?

Almost every book and article about American Sign Language or Deaf culture explicitly reminds readers that while Sign and D/deafness share deeply intertwined histories, one need not be Deaf to Sign, and not all Deaf people Sign. Furthermore, not all deaf people identify with or belong to the Deaf community. Some prefer to identify with the hearing world. In fact, most people who are audiologically deaf do not use sign language (Mitchell et. al. 2006:311). In terms of clinical deafness, “the overwhelming majority of people categorized as deaf” by the National Health Survey (U.S. Public Health Service project) and Survey of Income and Program Participation (Social Security Administration project)¹⁹ are “fluent speakers of English (or some other spoken language) and did not experience any difficulty in hearing until well into adulthood” (Blanchfield, Dunbar, Feldman, and Gardner 1999; Mitchell 2005, 2006). Deafness and ASL are not always symbiotic, which can be seen in the eclecticism of language use amongst D/deaf and hearing families:

¹⁹ Mitchell cites these two data collection projects as the primary sources for statistics on “deafness and other disabilities.” This is problematic because they both have been criticized for audiocentrically conflating D/deafness with blindness, for example, and ignoring ASL altogether (Mitchell et. al. 2006:311). These institutions constrain the data with their narrow categories and labels.

Less than 5 percent of deaf children have deaf parents, and more than 80 percent of the children born to deaf couples have no hearing impairment.²⁰ Deafness and ASL use should not be conflated. Not everyone with a significant degree hearing loss uses ASL or participates in a signing community.²¹ At the same time, when people with no hearing loss are born into families who use ASL, they grow up with ASL as their first language.²² Signed language use in the United States is undoubtedly related to the existence of deafness in the population, but its prevalence in the home is certainly not restricted to those who are deaf. [Mitchell 2006: 312]

ASLers are hearing, deaf, Deaf, young, old, poor, wealthy, hetero, queer, brunette, blond, dark, light, and everything in between. Several articles address the use of ASL in homes with family members who are not deaf (Higgins 1980; Lane Hoffmeister, and Bahan 1996; Meadow-Orlans, Mertens, and Sass-Lehrer 2003; Mitchell and Karchmer 2005; Schein 1989).

Undoubtedly, American Sign Language has a special place in the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (HOH) communities because it:

embodies the thoughts and experiences of its users and they in turn, learn about their culture and share in it together through their language. Thus, most Deaf people learn about their own culture and share experiences with each other through ASL...we see that ASL is used for social communication within the Deaf community. [Shenk 1991:58]

While ASL can be learned by anyone, its history and ability to cater to deaf needs gives it a special place in Deaf culture. Here, American Sign Language is considered as a solution (non-auditory communication) to a condition (deafness) and also is recognized for the cultures that arise from and are shaped by the language. Definitions of Deaf community have varied extensively, however, they can be categorized into either of two general types: “(1) the *clinical* or *pathological* view which takes the behaviors and values of the

²⁰ Mitchell 2004b, Mitchell and Karchmer 2004a; Schein and Delk Jr. 1974

²¹ Dugan 2003; Kisor 1990

²² Finton 1996; Mudgett-DeCaro 1996; Padden and Humphries 1988

hearing majority as the ‘standard or ‘norm’ and then focuses on how deaf people deviate from that norm, and (2) the *cultural* view which focuses on the language, experiences and values of a particular group of people who happen to be deaf” (Shenk1991:54). The first type implies an outsider’s view, which my interviewees would agree emphasizes the ways in which deaf individuals are different, stressing negative aspects of differences with the goal of deciding how society can help them become as “normal” as possible, to assimilate. The second type results from “the recent recognition of ASL as a separate language (not a deviant code for English)” as well as the acknowledgment of the Deaf Community as a separate cultural group with its own values and language (Shenk 1991:54; Baynton 1996).

While there is no singular identifying characteristic or trait that is shared among all members of the Deaf community, there is a web of factors that helps us understand membership. The most widely shared characteristic of membership in the Deaf community is “attitudinal deafness” (Shenk 1991). Attitudinal deafness “occurs when a person identifies him/herself as a member of the Deaf Community (which means supporting the values of that Community), and other members accept this person as part of the Community” as well (Shenk 1991:55). Since members of the Deaf community may not necessarily have a degree of deafness, hearing individuals may be accepted as members if they display the appropriate *attitudinal deafness*. Sean explained this phenomenon with the slightly different terminology “Deaf-minded.” This phraseology, he said, grants intimate affiliation (if not membership) with the Deaf community.

Interestingly enough research finds that attitudinal deafness “is more important than the actual degree of hearing loss (audiometric deafness)—which does not actually

seem to be very important in determining how a person relate[s] to the Deaf Community” (Shenk 1991: 55). Several potential avenues through which a person may gain acceptance by the Deaf Community exist. Furthermore, a multitude of channels exist through which a person may gain acceptance into the Deaf Community, depending on the person’s skills and experience as well as attitudes.

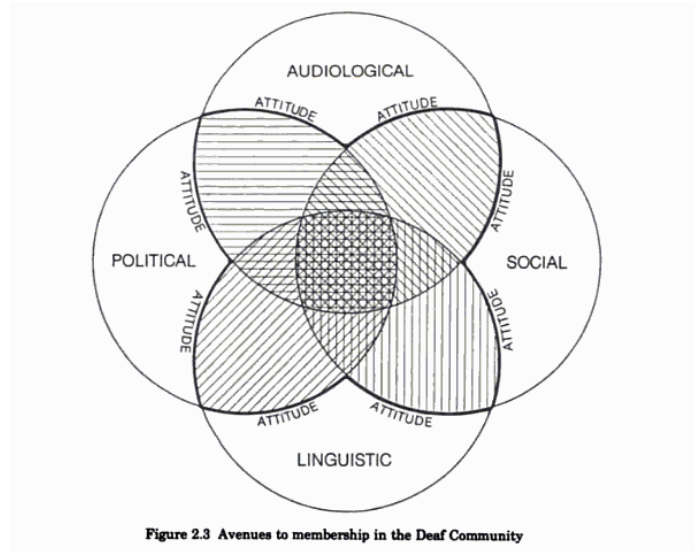
Avenues through which one could become a member are then as follows, first in list form and then depicted graphically:

- (a) *Audiological*: This includes actual audiometric deafness, exclusively non-hearing people. These individuals with a hearing loss are accepted by and identify with the community at a much deeper level (“the core”) and much more quickly than a hearing person with similar skills, experience, and attitudes.²³
- (b) *Political*: This avenue is contingent upon a person’s “potential ability to exert influence on matters which directly affect the Deaf Community on a local, state, or national level.”
- (c) *Linguistic*: The linguistic avenue “refers to the ability to understand and use ASL. The level of fluency seems to be related to the level of acceptance into the Community,” which makes sense since ASL is the channel through which values and goals are transmitted.
- (d) *Social*: The “ability to satisfactorily participate in social functions of the Deaf Community” with a sense of ease and connectedness with members. [Shenk 1991:56]

It is quite obvious then that “the avenues of acceptance for hearing people are [generally] the linguistic and social avenues” (Shenk 1991:57). My informants come from all four avenues and often have overlapping identities. I will be focusing on attitudinal deafness of members who enter through at least the linguistic field (if not through more) as a way to understand non-audiological membership in a Deaf Community. This graph depicts how different people would be located within or could gain entrée into the Deaf

²³ CODAs might disagree with this claim requiring audiometric deafness, rather than deaf-mindedness, for an intimate connection with the community, especially those like Robert who identify as indigenous to the community and culture.

Community. This list and graph provide a reference point to refer to when informants reflect on their motivations to use ASL in Chapter Three.



I asked my interviewees if hearing people could be(come) members of Deaf culture, or at least participate in it. Sean responded, “Yes. They can be a *part* of it; it won’t be *their* culture. But they’re welcome. They’re more a part of a Deaf community, I wouldn’t say deaf culture.” Prerequisites for membership in Deaf culture are not a clear-cut issue. In fact, culture itself is not always straightforward either as Mary has been grappling:

You know I haven’t really been able to understand that. I don’t really know how to put culture into a definition. One thing is really interesting to me in the Deaf culture. Did you notice at the expos or events like it, in their culture, if you need to pass by you don’t stop them and say excuse me I need to pass by, no, you just walk past. It’s part of the culture. You don’t interrupt. It’s part of their culture to make eye contact. If you look away that means conversation stopped. Deaf culture, one thing that pop into my mind, they can’t hear when they’re eating. So when they [makes smacking noise] for hearing, you don’t do that you eat quietly because it’s rude! That’s polite, that’s manners. It’s all customs.

Mary’s example of Deaf customs explains a few things. She reiterates that different cultures have unique customs. Many particular aspects of Deaf culture relate directly to linguistic norms or patterns of communication. Someone who is not native to Deaf

culture, like Mary, can learn these. As according to Mary and Sean, one can be a member of the Deaf *community* because they operate within these norms by learning these practices. The more sociolinguistic competence she gains, the more intimate her membership in the community becomes. Language is a feature of deaf culture that she can learn and participate in herself, as a hearing person with a place in the Deaf community. However, Mary compares politeness surrounding noisy eating habits, making a distinction between practices of Deaf and hearing culture that are innately tied to a shared experience of the condition of being deaf. In other words, as a hearing woman she would be unethically appropriating a non-native aspect of Deaf customs if she smacked noisily while she ate. Appropriation of culture will be addressed in greater detail in Chapter Four. Eckert and Rowley refer to Deaf American Community as a “community or polis of individual Deaf ethnics who prefer to rely and depend upon sign language in their everyday activities” (2013:103). American Sign Language and its users consistently bridge these variations of community.

Overall, I gathered from my respondents’ opinions that anyone may enter into the Deaf *community*. Over the course of my project this point remained uncontested. In fact, genuine curiosity and involvement of non-D/deaf people is even encouraged, for which I was personally very grateful. It should be known however, that some people’s notion of Deaf community does not include hearing or deaf people. Chapter Four addresses territorial reactions to ownership of culture evoking theory of cultural and linguistic appropriation.

It is hard to know exactly who uses ASL when estimates of the number of people who use ASL are incredibly variable, ranging broadly from 100,000 to 15,000,000

(Mitchell et al 2006: 307). Mitchell, Young, Bachleda, and Karchmer published “How Many People Use ASL in the United States? Why Estimates Need Updating” in a 2006 volume of the journal *Sign Language Studies* from Gallaudet University Press. This is the most recent article I found on the topic. They claim that there is “no systematic and routine collection of data on sign language or ASL use in the general population,” nor has there ever been, although California does record sign language use in the home when children enter school (Mitchell et. al. 2006:307).²⁴ Signers become invisible (as interviewees claim in the next section) because they are excluded from lists of non-English languages used in the home and “no state in the union counts its ASLers in either the general or the school population” (Mitchell et. al. 2006:306-7). In fact, “the census codes any mention of American Sign Language as English, on the curious grounds that signed languages are not written and therefore cannot be included in the ballot material” (Mitchell et. al. 2006: 309). Thankfully, since the time of Stokoe's (1980) and Washabaugh's (1981) articles, “sign languages have become accepted as genuine languages, and the notion of linguistic communities of (deaf) signers is no longer novel. Yet anthropological studies of Deaf communities are still in a relatively early stage” (Senghas & Mongham 2002:70).

I am confident that anthropological studies can use ASL as a vehicle to develop greater awareness of divides *and* bridges between hearing and D/deaf populations. As more research projects address this topic, greater attention will be paid to first hand experiences of people who partake in the increase of visibility and awareness of ASL and

²⁴ See California Department of Education 2004

Deaf culture that necessitates a discussion of the complex dynamics of prestige that arise between ASL and English.

(In)visibility and (Un)awareness

As mentioned in the last section, it is difficult to know who Signs because ASLers are rendered invisible by a history of oppression that materializes in contemporary institutional bureaucracy. Signers are underrepresented in statistics and research. I argue that ASLers today are concerned with this subjugation and actively react by rendering themselves more visible.

For example, the audiocentric nature of intent-laden phrasing on census data collection about language “might cause signers to hesitate declaring their use of ASL at home” (Mitchell et. al. 2006:309). Mitchell et. al. suggest that attempting to quantify and qualify ASLers won’t be achievable until distinct projects researching language of national origin unify with a separate research effort focused on deafness. Only then is ASL likely to be included as part of the demographic description of the U.S. population.

In the scholarly domain, according to Eckert and Rowley “sociological investigations of the Deaf American Community are rarely published in academic journals outside of Deaf Cultural Studies.” In 1985, Barnartt and Christiansen claimed, “the last article to appear in a major peer-reviewed sociology journal was more than 25 years ago.” Promisingly, the last couple decades of the twentieth century brought about a “burgeoning historiography of public discourses on language” (Woolard, 1998:4). As Deaf culture and ASL become more visible in mainstream culture, more research addresses these topics.

My interviewees gave examples of the (in)visibility of Sign. Robert's company facilitates the process and correction of cases in which "disabled" people, especially people who are deaf,²⁵ have been subjected to unequal treatment. When I asked him how his company is doing he replied:

Right now? Surviving. We've just come from a very difficult economic time when our office was almost collapsed. They were going to put it in another department, or completely shut it down. But we did a great job just being able to make it through the Great Recession. In fact, we lost a whole bunch of people, but we made it through.

Robert recognizes that the recent economic crises could easily have devastated his office. Even though they suffered from downsizing, his company survived, which is more than he would have expected in times past. The company and its efforts will remain visible, as will the changes they create for Deaf people.

Similarly, Mary thinks that many people have not known about the system of compartmentalized partial integration that works so well at her public elementary school. There, the kids from the D/deaf classroom interact with the mainstream kids regularly. They eat, play at recess, and attend assemblies together. Classroom time is mostly separate. Mary interprets for one student who is mainstreamed for two subjects. She says people do not know about this system of partial integration "because not a lot of people know about deaf. Even within the deaf community. Because when you have a deaf child but you're hearing you jump to, 'oh send them to a deaf school.' So a lot of people don't know about it. It's not that common. It's not well known." The efforts of Robert's office and Mary's school are slowly gaining attention, especially as ASL becomes more visible in mainstream society.

²⁵ He gave the example of working with a client who was denied the right to an interpreter.

Mika sees ASL as generally underrepresented. She “think[s] it’s an amazing language also just because of how disregarded it is. The deaf mute communities in most countries are marginalized entirely.” Mika’s language ideology of ASL and deaf people as subordinated supports April’s personal experience with D/deafness. April chose to conceal her deafness in her young adulthood. Now, April has:

no problem telling people I’m deaf. In the past I did. I hid it when I was a teenager, early 20s. Hair here [covers hearing aids with hair] and if I didn’t hear something right I would play stupid or drunk. I got drunk a lot back then. I used to say well, let’s get drunk. I’m old. I don’t care about appearance and stuff anymore. When you get older you grow into your skin and become more confident in who you are most of the time.

By feigning stupidity and becoming inebriated April pushed herself out of the limelight. With confidence, she now embraces her Deafness by “throw[ing] herself into Deaf culture.” Overtime, April has found empowerment in identifying with her Deafness. She not only found a community, but is a leader in making Sign more visible for non-Deaf community members who are interested in learning ASL. She has even met and befriended several Deaf celebrities.

Deaf and Hearing people alike had little exposure to deaf people although there is a general knowledge that they exist. Growing up, Ann “never knew or came across anybody that was deaf. My whole life I never have. And here I am, 60 years old and I’ve never come across a deaf person and it’s like god, whatcha been doin living under a bushel basket or something?” Ann said as a young child “somehow you know there’s deaf people in the world cause you’ve all heard of Helen Keller, who was deaf, but I’d never known anybody.” Ann now affiliates peripherally with the Deaf community.

As evidenced by Mika and Ann's pathway from unfamiliarity of Sign to becoming ASL evangelists, April thinks, "ASL is getting more and more popular." She sees:

More people are learning it. I used to think I was very isolated. I didn't realize how many deaf people were out there. I'd seen the language before. I'd seen the people. I'd never met a deaf person until five years ago, face-to-face talked to them. Not that I can recall. And I sought it out when I did. So I thought we were very few, but I was wrong! There are a lot of us. I'd seen people sign in restaurants before, but what was I going to do, go up and introduce myself? Now I might go [gestures ASL] 'Excuse me, hi!'

April's recent discovery of ASL and Deaf culture rests on the fact that she was educated in oralist methodology, assimilating her into mainstream culture. She referenced the invisibility in the origin of deafness itself. April has written essays about the root of deafness, which is "sometimes from sickness, but typically the result of a genetic pattern." Her own genetic makeup remains elusive as it does to most. She has not gone through the clinical process that reveals the source of her deafness:

I don't know if I have the gene or if it's from complications at birth for sure. I've never been tested to see if I have the gene, so I assume it's from when the [umbilical] cord was wrapped around my neck and that messed my eyes up. I could have the gene. I don't know. Usually with two deaf people the chromosome doesn't go through when there's two of them so they birth hearing babies. So hearing people have a deaf person right here in their tree and they could have that gene.

Recessive gene patterns contribute to the invisibility of deafness in families. Mika discovered that a great uncle of hers was deaf when she and her mother began learning Sign. As Mika learned more about his difficult past, her personal connection to the topic grew to be more intimate, as did her experience with ASL.

Mary believes that like "with anything, the longer it's been around eventually it becomes more popular." ASL and Deaf subculture gains more visibility, and with that

more interest and popularity. From her time in the public school district, Mary has witnessed a renaissance in hearing students' interest in Sign and the culture that accompanies it:

I have asked myself why hearing people are learning ASL a lot. And I don't know why. I don't know! Think about it like this. We've only had sign language for not that long. A lot of kids are—and I've worked at several schools—a lot of hearing high school students just thought it was cool. So yeah, fad. There are Sign classes offered at those public schools. A lot of high schools are starting to offer it more and more. Because when I was in high school none of the high schools offered it more. None of the schools in this area that I knew of offered sign language.

Mary also acknowledges that more mainstream schools are offering ASL as a language course than when she was a student. Welles agrees that there are more ASL classes offered in universities and colleges (2004). Two peers of mine shared stories of ASL in their hometown school districts. In one town, the kids at the public school created strong bonds with D/deaf students at the neighboring school for the D/deaf. Many of the hearing students learned ASL thanks to inspiring friendships with their Deaf peers. In the other larger peer's town, high school students were encouraged to enroll in Sign Language when they failed foreign language requirements because ASL was viewed as an “easy and less legitimate” alternative. This case renders ASL more visible, but does not recognize its worth.

As American Sign Language is offered in more contexts, it becomes more visible, but is not necessarily gaining prestige and legitimacy. A similar paradox of success in the status of ASL comes up again in Chapter Two when considering the position of Sign through media representations. With a marginalized and obscure position in the US, comes lack of awareness about Sign, the related community, and the culture.

Ann volunteers with a program for “special needs” adults in her town that hosts parties with DJs and fun activities twice monthly. She admitted slightly bashfully, “I didn't even know any of them were deaf. I never even thought these people were deaf. It never even crossed my mind.” When she began to inquire with caregivers about who Signs, she put her ASL skills to use with partygoers:

I signed ‘hi how are you?’ And I just got the biggest smile and Tia gives me a hug and they’re just thrilled if somebody knows their language because they feel included. So I asked the caregiver if he signs and he goes, ‘no. I don’t.’ You’d think if she had a caregiver they would, but anyway he didn’t. So every time Tia came by me that night she would ask me my name and every time she’d come by me and tap me and Sign, ‘I’m going to the bathroom!’ or ‘I’m gonna go dance’ or ‘I’m gonna color.’ She just kept telling me. It was so cool!

Tia was surprised a hearing volunteer Signs because it is out of the norm; most of the ASL-using volunteers and some of the caregivers do not Sign even though they serve Deaf clients. By initiating a simple conversation in ASL, Ann was able to recognize and include this woman. Ann’s awareness of Sign and customs in Deaf culture helped render this woman more visible. As I learned in my fundamentals of ASL class, it is a courtesy in Deaf culture to bring attention to entrances and exits from a space. Tia welcomed Ann to relate through customs of Deaf culture. Ann was incorporated into Tia’s Deaf community when she made her awareness of Sign known.

While the existence of more ASLers correlates with an increase in awareness of the language and its users’ culture, old stereotypes about the language die hard. Sean adamantly shared three common misconceptions of American Sign Language that he attempts to dispel: 1) sign language is not universal, there are “different kinds of sign language,” 2) ASL is not English in gestural form, and 3) it is not pantomime. Ignorance comes in the form of stereotypes like these. Misunderstandings about how assimilation

could empower D/deaf people has allowed for oralist methodologies to predominate in instruction that mainly serves hearing people. April's experience in the Inland Empire public school system shows this misplaced priority:

They had the speech and language pathology. They taught me to lip read. And there were all the normal classes but I went to speech path twice a week. It didn't benefit me that much. I look back and I don't say, 'Oh I'm so lucky that they did that. It helped me so much.' I look back and *it didn't help me, it helped them*. It helped them understand me, but none of it helped me understand them. It was all for their benefit. I can talk proper and, they teach me to read lips and they think they're doing me a big service but, you only get thirty or forty percent lip reading. Then you're brain has to put the pieces together.

She emphasizes the lack of awareness for her needs and the lack of initiative to investigate what her needs might be:

A lot of people don't realize it either. They don't look into it, what helps, what doesn't help. It's not given a lot of thought. And I've given it a lot of thought these last few years. That's why I'm learning ASL. Now I'm becoming sort of an advocate of teaching deaf babies both English and ASL. If I had known both English and ASL it would have been so much easier for me. I didn't even know there was a language, ASL, until I was in my twenties. Nobody told me there was a language. Nobody told my mom there was a language. My mom is now like, 'I'm so sorry I failed you.' I'm like, No! The system failed you. They didn't inform you. You didn't *know*.

Sean used the phrase "hearing-minded" to identify naiveté concerning the audiocentric prioritization of assimilation as well as general ignorance about ASL in relation to Deaf/ness that April narrated above. This phrase stands in direct opposition to the phrase "deaf-minded," therefore implying that the person is not native to Deaf culture, does not represent attitudinal deafness and perpetuates outside assumptions rampant in mainstream hearing discourse. April reverses the perspective, calling people who are hearing-minded, "hard of deaf" or "deaf impaired." These people represent a mainstream lack of

awareness concerning Deafness, in this case through ignorance about ASL.²⁶ Sean claims that hearing-mindedness is not only applicable to assumptive language ideologies, it applies to the way ASLers think while they Sign.²⁷

Another disturbing aspect of institutional unawareness of ASL and Deaf culture came across clearly in a personal anecdote April shared about an encounter with the police.

I was parked in my car and I was putting makeup on and I was behind a convenience store and a club, and I was getting ready to go into the club putting my makeup on and like five cop cars pulled in behind me. I wasn't looking in my rear view mirror I just had my handheld mirror. So I didn't know they had pulled up behind me. They didn't have their lights flashing or anything. And they got out their bull horn and I didn't have my ears on. And they said raise your hands! Blah blah blah. But I didn't hear. I finished and they're all like this. [gestures that they have their guns pulled on her] And it's like throw 'em up! And they're talking to me, talking to me and I didn't know ASL then so I couldn't tell them I was deaf or anything. I didn't know if they had told me to get out of the car. I didn't know if they told me to stay there. I didn't know what they wanted me to do, so I didn't want to get out of the car or anything because they'd shoot me if I did the wrong thing. I didn't know if I should show them my driver's license because I didn't want them to think I was getting out a gun.

April has since contacted local police departments offering to provide basic ASL education to prevent this mistreatment of D/deaf people.²⁸ She and her friends, “check in, making sure that law enforcement gets better training.”²⁹ All they have to do is learn this

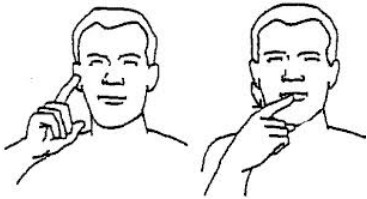
²⁶ Sean explained “a hearing-minded girl who said, ‘I don’t understand it, why do deaf people take ASL?’ It’s sad to me. She just asked why deaf people take ASL! She just *assumed* all deaf people *know* ASL because she’s hearing. They assume so much because they’re hearing. They don’t understand the deaf way yet cause they’re thinking like a hearing person in that mind frame.”

²⁷ According to Sean, at the beginning levels of ASL “you’re going to be more English thought versus ASL thought. You’re going to sign in English sentences. You’re not going to [makes a couple quick gestures to imply fluency and abbreviation]. But when you advance you change it and you don’t use English grammar anymore. You do your subject first and then your adjective. So when you think in ASL, you’ve got to put yourself *outside* of hearing and put yourself in their shoes.”

²⁸ April exclaimed that a police department deleted her public comment on Facebook after the event in the following footnote offering her services and then blocked her permanently from the page. Ashe believes

One sign. Deaf. Deaf. Why don't they know that? It's ridiculous! Ridiculous." The lack of awareness and, more importantly, lack of willingness to enlighten public safety enforcement officers defeats their purpose to protect citizens.

Ann, once she became aware of Sign, started finding it everywhere—in current events like the one above and “on TV in advertisements even.” She and I began compiling a list of places that she has noticed ASL, at amusement parks on signs, in church, at concerts.³⁰ Every interviewee with whom I met mentioned interpreting at



music events as a way that they or a person they know became aware of Signing and Signers. Ann remembered a video clip she watched online in which the leader of Pearl

Jam said ‘I don't know if we've ever had this at one of our concerts before and I just didn't notice it, we have a woman down here signing.’ She continued:

And he goes over there and leans off the stage and talks to her and is asking her if she'll come up on stage and someone gives her a boost up and he pulls her up and he has her standing on stage cause he says they're missing out, they're either watching him or they're watching her. And he says this way they can see both of them. And then when he wasn't Singing he went over and danced with her. And I'm like he is the coolest guy! To *share* his stage. He says, ‘everybody needs to be aware of this because it's

the police department seemed to be interested in keeping people unaware and that was an excellent PR opportunity to save face that the police department ignored.

²⁹ Another chilling example that took place in Hawthorne California and occurred earlier in 2014. April narrated: “The Hawthorne police beat someone to death because he was at his friend's house moving some boxes. His friend gave him permission and the key. The neighbors didn't recognize him so they called the police and said they were being robbed. The police came and told the man to put the boxes down. And the man didn't know what the police were saying so the man approached him and said it again. Well this man started going to sign and they thought he was going to pull a gun. They just grabbed him and threw him to the ground. Tasered him three times and beat him. It was totally uncalled for because [gestures like she's Signing] does it look like I'm doing this?”

³⁰ Ann said, “At my sister's church if you're deaf and call, or have someone call for you, at this church service, they'll have an interpreter there. So even the churches now! Maybe it's because there are going to be more deaf people. Nobody's going to put out an expense for so few But maybe now [there's a new demand].”

kind of hidden. Who would think you have deaf fans. You would never think that you had anybody deaf in your audience.’ They like to watch and feel the beat.

Ann is impressed that this celebrity literally rendered visible a hidden interpreter, that he would share his spotlight. Neither he nor Ann had thought about the presence of deaf people in rock concert audience because of the misconception that Deaf people cannot enjoy music. Happenings that invalidate inaccurate assumptions ensure greater visibility and awareness of ASL, and more often than not, Deaf community and culture as well.

April recognizes how much more awareness there is and the resulting “cool factor” that grants ASL prestige popularizes a historically marginalized language. She explains that where there are schools and programs for the D/deaf (like GLAD in downtown Los Angeles) there are more concentrated communities of Deaf and hearing people who Sign. When she was growing up:

There wasn’t a lot [in the Inland Empire] but there are more now I think because the schools are starting to get ASL. I think they learn what areas are more deaf friendly. I was more isolated. I probably *was* the only deaf person in my town! I know I was at my school. If I lived in LA I probably would have known a lot more. I probably would have gone to a deaf school even. And I’m 47 now. There’s so much more awareness and everything. ASL is “cool” right now. It’s popular right now. It’s a fad. Maybe, maybe not. I don’t know. It’s good because the more people that know it, obviously it helps us out in the world more. I go to Starbucks besides here and people are like, ‘oh ASL!’

Prestige: The Hierarchy Between ASL and English

In this section, I argue that ASL has been marginalized in relation to English much like D/deafness has been marginalized in comparison to hearing. Underlying the hierarchical relationship between ASL and English is a hierarchy between mainstream

hearing and D/deafness. Both hearing and Deaf informants confirmed that this is still true in some cases. Many of my interviewees mentioned cochlear implants and a widespread assumption of the hearing-minded that medical interventions to make a deaf person hearing, specifically with cochlear implants,³¹ would be preferable over other ways of living with deafness. They also suggested a sub-hierarchy of ASL that illustrates the inconsistent stratification of ASL, pidgin Sign, and See2, a system of gestures that correlate exactly with ASL.³²

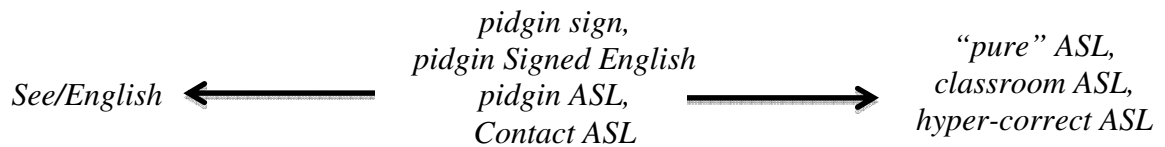
As a candidate for a cochlear implant, April found the risk of severe side effects to be “terrifying” especially since “it’s not a 100 percent guarantee” that the procedure will provide full audiometric hearing. April says, “*I’m ok how I am...now that I’m discovering more about my Deaf culture and ASL and all of that, I don’t think I’ll get [a cochlear implant]. You just have to teach me ASL or how to communicate a little different. I’m fine.*” April has found ASL provides an enriching and social method of interacting. Hearing-minded friends of hers though, April mentions, view hearing as superior to deafness. In response to her stance³¹ that parents should not choose for their baby to get a cochlear implant, they ask “‘why don’t you want the best possible for your baby and isn’t hearing the best possible?’ And I’m like, why? Did I turn out bad? You can turn out fine with the proper knowledge. I think parents doing cochlear implants is more for the parents’ convenience. Less work for the school or the parents.” April has been working hard and enjoying acquisition of the “proper knowledge,” ASL.

³¹ A large body of work exists on the ethics of cochlear implants (Tucker 1998). Delving deeply into that topic would unfocus this paper, but it is a very significant aspect of this conversation as evidenced by the fact that almost every interviewee brought it up in conversation.

³² Sean defines See as, “an invented language, they have a dictionary, it was invented as code for English. It’s word for word. The grammar of See 2 is English, with the same morphemes so you add s’s to the end of plurals you add -ing to the end of swimming.”

Mary, although indigenously hearing, recognizes that “the English language is very dependent on hearing. Hearing it, hearing it, hearing it,” repeatedly over time. She has found that her D/deaf students who “can write well were hearing at one point in their life so they were able to hear it or they could read lips really well, they were taught how to read lips. Because reading lips is learned. It’s not a skill you were born with.” Mary establishes that no one language is innately more natural or superior for humans. Understanding this basic equality amongst language varieties proves that varying language prestige is socially constructed, and reconstructed, over time.

Although English has historically been the chief language of dominant mainstream hearing culture in the United States, it is not universally viewed as prestigious, especially to hearing Signers. Sean described a scale of language purism beginning with See and English at one end and straight-ahead ASL on the other, with pidgin and contact sign representing amalgamations in between.



This spectrum does not imply hierarchy (only different language varieties and language contact) until language ideologies engage the spectrum creating value-laden social relationships with one another. Next, I will explain the complex (and sometimes contradictory) dynamics between the prestige that these languages and language varieties carry.

See is a gestural code created with the purpose of helping people who are D/deaf learn English, and potentially ASL as well. In Sean’s experience learning See in pre-

school and elementary school, “it’s expected that people will learn See and just forget it and only speak English or they will learn See, then English, and *then* learn ASL.” Rather than beginning with ASL, teachers use See as a visual-gestural tool to assimilate D/deaf children with the goal of attaining fluency vocalizing and writing in English. See is essentially an oralist, audiocentric method. Sean’s school did not discourage him from learning ASL thereafter, but did prioritize his English education, and therefore his potential to assimilate into the hearing world. Contrarily, his hearing ASL friends could not understand his interest in holding onto his See skills for linguistic curiosity since English is his native language. They encouraged him to replace his See with ASL. Sean’s experience shows that both English and ASL are more prestigious than See.

The status of pidgin Signed English/ASL (pidgin Sign) is more ambiguous. Sean explained it as “sign languages that are mainly ASL but have a lot of English influence,” which are heavily affected by knowledge of how to read, write, or vocalize in English. As of 1972, pidgin Sign was not common [except for at Gallaudet College] and was conflated with “simultaneous communication” (Woodward 1972:5). Also known as sim-com, “people talk a variety of English while they sign something that seems to be a pidginized version of English. The (syntactical) order is primarily English.” According to Woodward, in 1972 pidginized Signed English was “undergoing some very rapid modification towards standardization and correspondence to Standard English” (Woodward 1972:5). This standardization recognizes the prestigious import of English across communication styles and cultures and lubricates the process of assimilation.

By 1991, pidgin sign was viewed as a more widely used variety of Sign that bridged hearing and D/deaf people. The definition and practice of pidgin also began to

separate from sim-com. Pidgin Sign began to refer to Sign that was syntactically structured more like English, but used ASL's visual gestures and did not imply simultaneous verbalization. Sean and April agree that, today, sim-com is typically looked down on in the Deaf community because English structure trumps ASL when attempting to verbalize and Sign simultaneously.³³ As of 1991:

Deaf people rarely use ASL with a hearing person. Instead, Deaf people tend to use a variety of signing that is more like English when they talk with hearing people. The variety has been called Pidgin Sign English...as a result, very few hearing people know ASL. (1991:59)

By now over twenty years later, Deaf and hearing people alike use ASL with each other.

In fact, several interviewees agreed with Sean that now Deaf people use pidgin sign with each other more than they would if there was a non-native Signer present. This indicates the prestige in English influence on Sign. Sean confirms, “there’s prestige to pidgin Signed English among deaf people because it’s a mark of being able to read and write. It shows you know English.” In the Deaf community, the use of pidgin Sign evidences prestige in successful assimilation in mainstream culture.³⁴ He also remarked that “a lot of deaf people sign more pigeon signed English because they think hearing people wouldn’t understand it if they signed ASL,” that they need the English structure to understand ASL because “a lot of Deaf people don’t think hearing people would understand real ASL.” The idea that there could be a “real,” pure form of ASL inspires a

³³ Sean’s perspective on sim-com: “Deaf people hate sim-com. I feel like this is related to why they don’t like See. They really don’t like people who, it’s ok if you mouth while you’re signing ASL, it’s not ok to speak. And the rationality, is the two different languages, if you’re trying to speak full English and sign full ASL, the English will win over. One of them will have to win over and it’s gonna be the English.”

April’s perspective on sim-com: “It’s hard to talk and sign at the same time because your brain, when you talk, says English and your hands are doing ASL. But if you’re fluent in English first, that’s going to take over. So you’re going to start signing English and not ASL and you’ll trip yourself up. It’s like tongue-tied, but hand-tied. Can you talk Spanish and English at the same time?”

³⁴ Sean also mentioned that sometimes people prefer an interpretation that translates English more directly, “they prefer pigeon over full ASL especially in technical lectures” because they can get whole sentences at once and can imagine “exactly what the English sentence was.”

conversation about authenticity (Shapiro 1989). Diluting a language with another suggests a threat. It symbolically injects superiority of the dominant language, putting a minority language like ASL at risk of being dissolved into the mainstream language. Presently, I will focus on beliefs in which prestige in ASL overrides prestige in English.

Sean recognizes prestige of ASL amongst hearing and Deaf people. He says it is often a goal of Deaf people to “sign as ASL as possible but at the same time they won’t necessarily be trying to change the language too much, they’ll be like, ‘oh yeah ASL, that’s the right way to sign but I don’t sign that. I should sign it but I don’t.’” Classroom ASL is seen as an ideal for some Deaf people. Another differentiation that he makes is between “people who are fluent in ASL, who have known it since birth, versus the people who are learning ASL very much have that goal of getting to full ASL.” According to Sean, people whose first language is Sign do not strictly attempt to attain a perfect form of ASL (full ASL). Sean talked about hearing or non-native ASLers striving for “hyper-correct classroom ASL” in the hopes of achieving a more authentic language, and perhaps a more authentic entrée into a non-native culture, Deaf culture. When he has signed See to hearing people “and D/deaf people too who are ASL students, they will be like ‘that’s so ugly.’” Sean wonders, “I don’t know if they would have thought that before they took an ASL class. I don’t think they would have because I don’t think they would have known much about ASL. They’d be like oh it looks like a cool language.” Once again, Sean reminds us that all Deaf peoples’ language ideologies are not homogenous. The relativity of ideologies shows how people can curate the intimacy of memberships with hearing and deaf communities and cultures based on how prestigious language varieties are to them.

Deaf teachers of ASL have a large part in students,' especially hearing students,' language ideologies about ASL:

It's interesting because sometimes I feel like [hearing people] are more adamant about ASL than Deaf people are because I think they support ASL in part because that's very much what the teachers tell them. In the classroom they're very emphatic about ASL is the real sign language. A lot of my friends learn ASL from Deaf people who tell them, 'you must sign ASL and anything that looks like English is wrong.' And they told this lie so they can say 'oh this is wrong.' And they will say if they see someone signing English, 'oh I can't understand them!' Well actually, I don't know if that makes any sense because I feel like they would understand it. It might be that they're not used to seeing it like that but they also say that because they think that's the right thing to do. They come to believe it.

They come to believe that practicing "pure" ASL is more authentically Deaf and that English influence on ASL is a political action to decolonize ASL away from mainstream, hearing, English dominance. I had a similar experience in my beginning ASL course. I aimed to disprove the misconception that ASL is just English in gestural form, following English rules of grammar, believing this delusion needed to be faithfully disproven by detaching English as much as possible from ASL. I came to believe any errors I made in ASL that defaulted to my underlying English knowledge were sacrilege. Sean elaborated on the distinction between "artificial" Sign in the classroom and Sign in its "native" setting amongst Deaf people in daily life:

But it's often a weird dynamic for hearing people. What Deaf people say outside the classroom is more English stuff. Even if it's not actually the case, it's perceived I think to be more English. What you learn in the classroom is more "true" ASL. The deaf people outside of the classroom say, well actually you just learned an ASL that's not real. No one uses it. ASL in the classroom has been hyper corrected away from English. So when I learned ASL in ASL II, they taught us not to use certain structures because they were 'wrong.' But what I realized later is that they were probably a very natural part of ASL they just looked like English even if they didn't come from English. And because there was this other option of ASL, which wasn't that commonly used but still possible, they were like

use this one only! Even though probably even the teachers themselves when they are talking to other deaf people they don't use those. So they end up teaching things that just aren't quite true. No one signs that as a native language.

Sean shows conceptions of prestige in different social contexts accord with language ideologies of ASL. For him, language as it is used through mutual engagements in quotidian practice qualifies as “real,” and therefore his ideal goal. For Sean, ASL as practiced in the Deaf community is most prestigious. These “essential meanings about language are socially produced as effective and powerful,” proving values are conveyed through a variety of channels (i.e. education, Meetup CofPs) and reified through the transmission of ideologies (Woolard and Schieffelin 1994:58). Sean believes hearing people revere ASL based on controlled classroom environments that (implicitly or explicitly) preach language ideologies that contradict those displayed in mutual engagements acted out in the Deaf speech community. He said,

Hearing people definitely put ASL on a pedestal. Kind of like, ‘this is what I must aspire to. And maybe because I’m hearing I’ll never get there but I’ll always be trying as hard as I can to get to ASL.’ And it’s interesting what that says for how hearing students take in what they learn from the teacher versus what they learn from socializing with Deaf people. If you talk to native speakers outside of the classroom they have very different intuition from what you might have learned in the classroom. So you’ll understand each other but they might be like, ‘oh no, we don’t say that word ever. We use this word.’ A lot of that within the context of ASL is what people out there socializing tell you. If they’re Deaf, what they say is usually a given.

Sean identifies contradictions in people’s personal language ideologies and their actual practice. He acknowledges that Signers often code switch (alternate between using pidgin Sign and ASL for example) depending on with whom they are conversing, in order to pass as “more Deaf,” more native, or more authentic. Alternating between codes and corresponding identities rewards Signers the relative prestige they seek in each context.

CHAPTER TWO

Popular Culture Representations of ASL

The opportunity to communicate in sign language, one of the most beautiful languages in the world, is an advantage that deaf people enjoy. It's a language that combines several elements at once with a simple hand movement and facial expression: meaning, affect, time and duration. It's just so beautiful that printed or spoken words can't begin to describe it.

– Marlee Matlin (<http://www.marleematlin.net>)

The previous chapter explicates the positionality of ASL in the past and in the present, looking at how it was perceived, (de)legitimized and employed throughout the last two hundred years or so. The goal of this chapter is to understand the ways in which sign language and signers are represented today since media is a mediating link between social forms and forms of talk. It will set the scene for Chapter Three that explains what motivates people to be ASLers, providing examples of its position in mainstream culture. Media depictions of signers and ASL from fictitious television shows, formal news, and satirical news present a record of these perceptions, especially on the Internet. These examples elucidate the unique opportunity media has to introduce previously ignored stories and embrace media's power to "shape society's views and also have the potential to influence people's attitudes," their linguistic ideologies, and potentially behavior about Sign Language, Signers, and Deaf culture (An et al., 2013: 5). The invisibility of ASL and signers in mainstream society is slowly being peeled back to reveal the distinct, well-established culture and community surrounding D/deafness and sign language. More sources of media address those who communicate primarily with ASL than ever before. ASL's popularity has, overall, increased in mainstream America.³⁵ While increase in prominence reflects progress in terms of visibility, this positive trend does not guarantee a solution to the trivialization of ASL.

Representations of American Sign Language in Contemporary Popular Media

As established throughout Chapter One, it is important to understand the ways in

³⁵ The main point here is not to discover whether the media spurred popularization or the culture pushed for it. There are clearly causal links flowing in both directions as well as a general spirit of activism to recognize marginalized and under-represented communities.

which signing and signers have been thought of and stereotyped in the past. Without doubt, American Sign Language communicators have often been marginalized, typically because deafness has been pathologized and marginalized, not solely because of their mode of communication. Just over a decade into the twenty-first century, consumers of television, movies, newspapers, websites, musical concerts and all other sorts of media, see *more* portrayals of people who sign *more often* as the number of Americans learning ASL increases dramatically.

Portrayals in popular media today reveal the current cultural models (Holland and Quinn 1987)—individuals' implicit and explicit assumptions about society—of who uses American Sign Language in what ways and for what purpose. Cultivation theory affirms that television affects customs and mindsets efficiently since “media are a form of dissemination of cultural norms, practices, and ideologies to society members” (Signorielli & Morgan 2001). Since the majority of hearing people have had little to no experience Signing they form opinions based heavily on what they are exposed to—media representations. To find and assess contemporary models of ASLers, I will examine a few exemplary bits of popular culture: the cast and script of two TV shows (*Switched at Birth* and *West Wing*) featuring characters who sign and the presence of sign language as well as signers in the news (formal network television news, satirical news, and written news reports). Each of these shows, networks, news houses, and some individual actors, anchors, and writers reflect challenges that signers face, a previously scarce narrative in the canon of American media. The prominent presence of these examples and others like it of signers in mainstream media shows the trending ambition to express experiences of those who communicate through sign. Although the narratives

themselves are not novel, the positive pressure to share them is.

Unfortunately, the same sources of media also create new representations of ASLers that are not always well informed or accurate (relying on misconceptions in historically engrained cultural models) and can therefore distort genuine experiences of an already somewhat invisible and often marginalized language and group of communicators. Hopefully, the following examples will elucidate complicated contradictions inherent in representing American Sign Language as well as the inspiring fictional characters who motivate audiences to learn and use ASL. Clips from TV episodes, articles, reviews, public commentary shared on forums, and interviews with the actors and creators of the aforementioned media sources are referenced in order to analyze these reproduced *and* newly crafted depictions.

Mainstream Success

Mary was right: “When people think of deaf, Marlee Matlin pops into most people’s minds. Typically for the hearing person that’s very naïve about deaf, that’s who everyone thinks of probably because she is the only Deaf actor they know well.” Matlin has become a poster child of Deafness in the entertainment industry. She is well respected by hearing and Deaf alike. Her 1986 *appearance in Children of a Lesser God* reminds us that depictions of D/deafness in media are not new in popular culture. This performance won her an Academy Award and a Golden Globe for best actress. To date, Matlin has appeared in nineteen films, more than twenty TV shows, written four books, has a smart phone application that gives Sign lessons (“Marlee Signs), and is raising four children!

Producing episodes from 1999 to 2006, the serial political drama *West Wing* features two characters who appear in all seven seasons (rare for non-lead characters) communicating in ASL. Marlee Matlin plays Joey Lucas, a pollster and political operative based in California. Bill O'Brien performs the role of Kenny Thurman, Lucas' interpreter. Much like *Switched at Birth*, *West Wing* brings experiences of those who communicate with ASL or interact with someone who uses manual communication into the mainstream focus. More obviously though, the show empowers Lucas by placing a deaf female in a highly symbolic domain of power. This allows viewers to imagine that people like her have the capability to succeed in able-bodied white male dominated spheres (ie: politics) in real life. Lucas is portrayed as a cool, admired and sexually desirable woman.

In the following scene, Joey sits with her interpreter who facilitates a conversation about defending national identity by making English the official national language.³⁶ Dialogue bounces between two women (although the other female does not speak in most of the clip), the president and a few politicians:

Politician: Making English the official language of the United States will safeguard against the destruction of our national identity and help us avoid ethnic strife. What say you to that?

Joey: [arms crossed, makes farting sound with her tongue]

Politician: [addresses the president] You see that? That's what I've been dealing with all week.

Joey with Kenny interpreting: Mr. President, 72% of Hispanics are strongly opposed to such a law. The republicans will never put it on the table because they'll risk losing the second largest ethnic block of voters in the country. But if you did need a counter argument, then I'd mention to Monsieur de Tocqueville, over here, that aside from it being bigoted and unconstitutional, it's ludicrous to think that laws need to be created to help protect the language of Shakespeare.

Politician: K that's all I was looking for that one line. Took you four days.

³⁶ As discussed in Chapter One, issues of nationalism, language, and power are intrinsically tied to one another.

Joey: [tongue fart again]

Politician: She did it again.

President: Yup.

[Directed by Don Scardino, “Lies, Damn Lies and Statistics,” first aired May 10th, 2000]

Clearly, Joey is both playful and smart. She also one-ups the male politician. Her rebuke supports more than just her own interest. She does not focus on the explicitly personal response she could legitimately deliver that would address the audiocentric proposal of the politician. Rather, she provides another example of how this policy would upset a large population of marginalized people, Hispanics, let alone other ethnic groups whose identity would be not be prioritized. Before she is done making her point, she reminds the politician and viewers that English has a privileged history that need not be protected over other languages. Joey commands a position of power. Matlin and her character disturb the power asymmetry between oralism and visual-gestural language. In *West Wing* a Deaf female Signer proves to be a respected, critical influential political advisor. This portrayal consciously disrupts expectations of such a demographic.

Finding critical responses of Matlin’s performance proves to be difficult. There is only the briefest mention of Joey Lucas in “The Dark Arts of Good People: How Popular Culture Negotiates Spin in NBC’s *The West Wing*” (Richardson 2006). Richardson is impressed with the range of linguistic variation on *West Wing*. She finds that “many episodes get to display interpretation between English and ASL because Joey Lucas is deaf,” which she describes as “less predictable” (Richardson 2006:59). Even with this unexpected and unique representation of ASL and Deafness in mainstream TV, few researchers mention the show’s recognition of Deaf culture or Matlin’s performance. The lack of work on Matlin’s performance as Joey Lucas may be a positive indication that the

show's writers highlighted her wit and intelligence, with her Deafness as just another facet of her identity.

In the YouTube comments of this scene, viewers learn about the politics of language. Tally388 helps Srd1126 understand that declaring English as an official language of the United States would reconstitute an already privileged mainstream language at the cost of diminishing all minority languages.



Srd1126 3 years ago

How is making english the official language of a country that uses english "bigoted?" It just makes sense to make such a law.



tally388 3 years ago [in reply to Srd1126](#)

@Srd1126 it excludes everyone else in the population. the U.S. has the second largest spanish speaking population in the world. you don't need to make it a law, you don't need to protect english, so you're just excluding people otherwise

Very few posts address Lucas or Matlin (if they do, they often describe Matlin's beauty). The commentary seems not to notice Matlin's natural performance and debate more about immigration politics in conjunction with national language policy.

Nonetheless, even though the show successfully paints a picture of Joey's capabilities, her representation is not perfect. It is worth noting that her ideas are interpreted through a male. A feminist interpretation of her place in the hierarchy of power highlights the fact that she requires a male's filter to affect influence since she literally has no voice. Regardless, her interpreter works for her and is therefore under her professional (and somewhat personal) jurisdiction. So what work does *West Wing* do? It effectively shows that a Deaf Signer can succeed in the workplace. It realizes a future potential to recognize the capabilities of marginalized groups (women, people who are deaf) and envision them in the political sphere, and generally in positions of great responsibility and power.

Recently in her career outside of *West Wing*, Marlee Matlin was featured on *Dancing with the Stars*, exposing the wide public audience to “to a very competent Deaf woman” (Cohen 2008). By successfully dancing to the rhythm, she helped dismiss the popular misconception that deaf people cannot relate to music even if they cannot hear it. She was also accompanied by her sign language interpreter, which allowed audiences to observe the efficiency of the Deaf individuals’ communication through Sign (Decker 2009). Marlee Matlin’s powerful presence in mainstream media successfully inspires viewers to update their language ideologies to reflect that Deaf Signers not only handle, but excel beyond challenges they face, reminding them that ASL is an asset not a barrier.

Perhaps, hearing viewers watching this show will see first-hand the potential a deaf individual has in the workplace, on the dance floor and beyond to learn that employing an interpreter does not hinder capability. As explained in the next section, we realize how interpreting can insure large-scale inclusion or exclusion.

Paradox of Success

Marlee Matlin now stars as a Deaf mother in a primetime family drama. Airing first in 2011 on ABC’s Family network, Lizzie Weiss’s *Switched at Birth* shows the story of two young women who were mistakenly switched at birth. A well-to-do white family raises Bay Kennish, who attends an elite private school. Single mother Regina Vasquez raises Daphne in a working-class neighborhood. Daphne contracted meningitis at a young age causing her to become hard of hearing and sometimes completely deaf. ABC Family’s website describes her as a “hearing-impaired teenager.” The two young women discover each other in the first episode of the first season entitled “This is not a Pipe,”

thematically alluding Magritte's surrealist painting that suggests things are not always what they appear to be. For the benefit of the girls, the families decide to move in together.

The show clearly attempts to provide its audience with refreshed images to challenge existing stereotypes and provide role models for young, impressionable viewers. The umbrella plot itself does this kind of work since families with D/deaf members are rarely depicted on television. For example, in the same episode, Bay spends about thirty purposeful seconds donning and taking off a helmet before and after she bikes—deliberately sending a message to youngsters that even “cool kids” wear helmets. Ironically, Bay rides her bike until she reaches a blank wall where she illicitly spray paints artistic graffiti.³⁷ In this way, *Switched at Birth* repositions viewers so that they may evaluate stereotypes they hold, audiocentric assumptions of supremacy they perpetuate (Eckert and Rowley 2013). *Switched at Birth* works to put daily experiences of people who use sign language in mainstream media, normalizing a communication style historically conceived of as insular.

Since *Switched at Birth* is a new show only in its third season, An et. al provide one of the few academic analyses of the show. In their psychology oriented, hypothesis driven study “Prominent Messages in Television Drama *Switched at Birth* Promote Attitude Change Toward Deafness,” An et. al tested 211 females³⁸ on Cooper, Rose, and Mason's 2004 Attitudes to Deafness scale. The goal of their study was to find attitude adjustment (negative or positive) by comparing participants' pre and post exposure

³⁷ Weiss and her team demonstrate how graffiti is not always harmful and more importantly, can potentially be seen from another perspective as providing creative public art and an outlet for public expression.

³⁸ The demographic of the viewers is heavily female.

outlooks of deafness using a selection of three episodes that display a variety of dimensions, or issues, prevalent throughout the whole series.³⁹ Overall, attitude changes towards deafness increased positively, proving the first hypothesis. The issues most strongly represented in the program (more message content) concerning the dimensions recorded—social interaction, deafness as handicap, Deaf culture, and language issues—show the strongest attitude change, also verifying their second hypothesis.

Furthermore, positions on social interaction, deafness as handicap, and Deaf culture shifted to be more positive after watching an episode of *Switched at Birth*. An et al. attribute this improvement to “content that shows positive deaf/hearing friendships and capable deaf characters” (2013:21). Disappointingly, however, attitudes to deafness concerning language issues shifted negatively. Language issues, defined as “deaf language and communication between deaf and hearing characters,” determine the other three dimensions of social interaction, deafness as handicap, and Deaf culture, delegitimizing any enlightenment in those domains that positively affected participants’ attitudes (An et al. 2013:21). Although the term “deaf language” is not defined, it can be taken to mean the method(s) of communication a deaf individual uses. This includes, but is not limited to, lip-reading, vocalization, ASL, written communication, other sign languages, etc. A clearer term to describe this would be deaf communication.

The researchers attribute the singular negative shift to the “way that deaf characters communicated with hearing characters onscreen” (An et al. 2013:20). In other words, *Switched at Birth* fosters positive attitudes towards deafness and might encourage

³⁹ Hypothesis 1: “Exposure to the test episodes of *Switched at Birth* will increase viewers’ overall positive attitude toward deafness.” Hypothesis 2: “Episodes with higher representation of deafness-related messages will show greater attitude change.” Hypothesis 3: “Dimensions that are more prominently represented will show greater attitude change” only partially supported!

interest in ASL. *However*, the show leaves viewers without a positive cultural norm of how Signers (especially Signers who are not hearing or are HOH) relate to mainstream culture and Deaf culture, and without considerate, constructive ways in which hearing people can learn to relate to Sign Language and people who are D/deaf.

In the remainder of this section, I analyze examples from the show and the actors' own experiences that confirm that the show not only generates new models of some Americans' norms, but also a more widespread popularity of learning ASL to communicate. I find that *Switched at Birth* does not consistently provide representations of "language issues" that transcend audiocentric assumptions, thereby reproducing doubt in ASL as a worthy mode of communication in mainstream society and confirming why viewers might have a negative impression of D/deaf communication practices.

Throughout the show, Daphne copes with the Kennishes' ignorance of Deaf culture, but also of her mother's overprotective drive to defend her "vulnerable" daughter. Daphne tells her mother that the Kennishes encouraged her to attend Bay's mainstream (or "hearing") school that does not offer preexisting support structures for students with specific needs outside the hearing norm. Daphne reports her feelings on attending Bay's school to her mother Regina. Both Regina and Daphne vocalizes and signs simultaneously (use sim-com) in this vignette that also displays subtitles:

Daphne: I need to talk to you. I need you to stop lashing out at the Kennishes. As uneducated as they are about deaf culture, they mean well.

Regina: Those people—

Daphne: Let me finish. You are my mom. You will always be my mom. But I need to get to know them, too. I took a tour of that hearing school where Bay goes. They really want me to go. And I think I'm gonna say yes. So I need you to support my decision ok?

Regina: Absolutely not.

Daphne: What? [no sign]

Regina: You want to be that weird deaf girl with an interpreter following

her around? You know what happens to deaf kids at hearing schools! They're outsiders. Daphne, you can do anything you want with your life, I've always told you that. You're a thousand times smarter than any of those hearing kids who used to tease you and make you feel stupid.

Daphne: It's not going to be like that. I'm not five years old anymore! I don't need you to protect me!

Regina: Yes you do, now I have to protect you from yourself. You know what's right, but you're letting these people pressure you because you're so desperate for their acceptance. Let them love you for who you are, not who they think you should be. [Weiss, series and season premier "Ce N'est Pas Une Pipe," first aired June 6th, 2011]

Daphne refers to Bay's school as "hearing." A hearing person like Bay, would not consider her school hearing or non-hearing. Daphne marks mainstream school as specifically hearing, rather than as an unmarked standard catered to the general populations. This emphasizes the fact that her communication style will be out of the norm at this school. Nonetheless, Daphne chooses assimilation. In response, Regina warns Daphne of some realities that her daughter has undeniably already faced in life. When she envisions Daphne at Bay's school she sees "that weird deaf girl with an interpreter following her around," as an "outsider." While Regina acknowledges the exclusionary results of audism that Daphne would undoubtedly encounter, this argument contradicts the image of Daphne created thus far. We see Daphne communicate clearly with both hearing and deaf people throughout the show; she is already assimilated.⁴⁰

All throughout the episode, Daphne uses sim-com. Regina uses sim-com when Daphne is present, vocalizing otherwise. The Kennishes begin to learn sign so they can do the same. For the full hour of an episode, Daphne functions just as well as any other character in the show without an interpreter conveying her ideas vocally. Daphne's ease

⁴⁰ Assimilation is not a finite process, but rather one that occurs contextually at different paces. The point here is that Daphne is comfortable in an audiocentric setting, but like Sean, might prefer ASL over English or even complete emergence into the Deaf world. Chapter Three will provide personal narratives to ground this ethnographically in non-fiction, personal data.

in an audiocentric environment gives the impression that assimilation eliminates the necessity of, or desire to use, Sign Language. However, as established by my interviewees in Chapter One, Sign may offer Daphne a more suitable mode to express herself and provide opportunities for her to embrace D/deafness.

Throughout, An et al. acknowledge the unique persuasive opportunity media has to affect change, positively and/or negatively. Social cognitive theory “suggests that media can foster learning and positive attitudes in members of society...Media can serve a positive function by portraying deaf individuals favorably and by modeling appropriate attitudes and behaviors” (An et al. 2013:3). Still, any show (especially one that so clearly attempts to correct paradigms of ignorance in mainstream society) runs the risk of furthering exclusion, of addressing some issues but not all, or creating a show that feels inaccessible to the mainstream viewing population. Inherent risk lies in media’s persuasive nature. Brown and Fraser bring the point home: “If viewers perceive media characters as role models, the media characters can have as much impact on certain attitudes and behaviors through vicarious experience as an individual viewer’s direct experience” (2004; Jin 2006). An et al. recognize the potential, but also the risk in their persuasive trade of revealing (or unintentionally creating) stereotypes.

Further details concerning the negative shift in attitude towards deafness elucidate the researchers’ awareness of contradictions between portrayals of ASL use and actual ASL practice. They write:

The persuasive impact of television may be problematic when media delivers negative messages. The language issues dimension...showed a significant negative shift. It appears that viewers of the program felt more strongly after viewing that deaf people should prioritize learning to speak and lip read, even to the potential exclusion of sign language. From the perspective of the mainstream Deaf community, this is offensive on the

grounds that it denies deaf children their connection to the larger Deaf community.⁴¹ Deaf protagonist Daphne navigates successfully through the hearing world in large part because she is able to speak and read lips. It is only in scenes with her mother and her Deaf friend Emmett that she can communicate through sign language. In addition, as Bay and her deaf boyfriend become closer in Episodes B and C, language differences cause tension between the two of them.⁴² Regardless, viewers' negative attitude shift on the value of sign language after watching *Switched at Birth* may represent a significant concern for the Deaf community. This result emphasizes that it is not only what television depicts, but also how it is depicted which influences audiences' attitudes and perception. [An et al. 2013:22-3]

Here, it becomes clear that *Switched at Birth* may not encourage value in sign language even though it does encourage value in deafness because the show gives viewers the impression that ASL is a crutch, a tool towards the ideal of assimilation, rather than a rich and valuable aspect of a speech community and often Deaf culture. The content of the show carries as much significance as the way the themes of the show are depicted. Daphne's decision-making process about her prospective assimilation influences audiences' attitudes and perceptions of assimilation. An et al. found attitudes towards the relationship between hearing and D/deaf to shift negatively because of dysfunctional communication. Dangerously, that negative shift in language ideologies of Sign amongst hearing people could preclude ASL from gaining cultural capital in the mainstream hearing world. That said, "language issues" *do* cause tension. While the negative shift might "represent a significant concern for the Deaf community," the negative attitude acknowledges the realism of a complicated situation that is far from flawless (An et al.

⁴¹ Cooper et al. 2004

⁴² Emmett's entire immediate family is Deaf, and he has a deep mistrust of hearing people. He had always speculated that hearing and Deaf relationships won't work; however, his views change when he meets Bay. She is the only hearing person with whom he has ever developed a bond. In the episode "The Homecoming (Season 1, Episode 10) they fight about Daphne's confession that she like Emmett. Emmett realizes his mother was right, he would never feel comfortable around Bay's hearing friends and family. After a cooling off, he tells Bay he has always just viewed her as "Bay," regardless of whether she is hearing or Deaf. This is the first time he vocalizes. He says, "I just want you." Bay cries happy tears.

2013: 23). Even though this contradiction, hypocrisy, and prospective misunderstanding runs through the current of everyday life, *Switched at Birth* is still audiocentric.

For example, Regina contradicts herself by advising Daphne: “you can do anything you want with your life, I’ve always told you that. You’re a thousand times smarter than any of those hearing kids who used to tease you and make you feel stupid.” Regina knows Daphne *could* survive at Bay’s school and recognizes Daphne’s ability to make her own choices. Nonetheless, Regina sees no need for her to face the pressure of marginalization in her learning environment if she has alternative options that already respect and support her. In this way, *Switched at Birth* does not explicitly preach assimilation, but does establish how complicated Daphne’s choice is. As a young adult, Daphne is trying to assert herself as an empowered individual, incorporating D/deafness into her identity through assimilation. The paradoxical support Regina provides mirrors narratives of assimilation that my interviewees share in the next chapter. These depictions of the politics underlying the position of ASL *represent* real life language ideologies.

Switched at Birth admirably occupies space in primetime television attracting a mainstream, non-selective audience that learns more about the ways in which a family uses ASL especially when at least one member is deaf or hard of hearing. Weiss’s show openly resists replicating existing TV show models and challenges narrow visions of how people communicate off-screen. Still, the show reinforces many stereotypes. Technical aspects of production ignore ASL principles. Biographies and numerous webisode interviews with the actors from various entertainment networks complicate the relationship between their personal history with ASL and its alignment with their fictional characters’ experiences.

Most obviously, many shots (especially close-up head shots) crop some of the gestures out of the frame. While this makes it hard for viewers to learn how the characters sign, it also disobeys a basic lesson that is typically shared in the first or second ASL class sign language student attends. My ASL teacher asked our class to envision a rectangular space in front of them extending from their lower chest to the crown of their head that extends to the width of their shoulders plus about 6 inches on either side. This space creates an invisible frame in which the student should place their gestures. ASLers expect Signers to produce gestures within this perimeter so that addressees can maintain eye contact during conversation. Cropping this performance box violates a fundamental aspect of understanding Sign.

Further technical issues instigate controversy. Viewers debate the actual visual script as well. In online commentary on clips of this scene, [americasgottalent97](#) suggests in YouTube commentary of the clip that the sign Regina uses to express the English word desperate may actually be “thirsty” in American Sign Language, or not ASL at all.



Nicole3900 7 months ago [in reply to americasgottalent97](#)
If I remember correctly I think that is the sign for "thirsty."



americasgottalent97 1 year ago [in reply to ChelseaVenus](#)
Do you know what sign she used for Desperate??? I know thats not the ASL Sign for Desperate but im not sure what she used!



mshafer61 1 year ago
i dont get why they're using sign language

Nicole3900 responds that she used the sign “thirsty” inaccurately attempting to express the words “desperate.” Mshafer61 does not understand why ASL is being used at all, probably because they are both using sim-com and have the ability to vocalize.

More controversy brews over the use of sim-com.⁴³ The characters in *Switched at Birth* almost always sign and vocalize simultaneously exclusively in the presence of Daphne. Daphne herself uses sim-com even when conversing with Regina who is fluent in ASL. This choice most likely rests on the fact that Weiss did not want to risk appeal to mainstream hearing viewers by using solely ASL, subtitles or some other alternative to sim-com. Alternatively, many Signers use sim-com because they believe it helps ASL learners. Weiss's choice to have actors use sim-com trumps pure ASL use, even though (according Sean's comments in Chapter One) sim-com is "hated by Deaf people." Her audiocentric choice validates assumptions that ASL does not fit into mainstream hearing society.

The actress Katie Leclerc (Daphne) is described generically on the ABC Family website sharing where she grew up, her personal hobbies and her career highlights. The blurb also shares that "Katie Leclerc has Ménière's disease, a disorder of the inner ear that can affect hearing and balance to a varying degree. It is characterized by episodes of vertigo and tinnitus and degenerative hearing loss. Leclerc is fluent in American Sign Language." Clearly, Leclerc relates to her character Daphne in that they both experienced a loss of hearing that developed sometime since birth. Leclerc's diagnosis was much later at the age of 20, which explains her off-screen dialect—unmarked, vocalized Mainstream U.S. English (MUSE). For the show, Leclerc took classes with a dialect coach in order to learn how to mark her English with the phonology of a speaker who is deaf and cannot hear her voice (Thomas 2014). This choice is controversial in its own right.

⁴³ Unfortunately, Lucas Grabeel (plays Toby, Bay's hearing brother) is not as educated as he should be himself. In a web interview from Synergistic Productions Inc., called "Integrating Sign Language" he said, "I like to mimic, you know as an actor it's in your nature to do that, so watching somebody and copying signs has been pretty easy. And still, it's English. It's not like you're truly learning some other language. So it's nice" (2012).

This YouTube commentary dialogue responds to an interview in which LeClerc vocalizes with unmarked MUSE. Many posters remarked that they were surprised she can speak without the dialect she assumes as Daphne. Ramirez corrects inaccurate comments and also responds to Crook's shy question about LeClerc's disease, constructively inspiring viewers to learn about Deaf issues in the fictitious storyline as well as the actors' personal lives.



In sum, although *Switched at Birth* altered study participants' attitudes towards deafness positively, the negative shift concerning language issues found in An et al.'s study reflects the audiocentric approach of the show. Daphne models lip-reading and vocalizing to achieve assimilation. While her choice and communicative norms reflect daily reality for some deaf and hard of hearing folk, the creators of the show could recognize television's compelling influence to form viewers language ideologies. If lip-reading and vocalizing are depicted as an ideal tool towards mainstreaming, viewers may unintentionally devalue ASL, disempowering Signers. This equates to an exclusion of a

complex dimension of Deaf culture, a trivialization of Sign.

Trivialization of Sign on the Global Stage

A recent current event brought sign language into the headlines of the world's media. Both the Nelson Mandela's memorial itself and reactions to the interpreting scandal during the event epitomize contemporary language ideologies of sign language and communities of signers. Therefore, it is relevant to our understanding of how Signers are represented in popular culture. From this representation, we can better understand how people who are deaf, hard of hearing, hearing, who do or do not sign, perceive sign language as well as their relation to it.

Regrettably, the protagonist of Nelson Mandela's memorial ceremony on the 10th of December 2013 was not the dignitary himself but the event's interpreter, Thamsanqa Jantjie. Only hours after the approximately four-hour service in which international dignitaries shared eulogies about Mandela, audiences protested that the interpreter gestured meaningless motions.⁴⁴ An article on *The Raw Story*⁴⁵ reports that Jantjie "has been branded fraud by members of South Africa's deaf community,⁴⁶ who said his signing for US President Barack Obama and other world leaders amounted to little more than 'flapping his arms around.'" By understanding the dysfunction of the event, the

⁴⁴ Two deaf members of the South African Parliament tweeted about this *during* the ceremony. Many more spoke up shortly thereafter.

⁴⁵ The first search result that appears from the keywords "Nelson Mandela interpreter." I reference the *Raw Story* article here mostly because this is most likely the first thing a curious person would find about the event.

⁴⁶ Potentially an interesting political connection to the fact that it has now been confirmed (with footage) that Jantjie signed for President Jacob Zuma at the ruling party's 100th anniversary celebrations in 2012 [Raw Story]. This same article quotes Hendrietta Bogopane-Zulu, the deputy minister for women, children and persons with disabilities in South Africa, admitting the government attempted to track down the company Jantjie worked for, but when they "spoke to them wanting some answers they vanished into thin air."

journalism reporting this scandal, and global responses to the reports, we can better understand the place of sign language today, politically and socially. I argue that this event shows the position of ASL to be trivialized. Media and public responses to this trivialization emphasize widespread concern for the treatment and position of sign languages today.

Live feeds and messages posted to social media from journalists in the stadium for the memorial expose that the event itself was poorly planned. Written news reports, shared the chaos further exacerbated by heavy rain. On *The Guardian's* website, one can still find Matthew Weaver and Paul Owen's (now complete and archival) minute-to-minute update of the memorial, consolidating messages from those filing into the venue.⁴⁷ Clearly, the event was “shambolic,” as Weaver and Owen put it. Surprisingly enough, once inside the stadium journalist David Smith tweeted:



This foreshadows the issue of security that Jantjie produced with his failure to interpret; if Jantjie could be proved “fraudulent,” what were his motivations to be on the stage and could he be trusted to respect the power of that space?⁴⁸ Jantjie ruined an opportunity to

⁴⁷ They embedded tweets in their feed, commenting, “Bush and Obama motorcade stuck in traffic,” “Logjam outside VIP suite with Bono, Charlize Theron, and Mandela family members caught in crowd congestion. Mix-up over who goes where,” and “band plays during Indian President’s speech” [Weaver and Owen 2013].

⁴⁸ Furthermore, Jantjie remained on stage for four consecutive hours when interpreters typically alternate shifts to stay concentrated for long periods of time, another indicator that audiences could be skeptical—not to mention the fact that he needed to be fluent in at least five languages engaged by the speakers, even if briefly: South African Sign Language, English, Afrikaans, Mandarin and Zulu.

empower Sign on the global stage. However, his failure brings attention to the fact that people generally agree his employment was unacceptable.

First democratically elected President in South Africa, Jacob Zuma, spoke. Zuma claimed “it is impossible for an event like this to reflect Mandela's humanity...He leaves behind an entrenched legacy of freedom, human rights and democracy in our country...In his honor we commit ourselves to continue to build a nation made up of these values” (Weaver and Owen 2013). Ironically, the legacy of freedom, human rights and democracy was not entrenched enough to confirm the right to South African Sign Language interpretation. Mandela Jr. was reported to say, “to [Madiba], life was all about service to others, and setting those in bondage free” (Weaver and Owen 2013). The mistake of hiring Jantjie to interpret negates the values Mandela encouraged throughout his life and denies those who have a right to interpreting services.

Even in post-event cleanup, the apologies for this story speak to hearing people. Sean mentioned that the public apology he found was neither captioned nor interpreted. That apology addresses the scandalized hearing majority, not the marginalized signing minority. Paulston would argue that this becomes a human rights issue (1997). She establishes linguistic rights are just type of human rights, part of a set of inalienable, universal norms for just enjoyment of one’s civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights (Paulston 1997:81). Denying interpretation exploits the Linguistic Human Rights of signers due to the fact that “power and resources are unevenly distributed along linguistic and ethnic lines” (Paulston 1997:81).

The failure to provide decent interpretation exhibits typical dismissive, marginalizing, and “othering” treatment of signers and sign languages on the world stage.

Although this example does not specifically concern *American Sign Language*,⁴⁹ the event is relevant because the baffled media and public response to the trivialization illustrates general concern for the position of signed languages and D/deaf culture. Many reporters expressed disbelief at the event planners' lack of consideration and the imperialistic implications of such a mistake; the media critically, feeds on the absurd nature of the event.

And then, the media went wild! All sorts of publications, reports, social media, anything and everything heralded the news critical of Jantjie's failure and potential fraudulence rather than nuances of Nelson Mandela or his memorial.⁵⁰ From *The New York Times*, to *The Guardian*, to *The Star*⁵¹, reporters and individuals guffawed at the impossibility that Jantjie received the privilege and great responsibility to empower ASL by rendering it visible (literally and figuratively) from his position on the pedestal, the stage he shared with countless iconic international leaders.

For instance, *Guardian* Journalist Charlie Swinbourne wrote critically about the instance on his blog *The Limping Chicken: Deaf news and deaf blogs from the UK! Lays eggs every weekday* and published an editorial online entitled "Mocking an Interpreter for deaf people is no joke," which helpfully gives a framework to redirect the reaction to a critique of media treatments that mock the victims of marginalization and exclusion rather than Jantjie himself, or the event planners who were responsible for hiring Jantjie.

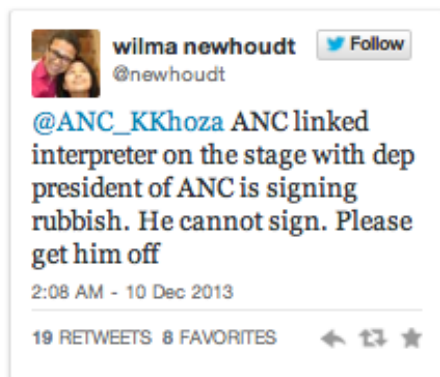
Swinbourne posted:

on a day when the world saluted a man who fought oppression, a guy

⁴⁹ The language of interpretation here was probably supposed to be South African Sign Language, according to my interviewee Sean.

⁵⁰ I acknowledge that I perpetuate this problem by focusing on the scandalous aspect of the interpreter. However, a critical examination of the position of Sign necessitates this emphasis.

⁵¹ *The Guardian* is a British paper and *The Star* is the Johannesburg daily paper



stood on stage and effectively oppressed another minority—Deaf people, by making a mockery of our language...During the service, rather than remembering Mandela, many South Africans (and others from around the world) who were either Deaf, or work with Deaf people, were expressing their outrage. [Swinbourne 2013a]

In this concise message, the blogger addresses the

layered oppression perpetuated by the scandal and

the misplaced (but now necessary) focus on what Paulston would label a human right to language (1997). Swinbourne embedded tweets in his writing to show the international dialogue that was taking place, even if it was not getting enough attention to remove Jantjie from the stage at the moment. Here is a tweet reconstituted from Swinbourne's reference to the Twitter feed of Wilma Newhoudt, Deaf Member of South African Parliament, World Federation of the Deaf Vice President and Deafsa National Vice Chairperson calling attention to the problem in the moment.

Even with public claims on social media like Swinbourne and Newhoudt's, it is important to consider what kind of visibility these reactions receive. Alex Wagner on US MSNBC News proclaimed, "It turns out there was one very big very real faux pas during yesterday's memorial that was visible to everyone across the world." While her intention may be to emphasize the scale of the "faux pas," Wagner's specific wording ignores the fact that person (especially a hearing person) who does not have experience with sign, or more precisely, viewers unfamiliar with South African Sign Language, may not be able to alert the public of the mal-interpretation since they would not be able to detect flaws in the first place. It is also worth questioning why officials were not alerted about the misinterpretation during the event in another way.

Later in the NBC News debate though, Wagner encourages viewers to consider the situation from the inverse perspective (as Swinbourne also eloquently does in his editorial). She lays it out:

Not to be overly serious, but if you did this at the UN Security Council and had a friend translating that was like ‘Bonjour zablalblahblahblah croissant’ people would be furious. It is a testament to people with hearing disabilities. Their protests were ignored to the degree they were. There were two deaf members of the South African Parliament who said this is complete gibberish. No one listened to them for four hours! [Alex Wagner on MSNBC News 2013]

Wagner’s humor feels conveys how nonsensical Jantjie’s interpretation was. She brings attention to the fact that the unmarked “mainstream” hearing population would most likely have been granted more attention had *they* been excluded from a historical event due to poor translation. Unfortunately, prioritization of mainstream perspective is not surprising since a majority pulls more weight in almost any context. However, Wagner was onto something. She attempted to acknowledge the completely avoidable risk of exclusion and disempowerment that could be inflicted by failing to provide an interpreter.

Several news articles and television reports attempt to give Jantjie himself a chance to explain his actions. While his explanations are not all similar, he defends that he was under the spell of a schizophrenic episode. In the Johannesburg daily *The Star* Jantjie claims he was hearing voices and hallucinating: “There was nothing I could do. I was alone in a very dangerous situation, I tried to control myself and not show the world what was going on. I am very sorry. It’s the situation I found myself in” (French Presse Agence 2013). Clinically, schizophrenia can make a person feel physically out of control of one’s own body, as Jantjie alludes to when he said he “tried to control [himself]” (cited in French Presse Agence 2013; Schizophrenia 2014).

Audiences trolling for digests of the event online, as I did, stumble upon a video of CNN's reporter McKenzie interviewing Jantjie:

Jantjie: For the deaf association, if they think that I've done a wrong interpretation, I ask forgiveness. But for deaf South Africans, if you will tell me that I was doing wrong interpretation, then they should answer me why they were silent all the time. All these years they were silent.

McKenzie [challenges Jantjie]: People have complained before when you interpreted for President Zuma?

Jantjie: Listen, listen, I've never ever, ever in my life have anything that said I've interpreted wrong. You can go through all the media of South Africa. I've been interpreting through all the medias of South Africa. Even if you can see my portfolio, I've been in papers for a very long time. No single one said I'm interpreting the wrong interpretation. [CNN Mandela's Interpreter 2013]

While the cause of Jantjie's failure to interpret correctly is allegedly due to mental illness, the crux of the concern surrounding this scandal is first and foremost the fact that the African National Congress did not prioritize employing a reliable interpreter, rather they provided a man accused of "not [being] an interpreter" at all, amongst other serious charges of rape and murder (Mandela Deaf Interpreter Accused of Murder 2014).⁵² This is especially shocking considering the stadium held such a high concentration of potent political public figures, a prime target for terrorism. The absurdity of the fraud and the potent security risk at a globally publicized event launched interpreting, and sign language in general, into mainstream focus. So little effort was put into hiring an accountable interpreter that the safety of the memorial's attendees, and some might argue symbolic national security, was compromised. Thus, media exposes another case of the audiocentric unequal distribution of power valuing oralism, trivializing sign. The "infotainment" sector of news also critiques trivialization of people's right to an

⁵² Notice that Jantjie does not claim that he interpreted correctly nor has the ability to do so. He simply claims that there is no public record of his failure to interpret accurately, which could readily be perceived as circumventing a confession that he is unqualified for the position.

interpreter as well as the diminution of D/deaf people and Deaf culture.

The following transcription from a satirical skit featured on *The Colbert Report* the day after the memorial pokes fun at the belittling paradigm of ignorance that often prevails when sign language is represented in the media:

Ladies and gentlemen, it is an outrage to criticize this man. In your rush to call this good man a fraud, did you ever pause to think perhaps he was translating for the sign language impaired? All the deaf people out there who just never got around to learning sign language but still wanna seem like they're participating. I mean imagine their sense of isolation. There are deaf people out there who can't even understand other deaf people. But now there's finally someone out there who speaks their made up language. Well I have a message for the brave members of the sign language impaired community. [stands up and starts gesturing] I Stephen Colbert, stand with you at this difficult time. [making a fart under the armpit gesture] For too long, *for too long*, you've had no voice. There has been no one to speak for you. [riding a horse gesture. Laugh track cheers] But from great hardship comes great strength. [sprinkler dance move] Did Mandela not teach us reconciliation? [makes finger in fist sexual reference gesture] And forgiveness? So now, let everyone in the deaf community join hands in the spirit of brotherhood and say hey, that's a pretty good bird [Napoleon Dynamite bird gesture]. [Sign Language Scandal. Aired December 11th, 2013]

In his initial address, Colbert ironically suggests that this man deserves criticism, or at least that it is almost humorous to *not* be skeptical of Jantjie. Throughout his witticism, he makes it clear that he believes “this good man is a fraud” who speaks a “made up language.” Saying Jantjie’s gibberish language is “made up” colloquially connotes that it is illegitimate. Colbert’s emphasis in this short phrase clarifies his ironic perspective that indirectly jests at people who do not know that sign languages qualify as legitimate languages, let alone that there are different sign languages throughout the world (ie: South African or British Sign Language). These jests critique Jantjie directly, the ANC indirectly for hiring him, and the overall trivialization of Sign. Mostly, Colbert’s humor satirizes viewers who are ignorant about the authenticity of sign languages.

Most effectively in this monologue, Colbert cleverly upsets the hierarchy of oralism over manualism by marking signing ability as the norm.⁵³ By recognizing a “sign language impaired community” he suggests that those who are able to sign fulfill the norm and those who do not are a specific subset of people who are “sign language impaired,” thereby reversing perspective and subordination itself. He does good work (makes more sociopolitical commentary) inverting audiocentric perspective. He challenges mainstream hearing viewers to consider their language ideologies about sign. Do they perpetuate the trivializing paradigm of ignorance about sign? April similarly explains hearing-minded people who do as “deaf-impaired.” Colbert’s humor would do more work if he focused on the absurdity of the fact that Jantjie—the man who attempted to interpret several languages on the world stage possibly without being certified to do so—is sign language impaired.

The danger though is this: it is possible that he (and more importantly his viewers) may not understand that there really are people out there who “just never got around to learning sign language” or less aggressively, have not learned sign for one reason or another. For those who are unaware, this joke about “sign language impaired” deaf people is humorous because they do not know that this demographic exists. This phenomenon, understanding how communication occurs non-verbally without sign language, is so unimaginable for them that it becomes ludicrous and humorous. If those who *do* know that some deaf people have not learned sign find Colbert’s jab to be funny, they may not remember that the subject is now unrelated to Jantjie. They are now bullying and further marginalizing an already suppressed group of people who may truly feel isolated.

⁵³ Just as Wagner does on NBC News and Swinbourne does on his blog.

Here, the old marketing adage comes into play; is any publicity good publicity? In each of these aforementioned spheres: a recently popular fictitious political show, a primetime family show, and a variety of social and news sources about a current event, sign language (usually ASL and often Deaf culture as well), gains visibility in mainstream discourse. Popular representations of ASL and signers are becoming more evident. It is clear though, that these representations often sustain the paradigm of ignorance pervasive in mainstream hearing linguistic ideologies of ASL and about Deaf culture. Not all publicity is good publicity. The next chapter will report motivations of active Signers to learn ASL. Chapter Three will elucidate the place of ASL in the daily practice of Signers' lives and at large as it gains capital in the hierarchy of language.

CHAPTER THREE

ASL Learner's Motivation to Study Sign

It is important to understand that ASL is the only thing we have that belongs to Deaf people completely. It is the only thing that has grown out of the Deaf group. Maybe we are afraid to share our language with hearing people. Maybe our group identity will disappear once hearing people know ASL. Also, will hearing people dominate Deaf people more than before if they learn ASL?

-Barbara Kannapell at the 1977 National Symposium
on Sign Language Research and Teaching

The hearing world is always there. You can't really leave it. In some ways, I will always speak to my parents.

-Sean

In Chapter Two, samples of TV shows, social media and news indicate ASL's place in mainstream hearing popular culture. I discussed how contemporary media works to critique the trivialized position of ASL (and signed language on the global stage). I demonstrated that some of these efforts successfully reveal and subvert subordination of ASL and Deaf culture, while others present a paradox of success in that they increase visibility and awareness of Sign, but leave audiences with negative ideologies concerning ASL and dynamics between hearing and deaf worlds. The present chapter shares personal motivations of ASLers to learn and use the language. This rich ethnographic data does not un-complicate the issue of who uses Sign and why, but it should shed light on the extent to which Signers described their own motivations to be informed by debates in Deaf communities about acceptable or unacceptable motivations of hearing ASL students. Barbara Kannapell's quote (p. 89) establishes the controversy that arises in the Deaf community about who is entitled to learn ASL. She addresses the risk that, by learning ASL, hearing people could appropriate Deaf culture to the point that mainstream hearing culture engulfs and erases a distinct Deaf identity that becomes colonized and subsumed in the mainstream.

I also share motivation of two Deaf interviewees to learn ASL and the corresponding pressures to prioritize intimacy of membership in the hearing or Deaf world. To accomplish the goals of this chapter, I will consider how ASLers learn Sign, the role ASL plays in Signers lives, as well as the connection ASL supplies between mainstream hearing and minority D/deaf communities.

I argue that Mary, Ann, Mika, and Robert show that motivation to learn Sign is often driven by intellectual curiosity about ASL as a language and benign social curiosity

in conjunction with intimacy (or desired intimacy) with the ASL and Deaf community and culture. Hearing people learn Sign for a variety of personal reasons unassociated with Deaf culture: for novelty (it's different, beautiful and fascinating), due to its cool factor, to fulfill a pre-existing passion for languages and learning in general, inspiration from media, as a bonding activity (for posterity and generativists), for confidentiality or discretion in public,⁵⁴ or to help infants communicate. Hearing Signers also learn ASL to build connections with Deaf community and culture: because they are fascinated by the culture, to communicate with specific deaf persons, to find community (enjoying appreciation and acceptance in a new subculture), with the goal of volunteering time to uplift a marginalized group, or to study professional interpreting (sometimes because it pays well). First, I explain how Signers learn and practice ASL to contextualize where the motivation is put into practice.

Meetup: How Signers Learn ASL

Generously, April spends several hours a week after full days of classes and commuting to host an ASL Meetup. April's boyfriend helps her pay the annual dues.⁵⁵ Besides the minimal financial burden, the group has been so successful in its two years of existence since 2012 that it is now self-sustaining. She explains the support system she founded in the group:

now everybody knows each other so well. I didn't show up for three weeks because of class and they didn't even have to have me here, everybody knows each other. So it's less and less responsibility now that people are capable of doing it on their own. So when there's someone new

⁵⁴ Almost everyone mentioned that they used it to cheat on a test at some point. An Iraq war veteran I met at a Meetup told me he is learning ASL because it is important as a tactic of confidentiality, protection, and security.

⁵⁵ Ann said it's about \$100 annually to maintain a Meetup.

that comes, they've been here for a year they now how it works. I search for deaf events. I post more at the beginning of every semester because I need them to go to for deaf events [for class] but also so people can go.

April makes these events incredibly accessible. Of course, we should consider the fact that one must have the time and resources to seek out and then attend the practice groups. As I mentioned in the Introduction, the groups that gather at the Meetups tend to represent the broad racial and class backgrounds of the Inland Empire, assembling an eclectic field. No prerequisites exist for joining this ASL Community of Practice besides interest in ASL. Therefore, individuals' other identities at the Meetups vary widely.

The main purpose of the group is to create a time, place, and space to practice ASL.⁵⁶ April said, "I needed a workshop. I needed practice. More than just what they have to offer at school." She says she "wanted more practice, more *people* to practice with and I wanted to help them and they help me" since she was a beginner in ASL when she established the group two years ago in 2012. Quickly, "it turned into so much more" than April expected. She reported that 250 members belong to the group now. "Every Thursday now, it's very common to have 20 or 30 people here. Sometimes there's only 5, but it's an average of 20. And now I'm really close friends with a lot of them. I didn't even imagine it." Not only did April bring a Community of Practice into being, her broadened social network confirms the cultural capital that ASL offers.

In the Meetup group, ASL students learn quickly and reciprocally. April exclaimed about the influence of the group:

We have people show up who don't even know the ABCs. One girl came and she barely knew the ABCs. She messed it up all the time. Now, she's

⁵⁶ The home page for one Meetup explains: "A group for Deaf, hard of hearing and students of ASL to meet and make new friends and practice ASL in a fun and relaxed environment. We will be setting up activities just to get out and have fun, such as dinner, lunch, hiking, beach and many other activities a few times a month, just to get out make new friends who speak Sign Language" [www.meetup.com].

been coming for about six months now. She can hold a conversation now. From the help she gets here. And she does it at home too. She's dedicated, so she works at it. And then a married couple, they've been teaching themselves too and the wife is *probably better than me!* She's better than me. She knows more words. Her vocabulary is bigger. When they came they hardly knew anything too. And then in a year! And they come to almost every event that I have. They're here every Wednesday religiously.

April's group is a site for the exchange and emulsification of linguistic capital. The group, like many other ASL practice groups, meet in Starbucks. Even the baristas have learned some Sign and basic customs of Deaf culture. The Meetup group enriches its surrounding, sharing the benefits of the linguistic capital altruistically. The website allows members of the group to create a profile with a picture and about 30 words describing your interest in the group. Other members of the group see this blurb about my



Anya Leyhe

Joined October 17, 2013

Last visited past few days

"Hi! I'm Anya! I'm excited to meet you! I hope to improve my ASL, meet ASLers, and write my senior thesis about how people use ASL to communicate."

motivation to attend ASL Meetups.

For example, Mary's main purpose is to "socialize with the D/deaf as much as possible" because she wants "to

learn more about Deaf culture and communication styles, both." Mary ranked her initiative; "it's mostly about helping me communicate with them but also the culture." Although this is her primary goal of attending Meetups, Mary also mentioned that she enjoys the group because she can tutor students that need help.

Later, I asked Mary about the purpose of the Meetup group in her day-to-day life. She struggled to word her response for fear of being politically incorrect, saying something that would be insensitive to D/deaf people or culture coming from a hearing person. She finally admitted:

Oh for Pete's sake! To be around deaf more. That's it. It's the contact and the practice. Maybe I shouldn't say, but I just wish there were more D/deaf

people that came. It's for the *contact*. I think for the group in general. I think the leader's whole purpose has been for us to practice and to learn it. So socializing with other deaf people or other people that are learning it will help us. If there were more D/deaf people that came that would benefit everyone.

Mary explained not only do different regional dialects of ASL confound some conversations, but every Signer also has a unique physicality and therefore stylized way of signing. She seeks exposure to as many D/deaf Signers as possible so that she can get practice adjusting to these relative styles, which she believes would benefit ASL students in general.

In regards to her careful restraint, Mary is clearly conscientious of how she comes off as a hearing person. She attempts to avoid any comment that could be construed as granting hearing people the right to imperialistically use D/deaf people to gain more linguistic capital, when they already hold so much as a part of dominant, mainstream, hearing culture.

Motivations and Methods of Hearing People to Learn ASL

The first question I was asked in my ASL class, each Meetup, and in every context related to Sign was why we, the hearing students, were learning the language. Why, as a hearing and verbalizing listener and speaker, am I taking the time to learn a visual-gestural language? Mary agreed that Deaf people often ask hearing people this basic question with much curiosity, and little restraint. Mary recounted, "If you're hearing, they always want to know, are you in ASL II, III, IV, V, are you an interpreter? They want to know why you know sign language. But they don't ask, 'why do you know sign language?' They say well, are you an interpreter? Are you in ASL or are you a

student?" Here, Mary refers to the reality that ASL students typically have a connection, a predisposition, or a clear purpose and context for learning the language. For many of my informants, myself included, the motivation comes from a web of personal intersecting curiosities.

Mary, for instance, is a hearing woman who works as a teacher's aid in a public school special education classroom that unites deaf children bused in from various places in the Inland Empire. She taught herself Sign Language from books and immersed herself in Deaf culture by attending Meetups and Deaf events. She does not have any certification to interpret. When I asked Mary why she thinks hearing people learn sign she answered that she knew I was going to ask her this question and then candidly proposed:

You know, I've been wondering why. When I first started working with the deaf teacher was happy and surprised like, 'Oh! You know sign!' For the next couple days that I was in her classroom she was explaining to me 99% of the people that learn sign language it's because they have someone in their life that's deaf or disabled. That's what she said. I always thought about that. Well for me I don't know anybody. I've never known anybody that's deaf or anything. So for me that's not the reason. I don't know. I don't know what could make a hearing person want to learn sign language other than that it's beautiful. It's fascinating. For me, just flat out. It's fascinating. It's a beautiful language. It's beautiful. It's pretty, to put it in childish terms, cool. It's cool. I mean you can communicate with someone with your hands. We're so reliant on our senses.

Immediately, Mary addresses the most common assumption (according to my findings) of why people believe sign languages are learned, "they have someone in their life that's deaf or disabled."

It is commonly held in mainstream hearing culture that sign language is learned as a solution to a communication deficit, either for one's own lack of hearing or another's. Mary ruminated on the spot, mentioning that she just thought for the first time her interest

in ASL could subconsciously be based in her connection to disability. She mused about whether she gravitated towards Sign because her son is autistic or because she was diagnosed with a learning disorder in her young adulthood. After entertaining this possibility briefly, she concluded that, no. She was fascinated with sign language since sixth grade, well before she was aware of her own disability or was anywhere near parenthood. Mary believes curious Sign learners like her with no obligation are perhaps out of the norm: "I think my story is unique, that I taught myself, that I've always been fascinated with it. It's interesting to [Deaf people] that I'm fascinated with deaf culture. Because typically, other people, they started learning when they went to college. And so, the reaction I usually get a pretty shocked reaction, like really! Wow! But it's not shocking to me!" Mary's assumption that her motivation is out of the norm is confirmed by "shocked reaction[s]."

What is out of the norm about Mary's trajectory (as a hearing person) with ASL is that her interest sustained over several decades. She tenaciously perused her interest without any sort of obligation or responsibility. I asked her if it was hard to learn ASL. Mary replied:

Not really. Not for me. And that's because I have a desire and a passion for it. Because I know some people, 'Oh it's just so hard!' And I think, really?! I strongly feel that we're all meant to do our own thing. So I was meant to work with the deaf. So that's why it's easy for me. Someone that wasn't meant to work with them, they might struggle...Like fate. I don't call myself religious, but I do believe in God so that does play a part...I fell into it. Literally fell into it. I decided in 1999, 2000, because I'd always had this fascination with sign language, I just decided I am gonna learn sign language. I want to. I don't know *anybody* that's deaf. So I went out, bought a book and memorized the whole thing. I taught myself sign language. I understood though that knowing the signs did not mean I could communicate with a deaf person because there is a whole grammatical structure. So I learned all the signs and then I was like, 'Well I don't know anybody that's deaf. I can't ever use this.' So I set it aside and forgot

about it and then a friend of mine told me that the county was hiring. I thought well ok, I'll go ahead because it was time for me to get a job. I was done being a stay-at-home mom. So I applied and got the job as a sub teacher's aid going to different schools everyday, subbing in autistic classrooms, MR classrooms. Well one day I subbed at the school that I'm working at now and the teacher said 'you know sign language?!' And I went 'well, I know signs.' 'Oh! You want a permanent job? You want to work here?' I've been there ever since.

Mary's fervent drive to learn ASL does not correlate with a specific person in her life, but a general fate she believes she was destined to fulfill. She perceives herself as what Robert refers to as a *bridge builder* between the D/deaf and hearing world (see Chapter Four). Her dream is to be a teacher, to help kids by explaining concepts until she discovers the format in which they best receive information, something she wishes her teachers had done for her. Although community interpreting is an option for Mary, she feels that it carries "too much pressure." Community interpreting, interpreting through an agency or in a more "official" context, typically pays much higher than a public school job.

In order to reach her goal of becoming a teacher, Mary engages herself in Deaf culture. She began as a peripheral member of the Deaf community and has since gained enough sociolinguistic competence from attending Meetups and other events to qualify as a core member. Mary gains much personal fulfillment, but very little compensation. This is proven by the fact that she earns just above minimum wage, but chooses this profession over working at Wal-Mart and Del Taco because that "isn't meaningful." In her own words:

I've been trying to immerse myself in the deaf culture lately by going to all these deaf events and trying to—because the hardest thing about sign language is the receptive. Meeting different deaf people and be able to understand what they're saying. Everybody signs different. Everybody has their own style. And so, I'm just trying to get used to meeting as many

different deaf people as possible. It's a struggle right now [to imagine how I will get through school to become a teacher.] A ten year [track] is the best I can do right now. We'll see where God takes me.

Led by spirituality, Mary demonstrates that her involvement stems from a place of fascination. Her experience represents the interaction of dominant hearing culture and D/deaf community/culture. Her attendance at Meetups and the like *became* related to her work, and furthers her interest. She does "try to learn more" because she interprets for a student. Mary's fascination with ASL predates her professional involvement interpreting and is unassociated with salary.

Similarly to Mary, Ann also found an interest in sign. She says she "researches everything about ASL." Making the most of retirement from her positions in local police departments, Ann self-identifies as a "learning junkie." Sign makes her "think creatively" because it's "it's kind of like a puzzle." Throughout our lengthy interview on her huge blue sectional couch, Ann became a quick friend. It was obvious that she is a people person. She shared the story of how she, a hearing woman, became inspired to learn sign. Ann describes meeting a deaf woman in her thirties who displays "developmental disabilities:"

Throughout the day I'd see Jess just lookin' at me. And then I'd look at her and I'd smile and she'd smile and I'm like, oh *wow* I would just *love* to be able to *communicate* with her! So we were going to see them again in two weeks so I thought I've just got to learn a little bit of sign language to communicate with her a little bit. I thought, well everything's on the Internet. I bet I could find stuff on the Internet. So for two weeks I crammed, just basic things, not even going along in order of the course, thinking what words would I want to say to her they might not be in the right order but she would get the gist. So she came over and I signed to her, 'hi how are you?' She got the biggest smile, *came* over, gave me a hug! She was just all smiles. I'd fingerspell, so I'd ask her signs and she'd help me.

Inspired by her encounter with this deaf woman, Ann kept learning Sign. Clearly, the women were mutually excited that they could begin to converse in ASL. Ann's effort to recognize Jess's communication style was the beginning of her relationship with the Deaf community. Ann shared another story about how she was able to recognize another person's wants and ease frustration simply by using a mutually intelligible language.

Every two weeks, Ann works with a group of volunteers to throw a party for adults with "special needs" (Special Needs Parties). This, Ann says, is an opportunity for them to have fun, to socialize, dance, and get creative with arts and crafts. She remembers when one of the party goers "comes running up to me all frantic saying, there's no paper over there and she wants to color. So I didn't have to just blow her off because I don't know what you're saying I could go get her more paper and crayons." This simple change made her aware of the fact that a typical reaction of someone who does not use Sign would have been to "blow her off" or ignore her, and isolate her.⁵⁷ At the Special Needs Parties, Ann became the point person for D/deaf people to convey a message. Like Mary, Ann is a bridge builder between the Deaf and hearing worlds as a member of the ASL speech community. She did not mention a desire to pursue membership in the Deaf community and admits that she may never achieve fluency. Still, she candidly cultivates warm relationships with folks in the community through a common interest in Sign.

Ann laughed when I asked her if she had ever thought of pursuing professional interpreting. She reminded me that she is retired and losing her memory. It is important to note that Ann has the ability to learn Sign because she is privileged enough to have ample

⁵⁷ She also unearthed a tacit assumption she previously held: "I always assumed if they aren't talking, they're autistic. I never thought they were deaf. I never thought, oh these that don't talk, maybe they're deaf, maybe they Sign."

time to devote to the study. Driven by a strong sense of generativity, Ann shares her learned skill with her grandkids. She told me, “I’m not looking for a job or anything like that, but I really enjoy doing it with the [grand]kids. It’s just a lot of fun. I really enjoyed going to the Meetup to practice.” She summed up several reasons why many of my informants (especially hearing) have interest in learning ASL, speaking more broadly about the language ideology she shares with many:

There’s a number of reasons why I like teaching them sign. It gives us something in common to do together, which is really fun and nobody else knows it, so it’s kind of just our secret. It’s kind of just a cute little secret thing and the older one, she likes knowing stuff that her parents don’t know. She likes to be able to converse and her parents don’t know what she’s sayin.’ The other thing is, like I said before it’s another language. And they’ve always said that learning another language is good for your brain because it makes the synopsis of different connections that you haven’t made before. So it’s good for your brain. And if we’re going to be having more and more deaf people I think it’s good for kids to at least be familiar with some of the basis or when they see it to recognize what it was and not somebody doing *gang signs*! And if we need more interpreters, maybe she would want to follow through with it and become an interpreter or something. For the babies, it just reduces their frustration a lot, so they don’t have to throw their little tantrums because no one knows what they’re talking about.

Primarily, Ann sees Sign as a productive learning activity to bond with her grandchildren. She, unlike any other interviewee, speaks about hearing people learning sign from the perspective that it will benefit *them* to familiarize themselves with the norms of ASL speech community. This language ideology relocates the locus of purpose in learning ASL from “for the benefit of those who are ‘disabled’” to “learning to operate with them,” collaboratively. Her ideology (cultural system of ideas about social and linguistic relationship) that learning ASL is about collaboration comes loaded with “moral and political interests” (Irvine 1989:255). Ann relocates cultural capital from ASL, bringing its worth into mainstream recognition. On the contrary, many informants share the belief

that hearing people learn ASL with the end goal of benefiting D/deaf persons. This contradiction will resurface in Chapter Four in relation to hearing people's savior complexes.

Analogously to Ann and Mary's thoughtful interest, Mika was motivated to teach herself American Sign Language while living as an ex-pat in China. Mika comes from a Dutch family who moved between France, China and the Netherlands during her primary and secondary school years. Currently, she attends one of the Claremont Colleges. Her unique upbringing sparked her general interest in language, but it was American media that motivated her interest in Sign. Mika says, "I fell in love with *Bones* [TV show], fell in love with anthropology, I wanted to be in the US for once in my life...I was only ever allowed to watch TV in English, that's how I learned English. I was only allowed to watch BBC, CNN, Cartoon Network, Disney Channel."

Mika is serious when she says she became obsessed with these shows, anthropology and moving to the US. She also assured me that, even if it sounds ridiculous, she makes life decisions based on inspiration from media. *Bones* and *NCIS* (*Naval Crime Investigation Scene*) both feature specific episodes and moments where characters use sign language. These shows spurred her interest in Sign as a channel to explore American culture; they intrigued her so much that she relocated from China to the US for her college years. Mika is serious about TV and serious about ASL.

She describes the scene when the protagonist of *NCIS*, Gibbs, signs with another character Abby:

they would sometimes just start signing to each other. Obviously there were subtitles so you would understand what was going on, but I realized that I'd never really thought about the deaf mute community because that's not something that I've come in contact with in my friends or family

or anything. And I started researching it. I started replaying every single segment when they were signing and tried to delude myself into thinking I was understanding it a little bit, which I do with all languages. I had just got done with my third year of Spanish and was pretty confident in my ability to learn language by myself. And then I started talking to my mother about it, who had a great uncle who was deaf. She told me about how he was a great uncle, so that's two generations back, so he was really ostracized and considered dumb and inferior to the people around him which was a big shock to me because that's really *fucked!*

Replicating the process through which she learned English, watching TV programs in English, she began to practice Sign. Clearly, the personal connection with her great uncle fired her intrigue as well. To follow through with her interest in ASL, she taught herself Sign vocabulary from dictionaries and quickly discovered the grammatical structure she would need to study in order to learn more than just vocabulary. Free websites with video clips of Signers taught her structure, dialectical differences and a bit about American Deaf culture. Since Mika still lived in China at the time, she found it difficult to progress with her ASL skills when there were no discussion groups or affordable opportunities to hire a tutor. Still, the power of the Internet enabled her to learn the fundamentals of Sign. Freshman year in Claremont she attempted to join an ASL club at the Claremont Colleges, but the club dissolved when the leaders graduated a year prior.⁵⁸

As Mika confirmed, Robert claims that hearing people learn American Sign Language most frequently because "there's somebody in their life that sends them to it." However, Robert maintains that "now a'days it's because they're making a living doing it. Language and money. It's so difficult to keep apart. The reality is probably that more people learn it to make a livin' at it. It's a sad reality. But outside of that I think it's cultural, tribes, family, cousins, brother, sister, parents. Marriage cases, children."

⁵⁸ Sean started an ASL club at the Claremont Colleges since that now meets once a week.

Robert, a CODA and self-identified Deaf native, holds firmly that ASL is being commoditized by hearing ASLers who learn the language purely to make a good salary from community interpreting, neglecting, and perhaps endangering Deaf culture itself of assimilation into mainstream.

Most of the hearing-minded interviewees did not explain their own motivations to learn Sign in relation to debates in the Deaf community about acceptable or unacceptable motives of hearing people. Mary recognized that her positionality as a hearing person in the Deaf community complicates the Deaf community's acceptance of her motivation. She carefully claims that contact with more Deaf people would benefit her, and the Meetup group as a whole, attempting not to imperialistically imply that their presence is valued because it serves hearing Signers needs. Robert, an attitudinally-deaf hearing Signer, explicitly mentioned *other* hearing people's unacceptable use of Sign for selfish capitalist ends. In Chapter Four, interviewees show more concern about *how people use ASL* in relation to debates in the Deaf community.

Motivations Of People Who Are Deaf To Learn Sign

It is important to consider Deaf perspectives of ASLers motivation. Several hearing interviewees admitted their audiocentric preconception that, before they began learning ASL, they believed all D/deaf people know ASL. April (47) and Sean (20) did not begin learning Sign until two years ago. For them, finding ASL became a way to get involved in Deaf culture and embrace their deafness. Sean is a deaf student at the Claremont Colleges. He explains his experience:

I started to recognize that communicating in English was not perfect for me, that I could do it, but I didn't always enjoy doing it as much. Even

though I didn't know ASL as well as English, ASL still had some advantages that English just would never have for me. There will be a day I think where I will be more comfortable communicating in ASL than in English. Right now, they're getting kind of close. Definitely if I don't have my hearing aids in I'm obviously more comfortable in ASL, but it might surpass English as my first language. It became part of my identity. When I have ASL, I think about my deafness in a different way. In a more positive—it's simultaneously more positive because I don't see my deafness as so bad, because ASL turns into something a little more positive.

Although English is his first language and therefore his native tongue, he identifies potential in ASL as a more suitable mode to convey his thoughts, to the point where he would identify Sign as another indigenous language. Once more proficient in the language, Sean believes Sign could feel more native to him than his first language because of its inherent recognition of D/deaf identity. ASL functions as a mediator between his perception of himself and the public discourse on disability surrounding deafness, so that he sees deafness as a cultural asset to celebrate and share.

However, Sean has not yet found his ASL cultural capital completely outweighs the opportunity afforded to him from his ability to vocalize and hear English through hearing aids. He feels that assimilation into hearing culture grants him opportunities not available to him if he shed his hearing aids and Signed primarily. He made a trade off by choosing mainstream education at the Claremont Colleges (electing to operate primarily in mainstream hearing higher education) because he was afraid he would not get a job.⁵⁹ The delight of finding ASL and its subsequent fulfillment is mitigated by the following paradox:

At the same time [finding ASL] does make me more frustrated. I'm like, 'Oh now that I've seen this other world, this world...[makes a disappointed face].' I still love Claremont, but now I realize it's not

⁵⁹ He also mentioned that Deaf educational institutes are not as well reputed or challenging as mainstream ones. For Sean, there is less prestige, less symbolic capital, in a Deaf college or university.

perfect for me. And it will not be perfect for me because I have this other aspect to me that Claremont just does not nourish at all. But the thing is, it's not that I'm inventing these problems, it's just that I always took them for granted and now I don't take it for granted if I miss something. I used to be like oh ok, whatever. Now I'm like ok whatever, *but* in the back of my mind that's because I'm deaf and that's because I'm at this school and that's because we communicate in spoken English and if I were somewhere else I might not have these issues. There are a lot of things where I'm like, 'Oh I'm deaf, I have to accept it.' Now I'm kind of like, I don't have to accept these things. But at the same time I'm very used to being able to survive.

Sean describes existing in the mainstream domain as “surviving.” Structural audism inherent in English and hearing culture becomes clear when compared to Sean's feeling of easy identification in ASL and Deaf culture. Since the D/deaf scene at the Claremont Colleges is largely invisible (especially to outsiders) and there are no formal contexts in which to learn and use ASL, Sean's linguistic and cultural capital floats unattached to any particular Community of Practice in this domain.

Outside of the Colleges, Sean comes together with other ASLers at Meetups. A majority of the people at the Meetups I attended was hearing. I asked April how she feels about hearing people learning Sign:

Awesome. The more they know, the better I can communicate with the world. But I'm realistic and I know that obviously everybody's not going to. You pick and choose the language you want to learn. Some people think French is beautiful that's what they're going to learn. If they don't know a deaf person or don't work with deaf people, they don't really have a reason to do it, except for if they think it's cool. They might think it's cool anyway if they do it, but if someone doesn't learn it I don't look down on them. It's not the language they choose to learn. Some people don't want to learn another language. It's a lot of work. I think if you're in the medical profession, you should learn it. That and Spanish. But then again, it's just this huge melting pot. I can't expect everyone in the medical profession to know every language. But the hospital should always have someone on hand that can interpret.

April is “realistic.” She puts herself in the perspective of a hearing person with no personal connection to D/deafness. From this perspective, she sees no incentive to learn Sign unless the motivation is directly related to one’s personal interest in ASL as a “cool” language. The only domain in which ASL should be required, according to April, is the medical field. This obligation is no longer about cultural capital or “coolness.” It satisfies functional purposes.

Without a doubt, April believes hearing people have every right to learn ASL. In fact, she views an increase in ASLers (hearing or deaf) to be extending the Deaf community, enriching it with more perspectives and more opportunities to learn about each other. April actively realizes her opinion. She has become a community leader, embracing social media websites to bring people, hearing, HOH, *and* Deaf ASLers, together in person.

The motivations of family members of D/deaf people to learn ASL are complicated in a similar manner. Withholding communication styles from children or forcing communication styles upon people becomes a power play that complicates family dynamic.

Family Dynamics in Motivations to Learn ASL

Since several interviewees harped on motivation (of themselves or others) to learn Sign typically being interrelated with a D/deaf friend or family member, it is important to address how they spoke about close relations who choose to, or not to, learn ASL. Mary shared some particularly striking opinions and examples collected from her thirteen years of interpreting in a Deaf classroom. I asked her how the parents of her students communicate with their children. She responded:

Since I've been working in the deaf classroom since 2001, we've had two parents that have known sign language or that bothered to learn it. Out of all of these years, all of these students, two parents know sign language. It's kinda shocking. So there's not communication at home. It's only at school. And then something that really hit me—I used to work with a deaf teacher and she got pregnant and had a baby. She invited me to the baby's birthday and it was all deaf people. And one couple had an infant that was just born, maybe a month old. And I noticed the baby started crying but the dad was talking with another person, they weren't engaged so he didn't hear the baby cry, obviously, but he kept checking on the baby, looking at it in the car seat and going back to Signing. Then one time he looked and he noticed that the baby was crying. So what did he do? What do you do as a hearing person? 'Ok sweetie! I'm here' So you pick it up. You talk to the baby right? You *talk* to the baby. You say *hello* verbally. What he did, he was signing in the baby's face. And I thought, that's so interesting because our deaf students don't get that. They don't get it here and they don't get it here [makes gestures and points to ears]. They don't see it and they don't hear it. Cause the parents don't know sign language so they're not signing in the baby's face from birth. They're not talking. And if they are, the baby can't hear what they're saying. They're getting none of that. The teacher I was working with was telling me it actually does something to the brain if there's no communication it actually damages the brain. I always knew that was wrong. If you have a deaf child, you need to learn sign language! How else, ya know?!

Mary was visibly upset that hearing parents of deaf children aren't learning Sign. Her anecdote in which a deaf father Signs to his baby clarifies that she does not view English as a mode of communication superior to Sign. Mary views ASL and English as equal linguistic capital for the infant; she suggests no hierarchy between visual-gestural and vocalized language. She simply expects parents to teach their children to communicate and convey emotions, thoughts, desires, signals and messages. Endowing communicative skills, linguistic capital, is an obligation and responsibility a parent assumes from the moment of their child's birth.

Still, Mary feels very strongly that parents of deaf who do not learn Sign strand their children without any linguistic capital. She tells of other children who have struggled with the same situation:

I think it's horrible. I think it should be child abuse. I really do. We've had students that are smart enough to realize, Monday! Yay school! I can go there and communicate! Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday they melt down by Thursday, Friday because they know they won't be able to communicate. The weekend's coming and I'm not going to be able to talk to anybody. All weekend. They cry when they have more days off than just Saturday and Sunday. Sometimes it's really bad. I remember years ago I had a student that Christmas break, she was just a mess because she didn't wanna go home and be alone. I get it. There's really no communication at home. What are they gonna tell 'em? [The parents communication] is all gesturing. Like, go take a shower. How do you [tried to gesture a showerhead spraying]? Go to bed? I interpreted a meeting one time for a parent that didn't know sign language and the student was there and they communicated [makes silly gestures only with face] with eyebrow movements! Is that enough for you because it's not enough for the kid?! A lot of deaf people I know now that have grown up and their parents didn't learn sign language it really does a number to them mentally. It really gives them emotional problems. You know you're parents don't bother to learn how to communicate with you?! What if you're a girl and you start your period? How are you going to talk to your mom, you have no one to talk to about that? Kids are picking on you at school, how do you tell them? I mean sure you can write back and forth, but come on. You're going to sit there and write back and forth. And there was a student who can't even write proper English sentences anyways.

Mary imagines the distress of going through life without fluidly communicating with the people whom I love most, putting herself in a Deaf frame of mind. I asked her why parents choose not to learn Sign. "A lot of it, I hate to be like this, a lot of it's cultural. The majority of our students have been Hispanic. And the parents speak mostly Spanish. We've had two students that weren't Hispanic [in thirteen years of teaching]," Mary disclosed. Cultural differences may be at the root of this lack of motivation to learn Sign. According to Mary's experience with Hispanic parents, supplying alternative linguistic capital may not necessarily be prioritized in their culture. The issue has been explicitly addressed. In parent meetings, Mary said that the principal tells parents 'you've got to learn sign language,' to which they respond 'No. I don't need to.' Why not? 'I don't need to! I don't want to, it's too hard.'" Mary confirms the ambiguity in the source of the lack

of motivation, “We’ve kind of determined that it’s kind of cultural. You know. Again, what does that mean, cultural?” Mary herself recognizes that this could potentially be an ethnocentric (or racist?) claim grounded in lack of understanding. From her perspective, the parents are extremely audiocentric because they would not sacrifice the time, efforts and resources, even at a great cost, to afford their child a much-needed form of capital, linguistic capital. These parents rely on the school district to provide them with this right.

This issue is not a new one. In 1972, Woodward wrote “environmental (social) factors influencing language development [in ASL] probably are: social class, educational level of parents and self, date and degree of hearing loss of parents and self, type of school (oral vs. manual) attended” and more (3). Parents’ socioeconomic backgrounds heavily manipulate the matrix of factors influencing a Deaf child’s language acquisition.

April also relied on her kids’ school district to provide ASL. She was “disappointed” when she found out they did not offer Sign in her kids’ public high school because she “wanted them to learn it.” She explained that her daughter has moved on to a small college in Southern California, but that institution does not offer ASL either. April reminds me that she is the only D/deaf member of her family, and certainly the only ASLer. April said, “My kids don’t know it. They haven’t learned much of it yet. My daughter’s going to but she’s so busy working full time and going to school full time.” Although this situation did not make her happy, she was by no means devastated. She understands that ASL is not a priority for her children; that it would not probably not hold as much cultural capital or be as personally enriching for them as it is for her. For April’s

children, work and specific courses at school take precedence over learning Sign. April suggested that her children want to learn it, but have yet to make the commitment.

On the other hand Mika believes some people do not learn ASL out of fear. She explains an audiocentric fear that they (or their children) would assume a disability, or an association with impairment:

I think it's part of the fear reaction. I'm not deaf, why would I? That doesn't happen to you. I think a lot of parents wouldn't want to teach their child sign language because it seems like it would be impairing to actual speech because I read a lot about it. Testimonies that were like, 'I never thought I would do this because I felt like my child wouldn't learn to speak as fast if she had this way of communicating at hand, which is a reasonable fear, but at the same time kids aren't stupid. I know a girl who was born deaf and her dad had to learn sign language for her and he said that was one of his most traumatizing thing to do as a father. To have to learn a whole new language because his child was hearing impaired. He was really bad at languages! It's a challenge. He realized how much work it was for him to do it, and obviously he would do it because it was his daughter, but the realization was no one else is going to put in this time, people that aren't related to them. And I think that is what is most scary about learning this language. It's because you're aware that someone else is going to be dependent on other people having learned that. And that's not something you can rely on that securely.

Fearful hearing parents, like this father, worry about disabling their children from mainstreaming by teaching them Sign. All interviewees agreed that hearing family members of D/deaf and HOH learning ASL should be viewed as bridge builders, who break down the dichotomy between distinct realms of hearing and D/deaf. Interviewees spoke of those who choose not to learn ASL as further delineating separate universes of daily life, sites of distinctly Deaf or hearing culture. The section "Discrete Worlds, Bridge Builders and Assimilation" in Chapter Four expands on connections and dissidence between worlds and family members.

CHAPTER FOUR

Implications of ASL Practice: A Web of Colonization

You want to give power to a D/deaf person, the road to open communication and understanding, but do not make the choices for them. Just give them the choices. Give them the information they need to make the choices.

- Sean

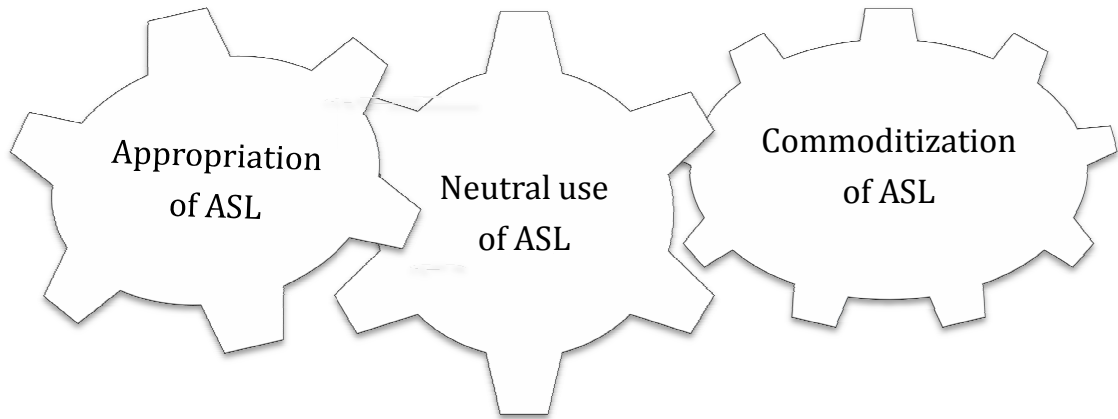
Chapter three provides accounts from ASLers in order to illuminate their motivations to learn Sign. Many hearing Signers motivations illustrated that they sought membership in the ASL speech community, but not necessarily the Deaf community. Others strove to learn ASL to form links between Deaf culture and mainstream hearing culture. Chapter Four aims to show the implications of Signers' ASL practice. I will examine intersections and divergences in people's ideologies on how ASLers *actually* use, *should* use, or *should not* use the language. This chapter reveals the controversy in the debate about the place of Sign Language and its students within that context. I will identify materialized language ideologies, focusing on how practices based on these philosophies are perceived once in action.

To begin, I will explain what interviewees repeatedly spoke of as discrete hearing and Deaf worlds. My interlocutors (Deaf and hearing) referenced experiences of Deaf people floating between these worlds, assimilating and de-assimilating sometimes by choice, other times from a force of pressure.⁶⁰ Bridge builders, Robert's label for people who partake in the Deaf community and mainstream hearing culture and facilitate connections between the two, softening stark contrasts between clashing customs and positions of these realms. Ann and Sean's practices prove that discrete worlds can be bridged through hearing and Deaf people learning Sign. Chapter Four will answer: who is entitled to bridge build by Signing, through what means, and for what ends? I share anecdotes that illustrate ideologies of discrete worlds hearing and Deaf worlds that are bridged by ASLers. Following this, I focus on these three areas of the web of ASL use and corresponding implications. Interestingly, my interviewees' responses focused on the

⁶⁰ This pressure comes from a matrix of factors: self-imposed, familial, institutional, historical, social, etc.

two extreme implications of hearing ASLers use of Sign more than their first-hand experiences in the neutral mid ground. They often shared stories of people whom they met in their CofP, which illuminates general concern of these colonial implications.

From interlocutor responses, a web of implication of ASL use emerges, especially in regards to hearing users.



Some interviewees hold the extreme view of hearing Signers as *commoditizers of ASL*, egotistically decontextualizing it from its significant cultural and historical moorings in the name of personal financial profit. This was in specific reference to hearing Signers who become mainstream interpreters for a high salary.

Another exceptionally negative view interviewees hold is that overzealous hearing ASLers (who are not native to ASL or Deaf culture) are seen as aggressively *appropriating the language*. These hearing Signers attempt to patronizingly uplift a subjugated population whom they view as plagued with disability(s). Maintaining safe membership in the hearing world, they are often believed to use ASL as tool to “uplift” Deaf people, implying that they are incapable not only of hearing, but of advocating for themselves. This phenomenon will be referred to as the savior narrative. They

imperialistically attempt to become Deaf, claiming ownership of Deaf advocacy and ethnic renaissance even though their indigenous culture (mainstream hearing) is already privileged.

These critiques pose hearing ASLers' practice as *colonizers* of Deaf culture through the imperialistic commoditizing or appropriating control of Sign. Amongst these perceptions of Sign as colonized by hearing ASLers, interviewees described other hearing ASLers' treatment of the language, including their own, in a variety of more neutral manners. Many hearing folks, like Mary, Ann, Mika, and Robert, identify intimately or peripherally (according to their daily involvement with Sign)⁶¹ with the Deaf community, passionately using ASL without oppressing Deaf. Every hearing-minded Signer I met envisioned themselves occupying this neutral position, but spoke with an awareness of colonizing hearing-minded practices. Sometimes they explicitly distanced themselves from these criticized uses of ASL. Use of ASL stemming from this neutral place can be described, as Robert put it, as bridge building between communities, between worlds.

Discrete Worlds, Bridge Builders, And Assimilation

Struck by one of her Meetup peers, Ann shared a story of a woman who attended the practice sessions regularly for while. One evening the woman arrived with her daughters, one of whom is going deaf. The daughter, Ellen, was born with a nerve complication that affects hearing and sight. Ann did not identify the condition, but knows

⁶¹ For example, Ann and Mika may not necessarily use ASL on a daily basis, but rather when they are specifically engaging Sign as an educational project. They are peripheral, situational members. Mary and Robert on the other hand use ASL on a daily basis in their line of work. Robert grew up as a native to Deaf culture. Mary makes a huge effort to learn about Deaf culture in order to be a better interpreter, but clarified that her job is solely to interpret well (which requires some cultural competency) not to act on her pupil's behalf or advocate for him. Mary is a non-native core member of the community, and Robert is a native core member.

that usually by the time affected people are forty years old they become completely blind or deaf. At sixteen years of age, Ellen has already lost about 90 percent of her hearing and wears hearing aids.

Ellen exclaimed to Ann that she is trying to learn ASL but nobody in her family will learn it with her. Ann was perplexed. She asked, “Wouldn’t you think this mom would be so into learning sign?” However, “she knows very little.” Ann went on to explain the controversy the family encountered when looking into a cochlear implant as an option, but was deterred by taboo associated with the risky surgical procedure to implant this invasive form of hearing aid. Cochlear implants are controversial in the Deaf community because they are of “dubious efficacy” and “pose a threat” to Deaf pride and culture (Tucker 1998:6). Ann implied that the mother was willing to find a solution that enhanced communication for the mother more than the soon to be deaf daughter. This is similar to how April felt about being taught to lip-read and vocalize in public elementary school—it was a solution for them to understand her, not for her to understand the world.

Ann saw that Ellen hovers inconclusively between worlds. Assessing the daughter’s position, Ann described the daughter as

just kind of hanging in between worlds. She’s getting to the point where she can’t really communicate because it’s getting really bad. She can’t really communicate with the hearing world, yet she’s not really D/deaf. So she doesn’t fit into the Deaf world. So at 16, which is a hard age anyway, she says it’s really hard for her hanging between worlds. So she says you’ve kind of got to make that decision, which world is it going to be. And you don’t think of that. You think oh they were born deaf or they’re not, but then you don’t think of the ones that are going deaf. Which world are they going to choose? [do they have a choice] Are they going to cling to this one and do everything they can with the surgery and stuff?

By listening to and retelling Ellen’s story Ann acts as a bridge builder. She, a hearing Signer, shares the story of a HOH, with me, a hearing individual. Ann acknowledges that

Ellen no longer comfortably fits into the hearing world, but is “not really D/deaf” either. Although the daughter has not accumulated the characteristics of Deaf culture, namely ASL, she has developed the condition of deafness, the loss of hearing. Without ASL, Ellen “hangs between worlds,” de-assimilated from hearing culture and unfamiliar with Deaf culture.

Furthermore, Ann implies a cultural model held by hearing people. She implies that hearing people “don’t think of” the scenario that someone in Ellen’s position must choose between worlds. Ann reveals a tacit assumption of hearing people to presume that deaf people automatically have a place in the Deaf world. Rather, Ellen taught Ann that she must modify her lifestyle to fit into either world. Ellen is faced with two trajectories; she either learns ASL and seeks membership in the Deaf community or she works towards reclaiming her hearing identity, by assimilating into the mainstream with oralism. Ellen and her family’s presence at the Meetup demonstrates their interest in learning Sign and potentially Ellen’s interest in assimilating into Deaf culture. Their mutual interest in ASL and Deaf culture is what bridges Ann and Ellen.

Sean also spoke of hearing and Deaf culture as distinct worlds. When I asked him if he could live in both worlds simultaneously, he acknowledged the omnipresence of the hearing world which is “always there. You can’t really leave it,” he claims. Since the hearing world is an unmarked norm in the Inland Empire and the United States at large, the Deaf world operates within the underlying mainstream hearing culture. He also speaks of family to exemplify this concept predicting:

in some ways I will always speak to my parents. They might learn ASL because they realize I might marry someone who’s deaf. My mom was like, ‘Oh I think I might learn ASL if I could talk to your Deaf spouse.’ And I was like thank you! And that’s kind of funny because in the back of

my head I was like it's not for me. It's like 'oh you're fine, you're hearing. My dad learned some sign language. He's really bad at language in general. So he tried! And my sister too. But I think what that means is that being in the Deaf world is when ASL communication is at least 50% of my day-to-day communication as opposed to speaking. And it'd be really cool if I did it not in ASL but a whole other sign language.

Sean identified as belonging to both hearing and Deaf worlds. He implied that his mother conceives of him as being hearing because he is “fine,” or in other words, is smoothly assimilated into mainstream culture. He refers to himself as “hearing-minded” because he communicates in spoken English and practices other hearing norms. While his family made an effort to learn ASL and acknowledge his membership in the Deaf community, they still regard him as indigenously hearing. According to Sean, the label hearing-minded is “often meant as derogatory, and in some ways I come to feel like it's not so derogatory as much as like for me it's just a fact of how I was raised and how I live my life. First, of all, it wasn't really a choice and I don't think it should matter even if it was.” His assimilation into mainstream hearing culture began from birth and was affirmed when he was taught to vocalize and use See2 (the sign language that he refers to as a “tool to learn spoken English”).

Sean believes that his native membership in hearing culture is permanent. He does not necessarily want to de-assimilate. Nor does he “know if [he] could ever de-assimilate if [he] wanted to.” Sean recognizes privilege in bicultural identity that gives him the ability to pass as a member in either culture:

I don't think I should try to de-assimilate. I think I should always be aware of the privileges I do have and being able to do this I shouldn't just be like, 'oh I want to be deaf now' and get rid of my ability to speak English. Like some people throw away their hearing aids. It's like you really hate your hearing aids and you only really use them if you had to, I understand getting rid of them. But if I feel comfortable I should not just try to hide it. I should own it. But I have assimilated.

Sean sees his ability to belong to both worlds positively. Although he primarily identifies as a hearing-minded Deaf person, he does not believe one can fully de-assimilate from hearing culture as a native culture. As discussed in chapter one, Sean acknowledges that native Sign accents mark Deaf people as being indigenously Deaf. In other words, a Deaf person who grew up primarily in the hearing world vocalizing English will not be capable of de-assimilating from hearing culture. Hypercorrect ASL and the use of sim-com (Sign and vocalize simultaneously) marks even a Deaf person as hearing-minded. How Deaf people use Sign signals their degree of assimilation in either world. Sean believes that “ultimately, [his] life has been shaped a lot by [his] deafness.” In his fourth year as an ASLer, Sign is still being incorporated into his identity. As a sophomore at the Claremont Colleges, he is very involved and seems passionate about his choice to major in cognitive science.

To this date, Sean has decided not to transfer to a Deaf-minded institution although he has considered other universities with larger populations, including Gallaudet University,⁶² where he could spend more time in the Deaf world. He plans on:

Spend[ing] four more years in the hearing, predominantly hearing world. And then after that I can go into the deaf world. But now I started thinking I'll go to the deaf world and see if I really want to stay there because the other honest truth is that there are much more opportunities outside of it than inside of it. A lot more varied opportunities. But one thing I like is that it balances out. People say college years are going to be the best four

⁶² Sean on his decision not to attend Gallaudet: “It was very weird to me to be there. And at this point I wasn’t very good at sign language. I was worried I wouldn’t be good or deaf enough for them. I almost tried to go to Gallaudet for one year on that full ride and then go to another college. They also have a ten percent four year graduate rate. When I was applying 90 percent drop out or don’t graduate in four years...So I really like that we have that [as an option]; it can be a lot better. And part of it us just like deaf education in the United States in general. My friend who went to deaf school or middle school, she went to [a more challenging big public high school] because she was like, ‘I wanted something more academic. And I saw I could survive in the high school’ so she thought, ‘I’m gonna go do it.’ She didn’t feel she was challenged enough in the middle school. And there’s still debates waging on how best to teach deaf children. It’s a whole other minefield.”

years of your life. After I have this trajectory in mind that's obviously not what I'm thinking at all. This is a really special time and it's going to be different in some ways better, some ways not better time.

Sean told me about his plan to leave the hearing world after college and immerse himself in an exclusively Deaf community. He hopes to explore his Deaf identity further in a purely ASL Community of Practice that mutually engages with the joint enterprise of creating a shared repertoire of resources over time (Lave & Wagner 1999:175). He looks forward to this immersion predicting it could be better than his mainstream college experience, which he has been told will be “the best four years” of his life. Sean is a Deaf bridge builder. His plural and simultaneous membership and assimilation into both hearing and Deaf culture allow him to relate to hearing and Deaf persons' language ideologies concerning Sign.

Robert speaks of the Deaf world in juxtaposition to institutional constraints of the hearing world explaining differences that come down to simple cultural expectations, like punctuality.⁶³ As an employee of a company that works for disability rights, Robert works to promote education and mutual understanding between worlds:

It's the difference of going from activist to action. If you really want to be empowered, you've got to be present you've got to work. You've got to roll up your sleeves and meet the establishment. The establishment doesn't know you! They don't know you! They don't know the communities. The establishment is filled with tall white guys with short hair cuts, like me! The establishment plays football, ok? The establishment works for cheerleaders. The establishment is a frat boy. And you want these people to do what? Understand where you're coming from and provide the accommodations that you need? Really? You want the frat boys to do this? So let's accept the frat boy ain't gonna do that. The frat boy may be the

⁶³ Robert: “When you sit down across the government, or across whomever and you've got to hash it out with and there are certain cultural expectations—like meeting times—deaf standard time doesn't cut it. You better be there when the damn meeting starts. You walk in and ‘oh sorry traffic,’ yeah, no. Very simple things. You know you can complain as much as you want when it comes to meeting times. They [the establishment] want to solve the damn problem, stop complaining. Get to it! Well why are you not here? Yeah actually we are [complaining] that's why we're here.”

sweetest guy on the face of the planet, wanna do the right thing, just dyin' to do the right thing. He doesn't know how. We've gotta sit at the table and let them know how. By hashin it out. Makin' it happen.

According to Robert, bridge builders spur action (not just dormant activist thought) by educating the “frat boy.” He describes powerful institutions as frat boys, implying that even if they have positive intentions and enthusiasm to be activist they may not follow through to make change. Robert believes it is the community's job to educate establishments about what the Deaf community needs. He traces miscommunication between hearing-minded establishments and the Deaf community “back to that more communal nature [of Deaf community], which hierarchy—business really—doesn't do well with.” He sees his role as a bridge builder as a step towards “hashin it out, makin' it happen,” educating oppressive, hearing-minded institutions and dominant cultures about how they can better recognize subordinated Deaf communities and culture.

Commoditizing ASL

Now I will address *how* bridges materialize between worlds, for better or for worse, from practices of American Sign Language. As we learned in Chapter Three, Mary fell into interpreting. She suggests hearing interpreters choose this career path because it “pays really well.” Her drive is “pure love of the language.” Mary explicitly separating herself from a de-contextualized use of ASL, responding to a discourse in the Deaf community about acceptable or unacceptable means of practicing ASL. Robert believes hearing ASLers who mobilize their Sign skills purely for profiting from interpreting jobs monetize and commoditize the language, stripping it of all its rich

cultural capital. He lays out the ongoing conflict between the Deaf community and interpreters.

According to Robert, hearing interpreters motivated by salary disregard the potential to construct links between disparate communities. He rhetorically questions, what does the Deaf community get in this exchange? In Robert's experience, the Deaf community receives nothing from interpreters who work in disregard of cultural context. He refers to an example of a coworker who "took our language and made a living at it which is not what we're about." He claims there is emotional pride involved in your language becoming an industry, but that a certain percent of "typical ethnocentric Americans" driven by capitalistic ambition have always commoditized it.

Robert tries to see this issue from the commoditizer's perspective:

There's a part of me that doesn't really blame them because it's just the way the American system is set up. That's one of the inequalities I am talking about, about how the system is set up. I can't say that I wouldn't have done the same thing had I come from their background. But there's also a certain percentage of those people that do go too far—how do you know that what you're doing is wrong?

Robert acknowledges that ASLers nurtured in a consumerist environment, those who have been raised by a "frat boy," have been acculturated to take advantage of the profits from capitalist enterprises. As a bridge builder, he takes responsibility for educating these Signers, helping them understand a culture and foreign community. However, the line of "going too far" remains blurred and ambiguous for Robert.

In a conversation with Mary, she and I wondered what makes it ethical to interpret as a hearing person. Does a personal connection to the Deaf community legitimize the professionalization of interpreting? Robert answers this question from his incredibly reflexive point of view. He describes himself as "a six foot five white guy,

straight white guy, ex-military” who has “all the hallmarks of a typical ethnocentric American.” He is also a CODA who grew up as a native to Deaf culture (simultaneously acquiring ASL and English) qualifying him as a Deaf-minded hearing Signer with bicultural community membership. He eventually revealed that at one point in his life he interpreted professionally himself. So what makes him different than an indigenously hearing interpreter? What entitles Robert to be a bridge builder?

Robert believes that he could have crossed that line, “gone too far.” He might have pursued a business venture in a niche of ASL monetization (ASL fairytales for kids) had he “come from a dominant culture and approached it from a dominant society perspective,” he said, “had I found a niche, yeah I coulda gone there. Sure there’s a market, nobody’s doin’ it! But I also think there’s a line that, ya know, hopefully I would not have crossed.” His moral compass prevented him from pursuing a business project that would commoditize ASL and therefore Deaf culture, but it did not preclude him from interpreting professionally. Robert rationalized his interpreting practice with non-capitalist, personal motivations:

I’m extraordinarily blessed. You know, I’ve had my struggles, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. The folks I work with, words can’t describe it. It’s a lot more purposeful than pulling a trigger on another human being. Like what were my options? I’m lucky man, I’m lucky. I commoditized the language for me. I commoditized it. I did. I became an interpreter. So yeah, that’s the one thing I had. If it wasn’t for that. I was cooked.

While personal core membership in the Deaf community legitimizes professional interpreting as ethical (non-subordinating practice) in Robert’s eyes, this is attributed to the fact that, as a bridge builder with membership in both hearing and Deaf worlds, he had the cultural competency to understand how to approach the line, but not cross it. Robert equates the purpose of his current career as a counselor who addresses inequalities

Deaf communities face with his purpose in the army. He explains that he did not join the army because:

the state of affairs at the moment was brilliant and everything was nice and clean. Ok. The constitution, like anything else, is a working document and it's always being hashed out and refined. It's same thing with the work that I do with folks with disabilities. That work is always being hashed out. If the current state of affairs was great, then you wouldn't need to be there.

Robert utilizes his bicultural community membership to relay needs between the two worlds, translating them so that they are mutually comprehensible to the Deaf world and the hearing world.

From Machines To Appropriation

Several of the people I interviewed from the Meetup CofP mentioned the complicated relationship between hearing people, especially hearing interpreters, and D/deaf peers or clients. They expanded on what qualifies as positive ASL practice. This section shows the vague line of professionalism that interpreters and other hearing ASLers risk crossing as they get more involved in the Sign speech community. I synthesize interviewees' language ideologies about the tension between Deaf demand for interpreters and the way that some hearing interpreters go too far by moving beyond bridge building between Deaf and hearing worlds to the point where their engagement with ASL reaches imperialistic appropriation. It is clear that the ASLers I interviewed believe this appropriation of culture in the form of overbearing interpreting advocacy (or unnecessary special treatment) assumes incapability of Deaf people. Furthermore, these hearing people who create too much space for themselves in the Deaf community produce a sense of obligation, as Sean describes, in Deaf clients to honor their

contribution to the Deaf community. Ironically, these interpreters who strive for core membership in an ASL Community of Practice mark themselves as non-native because they appropriate a Deaf ethnic renaissance.

Sean told me about a conversation with a hearing friend learning ASL. They wondered why hearing people “fall into the deaf community,” not just in terms of curiosity, but more complexly:

why exactly do they feel a need to save us? But at the same time, how do you not have that narrative? How do you not have interpreters? *We need you!* That is a very real *need* of the deaf community. It is the reality, but I feel like by the time they become interpreters some of them, maybe they're just kind of annoying. There's the whole relationship between interpreters and deaf people. [Deaf people] feel like they have obligation. Interpreters always have to draw the line between being a professional, which is they can't help the deaf person, it's them being unbiased. They simply interpret what the deaf person said, but they want to be advocates of the Deaf community. And it's not like, 'Oh I'm an ally' or whatever. No. Their job is to interpret. We thank them when they're good. But that's their job, that's their life.

Sean addresses the intrinsic dependency of a Deaf person on a (typically) hearing interpreter. Interpreters who feel an obligation to advocate for clients by acting on their behalf annoy him because the interpreter's presumptuous intervention infers that the interpreter's capability trumps that of their Deaf client. Unbiased translation of what the client wants to communicate qualifies professionalism in the practice of interpreting. This is the line Robert attempted not to cross. Sean appreciates an interpreter for their ability to relay messages accurately; he does not believe their primary purpose should be a personal mission to form an ally with the Deaf community. According to Sean, these hearing people are entitled to use Sign as long as they meet his expectations of professionalism.

Sean mentions that “in the old days” interpreters were mostly CODAs, and CODAs almost always became interpreters. Now he notices “a lot more people are becoming interpreters through other pathways. There’s a lot of hearing people—not all—who are studying ASL and it’s kind of interesting why they’d want to be an interpreter in the first place. When they become interpreters they get something. Ok you’ve become an interpreter, you’ve done this for something.” He postulates that this could be thanks to D/deaf people’s encouragement of others to learn Sign Language in hopes that, “kind of like a sea turtle lays its eggs and most of them don’t make it back, that there are some that make it all worth it. The rest are all eaten by raccoons!” Sean provides this metaphor to demonstrate that not everyone who has interest in learning ASL pursues it in the long term, so the more ASL students the better. Confidently, Sean ensures, “we want people to be learning sign language. And honestly, the ideal world would be one in which a deaf person could go many places and do basic communication with the person at the grocery counter, with the post office, with the bus driver. If the whole world knew some ASL, that’d be great.”

Consequentially, Sean recognizes that while an interpreter’s “human qualities matter” because they are expected to be flexible and thorough. Their job is “very simple and straightforward and they’re not supposed to deviate from these” expectations. Sean equates the ideal interpreter though, with a machine, but an interpreter’s personal wants sometimes interfere with the process:

One kid was talking about how his interpreter wanted to talk with him and be nice to him and he just said, ‘no but the best ones are cold-hearted bitches because they just sit down. Interpret it. Do their job and then they’re done.’ It’s kind of sad because I feel bad for the interpreters sometimes. We try to be nice but sometimes the thing is an ideal interpreter for a deaf person would just be a machine that would just

interpret for them. Not all these people in the way. I'll just wait for interpreters and captioners to be gone. Interpreters will be around for a lot longer though. It's hard to see when machines are perfect, would it be different?

Viewing interpreters idealistically as machines implies that they would not over-enthusiastically appropriate ASL, that they would not relocate the epicenter of Deaf cultural capital giving mainstream hearing culture ownership of distinctly Deaf cultural capital.

Idealistically, Sean situates hearing ASLers and interpreters in a supportive place in the web of Sign practices, which entitles them to share passion for Sign and even support struggles of the Deaf community without appropriating the culture or disempowering them by taking ownership of ASL or fighting their battles for them. Sean reiterates this point:

So the whole do we also want you to be advocates for the Deaf community question? No. And I've talked to some hearing people who are like, I support the Deaf community but I support it like I take a back stand. You guys are first and I want to make sure I don't try to support you for you. And I think deaf people, the worst kind of interpreter would be the kind of interpreter that would be like I'll take care of it for you. No deaf person likes that. It assumes incapability.

Sean voices the general consensus of the Deaf community that hearing ASLers are entitled, and welcomed, to use Sign as long as they do not assume the role of an imperialistic enabler and controller. This savior narrative itself disables Deaf people.

In reference to the interpreters' identities, Sean believes that the degree of their involvement correlates with the degree to which they appropriate Deaf culture. Interpreters who identify too closely with Deaf culture run the risk of appropriating the culture and its causes. He brings the conversation back to commoditization of ASL as a linguistic capital that already privileged hearing interpreters appropriate, implying that

their attempted assimilation into the Deaf world unintentionally coerces an already marginalized population:

I like it better when interpreters are interpreters as part time jobs. When it's their full time job I'm like, is that really all you do? It's a great job I love that you're doing it, but like you're making a living off of knowing sign language and English. If I were an interpreter I wouldn't want to interpret all the time. I would wanna also have things I do separately. I do think that it's something that if for the interpreter it's just a practical part time job, that makes it more ok to be like ok we are like—machine relationship. Like this is your part-time job I just need you here to understand what's going on but if this is like if this is a full-time, this is my life interpreter, I feel like it kind of somehow, they put more into it. So they put more of their life into it and you're supposed to somehow acknowledge that. You're like yes, this is kind of who you are and you're supporting me. I'm supposed to be very thankful for you. It's nice when it's part-time so it's not as much of their identity. Some people are really good friends with their interpreter and that's great but it's always so awkward when that interpreter sucks or something else happens.

When hearing interpreters' knowledge of the ASL speech community and Deaf community becomes a central part of their identity, they pressure (inadvertently or not) Deaf people to recognize their effort to help uplift them out of subordination. Hearing interpreters who appropriate the language and/or culture claim unjust ownership of ASL. They relocate its value as belonging to the mainstream hearing world, disempowering Deaf Signers. If their interpreting vocation becomes a significant portion of their identity, Sean explains that he feels a sense of obligation to recognize their interest and devotion. He resents this pressure because he views their behavior as wrongful appropriation that reifies Deaf colonized status rather than something that deserves to be validated. Instead of inciting positive action, this pattern further elevates hearing ASLers, thereby colonializing Deaf Signers as second rate disabled bodies in need of control.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ What naturally comes next in this discussion would be an entire chapter on contemporary discourses of disability in and around the Deaf community. However, I have removed this section because it centered the

Everyday examples of “special treatment” singling out Deaf people for being different reveal assumptions of D/deaf capability or inability do not reflect the reality D/deaf aptitude. One young lady I met recounted battles with her parents over their differing opinions on registering her at the small school where she could Sign. She wanted to be treated “exactly like [her] hearing brother,” who successfully attended her local mainstream high school. She empowered herself with her agency in this choice (regardless of whether she chose assimilation or mainstreaming). April also narrated a dynamic between her and her hearing friend who gives her “special treatment:”

If I’m going up to Starbucks and I don’t have a problem, I can read their lips fine, I don’t tell them I’m deaf. Chai tea latte? ok. There’s no reason to tell them we move on. Well, I have a friend who if she’s with me, I’m up there and everything’s going fine, they ask me a question—‘*she’s deaf by the way. She might not be able to hear you*’—and I’m like, why do you do that? It doesn’t embarrass me because of the fact that I’m deaf, I’m embarrassed for her because they’re like, what does that have to do with anything? That’s what they’re thinking. And she, when we’re walking at the beach she gets all [hyper-dramatically acts like she’s saving someone from a car], like protective, when we try to cross the street. And I’m like, ‘I know how to cross the street dude!’ She’s like, ‘well I don’t think you can hear the cars!’ I’m like, I *know* to look. And I see more than most people do. I can see the person sitting right there [points sideways and behind] even though I’m looking at you. [laughs] It’s her thing. I’m gonna have to blow up with her before she’ll really stop it. That’s how I get it through to her and then she cries and I don’t want to go through that crying. So I just put up with it. If she wasn’t a good friend [shakes head]. I think she kind of likes having a deaf friend. My boyfriend, he’s hearing, ‘oh you have a deaf girlfriend, that’s so *sweet!*’ Like he’s some hero or something. He’s like, ‘no she’s the sweet one! She puts up with me!’ ‘Oh you must be a good person because you’re best friend’s a deaf person.’ And my boyfriend it’s a double whammy because his best friend is blind. ‘Why are you so awesome of a person? A deaf girlfriend? A blind best friend? What a good person.’ And he’s like, they don’t get it.

April feels embarrassment for her friend for misunderstanding her abilities. Her friend and boyfriend are not heroes simply for spending their time with a Deaf person. Their

framework on Deafness, funneling my discussion away from the primary matter of this paper, American Sign Language.

friendships are not based on their support of Deaf needs, but rather their personal connection. That said, Robert does not believe interpreters should perform their role void of understanding to issues of the Deaf community.

Another (somewhat paradoxical) ideology of Robert's is that hearing-native interpreters lack a "certain sense of mission" that makes their work less meaningful. Their hearing privilege does not allow for a reciprocal exchange of experience of oppression with the ability to help empower fellow oppresses. Robert believes "there's something missing, a sense of giving back a sense of community a sense of this is what my elders gave me and I will do this because I saw what my elders struggled with, I saw what I've struggled with! You know, at school I was the freak who talked with his hands." He claims that "the vast majority of interpreters are not native to sign language, they're native to English. So there's a certain drive a certain sense of mission missing." My interviewees' responses varied. Some ASLers, like Robert, believe interpreters are legitimized only if they have a certain degree of native experience. Sean prioritizes the ability of interpreters to execute their job professionally. Sean might not feel a need to know the background of an interpreter. He does not view hearing interpreters as commoditizers of ASL, excusing them from what Robert categorizes as colonialism. Sean situates systematic interpreting in a neutral position in the web, while Robert views non-native interpreters as commoditizing colonizers.

As a teacher's aid and interpreter in a special education classroom, Mary views herself as somewhat of a neutral machine. Mary's perspective as an indigenously hearing-minded interpreter aligns with what Sean seeks in interpreters. She explains:

You know it really, really sucks because this is what I'm meant to do. And I would do it forever. I really would. But the pay is nothing. I wouldn't

survive especially if I was a single mom or something! It's like barely minimum wage. If what I'm doing right now paid more, I would do this for forever. And never quit. That would be my career for forever but I need to make more money.

Mary did not become an interpreter as a hearing champion of Deaf rights or for money.⁶⁵ She “fell into it” and developed a passion for her work, finding it more meaningful than working for the fiercely capitalist monopoly, Wal-Mart. For now, Mary sacrifices pursuing a higher salary because she “looks forward to being,” in the classroom she has worked in for thirteen years. Her sense of responsibility is to educate, not to exercise ownership of ASL. She told me, “I'm responsible for their education. It's my job to figure out a way to help them get it, whatever it is we're teaching.” Mary's goal is to graduate from being an aid to being a primary teacher because she needs the income. When I asked if she has considered training to be a mainstream interpreter, she immediately shook her head insisting that it would be too much pressure.

Mary sees her role as an aid and interpreter in a D/deaf classroom as neutral and hands-off to a certain extent. She is a bridge builder who understands the line of professionalism she is ethically expected not to cross:

As an aid and an interpreter, we're not supposed to [get to know the parents well]. I mean we can communicate like ‘hi how are you?’ But as far as communicating about their student, I can't. At all. That's a legal thing. That's up to the teacher. But I mean I get to know them sort of on a personal level. If they came to me as the interpreter and asked, how's he doing in the class? I'm just the interpreter! I know, of course I *know*, but I don't have the credential. I'm not the teacher. Even if the interpreter was a credentialed teacher it's still not ok ethically, for the interpreter to do that because interpreters are the voice and the ears. That's all we are. We're not supposed to get involved. And that's *fine*! If I become a teacher then sure.

⁶⁵ Mainstream interpreting pays well, much more than Mary earns as a teacher's aid.

Mary sees herself as the “voice and the ears.” She purely supplies the tools for her students to communicate their ideas without taking on their needs for them and is satisfied with the expectation that she should serve as a sociolinguistically competent machine. As she shared in the quote before, Mary has the sense of “giving back” that Robert believes interpreters should ideally have even without a personal history or familial connection to the Deaf community. The relationship *is* mutually beneficial in the sense that Mary gets fulfillment from working with D/deaf students (without crossing a line of professionalism or appropriation) and they receive an unbiased, but still humanized interpreter.

CONCLUSION

Technology and the Future of ASL

Every time my senior thesis came up in conversation over the last nine months, I was provided with additional anecdotes of ASL in someone's personal life or examples someone had encountered in popular culture. Last month, a human resources specialist interviewed me for a research position and asked me about my project. I explained the gist of the topic, extrapolating on a lengthy tangent about the use of ASL in families with one or more D/deaf members and my recent discovery that surprisingly few hearing relations of D/deaf people learn Sign. She validated my explanation, saying it was interesting and also of particular significance to her because she regrets not having learned ASL to communicate with a Deaf aunt. I froze. Having put my foot in my mouth, I wondered if I had ruined my chance to procure this position as my first post-graduation job. We ended up speaking about this phenomenon of language and kinship for over twenty minutes, providing each other with valuable insight. I found out last week that I got the job. Nonetheless, never again will I make the mistake of assuming a hearing person does not have personal experience with ASL and D/deafness.

After months of participant observation, semi-structured interviewing, media analysis, research, and writing, I have illustrated in this paper that ASL is becoming more popular and more visible in mainstream hearing culture. Chapters One and Two remind us though that Signers remain to be concerned about the status of ASL. Increased awareness of ASL as a legitimate and valued language does not confirm that members of mainstream hearing culture relate positively to ASL, specifically to Deaf Signers. Neither, does this assure that hearing students of ASL relate to Deaf culture considerately.

In Chapters Three and Four, interviewees reinforced their concern for the marginalized position of ASL by separating themselves from unacceptable uses of Sign, identifying as apolitical students with genuine curiosity about an unfamiliar language, community, and culture. My informants also emphasized the problematic phenomenon of hearing Signers colonizing ASL (and therefore Deaf people), through commoditization or cultural appropriation of the language. They reported ASL as commoditized by mainstream interpreters who work in the industry solely for the sake of personal profit. Deaf Signers reported the savior narrative to be an example of cultural appropriation that is unacceptable; non-native ASLers should not take ownership of the community's struggles for them. This practice assumes incapability where it is not warranted. So what happens when hearing people attempt to learn ASL? In the Meetup CofP, hearing and Deaf Signers bridge discrete worlds, developing mutual respect with the shared understanding that anyone is entitled to Sign with the stipulation that they do not become colonizers of ASL.

The Future of American Sign Language

Thus far I have illustrated language ideologies of American Sign Language as they operate in the present. Ann and Robert alluded to the future of ASL. Like in Kannapell's quote before Chapter Three, Robert addresses the risk that, by learning ASL, hearing people could appropriate Deaf culture to a point where mainstream hearing culture engulfs and erases a distinct Deaf linguistic identity that surrenders to colonization and is subsumed in the hearing mainstream. Robert and Ann both believe technology to be directly related to American Sign Language's future.

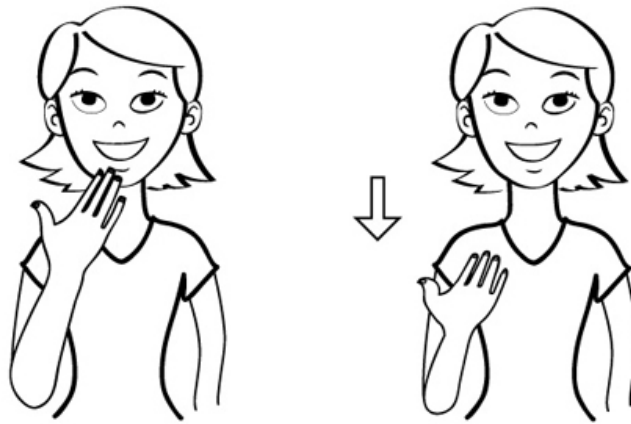
On one hand, Robert sees technology like cochlear implants, hearing aids, FM systems, etc. catalyzing assimilation of D/deaf people into hearing culture, decreasing incentive to learn ASL. In reference to ASLers, Robert said, “you may be looking at the beginning of the last of a dying breed. With cochlear implants and the way technology is going, it’s frightening, but it may actually be dying out.” Robert sees assimilation of Deaf ASLers into the audiocentric mainstream with the aid of technology as a threat to Sign, endangering the language that could eventually die.

I maintain that ASL is not going extinct. Rather, ASL’s moorings to Deaf indigenous roots are loosening as Sign becomes more popular among second language learners. If ASL were to lose all ties to Deaf culture, if the language itself de-assimilated from Deaf culture by assimilating into mainstream hearing culture, would it be extinct? Or would there be a new kind of native?

Ann envisions a different trajectory also catalyzed by technological advances and intervention. From personal experience, conversations and online research, she postulates a correlation between developments in medical technology and decreases in infant mortality rate. She said:

I was surprised that there are still so many special needs people [including deaf people] because you think with technology and the pre-natal care that you get now, you’d think there’d be fewer people with disabilities. On the contrary. What’s happening is the one and two pound babies that used to die, they’re surviving, but they’ve got disabilities. So the number of disabilities is going to be on the increase and deafness is one of the major things that isn’t going to develop when they’re that young. And here I am thinking it would be less and less as we get the technology, but because we get the technology now we’re going to have more and more. These things we do: are they really for the best? You know maybe it was better that those pound babies didn’t make it. Are we really just keepin’ ‘em here for us? I don’t know. This lady says deafness is really going to be on an incline the more that you save them. She says they’re going to need more interpreters.

With more humans surviving biological conditions that would historically guarantee fatality and the current ethnolinguistic renaissance of Sign, American Sign Language and Deaf culture are not likely to vanish soon.



Thank you!

I would like to acknowledge Professor Park and Claudia Strauss for their incredibly helpful comments on this paper. I could not have asked for more patient and understanding readers. My fellow anthropology majors and peers in the class of 2014, thank you for taking the time to contribute your fresh feedback and encouraging me to build my confidence, providing solidarity throughout the creation of our epic senior theses all the while.

A very special thank you to Sean, April, Mary, Ann, Mika and Robert and my other informants, the wise ASLers whose infectious curiosity inspired me at all times throughout this paper.

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