UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

Music to the Eyes: Popular Music, American Sign Language, and Deaf Culture on Stage and Screen

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Drama and Theatre

by

Stephanie Lim

Dissertation Committee:
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2022

DEDICATION

For the “People of the Eye,” the Deaf community

whose artistry inspired this project

To my mom

my biggest supporter

And in loving memory of my dad

who I hope to make proud every day

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, my deepest gratitude to my committee chair, Professor Tony Kubiak, for his constant wisdom, support, and guidance since the beginning. Thank you to my wonderful committee members, Professors Tara Rodman, Jade Power-Sotomayor, Adria Imada, and Ray Knapp, whose feedback, questions, and encouragement were instrumental to the development of this project. Special thanks to Ray for his continued mentorship since our first chat in 2017 about all things musical theatre. I would also like to thank the PhD faculty at UC Irvine for instilling in me a lifelong passion for critical inquiry and creativity and for the rich conversations you each fostered in your courses.

My thanks to the faculty at CSU Northridge for inspiring me to pursue a doctoral degree—and indeed, for always telling me that you believed I could do it. Many thanks especially to Professor Anthony Dawahare, who gifted me a copy of Ray's *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity*, which steered me down the theatre and performance studies path, and to Professor Sandra Stanley, whose mentorship has been influential to my doctoral journey and whose class prompted my first scholarly exploration of Deaf West Theatre's work.

Thanks also to the Dissertation Bootcamp Summer 2020 cohort. In the midst of a pandemic, I not only gained the confidence to write this dissertation, but I also learned about my writing process and how to tap into my creativity—and had some fun along the way. I am especially grateful to my Muddy Buddies Daniel Ricken, who read the very first iterations of what are now Chapters 2 and 3, and Alexis Riley, who has seen this project evolve from beginning to end and whose expertise, inquiries, and friendship flow across these pages.

I would like to thank the editors of *The Journal of American Drama and Theatre*, Naomi Stubbs and Jim Wilson, whose feedback strengthened my article, "Silence, Gesture, and Deaf Identity in Deaf West Theatre's *Spring Awakening*," published in 2020. Select quotes from this article are used towards my analyses in Chapter 4 as examples of Deaf musical theatre's dramaturgies.

Financial support for my dissertation was provided by the University of California, Irvine's Graduate Division Completion Fellowship and California State University's Chancellor's Doctoral Incentive Program (CDIP) Dissertation Fellowship. UC Irvine and CDIP also provided funding for conference presentations at ATHE, ASTR, and MLA, where I had the opportunity to share and receive feedback for snippets of the ideas herein.

I am indebted to Deaf West Theatre and Artistic Director DJ Kurs, as well as to Ground Floor Theatre's Lisa Scheps and Deaf Austin Theatre's Brian Cheslik, for welcoming me into your theatre (and sometimes, rehearsal) spaces and for making musical theatre in such enriching and exhilarating ways.

Finally, this dissertation would not be possible without my support system: Tania, for always being a phone call away; Amy and Joe, my theatre buddies; Dr. Steve Florian, my grad school pal; Tisha, for keeping me accountable (well, something like that); DR, for the workspace, countless meals, and endless support. And my mom, for her unwavering love, patience, and understanding, despite what has become my never-ending life in academia.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Music to the Eyes: Popular Music, American Sign Language, and Deaf Culture on Stage and Screen

by

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Doctor of Philosophy in Drama and Theatre

University of California, Irvine, 2022

Professor Anthony Kubiak, Chair

What may at first seem like an oxymoron, the combination of music, American Sign Language (ASL), and Deaf culture has evolved into a popular artform known as song signing. Song signing, which grows out of a long history of ASL storytelling practices, is akin to what musicologist Christopher Small terms *musicking*, turning the object-oriented, noun form of music into an active, process-based verb, employing visual, kinesthetic, and tactile methods of reception and participation. While song signing has become especially popular since the 21st century among both d/Deaf and hearing people, the latter has not gone without criticisms of inaccurate language use and cultural appropriation, at times overly concerned with verbatim translation and teaching. Turning my attention to performances and productions created either *by* or in collaboration *with* Deaf artists and performers in the United States, I am most interested in the various performative shifts that occur from the original source material to the new, Deaf musical performance, asking: In what ways does a d/Deaf musical performance *perform* sociocultural meanings about the Deaf community and Deaf identity? How does the musical

integration and staging of ASL bolster the meanings of the original, hearing-created works? And how does this growing trend impact both d/Deaf and hearing worlds alike?

Building on scholarship in Deaf studies, disability studies, media studies, and theatre and performance studies, I apply close reading strategies to examples of song signing across television (at the Super Bowl, in television musicals, and on *Sesame Street*), music videos (by professionals and amateurs), and musical theatre (most notably, versions produced by Deaf West Theatre, as well as original sign language musicals). Contextualizing this work within what I describe as contemporary music and performance's Deaf turn, this dissertation explores the sociocultural, historical, and political significances of d/Deaf musical performances on stage and screen. I analyze how d/Deaf forms of music are staged and made theatrical, attending especially to its dramaturgies, such as contexts, artistic intentions, narratives, and song and sign choices. In re-centering the labor, artistry, and voices of the Deaf community, I argue that Deaf-led song signing produces musical texts that are both highly artistic and accessible, not only fusing with the parameters of the given genre but also challenging and expanding the (predominantly hearing) forms with a Deaf aesthetics. In all, this project considers the ways in which d/Deaf musical performances subvert hearing-centric notions of music, affirm Deaf cultural identity and pride, and ultimately act as a bridge between hearing and Deaf worlds.

CHAPTER 1 / INTRODUCTION: Music's Deaf Turn; or, Attending to the Borders of Sign and Song

> Meaning is made in the moment at the borders between hearing and deafness, between audience members and performers, through the listening bodies. At the interstices of sound, silence, and the moving body, we hear the meaning as it emerges.
>
> Kanta Kochhar-Lindgren, *Hearing Difference: The Third Ear in Experimental, Deaf, and Multicultural Theater*

Around the turn of the 21st century, an abundance of *deaf musical moments* begins appearing in American popular media and culture. d/Deaf people[1] are featured signing, singing, and dancing on television, including at national sporting events, on scripted series, and on reality competition shows. A non-profit organization called Deaf Professional Arts Network (D-PAN) launches to produce music videos for Deaf and Hard of Hearing (HoH) people, and American Sign Language (ASL) music videos appear in the hundreds of thousands on YouTube. ASL interpreters become Internet sensations after interpreting for famous rappers. And the Great White Way presents fully staged musical theatre productions in simultaneous ASL and English. Taken together, these encounters between music and deafness are much more than mere showcases of individual talent. Rather, they reveal a larger movement within the Deaf community and Deaf art that signals the emergence of a Deaf musicality—or, a Deaf sensibility and aesthetic oriented towards music.

These moments move away from prior representations of deaf people in stereotypical terms, as a passive, incomplete people without sound—as "helpless, dependent objects of pity; as disabled individuals who need to be 'fixed' so as to be more 'normal' (i.e., more like the hearing population); or, to go to another extreme, as people possessed of extraordinary powers of

[1] Following conventions in Deaf Studies scholarship, the lower-case *deaf* refers to audiological deafness, and the upper-case *Deaf* refers to those who identify as culturally Deaf. See Holcomb, Thomas K. *Introduction to American Deaf Culture*. Oxford University Press, 2013.

courage and endurance who serve as sources of inspiration" (Rholetter). Instead, such emergent Deaf musicality parallels what Disability Studies scholar Lennard J. Davis calls the *deafened moment*, wherein readers (audiences) recognize that their engagement with the texts (music and performances) does not rely strictly on speaking or hearing ("Deafness and Insight" 882-83). In the case of music, texts are not made up simply of sounds heard through the ears, but also of a combination of melodies, rhythms, and rhymes that are felt through the body and soul. As UK theatre practitioner George Home-Cook also makes clear, there is "a great deal more to listening than meets the ear. Listening is not only something that we do, but is an 'act' that does something: *how* we listen phenomenally affects our perception of *what* we hear" (168). In this way, Deaf participation in music invites both d/Deaf and hearing audiences to re-experience and re-consider music on Deaf terms, visualizing and physicalizing music within and through the body and hands.

The continuous tensions found within Deaf/ASL music embodies what English and ASL scholar Christopher Krentz calls the *hearing line*, the "invisible boundary separating deaf and hearing people" (2). This line between deafness and *hearingness* is always in flux, "resid[ing] behind every speech act, every moment of silence, every gesture, and every form of human communication, whether physical deafness is present or not" (Krentz 5). Every Deaf musical performance encompasses this shifting perimeter, drawing attention to the boundaries and power dynamics between, and the very definitions of, sound and silence. Through music and performance, as "through writing, people can support or subvert power arrangements, not to mention concepts of reality and order" (Krentz 17). Art historian W. J. T. Mitchell also observes the power of signed art and performance as sign language's *utopian gesture*, "a way of unmaking the world and producing a revolutionary shock" (xx). Above all, d/Deaf musical acts (re)write

into being a bilingual Deaf identity that works in-between Deaf and hearing cultures. This is what musicologist Katelyn E. Best defines as Deaf bi-musicality,[2] or "the incorporation of both manual and aural languages, and a combination of Deaf musical aesthetics with aural elements that may not be valuable to a Deaf experience of music but would appeal to a hearing audience" and a form through which "Deaf artists express a Deaf construction of music that refocuses the lens of mainstream musical compositional styles, configurations, and productions of music to culturally relative realization of these processes" (*That's So Def* 134). It is perhaps this intrinsic liminality to Deaf musical moments that also produces its radical possibilities.

The many performances examined within this project signal what I perceive as a *Deaf turn*[3] towards Deaf language, culture, and identity in American performances of popular music and musical theatre. This "turn" characterizes a) an increased sociocultural interest in making visible d/Deaf expressions and experiences of music, emerging most noticeably after the turn of the 21st century and often from both d/Deaf and hearing perspectives, and b) the ways in which musical performances have become physicalized, choreographed, and embodied through sign language and Deaf performance aesthetics. Though the existence of hearing perspectives and success within this realm is oft-criticized, the intentions of creators and audiences—d/Deaf and hearing alike—frequently take idealist shape: in simplest terms, to share in "the power of sign language and the power of music and rhythm" (*Songs of Deafhood* 10). Indeed, a similar Deaf

[2] Best borrows from ethnomusicologist Mantle Hood's 1960 theorization of bi-musicality, or musical fluency across two cultures, such as one's native (Western) music and other practices and styles of music. See Hood, Mantle. "The Challenge of 'Bi-Musicality.' *Ethnomusicology*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1960, pp. 55-59.

[3] I acknowledge Michele Friedner's earlier use of the phrase *deaf turn* in her ethnographic study of urban India and of the development of a deaf social identity therein. (See Friedner, Michele. *Valuing Deaf Worlds in Urban India*. Rutgers University Press, 2015.) Although there are parallels with Friedner concerning the increased visibility of deaf bodies, my use of the term is specifically a play on phrases like the *digital turn* or the *queer turn*, indicating a shift within popular culture towards d/Deaf approaches to music-making. Less central to my use of *Deaf turn* is the sociocultural formation of Deaf identity; rather, my conception of the *Deaf turn* centers on how Deaf culture and identity are readily expressed through music.

turn can also be found across American popular culture more broadly, including in film (the *A Quiet Place* movies (2018, 2021), *Deaf U* (2020), Marvel's *Eternals* (2021), and *CODA* (2021)), television (as in a number of Google commercials about d/Deaf users (2021), Echo in *Hawkeye* (2021), Monk Murphy in *The Simpsons* (2022), and Jackie in *Craig of the Creek* (2022)), and literature (Ilya Kaminsky's *Deaf Republic* (2019), Ann Clare LeZotte's *Show Me a Sign* (2021), Sara Novic's *True Biz* (2022), and Nyle DiMarco's *Deaf Utopia* (2022)). While praise for these broader examples focuses mainly on the positive increase in d/Deaf representation and authenticity in storytelling, music's Deaf turn necessitates more nuanced attention to content and form and to the movement from the original (hearing) texts to the adapted (Deaf) texts. Deaf musical performances frequently entail rigorous collaboration between d/Deaf and hearing artists; aesthetic transformations and considerations between written/sung English, visual/physical sign language, and musical elements such as rhythm, melody/harmony, and dynamics; and dramaturgical shifts in meaning and in performance from hearing subtexts to d/Deaf perspectives and approaches. This project thus attends to these interstitial spaces between sign and song.

Building on work in Deaf studies, disability studies, media studies, and theatre and performance studies, I apply a close dramaturgical analysis to examples of song signing across television (at the Super Bowl, in television musicals, and on *Sesame Street*), music videos (by professionals and amateurs), and musical theatre (most notably, versions produced by Deaf West Theatre and original sign language musicals). Contextualizing this work within what I describe as contemporary music and performance's Deaf turn, this project focuses on performances and productions beginning in the 21st century that are either created *by* or in collaboration *with* Deaf artists and performers in the United States, as opposed to the many examples produced by non-

Deaf creators and non-US-based artists—though the intended audiences are almost always a mix of d/Deaf and hearing peoples. In what ways does a d/Deaf musical performance *perform* sociocultural meanings about the Deaf community and Deaf identity? How does the musical integration and staging of ASL bolster the meanings of the original, hearing-created works? And how does this growing trend impact both d/Deaf and hearing worlds alike? Driven by these inquires, this dissertation explores the sociocultural, historical, and political significances of d/Deaf musical performances on stage and screen. I analyze how d/Deaf forms of music are staged and made theatrical, attending especially to its dramaturgies, i.e. contexts, artistic intentions, narratives, song and sign choices, shifts that occur in adaptation, and audience reception, and taking into consideration how each performance mediums shapes the Deaf musical text in particular ways. Drawing on Deaf perspectives and scholarship, this project considers the ways in which d/Deaf musical performances subvert hearing-centric notions of music, affirm Deaf cultural identity and pride, and ultimately act as a bridge between hearing and Deaf worlds. In the sections that follow, I situate my project in conversation with scholarship concerning Deaf Rights and Crip Art, Deaf Musicality, and Deaf and Disability Studies.

The Rise of Crip/Deaf Art & Aesthetics: A History of American Deaf Rights

That Deaf performances of music materialize alongside the contemporary history of Deaf rights in America may be no surprise. From the 1950s on, Americans witnessed a number of Deaf-affirming shifts in society: the recognition of ASL as a natural and formal language, thanks in part to William Stokoe's *A Dictionary of American Sign Language on Linguistic Principles* (1965); the partial return to manualism, the use of sign language in the classroom; protests against cochlear implants; the Deaf President Now (DPN) movement at Gallaudet University in 1988, which led to the school's first deaf president; the 1989 Deaf Way international conference

celebrating Deaf culture; and the invention of devices for deaf communication, such as the teletypewriter (TTY). As well, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) mandated increased access across education, employment, and media. ADA considerations have since generated additional forms of access through the invention of new technologies in the 21st century, including smartphone apps, glasses, gloves, and tactile wearables. These devices improve the means of communication, and their existence today can directly augment the transmission of sounds and music. Just as the civil rights, gay rights, and women's rights movements recognized the oppression of and need for equality within marginalized communities, so too was the Deaf community working to advance the quality of life for d/Deaf Americans as a whole.

As Deaf rights emerge, so too do critical theories that articulate the positive formation of Deaf identity, such as what Deaf scholars H-Dirksen L. Bauman and Joseph J. Murray call *Deaf Gain*. The framework of *Deaf Gain* counters the prevailing notion of *hearing loss* and "refers to the unique cognitive, creative, and cultural gains manifested through deaf ways of being in the world" (Bauman and Murray xv). Deaf scholar and activist Paddy Ladd similarly theorizes the productive formation of Deaf identity as *Deafhood*, an "existential state of Deaf 'being-in-the-world'" that continuously fluctuates—"a process by which Deaf individuals come to actualize their Deaf identity" (*Understanding Deaf Culture* xviii). More recently, the term *Deaf Power* has been adopted to signify the Deaf community's history, values, and diversity. Expressed as both a symbol (written as <0/) and a physical sign (with a fist in the air and one hand over the ear), the expression motions towards cultural unity and pride on an international scale ("Deaf Power"). Each of these Deaf affirming concepts is made manifest through works on stage and screen that purposefully combine popular music, ASL, and Deaf culture.

Coupled with the heightened visibility of deaf people in society, a Deaf culture and unity became visible through the arts. In 1989, a group of Deaf artists developed a manifesto for the De'VIA (Deaf View/Image Art) movement within the visual and fine arts, which

> uses formal art elements with the intention of expressing innate cultural or physical Deaf experience. These experiences may include Deaf metaphors, Deaf perspectives, and Deaf insight in relationship with the environment (both the natural world, and Deaf cultural environment), spiritual and everyday life. ("De'VIA Manifesto")

De'VIA art most often affirms Deaf identity and resists the oppressive hearing world, themes that also find their way into the performing arts. Around this same time, and because of improved film technology, Deaf artists began archiving ASL poetry, adding to what was already an extensive corpus of literature written by d/Deaf writers, as well as literature that contained a "'deaf presence,' made up not just of deaf characters, but also depictions of silence, sound, and deaf-related metaphors" (Krentz 13). Studying modern d/Deaf forms of and participation in music further enhances this cultural history already brimming with rich identities, language, and artistic movements. At the same time, the most frequently cited examples of Deaf musicality merge ASL and popular, extant music, producing a complicated entanglement between Deaf culture and hearing worldviews. While some work is performed specifically for Deaf audiences (such as at Deaf clubs), d/Deaf musicality is readily available for and received by both Deaf and hearing audiences.

Although the term De'VIA is exclusively employed within the fine arts, its goals and thematic outcomes have great application to my study, as Deaf musical performances predominantly utilize formal elements (of television, music videos, and theatre) to express Deaf worldviews. Broadly speaking, Deaf and ASL performances of music also fall under what

Christiana Myers calls “cripping the arts”:

> to embrace the ways that disability can disrupt the status quo and lead with difference. By “cripping,” or subverting, the language used within the arts, exclusionary or patronizing tropes related to disability can be dismantled, allowing access and inclusion to be standardized, terminology to be reclaimed, artists and audiences to be empowered and proper representation to be achieved.

There is currently no equivalent phrase to “cripping the arts” in Deaf Studies and scholarship, and no formal idiom like De’VIA for the performing arts; I nevertheless borrow from these phrases to approximate the sociocultural significance, labor, and activism being undertaken by Deaf performers in music, theatre, and performance at large. The aim of Deaf musicality as a larger practice holds similar value in that exclusionary and stereotypical views of deafness within the field of music—and, indeed, traditional (i.e. colonialist and hearing-centric) concepts of music itself—are interrupted and dismantled. In other words, Deaf participation in and creation of music thus function in ways that “crip,” subvert, and disrupt the so-called standards of music—i.e. hearing standards and structures of music—adding complexity to the intertwining of Deaf and hearing worlds explored within this dissertation. To express music in d/Deaf ways not only affirms Deaf identity and culture in ways that activate the frameworks of Deaf Gain, Deafhood, and Deaf Power, but also invites the hearing community to progress and grow in partnership.

Challenging the Boundaries of Music, Sound, and Silence

> Sound is active: it travels, it insinuates, reverberates, repeats, and fades away. Sound is sensual: it whispers and shouts, tickles your ear, and thumps in your chest. We embody, and are embodied through, sound.

Gillian Siddall and Ellen Waterman, *Negotiated Moments: Improvisation, Sound, and Subjectivity*[4]

> There is no such thing as music. Music is not a thing at all but an activity, something that people do.
>
> Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening*

Just as the notion of "deaf presence" is readily apparent within music, so too is a "musical presence" within Deaf literature and storytelling. In fact, there are countless intersections between the concepts of sound and silence across Deaf and hearing spaces. Records from the 19th century indicate how Deaf people have articulated their understanding of music. For example, in 1816 during a question and answer exchange with a hearing audience, French Deaf educator and later co-founder of Gallaudet University Laurent Clerc describes music as "a concert of various sounds, emanated either from the voice or from some instrument, which form a most agreeable harmony for the persons endowed with the sense of hearing" (Krentz 31). Later, in 1827, Deaf poet James Nack uses the metaphor of music in his poems "The Minstrel Boy" and "The Music of Beauty," using phrases like "the music of affection" (72) and "Of Beauty's music, breathing to the eyes" (193). Silence and deafness have similarly been used as metaphors within music, such as in Simon & Garfunkel's "The Sound of Silence" (1965) and Queen of the Stone Age's album *Songs for the Deaf* (2002). As metaphors, these phrases and titles mean something other than music and silence, yet their presence also signals an interest from both deaf and hearing artists regarding the meanings, borderlines, and indeterminacy of sound and silence. Even *Keywords to Sound* (2015), a Sound Studies resource published by Duke University Press, devotes a rich entry to *deafness*. Within, Mara Mills defines deafness as "a variety of hearing; alternately, it can be conceived as a precondition of hearing or as the resistance to hearing and

[4] Siddall, Gillian, and Ellen Waterman. Introduction. *Negotiated Moments: Improvisation, Sound, and Subjectivity*, edited by Siddall and Waterman. Duke University Press, 2016.

audism" (53)—or, to rewrite Mills' definition another way, hearing is a variety and precondition of deafness. These continuous entanglements indicate a modern dissolution of boundaries between deafness and hearingness, sound and silence.

Artists have also tested the boundaries and limits of music and sound by removing elements traditionally thought essential to musical work. For instance, ASL poet Ella Mae Lentz's piece "Eye Music" visually explores her experience during a long car ride at a young age, watching the rise and fall of telephone wires, which "were like lines on music sheets. The way the wires moved past me. I imagined them to be like the high notes of the flute or harpsichord. And the telephone poles punctuated the movement like the constant beat of drums" ("Eye Music"). Within ASL poems such as this, performed without any aural sound, the poet creates lines, rhythms, and rhymes with their hands; for Lentz, her movements and gestures physically and visually represent the thrill of looking out the car window as a child. Jody Cripps has also worked extensively on what he terms *Signed Music*, a form of music that does not rely on or include any aural sound, much like ASL poetry, but which experiments with the musical elements of rhythm, melody, harmony, timbre, and texture ("Introduction: ASL Music"). Cripps' notion of Signed Music, discussed in Chapter 5, holds particular significance "because it reclaims music as its own and reflects cultural autonomy in the performance. Signed Music challenges scholars to ask what culture owns music and what culture has the authority to define what music is" ("Music, Signed"). Notably, ASL poetry and Signed Music are not intended for hearing audiences, as one must be fluent in sign language and Deaf culture in order to understand and appreciate the forms' poetic and musical nuances.

Comparably, Deaf sound artist Christine Sun Kim dedicates much of her work to exploring the visualizations of sounds. In *face opera ii*, a Deaf choir "sings" without using their

hands—that is to say, with their faces ("face opera ii"). Playing on words such as SICK, EMPTY, and EARLY, *face opera ii* demonstrates how sign language's non-manual facial markers (the moving of the mouth, cheeks, eyes, and eyebrows) can produce meaning apart from the hands. Kim also elaborates on the similarities between ASL and music in her 2015 TEDTalk, explaining that there is no such thing as complete silence; rather, there are relative degrees of silence, and even to the nth degree, "very obscure sound[s]" exist ("The Enchanting Music of Sign Language"). A number of musicians have experimented with the boundaries of music, sound, and silence, such as drummer Chad Smith of the Red Hot Chili Peppers, who briefly performs "silent" drumming during a solo at PASIC (Percussive Arts Society International Convention), wherein he plays physically but does not actually hit the drum heads or cymbals ("Red Hot Chili Peppers"). Most famously, John Cage's performance piece, *4'33"* (1952), presents three movements wherein musicians sit in so-called silence, instead allowing the audience's movements and expressions to help "fill[] the sonic gaps" and "register[] in the listener's consciousness" (Bennett 72)—as if an incarnation of the saying, *the music is not in the notes, but in the silence between*. Whereas the purposeful "silence" in Lentz, Cripps, and Kim's pieces demonstrate the musicality of sign language, the removal of the expected sonic layer in Smith's and Cage's pieces directly challenges participants' very definitions of music and, at the same time, illustrates the possible musicality of sounds.

Among more traditional presentations of music, two examples within choral performance similarly subvert the boundaries and expectations of sound and music. In a 2017 video posted to YouTube, Iowa's Wartburg Choir performs the spiritual "Ain't No Grave Can Hold My Body Down," arranged by Paul Caldwell and Sean Ivory; the performance features an ASL interpreter (physically situated as a soloist), various signed verses and choruses by the entire choir, and a

"silent" chorus that is signed-only by the whole choir ("The Wartburg Choir"). Wartburg Choir's presentation echoes the challenge posed by Smith's and Cage's musical performances, asking audiences what constitutes music. Taking a much different approach, Venezuela's Coro de Manos Blancas (The White Hands Choir) performs with two choral sections:

> the *Vocal*, directed by professor Luis Chinchilla, made up of children and young adults with visual and cognitive deficits, motor impairments, learning difficulties, autism, as well as those who do not have any disability; and the *Gestual*, directed by the teacher María Inmaculada Velásquez, made up of children and adolescents with hearing impairment, who are encouraged to speak orally through choral singing. ("Coro de Manos Blancas")

The full choir, made up of 120 members, characteristically performs with the Vocal members occupying one side of the risers and the Gestual occupying the other (wearing their signature white gloves)—the aural and visual aspects of music working together on stage. Although Coro de Manos Blancas's work does not specifically include musical expressions of silence as Wartburg Choir, Cage, or Smith do, their performances generate a visuality and physicality to music analogous to Kim's expression of music through the body and hands. We might ask in each of these cases, what is music? Or, as Christopher Small's declaration in this section's epigraph poses, is there such a thing as music?

As these examples show, sound is as ubiquitous to deaf people as it is to hearing people. What is different is *how* it is experienced. Summer Crider Loeffler reminds readers that "the absence of hearing has nothing to do with the absence of sound." In fact, Deaf Studies scholars Carol Padden and Tom Humphries assert Deaf people have a keen sense of sound and that "sound itself—not just its absence—plays a central role in their lives" (93). Having developed a

heightened awareness of what sounds are and are not acceptable, particularly within shared and public spaces, Padden and Humphries elucidate, "The trick for Deaf people living among hearing people is to figure out the complicated meanings attached to various sounds" (99). These include what are otherwise unspoken rules within hearing culture, such as burping, stomach rumbling, slamming doors, and eating from a bag of chips. Echoing Padden and Humphries, Kim also acknowledges her hyper-vigilance around sound: calling it "sound etiquette," Kim asserts that she thinks of sound etiquette more as a deaf person than the average hearing person does ("The Enchanting Music of Sign Language").[5] As well, deafness and hearingness exist across a spectrum, rather than as an either/or state of being, fluctuating throughout a person's lifetime; this means that a person's relationship to sound also changes depending on the context. As Loeffler, Padden, Humphries, and Kim have described, Deaf people indeed understand sounds and the sociocultural connotations of sounds, perhaps even more articulately than hearing culture does. With these examples in mind, the terms *sound* and *silence* are called into question and transformed into unstable signifiers; they are arguably always present, existing in tandem and in manifold measures.

The expression and experience of music through d/Deaf perspectives and approaches is not without its criticisms, including that the most popular and successful examples of Deaf/ASL music borrow its source material from—and subsequently remains dependent on and limited to—hearing culture and music's form and content. In addition to such criticisms, d/Deaf artists who pursue music can be doubly eschewed on both sides of the hearing line. Best notes how

[5] Likewise, blind individuals are hyper-vigilant when it comes to space. In the 2006 documentary *Acting Blind*, which follows a group of blind actors rehearsing *Dancing to Beethoven*, one performer describes, "For a blind person to have a much higher awareness of the space that they are occupying at any given moment is extremely beneficial to your functioning in a sighted world. And perhaps Tai Chi has contributed by my being in the moment and being aware of my surroundings. Perhaps it has helped me to be able to maneuver around the table. When I go for Suzanne, my girlfriend in the play, I know exactly where I am, and where everyone else is, and where I have to go to find her." See *Acting Blind*. Directed by Martin Duckworth, Fanlight Collection, 2006.

artists within the Deaf hip hop movement, also known as *dip hop*, "are denied not only their culture, but also their expression of music. Faced with this cultural injustice, dip hop artists have worked to gain recognition for their music, to break down misconceptions of deafness that bar their way, and to earn respect from both Deaf and hearing communities" ("We Still Have a Dream" 76). Thinking liminally, Brenda Jo Brueggemann proposes the notion of *deaf-betweenity*, an "attending to the value of being between worlds, words, languages, and cultures" (41). This in-between state calls attention to the continuous and controversial oscillation between Deaf and hearing worlds that d/Deaf forms of music enact. Undeniably, d/Deaf participation in musical spaces engenders a deaf-betweenity as one straddles the line between Deaf and hearing worlds, perspectives, and aesthetics. Regarding the work of Deaf West Theatre, whose musical productions are purposeful collaborations and partnerships between Deaf and hearing communities, Artistic Director DJ Kurs explicates, "We don't only bring sign language to the world, we also bring music to the Deaf community" ("Working in the Theatre"). Kurs' declaration highlights the productive potentials of deaf-betweenity that exists when communities are willing to work together. As more and more d/Deaf artists and collaborators become involved in such musical practices and processes, and as more training programs make space for d/Deaf performers, these expressions of music will continue to shift and evolve—dismantling the hearing politics that inform its spaces.

Redefining Musical Experiences: On Deaf Listening, Deaf Musicking, and Song Signing

> It is not true that a person hears sound only through his ears; he hears sound through every little pore of his body. It permeates through his whole being, and according to its particular influence it either slows the rhythm or it quickens the rhythm of the blood circulation; it either wakens the nervous system or it soothes it; it arouses a person to higher passions or it calms him by bringing

> him peace. In accordance with the sound and its influence a certain effect is produced.
>
> Hazrat Inayat Khan, *The Mysticism of Sound and Music*[6]

Music may not be a part of every d/Deaf person's life, and some "find music to be of little importance or not important at all" (Darrow 106), but it has undeniably become a flourishing mode of artistic expression for many in the Deaf community. Though some might hastily define music as an aural and sonic modality, it is—as hinted at by the Hazrat Inayat Khan passage above—experienced by both deaf and hearing people in multisensory, multimodal, and multilingual ways. Even for those with a keen sense of hearing, Home-Cook describes that listening is never isolated to the ear; instead, vision "plays a key role in shaping the phenomenology of auditory perception. Indeed, it is by means of looking that listening is *activated*," such that "to experience the *play* of listening is also to be aware of a sense of movement" (168). Music and deafness are therefore much more compatible than mainstream (non-deaf, or hearing) culture may initially believe. Composer Gabriela Lena Frank reasons that Beethoven's musicality and musical styles (and so too, those of his contemporaries) are directly informed by his personal journey through deafness: "as Beethoven's hands stretched for lower and higher notes, he demanded pianos with added notes, elongating the pitch range of the keyboard; he asked for physically heavier instruments that resonated with more vibration." By disengaging the sociocultural hierarchy of sound from the definition of music, and by accentuating definitions from d/Deaf perspectives, we can discover how all bodies enact a sense of Deaf listening and Deaf music-making.

As Deaf Studies and Sound Studies research have consistently maintained, d/Deaf encounters with sound are a multi- or cross-sensory experience—a literal embodiment of sound.

[6] Inayat Khan, Hazrat. *The Mysticism of Sound and Music*. Shambhala, 1996.

Historically, musical spaces have long privileged a particular hearing expertise; Joseph Straus refers to this as the difference between *prodigious hearing*, *normal hearing*, and *disablist hearing*, wherein each of these modes imagines a particular type of listener. Prodigious listeners are those sharply attuned to classical musical literature, such as by Ludwig van Beethoven, Arnold Schoenberg, and Igor Stravinsky, though such listeners are extremely rare and musically gifted. Normal listeners, too, are not "normal" at all, but rather, taught through music theory and pedagogy to identify minute sonic details. Pushing against these models of hearing, Straus proposes *disablist hearing*, or "the ways in which people with disabilities make sense of music" (160), and specifically *deaf hearing*, where people "use senses other than the auditory to make sense of what they hear: they see and feel music" (167). This aligns directly with Deaf accounts of musical experience, such as Scottish drummer Evelyn Glennie, who describes the feeling and seeing of vibrations; Deaf dancer Shaheem Sanchez, who explains his rehearsal process, which includes putting his hand on the speaker, memorizing the beat, and studying the lyrics ("How Do Deaf People Experience Music?"); and Deaf model and activist Nyle DiMarco, who describes the visual sensation of seeing music, "how the character of the music actually flows. For me, that's music to my eyes" (Locker).[7] In addition, members of the Deaf rock band Beethoven's Nightmare play loud enough to hear the sounds and feel the vibrations ("Through Deaf Eyes"). These examples all push the boundaries of listening—and specifically, deaf listening—beyond the singular sensation of sound.

Even more to the point, d/Deaf listening intertwines several senses together. Musicologist Jessica A. Holmes resists the temptation to reduce the deaf listening experience to vibrations alone or to sensationalize deaf super-hearing abilities, what disability scholars might call the

[7] This phrase, along with activist-leader George Veditz's "people of the eye" and artist Mark Suffridge's "My eyes are my ears," directly inspires part of this project's title, *Music to the Eyes*.

supercrip trope (179-81).[8] Similarly, Composition and Sound Studies specialist Steph Ceraso cautions readers that "swapping the ears for the eyes is still too limiting—too dependent on a single mode." Musicologist Nina Eidsheim similarly refuses these types of sonic reductions in favor of understanding music's ontology as "an unfolding phenomenon that arises through complex material interactions" (*Sensing Sound* 2). To these same ends, Holmes amplifies the multiplicity of musical experiences, emphasizing how "deafness demonstrates that listening encompasses a full spectrum of sensory experiences, musical contexts, individual preferences, cultural practices, and social experiences—what amounts to an ever-evolving set of listening states" (212). In a *New York Times* "360 Video" featuring Deaf scholar and disability advocate Rachel Kolb, Kolb expresses how for her, "Music is not just about sound. Music also is about the body. About what happens when what we call sound escapes its vacuum and creates ripples in the world... Music is a celebration of feeling movement." Kolb goes on to describe her multisensory and multimodal experience of sound: "Music is also visual, physical, tactile. It weaves its rhythms through our lives. I believe music becomes more remarkable when we experience it with our whole bodies." In this way, music, like ASL, transcends temporal and spatial boundaries, unlike the linear limitations of spoken and written languages ("The Enchanting Music of Sign Language"). These examples and accounts exemplify "hearing as seeing, hearing as feeling, hearing as movement, hearing as silent, out-of-time contemplation" (Straus 170). I would also argue that these visual-kinesthetic-tactile forms of musical experience are equally true for hearing audiences, though most may not necessarily realize it; take, as just

[8] Sami Schalk defines this as a *regular supercrip narrative*, which "both normalizes and others people with disabilities because although the representation shows a person with a disability doing something 'just like everyone else,' the creation of the representation is premised upon the ableist assumption that people with disabilities do not do these things and thus are not just like everyone else" (79). See Schalk, Sami. "Reevaluating the Supercrip." *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2016, pp. 71-86. Any description of deaf listening is in danger of falling into this type of stereotype, also considered a type of *overcoming narrative* or *inspiration porn*.

one example, the throngs of hearing people who rush to the pit at music concerts so that they can feel and engage physically with the music, experiencing and participating through their whole bodies. Both Deaf and hearing worlds therefore stand to gain from recognizing the fluid states and experiences of listening that exist—a Deaf listening sensibility.

In describing the combination of Deaf listening and music, I turn to musicologist Christopher Small's term *musicking*, which is often used when referring to d/Deaf musical participation. Formally defined, musicking means "to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing" (Small 8). In other words, Small's idea takes the noun and product-oriented notion of *music* and refocuses it into verb form based on process and action. To describe the musical participation of d/Deaf bodies in this way is productive because it detaches music from hearing culture and its inherent aurality and *audism*. Audism, coined by Deaf Studies scholar Tom Humphries, is "The notion that one is superior based on one's ability to hear or behave in the manner of one who hears" (12). The internalized audism of musical spaces is especially troublesome when considering authorship, as what occurred to Finnish Deaf rapper Signmark. In 2012, Signmark was denied royalties to his own music because, "according to [music management company] Gramex, signing in sign language is not singing, because in their opinion recording consists solely of sounds" (Leppänen 42). Despite the fact that Signmark writes and translates his own lyrics and was even a finalist to represent Finland in the Eurovision Song Contest in 2009, he is devalued because his voice is not considered under aural terms. Here, the politics of hearing and hearing-centrism are made material because of the financial and artistic implications of Gramex's judgment. However, Signmark's work would likely be recognized under the umbrella of musicking, thereby

expanding the idea of one's *voice* beyond vocalization alone. The refusal to acknowledge Signmark's Deaf voice—in its artistic (lyrics) and signed (performance) forms—is what Eidsheim argues as Western music's conception of voice "as a generic vehicle for words, pitches, and duration" that "results in the neglect of key vocal and sonic dimensions that are not traditionally notated" ("Sensing Voice" 134). Eidsheim, like Holmes, Kolb, and Small, instead suggests "multisensory perspectives [that] may enrich the analysis of musical sound in general, and vocal practices in particular" ("Sensing Voice" 135). The notion of Deaf musicking thus provides a productive approach through which to consider music performances that feature d/Deaf individuals and characters, as well as their various forms of expression.

Deaf musicking occurs in a variety of ways—with or without vocalization—including in the composition and performance of original music like in Signed Music and "dip hop," or deaf hip hop (WAWA, Signmark, and Sean Forbes); the work of Deaf dancers and dance companies like Shaheem Sanchez, Gallaudet Dance Company, and Antoine Hunter (Purple Fire Crow)'s Urban Jazz Dance Company; the redefining of music as a visual art form, such as in Christine Sun Kim's sound-based performance art; the live concert participation of subcultures like Deafheads, the d/Deaf fans of Grateful Dead; and in "song signing" (also called signed songs) that translate popular music into signed lyrics. Song signing has direct derivations from Deaf storytelling traditions, or what Ben Bahan categorizes as *percussion songs* and *translated songs*.[9] Borrowing from Ted Supalla, Bahan maintains that "translated songs" are performed independently from the strict pace and rhythms of auditory music, while forms that do keep pace

[9] In addition, the history of film—a genre that has had direct impact on the development of music videos—has included widespread participation by Deaf actors and audiences. The early twentieth century's silent film era "was one of the few aspects of hearing culture in which the deaf could participate as both creators and appreciators on equal ground with the hearing" (Robinson 196). See Robinson, Carol L. "Visual Screaming: Willy Conley's Deaf Theater and Charlie Chaplin's Silent Cinema." *Signing the Body Poetic: Essays on American Sign Language Literature*, edited by H-Dirksen L. Bauman et al. University of California Press, 2006, pp. 195-215.

with the auditory aspects of music are typically performed by those who are hearing or have residual hearing. Overall, each form of Deaf musicking reiterates how the very idea of music in Deaf culture can be divorced from, or at least less dependent on, the aurality that defines traditional, hearing definitions of music.

To take into account the diverse forms of participation from deaf and hearing bodies on both sides of the stage, I also turn to what Kochhar-Lindgren terms *the third ear*. Whereas Deaf listening attends to how d/Deaf bodies experience music, the third ear attends to *listening to* Deaf forms of musicking—that is, how audiences listen, see, and/or experience differently when d/Deaf bodies perform.[10] Kochhar-Lindgren describes "hearing" with the third ear as a hybrid, improvisational, cross-sensory, and cross-cultural method of listening, involved with "the silences, the gaps between image and sound, the incongruities between movement and text, the dissonant intercessions of noise and gesture, and the positions of the performing bodies that speak to us" (2). Through this terminology, Kochhar-Lindgren, moves beyond hearing culture's configurations of music as predominantly sound-centric. Rather, this move emphasizes the visual performativity of deafness, which "curtails the oral dimension of communicative exchange and promotes a phenomenology of **speaking from other spaces of the body** . . . Signing disrupts the location of voice as sound, but it amplifies the voices that emanate from the body" (Kochhar-Lindgren 15; emphasis added). This third ear has cultural implications on both sides of the hearing line. First, like Small, it focuses on how d/Deaf bodies perform differently from other bodies, thereby de-emphasizing hearing/sounding as the main form of communicative and performative practices. Second, it accentuates how Deaf musicking innately generates cross-

[10] Kochhar-Lindgren points out English's sensorial bias, in that there is not yet a word that combines what spectators (who view) and audiences (who hear) do (16). For lack of a better term, I use the term *audience* here as an all-encompassing word.

cultural exchanges between Deaf and hearing worlds. It is, therefore, not enough to know how Deaf musicking functions, but both deaf and non-deaf audiences must also understand how to listen to Deaf musicking in new ways, altogether subverting hearing-centric definitions of music.

My focus throughout this project is on the Deaf musicking form of song signing. My use of the term song signing parallels Bahan's notion of translated songs, as well as Anabel Maler's analysis of a song signing video, where songs are translated lyrically from (sung) English into ASL ("Songs for Hands"). An early example of translated songs is Washington Barrow's performance of "Star Spangled Banner," featured in a 1940 film about Deaf filmmaker Charles Krauel (Bahan 34). Maler further refines Bahan's definition of translated songs via four categories: *live music interpretation services*, such as at concerts or church services; *live performances by song-signing artists*, including original music by Deaf artists like Sean Forbes, Signmark, and WAWA; *videos featuring the performance of an original song*, like the music videos created by Forbes, Signmark, and WaWa as visual extensions of their albums; and *videos featuring the performance of a preexisting song* ("Musical Expression"), which includes the works of Deaf artists like Rosa Lee Timm, Russell Harvard, Jason Listman, and Sarah Tubert, in addition to non-Deaf persons like Stephen Torrence and Tina Sirimarco—a cultural tension explored in Chapter 3. In the case of Deaf-created song signing, the aim is to "mak[e] Deaf music: music that privileges visual forms of expression, that uses techniques specific to natural sign languages, and that is particular to a specific body" (86), bolstering the need to understand Deaf musicking as an active and growing artform in and of itself.

Song signing has become incredibly popular among beginning learners of ASL, who are most often hearing people; a search of "ASL music" or "song sign" in YouTube returns over three million results, with no way to narrow down videos by creatorship. This trend is heavily

criticized by the Deaf community as being a form of cultural appropriation because ASL includes grammatical structure and cultural meanings, and a hearing person's translated lyrics can devolve and dilute the language into bastardized form. However, there is an increasing amount of song signing being performed by d/Deaf artists today that closely follow the rhythm of the music while integrating Deaf aesthetics. This trend signals that the boundaries between song signing and Bahan's original notion of translated songs are in a continuously shifting state and that when created ethically—that is, from within the Deaf culture—song signing can be considered a valid form of Deaf musicking. In addition, while translated songs may traditionally be aimed at Deaf audiences, I suggest that the emerging style of signed songs examined here is performed for both d/Deaf and hearing audiences, requiring interdisciplinary analytical methods that merge perspectives from music, theatre and performance, and Deaf Studies fields.

Deaf and Disabled Bodies in Performance: Audism, Oralism, and Hearing-Centrism

Earlier, I suggested that any instance of a Deaf-centric musical act inherently challenges hearing definitions of music. Given the examples mentioned so far and the vast range of ways music is created, we might more broadly assert that any d/Deaf experience of or participation in music resists hearing notions of music altogether. The implication of these statements is directly informed by Deaf and Disability Studies scholarship that recognizes the ways in which social and cultural values frame and reframe issues related to the body. More specifically, this project is indebted to Deaf Studies research that articulates how Western and American societies privilege hearing worlds and experiences, outlining terms such as oralism, audism (and dysconscious audism), and hearing-centrism.

Oralism, a pedagogical ideology that rejects the use of signed languages in the classroom,

is marked most prominently by the 1880 Second International Congress on Education of the Deaf, also known as the "Milan Conference." Despite its title, this conference was the first international meeting of predominantly hearing educators around the world, during which the use of sign language and sign language instruction (*manualism*) was effectively banned in favor of oralism, or oral-only education. Although some attendees were advocates for deaf students and education, no deaf participants were involved in the creation of the resolutions, two of which read:

> (1) given the incontestable superiority of speech over signs in restoring deaf-mutes to society, and in giving them a more perfect knowledge of language that the oral method ought to be preferred to signs; and (2) considering that the simultaneous use of speech and signs has the disadvantage of injuring speech, lipreading, and precision of ideas, that the pure oral method ought to be preferred. (Moores)

The language of these resolutions shows a negative reaction to and disapproval of sign languages, and the rhetoric of "restoring deaf-mutes to society" demonstrates how less-than-human Deaf people were considered at the time, establishing a period of 80 years during which sign language use diminished across the world. It was not until 2010, in Vancouver, Canada, at the 21st International Congress on Education of the Deaf, that the resolutions were rejected and a formal apology issued.

During this age of oralism, hearing teachers replaced deaf teachers, and students were made to lipread and vocalize—or punished, otherwise. Just forty years after the Milan Conference, "80 percent of deaf students were taught without sign language, and the teaching corps at residential schools went from being 40 percent deaf to less than 15 percent" ("Oral Education"). Inventor Alexander Graham Bell is cited as one of the prominent figures within the

oralism movement. In spite of—or *because* of—his hard of hearing mother, Bell believed that "to ask the value of speech is like asking the value of life" ("Early 19th Century Deaf Education"). Given his Darwin-esque belief that humankind was only made full through the use of speech, Bell's participation in the Milan Conference no doubt bolstered the oralists' reign over the education of deaf students. These oralist practices and ideologies are still in use today, compelling society towards hearing assimilation and a particular type of speaking body.

Whereas oralism dictates methods of communication, the notions of *audism* and *hearing-centrism* call attention to oppressive attitudes held towards deaf people. In his influential 1977 dissertation, Deaf Studies scholar Tom Humphries defines audism as "The notion that one is superior based on one's ability to hear or behave in the manner of one who hears" (12). Best identifies similar biases within society, especially with regard to music, defining hearing-centrism as "the process of judging musical expression based on values formed by a conventional experience of aural sound" ("Musical Belonging" 1), judgments also shaped by the types of "listening" that Straus classifies. Both Humphries' and Best's notions emphasize society's privileging of a particular sense (and use) of sound that seek to regulate the ways in which bodies receive and transmit aural sounds. These attitudes are also indicative of what Genie Gertz regards as *dysconscious audism*, the internalized acceptance of hearing norms and privileges which "adheres to the ideology that hearing society, because it is dominant, is more appropriate than the Deaf society" (219). That the ability to hear and speak are so engrained within society consequently demands that deaf and hearing bodies act and behave in the world in certain ways—a type of favoring of able-bodiedness.

In using the term able-bodiedness, I simultaneously draw upon Disability Studies while also acknowledging that the fields of Disability Studies and Deaf Studies have long had a

contentious relationship. This is due to the fact that the Deaf community sees itself as a cultural, linguistic minority rather than as disabled or lacking; Douglas Baynton famously proclaims in *Forbidden Signs: American Culture and the Campaign against Sign Language* that "Silence is experienced by the hearing as an absence of sound. For those who have never heard, deafness is not an absence" (23), echoing what many native signers understand of their lived experiences. Some have also noted how this perspective can further stigmatize disability at the same time. Nevertheless, many Americans see deafness as a type of bodily difference and, therefore, subsume deafness within the larger category of disability. In Davis' foundational text, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body*, he opens with the notion that "One is either disabled or not. One cannot be a little disabled any more than one can be a little pregnant" (1). Davis' viewpoint recalls the prescriptive attitude towards deafness: one is either deaf or hearing—states of being seen through a binary lens, rather than on a spectrum. The pressure to identify one way or the other again calls upon Gertz's *dysconscious audism*, in which society urges and makes compulsory the performance of hearing values.

That Deaf and disabled bodies must persistently *perform* in order to fit within the demands of society draws significant parallels between Deaf experiences in America and what Disability Studies labels the *social model of disability*. Unlike the pathological or medical model that seeks to fix and cure dissimilar bodies, the social model calls attention to how institutions, systems, and environments within society generate disabled bodies—that is to say, one is only disabled when society makes it so. Ladd suggests as a third, community-affirming model the *culturo-linguistic model*, which "focuses on preserving our languages, our Deaf schools and clubs, and institutions such as Deaf TV, university departments of Deaf Studies, Deaf Heritage Centres and so on" to serve as "supportive resources for Deaf individuals to then engage with the

wider world with more confidence and self belief, and thus to share their own special gifts with the rest of humankind" (*Songs of Deafhood* 14). The d/Deaf performance and expression of music is one way that the culturo-linguistic model can be upheld and attained. As Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander remark, "to think of disability not as a physical condition but as a way of interacting with a world that is frequently inhospitable is to think of disability in performative terms—as something that one *does* rather than something one *is*" (10). Deaf bodies, like disabled bodies, are constantly in performance, not because (or not only because) of sign language, but because of how they must move through the world—dictated by oralist, audist, and hearing-centric frameworks.

Helping to break down such frameworks are recent advancements in technology, which are most often produced with an impetus of accessibility during performances and generate additional layers of participation for both Deaf/HoH and hearing audiences.[11] For example, Smart Caption Glasses, developed for use at the UK's National Theatre, "project dialogue directly onto the lens, allowing the wearer to follow the action without having to glance toward the sides of the stage, where caption screens are usually placed" (Kendall). Such glasses offer an alternative and direct experience for Deaf/HoH audiences and can be used at any performances, especially helpful since open-captioned and interpreted performances during a production's run are usually limited. In addition, there are wearable devices that visualize and physicalize sound, such as Wavio, a smart home device that can distinguish between different sounds, ("See Sound"); Neosensory, a wristband that turns sounds into vibrations ("Neosensory"); Dome's D4

[11] In discussing deafness and accessibility, I acknowledge a precarious history of technology that upholds the medical model of disability, specifically the introduction of cochlear implants in the U.S. in 1984. Cochlear implants are not only an invasive surgery but also present a false sense of "hearing," since they generate electronic representations of sounds rather than enable hearing sounds themselves (i.e. "fixing" one's hearing, as many assume). Moreover, the Deaf community views cochlear implants as threatening sign language and Deaf culture with extinction.

bone conductor headphones, which transmit soundwaves through the skull and sit on or outside of the ear and ear canal ("Dome Headphones"); and SUBPAC, a vest that "accurately translates deep bass frequencies into high fidelity vibrations across the user's body . . . felt in several ways including conduction of sound via the bones" (SUBPAC). Using SUBPAC, UK Deaf dancer Chris Fonseca describes how "the beat comes through the pack and they essentially spread out across the back and down my arms and down through my legs, so I actually feel vibrations from head to toe. It's like a wireless connection to the music. I can move around and connect to the music at a much more granular level" (SUBPAC). Paradoxically, these devices at once signal a growing interest in empowering Deaf/HoH individuals in a sound-centric world while also creating additional and/or alternative facets to music outside of its sonic registers.[12] Moreover, these devices make music accessible to all types of users, whether or not someone is Deaf/HoH.

While I primarily utilize d/Deaf and Deaf Studies perspectives within this research, I recognize the usefulness and political and social activism that Disability Studies has engendered within theatre and performance. This is particularly true with regard to how the inclusion of Deaf *and* disabled bodies on stage challenge binary categorizations and essentialist notions of identity, as well as produce counter-hegemonic performances that resist systemic and structural frameworks of oppression and knowledge. These frameworks have historically silenced (as it were), marginalized, and/or dehumanized bodies of difference (ideas addressed by scholars like Sandahl and Auslander, Petra Kuppers, and most recently, Samuel Yates and Ryan Donovan; these ideas are also found throughout Deaf Studies collections). I actively take up Sandahl and

[12] In 2019, Kenyan inventor Roy Allela created Sign-IO, gloves that transmit sign language into audible speech. Unlike the devices described in this section, Sign-IO gloves do not extend sonic layers into other senses; rather, it provides a way for hearing peoples to understand Deaf peoples without having to learn the language. While this device makes sign language accessible to hearing peoples, it does not yet offer a way for hearing peoples to communicate back to sign language users.

Auslander's call to explore "disability [and deafness] as performance," asking "How does the work of disabled [and deaf] performing artists transform the artistic genres in which they work? What new genres are they creating?" (1). In light of these questions and of the variety of Deaf performances mentioned earlier, my research focuses on the music and musical productions created by or co-created with the Deaf community, staged across different performance media and mediums. These Deaf-inflected genres or subgenres follow particular aesthetic guidelines and have specific artistic and cultural objectives in mind—thereby signaling a Deaf turn, or presence, within music.

Even though Deaf musical performance continues to increase in 2022, research that addresses these cultural outputs is limited. This includes scholarship by Best, Alice-Ann Darrow, Anabel Maler, Raymond Knapp, Sarah Wilbur, and myself. The majority of work written about Deaf art focuses on ASL poetry and ASL literature, or on hearing representations of d/Deaf characters and narratives. In addition, the field of Sound Studies focuses on understanding the multisensory experience of music for Deaf individuals, while musicology continues to read deafness as a medical condition that can be remedied or supplemented through forms of music therapy. It is thus my hope that this project will productively address these gaps, examining the positive, productive, and political ways that Deaf music contributes to and challenges the hearing world at large, through its narratives, forms, aesthetics, and dramaturgies.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 2, "Framing the Performer: Representations of d/Deaf Musicking in Contemporary American Television," attends to televised performances of song signing and the overall complexities that arise from staging deafness on screen. Using the Super Bowl, *Zoey's*

Extraordinary Playlist, and *Sesame Street* as primary examples, I analyze how specific televisual framings, or dramaturgies, of d/Deaf bodies directly affect television viewers' receptions of those bodies as either a performer or an interpreter. Whereas Super Bowl broadcasts tend to generate a confusing and liminal framing of d/Deaf artists as ASL interpreters, scripted series effectively frame d/Deaf performers as the primary musical performers. Educational series are particularly effective, inviting hearing audiences to actively participate in song signing as a musicking practice. When the narrative, televisual, and performative frameworks of a Deaf-led musical number succeeds, deafness is seen as a strength, rather than a lack, altogether promoting Deaf identity, development, and community.

Chapter 3, "Internet Made the ASL Star: American Sign Language Music Videos as Deaf Cultural Remixes," traces the emerging Deaf/ASL music video form, a popular genre among Deaf and non-Deaf creators that cover or adapt official versions of music videos. Many (predominantly hearing) attempts at Deaf inclusion have, at best, ceased at the level of lyrical accuracy or, at worst, use the deaf body and sign language as object or metaphor (what disability theorists call *narrative prosthesis*). However, music videos that are created by or in collaboration with Deaf artists and directors generate dynamic texts that blend linguistic accuracy and communication (accessibility) and a Deaf music video aesthetic (with emphasis on cuts, transitions, split screens, and stylized captions). In addition, these texts engage today in the social space of *YouTube*, producing a relationality between the original (non-Deaf) texts, the new Deaf texts, and their mixed (Deaf and non-Deaf) viewers. I borrow from Gérard Genette's notion of the *paratext* to accentuate how Deaf/ASL music videos actively circulate and converse with the original versions in moving and meaningful ways that showcase Deaf community, identity, and pride.

Building upon these discussions surrounding the television's framing and music video's paratextuality of song signing, I turn my attention to the genre of musical theatre in Chapter 4, "Signs, Songs, and the Stage: Dramaturgies of American Deaf Musical Theatre." Rather than thinking of ASL versions of musical theatre as merely revivals and adaptations, as they have been categorized commercially, I re-read such texts through the lens of Marvin Carlson's *ghosting* and Jonathan Miller's *afterlives*. Carlson and Miller provide theoretical frameworks that allow for a reconsideration of what Deaf-centric theatrical texts are and how they function—that is, as productions that simultaneously evoke the cultural memory of "traditional" versions and operate with unique performance methodologies. Taking as my primary examples Deaf West Theatre's *Spring Awakening*, *Pippin*, and *Big River*, I articulate the common dramaturgies of Deaf musical theatre, including the establishing of a Deaf world, the use of bilingual and bi-musical layers, accessibility for a mix of d/Deaf and hearing audiences and performers, the embodiment of Deaf time, and dramatic devices such as double-casting, shared signs, and silent music. These on-stage dramaturgies disrupt the hearing-centric spaces of musical theatre and provide a model for how hearing and Deaf communities can collaborate and communicate successfully off-stage.

I end my analyses with a discussion of original Deaf and sign language musicals in Chapter 5, "Deaf Futurities and Musical World-Building: Decolonizing the Hearing Present Through Original Deaf and Sign Language Musicals." Addressing the notion of crip and Deaf futurities, I begin with an overview of how disability and Deaf studies scholarship has envisioned the future, where Deaf futures in particular engender decolonialist practices and attitudes. Notably, crip and Deaf futures also reject what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson deems the "normate" body, a fantasy or construct of identity through which disability is othered and against

which the normate is defined and extended sociocultural power. Then, using *The Black Drum*, *Stepchild*, *Disconnected*, and *Signs of Freedom* as examples, I analyze how original Deaf and sign language musicals have re-imagined commercial musical theatre spaces by rehearsing new models of theatre-making; this occurs through creative relationships and partnerships that model cross-cultural collaboration and design, through thematic and musical re-centerings of Deaf narratives and histories, and an overall unsettling of hearing-centrism by way of Deaf-driven musical practices that derive from the d/Deaf body.

Finally, in the Conclusion (Chapter 6), "A Re-Turn to Deaf Music's Futures," I conclude by reflecting on the key take-aways of this project. By way of an anecdote about my recent attendance at an innovative production of Beethoven's *Fidelio*, I prompt a look towards the future of Deaf musical performance.

Each of the Deaf turns I explore within this dissertation focuses a spotlight on the pitfalls, gaps, and creative potentials of different performance mediums with regard to Deaf access and representation. While television, music video, and musical theatre each ask their creators and audiences to engage with texts in different ways, the core values of Deaf culture and of ASL transfer steadily across media's lines. Through these critical analyses, I hope to demonstrate the significance for both d/Deaf and hearing communities of experiencing music through Deaf eyes.

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CHAPTER 2: Framing the Performer: Representations of d/Deaf Musicking in Contemporary American Television

> You can look at it as pressure, but I don't think of it as pressure. I think of it as a wonderful opportunity. An opportunity to finally show what a Deaf artist can really do, especially as a musician. Portray it, to wake up people. Hello! We are here. Stop sleeping on us. Wake up. Sign language is so beautiful.
>
> Warren "WAWA" Snipe,
> on performing songs in ASL at *Super Bowl LV*[13]

In February 2021, d/Deaf rapper Warren "WAWA" Snipe performed "The Star-Spangled Banner" and "America the Beautiful" in ASL at *Super Bowl LV*. WAWA's performance was praised—in viewers' words—for captivating audiences, winning the crowd over, stealing the show, and being "the real MVP" (Bueno).[14] ASL performances of the Super Bowl's patriotic pre-game ceremonies have been customary since 1992, coinciding historically with the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and the Television Decoder Circuitry Act of 1990, which mandates that all manufactured television sets have caption decoding technology by 1993. Yet, nearly twenty years later, WAWA's performance was barely seen by television audiences. Although a CBS Sports article announced that "Those who are deaf will not miss out on the heartfelt opening ceremony" (Walker), the broadcast focused primarily on musicians H.E.R., Eric Church, and Jazmine Sullivan, while WAWA himself was (dis)placed on the field over thirty yards away from H.E.R. and five away from Church and Sullivan.[15] The lack of split screen or picture-in-picture presentation for Deaf music performances at the Super Bowl continues in 2022 despite the fact that ASL is a visual language and must therefore be *viewed*,

[13] See "Interview with Wawa, Super Bowl 55 Signer."
[14] Many of these viewers are presumably hearing; as shown in Antoinette Bueno's article, Twitter user @JRown32 refers to WAWA as "the sign language guy" and @PforPatrick explains that he wants to learn ASL because of the performance.
[15] WAWA's full performance was captured from the CBS Sports live feed and posted to the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) YouTube channel, though other channels frequently cut away from him.

unlike the sung music (Garrand).

This dilemma, widely commented on by various Deaf and disability activists, artists, and scholars,[16] prompts questions about *how* Deaf music performers are presented, or framed, by the television screen. On the one hand, Deaf musical presence on a nationally-televised event like the Super Bowl is largely celebrated as an advancement in terms of inclusion, accessibility, and diverse representation. On the other hand, the obliviousness towards and lack of regard paid to WAWA—and indeed, a consistent disregard of the Deaf artists who have performed on the Super Bowl since 1992—reveals a misunderstanding of representation, one in which the body of the performer is collapsed into and onto the role of an interpreter. This misunderstanding also indicates a paradoxical compulsion towards hearing aesthetics, in spite of supposed increased awareness of and regulations regarding accessibility on a national level. In Pierre Schmitt's "Representations of Sign Language, Deaf People, and Interpreters in the Arts and the Media," Schmitt compares viral press conference interpreters and music interpreters, contending that sign language interpreters can generate sites of confusion when a broadcast's mise-en-scène operates as access and knowledge dissemination rather than as entertainment and performance. This conflation of ASL interpreter (access and knowledge) and the Deaf performer (entertainment) occurs most often on television, a convergence of multiple programming subgenres.

Though televisual performances and representations of d/Deaf musicking continue to be a work-in-progress, presented with differing degrees of visibility and effectiveness, I do not discount that the overall positivity surrounding WAWA's performance and presence at the Super

[16] Commentary surrounding the lack of accessibility during ASL performances at the Super Bowl regularly emerges immediately following each year's event, spanning social media channels, newspapers, and online media outlets. An updated list of the controversies, performers' responses, and video footage has been compiled on DEAF, Inc.'s website. See "A Two-Second Love Affair: Sign Language at the Superbowl." *Deaf, Inc*. 12 February 2022, https://www.deafinconline.org/post/a-two-second-love-affair-sign-language-at-the-superbowl. Accessed 26 April 2022.

Bowl signals a markedly different showcasing and reception of d/Deaf musicking than in the two decades prior. In a 1999 study, Alice-Ann Darrow and Diane Merchant Loomis examine five visual texts created between 1968 and 1991 (*Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, *Children of a Lesser God*, *A Different World*, *Quantum Leap*, and *Crazy Moon*), finding that portrayals of d/Deaf musical experiences commonly depict condescending scenarios in which hearing people teach Deaf people about what music is—a constant misrepresentation of the Deaf community as simply "hearing nothing" (106). Focusing on d/Deaf and hearing viewer responses to the excerpts, Darrow and Loomis' research suggests that the predominantly hearing perspectives of the texts' writers and creators consistently misinformed the depictions. While recognizing that progress continues to be made (*Super Bowl LVI* in 2022 featured two Deaf rappers, WAWA and Sean Forbes, during the halftime show for the first time), it is equally important to acknowledge the continued missteps and mispositioning of television networks (WAWA and Forbes' performance, placed behind a goal post, could only be viewed by audiences on a separate, delayed feed on the NBC Sports website and app).

Taking up Darrow and Loomis's call to examine "the accuracy of other images portrayed in the media, continue to define deaf persons' musical perceptions, [and] further assess hearing persons' judgments of the deaf" (107), this chapter expands on their study to focus on Deaf-led examples of song signing featured on television since 1971 (see Table 1). How has the existence of a Deaf presence in music developed since Darrow and Loomis's initial examples? How do notions of "music" expand because of Deaf presence, leadership, and collaboration? And how do modern television aesthetics help and/or hinder the presentation of Deaf musicking and its performers and participants in ways distinctive from music videos and musical theatre, genres examined in later chapters? To answer these questions, I compare recent Super Bowl

performances to appearances of song signing on scripted series like *Zoey's Extraordinary Playlist* (2020-2021) and *Sesame Street* (1969-present). I argue that the conventions of reality and liveness that contextualize Super Bowl performances erroneously conflate Deaf artists and ASL interpreters, whereas scripted television (specifically, musical and educational series) more effectively frame the image of a Deaf/ASL performer *as performer* through their narrative, aesthetic, and performative frameworks. Televisual representations of d/Deaf music, as a whole, demonstrate a strong shift away from earlier medical model-based attitudes towards d/Deaf relationships to music to more access-, identity-, and culture-oriented depictions.

Table 1
Examples of Deaf musicking on television, organized by genre and year of debut

Show (Year(s))	**Character/Performer, Song(s)**	**Performer (d/Deaf or hearing)**
SPORTING EVENTS[17]		
Super Bowl XXVII (1993)	Marlee Matlin, "The Star-Spangled Banner" (with Garth Brooks)	Deaf
Super Bowl 50 (2016)	Marlee Matlin, "The Star-Spangled Banner" (with Lady Gaga) Matlin, "America the Beautiful" (with the Armed Forces Chorus)	Deaf
Super Bowl LIV (2020)	Christine Sun Kim, "The Star-Spangled Banner" (with Demi Lovato) Kim, "America the Beautiful" (with Yolanda Adams)	Deaf
Super Bowl LV (2021)	WAWA, "The Star-Spangled Banner" (with Eric Church and Jazmine Sullivan) WAWA, "America the Beautiful" (with H.E.R.)	Deaf
Super Bowl LVI (2022)	Sandra Mae Frank, "The Star-Spangled Banner" (with Mickey Guyton) Frank, "America the Beautiful" (with	Deaf

[17] Listed here are select *Super Bowl* performances, specifically those mentioned in the chapter.

	Jhené Aiko) WAWA and Sean Forbes, halftime show (with Dr. Dre, Snoop Dogg, Eminem, Mary J. Blige, and Kendrick Lamar)	
London Summer Olympics (2012)	Evelyn Glennie Kaos Signing Choir, "God Save the Queen" (British National Anthem)	Deaf and hearing
MUSICAL SERIES		
"Hairography," *Glee* (2009)	Haverbrook Deaf Choir (with members of New Directions), "Imagine"	Deaf and hearing
"Zoey's Extraordinary Silence," *Zoey's Extraordinary Playlist* (2020)	Abigail (and other schoolmates), "Fight Song"	Deaf
NON-FICTION SERIES		
The Saturday Night Show (Ireland, 2013)	St. Mary's School for the Deaf Choir, "Fix You"	Deaf and hearing
Jimmy Kimmel Live! (2014)	Amber Galloway Gallego, JoAnn Benfield, Holly Maniatty "Black & Yellow" (with Wiz Khalifa)	Deaf and hearing interpreters
Italia's Got Talent (2015)	Martina Giammarini	Deaf
Dancing with the Stars (2008 and 2016)	Marlee Matlin Nyle DiMarco	Deaf
America's Got Talent (2017)	Mandy Harvey	Deaf
Ireland's Got Talent (2018)	The DeafTones, "Photograph"	Deaf
The Greatest Dancer (UK, 2019)	Chris Fonseca	Deaf
The Voice Australia (2020)	Andy Dexterity	Hearing
Little Big Shots (2020)	Savannah Dahan, "Brave"	Deaf
EDUCATIONAL SERIES		
Sesame Street (1971-2002)	Linda the Librarian, "Sing" (with Olivia), "Firefly" (with Olivia), "Keep Christmas with You" (with Bob)	Deaf
Signing with Cindy (1982)	Cindy Cochran, "Darlin,'" "Fame," "Hit Me With Your Best Shot," "Sunshine On My Shoulders," "The Main Event," "You Needed Me"	Hearing ASL interpreter

When the Medium is the Message: Televisual Representations of Deaf Musicking

Broadly speaking, the efficacy and accuracy of d/Deaf representation is widely written about across the fields of literature, cultural studies, and popular media studies, including scholarship that examines d/Deaf characters in young adult fiction since 2000 (Gangwish), in 19th century American literature (Krentz), and in children's picture books (Golos and Moses; Brittain), as well as Russel Rosen's study of written descriptions of sound and music in literature by d/Deaf authors. More recently, a number of scholars have examined d/Deaf representation in media, such as Katherine A. Foss's "Constructing Hearing Loss or 'Deaf Gain?' Voice, Agency, and Identity in Television's Representations of d/Deafness," a survey of d/Deaf characters in forty television series between 1987 and 2013 and finds that mainstream depictions of deafness continue to perpetuate the medical model of disability[18] despite an increase in overall representation. A number of scholars also examine specific texts featuring d/Deaf leading characters, such as Carson McCullers' *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940) (Steele), *Mr. Holland's Opus* (1995) (Avon), and ABC's *Switched at Birth* (2011-2017) (Asif). Direct responses to and analyses of specific d/Deaf characters in the texts mentioned above are also composed amongst fans and journalists, found within newspaper articles, blog posts, discussion forums, and on social media.

Studies addressing Deaf musicking on the screen are, by contrast, few and far between. Most commonly, the role of music within the Deaf community has been discussed within the fields of ethno/musicology, which seeks to understand d/Deaf forms of music-making and experiences of music, such as vibrational, kinesthetic, and visual approaches; technology, including issues surrounding accessibility, captioning, and translation; and more problematically,

[18] The medical model of disability pathologizes deafness as something to be "fixed" or "cured," often through cochlear implants, and is vehemently rejected by Deaf culture.

music therapy and/or language development, which often center around the combination of sign language and music to enhance language development in both d/Deaf and hearing children. A 2018 special issue in *Journal of American Sign Languages & Literatures* (*JASLL*), titled "Deafening Music: Transcending Sound in Musicking," features nine video essays (as is the journal's convention) that discuss the rising popularity of translating songs and the appropriation of Deaf culture that regularly occurs as a result. Similarly, practicing artists led a plenary on "Signed Music and the Deaf Musicians" during the Canadian Association of Theatre Research (CATR/ACRT)'s 2020 conference, *Partition/Ensemble*, where they discussed their own videos in terms of the creative process of signing a song. However, Signed Music is a unique performance style, distinct from song signing, that melds musical elements like rhythm and melody with features of ASL poetry like lines and rhyme; as such, it does not include aural forms of music and is described by Jody Cripps as a "visual listening of music" ("Signed Music and the Deaf Musicians"). The specificities of Signed Music as a musical genre, and the broad ways in which "music" can be defined as a whole, generate questions about what it means to perform music from a Deaf cultural perspective.

The list of televised Deaf musicking occurrences compiled in Table 1 is divided into four programming subgenres: sporting events (including a selection of Super Bowl games and the London Summer Olympics), musical series (*Glee* and *Zoey's Extraordinary Playlist*), non-fiction shows (including variety, reality competition, and talk show series), and early educational series (*Sesame Street* and *Signing With Cindy*). These differ from Darrow and Loomis's original study in ways that draw attention to important sociocultural shifts. With regard to the performers' identities, only six instances of Deaf musicking include non-Deaf bodies, counting two performances of choirs made up of Deaf and hearing members and two performances that

include ASL interpreters. While interpreters are not necessarily a part of Deaf culture, they have awareness of cultural nuances that at least help to maintain a song's linguistic accuracy. That d/Deaf artists are now primary participants indicates that the community itself is reclaiming ownership over its own cultural representation in media. Even though Darrow and Loomis's study uncovers that misrepresentation can still occur despite participation from the community, many recent Deaf musicking and signed songs were created by or in consultation with d/Deaf artists. Additionally, unlike in the original study, none of the performances are contextualized as hearing people teaching d/Deaf people about music; instead, they are most often (re)presentations of Deaf musicking as a participatory, identity-affirming practice.

The conventions of television present a unique and challenging medium through which Deaf musicking is framed. A number of scholars have written about the aesthetics and style of television in general, including John Thornton Caldwell's formative text on what he calls *televisuality*, Tim Dant's view of the television's capacity to appeal to the *moral imaginary* of audiences, Peter Ward's formalist approach to visual composition, and studies of televisual aesthetics and style by Jeremy Butler and by Jason Jacobs and Steven Peacock. In addition to specific visual tropes custom to each broadcast genre, the variety of camera transitions alone can generate a specific rhythm and flow that showcases, interrupts, supports, or negates the performance of sign language when combined with music, which may have its own rhythms, patterns, and structures. For instance, television tends towards multi-camera set-ups, especially for "live" events, as well as frequent cuts from one camera angle to another during a single scene. Longer shots are typically used in scenes with minimal action, to convey cinematic tones, or during formal events such as press conferences, for which an ASL interpreter would normally be placed near the speaker or superimposed onto the screen. However, while music interpreters

are becoming more widely utilized in live concert settings, they are not yet conventional to television, including for pre-game ceremonies at sporting events, reality competitions and talk shows featuring musical acts, as well as concerts. This presents a further conundrum, since music is not only lyrical but is also made up of other important elements such as melody, harmony, rhythm, and instruments, all of which are unlikely to be conveyed through closed captions. Although the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) mandates closed captioning for all television programs, the use of closed captions presume viewers' linguistic fluency, even though Deaf people's first language may be sign language and not necessarily English. The task of captioning music is often ignored altogether or, when they do exist, "[t]he multidimensionality of sound, or many layered sounds, are often reduced to brief captions. The captioner chooses which sounds to reference and which to leave out" (Kim, *Close Readings*). Through her *Close Readings* project which re-captions sounds through deaf perspectives, sound artist Christine Sun Kim (who performed at the Super Bowl the year prior to WAWA) prompts questions of ownership, objectivity, and empowerment when it comes to the process of translation and captioning, altogether urging a Deaf re-claiming of sound, music, and meaning.

Although d/Deaf bodies do not all or always identify as disabled, I find Krystal Cleary's feminist analysis of the extraordinary (disabled) body on reality televisi

on a productive avenue through which to understand the broader framing of the d/Deaf body on television. Borrowing from Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's concept of *misfitting*, Cleary analyzes disabled bodies in three popular TLC programs, reading the presentation of performers through

> a conjoined discourse of extraordinary normalcy in which they are figured as extraordinary *because* they are so profoundly ordinary. Accordingly, the representational

> mode of these programs appears as a corrective to oppressive depictions of people with non-normative bodies. [Yet,] the discourse of extraordinary normalcy built into the narrative framework of these programs is in fact supported by a scaffolding of normativizing logics that hinge upon casts members' whiteness, upward class mobility, and fulfillment of conventional gender and sexual norms.

While Cleary's examples focus on a specific type of reality television that media studies scholar Misha Kavka calls the "no-talent format" (qtd. Cleary), which dictates a different type of staged performance, editing process, and representational mode, the d/Deaf body is similarly situated within the ordinary, whether in scripted or non-scripted situations—at least, what is considered ordinary to the hearing mainstream. Unlike Cleary's examples, however, the d/Deaf body is then called into being—or hailed—as *extraordinary* through the expression and performance of music. Compared another way, Cleary's examples witness the extraordinary body visibly marked (conjoined twins, dwarfism, fat) but positioned as ordinary, while the d/Deaf body on television is initially unmarked and presented as ordinary, then made extraordinary in performance. It is, of course, difficult to separate d/Deaf performances of music from their reception as extraordinary precisely because of the limited occasions during which these performances occur in popular culture. Nonetheless, understanding how such performances are framed is vital to ensuring that future instances of d/Deaf musicking are attended to effectively and successfully—that the artist is represented and respected as a performer and that audiences are capable of accessing the communication (be it sign language and/or musical elements) imparted through the performance.

My emphasis on the (re)presentation of Deaf music performances is, in part, based on communication theorist Marshall McLuhan's famous phrase, "the medium is the message." That is to say, *how* the d/Deaf performer is framed via the television screen—or, as I explore in later

chapters, the music video and the musical theatre stage—directly shapes what and who is presented and, as a result, what and who is received by audiences. This relationship between what is presented, what is received, and who does the receiving echoes disability and media studies scholar Beth Haller assertion that media depictions of disability have a moral responsibility to truthfully and accurately educate society about disabilities "[b]ecause people with disabilities still face many architectural, occupational, educational, and communication barriers in the U.S." and "interpersonal contact between able-bodied and disabled persons is still limited" (28). Not only do "many people in Western cultures get their information about people with disabilities and their issues primarily from mass media sources" (40), but such media depictions of disability "have implications for the self-concept of people with disabilities themselves" (41). Paul Higgins reminds readers that we "'make disability' through our language, media, and other public and visible ways" (qtd. in Haller 41), including televised performance as a nuanced representational mode. That television's representational modes not only shape images of disability but also impact the lived experiences of disabled peoples is similarly taken up by disability studies scholars like Jay Timothy Dolmage. Dolmage extends Garland-Thomson's conception of "disability as a representational system" in which "representation structures reality" (qtd. in Dolmage 31) to write extensively on dominating disability myths perpetuated in and by popular culture that "mark and construct disability as surplus, improper, lesser, or otherwise *other*," rhetorically structuring the position of disabled bodies in society (31).

Deaf performers' featured, or unfeatured, status during both scripted and unscripted television events not only gestures towards their social identity (either as performer or as interpreter) but also marks their importance to the musical act and to the event as a whole. The Super Bowl is particularly instructive here due to its excess representational complications: the

televisual event is contextualized overall as a presentation of "reality" or unscripted moments (namely, the game itself) but is in fact framed by highly deliberate, staged moments (the pre-game ceremonies and the halftime show),[19] aspects I contrast later in this chapter with scripted series that utilize music to heighten the represented reality. Prompting my interest within this chapter is thus the layering of representational modes—the television, a medium that frequently "(re)creates images to reflect, suggest, or construct reality" (Friedman 2), and disability/deafness, which is itself "*necessarily representational*" (Bérubé 154)—and the television screen's power to dictate the image of the d/Deaf body and community in ways that deviate from the dramaturgies of other performance mediums. The misrepresentation of Deaf cultural identity, as Darrow and Loomis' and Schmitt's research reveals, leads to an inaccurate view of d/Deaf people as a) incapable of fully experiencing or understanding music and b) needing music to be fulfilled in the first place. On the surface, these various considerations make the presentation and representation of Deaf musicking seem like a fraught endeavor. Still, television performances of song signing have the potential to push back against issues of translation, interpretation, and representation—revising Higgins' expression, to *make Deaf*—or to re-make it—on culturally-affirming terms.

"We Are Here": Framing the Deaf Performer at the Super Bowl

The Super Bowl is a quintessential American event that brings in 90 to 100 million viewers each

[19] Even this statement can be taken as a fallacy unto itself, as David B. Sullivan argues that televisual shots of sporting events are intended to produce an insider view, bringing the viewer to the stadium, but are in fact highly mediated, "obliterat[ing] the viewer's appraisal of linear time, gravity, and spatial dimensions in relation to the live event," and further framed by commentary that serves dramatic purposes. See Sullivan, David B. "Broadcast Television and the Game of Packaging Sports." *Handbook of Sports and Media*, edited by Arthur A. Raney and Jennings Bryant. Taylor & Francis Group, 2006.

February, including those who tune in for the commercials or for the halftime show.[20] Super Bowl pre-game ceremonies traditionally feature performances of "The Star-Spangled Banner" and "America the Beautiful," songs that lyrically emphasize patriotism, militarism, and the nation's aesthetic beauty. Although this musical framing occurs nationally across other major and densely populated sporting events, like basketball, baseball, and hockey, and at motorsport events like NASCAR and NHRA, the Super Bowl is distinct among televised events due to the national and international optics that typically inform it. The ceremonies' framing is also the reason protest-driven actions like kneeling are "labeled anti-American, anti-military, and anti-nationalist," even though the protests themselves are about inequality and oppression and not about nationalism or militarism (Schmidt). As well, the irony is not lost on me that WAWA's proclamation that "We are here" ("Interview with Wawa") is juxtaposed, in striking irregularity, with how visibly "here" he and other Deaf performers are actually positioned at the event. While the impulse to incorporate ASL performers at the Super Bowl implies accessibility and inclusion on a global scale, the staging of such performances is largely ineffective, conducive neither to inclusion nor to accessibility. Such inconsistent and confusing framing of Deaf performers at the Super Bowl also perpetuates the sociocultural liminality of Deaf identity in terms of American belonging.

Since 2009, the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) has helped choose the ASL performer, who is then given a few weeks to rehearse with the other singers and musicians prior to the performance. The rigorous selection process and rehearsal period indicates that those

[20] Acknowledging that the term *viewers* centers sight, I use the term over *audiences* purposely throughout this chapter over to differentiate from live performance, as well as to emphasize the ableist assumptions of television content creators towards sight and hearing.

chosen are not *interpreters*, as some media outlets refer to them, but *performers*.[21] Indeed, recent Deaf actors and musicians such as Sandra Mae Frank, WAWA, John Maucere, Amber Zion, Alexandria Wailes, Treshelle Edmond, and Marlee Matlin (who has performed at the Super Bowl three times) come from the various entertainment industries. The distinction between sign language interpretation and performance can seem difficult to mark, since ASL requires the use of full bodies and facial expressions to convey the speaker's (or singer's) message. However, formal interpretation aims towards linguistic access, whereas Super Bowl performance captures the musicality of the songs beyond lyrics alone. The NAD website specifically uses *perform* (and variations of the word) when announcing and referring to the Super Bowl. This distinction in terminology is imperative to how deaf bodies are framed, positioned, and presented on television.

Performers who are selected for the Super Bowl make use of artistic styles of ASL, which also amplifies the theatrical qualities of the songs. WAWA explains how he utilizes a combination of ASL and visual vernacular (VV), which are "[g]estures, almost like International Sign. But instead of signs there are many gestures to identify the shapes so you can see and understand. Like the White House, or stars" ("Episode 7: Super Bowl MVP"). VV is not a strict adherence to ASL's grammar and vocabulary but rather allows for heightened expression, creativity, and theatricality, such that the performer is conveying lyrical and musical meanings. This performance modality is used in ASL poetry to add spatial dimensions to the words, allowing "[m]eanings, images, and words literally [to] become less flat, more active and expressive. By playing on signs that share similar configurations or spatial flow, ASL poets alter

[21] I reserve the word *interpreter* for the formal role of certified sign-language interpreters (SLIs), many of whom are hearing, or certified Deaf interpreters (CDIs). It would be uncustomary for the Super Bowl ASL performer to be an SLI, and if any performers are also CDIs, it would be by coincidence rather than by intent.

phonetic nuances into visual ones, one-dimensional words into three-dimensional shape" (Burch 124); in addition, VV helps the performer "embod[y] various images and elements of the poem" (Burch 124).

VV becomes an especially important element to WAWA's performance because H.E.R.'s approach to "The Star-Spangled Banner" includes a 36-second guitar solo. WAWA subsequently takes an artistic approach to this instrumental moment:

> I'm not going to just stand there during the whole song. So I decided to assess that song and make it clear she's talking about America. So that's why I described America itself with VV… For example, when she started playing the guitar, I started with the Statue of Liberty in New York, and traveled, then the White House in Washington DC, and then Saint Louis. How do you identify that? I made a gesture to convey the Gateway Arch, and the mountains, valleys, and Hollywood. Who can forget that? And then water… And then a river, and then I went in reverse and went back to New York. So I was traveling, and at the same time, you see it from that angle, from a bird's eye view. ("Episode 7: Super Bowl MVP")

WAWA's descriptive explanation of what occurs during the guitar solo captures the heighted theatricality and artistic potentialities of ASL performance that functions beyond a direct word-for-word translation or interpretation of lyrics.[22] In addition, artistic ASL performance requires a layer of creativity and performativity that ASL interpreted briefings do not contain (though, at

[22] The terms *translate* and *interpret* are used in scholarship with varying differences. While here I reserve the term *interpreter* for the formal profession, I also acknowledge that the two concepts overlap, and that an interpreter engages in the act of translation during interpretation. Campbell McDermid provides nuanced definitions for these terms, describing, for instance, how translators "take time to review a translated target text and can make use of various resources" to achieve a definitive version (xii). At the same time, McDermid notes that "to produce a dynamically equivalent message, an interpreter may have to work between the literal and enriched levels of meaning to translate [a speaker's] concepts successfully in context" (18). See McDermid, Campbell. *Learning to Interpret: Working from English into American Sign Language*. RIT Press, 2018.

times, audiences can confuse these modes of signed languages). WAWA emphasizes how he worked through at least 50 versions of the performance, continually modifying and playing with his version based on both the lyrics and the performers' prerecorded versions provided to him ("Behind the Scenes with Wawa"). The meticulousness and synchronicity of his performance differs from formal interpretation in that interpreters may have a general idea about the topic and context of a situation but do not typically rehearse beforehand. As such, there is often a delay in relaying the message from English to ASL, or vice versa, and the interpretation is normally improvised on-the-spot. That there are endless possibilities to ASL versions of both songs, and that such possibilities can only be explored successfully through a laborious process of translation and rehearsal, signifies the level of artistry, performativity, and creativity involved in a Super Bowl performance.

Even if the Deaf person who signs "The Star-Spangled Banner" and "America the Beautiful" is indeed a performer and not an interpreter as I maintain here, the Super Bowl's presentation and broadcast of the performances themselves contradict the instincts of both performance and interpretation. In other words, Deaf performers at the Super Bowl are presented as neither performer *nor* interpreter. Each year, the Deaf performer(s) is inconsistently displayed for television viewers; if they appear at all, they are either shown in full screen for a few seconds or are shown via picture-in-picture or split screen, reducing the ASL performer to what Pierre Schmitt refers to as a "prisoner of the bubble" (131). The "bubble" is the literal overlay of an oval- or square-shaped area that covers part of the screen (Schmitt 142), a format most often associated with television press conferences such as White House briefings for Joe Biden ("01/25/21: Press Briefing") and Gavin Newsom's daily Covid-19 press briefings ("Governor

Newsom Press Conference").[23] Much like during off-stage, "platform" interpretations of theatre, the bubble physically (dis)places or removes ASL from the main action or performer on stage. Schmitt goes on to argue that the mise-en-scène of the bubble "confines ASL to an accommodation for Deaf people" (133)—the performer is reduced to the level of an interpreter for d/Deaf viewers rather than as an active and equal performer of the music. Schmitt asks of this (dis)placement, "How can a viewer perceive [2014 Super Bowl performer] Amber Zion as an artist in her own right when her image is set off to the side, in a space typically reserved for a hearing SLI?" (132).

One example of successful sign song framing occurred in 1993, when Deaf actress Marlee Matlin first performed with Garth Brooks and positioned on the same stage, immediately next to Brooks. This is ideal staging for what is essentially a dual English-ASL song—or a multilingual duet, as it were—because cameras could capture both performers in a single frame. During one version of the broadcast uploaded to YouTube, the camera angles change every few seconds to include close-ups and wide shots of Matlin and Brooks, as well as cutting away to show the players and coaching staff. The broadcast works in favor of the ASL by utilizing the bubble so that Matlin remains in view during the entire song; by comparison, Brooks is not always shown since the vocals can be heard with or without the camera's focus ("Superbowl 27 – Anthem"). In this case, Matlin's placement next to Brooks, despite the network's use of the televisual bubble, works in favor of her framing as an equal performer. Ten years after Matlin and Brooks' performance, performer John Maurece and the NAD would request that Maurece be similarly positioned close to the performers (Alicia Keys and Jennifer Hudson) "to share in their limelight" (Bella); that he enraptured audiences and was praised as "The World's Sexiest Deaf

[23] Sometimes, interpreters are not placed in a literal screen bubble but simply to the side of (and/or behind) the speaker, which nonetheless produces a similar effect as platform interpretation.

Guy" (Gordon) is confirmation that the staging of the performer is crucial to how they are received and understood by audiences.

More often, ASL performers are not provided this same proximity to the "main" (usually solo) artist. Despite the Super Bowl's pretense towards accessibility for d/Deaf/HoH viewers, the cameras frequently jump from one angle to the next (again, conventional for this type of live televised event), such that the ASL performer—and thus, the ASL itself—is not displayed for the full duration of the songs. This can be observed in the years immediately preceding and following WAWA's 2021 performance, during which Christine Sun Kim, Sandra Mae Frank, WAWA, and Forbes are all displaced from the other guest artists. The majority of televisual choices during each of these performances repeatedly include fleeting moments of camera attention and camera shots that continually cut back and forth between the vocalists, the football teams, and members of military units, such as at the Al-Udeid Airbase in Qatar ("Watch Demi Lovato"). Since the Deaf artists are placed a considerable distance away from the main platform, there is no way for cameras to capture or focus on both the signing and the singers at once. Some overhead wide-angle shots may capture the Deaf performer at the bottom corner of the screen, though this (seemingly unintentional) placement does not assist with linguistic access nor a view of the signer's performance since bodies and hands are miniscule within bird's eye views—indicating a privileging of aesthetics over access.[24] Even Frank's 2022 performance, which was

[24] NAD's CEO Howard Rosenblum explains that the event logistics—and, therefore, the attention paid to the Deaf performers—necessarily change each year depending on who is involved (as the Super Bowl broadcast rotates between three networks), on what items "must" be shown (musical artists, audiences, football players, special flyovers, etc.), and on the physical and technological infrastructure of the host stadium. While NAD's earlier request for picture-in-picture was denied, recent networks and stadiums have been agreeable to a dedicated camera on the performer, though relegated onto a separate streaming feed, and to spotlighting the performer on the stadium's jumbotron; the latter, however, is only visible to those physically in attendance. Rosenblum reminds interviewer Melissa Elmira Yingst (known as Melmira), "No law requires ASL on TV. . . . so for any ASL access, that is progress." See "Melmira | Superbowl Logistics with the NAD." *YouTube*, uploaded by Melissa Elmira Yingst, 21 Feb. 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yqIHlLnjqBQ. These issues bring up a complex convergence of factors such as network and corporate sponsorships, fan and audience access to the Super Bowl stadium, and

captured by a dedicated camera and streamed onto a separate feed available online, was visually disrupted by the appearance of a man on the field who did not realize he was blocking the camera's view of Frank entirely ("Sandra Mae Frank"). Considering these complexities of televisual framing, it would seem that the only way to ensure a Deaf artist is seen as a "main" performer is if they are the *only* performer, or, at the very least, physically situated next to singers as an equal partner (as in Deaf West Theatre's productions).

Given the Super Bowl's nationalistic tendencies, the secondary status of Deaf performers at the event becomes an apt metaphor for the Deaf community's secondary status as citizens of the United States. Pathological attitudes towards deafness still employ the medical model of disability, which seeks to fix or cure disabilities. As such, deafness is often lumped under the category of disability, as deafness is often construed as a negative state of being (hearing) and with a lower quality of life, including within social institutions like education, medicine, employment, and in this case, musical performance. However, the Deaf community does not define itself as disabled or lacking (i.e. *hearing loss*), supported by the very existence of Deaf culture and pride, as well as by the abundance of Deaf art, literature, and performance that affirm Deaf identity—though, problematically, this position generates further stigma towards disability. Still, the inclusion of Deaf performers at the Super Bowl is an act of ideological and cultural contention. To be invited to participate in the larger national and ritual traditions of the Super Bowl suggests an atmosphere of inclusivity and progress, but the inability of both the NFL and television networks to feature Deaf performers in culturally respectful and fruitful ways

national commercialism and economics—a reminder that "when the megaevents of sport and media mix they are most likely to command the powers of nationalism while, at the same time, benefiting the global interests of transnational corporations" (Wenner 56). See Wenner, Lawrence A. "Sports and Media Through the Super Glass Mirror: Placing Blame, Breast-Beating, and a Gaze to the Future." *Handbook of Sports and Media*, edited by Arthur A. Raney and Jennings Bryant, Taylor & Francis Group, 2006.

symbolizes and embodies exclusivity. These performative instances become, then, an example of what Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell formulate as *ablenationalism*, or "the degree to which treating people with disabilities as an exception valorizes able-bodied norms of inclusion as the naturalized qualification of citizenship," where disability exists "as a discrete, sociological minority" (113). Deaf participants at the Super Bowl's pre-game ceremonies, still twenty years after first being "included" in the event, are treated as an exception, at first embraced and given special status and positioning at the game,[25] then televisually excluded, betraying society's supposed ethos towards visual and linguistic access,[26] and thereby undergirding the d/Deaf body's—like the disabled body's—subordinate status as United States citizens. The liminality of Deaf performers between, or outside of, linguistic access and artistic performance devalues their presence at the event and the Deaf community's inclusion nationally.

As Deaf performers of color, both Kim and WAWA (who are Korean American and African American, respectively) have underscored how their appearances on such a widely viewed television broadcast can generate intersectional and coalitional tones. In response to her lack of screen time during *Super Bowl LIV*, Kim explains in a *New York Times* op-ed that "it was a huge disappointment — a missed opportunity in the struggle for media inclusiveness on a large scale. Though thrilled and excited to be on the field serving the deaf community, I was angry and exasperated" ("I Performed"). She explains the hesitation she experienced before accepting the invitation to perform due to how polarizing the Super Bowl and NFL platforms have become

[25] Alexis Kashar, a civil rights lawyer who partnered with NAD for the Super Bowl, explains that Frank was actually positioned center stage at the 2022 pre-game ceremonies, between the other two artists—a staging choice that was not visible to television audiences. Kashar and Rosenblum also explain that event planners had initially worked hard to ensure that WAWA and Forbes' halftime performance was brightly lit but that they were unaware of how different and dimly lit the streaming feed ended up. See "Melmira | Superbowl Logistics with the NAD." *YouTube*, uploaded by Melissa Elmira Yingst, 21 Feb. 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yqIHlLnjqBQ.
[26] Prior to the NAD's involvement, around 90% of Super Bowl commercials were not closed captioned. See Timothy Bella's "A Silent Super Bowl: The Fight for a More Deaf-Friendly Game."

since the 2016 season, when Colin Kaepernick first kneeled during the national anthem to protest against systemic racism and police brutality. Kim goes on to reflect on the intersection of oppression faced by both African American and Deaf communities, listing the names of multiple Deaf victims of police brutality. Through her written testimony, Kim offers her participation at the Super Bowl "in recognition and support of those who have used the N.F.L.'s platform toward wider goals of social justice" ("I Performed"). WAWA equally draws attention to his participation and performance in the spirit of national unity. When asked what he hopes people will take away from his performance, he explains,

> Unity now. Since the pandemic and before that, there's been a lot of madness, especially with the country divided on so many things. We forgot who we are. We forgot. We forgot what makes this country this country. I know it can have the good, the bad, and the ugly, but we still push and strive for the best. And we did, but not by ourselves. We did it together. I want inclusivity. I want accessibility. I want to see and understand. You can't just not include each other. We have to work together, regardless of background, creed, sexuality, disability. The time is now. ("Episode 7: Super Bowl MVP")

Both Kim's and WAWA's statements take into consideration their respective performances as Deaf artists in light of the sociopolitical context that has tainted the NFL and the Super Bowl as being an institution that perpetuates systemic racism and inequality. Their hyperawareness of themselves not only as part of the Super Bowl's pre-game entertainment but also as cultural representatives of the Deaf community, in addition to Kim's internal struggle to rationalize her participation and WAWA's alertness to the disunity of the nation, signals a) a move away from the *minority model* framework that "center[s] the experiences of white, middle-class disabled Americans" (Frederick and Shifrer 201) and b) a larger disjunction between the televised

performances and the positionality of the Deaf community and of Deaf people of color within the United States.[27]

Since each broadcast performance differs depending on staging and camera angles, the status of the ASL performer(s) can become unclear. Whereas Matlin is staged in a way that makes her integral to the performance *as a performer*, Kim, Frank, WAWA, and Forbes are subordinate elements to the singers' performances, and the directorial choices (and the separate streaming feed they are each relegated to) suggest they are superfluous to the performance altogether. It is as if they exist only for Deaf/Hard of Hearing viewers, reducing d/Deaf musicking to an act of translation rather than an act in and of itself.

"I've Still Got a Lot of Fight Left in Me": Framing Deaf Performers in Musical and Educational Series

Unlike the immediacy and liveness purported within Super Bowl broadcasts, scripted television offers fictional and carefully structured settings wherein d/Deaf musicking and characters can take on imaginative dimensions that may not be permissible otherwise. These settings also deliberately and more easily frame the d/Deaf performer *as performer*, accentuating their performative qualities and further removing them from the modality of interpretation. Paradoxically, scripted series differ in that there is no pretense to "reality," though, as is commonplace in Western performance, many are indeed rooted in realism. Additionally, as media scholar James Friedman argues, "television as an institution is ideologically,

[27] Kim and WAWA's presence as Deaf performers of color also encourages a discussion about race at the Super Bowl that the NFL has not itself truly begun to wrestle with. For *Super Bowl LVI*, in addition to Jhené Aiko and Mickey Guyton's pre-game performances, gospel duo Mary Mary performed "Lift Every Voice and Sing" (considered the Black national anthem), and the halftime show brought together hip-hop legends Dr. Dre, Snoop Dogg, Eminem, and others, choices that in the end appear to be performative activism by the NFL and host network NBC.

technologically, and programmatically linked to the presentation of reality" as a purposeful delineation from other media (4). Besides the ongoing, serial nature of television series and the various dramatic climaxes that frame commercial breaks, "TV drama consists of clusters of expected, conventional happenings, such as the moment when characters finally meet, or face-off, or the penny drops and so on" (Jacobs and Peacock 6). More importantly, the two shows of primary interest here (*Zoey's Extraordinary Playlist* (2020-2021) and *Sesame Street* (1969-present)) include music as the key presentational modality intrinsic to the series. Adding d/Deaf bodies to these already-musical contexts generate sharper images of Deaf musicking and song signing as a cultural function, as well as promote the understanding and experience of music beyond the ears. In ways much more successful than the Super Bowl, scripted shows' musical, televisual, and narrative structures not only frame the Deaf performer as a performer, but also bolsters Deaf inclusion, access, and community.

Prior to *Zoey's Extraordinary Playlist*, the television musical *Glee* (2009-2015) introduced mainstream audiences to song signing through the fictional Haverbrook School for the Deaf's glee club during episode eleven of the first season, "Hairography." Cast with majority d/Deaf performers, Haverbrook's performance of "Imagine" was received by d/Deaf and Hard of Hearing viewers as a start for positive representation and mainstream exposure to sign language ("Glee Tonight").[28] However, under the narrative guise of diversity, inclusion, and unity, Deaf identity—embodied by Haverbrook—is continually diminished in favor of hearing parameters of music and the show's larger message to "be yourself." The performance, which includes a vocalizing soloist (John Autry II) and song signing, is framed as a friendly intercampus exchange; Haverbrook students begin the song, and then are joined by New Directions, the

[28] Such disability-specific casting is, however, inconsistent within the context of *Glee*, which infamously cast Kevin McHale, an able-bodied performer, in the role of wheelchair user Artie Abrams.

show's main choir, who add soloists and harmonies as they "learn" the signs from their Deaf peers. Most troublesome is that the music does not "come alive" until New Directions combines with Haverbrook (or, as critics Mike Hale and Raymund Flandez consider it, when New Directions interrupts Haverbrook's performance). The episode thus perpetuates the dichotomy and hierarchy between hearing music and Deaf musicking—that is, musical sounds and song signing, where the former is favored and the latter is incomplete. On the surface, the duet between Haverbrook and New Directions aids the song musically for viewers who may not be familiar with song signing as a practice; since neither the piano nor Autry are carrying the traditional melody of "Imagine," New Directions adds musical support for what is a three-minute musical number. In addition, while New Directions sings, Autry continues to vocalize the lyrics but does so off-tempo, perhaps so as to not be drowned out by the singing. Yet, New Directions' participation is symbolically and literally a taking over of a Deaf musical performance by hearing people. This generates the problematic undertone that Haverbrook's performance, and Haverbrook's very identity, is insufficient without the aurality of music. This framing, as with the Super Bowl, also reduces the d/Deaf characters' performance to a secondary interpretation of the music.

Whereas music in *Glee* is diegetic, music in *Zoey's Extraordinary Playlist* is typically non-diegetic—or, in a more complicated view, music exists to the title character and to audiences but is not fully a part of the world itself.[29] The musical architecture of *Zoey's Extraordinary*

[29] Diegetic sound exists in the world of the text (and to the characters within the world), whereas non-diegetic sounds are "unheard" or, at least, come from unseen sources. Musical theatre-like numbers, such as those in *Glee* and *Zoey's Extraordinary Playlist*, function in more nuanced terms: Sarah Taylor Ellis describes *Glee*'s musical numbers via Raymond Knapp's concept of Musically Enhanced Reality Mode, or MERM (Ellis 186), which sets up a musical number as naturally as possible and then permits "both audio and visual violations of what might actually be possible" (Knapp 67). See Ellis, Sarah Taylor. *Doing the Time Warp: Queer Temporalities and Musical Theater*. 2013. University of California, Los Angeles, PhD Dissertation; see also Knapp, Raymond. *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity*. Princeton University Press. 2009.

Playlist is built on the titular character Zoey Clarke's (Jane Levy) ability to hear others' innermost thoughts expressed in musical form, referred to in the show as "heart songs." The majority of the musical numbers in the show occur as Zoey's private observations of others' performances, which provide Zoey special insight into a character or situation and that is then used to help resolve the episode's conflict. "Zoey's Extraordinary Silence," the show's ninth episode, focuses on father-daughter relationships and specifically parallels the relationships between Zoey and her father Mitch, and Howie (Zack Orth) and his Deaf daughter Abigail (Sandra Mae Frank). While working as Mitch's caretaker, Howie reveals to Zoey that Abigail has stopped speaking to him for several months. Howie's desire to reconcile with his daughter forms the crux of the episode and prompts Zoey and Howie to visit Abigail's college dorm, where Abigail performs her heart song, "Fight Song" by Rachel Platten. Compared to *Glee*'s conflicting dramaturgy and framing, "Fight Song" is presented as a unique form of Deaf musicking and song signing that encourages a more accurate and positive understanding of the Deaf community.

Abigail's heart song and overall storyline are contextualized as pride in difference, unlike in *Glee*; theatricality, it is also staged as a performance, unlike at the *Super Bowl*. Most importantly, in only a few minutes, Abigail's narrative is presented in terms of Deaf pride and identity. Notably, Abigail is not "seen" as a Deaf character until she physically appears in the episode, i.e. when Howie and Zoey enter her dorm's common area, which Howie explains is a Deaf dorm. Since Howie is hearing, viewers likely assume at first that Abigail is also hearing.[30] He does not initially draw attention to her deafness, having only described her as a computer science major and senior at UC Berkeley. Howie's decision not to mention her deafness is soon

[30] This parallels real-life families, as "More than 90 percent of deaf children are born to hearing parents." See "Quick Statistics About Hearing."

contrasted with his overprotectiveness of Abigail precisely *because of* her deafness and, the likely reason for their disconnect, her desire to travel to Kenya to teach students about English and sign language while introducing them to STEM activities. After finding out that Abigail has gotten a grant for her trip and will be going anyway, an exasperated Howie tells her, "It's too risky for someone like you, and you're not going," which cues the musical number. Later in the episode, Abigail visits Zoey's work, a tech firm called SPRQ Point, and explains her backstory in light of a possible internship at the company:

> Ever since I was little, he's always tried to shelter me from the world and make me better, whether it was cochlear implants or hearing aids or speech therapy. But when nothing fixed me, he was devastated… He always made me feel like something was wrong with me. And then I went to college and met people who didn't view their deafness as a weakness. I now know I can do anything I want to do… I could choose to wallow or feel bad for myself, or I can embrace life, take control, and make my own destiny. I'm not gonna let him or anyone else stop me.

In what is otherwise a brief stint and monologue in the episode, Abigail's story arc definitively presents Deaf identity as a source of pride—combating pathological views of deafness as something to be cured, emphasizing the capabilities of Deaf people to do anything hearing people can do, and capturing Deaf people as a larger community of like-minded individuals. Upon hearing her story, Zoey reaffirms Abigail's desires to Howie, who reconciles with Abigail, and their story arc ends with a playful conversation in the Clarke's kitchen about her upcoming trip to Kenya.

Most compelling is the televisual and theatrical presentation of the song itself, a unique twist on song signing and Deaf musicking. Performed by Frank and at least ten other students

sharing the dorm common room (cast in collaboration with Deaf West Theatre), the song is vocal-less; instead, the performers sign the lyrics while instrumentals carry the aural rhythms and fills, and a violin solo achieves the melody. The scoring of the song takes into consideration all aural musical elements equally, and since the signers perform the lyrics and the violin performs the melody, there is no need to add vocalization (as *Glee* does in "Imagine"). The only other sounds made are brief rhythmic taps—each person's hand on their heart—produced by the group in unison; this is both a sign/action that concludes the first chorus ("'Cause I've still got a lot of fight left in me") and transitions into the chorus reprise. This performance thus varies from other forms of song signing that depend on a vocal layer, thereby dissociating or diminishing the dependence of aural voice from music, recalling for me Signmark's struggle to be recognized as a creator of his own music. Here, the Deaf performers *are* the musicians, and their hands (through sign language) function as a type of voicing.

Songs in *Zoey's Extraordinary Playlist* are not meant as performances *for others* but rather performances *for the self*, emphasized in the performance of Abigail's heart song. Within the complex musical framework of the show, the person(s) performing does not know they are performing, Zoey is not meant to see the songs, and no one except for Zoey observes what is happening; Zoey later communicates Abigail's point of view to Howie, as she often does to resolve each episode's storylines. Even though Howie's hurtful comment to Abigail is what triggers the heart song, Howie does not know that the song occurs at all—and as such, the song is not meant for him but rather as a manifestation of Abigail's complex mesh of frustration and self-confidence in the moment. "Fight Song" further stands out (tele)visually from the show's other musical numbers, many of which are presented with a long-shot approach. Framing "Fight Song" via a multi-camera approach, the cameras attend closely to the performers and cut away

for only a few seconds as Zoey walks through the room. The Deaf performers each sign in a variety of directions, which counteracts camera angles that might otherwise obstruct or obscure the signing. That the Deaf students unite musically with Abigail suggests that they are taking up her "call": strength, self-worth, and standing up for oneself ("I'll play my fight song / And I don't really care if nobody else believes / 'Cause I've still got a lot of fight left in me"). Paradoxically, "Fight Song" becomes inspirational not for television audiences (though that is a likely effect of the song), nor for Howie and Zoey, but for the other Deaf students in the room even though, as mentioned above, they are not aware they are participating at all. The unified performance of the Deaf students can be read as connoting similar struggles they each have with their families, and their participation indicates their own identification with the song—their own individual heart, or fight, songs. Howie therefore becomes an embodiment of a hearing parent or family member who resists their development as a Deaf person. Abigail, who is similarly unaware that she has performed a song at all, does not need her father's approval as, she implies to Zoey later, she knows what is best for herself.

Deaf West's involvement in the work provides an additional layer of significance, and the episode (and show) is represented as supporting inclusion and diversity. In a promotional video for the episode, actress Jane Levy explains "There's things that we can't say with words that we can only express through song and dance, and I'm glad that our show represents differences" ("Deaf West Theatre Joins Zoey's Extraordinary Playlist"). Unlike *Glee*, in which Deaf identity is fraught with lack, difference, and otherness, and deafness works in service of hearing values, *Zoey's Extraordinary's Playlist* transmits Deaf values, actively diminishing the prominence of hearing characters to one's development and of vocals to the performance of music. The televisual framing of "Fight Song" generates accessibility for viewers and reproduces the song as

a Deaf anthem that represents Deaf identity with more depth and gives space for Deaf cultural values to stand on their own.

Building upon this type of performer-based framing, I turn to televised educational series, which offer audiences of all ages a space to take a more active role in learning about Deaf culture and song signing. The emergence of educational series featuring the combination of ASL and music on American broadcast television during the 1970s and 1980s merits particular attention apart from the previous examples because "More than 90 percent of deaf children are born to hearing parents" and "Approximately 15% of American adults (37.5 million) aged 18 and over report some trouble hearing" ("Quick Statistics About Hearing").[31] This means that 1) deafness is not necessarily hereditary and 2) hearing differences are vast across the United States population. In addition, if a deaf child exists in a hearing household, it becomes imperative that they have an opportunity to see and learn from others like themselves. The existence of educational series like *Sesame Street* and *Signing with Cindy* thus provides all deaf individuals, regardless of the existence of deaf parents and/or siblings, not only the ability to see themselves represented in the media but also in a positive light. Educational series aim at respectful and inclusive portrayals of Deaf culture and people as an important part of American life.

Couched within the show's larger aim towards cultural diversity, *Sesame Street* (including its spinoffs and international work) has attempted to expose American families to all types of disabled people/characters, including blindness (Aristotle), wheelchair users (Katie and Tarah), down-syndrome (Jason Kingsley), and in 2015, autism (Julia), as well as an HIV-positive muppet named Kami in the South African version of the show.[32] This work, unlike other

[31] These statistics come from studies done in 2004 and 2014, respectively.
[32] With the introduction of Julia, Sesame Workshop (the non-profit company that produces *Sesame Street* and its counterparts) also debuted a collection of online materials about autism via their "See Amazing in All Children"

representations of disability in media, is paired with an online resource called "See Amazing in All Children" that helps to generate "increased knowledge and acceptance, promoted community inclusion, reduced parenting strain, and enhanced parenting competence" (Anthony et al.) among viewers. The careful curation and availability of this resource emphasizes Sesame Workshop's educational aims for young audiences and their families. *Sesame Street*'s Deaf/disability educational mindset continues in 2022: in partnership with National Theater of the Deaf, Sesame Workshop celebrated Deaf History Month by releasing four music videos that teach viewers ASL via numbers, the alphabet, and two songs ("What I Am" and "If You're Happy and You Know It").

Well-known for the advancement of Deaf culture on *Sesame Street* is Linda Bove, whose now-beloved character Linda the Librarian debuted on *Sesame Street* in 1971.[33] Linda the Librarian is featured in various programming on the show to familiarize audiences and *Street* residents with sign language and Deaf culture. Based on available archival videos today, Linda has performed "Sing" and "Firefly" (both with Olivia Robinson, played by Alaina Reed) and "Keep Christmas With You" during the 1978 *Christmas Eve on Sesame Street* special (with Bob Johnson, played by Bob McGrath); she also appears in the 50th anniversary special (2019), signing as the cast performs "Sing" for the finale. In addition to segments when she introduces sign language words, and a special segment called "Signs for the Hearing,"[34] Linda shares a close (and later an implied romantic) relationship with Bob Johnson, the *Street*'s music teacher. The pairing of deaf and hearing characters, on the one hand, seems obvious, as Linda is for the

initiative. See "Resources for Parents." *Sesame Street and Autism*, https://autism.sesamestreet.org/. Accessed 5 Aug. 2021.

[33] I use Linda when referring to the *Sesame Street* character and Bove when referring to the performer.

[34] This series of sketches showed Linda the Librarian signing a word, and a hearing person—placed in the proverbial bubble—translating the word into English. After several repetitions of the word, a physical materialization of the word (wind, rain, pie, etc.) would occur to the hearing person.

most part the only long-running deaf character on the show. However, the pairing of a deaf character and a *musically-driven* character is especially unique. Linda's presence on *Sesame Street* may be one of the first instances of deaf music on broadcast television, and Bove's recent work on Deaf West Theatre's musicals makes her ongoing relationship to ASL performances of music all the more pertinent. The well-rounded approach to Linda overall is due to Bove's self-advocacy, challenging *Sesame Street* writers to move beyond a one-dimensional representation of her d/Deaf character beyond their deafness—in other words, to treat her *as a person* rather than as deaf (Harrington 16). Her musical performances thus serve to draw attention to the *compatibility*, and not the dissonance, of music performed with ASL.

Within the instructional context of *Sesame Street*, Deaf musicking is seamlessly introduced to viewers by framing the use of ASL, rather than English, as the primary language of Deaf individuals. For example, in the preface to "Sing" (episode 1330, 1979), Olivia explains, "Signing is a way of talking used by people who can't hear, who are Deaf… Now Linda is going to sign the word, 'sing.' Then we're going to play a game. I'm going to do a song with the word 'sing' in it, and every time you hear it, sign the word!" ("Sesame Street- Sing (with Olivia and Linda)"). That the song is introduced by explaining what Linda is doing helps to normalize the act of using sign language and not vocally speaking. Furthermore, the show asks viewers—children, presumably within an environment with adults around—to participate and *learn to sign to the music*. "Sing" is a particularly useful song through which to introduce sign language, because the word itself appears frequently throughout the number, making it easy for participants (on screen and in front of it) to follow along.[35] As well, the televisual framing of "Sing" is of

[35] Lily Tomlin was also featured a few seasons earlier in episode 0901 (1976), using a combination of American Sign Language to perform "Sing" to two deaf children. Her appearance and use of ASL with music can likely be attributed to her role as a gospel singer and a mother to two deaf children in the film *Nashville* (1975), for which she

Olivia and Linda as equal performers, not only because of the introductory explanation (above) but also because of the close proximity the two have in the televisual frame (Olivia stands behind the stoop and Linda is seated). The show later integrates children into "Firefly" (episode 1662, 1981-2) and "Keep Christmas With You." The visibility of the children learning and signing along with Linda in these cases further emphasizes the invitation for viewers to participate in signed music.[36] All in all, the inclusion of Linda in various musical numbers promotes the notion that d/Deaf people *can* sing, with their hands rather than with their vocal chords.

Finally, this chapter would be incomplete without a mention of *Signing with Cindy*, an eight-part series called *Signing with Cindy* emerged on PBS and KUHT (Houston, Texas) in 1981. Focused on teaching audiences about Deaf culture and language with the same educational and musical mindset as *Sesame Street*, *Signing with Cindy* intensifies the possibilities between ASL and music. The series stars Cindy Cochran, a former sign language interpreter for Houston's KTRK (Channel 13); synopses of the series on IMDB describe the show as "An educational series that demonstrated the fundamentals of American sign language to both children and adults alike through the medium of song and dance" and "An educational series hosted by Cindy Cochran using sign language to interpret popular songs of the day for both the deaf and hearing alike" ("Signing with Cindy"). Although descriptions of the show explain that Cochran taught a section of John Denver's "Sunshine on My Shoulders" in each episode and that

learned sign language. See "Classic Sesame Street - Lily Tomlin Sings 'Sing.'" *YouTube*, uploaded by Sesame Maniac, 27 Aug. 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3JvdorJ6AY0.

[36] In the introduction to "Firefly," Olivia has ostensibly learned some sign language, sharing (simultaneously speaking and signing) a brief personal narrative about catching fireflies. Although it is disappointing that *Sesame Street* chooses to showcase Olivia's story rather than Linda's, the overall favoring of Olivia (and the shaping of Linda as a supporting figure) is possibly due to her regular appearance as a featured singer on the show. As well, for "Keep Christmas With You," there is no teaching element at all; rather, Linda and the children surprise Bob with song signing. This is likely because special episodes are plot-driven rather than lesson-driven. However, the choice to invite Linda back to the *Sesame Street* throughout the years displays the nostalgia writers and audiences have to the character and to the larger attempt at inclusion overall of the Deaf community and culture.

the show culminated with a full music video version of the song in ASL, existing footage that exists today include six full music videos performed in sign language by Cochran, include other popular songs in addition to "Sunshine on My Shoulders":[37] Barbra Streisand's "The Main Event," Pat Benatar's "Hit Me with Your Best Shot," Bonnie Raitt's "Darlin,'" Anne Murray's "You Needed Me." The show was also distributed as a 1995 instructional video and a companion book that introduces readers to basic sign languages and phrases, which helps to make "the learning of sing language seem like a game" (Galloway).

Signing with Cindy is influenced by the emergence of music videos in the 1980s and, like *Sesame Street,* aims towards educating a predominantly hearing audience and making visible the d/Deaf and hard-of-hearing (HoH) communities. In the companion book to the series, Cochran writes that the purpose of show "is to introduce you to this language and help bridge the communication gap between the hearing and the millions of deaf who use sign language. Regardless of the method, the ability to communicate is always the first step towards a better understanding of our world" (Cochran). Though little else exists about the show, and the archival videos separate the songs from the show contextually, what we know about the series and what the existing footage showcases are the productive potentials of d/Deaf musicking as educational, interactive, and entertaining in ways that affirm the cultural language. Much more than *Sesame Street*, Cochran's work strengthens the link between music and sign language, simultaneously showing hearing viewers that there is more that exists to music than lyrics and showing d/Deaf and HoH viewers that there is more to the music than sound. Cochran's words speak to an idealistic vision of a world where Deaf and hearing communities have greater compassion and understanding towards each other—sharing together in the music and musicking.

[37] Most songs are performed by solely by Cochran, but "Fame" and "The Main Event," includes at least 10-15 dancers behind her performing actual dance choreography. Some choreography integrates sign language.

Conclusion

Deaf people are being shown on television at increasing rates, and many of these performances include some sort of musical layer. In sporting events like the Super Bowl, Deaf music performers are given a platform to interpret nationally-significant songs in artistic and culturally meaningful ways; however, the physical and televisual separation of the Deaf performer renders the artist as an interpreter, subservient to both the music and the other musical artists. As well, this disconnect mirrors the secondary status of Deaf peoples as a whole. In contrast, musical and educational series include Deaf characters by contextualizing them narratively, televisually, and performatively to highlight their presence as primary performers of music. In these predominantly hearing spaces, music becomes a means of expression in defining d/Deaf identity, development, and community. In addition, these acts of d/Deaf musicking receives accentuated attention as performance in ways that challenge viewers' assumptions about how others participate in musical spaces. In the case of educational television specifically, d/Deaf musicking and ASL are framed as something to be learned—an active and participatory endeavor for the whole family regardless of deaf/hearing status. Though there is certainly further progress that can be made within these spaces of representation, they nonetheless begin the work of emphasizing that being deaf is not a lack but a strength—*Deaf Gain*—even and especially within the field of music. In addition, these texts by default engage deaf and hearing artists and audiences on both sides of the camera, encouraging engagement between communities.

As this essay is limited to television broadcasts within the U.S., other research could expand the scope of d/Deaf musicking analyses beyond these geographical borders. Ireland, for example, has televised deaf/hearing choirs featuring youth and young adults, including The

DeafTones, contestants on *Ireland's Got Talent* in 2018, and St. Mary's School for Deaf Girls, featured on *The Saturday Night Show* in 2013. In addition, analyses in this essay narrows down d/Deaf musicking to song signing, but future research might take up other forms of d/Deaf musicking, such as the work by Mandy Harvey (from *America's Got Talent* in 2017), who sang original songs but did not use sign language, as well as d/Deaf dancing, featured on national and international dance competition series (Marlee Matlin and Nyle DiMarco on *Dancing with the Stars* (2008 and 2016, respectively), Martina Giammarini on *Italia's Got Talent* in 2015, and Chris Foneseca on Series 1 of the UK's *The Greatest Dancer* in 2019). These representations and presentations of d/Deaf musicking may employ language, gesture, and the body in different ways.

When presented with clear narrative, televisual, and performative frameworks, song signing—the form of d/Deaf musicking often showcased in the U.S.—can help shift the hearing world's understanding of music as existing beyond simply vocal- or sound-centric features. By emphasizing meaning, passion, and physicality, d/Deaf forms of musicking expand and extend traditional definitions of, and limitations to, music while at the same time bridging the gap between Deaf and hearing communities.

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CHAPTER 3: Internet Made the ASL Star: American Sign Language Music Videos as Deaf Cultural Remixes

> ...deaf people do appreciate music. Deaf people buy songs on iTunes. Deaf people buy Beats headphones. Deaf people want to be as included as anybody else."
>
> Sean Forbes, "Listen to His Hands"[38]

When I first began teaching undergraduate English Composition, even before this dissertation was conceived, I asked students to deconstruct Ed Sheeran's 2011 music video for "You Need Me, I Don't Need You." Pedagogically, I intended to use the ensuing discussion as an example of the kind of visual analysis that students would consider within their own essays. But personally, I was riveted by the British singer-songwriter's inclusion of British Sign Language (BSL), performed by Matthew Morgan for the entire four-minute video, and wondered what others would think of its function within the song. The video juxtaposes Sheeran's fast-paced rapping and Morgan's energetic signing against a montage of props and objects that parallel the song's lyrics. At the time, the mix of sign language and music was a seemingly random move for Sheeran and a rarity among commercial music videos in general. But why sign language? What did Morgan's performance do for or add to the song? And for whom was the video even created? Although students' interest in the text quickly waned, these questions have continued to exist in the surrounding spaces of this dissertation.

As with the existence of ASL in television broadcasts, the showcasing of sign language in "You Need Me, I Don't Need You" is much more complicated than a simple act of representation or inclusion. In the first place, Sheeran's intention was to "make a music video for that song that had never been done before… Sign language would highlight the lyrical aspect of

[38] "Listen to His Hands." *YouTube*, uploaded by National Endowment for the Arts, 11 May, 2015, https://www.*YouTube*.com/watch?v=Ohqyy4cSJFU.

it. Both [of Morgan's] parents are deaf, but he's not and he knows how to do BSL fluently and he's just great" (Newsdeck). There is thus no specific dramaturgical impetus for including Morgan or BSL, and Sheeran's song indeed has nothing to do with the Deaf community or with sign language. Instead, the song's lyrics reflect Sheeran's arrogance about "making it" within the music industry. An analytical stretch, as some of my students posited, is that the video's d/Deaf representation stands in for the same type of marginalization that Sheeran experienced early in his career—though this awkwardly conflates the status of a cultural minority group with the challenges of being a successful indie artist in the music industry. In the second place, while Morgan's identity is neither explained nor made "visible" in the video, he is not d/Deaf but a hearing Child of a Deaf Adult (CODA) fluent in the language. Morgan is, therefore, not a representative of the Deaf community per se but rather becomes a metaphor or stand-in for it. In the third place, the video is uncaptioned, yet the camera does not focus on Morgan's signing exclusively. The video repeatedly cuts away to show props, dancers, and Sheeran on the guitar, such that d/Deaf viewers do not have full access to the lyrics or music. Given these complex layers, the video is not made *for* d/Deaf or Hard of Hearing audiences but instead relies on its "cool" factor to entice hearing viewers, as it did initially for me. Here, sign language is rendered into a cultural object merely intended to entertain and intrigue, and the video misses the mark in terms of true accessibility, inclusion, and representation.

In an effort to re-center the labor, artistry, and voices of the Deaf community, this chapter focuses on Deaf/ASL music videos that move beyond such metaphorical uses of the deaf body—most often covers and adaptations of "official" videos—created by, or in collaboration with, d/Deaf artists. Deaf/ASL versions simultaneously engage with the particularities of the music video genre and also participate in the online, social space of *YouTube*, where the lifespan of

musical text is extended based on how others revise and remix the original song and/or music video. This undefined, unbounded, and enduring presence of the text—what occurs outside, inside, and around the original music video—is a phenomenon first defined by literary theorist Gérard Genette as the *paratext* (2). Paratextuality attends to "what media audiences add to a text, what gets written in the margins of a text and what new meanings fans read between the lines" (Geraghty 2). Recognizing the paratextual nature of Deaf/ASL music videos "underline[s] the considerable power of viewer-end paratexts to set or change the terms by which we make sense of film and television, and hence, to add or subtract depth and breadth to a text and its storyworld" (Gray 174). Through a Deaf visual, linguistic, and cultural remixing, Deaf/ASL music videos function as paratextual objects and digital artefacts that extend, expand, and (re)shape the original source material and the very form of music videos.

How does the music video genre, as a medium distinct from television and theatre, proffer particular avenues for d/Deaf cultural expression and artistic development? And what are the larger sociocultural implications of posting, sharing, and (re)creating popular music videos—initially created with predominantly hearing audiences in mind—through Deaf eyes? In an attempt to answer these questions, I explore the music video's Deaf turn by analyzing artistic and aesthetic trends across the form, as well as evaluating the resulting shifts that occur when compared to their original source materials. Taking as my case studies music video covers or adaptations by Nyle DiMarco, Russell Harvard, Amber Zion, Sandra Mae Frank, and Deaf West Theatre, I attend to the gamut of ways that d/Deaf bodies, culture, and aesthetics shape and inform the music video (and, at times, vice versa). Deaf/ASL music videos generate accessibility, merge music video aesthetics with Deaf culture and language, and challenge hearing-centrism at once—a visual remixing that resists and disrupts the exploitation of Deaf

ontology as metaphorical object.

The Emergence of Deaf/ASL Music Videos

Soon after the debut of *YouTube* in 2005, the platform became a popular repository for music videos, posted by music conglomerates and (re)created by everyday people, prompting the Buggles-inspired catchphrase, “Internet killed the video star” (Edmond 306). At the same time, the Internet also popularized the ASL music video—and, accordingly, the ASL music video star. Today, a search of “ASL music video” returns hundreds upon thousands of results ranging in cinematic quality and form, musical and linguistic artistry, and across varying degrees of creatorship, i.e. d/Deaf, non-d/Deaf, and everyone in between. “You Need Me, I Don’t Need You” is **not**, therefore, the first of its kind as Sheeran suggests but joins a rapidly growing genre, towards which both hearing and d/Deaf people contribute. Problematically, many ASL songs posted online are by hearing creators, such as Stephen Torrence (known as Captain Valor), Jacob Vanderwerken (Jake the Signer), Tina Sirimarco (Paul and Tina's Signalong), and YouTuber Kylee Signs. Hearing signers, using the term loosely, have been criticized for linguistic inaccuracies or incomprehensibility and overall artistic weaknesses, what Deaf artist Amy Cohen Efron calls the “bastardization of ASL.” They have also capitalized financially on the popularity—or, perhaps, novelty—of song signing, thereby facing accusations of cultural appropriation and altogether widening the cultural rift between d/Deaf and hearing communities. Centering on the popularity of these videos, Deaf literature scholar Pamela J. Kincheloe analyzes Paul McCartney’s “My Valentine,” in which the use of sign language, like in Sheeran’s video, is “a way to make [McCartney’s] song ‘different,’ more ‘touching,’ more emotionally appealing. Sign adds a *je ne sais quoi*, a little ‘something,’ to the song. The video is a hearing person’s

fantasy of what a signing person looks like, what sign language is, and what it does. McCartney used that fantasy, and the sentimentality that it evokes, to sell the song. And it worked." In the end, hearing creators continually overshadow talented Deaf music video artists (such as Harvard, Rosa Lee Timm, Jason Listman, and Sarah Tubert to name a few), and their work eclipses the history of the form as an artistic outgrowth from within Deaf culture. This persistent obscurity between Deaf artists and hearing signers has significant ethical, financial, and social implications within the world of *YouTube*.

In 2006, a year after *YouTube*'s debut, Deaf rapper Sean Forbes launched the non-profit organization Deaf Professional Arts Network (D-PAN), whose mission is

> to make music and music culture – the predominant shared language and experience of people worldwide – universally accessible by extending its reach to the Deaf and hard of hearing. Since 2006, D-PAN has pioneered the art form of creating high quality American Sign Language (ASL) music videos, translating the lyrics of popular songs through ASL. ("Our Mission")

Years prior, Forbes had performed an ASL version of Eminem's "Lose Yourself" to Eminem and his team (Walsh), a music video for which has since been published on D-PAN's website.[39] Wanting to encourage more professional videos by and with d/Deaf artists, D-PAN hosts summer ASL music video workshops for d/Deaf youth. Camp Mark Seven's summer Deaf Film Camp similarly teaches and collaborates with campers to create professional music videos ("Deaf Film Camp"). While the very existence of sign language videos may seem wholly unnecessary given widespread use of captions and subtitles, such textual modalities are incomplete and limited in expressing the numerous aspects of a song. Hearing creators and

[39] Notably, "Lose Yourself" is one of the songs Forbes performed at the 2022 Super Bowl.

interpreters frequently focus on the lyrical utterances of a song, but music is not made up of lyrics alone. Adapting a song into ASL is thus not merely a matter of converting English lyrics to ASL. As well, music videos posted on *YouTube* are not subject to the same laws as television and film and, therefore, are not required to be captioned at all.

The ethicality of hearing-created ASL music videos, though a popular genre among viewers, has not gone unquestioned. Deaf peoples, and sign languages, make up a minority culture ("Complementary or Diametrically Opposed"), such that the posting of ASL music videos function within an uneven societal power structure. As musicologist Áine Mangaoang observes,

> Somewhere in the contemporary practice of *YouTube* signed songs, the original function of sign language interpretation has been misplaced, if not lost. The primary goal of mediating information and dialogue between the deaf and hearing worlds has been, in several cases, replaced by the desires of interpreters and beginning sign-language students to become performers. Rather than signed-song interpreters being a conduit for deaf to can [sic] impart meaning and understand a particular work of art, an overwhelming number of hearing sign-language interpreters have colonized the very function of interpreting for their target audience, seduced by the theatrics of performance for performance's sake. (217)

Mangaoang's emphasis on performance for performance's sake is critical, as hearing song signers do not—and cannot—effectively or wholly approach their work through a Deaf perspective, dismissing the needs of the culture and community. Mangaoang's use of the term *colonize* also highlights how hearing-created ASL music videos embody acts of cultural appropriation. In her comparative analysis of d/Deaf and hearing song signing, "Musical Expression among Deaf and Hearing Song Signers," Anabel Maler similarly argues,

> hearing song signers are generally motivated by a desire to express themselves musically *through* sign language, while Deaf song signers are more often motivated to create music *in* sign language. In other words, hearing signers try to convey something about their own experience of music through the medium of sign language, while Deaf song signers create sign language music, grounding that music in the characteristics of sign language. ("Musical Expression" 74)

In Maler's assessment, whereas Deaf creators participate in a culturally- and linguistically-driven artform, hearing creators utilize sign language as an additional layer of musical expression. In attempting to translate, interpret, and perform music in sign language, the hearing community purports to act *for* the Deaf community instead of *with* it.

Raising additional concerns of ethicality is that the social media layers of *YouTube* are directly intertwined with profit, and even amateur creators like Torrence and the Sirimarcos can make money if they have at least 1000 subscribers, among other requirements of the *YouTube* Partners Program ("*YouTube* Partner Program Overview").[40] Any hearing content creator of ASL music videos is therefore potentially making revenue off of their viewership and, accordingly, off of Deaf culture and art as a whole. Two hearing creators often cited in such discussions are Stephen Torrence and Tina Sirimarco. Having been introduced to ASL in college, and inspired by song signing videos by Deaf artists, Torrence began posting home-made videos to *YouTube* under the username CaptainValor. After his cover of Miley Cyrus' "Party in the USA" went viral in 2009, Torrence used subscription-based platform Patreon to crowdfund money in order to improve his production quality and justify his "labor." In 2014, Sirimarco, a hearing interpreter posting under the *YouTube* handle Paul and Tina's Signalong, was featured on

[40] As of this writing, Torrence has 40 thousand subscribers, and the Sirimarcos have 36 thousand.

The Today Show for her ASL video of *Grease*'s "You're the One that I Want," performed in the car as her husband drives (Kim). Like Torrence, Sirimarco began a Kickstarter for $20,900 to cover the creation of a website and more videos, "rais[e] awareness" (unexplained), partner with musical artists, and produce live events ("Signalongnow.com"). That Torrence and Sirimarco benefited in both finance and fame while showcasing an artform that is neither of theirs to claim has drawn sharp criticisms of cultural appropriation, expressed by both d/Deaf individuals and hearing allies in the form of *YouTube* comments, discussion forums, and other *YouTube* videos (see notable video responses by Don Grushkin; Krithi Reddy; Antonio Heckstall; Austin "Awti" Andrews; and The Stews). Torrence has since written an extensive post that explains his hearing privilege and announces the termination of his song signing practices ("On the Ethics of 'My' Art"); Sirimarco has also canceled the couple's Kickstarter. Both users have seemingly retired from the craft (Torrence's last video is from 2014, and Sirimarco's from 2018), yet their videos remain viewable on *YouTube*.

Adding to these concerns of cultural exploitation, hearing signers tend to have neither the fluency needed to translate songs accurately nor the musical competence needed to perform a song. Sirimarco's videos are particularly troublesome because they claim sign language performance in spontaneity: her popular version of Beyonce's "Halo" claims to be done "with no practice" ("Paul Films Tina"). In addition, during an interview with Smile TV Group, Tina jokes that the initial idea for their *Grease* video was a decision between her then-fiancé Paul learning sign language or having to listen to Tina sing for several hours ("Paul & Tina's 'Signalongs' Bringing Sign Language Awareness"), a comment that implies she is not musical and, therefore, not qualified to interpret music, even if she is a working interpreter. As an amateur ASL student, I observe that Sirimarco's signing is exceedingly literal, an attempt to follow both the aural

rhythm of the music and the English lyrical structure to a T. At most, Sirimarco signs each individual word correctly, but at worst, she is performing musical Simultaneous Communication (SimCom). SimCom, the use of spoken and signed language at the same time, is controversial because it aims for inclusivity in theory but almost always privileges the spoken language in reality—in this case, the English lyrics. Since ASL and English grammatical structures are different, one cannot simply sign the same words at the same time, and the English usually takes priority (engendering a different sign language form known as SEE, Signed Exact English, or PSE, Pidgin Signed English). Although the term SimCom most often describes the duality of verbal and signed languages, the same principle can be applied to ASL music videos: a hearing creator will naturally be drawn to the English lyrics and thus its grammar, as well as to the strict beat and rhythms of the sung lyrics. It is perhaps because of this that ASL music videos by hearing creators most readily capture the attention of other hearing viewers. Maler elucidates,

> Hearing song signers tend to use the sounding music as a dominant force in shaping the rhythm and location of their signs. They usually produce interpretations in which the placement of signs coincides as closely as possible with the rhythm of the song words, and they almost always coordinate the ends of signed phrases with the ends of sung ones. Deaf song signers, by contrast, bring the quirks and characteristics of sign language and Deaf culture into their performances in order to create a visual and kinetic form of music. ("Musical Expression" 87)

If, as Maler describes, hearing song signing appears more "natural" to a *hearing eye*, as it were, this may explain why hearing creators like Torrence and the Sirimarcos attract more viewers. These gaps between the Deaf and non-Deaf (hearing) treatment of music and music video accentuates the necessity to re-center these discussions around Deaf performance and

perspectives.

ASL music videos span an incredibly extensive range of creatorship (d/Deaf and hearing), cinematic quality (amateur and professional), sign language fluency (beginning to native signers), and intention (accessibility, educational, and/or for musical expression and performance). The majority of videos fall under what Mangaoang (adopting terminology from Richard Chalfen) describes as "home-mode footage," such as the work of Torrence and Sirimarco; these typically begin as private videos—or have the aesthetic of them, taking place in domestic spaces like living rooms or cars—and have little to no production value. Kathrin Peters and Andrea Seier refer to a similar phenomenon they call "home dance," "where performers play back pop songs in private and dance to them" (188)—though the idea of privacy here appears an oxymoron since the intent is to post the video online. Home-mode, or home dance, videos are popular amongst hearing creators, including beginning and amateur ASL students, as well as interpreters. These videos are also created by Deaf artists, like Harvard, Megg Rose, John McGinty, and Jo Rose Benfield, as well as certified interpreters (commonly Deaf and HoH) who specifically specialize in music, like Amber Galloway Gallego, Holly Maniatty, and Matt Maxey.

In the case of both home-mode and professional music videos, uses of deaf body—and, by extension, Deaf culture and ASL—as a metaphor or marker for deafness (as in the Sheeran example analyzed in the beginning) generates what Kincheloe describes as a "'different,' unique, mysterious, exotic, heartwarming *spectacle*" for hearing viewers. This occurs in the case of many hearing-created videos, wherein the performance of signing does not serve as the language or culture itself but as "a decorative ornament, a narrative prop" (Kincheloe). Kincheloe goes on to describe this as a deaf form of *narrative prosthesis,* borrowing from disability scholars David T.

Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder's seminal text, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. If, as Mitchell and Snyder assert, disability "accomplish[es] an illusion" (6) and acts as "a crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality and analytical insight" (49), then "*all* narrative is thus dependent upon some type of disability used as a prosthetic, which serves not only to 'fill in' lack, but also to restore and reinforce normalcy" (Kincheloe). In this way, "You Need Me, I Don't Need You" and many hearing-centered ASL music videos like it are meant neither for the Deaf community nor to present a Deaf perspective, but rather exists for hearing eyes to maintain their own hearing privilege and status, even if subtly or indirectly so.

More recently, popular musical artists are beginning to include sign language and d/Deaf performers in more substantial and dynamic ways, rejecting narrative prosthesis as a representative mode and aiming primarily towards an artistic accessibility. Most of these videos do not include any particular narrative meaning, such as Tove Lo's album *BLUE LIPS*, released by the artist in 2018 as a full playlist of ASL interpretations ("Blue Lips – ASL Videos"). Wanting to make her whole album accessible to the d/Deaf community, Tove Lo collaborated with Gallego, whose music interpretation business brought in various ASL interpreters and performers; the playlist videos are all captioned and filmed in home-mode. Videos such as Tove Lo's, though important in their partnership with those fluent in ASL, may still ignore or appropriate Deaf culture. Other Deaf/hearing collaborative videos, such as Francois Klark's "Always," Elise Trouw's "Enter Sandman," and a series of music videos produced by Disney Music,[41] include Deaf artists and performers (rather than interpreters) and are of a high or professional quality. These videos, too, concentrate exceedingly on access rather than on Deaf

[41] See "How Far I'll Go" (*Moana*), "All I Want" (*High School Musical: The Musical: The Series*), and "Show Yourself" (*Frozen 2*), each posted to YouTube under the DisneyMusicVEVO channel.

music video aesthetics. In addition, they may be offered as alternatives to the "official" (i.e. hearing) versions, redirecting viewers to a secondary text, or they may relegate ASL performers to the "bubble," rather than meaningfully integrating d/Deaf identities and perspectives.[42]

A growing number of videos are professionally directed and of high-quality, involving whole production teams. In limiting the scope of this project, I focus on these professional, official music videos by Deaf artists, which deliberately engage music video aesthetics such as editing techniques, camera angles and effects, and the overall mise-en-scène, as well as engage with the original music videos' framing, setting, characters, narrative and meaning (if/when such elements exist).[43] These videos exist one measure beyond the general label of *ASL music videos*—that is, videos that transpose lyrics into sign language, even those generated by the Deaf community. Rather, we might call them *Deaf music videos*—that is, music videos created primarily with Deaf cultural perspectives and aesthetics in mind. This relabeling follows Deaf Studies scholarship which indicates a difference in connotation between the terms "Deaf" and "ASL." Writing about theatre, Tyrone Giordano elucidates that sign language theatre generates worlds where participants automatically know sign, while work that aims towards Deaf norms "include portrayal of authentic or relevant Deaf experiences, accuracy in use of sign language, or use of Deaf aesthetic principles." This delineation between ASL and Deaf theatre can also be applied to music videos: whereas ASL music videos can be, and often are, created by non-Deaf individuals, typically focusing on translation and the personal "performance" of the language or

[42] Similar videos include Marshmello's "You Can Cry," Tom The Lion's "Silent Partner," Will Dailey's "He Better Be Alive," Young Thug's "Anybody," Andy Mineo's "Hear My Heart," and JP Saxe's "If the World Was Ending" and "Line By Line." Many of these are not adaptations but instead exist as the only music videos for the songs.
[43] Additionally, these descriptions do not account for videos like "Drug," written and performed by Nyeisha "Nyke" Prince, which does not contain any vocalized lyrics, or covers by British artist John Smith (posted to Facebook on "The John Smith Show"), signed in BSL but without any aural sound. In another case, hearing interpreter Bjorn Storm (under the YouTube pseudonym Storm Fx) creates ASL music video covers like "Pump It" (by the Black Eyed Peas) and "Crazy" (by Gnarls Barkley) that use sophisticated sign language and amplify music video aesthetics, embodying musical rhythms through his body, editing, and transitions.

of musical expression, Deaf music videos include Deaf perspectives, meanings, and aesthetics—altogether encompassing a Deaf artistic treatment.

Cross-Cultural Remixes: The Paratextual Aesthetics of Deaf Music Videos

Historically, the launch of D-PAN and the uptick in ASL music videos overlaps with the very transition of music videos from music television networks (MTV, VH1, BET, and CMT) to social networks (*YouTube,* Vimeo, MySpace, Facebook, and other now-defunct platforms). Within the *YouTube* cycle, artists post their original music videos, which people (hobbyists and professional artists alike) then remake or borrow from, and others then comment, like, share, and respond to, possibly making their own versions and/or responses along the way. Music videos typically have short life spans in and of themselves, but a video's *impression* can live on through covers and digital conversations, thereby engendering Genette's notion of the paratext. Music videos, therefore, simultaneously inhabit an ephemerality and permanence at once. Deaf and ASL music videos participate in this broader culture of content-creation and sharing—a dialogic space in which "the discourses of participatory culture and the emergence of the creative, empowered consumer" play out (Burgess and Green 89) and a type of social networking in which television, film, and theatre do not partake. Fan studies theorist Henry Jenkins defines this as the act of *textual poaching*, where "fans cease to be simply an audience for popular texts; instead, they become active participants in the construction and circulation of textual meanings" (24). Maura Edmond similarly describes that

> while there have been fan-made music videos almost as long as there have been music videos… in a *YouTube* era, the ease, volume, and importance of participation and interactivity are greatly increased. Music videos have become a dialogic, conversational

> hub around which a wide variety of mash-ups and remakes take place, which addresses a growing audience extremely literate not only in music video aesthetics but also in the rhetoric of parody, remixes, and fan cultural productions. (314)

Deaf/ASL music videos in particular continually circulate as relational objects working and dialoging with, against, and/or alongside the original source material, especially since they involve a linguistic transference across cultures. Applying Jenkins' and Edmond's ideas here, ASL music videos are a distinct subgenre that engages *in* and *as* conversation with the songs they cover—remixing, reworking, and (re)embodying the original text to engender pleasure, accessibility, and sometimes, sociocultural meaning.

Distinct from television and theatre, music videos follow a conventional style and form well-documented and theorized by scholarship. A seminal text regarding the music video is Carol Vernallis' *Experiencing Music Video*, which offers readers a formalist understanding of music video design, taking into consideration narrative, editing, character and/or performer, and mise-en-scène elements, which combine with—and, at times, enhance—the song's music and lyrics.[44] Vernallis "treat[s] music video as a distinct genre, one different from its predecessors—film, television, photography—a medium with its own ways of organizing materials, exploring themes, and dealing with time" (x). Unlike classical Hollywood film, the uncanny nature of music video stems from its nonnarrative (or antinarrative) modes, disjunctive unfoldings of time, absence of character and character development, dearth of dialogue, and "MTV-style editing" (meaning "quick cutting or editing on beat")—each of which are wholly dependent on, subservient to, and/or responsive to the song itself ("Strange People" 125). To these, Hal

[44] Andrew Goodwin's 1992 text, *Dancing in the Distraction Factory*, also provides a sociocultural reading of the production and consumption of music television as an institution, though Goodwin's work specifically looks at the televisual framing of such texts. See Goodwin, Andrew. *Dancing in the Distraction Factory: Music Television and Popular Culture*. University of Minnesota Press, 1992.

Markovitz adds in *The History of Music Videos* that music videos often present surreal, bizarre worlds to the viewer and are "an art that is limited only by the talents and imaginations of its performers and producers" (9). This is not to mention the finite window of time within which a music video operates. To be sure, a key shift from Vernallis' and Marcovitz's writing is that the music video has moved from television to online platforms, namely *YouTube*. Aware of these idiosyncrasies, and as inherent to the creation of paratexts, Deaf artists who produce ASL music videos interpose a cultural consciousness that readily extend and/or challenge the genre's artistic and aesthetic limits. Put another way, any Deaf cover or adaptation is, consciously or not, generating a paratextual relationship to the original source material and to the music video form. In what follows, I outline common aesthetics techniques in Deaf music videos, then trace a series of Deaf paratexts that merge access and artistry; these examples center Deaf voice and showcase narratives that highlight Deaf cultural identity and pride.

Deaf Music Video Aesthetics: Split Screens, Captions, Cuts, and Transitions

Investigating the development of modern song signing, Maler finds that differences in performance between Deaf and hearing song signing include "favor[ing] different communication strategies, us[ing] space differently, and employ[ing] contrasting rhythmic techniques" (78). First and foremost, Deaf creators and viewers value grammatically-correct translations, while hearing song signers (who are often not fluent in the language) tend to generate diluted and incorrect ASL lyrics. Second, Deaf song signers use the physical space to indicate narrative and emotional dynamics, whereas hearing song signers use space to indicate vocal register and pitch. And third, with regard to physicalizing rhythm, hearing song singers often privilege the aural beat, strictly syncing their signs to when vocalized lines begin and end;

Deaf song signers, on the other hand, produce repeated signs or hold signs consistent with the conventions of ASL poetry, generating an embodied Deaf music in which "the relationship between the sounding music and the sign language is fluid and changeable: sometimes the beat of the drum prevails, and at other times ASL prosody takes the reins" (85). In the end, the entirety of a Deaf music video works together to generate a complete musical-visual image.

I expand upon Maler's study of song signers to focus here on the aesthetics of the music video form, which includes, but is not limited to, the Deaf body itself. In Janine Butler's "Where Access Meets Multimodality: The Case of ASL Music Videos," she explains that Deaf/ASL theatrical and artistic qualities often include elements outside of the conventional (non-Deaf) music video, such as overlaying lyrics on the screen with vibrant colors and font faces, as well as the use of split screen (or other forms of the bubble). Artistically, Deaf music videos "synthesize sound, dynamic visual text, and performing bodies" (Butler) alongside sign language and the conventional aesthetics of music videos, including edits/cuts, multiple camera angles, and considerations of lighting, sets, costumes, props, and storyline. Butler also emphasizes that digital captions "are material that can and should be manipulated and moved beyond the bottom of the screen" in order to embody (visually and rhetorically) the meaning of a video ("Embodied Captions"). Taking advantage of the surrealness or uncanniness of the music video form, culturally-specific Deaf music videos aim towards what Butler describes as a synchronization of multiple modes—visual, digital, gestural, spatial, aural, linguistic—in ways that produce both accessibility, or what she calls *accessible composition*, and Deaf artistry ("Where Access Meets Multimodality").

The active and artistic use of captions and split screens can be seen in Rosa Lee Timm and Damon Timm's "All I Want," an original ASL music video analyzed in part by Maler. The

video employs a split screen technique to provide a continual visual focus on the Deaf performer, as well as stylized open captions, which have the visual effect of being embedded onto the video screen (as opposed to closed captions, which can be turned on and off by the viewer). Timm and Timm's video begins with Damon singing and playing guitar on one side of the split screen, with Rosa Lee signing on the other; the camera following Damon moves dynamically to focus on the performer (who is shown singing and jumping in the background, a visual allusion to slow-motion, dream-like scenes of indie or country music videos), whereas the camera on Rosa Lee is fixed, with the captioned text covering and then overtaking her side of the screen ("ASL Music Video"). As the video progresses,

> The split screen [and overlaid text] disappears, the camera becomes mobile, and Timm begins to interpret the music differently. In the first part of the video in SEE, her signs are halting, almost robotic, and remain staunchly unchanged by the presence of music. As she transforms her signing into ASL, her body begins to move with the music and her signs become more rhythmic. (Maler 78)

The previously static camera following Rosa Lee also begins to move and swing, and a brief split screen appears to show her jumping in the background, a la Damon's initial camera movement and scene. Cleverly, as Rosa Lee's signs change from the word-for-word, fractured style of SEE to the natural, storytelling style of ASL, Timm "begins to express how she feels about communicating as a Deaf person, asking whether people can accept her for who she is," which alters the meaning of the English lyrics that Damon sings (Maler 78). Though this is an original song and video, and therefore not a paratext or remix per se, "All I Want" readily demonstrates Butler's notion of synchronized multimodality, wherein accessibility (sign language, over captions alone) and video aesthetics (split screen and camerawork) combine to generate a vibrant

musical performance.

In addition to split screens and stylized captions (or what director Jules Dameron calls "creative captions," discussed in more detail below), the timing of cuts and transitions is crucial to successful signed communication. Early in the organization's timeline, D-PAN recreated Fort Minor's video for "Where'd You Go," scene by scene to the original video but with sign language, some open captions, and d/Deaf performers (Yolles). Hearing director John Quigley reflects that "he cut it in typical music video fashion, ignorant to the fact he was cutting away in the middle of sentences, which made it nearly impossible for the deaf to follow the flow of the song" (Miss-Delectable). In addition, despite their efforts to recreate Fort Minor's original video with d/Deaf performers and in ASL, the visuals often over-emphasize the musical beat (including hands at the piano, movement of the speakers, and the visualized levels on a channel mixer) and show static images (including frames of dirty dishes in the sink, a wooden chair, and pictures of families). Quigley's comment signals at once the need for d/Deaf directors specifically and the fact that inclusion must move beyond recreations of the original, hearing videos, which do not typically account for d/Deaf viewers in the first place. As well, an ASL music video for Shaina Taub's "Is This Not Love?" (*Twelfth Night*) uses predominantly fixed camera angles for the early verses and choruses; later in the video, more dynamic camera movement occurs, but at the same time tends to cut off one or more of the five signers. This example, while a valuable collaboration between Public Theatre and New York Deaf Theatre, demonstrates one further point: that even collaborations can fall short of the type of synchronized multimodality that Butler advocates for.

A video's transitions and cuts must, therefore, maintain a symmetry to the sign language performance and to signed lines. Sean Berdy's adaptation of "Hero" (by Enrique Iglesias), as one

example, focuses mainly on Berdy's signing, combined with stylized open captions and split screen effects.[45] While the captions closely emulate the pace of Iglesias' vocals, the rhythm of Berdy's signing, at times, diverges from the vocalized lines to convey the full idea in ASL (such as foregoing the musical rest between "would you die / for the one you love"), which produces a Deaf-inflected pacing for the lyrics. In between signed lines (here, the equivalent of each English phrase), the video flashes briefly to clips of a young woman, who turns out to be the love interest of Berdy's character, before rapidly cutting back to his signing, or using split screen to show both the signing and the narrative (the woman) at once. Throughout the video, the camera only cuts to the woman when lyrics are not being signed. This conscientiousness in cutting and transitioning only during signed rests produces the opposite result of Quigley's directorial choices in "Where'd You Go," while still providing ample space for the love story to develop visually.

These considerations of aesthetics and access combine to center the Deaf voice—and, accordingly, to decenter aural voice. This occurs in Ingrid Michaelson's and Kelly Clarkson's videos, which deprioritize the hearing artist in favor of d/Deaf performers and the overall ASL performance. Both videos highlight the prominence and strength of the Deaf community, are each commissioned collaborations with Deaf West Theatre, feature closed captions and split screens, and contain minimal mise-en-scène and story. Clarkson's video for "I Dare You" follows a series of lyric video variations recorded in different languages, including Spanish, German, and Hebrew, with Clarkson performing the song as a duet with recording artists from each country. While the non-English videos all display the same stock photos of love and relationships with overlayed text in the corresponding language, the ASL version is an active and

[45] See Butler for a more detailed analysis of this music video's multimodalities.

dynamic performance video that features around twenty d/Deaf performers of all ages, genders, and races, as well as a dancer. Like Berdy's "Hero," "I Dare You" carefully transitions between musical lines for the first verse and chorus so as to not cut off any lyrics and signs; each performer signs a musical phrase before the screen displays another performer. The video progresses to include two-, three-, and four-way split screens, transitioning more rapidly during the repeated choruses, and finally culminating in a collage of 21 boxes to display the performers and Clarkson signing the final lyric of the song. The use of split screens in this case is particularly poignant because of the video's debut in April 2020, such that the performers could not appear together physically otherwise. Importantly, Clarkson only appears at the beginning and end of the video, such that the d/Deaf performers and ASL are the visual focus for almost the entire video.[46]

Michaelson's "Hell No," a post-breakup tune about refusing to take back a cheating ex, presents an even more playful combination of video aesthetics and performance techniques. The original video consolidates Michaelson's self-recorded lip-syncs using humorous Snapchat filters, recorded over the course of four weeks, and the ASL version (released in 2016) parallels the same fun, sassy tone of the original and features Michaelson with six performers from Deaf West's *Spring Awakening*. Throughout the video, the camera transitions back and forth between the performers signing individually (the d/Deaf performers wear black, possibly to help with the visual contrast of physical signs, while Michaelson wears a white top with "HELL NO!" in black font across the chest). Some transitions are instant cuts, while others are cross-screen wipes/slides; many of the transitions are not synchronized with signed phrases, as in "Hero" and "I Dare You," and instead abide by conventional music video editing, which more often follows

[46] Clarkson's collaboration with Deaf West is, perhaps, not surprising given that she is known for having featured the Deaf community several times on her talk show, *The Kelly Clarkson Show*.

the beat of the music. However, many of the single performer views are filmed with the same framing, such that performers are always viewed standing in the same position, and the performers sign in unison during these moments, aiding the visual flow of the signed lines. As well, some of the repeated "No!" lyrics feature Michaelson in the middle of the frame and suddenly surrounded by several hands that sign NO in ASL. At times, the video also uses a four-way split screen to show four performers signing at once; during the second verse and chorus, the frame captures Michaelson either singing from the side, or standing in the background out of focus while various signers perform directly to the camera, thereby displacing the prominence of the hearing artist.

Michaelson's video also includes a type of ASL musical polyphony that does not exist in the original song, altogether challenging the hearing-centric boundaries of "voice." During the song's bridge, Michaelson places her hands behind her back as two female Deaf performers (Lauren Putz and Amelia Hensley) sign for her—Putz using her right hand and Hensley her left, a style that mirrors the "shared sign" technique of Deaf West's musical theatre productions (discussed in Chapter 4). At the end of the bridge, Michaelson, who has up to then been lip-syncing the lyrics, stops mouthing altogether and instead signs for herself. This centering of sign language—of a Deaf voice—and the decentering of aural voice symbolically lets go of the music video's hearing-centrism, first allowing Deaf hands to express Michaelson's message, then Michaelson conveying her own message in ASL. On the surface, the ASL version of "Hell No" is fun and different, and narratively, there is no storyline (as the original does not have one either). Yet, the work is also culturally meaningful because it creates a collaborative effort across Deaf and hearing worlds, and its careful multimodal choices generate both musical artistry and

accessibility.[47]

That Michaelson's and Clarkson's videos are commissioned and created in collaboration with a major Deaf theatre company, especially one that is known for its Deaf/ASL musical endeavors, also holds particular significance because of the commercial spaces that the original artists inhabit. The popularity of Michaelson and Clarkson, including the number of followers that they each have, means that the work of d/Deaf artists is given global visibility. As well, their collaboration and partnership with Deaf West Theatre means that the resulting work is produced in a respectful and artistic manner. As Deaf West's Artistic Director DJ Kurs explains, "Our mission is to bridge the divide between the hearing and deaf worlds, and our collaboration [with Michaelson] is a significant step towards this goal. Our company is always exploring the synergy between ASL and music, and we're thrilled that our work is being seen by a new audience" (Nelson). These videos make Deaf language visible, accurate, and entertaining, while also maintaining a Deaf visual aesthetic.

The Deaf music videos discussed so far embrace a constant (re)negotiation of cultural, hearing values, being that most Western music disregards deafness from the outset. Katelyn E. Best stresses the hearing-centrism of music, noting

> Language shapes a particular reality of the term 'music,' and this reality is reinforced as hearing-centric through musical discourse, products, and institutions. Phrases such as being 'tone deaf,' having 'an ear for music,' or being able to 'play by ear' perpetuate

[47] A few months after the ASL video's debut, Michaelson and four of Deaf West's artists from the video performed the song on *The Today Show*. In 2020, Michaelson also appeared in MCC Theater's virtual Miscast benefit, singing a song from *Dear Evan Hansen* while Deaf performer Lauren Ridloff signs. Michaelson's recurring partnership with Deaf performers demonstrates a continued interest in working with the community and providing a platform for Deaf performers to express themselves musically. See Edmond, Treshelle. "Treshelle Edmond performs 'Hell No' w/ Ingrid Michaelson on the Today Show." *YouTube*, 6 Sept. 2016, https://www.*YouTube*.com/watch?v=pGWdglgD0ww, and "Ingrid Michaelson And Lauren Ridloff Perform You Will Be Found From Dear Evan Hansen at MISCAST20." *YouTube*, uploaded by MCCTheater, 18 Sept. 2020, https://www.*YouTube*.com/watch?v=T7tuppPG398.

> hearing-centric constructions of music that assign value to the ear and its reception of aural sound. This type of discourse perpetuates stereotypes of 'music' and 'deafness,' imprisoning Deaf expressions of music to the confines of hegemonic thought which places aural senses at the forefront of musical experience. (1)

By design, Deaf music videos break out of these hearing-centric and audist restrictions and stereotypes. While most videos do not render the aural components of music unimportant or unnecessary (though the genre of Signed Music does), they do challenge the primacy of sound as the reigning, or only, modality of music videos. More precisely, Michaelson and Clarkson incorporate moments that defy the hearing-centric notion of voice by adding a multitude of Deaf voices and bodies to accentuate the communication of sign language and by visually displacing their own aural voices and artistic prominence in the videos, all of which is reinforced through the creative use of split screens, captions, and cuts and transitions.

Paratextual Considerations: Re-Imagining Narratives Through Deaf Identity and Pride

Utilizing the modes of artistic accessibility above, Deaf music video paratexts present reimagined narratives that highlight Deaf community, identity, and pride, and often, Deaf activism. While D-PAN and Quigley's "Where'd You Go" is an early attempt at engaging directly with source material, paratextually the video only goes so far as to add Deaf performers and mirror the original video's images. Videos that demonstrate a more direct paratextual engagement with the source material include Nyle DiMarco's version of "7 rings" (by Ariana Grande) and Harvard's version of "Same Love" (by Macklemore and Ryan Lewis), both of which exhibit a Deaf, queer treatment in narrative and aesthetic ways. Whereas Grande's "7 rings" includes an all-female cast with visually vibrant shades of pink, DiMarco's version

includes an all-male, gay cast and visually tinted shades of blue ("Ariana Grande '7 rings'"). The Deaf/ASL version is directed by Jake Wilson, who is popular for taking music videos and recreating them with a marked difference (such as with toys, kids, and flipped genders).[48] In addition to adding open captions and sign language, as well as flipping the genders, sexualities, and colors of the original, the DiMarco's version recreates the energy and attitude of the Grande's video, including the opulent, decked out party atmosphere, with overall scenes, stagings, costumes, and poses parallel the aesthetics of original. DiMarco is not restricted to simply signing the lyrics; instead, the aesthetics of the music video (with its various scenes and cuts) work together with the captions and DiMarco's signing, or "singing," to re-present the story through a Deaf character.

Similarly incorporating a Deaf, queer eye, Harvard's "Same Love" video employs accessible multimodality while also using its framed spaces in hyper-visual ways. The original video by Macklemore and Lewis was released in 2012 in support of marriage equality and follows the life journey of a gay couple and the obstacles they face along the way. Narratively, Harvard's version closely echoes the original story, here following the journey of two Deaf gay men and the struggles they face (which include attempts to come out to their families and conclude with Harvard's character meeting his partner's mother). Aesthetically, the video presents a visual onslaught of backgrounds, images, and at times, captions. For the rapped verses, signer Bobby Loeffler stands outdoors where behind him exist an array of broken cement pillars, all of which are covered with colorful graffiti. In addition to a full view of the ASL and closed captions, the video also embeds stylized font during choruses, signed by Jenica von

[48] The release of the video was also accompanied by a video message from Wilson, for which he learned sign language. See "'7 rings' ASL VERSION | message from Jake Wilson." *YouTube*, uploaded by jakewil, 28 Jan. 2019, https://www.*YouTube*.com/watch?v=uY11PIds2TI.

Garrel. As von Garrel signs in front of a wall and while sitting on a dock and porch, the video frame leaves half the screen of space for creative captions. Short semi-transparent clips of the characters are also shown, taking the place of the screen text and helping viewers connect the lyrics to the overall narrative. Finally, at the end of the song, the video rests on a close-up of a window as it rains; pictures of real LGBTQ couples flash across each square of the window pane.[49] Like "7 rings," "Same Love" generates an intersectionality between the gay and Deaf communities—and/or highlights those who are both gay and Deaf—extending the original video's emphasis on interracial queer love.

Most significantly, "7 rings" and "Same Love" take part in a paratextual, cross-cultural relationship that not only recreate the overall tones and narratives of the original videos, but also re-envisions the source material within a Deaf, queer world. DiMarco's video, which is created out of sentimentality and interest in Grande, as briefly explained in his Tweet to her (qtd. in Wong), the video is *about* excess (financial and material) while also *embracing* excess (visual and physical—including DiMarco's costume, which is a see-through chain mesh material, and sexual dance moves, coded at times as feminine and other times as masculine). Harvard's video, though a completely different style and quality than DiMarco's, also contains visual excess through the graphics and images. Both videos thus act as narrative extensions of Grande's and Macklemore and Lewis' originals by infusing a Deaf treatment that speaks to and about a specific portion of the community (that is, queer Deaf folks) and also engendering a Deaf affective pleasure. Furthermore, the videos include layers of Deaf activism; "Same Love," most perceptibly, is an extension of the original video's call to action to approve Washington's Referendum 74 to legalize same-sex marriage. And, as part of DiMarco's own activism

[49] Images were obtained through an invitation by the video's production team to supporters of the video project.

regarding Deaf representation and sign language, he had previously asked VEVO and Grande to add captions to her music videos, to which she not only acquiesced but has continued to do for her videos since (Pineda). Rather than merely mirroring the original texts, as in the case of "Where'd You Go," DiMarco's and Harvard's texts dialogue with the original videos in ways that expand and extend their aesthetic and narrative modes.

Finally, a number of videos exemplify a heightened awareness of Deaf accessibility, culture, and music video aesthetics that move beyond the confines and limitations of the original songs and videos. In these cases, Deaf artists are the (co)creators and stars of the videos; importantly, their works also explicitly act as conduits for Deaf art, activism, and awareness. More so than in DiMarco's and Harvard's videos, the music videos analyzed in this section practice what Summer Crider Loeffler (borrowing from Mildred L. Larson's translation theory) calls *unduly free* translations of music, which include

> the English text of the song [] translated into ASL, with the performer's own style and creativity influencing and altering the meaning behind the song. The song's true meaning is dropped, and the performer has artistic license, or the right to modify the song and make it into their own song, as inspired by the original song. (Listman et al. 4)

In these cases, the original source material plays little to no role, visual or otherwise, as they do in the previously analyzed examples. Instead, the Deaf creator(s) determines their own linguistic and visual meanings that arise from the song itself. I focus here on Jules Dameron's "Rolling in the Deep" (by Adele), Sandra Mae Frank's version of "Pride" (by American Authors), and Deaf West Theatre's "You're All I Need to Get By" (sung by Emilia Jones for the 2021 movie *CODA*). These three examples demonstrate the utmost strengths and potentialities of Deaf music videos; as paratexts, they multimodally enhance the meaning of the recorded music and

showcase the future potentials of culturally artistic and accessible work.

Dameron's version of "Rolling in the Deep" (released in 2013) effectively integrates a Deaf dramaturgy and aesthetic, including purposeful transitions, creative captions, mise-en-scène, and narrative. Dameron's directorial credits include a multitude of ASL music videos, as well as collaborated with D-PAN and Forbes. Importantly, her videos employ professional teams of d/Deaf artists on both sides of the camera. In the description for "Rolling in the Deep," Dameron writes, "We believe in supporting deaf people everywhere and allowing access to the sign language community to one of the best songs in music history. And not only that, music is loved by all." The spirit of this statement, however brief, comes alive in Dameron's work. Adele's original video for "Rolling in the Deep" contains scenes of the artist sitting alone in a room, sequences of a dancer, plates being thrown and broken against a wall, and glasses of water vibrating to the drummer's rhythm. If there is meaning to the video, it is not readily apparent, though the lyrics suggest an antagonistic break-up song towards a cheating partner. Dameron's video takes inspiration from Adele's lyrics but produces a brand-new visual text: the video starts with performers Amber Zion and Chris B. Corrigan smiling at and facing each other while a honky tonk-esque piano tune plays (not part of Adele's recording). Suddenly, the music shifts into a high-pitched, eerie tone as Corrigan shoves Zion, and the image of Zion slowly falling backwards transitions us into the Adele song. The crux of the video alternates between Zion signing the lyrics while in a bathtub and flashbacks of the couple creating a new life together, enjoying each others' company. Gradually, Zion notices changes in Corrigan's temperament, she burns a picture of Corrigan and a woman (is it her? or is it another woman?), and her slow-falling body finally lands in the bathtub—altogether producing a paratextual narrative meaning inexistent in Adele's original.

During the early verses and choruses, the video focuses on Zion's signing, primarily cutting away only after the signed phrases are complete. Dameron's captions, appearing as highlighted white serif font, display on the screen in musical rhythm, matching Adele's voice. However, even when Adele's voice is held for longer phrases, the video takes liberties in cutting away to a flashback scene while the captions continue playing across the frames. Thus, at times, the captions embody Adele's sung lyrics and her vocalized phrasings, while the video embodies the couple's story. Regarding the difficulty of translating the song's lyrics from English into ASL and still conveying a sense of the musical rhythm, Dameron explains, "We have to think in signing time, and at the same time, clearly communicate the right feelings to all of the native ASL signers" ("Jules: A Documentary"). Towards the bridge and end of the video, sequences of Zion and Corrigan together (laughing, sleeping, fighting, etc.) begin to take up more visual space; the captions continue, but Zion's signing no longer takes precedence since the chorus simply repeats. This, in turn, makes space for the video's narrative to emerge more clearly. In this way, Dameron's work takes a popular (hearing) song but adapts it into a Deaf music video, driven by Deaf perspective, design, and—as Dameron explains—*signing time*.

Signing time, as opposed to normative or hearing time, derives from disability studies, where the notion of cripped or queered time refers to the unsettling or rearranging of linear and steady normative time. Deaf time, like cripped time, can move faster or slower based on the use of signs, the fluency and body of the signer, and/or on the phrase or line being signed/spoken, in the case of simultaneous dialogue or lyrics (an extended discussion about Deaf formations of time and futurity is found in Chapter 5). When theorized in terms of performance, signing time is made most visible when aural voice and signed voice combine. In an interview with the Deaf West cast of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, Sharon Pierre-Louis refers to the temporal

discrepancy between spoken lines and signed lines, which at times can result in a hearing actor trying to "catch up" with signed phrases (Sherman 200). Harvard also explains how signs have evolved from what he calls "vintage signing" to today's more rapid or short signing (such as older, formal signs which originally utilized two hands, which have developed into "half-signs" that utilize one hand) (Sherman 201). In terms of musicality, such as in Dameron's example and in the diverging sings found in Berdy's "Hero," signing time refers to the distinction between the vocalized phrase and the signed phrase: "Instead of dancing, pulsing, or standing still between phrases or verses, Deaf signers may time their signing so that the signed phrase occupies more time than the sung one, hold final signs of phrases, and repeat or add signs until the space is filled" (Maler 84). Signing time is most perceptible in Dameron's "Rolling in the Deep," during which some signed phrases begin or end earlier than the vocal lines. For example, during the lyrics "throw your soul through every open door," Zion signs three specific movements to convey what in English takes seven words. Artistically, Dameron and Zion must make choices as to how (if at all) to fill the musical time, such as by holding or repeating signs in order for both signed and sung lines to synchronize and in order to maintain the attention and engagement of viewers.

Another example of a Deaf music video presented with a Deaf paratextual framework is Sandra Mae Frank's version of "Pride" (2016), which accompanies the radio mix of the American Authors song and is posted to the band's official *YouTube* channel ("American Authors"). American Authors' version of the video features the band's frontman in different outdoor spaces in Denver, from city streets to the snowy mountaintops, and intersperses concert clips of the band performing. The narrative and meaning of the video are difficult to pinpoint, similar to Adele's video, although the lyrics of "Pride" describe an individual who has become a

new version of themselves—different from the family, friends, and home they once knew—emerging with a sense of pride that comes with discovering oneself. In the Deaf/ASL version, a sleeping Frank is awoken by a roommate who explains she is late; jumping out of bed, Frank meets a series of obstacles as she attempts to go to Manhattan, including a hearing cab driver who refuses to communicate with her, and her missing the train because she trips and spills everything in her purse. As she continues rushing through the streets of New York, Frank sees a child whose distracted hearing mother is talking on the phone; the child runs into a street of oncoming cars, and Frank rushes in to save her.

Unlike Dameron's video, the Deaf/ASL video for "Pride" includes only closed captioning, but the video editing more prominently visualizes the musical rhythm, and the overall narrative displays a Deaf sense of pride. The video's rapid cuts occur with the beat of the music as Frank signs; towards the song's bridge, a passerby bumps into Frank, creating a slow-motion sequence which visually cues the bridge. At this point, rapid cuts emphasize and follow the music's quarter note beat, while visually the frame still maintaining a clear view of Frank's signing; transitioning out of the bridge, the video's transitions follow the syncopated drum riff, and the transitions pause (along with the drums) at the song's climax before restarting for the final chorus. Throughout the song, then, the sharp cuts of the video work to visualize the rhythm of the music. In order to present both the storyline and the signing, the video also includes split screens as needed, showing Frank's actions and interactions on one side, and her signing on the other, recalling the artistic use of split screens in Berdy's "Hero." Most significantly, the narrative of the video presents a Deaf perspective and imbues the American Author's song with Deaf cultural meaning: the main character's "pride" comes from refusing to let anything stand in her way, as well as from her heroic actions, saving the hearing mother and child. As the Deaf

hero is not often presented in popular media, this video holds particular cultural significance as a text in representing a Deaf-affirming narrative. Like “Rolling in the Deep,” the paratext of “Pride” foregoes dependence on the visuals and narrative of the original video while finding a stirring cultural meaning to the song.

As one final example, Deaf West Theatre’s music video for “You're All I Need To Get By,” created for the 2021 movie *CODA*, presents a complete reversal of the hearing-centric works laden with narrative prosthesis discussed at the beginning of this chapter. The video is a result of Apple TV+’s prompt, explained in a post on Deaf West’s *Instagram* page:

> Could we create a music video without signing the lyrics? That’s what Apple TV+ asked us when we started collaborating on this music video inspired by the movie CODA. The result is a short video that we couldn’t be prouder of. We are a visual and expressive people, and the rhythms of love and connection are stronger than sound waves. (@deafwest)

The resulting music video tracks an increasingly strained relationship between a Deaf mother and daughter as the daughter grows up and prepares to move out of the house (itself reminiscent of the storyline in *CODA*, which follows a Deaf family and their hearing daughter’s desire to pursue music outside of her responsibilities to the family’s business). Using closed captions, the video is similar to (hearing) music videos in which there is no lip-syncing or performance of the lyrics by the musical artist; all that is observed throughout the video is the progression of the storyline, which ends with the daughter and mother reconciling and placing their hands (in the “I love you” ASL handshape) on top of each other, as they did when the daughter was younger. The song’s lyrics in their original form (first sung by Marvin Gaye & Tammi Terrell) present the unwavering commitment and love between a man and woman. Deaf West’s video transforms

those sentiments into a narrative about a Deaf family inserting, instead of romance, a familial bond between mother and daughter, i.e. Loeffler's unduly free translation. As a Deaf paratext, this version of the music video enhances the original lyrics and song, moving outside of its original parameters (in narrative and meaning) to present a new cultural text that engages with a shared sense of Deaf identity. Taken together, "You're All I Need To Get By," "Pride," and "Rolling in the Deep" demonstrate a creative agency beyond the bounds and restrictions—aesthetic, musical, and narrative—of the original texts.

Within my analyses of these examples, I do not mean to suggest that the primary goal of Deaf music videos is to convey visual meaning. As Helena Julia Minors points out, "musical meaning can be made explicit only by language and the process of 'translation' therefore presupposes some sort of vital relationship between music and text." Many non-Deaf music videos, returning to Markovitz's description of music videos as surrealist, do not contain any meaning whatsoever. A song and video's meaning(s), if it can be determined and articulated at all, is continually subject to the translator's subjectivity. While many d/Deaf artists choose source material based on how a song's messages and meanings parallel an aspect of the Deaf community, paratexts as a form also invite and welcome artists to translate and adapt the work in any number of ways—and asks viewers to interpret and appreciate the resulting texts for themselves.

Conclusion

In describing the extensiveness of ASL music videos as a whole, I stress the significance of recognizing how intentionality, creatorship, and context can shape a video's musical and aesthetic designs. Works created by hearing artists can easily fall into the trap of narrative

prosthesis, producing deafness in metaphorical or imaginary ways that reduce the deaf body and Deaf language to an object in terms that primarily serve hearing audiences. Other videos may hinge too heavily or solely on accessibility; while in the service of d/Deaf audiences, these videos overlook Deaf aesthetics and perspectives. Comparatively, videos that most effectively combine access and multimodal aesthetics encompass a multitude of successful approaches that can generate Deaf worlds in the process. By offering these analyses, I do not emphasize a demand for clear-cut separation between Deaf and hearing music videos but an opportunity to see Deaf and hearing artists working together in collaboration. Although some argue that these forms still find themselves indebted to popular hearing music, those who enjoy such work can observe artists across the range of deafness/hearingness that are inspiring each other's art in culturally meaningful ways.

As a hearing ally, I also recognize my limited ability to analyze these examples fully. Thus, future research might examine more closely a video's specific sign choices in translating the music. Or, others may discover alternative Deaf-specific design choices that establish a Deaf aesthetic. As well, in presenting such works again in the classroom, I acknowledge the need to contextualize them for students more clearly and/or to present ASL music videos as a way of introducing accessible composition. There is also a growing number of videos featuring a live ASL performance of a Broadway musical number, including videos by Harvard and hearing Instagrammer Katie (@broadwaysignlanguage), which might be read and analyzed through the paratextual frames of *YouTube* and *Instagram*.

Currently, there exists no easy way to filter for Deaf-created videos, unless one has specific knowledge of each individual creator or creative team. However, Dameron has compiled a public *YouTube* playlist of 178 of the "Best Sign Language Music Videos," featuring selections

that are successful “in terms of performance, quality of work and sign language translation/expression.” In addition, a public playlist created by D-PAN for their music videos also exists (see “D-PAN ASL Music Videos”). Highlighting the wide range of effective and robust Deaf-centric music videos in this way provides individuals searching for signed songs a path beyond hearing-created videos and towards ASL stars from within the Deaf community, thereby yielding an optimistic outlook for the future of the Deaf music video genre.

While the videos analyzed here aim for accessibility towards the d/Deaf and Hard of Hearing community, they do not purport to be universally accessible, as Forbes suggests of D-PAN’s work. Butler recognizes the paradox that “ASL music videos show the potential for continually making communication more accessible” while at the same time “remind[ing] us that no composition is fully accessible by every single body” (“Where Access Meets Multimodality”). Borrowing from Stephanie Kerschbaum’s work on modality and disability, Butler reminds readers that, in expanding a text’s modalities, one or more modalities can simultaneously be rendered inaccessible, thereby creating an “inhospitable multimodal environment” or what Kerschbaum calls *multimodal inhospitality* (qtd. in “Where Access Meets Multimodality”). Indeed, though ASL music videos may expand access to d/Deaf and Hard of Hearing audiences, they do not afford the same privileges to blind or Deafblind individuals within the same context and are, therefore, not universally accessible. Perhaps, then, the ultimate aim of music videos is not to substitute one mode for another (i.e. sonic for linguistic, or sonic for descriptive) but one that layers modes on top of each other, such that multimodal approaches can work together and not against each other. It is the hope—indeed, goal—of music and music videos, then, to continue expanding their modalities in ways that are *fully accessible to all*.

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CHAPTER 4: Signs, Songs, and the Stage: Dramaturgies of American Deaf Musical Theatre[50]

> If you think about it, it's crazy; music and deaf people? It doesn't seem like it would fit together at all. But I think sign language is a natural fit for music actually. It offers a new layer of expression similar to the way that choreography brings a new perspective to music.
>
> DJ Kurs, in "Working in the Theatre"

In 1999, then-newly hired drama director Diane Brewer develops an idea: put together a joint production of *West Side Story* between her campus, MacMurray College, and a nearby high school, Illinois School for the Deaf (ISD). In it, MacMurray students (including a mix of Deaf education and theatre majors) would portray the Sharks, while ISD students would portray the Jets—and though there are already strong ties between the two schools, the year-long process is, inevitably, frenzied and turbulent. Still, the overall result, meticulously documented in Mark Rigney's book *Deaf Side Story*, is a successful though short eight-show run of the quintessential American musical, to the surprise of many involved. Most rewarding to the educational space of the MacMurry-ISD collaboration, Brewer asserts, is that participants learn they "can create theatre that crosses boundaries" (33). Writing on how sign language works organically with the interconnected dramatic structure of Laurents and Bernstein's musical, Rigney declares with some certainty that "it seems unlikely that any musical will ever be truly Deaf-friendly, but *West Side Story* may well be as close as any will get" (42). In retrospect, Rigney's claim would soon prove false: during the twenty-some years since Brewer's *Deaf Side Story* endeavor, Deaf musical theatre has taken on a life of its own, with collaborative productions of *Oliver!* (2000), *Big River* (2003), *Pippin* (2009), *Spring Awakening* (2015), *Next to Normal* (Ground Floor

[50] Except when noted in parenthetical citations, this chapter includes quoted portions from my close reading of Deaf West's *Spring Awakening*, published in *The Journal of American Drama and Theatre (JADT)*, in which I compare the Deaf West and original Broadway stagings of the musical. See "Silence, Gesture, and Deaf Identity."

Theatre/Deaf Austin Theatre 2019), *Newsies* (Ziegfeld Theater, 2019), an adaptation of *Medusa* (2019), a version of Beethoven's opera, *Fidelio* (2022), and an upcoming production of *The Music Man* (Olney Theatre Center, 2022), as well as productions that include d/Deaf characters, such as Lyric Theatre's *Fiddler on the Roof* (2016) and *Fun Home* (2018), and Glenn Casale's direction of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (2016)—each performed even more creatively than the one before it.[51] Certainly, too, Rigney's statement discounts an alternative possibility beyond a musical's ability to complement sign language: that, as Deaf West Theatre's Artistic Director DJ Kurs suggests, "sign language [is] not just a means of communication but a deeply beautiful artform that could redefine the Broadway musical" altogether ("Our 'Limitations' Are Actually Superpowers").

Of the over ten shows listed above, *Spring Awakening* has gone on to receive considerable critical acclaim and to amass an exceptional fan following, though, like *West Side Story*, the production was also a mammoth undertaking for all involved. In her analysis of the Deaf West Theatre (hereafter shortened to DWT) version, dance scholar Sarah Wilbur explores how the production's "layered gestural economies" (146)—which include choreography and the cueing systems through which the mixed company of hearing and deaf performers negotiate a live performance—directly impact the show's time-based needs and financial demands. These gestures generate "pressure and expose norms of production within the generally time-stamped, cost-conscious context of mainstream commercial theatre" (152). Using Wilbur's argument as a stepping-stone, this chapter traces the theatrical languages, or modalities, of Deaf musical theatre productions through a broader dramaturgical lens, where gesture makes up but one aspect of such performances. Deaf musical theatre not only challenges normative measures of Broadway

[51] Productions listed are helmed by Deaf West Theatre except when otherwise noted.

musicals, as Wilbur argues, but, as I will show, also presents the musical theatre industry with pragmatic ways to rehearse inclusive and diverse practices, on and off stage and among audiences and performers alike. Reiterating what I have argued elsewhere, Deaf musical productions provide "not only the literal stage upon which the Deaf and hearing worlds convene, but also a space where Deaf culture and silence are often emphasized, reconsidering traditional renderings of the Deaf/hearing divide within the space and modalities of musical theatre" (Lim).

Following my prior chapters on the staging of Deaf musical performance on television and in music videos, I attend here to the musical Deaf turn in stage performance, focusing on the dramaturgies that inform and impact Deaf musical theatre's practices and processes. Reading Deaf musical theatre as its own subgenre and form, I first examine the terminology that surrounds productions themselves; that is, while the industry typically categorizes such work as *revivals*, I offer a nuanced understanding of Deaf musicals as operating simultaneously as *translation*, *adaptation*, and *interpretation*. Works, in other words, are both a continuation of the original material **and** its new lifeform. Second, I articulate common dramaturgical techniques found within Deaf musicals that set them apart from their non-Deaf (or hearing) counterparts, i.e. the particular performance methodologies that take shape within Deaf musicals. This chapter traces the evolution of Deaf musical theatre performance that has emerged within the last two decades, focusing primarily on DWT's dramaturgies and their signature performance aesthetics. In what ways are Deaf stage musicals both informed and, as Marvin Carlson might put it, *haunted*, by the originals? In what ways do they actively augment the originals, pushing and expanding what Wilbur describes as "the practical means by which hierarchies of representation, reception, and theatrical production in US commercial theatre are established and maintained" (146)? And how might a Deaf-centered reading of musical theatre reveal Deaf forms of sound

and music-making? Guided by these inquiries, I argue that the theatrical ideologies of Deaf musicals—that is, the Deaf-centered principles that guide and inform musical productions—generate new approaches and inclusive performance techniques practices for all theatremakers to consider. Through these dramaturgies, Deaf musical theatre functions as a type of crip art that disrupts and expands the boundaries of the musical theatre world at large.

Deaf Musicals as Theatrical Afterlife: Translation, Adaptation, and Revival

When DWT's production of *Big River* premiered on Broadway in 2003, critics instinctively categorized the work as a *revival*, given that a production of the William Hauptman and Roger Miller musical had debuted on Broadway eighteen years earlier. DWT's 2015 Broadway transfer of *Spring Awakening* was defined in the same way, having opened nine years after the original Broadway production. Both *Big River* and *Spring Awakening* also went on to receive nominations within the Revival categories during their respective awards seasons. Yet, DWT's musical productions function in different ways—sometimes unintended—than the originals: dialogue and musical numbers are delivered in both ASL and English, characters are often expanded with two or more performers working together, and, most strikingly, the worlds on stage are transformed in ways that establish new meanings and readings of the texts apart from the librettos. Kurs and performer Tyrone Giordano (writing in "Deaf West Theatre") also refer to the company's work as *adaptation*, *translation*, and *revival* in their respective articles, even though each of these terms formally connote different theatrical concepts. As a musical theatre fan familiar with both the Deaf and non-Deaf versions of musicals, I continually experience DWT's work as simultaneously a revival and *more than* a revival at once; adaptation and not

adaptation; translation and interpretation in tandem.[52] Given that language itself is limited, and such theatrical taxonomy does not capture the exactitudes of the staged productions at hand, this section attempts to articulate the *what* of Deaf musical theatre as it stretches across hearing and Deaf cultural boundaries: what is it, and how does it function?

Theatre, and musical theatre in particular, is premised on the idea of repetition, not only night after night, but production after production. This frequency of repetition sets theatre apart from film and television, where "remakes" are largely criticized as to how closely they attend to the source material, or what the field of adaptation studies calls fidelity. Film and adaptation theorist Robert Stam cautions that fidelity is a fallacy that contributes to a misleading hierarchy from product to product; the notion of fidelity stands in for "our sense that some adaptations are indeed better than others and that some adaptations fail to 'realize' or substantiate that which we most appreciated in the source" ("Beyond Fidelity" 54). Revivals in theatre and performance have become especially popular since the 1990s—after all, the Tony Awards, among other theatrical awards shows, designates a Best Revival category to celebrate such occasions—though the exact definition of *revival* varies in its use by scholars, critics, and fans. Writing for *The Oxford Companion to the American Musical*, Thomas Hischak theorizes a revival as "a production in which the musical is rethought, redesigned, and reinterpreted by different artists from those who had originated the work," rather than an exact replica of the original. (In more recent years, revivals have appeared before a generation has passed.) In practice, however, the term *revival* indicates a large range of meanings, with close replication of the original source on

[52] The term *interpretation* carries with it its own connotations, with theatre and film scholar David Saltz contending that all performances interpret their playscripts; if so, every production is no more an interpretation than any other (re)staging of the show. See Saltz, David Z. "What Theatrical Performance Is (Not): The Interpretation Fallacy." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 59, no. 3, 2001, pp. 299–306. https://doi.org/10.1111/1540-6245.00027.

one end, such that the work appears similar in content, aesthetics, and through what some might call “traditional” casting, and on the other, radical reworkings that add material or include extensive changes that render the work wholly unrecognizable by those familiar with the source material. Still, within the last decade, only a handful of Broadway musicals have reimagined their source materials in ways that markedly deviate from expectations, including *Oklahoma!*, *Once on This Island*, *Pippin*, and, as I argue here, the productions by Deaf West Theatre. Following the analyses in Chapter 3, the notion of Deaf musicals might be understood as paratextual reworkings rather than as revivals per se. As this project has discussed so far, the practice of song signing, whether framed by broadcast television or fashioned into music videos adaptations, take extant material and imbue it with new life, regularly producing a relational quality between the source material and the new performance in ASL.

Further complicating theatrical taxonomy are the terms *translator* and *adaptor*. As posted on Instagram for National Author’s Day, Concord Theatricals (the theatrical licensing company that today comprise R&H Theatricals and Samuel French) explains that a translator is an “interpreter of source text” who “[t]ransforms written work from one language into another” while “remain[ing] sensitive to the author’s original intent and tone,” while an adaptor is a “transformer of an existing work” who “[a]dapts a story from one medium into another” and “rewrites.” That is to say, translators work linguistically but as “authentically” to the original as possible, while adaptors work between media and, by nature, re-work the original text. Still, these terms continuously fall short, providing only an approximation of what Deaf musicals might be and might do. DWT’s musicals, as a primary example, do more than simply translate the written words, in part since musicals are performed and not merely written and read. Performance studies scholar and translator Jean Graham-Jones describes how translation

"remains invisible unless remarked upon when chafing against the recipient's sensibilities" (320); however, since DWT's work includes simultaneous use of spoken English and American sign language, the act of linguistic translation has the appearance of occurring live, as if in real-time. The translation, in this case, is made visible, embodied and heightened through physicality (and written, such as via surtitles projected onto the stage).

These productions are also not *adaptation* proper, as they remain grounded as theatrical performance rather than as a shift across mediums. Adaptations scholar Margherita Laera, borrowing from linguistic and literary theorist Roman Jakobson, posits a series of further classifications to understand what precisely occurs within the act of adaptation. Of these, Deaf musicals can be better understood as a combination of: *interlingual*, as in a translation between two languages; *intersemiotic*, or the transmutation between different semiotic systems, such as verbal and non-verbal ones; *intramedial*, as in adaptations that occur within the same medium; and *intercultural*, or transculturation, ensuing between two different cultures (Laera 5-6). As translations, Deaf musical theatre performances render the libretto into another language while instilling the overall narratives with additional cultural meaning and, as adaptations, they retain their musical theatre structure while also shaping the form to not only include d/Deaf performers and audiences, but also Deaf aesthetics and modalities. This blending of translation and adaptation techniques is what theatre scholar Ian Borden terms *trans-adaptation* to discuss how productions can actively transcend cultural and temporal lines, strengthening the relationship between stage text (stage picture) and audience.

Deaf musicals thereby generate with them a particular essence that is, in the end, wholly absent from the texts' original forms. This Deaf essence—or *aura*, to use adaptation theorist Linda Hutcheon's term—falls somewhere in-between translation, adaptation, and revival—

generating a type of performative practice and output that appears similar to and different from the source material simultaneously. Deaf musicals are not simply linguistic transpositions into ASL, nor are they adaptations from one medium to another, nor are they standard revivals. Alternative terms that also help to describe this type of work are those with the "re-" prefix: re-making, re-imagining, re-telling, or, as *Playbill*'s Evan Henerson describes it, a re-birth. Stam expounds on adaptation theory's "rich constellation of terms and tropes – translation, actualization, reading, critique, dialogization, cannibalization, transmutation, transfiguration, incarnation, transmogrification, transcoding, performance, signifying, rewriting, detournement" (*Literature Through Film* 4). Framing many of these terms is the notion of *repetition with a difference*. Whereas the notion of "fidelity is based on the implied assumption that adapters aim simply to reproduce the adapted text," as Hutcheon argues, "Adaptation is repetition, but *repetition without replication*" (7, emphasis mine). What occurs, then, within the realm of repetition between an original Broadway production and a Deaf musical adaptation?

Influential to understanding the ambiguities of Deaf musical classification is Marvin Carlson's idea of theatre's *ghosts*. Borrowing from Herbert Blau, Carlson argues that "one of the universals of performance, both East and West, is its ghostliness, its sense of return, the uncanny but inescapable impression imposed upon its spectators that '*we are seeing what we saw before*'" (1). For theatremakers and theatregoers to understand Deaf work as a revival at all, the ghosts of the original production(s) must exist in the cultural memory. From an economic standpoint, name recognition and familiarity is vital to attaining ticket buyers. However, asking audiences to see a show like *Spring Awakening* only nine years after its first incarnation also requires that the show's marketing team explain the production's difference(s) from the "known" version. Katie Welsh and Stacy Wolf draw attention to how the Broadway marketing team for DWT's *Spring*

Awakening exploits audiences' expectations (or, the "ghosts" of a show):

> the poster for the Deaf West revival of *Spring Awakening* (2015), which featured Deaf performers in the lead roles, read, 'The Tony Award-Winning Musical Returns in a New Production Unlike Anything You've Ever ~~Seen Heard~~ Imagined,' overtly marking how the new concept revised what audiences already knew about the show. (7)

The tagline draws attention to the production's possible shifts in modalities. By crossing out the words seen and heard, the promotion attempts to emphasize how the production functions beyond/outside of the senses—or, at the very least, not exclusively to any one sense. This marketing strategy employs *sous rature*, or what Jacques Derrida terms "under erasure," here premised on how the words "seen" and "heard" produce meaning along with "imagined" (as opposed to simply removing the words completely). The poster is, therefore, reliant on audiences' familiarity with how musicals are typically sensed, which then yields an anticipation for something beyond those senses. Compare this to the *Playbill* headline announcing the Broadway production: "*Spring Awakening* Is 'Translated Into Silence' for Broadway Return" (Hetrick), which renders a problematic impression of the show as being soundless, if not performed solely in sign language. Both promotions emphasize a (re)imagining of what audiences are familiar with, suggesting either a rejection or reduction of specific senses. Nevertheless, as I will discuss in the next section, the production explicitly *heightens* the various senses, drawing from the original production's performative modes and accentuating new, Deaf ontological modes.

DWT's version of the show—and more broadly speaking, Deaf versions of any musical—exemplify Carlson's notion of the existence of theatrical ghosts. In these cases, a ghost leaves traces of the original, rather than fully substituting or replacing the past iteration.

Complicatedly, Deaf productions insinuate the existence of *hearing*-centric ghosts, since the musicals are generally written with a predominantly hearing audience in mind. Many find this Deaf-hearing translucency a troublesome facet of Deaf musical adaptations and revivals, as I will address shortly. For the moment, I set aside the hierarchical and judgmental complications of ghosting to theorize how Deaf musicals operate culturally and theatrically as productions in and of themselves—as culturally-specific retellings of known musical narratives that stand on their own. Like the notion of the paratext, ghosting offers a way of discussing the dramaturgical relationship of Deaf musicals to their better-known (hearing) counter-parts, while also indicating a quality of Deaf musicals that works beyond the adaptation/revival framework. Ghosting also helps me to make sense of how Deaf musicals function as both separate from and indebted to their progenitors—a performative translucency that exists continually on stage.

I also find it productive to analyze these productions through what director Jonathan Miller calls a performance's *afterlives*:

> it seems right and proper to describe the renewed existence of these works of art as afterlives, and to see them not simply as faint or attenuated versions of their previous existences but as full-blooded representations of their existence now. This unforeseen hereafter that we inhabit, and in which we perceive such objects, departs so much from the time of the work's original conception that it seems advisable to think of the work as a separate entity with its own peculiar conditions. (32)

Miller's definition is productive in that it turns our attention to the new work as a cultural object unto itself and existing *apart from* its original. In this way, I understand Deaf musicals as an extension of what exists in the cultural consciousness. As afterlives, Deaf musicals are in continual dialogue with the originals while also seeking to generate their own ideological

meanings and narratives. In other words, the productions uncover Deaf culture and identities that exist within the musical (con)texts and, as Giordano claims regarding Deaf theatrical adaptations, the works "more closely align with Deaf worldviews and experiences," as opposed to ASL productions, within which everyone in the playworld instinctively knows sign language ("Theater, Adapted"). Such productions, accordingly, confront audiences as something uncanny—both familiar and unfamiliar at once.

In rejecting easy theatrical taxonomy, Deaf musicals also decolonize the sound- and hearing-centrism of musical theatre practice. One might argue that mainstream musical theatre is most often written with hearing audiences in mind, and so DWT's work is always-already haunted by the known (hearing) versions of the musicals. If this is the case, Deaf musicals at once work alongside the original librettos and also push against them. The production specifically pivots around a Deaf musical experience by "briefly privileging Deaf modalities of meaning-making over English- and hearing-centered ones" (Lim) through a combination of visual and physical interactions with music. Although the libretto generally remains unchanged, DWT offers contextual and cultural nuances to the original librettos. *Spring Awakening*, as one example, augments the libretto's setting of 19th century Germany with a Deaf history, demonstrating the treatment of d/Deaf students in the classroom. During this era, classrooms were dominated by oralism, the forced education of d/Deaf students via oral speech practices, as opposed to manual (signed) language. The production thus utilizes the original libretto as is while also challenging the hearing-centrality of musical theatre's overall ideology, content, and form—and of history as a whole—by uncovering a Deaf history and reality therein. That a work's afterlife can both employ and subvert the original in this way is, as Laera contends, the process through which adaptation-based subversion functions: "in every attempt to challenge the

politics of a source through adaptation there lies a contradictory stance which accepts to reiterate the 'norm,' however briefly and fleetingly, in order to denounce it" (10). Deaf musicals simultaneously utilize and play with the conventions of musical theatre form and generate new methods therein.

The gap or space between the original, hearing-centered source material and the newfound Deaf material is, nevertheless, a complicated relationship. For Stam, "The artistic utterance is always what Bakhtin calls a 'hybrid construction' mingling one's own word with the other's word" (*Literature Through Film* 4), demonstrating the impossibility of complete originality. Miller also argues, "The revival or re-production of a play could never take place in complete ignorance of its previous incarnations, so that although the text has remained unchanged by the vicissitudes of various productions, the memory of previous performances exerts a powerful influence on the shape of subsequent ones" (68). Most productively, Deaf musicals can be thought of as a form of *crip art*, which is framed as possibility, rather than as limitation or mistake, and as disruption of the given art practice (Reid). While there is currently no phrase for Deaf performance equivalent to crip art, I understand Deaf musical theatre as enacting a similar "cripping" of, or unsettling of, the hearing-centric institutional and systemic hierarchies found within the musical industry. These include, but are not limited to, prioritizing not only access and inclusion, but also accurate representations, authentic casting, and clarity in ASL, as well as making serious considerations for the amount of labor, time, money, and resources that such collaborations take, and the need for d/Deaf involvement at all levels of theatre-making (not only for performers and audiences).

Drawing a connection between ghosting and "cripping up," a harmful casting practice in which non-disabled performers often portray disabled characters, Chelsea Temple Jones et al.

emphasize how “the kinds of ghosts that disabled performers have had to contend with regularly are those generated by the legions of disabled mimicries” (321). On stage, the mimicry begins from a marked absence altogether: mainstream theatre—and musical theatre, in particular—rarely feature d/Deaf characters; behind-the-scenes, this lack of d/Deaf theatreworkers is even more noticeable. Unlike the disabled ghosts that Jones et al. discuss, Deaf musicals do not (re)present d/Deaf performers in light of a history of “cripping up” deaf characters but, rather, present d/Deaf performers in light of a relative dearth of deafness on stage. Jones et al. note how crip art such as this rejects disappearance and, instead, generates new potentialities and possibilities: “When artists co-create access” (318), as DWT’s combined Deaf-hearing creative teams aim to do, “a new aesthetic emerges that defies traditional aesthetic expectations” (318), one that “emerge[s] as agential and prideful, liberated from biomedical markers that impose ableist norms and conventions, bringing the audience into an aesthetic realm of experience and sensation that requires new vocabulary and also inquiry into disability, D/deaf, and mad arts and culture” (318). Deaf musicals, it could be argued, rest in the space between a ghostly absence and an afterlife; within this space, such shows respond to the underrepresentation of Deaf realities and present a new critical theatricality by introducing unique approaches to musical performance. Musical theatre’s Deaf mimicries, similar to music videos by Deaf creators and performers, offer audiences “specific aesthetic choices or interventions with ableist traditions and ghosts” (Jones et al. 322). In the analyses that follow, I take into consideration both the original stagings and the Deaf renderings of musical productions, acknowledging how, informed by musical theatre’s (hearing) ghosts, a distinct Deaf dramaturgy emerges within musical theatre.

Dramaturgies of Deaf Musical Theatre

Dramaturgy offers a valuable lens through which to understand the active process of making Deaf musical theatre; dramaturgy is the invisible lifeblood of any piece of theatre (Chemers 3) and what dictates the world of the play (Fuchs). Laera describes, as an extension of dramaturgy, a *theatricality of adaptation*: "One could say that adaptation is a 'theatrical' device precisely because it contains, extends and multiplies those principles that are already at the core of performance: restored behaviour, representation of the world and a relentless repetition lacking the exactness of machines" (3). Here, I (re)read musical theatre, and specifically Deaf adaptations of musical theatre, in light of Deaf performance aesthetics and analyze what occurs in the active process of reviving with a Deaf conscientiousness (with Deaf "eyes," as it were)—inclusive of its translation, adaptation, and interpretive qualities—altogether articulating the shifts that occur between a hearing-centered theatrical text and a Deaf-focused performance. Primarily informed by the work of DWT (including *Spring Awakening*, *Pippin*, and *Big River*), as well as non-DWT adaptations (focusing on Ground Floor Theatre/Deaf Austin Theatre's *Next to Normal*), I identify several common dramaturgies embodied within Deaf musicals that not only indicate a cultural musical aesthetic but also work to redress the history of Deaf absence, both on and off stage. In the interest of space, the scope of this chapter is limited to collaborations between Deaf and hearing theatremakers, presented for mixed audiences. The dramatic elements, or dramaturgies, discussed in what follows include the recognition of a Deaf world; the use of bilingualism and bi-musicality (ASL, spoken English, and sung English); accessibility for a target audience that includes both Deaf and hearing communities; the enactment of a Deaf sense of time, or Deaf temporality; and dramatic devices such as the use of double-cast characters, shared signs, and silent music.

Deaf World

First, in terms of a musical's content and context, Giordano emphasizes that the difference between sign language theatre and Deaf theatre is the explicit dramatic recognition of two (sometimes opposing) cultures within the world of the play, following definitions from Dorothy Miles and Lou Fant. Sign language theatre "embodies the conceit that all of the characters in the original plot and script happen to know sign, regardless of their origin" (Giordano, "Theater, Adapted"). As practiced in shows such as DWT's 2017 production of *Edward Albee's At Home at the Zoo*, hearing performers are "positioned in the margins of the cage [which surrounds the set] and stage and presented as mere shadows of the main characters" (Lim, "Edward Albee" 99). This world is specifically Deaf; the hearing performers exist as a mode of access for the benefit of hearing patrons, but the main stage action occurs within a world in which everyone's main language is ASL. In this way, sign language theatre provides a space for Deaf narratives to exist outside of or beyond the ideologies of audism—in other words, Deaf culture is the norm.

Within Deaf theatre, the world is much like our current reality, where hearing culture and ideologies have a tremendous impact on d/Deaf characters. In acknowledging both Deaf and hearing cultures, Deaf theatre also acknowledges the tensions that exist in such a collision of discourses (Giordano, "Theater, Adapted"). *Spring Awakening* falls into this definition, such that the world itself is a complex social space that comprises of the intermingling of Deaf and hearing cultures; in it, we witness the story from protagonist Melchior's point of view. The character speaks and signs for himself (a controversial practice known as Simultaneous Communication, or SimCom[53]), and his unique position as a son of a Deaf mother and hearing father makes

[53] In theory, SimCom seems beneficial when communicating with mixed d/Deaf and hearing audiences, but in practice, it generally produces unequal communication because speakers tend to privilege or default to the structures of spoken English. For more on SimCom, see Stephanie Tevenal and Miako Villanueva, "Are You Getting the Message?: The Effects of SimCom on the Message Received by Deaf, Hard of Hearing, and Hearing Students," *Sign*

personified the tensions between the Deaf and hearing worlds:

> Melchior is positioned as the hearing line in human form, performed by a hearing actor who is fluent in ASL. That Melchior uses SimCom is problematic from a linguistic and logistical point of view, since he is the main character and has a great deal of dialogue. Dramaturgically, however, Melchior is the hearing line made manifest—a human bridge between d/Deaf and hearing worlds, such that SimCom becomes a metaphor for Melchior's existence in and ability to *move in-between both worlds*. Notably, of the parents portrayed in the production, Melchior's are the only Deaf/hearing couple. . . . Melchior's actions can thus be read as an attempt to mediate the relationships across both worlds, particularly between teachers and students, and adults and teenagers. (Lim, emphasis added)

The playworld of *Spring Awakening* is conceived of as a world that not only recognizes both hearing and Deaf communities, identities, and languages, but also recognizes the complicated relationships that exist therein. As mentioned above, the show also maintains the playscript's 19th century setting in Germany, while the production augments the playscript with a Deaf historical lens.

Here, the characters do not "happen to know sign," as in Giordano's definition of sign language theatre ("Theater, Adapted") and in the example of *At Home at the Zoo* above. Select characters in *Spring Awakening* vehemently reject sign language use altogether, mirroring the true history of oralism and heightening the show's themes of miscommunication and "the desire not to communicate at all" (Lim). In manifesting on stage the intricate realities of how the Deaf

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Language Studies 9, no. 39 (2009): 266–286. Also see Ronnie B. Wilbur and Lesa Petersen, "Modality Interactions of Speech and Signing in Simultaneous Communication," *Journal of Speech, Language & Hearing Research* 41, no. 1 (1998): 200–12.

world exists both inside and outside of the hearing world, the musical demonstrates how "disability, D/deaf, and mad theatre art and performance are created in specific historical contexts haunted by past cultural production that has shaped and been shaped by ableism, racism, colonialism, sexism and heteronormativity" (Jones et al. 324). All this, to be sure, is also the result of a conscientious selection process regarding what source material to work with; the tensions between Deaf and hearing cultures at an intergenerational level easily parallels the themes of mis/communication in *Spring Awakening*. As another example, Regarding Olney Theatre Center's upcoming production of *The Music Man*, actor-director Joey Caverly describes the show as a perfect fit for a Deaf filter or perspective, as the show is not about Harold Hill teaching the River City residents how to *hear* music but how to *play* music ("The Music Man"). Such stage work exposes and resists the historical ghosts that have previously informed the knowledge and reception of Deaf culture and persons.

Deaf Language(s): Bilingualism and Bi-musicality

Second, Deaf musicals contain multiple languages employed simultaneously. At the very least, Deaf musicals include both ASL and spoken/sung English. In the case of *Spring Awakening*, written English surtitles also exist, projected in a variety of areas on stage, such as on the chalkboard in classroom scenes, and on the back wall in outdoor scenes or during scenes that take place in the home. On the one hand, that spoken and written forms of English exist privileges hearing audiences; on the other hand, the inclusion of ASL "compels hearing audiences to reconsider the ways in which meaning is communicated, changing how audiences *hear* and *listen*, particularly in the space of musical theatre" (Lim). This theatrical bilingualism generates what performance studies scholar Kanta Kochhar-Lindgren refers to as a "double

language of sign and speech" that "merges image and sound to explore the potential of language as action-in-space. As a result, the hearing audiences must learn to listen with their eyes as well as their ears" (3).

That the musical numbers, too, maintain the presence of sign language and vocalized English is a form of what ethnomusicologist Katelyn Best, drawing from Mantle Hood, calls *bi-musical*. Bi-musical texts incorporate "both manual and aural languages, and a combination of Deaf musical aesthetics with aural elements" with aspects appealing to d/Deaf and hearing audiences (Best 134). Through these bi-musical constructions, "Deaf artists express a Deaf construction of music that refocuses the lens of mainstream musical compositional styles, configurations, and productions of music to culturally relative realization of these processes" (Best 134). Though developed through a challenging and time-consuming process, not least because ASL and English are not equivalent in form and grammar, bi-musical compositions allow for cross-cultural accessibility. By "enabling a cross sharing of musical expressions between cultures" (Best 140), productions thereby "expose[] hearing individuals to Deaf culture from its source instead of through varying channels of information that distort its construction" (Best 143)—what Best refers to as music written in *Deaf clef* (134). This type of performance also demonstrates, for d/Deaf performers, a "bicultural identity as Deaf Americans" (Best 139). In practice, bi-musicality generates a problematic privileging of certain forms of music (that is, a privileging of Western forms as opposed to music practiced and performed in Eastern countries), and this same privileging of one culture over another could be said of Deaf musical theatre. In keeping with standards of musical theatre performance, production, and training, music on stage preserves hearing standards of tempo and rhythm. One of many criticisms of such work is that Deaf musical performance is dictated by hearing culture, rather than a performance wholly

informed by Deaf embodiment. At the same time, the music conveys a specific lyrical composition, delivered by multiple performers and in two (or more) languages at once, as well as accompanied by an on-stage band; this multiplicity of layers within the Broadway musical form compels that adherence to specific tempos and cues.

These bi-musical considerations, through the combined delivery of vocal and signed music, generates a valuable space where both hearing and d/Deaf audiences learn to listen in new ways together. Kochhar-Lindgren calls this *the third ear*, a body-to-body listening practice wherein "we shift our attention from the overt content of the performance to its forms of expression" and "become more involved in the felt sense of the performance as it unfolds: the silences, the gaps between image and sound, the incongruities between movement and text, dissonant intercessions of noise and gesture, and the positions of the performing bodies that speak to us" (4). Like National Theatre of the Deaf's work, which similarly employs spoken and signed languages, DWT's work and Deaf musicals in general disrupt "traditional and expected linkages between the normatively audial and visual [and] the numerous combinations of the performance of sound create new possibilities for understanding, as well as, potentially, for political change" (Kochhar-Lindgren 4). Moreover, the continued development of this type of bi-musical and collaborative performance style can lead "to radical revisionings of the possibilities for theater" (Kochhar-Lindgren 13) and the destabilizing of the hearing ideologies so deeply engrained in the make-up of musical theatre altogether.

Accessibility: Comingling Audiences & Decolonizing Spaces

Such hearing ideologies are also dismantled through the comingling of audiences and cultures—that is, d/Deaf and hearing audiences—centered around the framework of accessibility.

Deaf/ASL musicals emphasize Deaf and Hard of Hearing (HoH) viewers' experiences with the performances on stage without barriers while also welcoming non-deaf audiences. Some argue that popular Deaf musicals cater to and thus privilege hearing audiences and audist ideologies; for example, based on patron feedback analyzed by Brandice Rafus-Brenning, the experiences between hearing and Deaf audiences at DWT shows are perpetually imbalanced in favor of hearing patrons, in part because of the use of theatricalized ASL and SimCom and the lack of ASL clarity and fluency among hearing performers, which "cause[] the inequality in accessibility and experience" (79). Jehanne C. McCullough has also denounced *Spring Awakening* for how the overall design and casting of the show continually works in favor of hearing audiences. Still, DWT's official mission is to operate as an "artistic bridge between the Deaf and hearing worlds" ("About") and, therefore, its performers and patrons are intentionally mixed. So too are the audiences of the Ground Floor Theatre and Deaf Austin Theatre's co-production of *Next to Normal*. For Megg Rose, who performed as *Next to Normal*'s leading character Diana Goodman, the collaboration demonstrates "how hearing and deaf people can work together as one entity and make a meaningful impact on both worlds" ("Sold-Out Opening").

Since musicals traditionally presume hearing audiences in the first place, Deaf/ASL musical adaptations must continually find ways to transform its hearing-centered elements (which are mostly focused on sonic layers of meaning and performance) to Deaf-centered modalities, such as an emphasis on visual and kinesthetic forms of performance, in order to serve its Deaf/HoH viewers. The very existence of d/Deaf bodies within such musical spaces engenders a layer of resistance, challenging the assumptions of the dominant hearing culture. Such hearing-dominated spaces are as prevalent, if not more prevalent, in the realm of musical theatre and performance, which itself emphasizes the ability and *ableness* of its performers, who

are "'sound' in body and mind, and especially proficient regarding vocality and movement" (Knapp 815). This is most evident in the idea of the *triple-threat* performer who can act, dance, and sing. Disability and performance scholar Samuel Yates points out the paradox of disability and musical theatre, describing,

> An able body is at the center of musical theatre performance yet disabled characters are everywhere in the musical theatre genre: conjoined twins dancing on vaudeville stages; wheelchair users longing to walk; chronic illnesses threatening death; even Dorothy's traveling companions in Oz lack brains, heart, and nerve – parts vital for bodily functions. (265)

Just as disability's presence continuously reveals itself in the midst of able-minded spaces, so too does a d/Deaf presence persist ideologically—often invisibly—in musical theatre spaces. Any instance, therefore, of Deaf musicking on stage actively decentralizes aurality and decolonizes the predominantly hearing-centric spaces and forms.

This accessibility extends across the aisle *and* apron. That is, DWT and Deaf Austin Theatre specifically stage their shows with an accessibility mindset that takes into account patrons and performers who may be deaf, blind, and/or have other physical disabilities. During *Spring Awakening*, access was provided for the multitude of deaf performers, such as through interpreters for rehearsals and real-time cues during performances (via lighting, physical touch, and other discreet choreography). In addition, Ali Stroker, the first actor in a wheelchair on Broadway, was provided with a stage-level dressing room and staging that "ensures that she always exits and then re-enters from the same side of the stage, because the theater's backstage crossover is in the basement. And to get into the building, she uses a ramp at an alternate entrance" (Cox). Many Broadway theatres were built prior to the signing of the Americans With

Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, including the Brooks Atkinson Theatre where *Spring Awakening* was performed, and only recently have venues been legally compelled to meet ADA requirements (Paybarah). Stroker's inclusion compelled the show's producers to understand the needs of their differently-abled performers, in the long-run making room and space for disabled performers to exist in the future.

Off-stage, the production also generated access for its audience members. In addition to the sign language and captioning already exemplified within the production, Deaf-blind audience member Ryan Odland was the first to experience special interpreting services for a Broadway show, with one of two sign language specialists signing onto his palm and a third "using [Odland's] back as a proxy for the stage to communicate the show's complex choreography" (qtd. in Hollander). Odland explains such accessibility services for live performance help him to make sharper sense of the action and energy taking place on stage: "'I could see it all,' said Mr. Odland, as well as absorb the show's subtler nuances. 'Is it high energy, low? Is it more quiet? Are people bounding around stage or being soft? What's the sexual activity? I got all those moments'" (Hollander). Although the argument can be made that there is need for theatre and art made specifically *by* Deaf artists *for* Deaf audiences, the artistic intention behind DWT's work and many current Deaf/ASL musicals is to reach a mix of audiences and, most importantly, to share their stories with those beyond their own cultures and communities—a continuous process of cultural exchange for those working on and watching the production.[54]

Deaf Temporalities: Challenging Commercial & Sociocultural Demands

[54] As of the 2018-2019 season, disability and deafness are not yet reported or recorded as a category of identification for audience-goers, making it difficult to know how many d/Deaf patrons attend musical theatre in general. See The Broadway League. *The Demographics of the Broadway Audience*, Nov. 2019, https://www.broadwayleague.com/research/research-reports/.

Extending Wilbur's contention that DWT's *Spring Awakening* has had a direct impact on the commercial demands of Broadway—generating "pressure and expos[ing] norms of production within the generally time-stamped, cost-conscious context of mainstream commercial theatre" (152)—I suggest that Deaf musicals inherently challenge the demands of commercial musical theatre specifically. Wilbur explains how "the army of ASL intermediaries hired to translate Deaf West's work make for significant time lags during the company's technical rehearsals" and "strains the swift expedition of production changes typically demanded by union musicals" (152). Staging what might otherwise be a simple scene can take a substantial amount of time longer due to the process of communication across speaker/signer (director, choreographer), to interpreter, to receivers (performers), and back again, and these considerations multiply tenfold for musical numbers and dance choreography. In contrast to the demands typically put onto Broadway producers, DWT's process reveals how "oppressive timelines and producers' aversions to excess spending doubly threaten future interventions that require translational practice" (Wilbur 153). DWT's work, and any Deaf musical that involves a collaboration between d/Deaf and hearing artists, generates "counterhegemonic practices that disrupt pedagogies of US commercial theatre" and "enacts temporal, material, and practical demands that push back against economically motivated shortcuts of many musical productions" (Wilbur 153). In a way, such a production humanizes its artists and reminds those in charge that the human body is not an indomitable machine, despite the grueling physical and mental stress that the customary "10 out of 12" work schedule that Broadway contracts currently demand.[55]

[55] The phrase "10 out of 12" refers to the theatre industry's practice of 6-day workweeks and 12-hour workdays (for technical rehearsals) during the rehearsal process. In 2021, advocacy groups No More 10 Out of 12s and Parent Artist Advocacy League (PAAL) began calling for better work conditions for theatre workers. See Tran, Diep. "Theater Workers Demand an End to Grueling Work Conditions." *Backstage*, 17 Nov. 2021, https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/theater-worker-group-demand-better-working-conditions-74253/. Accessed 12 May 2022.

Beyond the ideological and institutional complications that cross-cultural and interlingual collaborations like these generate, these productions also manifest a positive paradigm for what I see as *Deaf time* and temporality. Deriving the term from Judith Halberstam's concept of *queer time*, Kristin Snoddon and Kathryn Underwood define Deaf time as the "imagined futures of Deaf communities," due to the ways in which the Deaf community and language acquisition form in intragenerational—rather than intergenerational—ways, i.e. deaf children are most often born to hearing parents and, therefore, establish community and language outside of the conventional family unit (1402). The phrase *Deaf time* has also been used to refer to pre- and post-ADA law: Irene Taylor Brodsky describes the 1970s as a "prehistoric era, before modern TTYs (teletypewriters) were common." Within the context of theatre and performance, I identify Deaf time as a direct extension of *crip time*, in which disabled bodies and experiences mark time differently than able-bodied constructs of time: operating in crip time "might be not only about a slower speed of movement but also about ableist barriers over which one has little to no control; in either case, crip time involves an awareness that disabled people might need more time to accomplish something or to arrive somewhere" (Kafer 26). As such, crip time "breaks open rigid socioeconomic structures of time and afford[ing] others" (Samuels and Freeman 249). Deaf performance puts pressure on the normative demands of the Broadway industry by recognizing how non-normative bodies function.

In theatrical production, Deaf time may disagree with hearing time altogether. For Deaf-hearing collaborations, additional time is often needed when working with a team of deaf and hearing bodies; this includes taking into account script translation (a job typically carried out by ASL Masters), rehearsal interpreters (including the extra time required for real-time interpretation), and the very performance of simultaneous ASL and English (during which the

sign language may take shorter or longer intervals of time than spoken English, and vice versa). These considerations embody and "enact[] temporal, material, and practical demands that push back against economically motivated shortcuts of many musical productions" (Wilbur 153). From a disability studies perspective, crip temporalities such as these can also exist "detached from chrononormative capitalist structures and [as] predicated instead on the myriad realities of bodyminds along a spectrum of abilities," what Samuels and Freeman envision as "crip timescapes we all may create and share together" (252).

Deaf time is also apparent within the internal framework of musical theatre numbers; whereas crip time disrupts "the physical and mental strictures of the crip bodymind" (Samuels and Freeman 249), deaf individuals also embody linguistic strictures, altogether unsettling live musical performances. As described by composer and dramaturg Sarah Taylor Ellis,

> a song lyrically, musically and choreographically expands upon an evanescent moment, temporarily displacing the linear narrative drive. Animated by song and dance, bodies in musical performance can accelerate and decelerate time, foreground repetition and circularity, dip into memory and project into the future, and physicalize dreams in a narratively open present. (15)

On stage, Deaf time has the potential to unfold as a double queering or cripping—not only of hearing time, but also of narrative time. This is most discernable amid simultaneous ASL and English performances of music and lyrics. While signed and spoken languages can have differing temporalities when performed simultaneously, the pace of scripted dialogue is generally dictated by each individual performer (or pair of performers, as in the case of some characters in Deaf musicals). However, the strict rhythms and tempos of music, along with the intimate partnership entered into by singers, signers, and instrumentalists, insist upon an exactitude of performance to

the utmost degree. There is therefore a constant negotiation that occurs between the signed and sung lyrics—i.e. the need for one or the other to wait for or "catch up to" the other.

One example among many in *Spring Awakening* occurs during Otto's short verse in "Touch Me": Otto's verse contains twenty-five words ("Where I go, when I go there / No more shadows anymore / Only men with golden fins / The rhythm in them, rocking with them to shore"). However, Otto is performed on stage by Miles Barbee (using ASL), with Sean Grandillo as a vocalist (and also playing bass in the stage band, such that he is not a part of the stage action). In ASL, there is no precise way to quantify the number of signs Barbee performs, though they appear far fewer and take less time; taking on a storytelling quality, his signs instead make up a series of intricate spatial movements that generate comparable meanings, such as wondering and shadows disappearing. Because the song involves the entire ensemble, as well, the signs and sung lyrics must work together for the music and choreography to synchronize, even when (in this case) the number of signs is **not** equivalent to the number of sung words; indeed, this is generally not the case for English and ASL whether sung or spoken. Nonetheless, Otto sits on the shoulders of ensemble members, as the whole group sways back and forth, producing a choreographic rhythm that engenders a synchronicity between the signed and the sung music. Add this, too, to the narrative temporality of the song itself, during which the stage time pauses to allow for the characters' musings. In this case, the Deaf time of signing the lyrics moves faster than the English, through the signs slow down to match the musical rhythm.

Steven Sater's lyrics for *Spring Awakening* posed especially complex challenges for DWT. Describing the difficulties ASL Consultant Linda Bove encountered during the production process, Kurs remarks:

She doesn't want the audience to misunderstand or miss anything in the show. So we

> work very hard on making the show feel normal. It's by trial and error, I have to say. Some plays are very easy to translate, and others are not. Steven [Sater] is not very easy to translate. It's very abstract and it's very poetic, and it's open to interpretation. . . . You hearing and me being deaf – we're seeing the same show but through two different sides of a prism. (qtd. in Davenport)

The poetic lyrics and the musical tempo's inflexibility form a complicated composition within which ASL must fashion itself, as in the "Touch Me" example. On the one hand, it can be argued that this not only privileges modes of communication based on speech and hearing but also amplifies the hearing ghosts of musical theatre practice in and of itself. ASL is, as is oft criticized, repeatedly subservient to the music. On the other hand, Deaf musical adaptations compromise by adhering to (hearing) musical standards for the purposes of partnered and group choreography—choreography, in this case, that incorporates both linguistic and performative (dance) layers. Problematically, just as the mode of SimCom is obstructive to equal communication of scripted dialogue, the act of singing and signing in unison is, in part, analogous to a group singing in two different languages at the same time. Deaf musicking can, nevertheless, be read within such performance: just as what is described about music videos by director Jules Dameron, ASL performances of music enact a type of *signing time* that matches the dictates of musical rhythms but through a Deaf cultural expression, language, and tone ("Jules: A Documentary"), discussed in detail in Chapter 3. Such Deaf temporalities "are about neither speed nor slowness, precisely, but about new rhythms, new practices of time, new sociotemporal imaginaries" (Samuels and Freeman 251). Ellen Samuels also refers to this as a type of "broken time" that "requires us to break in our bodies and minds to new rhythms, new patterns of thinking and feeling and moving through the world." These descriptions indicate the

possibility of Deaf time as a type of liberating, anti-ableist possibility for musical performance.

Double-Casting & Duality

Deaf musicals often cast two performers as one character (one d/Deaf, one hearing), a unique theatrical device that produce a dramaturgical duality within certain characters and within the playworld at large. In addition to the typical one-to-one ratio of signing and singing voices, productions frequently experiment with the performance techniques between d/Deaf and hearing performers, such as in Olney Theatre Center's playful staging of "Rock Island," *The Music Man*'s opening number, which features nine signing salesmen and Harold Hill's hearing actor as the only aural voice covering all of the lyrics ("The Music Man").[56] Moreover, as will be discussed below, aural voice is, at times, discarded altogether. These different considerations of "voice" are generally brief and used for specific musical numbers or scenes and thus beyond the analytical scope of the broader dramaturgical frameworks considered in this chapter. For now, my focus is on how casting choices declare, in a sense, which characters are d/Deaf and which are hearing within the worlds of the musicals.

DWT demonstrates a particularly intricate dramaturgical precision and intent in their casting for *Spring Awakening*, wherein select characters like Wendla and Moritz are performed as a pair (whose hearing counterparts both play guitar in the stage band), while Melchior is performed as and by a hearing person fluent in sign language. Kurs explains of DWT's character methodology:

> In our shows, we have alter-egos for each character. Some people call them fairy angles. Every deaf character also has a voicing actor. An actor that speaks and sings for them.

[56] This staging is presented in Olney Theatre Center's workshop footage from 2019; it is unknown if their upcoming 2022 production will employ the same type of voice play in "Rock Island."

> And that actor is shadowing them. They're not doing the exact same blocking, we like to play with those boundaries. For example, Moritz gives his voice a cigarette. That interaction adds complexity to the character. That concept has been a trademark of Deaf West. We realized early on that there are many possibilities with the dramatic device of using a hearing voice for a deaf actor. ("Working in the Theatre")

Kurs' explanation underscores the dramatic potentials not only of double-casting but also of the reverse: that is, a common criticism is that DWT simply double-cast *all* characters with a Deaf and hearing pair of performers in order to avoid the use of SimCom, but the decision *not* to double-cast all characters is likewise a deliberate dramaturgical move. This is seen in examples such as Melchior, who is situated as the "hearing line made manifest" (Lim), and in the Austin production of *Next to Normal*, with the single-casting of Diana's son Gabe. Dramaturgically, Gabe's presence is revealed early in the show to be like a ghost, having passed away many years earlier; his use of SimCom renders him into "[a] figment of [Diana's] imagination" and accentuates the idealization of his character's relationship and connection to his mother (Lim, "Next to Normal" 370). Though a controversial choice (and an especially ironic one, in the case of *Spring Awakening*), Bove asserts that there is a difference between educational uses of SimCom and theatrical uses of SimCom; the theatre space is one of artistic license and freedom, and as such, performers who speak and sign for themselves add a dramatic aspect to the characters they play.

In the same way that theatrical performance can instill a single-cast, SimCom-using character with dramatic purpose, so too can productions play with double-cast characters, particularly through an emphasis of characters' duality. On a practical level, double-casting as a performance technique is often used to acknowledge to a degree that Deaf audiences' primary

language is ASL and not English; this is established based on blocking and how characters interact with each other (such as looking at or speaking directly to the Deaf performer rather than the hearing performer). Moreover, this type of double-casting offers audiences precise sign language use and bypasses the need for interpreters altogether, which are typically limiting for Deaf audiences, since they are often placed on the sidelines (called "platform interpreters"), diverting focus away from the main performers and diminishing the primacy of ASL. As a dramatic device, double-casting is employed to explore the emotional and psychological complexity of characters. For instance, in *Next to Normal*,

> the hearing actor playing Dan often sang to his d/Deaf counterpart, highlighting the self-reflective and introspective nature of the character. Younger characters enacted more playful interactions: as Henry worked up the nerve to meet Natalie for the first time, the actors gave each other a fist bump, demonstrating a brotherly, supportive connection. Similarly, when Natalie grew frustrated at Diana's absence at her piano recital, the hearing performer motioned to her d/Deaf counterpart to take a deep breath. (Lim, "Next to Normal" 370-371).

The performed relationality of double-cast characters moves beyond the type of shadow interpretation and blocking referred to by Kurs. As well, this dual-performance of a character underscores the type of artistic license that theatre allows for, referred to by Bove.

For DWT, double-casting is also executed with a larger dramatic pay-off, wherein characters are "split" from each other, often signifying a metaphorical or literal death. Towards the end of *Spring Awakening*, DWT amplifies the use of double-cast characters by physically splitting the pairs of performers for Wendla and Moritz from each other during their respective deaths. As I have analyzed at length elsewhere,

> Moritz's voiceless suicide demonstrates an end to his interaction and communication with the (hearing) world, embodied through his voluntary separation from his Voice Of. This is contrasted with the unwanted death of Wendla—brought about by the actions of her mother—which includes the involuntary separation from her Voice Of and subsequent vocalized cries. (Lim)

This is a similar technique in DWT's *Pippin*, used symbolically, during which "the hearing Pippin is physically carried out of the building by members of the ensemble; his subsequent screams of pain and agony can be heard coming from the outer lobby area, almost as though the hearing Pippin is being tortured or even resisting the troupe's attempts to sacrifice him" (Lim, "At the Intersection" 29). Problematically, one reading of these "deaths" is that the hearing and Deaf pairs cannot exist without the other—i.e. that Deaf people cannot exist without a hearing or aural voice, and vice versa. However, in each case, the onstage rupturing of the character is not the end of their narrative: the Deaf Pippin remains on stage finds his own voice apart from his hearing half, and the Deaf halves of Wendla and Moritz return as ghosts to guide Melchior; even when Wendla and Moritz's hearing performers re-appear on stage, they are left in the dark, unlit, while the Deaf performers interact directly with Melchior. All in all, the dramatic acknowledgement of the characters' duality highlights their dramaturgical function as a pair of performers; they do not exist simply for theatrical practicality, in order to provide an aural/signed voice for a performer, but rather, they are an emotional, psychological, and physical aspect of the character.

Shared Signs On and Across Bodies

Within DWT shows specifically is a unique theatrical device musicologist Raymond Knapp

refers to as *sharing signs*, in which two or more performers form singular signs by combining their hands. In Knapp's analysis of the device as used in DWT's *Big River* during "Muddy Water," Jim (hearing) and Huck (d/Deaf) generate an intimately shared sign for the final repetition and phrase of the lyric, "I got a need to climb upon your back and ride." Prior to the shared sign, Jim and Huck each perform the sign on their own during their respective verses and choruses, which produces the image of a person standing and sailing on a raft. (In Deaf time, the eleven words in English are condensed into four signs, with the standing and sailing away aspects drawn out to match the musical rhythm.) Towards the end of the song, the duet moves from individual, separate signing to signing in tandem, culminating in Jim's hand (signing a person standing) physically riding on top of Huck's hand (signing a raft). Used only a handful of times in *Big River*, the sharing of signs between Jim and Huck occurs in several different songs and "take[s] on the aspect of signing lessons" (Knapp 827). Like their use of double-casting, DWT's use of shared signs accentuates the themes of the play and production: "that the sensibilities and sensitivities entailed in living with difference, whether those differences are based in race or disability, must be just as carefully taught" (Knapp 828). Shared signs as a dramatic device produces an intimacy and interconnectedness across characters—a feeling beyond that which can be spoken or put into words.

Within *Spring Awakening*, shared signs are used with more frequency, enacted with, on, and across each others' bodies. When shared signs occur, they are often charged with overtly-suggestive dimensions that heighten the show's themes of sex and sexuality, such as during "My Junk": in Hanschen's masturbation scene, two, three, and eventually five female performers are integrated into the scene to act as his extra hands. Later, in "The Word of Your Body," Wendla and Melchior (and, in a later reprise, Hanschen and Ernst) share signs that evoke tones of

aggression and violence; the lyrics refer to wounding and bruising, and the characters sign these *onto* the other person's body, across foreheads and chests. Shared signs in this case generates a physical, often romantic and erotic entanglement between the characters. More than that, too, DWT's staging and choreography accentuates the psychosexual links between characters, whereas the original Broadway choreography focuses on individual, repressed sexuality: DWT's visual representation of the act of sharing "diminish[es] the original staging's emphasis on individual experience and suppressed, inner turmoil, while also accentuating relationships that are both erotic and indeterminate in nature" (Lim). The sexual connotations of shared signs is especially obvious and evocative when used between performers of different genders, such as in the examples above.

When used between performers of the same gender, other nuances are produced; for best friends Melchior and Moritz, shared signs in "Touch Me" "parallel[] Melchior's desire to share his (sexual) knowledge with Moritz, and Moritz's mutual desire to learn about sex from Melchior" (Lim). This pairing of characters and sharing of signs generate homosocial, or possibly bisexual, dimensions and has a similar teaching quality to that of Jim and Huck in *Big River*. Used across several same- and opposite-gendered pairs of teenagers during "Touch Me," and intensified depending on who is sharing signs with whom, the device "highlights the consequences of repressing the truth about sex and of isolating girls and boys: children will educate each other about sex if their parents refuse to" (Lim). Like the dramaturgy of double-casting, shared signs are used most often during choreography and produce meanings and dimensions within and between characters that is difficult to convey through spoken or sung words alone, transcending the limitations of linguistic meaning and representation on their own.

Silent Music

One additional dramaturgical method pioneered by DWT is what I have described elsewhere as *silent music*. During these brief moments, verbal speech and music halt onstage while the sign language (and sometimes, dance) continues as a physical speech/musical act for the performers, subverting traditional, negative connotations of silence and, instead, reclaiming the notion of silence as an active, meaningful force, "a powerful and central act in and of itself" (Lim, "At the Intersection" 26). This device is utilized sparingly within DWT's musicals and almost always towards the end of the shows—specifically, during choruses and reprises of songs. Within *Big River*, silent moments occur during "Waitin' for the Light to Shine," a song performed three times during the show. The first semi-silent iteration, performed by Huck without vocal accompaniment, "encourag[es] hearing members of the audience to 'read' the signing" (Knapp 828). The second time occurs during the Act II reprise of the song, when both the music and voices drop while the signing continues, generating for Knapp two opposing effects:

> The actors' seeming obliviousness to the music's absence, most immediately, reminds the hearing audience that the deaf performers do not hear the music; more importantly, however, signing as an independent language thereby asserts itself more forcefully, in an amplified echo of Huck's unsung signing in the first act. (828)

Such dramatized moments, at first glance, put hearing audiences "in the same shoes" as deaf audiences; still, it is also true that deafness exists on a spectrum, and many do not simply "hear nothing." Thus, it may be more productive to read these scenes as Deaf music-making made theatrical—a reminder about the different ways that music can be performed and expressed.

That hearing audience members are confronted by the realities of deafness represents, in part, what Petra Kuppers calls *perceptual challenges*, expanding upon choreographer Deborah

Hay's experience and use of the term. In *Disability and Contemporary Performance: Bodies on Edge*, Kuppers describes her effort to reshape and subvert popular perceptions of mental health and illness through a community art project in collaboration with people diagnosed as mentally ill. She asks:

> If we can find ways to challenge perception, the way we experience the world, are these then not also ways to challenge representation and the processes through which we make meaning out of what we *see*? How can challenges to audiences' perceptions inform a performance practice that does not offer clear-cut images but rather subverts representational certainties?" (123).

I apply Kuppers' term and questions to the integration of d/Deaf bodies within musical theatre, a theatrical combination most often perceived as an oxymoron. Within the silent music of "Waitin' for the Light to Shine," there exists both a visual-aural reminder and prominent declaration at once: d/Deaf people may not hear in the same ways as hearing people, but they *can* experience and participate in music in similarly vibrant, rhythmic, and meaningful ways.

In DWT's *Pippin*, silent music is carried out with additional dramaturgical meaning. At the end of the metatheatrical musical, Pippin is stripped of his hearing counterpart, a reprimand for refusing to complete the story being performed by the troupe. At first, this separation seems to leave the deaf Pippin "voiceless," as analyzed in the "Double-Casting and Duality" section above. Suddenly, however, he signs the lyrics to a previous song, and his love interest, Catherine, begins to sing the lyrics for him. I read this otherwise short moment as a "powerful and definitive action" in which

> Pippin is shown as finding his voice, though not in the normative sense of voice – that is, not a verbalized voice. This Pippin subverts the stereotype and notion that deaf and hard-

> of-hearing individuals have no voice, as Pippin defines himself as a Deaf character who is not only content with his ordinary life but able to exist without his 'hearing' half. (Lim, "At the Intersection" 29)

Here, the perceptual challenge is enhanced by the duality of the "silenced" character, who discovers that he has had a voice all along—just not the one prescribed by hearing society. This discovery of Deaf voice is similar to the "materiality of voice" as accomplished in the sound drawings and installations of Christine Sun Kim. Deaf and disability studies scholar Michael Davidson explains how Kim "explore[s] the material of voice and sound" by

> mak[ing] sound visible and tactile while enabling her hearing audience to listen through a deaf optic. Her work challenges the idea that the world of deaf persons is silent and, correlatively, that there is no voice in deafness. . . . By materializing sound, Kim exposes the social currency of hearing while expanding possibilities for deaf gain. (224-5)

Similar to the materializing of sound in Kim's work, Pippin visualizes and physicalizes sound through the literal dual-embodiment of Pippin as a Deaf/hearing character. Subsequently, through silent music, DWT confronts the perceptions and presumptions of hearing audiences regarding sound and voice itself.

Finally, in *Spring Awakening*, DWT utilizes silence within even greater frequency and dramaturgical force than in the previous productions. During the show, several silent moments occur that redefine and reshape audience perceptions of sound. One notable silent conversation transpires between Moritz and his father (both of whom are d/Deaf), enacted with the same dramaturgical weight as in *Big River* and *Pippin*: "While hearing audiences might experience the aural 'silence' of this scene, it is the magnitude and force of Stiefel's rage when he interrogates Moritz that is emphasized—a reminder that anger is not communicated through volume alone.

Then, towards the end of the show, a single ASL-only musical line repeats, generating a unique Deaf-centric musical reward. In the final moments,

> When Melchior is confronted by the ghosts of Moritz and Wendla, he decides not to kill himself and realizes that they will always be with him; this is musically signified in the repetition of the phrase 'Not gone.' However, coupled with ASL, and repeated several times by the ensemble, one phrase omits the singing in favor of the signing; that is, the phrase is signed in ASL but not sung in English. As in Deaf West's productions of *Big River* and *Pippin*, this crucial musical moment is placed towards the show's finale, displacing hearing audiences from the audist realm but also repositioning them within the Deaf side of musical experience. No longer is music (or meaning) simply about tones and sounds, but it is now instilled with physicality and feeling for both Deaf and hearing audiences. (Lim)

This single ASL-only line is, to borrow Knapp's phrasing, like the "amplified echo" of Melchior's literal ghostly friends. Its fleeting presence, along with the presence of the phantom Deaf figures, nevertheless affirms the linguistic and cultural significance of deafness; that the device is used sparingly makes its impact on the audience all the more powerful. As well, from a Deaf studies perspective, this silent moment exemplifies the Deaf-affirming potentialities offered by Kochhar-Lindgren's *third ear*: "By disrupting traditional and expected linkages between the normatively audial and visual, the numerous combinations of the performance of sound create new possibilities for understanding, as well as, potentially, for political change" (4).

Theatrically, the payoff and potentials of silent music serve as a community-building force across the theatrical apron. In order to enact silent music at all, the production(s) must work hard to "teach" hearing audiences, beginning early in the show, and with simple, easily

noticeable signs. Songs that have reprises or oft-repeated choruses and lyrics are, therefore, typically chosen for this purpose. This is also easily accomplished with music because of the ways in which music enacts memory in ways that dialogue alone cannot. There is, on the one hand, a Brechtian quality of alienation that moments of silent music momentarily produce; hearing audiences are almost always caught off-guard by its appearance. For me, attending subsequent performances with the knowledge and memory of when exactly silent moments would occur also provided me with a distinct phenomenological experience: sitting in a dark theatre, the (predominantly hearing) others around me came to encounter the same realization I previously did of how silence music can function and, sometimes, audience members would respond audibly, with gasps or grunt-like sounds of understanding and awareness.[57]

On the other hand, the moment itself also generates the beginnings of cross-cultural communication and relationality; for both Knapp and myself, we learn to listen differently and, even, to remember a phrase or two in sign language before the night is over. Many repeat fans of the show, like myself, even take the time to learn basic sign language in order to communicate with the cast at stage door, engendering an off-stage community-building ethos (@CastilleJoshua). And, various stories exist regarding the cast's bonding with each other throughout the production process, such as Daniel Durant (Moritz) recalling how "you could see it becoming, instead of two groups, becoming one group where there was mutual learning between each group; both in sign language and in music" ("Episode 6"). Though such payoff does not come easy, this process of reclaiming, teaching, and connecting is powerful, asking audiences and artists to empathize and connect with one another beyond the performance.

[57] Many thanks to my co-panelists at the Modern Language Association's 2022 conference, as our sharing and discussion helped to develop the ideas addressed in this paragraph.

Conclusion

As Giordano and Bove stress in their delineations and definitions of sign language and Deaf theatres, Deaf musical theatre repeatedly takes advantage of how expansive, creative, and powerful the world on stage can become. Deaf musical theatre thereby enacts a performance style that includes both practical and artistic payoffs. Based on my experiences and analyses of such performances, this occurs primarily through the emphasis on Deaf worldviews and perspectives, bi-lingual and bi-musical transfer, an attention to accessibility for both performers and audiences (who come from a range of backgrounds, including both Deaf and hearing cultures), an engendering of Deaf time, and through the use of dramatic devices such as double-casting, shared signs, and silent music. While the presentation of a Deaf-only world, as in the case of sign language theatre, is equally needed in theatre and performance (and as will be discussed in Chapter 5), Deaf theatre (re)produces ongoing realities and tensions that enable important conversations between communities. As well, although the works analyzed here are reviving existing librettos, they are not revivals in the conventional sense of the term; more accurately, they reinterpret, reimagine, and extend the original work, creating new theatrical (after)lives that resonate with the here and now and viewed through Deaf cultural perspectives.

Deaf musicals, possibly more so than hearing-centered revivals of musicals, demonstrate "the capacity to generate an almost infinite series of unforeseeable inflexions" (Miller 35). I extend Miller's focus on the play/playwright to the collaborative work undertaken by Deaf and hearing theatremakers, such as in the case of DWT. Just as theatrical texts are, in a sense, always *unfinished*, capable of generating many more versions of themselves, so too does adding Deaf culture, language, and identity add further possibilities of continuous creation. Although the presence of mainstream theatre's hearing ghosts might suggest that sign and conceptions of

sound in Deaf theatre and music are a filler or substitution for a lack of something, Deaf musical performance offers the potential for a Deaf/crip futurity and space: "Rather than being an issue of translation or compensation, the aesthetic form itself—through the separation of sound and image—creates a third, or new, space for the unfolding of the drama" (Kochhar-Lindgren 6). These productions work with and against the template of musical theatre proper, engendering a community-building quality both on and off stage.

Expounding on the nuances of music for d/Deaf audiences, ASL performer Noah Buchholz also explains, "[music] is part of Deaf culture because many Deaf people do enjoy music, but it is not *central* to Deaf culture like it is in every other culture. . . . [H]owever, the fact that some Deaf people find enjoyment in music is indeed a characteristic of Deaf culture and the Deaf community in general" (3). Certainly, many within the Deaf community have found enjoyment and also success in performances of music, taking into account not only DWT's mainstream success on Broadway but also one-off concerts by groups like Signmation and their *Broadway SIGNs!* and *ASL Cabaret* series, which frequently include ASL versions of musical numbers, the plethora of videos posted to social media that feature musical theatre songs translated into ASL and performed by hearing, Deaf, and HoH individuals, and the ASL versions of musicals produced by Deaf Broadway. It is my hope that future scholarship can attend not only to the various spaces within which musical theatre and sign language are interacting, but also more closely to the ways in which such works shift linguistically from English to ASL and what meaning occurs within those transitions. As well, future musical collaborations will continue to develop and expand upon the types of Deaf dramaturgies and methodologies articulated here, inviting other types of analyses and approaches. As more and more d/Deaf artists and collaborators become involved in musical theatre practices, and as more training

programs make space for d/Deaf performers, Deaf musical theatre as a form will continue to shift and evolve—dismantling the hearing politics and ghosts that inform its spaces.

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CHAPTER 5: Deaf Futurities and Musical World-Building: Decolonizing the Hearing Present Through Original Deaf and Sign Language Musicals

> If there was a world with no hearing people then how would we, as deaf people, express our music?
>
> Dawn Jani Birley[58]

During an interview with the cast and creatives of the 2018 original Canadian Deaf musical *The Black Drum* (written by Adam Pottle), performer Dawn Jani Birley recalls being urged by the show's director and ASL consultant to consider what music would be like in the context of a Deaf world, as provocatively posed in the epigraph above. After displaying her initial surprise at the thought, Birley reflects, "throughout my career, I'd been following hearing people's definition of music," and she goes on to share that the original Greek *musica*—or "music of the spheres" from Pythagoras—today focuses on the auditory components but was initially conceived as a musical experience *for the eyes* ("The Black Drum").[59] This dialogue, though brief, establishes several ideas that productively frame this final chapter, including a) the envisioning of a new world as conceived of by Deaf artists and performers; b) the delineating of music from a Deaf perspective that is dislodged, or decolonized, from its current auditory demands; and c) the possibility of a world in which hearing tendencies and ideologies no longer carry weight or dominate individuals' experiences. That there is a bourgeoning space within musical theatre that allows for these potentialities to be both imagined and performed signals for me an important shift for the future of the genre as a whole, particularly in light of mounting demands and calls within the industry in 2020 to dismantle its inclinations towards white

[58] See "The Black Drum."
[59] See also The Black Drum program book, p. 16, https://deafculturecentre.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/FINAL_V5-Black-Drum-5.5x8.5.pdf.

supremacy and colonialist practices.[60]

In addition to *The Black Drum*, a small but growing number of original Deaf and sign language musicals have materialized: Paddy Ladd's *Signs of Freedom* (first conceived in 1999), Chad Kessler and David James Boyd's *Stepchild* (2018), and Dickie Hearts' *Disconnected* (released online in 2021), as well as musicals in the early stages of development, including *A Thousand Faces: The Lon Chaney Musical* (by Eric Lane, Rachel DeVore Fogarty, and Kevin Fogarty), *Meat Expectations*, and a stage adaptation of the award-winning 2021 movie *CODA*. Notably, *The Black Drum*, *Stepchild*, and *Signs of Freedom* are, as of this writing, ongoing works-in-progress. As well, this list does not include *Sleeping Beauty Wakes*, which was mounted in 2007 as a bilingual ASL-English musical co-production between Deaf West Theatre and Center Theatre Group but later rewritten for a traditional, hearing company. These works warrant scholarly attention not only because they are conceived by, with, and for Deaf performers and audiences from the outset, unlike the adaptations of already-existing, hearing-centric songs and musicals discussed in previous chapters. These original works are also significant because of how they re-envision new worlds and Deaf-centric futures, new structures of musical theatre production and performance, and, as Birley indicates in her interview, new ways of conceiving of music beyond its auditory layers. As well, the productions named above can be read, in part, as theatrical reconciliations (casting, staging, design, etc. that focus on Deaf bodies and identities) and as contextual reconciliations, namely the recognition of d/Deaf worldviews and inclusive, diverse representations of d/Deaf histories, communities, and existence.

[60] Examples of advocacy groups established for these purposes are Broadway for Racial Justice; We See You, White American Theatre (WAT); Black Theatre United; and Boston University's School of Theatre Anti-Racist Student Initiative (SARSI).

An apropos ending to this project's journey through Deaf musical performances, this chapter explores the development of original Deaf musicals as interventions against the past and its "normalizing impulse[s]" (Kafer 23). This includes the historical past, such as moments when compulsory able-bodiedness has materialized (the oralist movement, hearing aids, and cochlear implants) and the immediate past, such as examples explored in the previous chapters (the Super Bowl's mis-framing of Deaf performers, hearing creators' appropriation of ASL music video covers, and musical theatre's frequent erasure of d/Deaf existence). Most importantly, these productions give rise to performances of Deaf futurity or, as disability theorist Alison Kafer describes it, an imagined, crip future "in which disability is understood otherwise: as political, as valuable, as integral" (3) to the organization of society and humanity. After a brief exploration of crip/disabled and Deaf futurities, I discuss four original sign language musicals—*The Black Drum*, *Stepchild*, *Disconnected*, and *Signs of Freedom*. I identify how these works function as musical embodiments of Deaf futurity, not only in content but also in shape and form. In doing so, I establish possibilities for the future of Deaf musical theatre as a decolonialist theatrical practice and as a bridge-building genre that enriches both Deaf and hearing worlds.

Deaf, Crip, and Queer Futurities

Among disability studies scholars—and by extension, crip and Deaf studies—various notions of *futurity* have re-imagined and re-configured non-normate bodies and identities via new ways of being and existing. During the *Cripping the Arts Symposium*, artist-activist Syrus Marcus Ware imagines a future in which "Deaf, disabled, and mad people are leading our societies. We are experts in what we will need to survive – interdependence. We know how to do it, we know how to rely on each other, we know how to show up for each other, and we end up being examples

and leaders in showing the rest of the community how to live that life" (Choi et al. 335). Such a disabled-oriented future resists able-bodied notions of existence which prioritize independence and exclusion, heightened in the United States by an "American ethic of individuality and personal achievement" (Davis 264), instead aiming towards interdependence, accessibility, and the persistence of the disabled body. As Jay Dolmage writes, "A 'futuristic' disability studies will not be about eradication of disability, but about new social structures and relations, made possible by new rhetorics" (2). Although the implication of *futurity* itself suggests a later, distant potentiality, disability-oriented futurities are also occurring within the immediate moment. Artist Elizabeth Sweeney directs Symposium participants toward "the future of our bodies in our own lifetime" (Choi et al. 336), in the here-and-now, as opposed to reading the future as a far-away site of possibility.

Scholar-activists most frequently displace able-bodied-oriented futures by setting forth new language and terminology, such as Carla Rice et al.'s *dis-topia*,

> where disability pushes into and productively disrupts imagined, deferred space. Utopia *cripped* functions as a shared envisioning of a future world—of overlapping future worlds—that is ideal only insofar as it is marked by diversity complexity, fluidity. The term *dis-topia* playfully stands in phonetic relation to utopia's antithesis *dystopia*—the *dys* acting as a negation of a preferred *topos*. (223)

Though Rice et al. consider the term a "playful" relation to *utopia*, I read dis-topia's simultaneous borrowing of and opposition to utopia as a significant subversion. Whereas the primary terms suggest a binary opposition—dystopia indicates an apocalyptic and catastrophic future, and utopia implies a perfect and ideal future—*dis-topia* a) deliberately inserts "dis"-ability into the concept of topia and b) precludes the binary meanings of catastrophe and

perfection. Instead, dis-topia signifies a third possibility that does not rely on negative and positive connotations. This configuration of the future is directly influenced by the past, acknowledging "disability legacies, drawing from the power of and within our past, as gesturing toward a different way of being in the world with difference" (Rice et al. 221). Most important to Rice et al. is the power of crip art as a response and reaction to the definite finality that so many assume about disabled bodies and lives; in its place, crip art imagines new potentialities for disabled existence: "Yet in a culture in which disability has been rendered a site of 'no future', perhaps imagining otherwise produces possibility for a desired futurity where there was before no possibility or only abjected possibility. Through art, we can imagine a world where things, time, identities, and differences are arranged differently" (228). Each of the examples explored in this project, and in particular the examples that will be examined in this chapter, take part in this type of cripped re-envisioning and re-arranging of the world, of communities, and of identities. Performance, in particular, offers a unique framework through which these futures can materialize and be rehearsed.

In the same way that dis-topia refuses binary oppositions of dystopia and utopia, Milo Obourn's ethical interpretation of temporal, *disabled futurism* "looks neither to the perfectibility of bodies nor to full redemption from our social and political pasts" ("Octavia Butler's Disabled Futures" 136). Through an intersectional lens, and closely modeled after Kafer's work, Obourn asks readers to "think about futures that we may desire that are not free from histories of or even present experiences of woundedness, limitation, frustration, or barriers" (*Disabled Futures* 8). Their analysis of Octavia Butler's Xenogenesis trilogy uncovers "an interdependent, dismodern future . . . that is not future-oriented in a utopian or dystopian teleological sense. This future has to incorporate pain, loss, impairment, and appreciation for the value of disability, both in terms

of bodily difference and in terms of identity construction" ("Octavia Butler's Disabled Futures" 112). As well, Obourn's views draw on disability studies scholar Lennard J. Davis's theory of the "dismodern" subject wherein, he proposes, disability itself is an unstable identity category (271). Davis's vision of the dismodern future

> allows for a clearer, more concrete mode of action—a clear notion of expanding the protected class to the entire population; a commitment to removing barriers and creating access for all. This includes removing the veil of ideology from the concept of the normal, and denying the locality of identity. This new ethic permits, indeed encourages, cosmopolitanism, a new kind of empire, to rephrase Hardt and Negri, that relies on the electronic senses as well as the neoclassical five. It moves beyond the fixity of the body to a literally constructed body, which can then be reconstructed with all the above goals in mind. (276)

Obourn and Davis' re-configured future refuses the perfect body and instead posits the disabled body at its center—a (re)centering of the disabled body at the foreground of society, aligning to an extent with the type of disabled future envisaged by Ware at the beginning of this section. For some, this foregrounding of disability exists in a future apart from the current moment, while others see this as a more immediate futurity that we may still see in our lifetimes.

No matter disability future's proximity, however, I am drawn in each articulation of these various futurities to the very denial of the *normate* body, defined by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson as "the social figure through which people can represent themselves as definitive human beings. Normate, then, is the constructed identity of those who, by way of bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them" (8). Most fruitful to this project and to the notion of disabled futurity is

Garland-Thomson's emphasis on the socially-constructed body and its relation to sociocultural power, for disability—and deafness—exists only in delineation from or in relation to other bodies, at which point it becomes vulnerable to oppressive or exploitative institutions and systems. This conceit is similar to H-Dirksen L. Bauman's notion that "it is only within the contact zone between hearing and deaf worlds, between auditory and visual modalities, that the conditions of disability make themselves present" (314) and that the signing d/Deaf body in particular "operate[s] in a space historically contiguous with the 'highly active borderland between *dis* and *abled*" (Harmon 34). Such resistance and rebellion also generates Robert McRuer's "crip promise that we will always comprehend disability otherwise and that we will, collectively, somehow access other worlds and futures" (208).

For Deaf activists, artists, and scholars, the concept of another world is particularly palpable. Unlike crip futurities that can refer to immediate and/or faraway futures, Deaf futurities specifically exist in the present—or, as a potentiality of the present—offering a different and distinct way of thinking about our ontological realities. Indeed, the notion of *Deaf culture* itself engenders the simultaneous existence of two different worlds, one in which Hearing principles and values take precedence, and the other in which Deaf principles and values take precedence. Deaf historian Harlan Lane et al. discover an emerging class consciousness (here, "class" is the preferred term by scholars over "tribe," or community) as early as the 19th century in Henniker, New Hampshire. In Henniker, "a single language was emerging that connected Deaf people despite wide differences among them in region, family circumstances, isolation, and former methods of communication; with it, a sense of we-who-use-this language might naturally have emerged" ("Origins" 52). Unlike the well-known community of signers in Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, where both deaf and hearing people learned ASL, Henniker's Deaf community

formed *because* of—not in spite of—the awareness that there was, in fact, a division between deaf and hearing people: "it takes a 'them' for an 'us' to develop, and the blending of hearing and Deaf lives on the Vineyard, because of shared family life and language (underpinned by genetics), discouraged the construction of hearing people as 'them'" (67). As journalist Cari Room recounts of the Martha's Vineyard community, "The language didn't belong to the deaf community; it belonged to the town." The shared sense of linguistic unity amounted to a shared culture of the Vineyard as a whole, rather than the formation of a separate deaf culture.

One example of Deaf futurity is established in the concept of the *Deaf-World*, sometimes written in all caps (DEAF-WORLD) as a denotation of the ASL gloss, or notation. First introduced by authors Harlan Lane, Robert Hoffmeister, and Ben Bahan's 1996 *A Journey Into the Deaf-World*, this Deaf-World is not a hereafter but, rather, exists as "a parallel universe, a companion planet to the 'hearing world'" (Harmon 33)—a type of present-day world-making. Lane describes the Deaf-World as "a relatively small group of visual people who use a natural visual-gestural language and who are often confused with the larger group who view themselves as hearing impaired and use a spoken language in its spoken or written form" (291). Lane's work in "Ethnicity, Ethics, and the Deaf-World" deciphers Deaf culture as an ethnicity, defining the Deaf-World through the common criteria of ethnic groups as studied by the social sciences: collective name, feeling of community, norms for behavior, values, knowledge, kinship, customs, social structure, language, art forms, and history. Recognizing the Deaf-World as a distinct ontology is important because "[t]he Deaf-World offers many Deaf Americans what they could not find at home: easy communication, a positive identity, a surrogate family" (Lane 292) and because "[t]here is a Deaf utopian vision of 'a land of our own' expressed in folk tales, novels, journalism, theater, and political discussions" (Lane 293). The Deaf-World's

sociocultural outputs are, therefore, similar to the type of dis-topian crip art discussed above, re-imagining and re-arranging the (normate) world into new formations with a Deaf lens.

Another expression for this Deaf-World is *Eyeth*. In *Through Deaf Eyes*, a PBS documentary about American Deaf life and history, performance artist Mark Morales explains how the Deaf-World is demarcated along visual rather than aural borders:

> We have this planet which we call earth. We spell it E-A-R-T-H, so it relates to the ear, to speaking and hearing. There's this other planet, E-Y-E-t-h, and that relates to the eye and to the visual. So there are two worlds. I grew up on Earth. Now, I'm on this other planet, Eyeth, a world where all these possibilities are open to me.

The distinction of the Deaf-World can also extend to the terms by which individuals identify themselves, not as merely humans or Deaf persons, but as Kristen Harmon lists: ASL-PERSON, ASLians, or "ASL-ers" (36). These re-formations of Deaf ontology, through planetary or individual terms, renegotiates the language by which one defines oneself and is valued in the world. For Harmon, the Deaf-World "operates as a powerful metaphor for the 'different center' through which many deaf Americans orient their individual, social, and professional lives" (33-34). The Deaf-World also functions in Davis' dis-modern sense, as "Deaf and deafened people further destabilize the binary between ability and disability by bringing in the question of language use and, through access to a linguistic community, the effective erasure of an 'impairment'" (Harmon 41). Perhaps, then, Deaf futurity is not so much a *future* as it is an ongoing process of (re)negotiating how the world operates in the here and now—a reclamation of spaces and existence in the world as it currently stands, wherein "signing d/Deaf people assert a space that radically dis-ables the narratives of 'normalization' and compulsory hearing" (Harmon 43).

I thus read Deaf futurity as resisting the type of (queer) utopia offered by José Esteban Muñoz in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*—a type of "backward glance that enacts a future vision" (4). While Muñoz's vision is driven by the hope in a world apart, in that "we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds" (1), Deaf futurity dreams of a new world enacted in the foreseeable future, in the here and now (a here and now that Muñoz otherwise describes as a "prison house" (1)). The Deaf-World also challenges what Eunjung Kim refers to in *Creative Violence: Rehabilitating Disability, Gender, and Sexuality in Modern Korea* as *folding time*—"an insistence on making the present disappear by replacing it with the normative past, simultaneously projecting onto it a specific kind of normative future" (4). As opposed to making the present invisible and accentuating non-disabled pasts and futures, as what occurs in folded time, Deaf futurity asks for the present—and Deaf *presence*, historically and hereafter—to be made hyper-visible in order to rebalance social hierarchies and to disrupt normalcy.

In this light, Deaf ways of being generate what Harmon calls *ability trouble*, drawing from McRuer's use of the term (and itself a resignifying of Judith Butler's *gender trouble*) to mean "not the so-called problem of disability but the inevitable impossibility, even as it is made compulsory, of an able-bodied identity" (McRuer 10). Whereas McRuer conceives of *compulsory able-bodiedness*, which "functions by covering over, with the appearance of choice, a system in which there actually is no choice" (8), Harmon exposes a systemic impulse towards *compulsory hearing*. Building upon McRuer's ideas in *Crip Theory*, Harmon defines *compulsory hearing* in the following way (Harmon's substitutions appear in brackets): "A system of compulsory [hearing] repeatedly demands that [deaf people] embody for others an affirmative answer to the unspoken question, 'Yes, but in the end, wouldn't you rather be more like me [a

hearing person]?'" (Harmon 34). Compulsory hearing produces an ability trouble predicated upon hearing: the inevitable impossibility of a hearing identity—or, as some might point out, we will all, if we live long enough, lose our hearing. This "trouble" is made tangible in Deaf musicals, both adapted and original works, sometimes playfully (such as when Deaf West incorporates "silent" musical moments) but oftentimes more critically (such as *The Black Drum*'s focus on their deaf audiences over hearing ones).

Within each of these iterations of Deaf futurity is the notion of renegotiating and rebuilding the world as we know it in order to generate a Deaf empowerment, self-determination, and, eventually, liberation—in other words, a decolonizing of hearing-centric spaces and ideologies. My use of de/colonialism as a framework for understanding the implications of Deaf musical theatre follows Deaf studies scholarship, such as Paddy Ladd's conclusion that the colonization model offers "maximum generative power" for understanding the history and development of Deaf communities and consciousness (*Understanding Deaf Culture* 78). Expanding upon Harlan Lane's parallels between colonialism and audism, Ladd observes in his book *Understanding Deaf Culture* that Deaf colonization, or *Hearing hegemony*, occurs across linguistic, medical, educational, welfare, and economic spheres, the most distinct form of colonialism being oralism, or the suppression of sign language and the enforcement of spoken language within educational spaces. Deaf peoples have indeed faced many forms of disempowerment and oppression throughout time and across various geographies,[61] with a signed language traced as far back as the Mayan empire. At times, Deaf culture has also been compared to Indigenous cultures, in that they both share collectivist and community values and a respect towards the community's Elders; moreover, both exist within unequal power structures

[61] In some cases, such as the American-led planting of Deaf schools internationally, American Deaf culture has enacted its own colonization in other countries and spaces.

and have undergone cultural invasions, resulting in generational trauma and the eradication of cultural practices, such as sign language itself (Bone et al. 5), and altogether strengthening the instinct to frame Deaf culture through the rhetoric of de/colonization. Furthermore, in *Deaf Empowerment: Resistance and Decolonization*, Donald Grushkin and Leila Monaghan describe that Deaf empowerment, such as the Deaf community's unified efforts during the Milan Conference and the Deaf President Now movement, as well as the overall emergence of a Deaf consciousness—what Ladd terms *Deafhood*, or "the existential state of Deaf 'being-in-the-world" (*Understanding Deaf Culture* xviii)—"is not only about recognizing colonialism and its effects; it also involves the process of decolonizing—efforts by the group itself to remove traces (both internal and external) of colonial forces through educational, legal and infrastructural changes" (Grushkin and Monaghan 19). With these parallels in mind, I identify Deaf musical theatre's development as participating in an ongoing process of decolonization, reclaiming and reconfiguring the hearing-centric spaces of musical theatre.

Enacting visions of a Deaf futurity, the original Deaf musicals explored in this chapter purposefully re-configure how theatre and musical theatre operate. As discussed in Chapter 4, Deaf musical adaptations deliberately disrupt hearing-dominant structures, such as time, economics, and sound. In what follows, I propose that original Deaf musicals do not merely disrupt but also refuse the structures of compulsory hearing that exist within musical theatre in particular—behind the scenes (such as through majority or all-Deaf creative team members), on stage (with majority or all-Deaf casts), and as target audiences (such as conceiving of a musical as primarily for d/Deaf audiences, as in the case of *The Black Drum*).

(Re)Imagining Deaf Futures, (Re)Writing Deaf Musicals

So far in this project, I have focused on Deaf and sign language performances on television, online, and on stage that engage with pre-existent texts and forms of music and which introduce deliberate dramaturgical shifts in adaptation toward a Deaf aesthetics. Such work is nevertheless persistently haunted by the original (i.e. hearing) versions of the music they borrow from. Within original Deaf musicals, a different type of haunting occurs, this time based on past and current realities—that is, of the oppression that the Deaf culture and community has faced within the (hearing-dominant) world at large. Therefore, original Deaf musicals do not merely push against the systemic audism of musical theatre as a single industry but, more exactly, intervene in historically, socioculturally, and politically significant ways, challenging the very power dynamics and social hierarchies that operate within the Western world, namely oppression as a result of audism, hearing privilege, and the Deaf stigmas and stereotypes that continually devalue and dehumanize d/Deaf bodies and culture. In short, original Deaf and sign language musicals work to decolonize the hearing past, present, and future within theatre and beyond.

Because most of these works are new or still in development, and because *Signed Music* (conceived by Jody Cripps et al.) is still a new practice within the Deaf community, very little literature exists discussing the productions themselves or the performance techniques as a whole. As well, I am limited by the archive—or, rather, the lack of an archive; as of this writing, *Stepchild* and *The Black Drum* are not available for public viewing, though they are, ironically, the only two original Deaf musicals that have been produced for live audiences. Posing a contrasting issue, Paddy Ladd includes extensive dramaturgical context and material for *Signs of Freedom*, in addition to the script, but only demo recordings of several songs from the show exist in audio-only format. Nonetheless, notable aspects of each production are worth investigating, particularly as examples of musicals that actively engage with Deaf futurity and decolonialist

theatre practices.

Decolonizing Musical Theatre: Signed Music in The Black Drum

Most significant to this chapter is the re-configuration of music and sound through a Deaf lens. Within *The Black Drum*, this occurs in both narrative and physicalized/musicalized ways, drawing from Deaf experiences and expressions of the world and of music. Featuring all deaf characters and a combination of sign language, Signed Music, dance, projections, and physical theatre techniques, *The Black Drum* takes place in an ominous world with "no music, no laughter, no love and no freedom" (Canadian Cultural Society of the Deaf 16), controlled by a character called the Minister and his black drum, a metaphor for a type of dark magic. In this dystopia, Joan (whose partner recently died and has become trapped in a liminal purgatory) finds that her tattoos have come to life; through the discovery of her inner signed music and the recognition that "her body is her musical instrument" (16), Joan gains strength, beauty, and freedom, saving her partner and defeating the Minister. This narrative palpably demonstrates a Deaf future in which, while no formal music exists, the antagonist's weapon is itself a musical instrument; I interpret this as a metaphor for the tyrannical nature of audism in our current world—that is, how sound can dominate and torment d/Deaf bodies. It is only when the protagonist gains an understanding of her own d/Deaf music-making abilities that she emerges victorious and free. To illuminate the difference between oppressive sound and d/Deaf forms of music, early on in the development process, the company carefully demarcated between the drum used on stage by the Minister (Bob Hiltermann), which was conceived as an **oppressive** sound and tool that controlled the characters, and the drum used by percussionist Dimitri Kanaris off-stage, which was conceived as an **expressive** extension of the characters and "as an external

tool of the sign language itself" (Deaf Culture Centre)—in other words, the performance of music emerges from a native (or indigenous) Deaf perspective.

While all four musicals under discussion (*Stepchild*, *The Black Drum*, *Disconnected*, and *Signs of Freedom*) introduce original music, written for d/Deaf characters and performers, *The Black Drum*'s creative team specifically refers to their music as what Jody Cripps et al. have termed *Signed Music*. Playwright Adam Pottle's explanation of his playwriting process, which I include in full here, explains not only how Signed Music works but also why it is such a powerful concept when compared to hearing or borrowed forms of music:

> I had to write the script in a way that would make it easier for the performers to springboard off of and again not be performed word for word or verbatim on stage -it was a real challenge but one that was totally worthwhile . . .
>
> The biggest challenge was trying to imagine what it would look like on stage because signed music is something that is very new . . . we've all experienced song lyrics from songs that have been performed orally – We've experienced those being taken and then translated them into sign language but . . . many of us haven't seen signed music that arises organically through the body and from Deaf experience and so being able to write a story that would allow those kinds of rhythms, that way of storytelling to flourish on stage was a big challenge but one that I was happy to take on. (Canadian Cultural Society of the Deaf 9)

Pottle's explanation includes two key details: first, that the script was not fixed in English,[62] in order to make it easier for the performers, and second, that Signed Music is the exact opposite of

[62] In a talk back with the crew, the creative team explains that Pottle wrote the script in English, then the company worked to bring the script to life in ASL through a series of workshops and trainings (such as with Jody Cripps and Pamela Witcher), which then opened to the experimental possibilities that Signed Music had to offer. See Deaf Culture Centre's "The Black Drum: Talk Back with the Crew!"

what most tend to think of with regard to music performed in sign language. While signed songs, such as those explored in previous chapters, are entirely dictated by oral and aural parameters, Signed Music is instead generated by the organic development of music as it emanates from the d/Deaf body. To be clear, Signed Music is a particular form of Deaf musical performance that does not depend on auditory, sonic layers; rather, it is generated through other musical elements—specifically, rhythm, melody, harmony, timbre, and texture. Signed Music is therefore visually-driven, often filmed and published online or on DVD, and can only be fully understood by those fluent in sign language.[63]

This formation of music through the d/Deaf body is concerned not only with the linguistic properties of the performance but also with the very expression of the music's rhythm and dynamics. Kanaris, the sole hearing cast member in *The Black Drum*, explains that his drumming technique and musicality was continually shaped and directed by the Deaf performers, rather than vice versa. In a streaming talk back with the show's cast, Kanaris describes that an important aspect of the production's development and rehearsal process was

> Not having the drum leading any of the performers, but to have the performers kind of lead what I was doing so that the drum was an expression of the actors, and not something that was, you know, providing a rhythm for the actors to follow, because I think that was a really important distinction really early on, that drum, you know, whether the performances or the songs that were happening, if it was really structured or if it was very, like, flowy, that the drum was really just an extension of the performance and not something that was there to provide any guidance or anything like that. (Deaf

[63] For more detailed information on and examples of Signed Music, see Jody Cripps et al.'s research website, *Understanding Music Through American Sign Language*, https://wp.towson.edu/signedmusic/contact/. Cripps typically capitalizes both words in publications about Signed Music, a practice I follow within.

Culture Centre)

Kanaris' experience not only echoes Pottle's illustration of Signed Music but pinpoints the power of Deaf-driven music, in that the drum becomes an **expression** and **extension** of the (Deaf) performers' bodies in ways that would not be feasible when music is borrowed from popular culture or pre-existing musicals.

Pottle and Kanaris's accounts therefore point towards decolonialist practices that aim to disrupt and restructure preconceived notions of musical theatre. By (dis)locating music outside of, or beyond, the sonic, music itself is re-conceived as a Deaf practice. In the case of *The Black Drum*, music does not originate from a hearing body or instrument of sound, but from a d/Deaf body and culture. This means that music as an output may not sound or feel similar to mainstream standards of music—standards that are certainly the product of a world hyper-focused on hearing. Such standards are also typically mediated through extraordinary levels of training that music and disability studies scholar Joseph Straus calls *prodigious* or *normal* hearing, frameworks based on Western musicology and music theory and traditionally presented as "objective," such as via notation and listening assessments. Nevertheless, Straus' models of *disablist hearing*—"the ways in which people with disabilities make sense of music" (160)—and *deaf hearing*—where people "use senses other than the auditory to make sense of what they hear: they see and feel music" (167)—are generally limited to the **reception** (hearing) of music, rather than to the **production** (making) of music. Small's term *musicking*, therefore, seems more fitting as a term in this context. However, Straus' work exposes that any compulsion to judge Deaf forms of music through hearing standards presents a Catch-22: d/Deaf music-makers are less likely to gain recognition without training and experience, while they are also more likely to be barred from spaces where training and experience are cultivated, precisely due to their deaf

hearing.

In addition to decentering, or recentering, deaf bodies in the expression of music, the production also decentered written and spoken English. Zuckermann recounts during the crew talk back her hesitation to cater to hearing audiences at all: during the developmental stages, the creative team deliberated about how hearing audiences would be able to understand the show, thereby testing various theatrical techniques that might aid non-ASL attendees. Eventually, Zuckermann halted discussions and experimentations, determining instead that "We need to let hearing people use their eyes and see what it is that we're showing" ("The Black Drum: Talk Back with the Crew!"). Pottle reiterates that the hearing audience "had to focus in a different way to understand it," to which talk back moderator DJ Kurs added: "They had to let go of listening and just use their visual senses to be able to partake of this performance, right? And that wasn't what they're used to as a hearing audience" ("The Black Drum: Talk Back with the Crew!"). Putting it bluntly, *The Black Drum* forces hearing, non-signing audiences to take a subordinate position for a change.

The team opted to include minimal voice narration in the form of synopses, but in a way that continues to represent Deaf aesthetics. The voices were designed as an artistic element of the production: two actors' voices (male and female) were pre-recorded, blended, then "synchronized with visual images of projected 'talking heads' on either side of the stage. The 'talking heads' were authentic artistic expressions of Deaf experience - moving mouths that are not understood" (Canadian Cultural Society of the Deaf 17). Though I do not have first-hand knowledge of what this would have looked like in performance, this description of talking heads whose mouths are incomprehensible seems to confront the myth that d/Deaf people (or even non-deaf people) can (automatically) read lips. Even though, Zuckermann explains, the choice to use

voiceovers was not her preference, the production's inclusion of voice narration does not compromise the overall dramaturgy or reception of the work, as both Zuckermann and Joanne Cripps (Deaf Culture Centre's former executive director) describe the overwhelming support and praise received from both deaf and hearing audience members.

Moreover, although many Deaf people are bilingual, English is not necessarily a first language, and so Pottle's inclination to keep the script flexible for the cast allows them to transform the script into sign language through a process akin to devised collaboration, aligned with the story, their characters, and their performance styles. The show's program and activities guide do not, in fact, explicitly refer to ASL except for crew members (ASL masters and interpreters). ASL is one of two sign languages used in Canada, the other being Quebec Sign Language (LSQ); however, the company included a diverse group of sign language users from around the world, including the show's Norwegian director and cast members from various parts of the United States, Finland, and Sweden. Given the company's collaborative and global framework, it is perhaps more appropriate to refer to their on-stage dialogue as artistic sign language, with some signs formed and agreed upon through the rehearsal process.

The Black Drum is thus a valuable example of what musical theatre production can look like in the hands and eyes of the Deaf community. Here, the musical not only re-imagines the world through Deaf perspectives but also presents the oppressive nature that audist ideologies can have on deaf bodies. With a predominantly d/Deaf creative team and cast and a focus on d/Deaf audiences, the show demonstrates the expansive and cosmopolitan creative and theatrical possibilities that can occur when the Deaf community can be involved in all aspects of musical theatre production.

Community Bridge-Building: Deaf-Hearing Partnerships in Stepchild

Like *The Black Drum*, Chad Kessler and David Boyd's *Stepchild* envisions an alternative world in which d/Deaf identity is, at first, oppressed but in the end emerges triumphant. Set during the Italian Renaissance and fashioned after the Cinderella story, *Stepchild* follows the young, deaf Orella on the fictional island of Costa Bella, where King Octavio has forbidden any embrace of difference, including the use of other languages, deemed the devil's handwork. Secretly, Orella and her father Massimo have been learning sign language from a Deaf fortune teller "who has learned sign from observing the future in her crystal ball"; Massimo dies, and Orella is locked away by her stepmother, prompting "a dark yet powerful spiritual journey of self-discovery. She is searching for her courage, fighting for her kingdom to overcome prejudice, all while discovering a new meaning of family" ("About *Stepchild*"). Performer Amelia Hensley also hints of the ending in a behind-the-stage video: "Maybe she'll take over the kingdom and become the first deaf queen" ("DPAN Feature"). Whereas in *The Black Drum*, sound is the metaphorical force that governs the world, a problematic situation for which the deaf expression of music is its match, the controlling force in *Stepchild* is forbidden access to language, and for which sign language itself is the solution.

Dramaturgically, the privileged position of spoken language generates a different, though equally powerful, metaphor—here, to the oralist movement, which, like King Octavio, punishes and seeks to eliminate sign language. This embrace of Deaf culture and of signed language is significant because, unlike "in other productions, [where] there's this whole process of the character coming to grips with their Deaf identity," Hensley asserts, *Stepchild*'s Orella is "D-E-A-F, all the way" ("DPAN Feature"). Based on the lyrics and on the synopses I have seen of *Stepchild*, the musical number "Orella Must Go," occurs when Orella's stepmother, Antonia,

decides to banish her; Antonia sings, “She’s not really my daughter / Not of our flesh and blood,” signaling the disconnect that frequently occurs between deaf children and their hearing parents and families. The chorus, in which Antonia remarks, “Stoned to death in the village! / Burned alive at the stake? / We’re protecting us if we just send her away” (“Orella Must Go”), indicates the family’s fear not only of prejudice but of violent punishment, akin to a witch hunt. Narratively, then, the musical presents an important vision of a world in which a Deaf heroine exists who, as she learns to sign, is unafraid to exhibit her Deaf pride no matter the costs, despite a lack of support from the society around her. In addition, the musical’s crystal ball gestures towards the significance of sign language, located in the future. In a *Human Potential at Work* podcast interview with the creative team, Boyd points out how he and Kessler intentionally revise the superficial elements of the original Cinderella tale through *Stepchild*: “What if she rescues the prince? What if she becomes queen because of her fortitude, her intellect, and her talent? And what if she’s a deaf woman?” (“#153: Stepchild”). The show therefore activates a Deaf, feminist futurity in the face of cruel realities.

Based on interviews, video clips, and audio demos available for the show, the framework for the show seems to be much closer to traditional forms (and Deaf adaptations) of musical theatre. That is, Kessler and Boyd wrote the script and songs in English, which ultimately dictated the rehearsal process, during which the Director of Artistic Sign Language (DASL) worked with Deaf performers to generate the ASL translation, differing markedly from the more collaborative, development framework of *The Black Drum*. Musical numbers, at least as performed in rehearsal footage, also use both voices and Deaf signers, therefore functioning as signed songs and not Signed Music. Additionally, some characters are double-cast with deaf-hearing pairs, such as Luca (Dickie Hearts) and Luca’s Voice (Johnny Link). Although these

factors suggest that hearing audiences are likely to be afforded more opportunities than d/Deaf audiences to comprehend the material, creatives were at the same time not afraid to defy hearing norms. In parallel to Zuckermann's directorial intentions in *The Black Drum*, *Stepchild*'s director Kim Weild explains, "I don't caption everything, so a hearing audience has to sit and, like, change their—the audience's point of view . . . They have to work hard . . . and that's okay" ("DPAN Feature"). Posing such challenges to hearing audiences can work, little by little, to decolonize and decenter facets of musical theatre.

Structurally, the most significant aspect of *Stepchild* is the purposeful creation of Deaf-hearing partnerships among the creative team, through an associateship model, challenging how musical theatre is produced and, ultimately, passed on. Although the creative team was well-intentioned, writing a musical about Deaf characters and making sure to hire deaf talent and artistic sign language directors, the work was not initially as Deaf-driven or -centered as one might hope an original Deaf musical to be. Both Kessler (book) and Boyd (music, lyrics, and book) are hearing writers and no strangers to the musical theatre industry, their careers each spanning over a decade of work, in collaboration and individually. Consequently, they bring to *Stepchild* hearing-centric notions of how musical theatre should function and sound; they are indeed key examples of Straus' prodigious/normal hearing frameworks. In addition, Weild and Kori Rushton (Artistic Director of IRT Theatre, where the show rehearsed in 2018 and was later performed in 2019), have personal, familial ties to the Deaf community and know some ASL, though they themselves are hearing.

This imbalanced and hearing-dominated creative team was an early object of criticism towards the show and its production process, arising from the cast itself. As Rushton recounts:

We did a great job at making sure that the actors were deaf, and we're creating the show

> specifically for deaf actors, but there was nobody on the creative team. There was nobody on the production team that represented the community that we were creating this show for and about. And I really like to get feedback from people at the end of any show that I'm involved in and I asked all of the deaf actors what their experience was and that was one of the main things that they complained about. That it was just too lopsided. And I said, okay, well, let's fix this. ("#153: Stepchild")

As a result of this feedback, and in light of IRT Theatre's receipt of a CreateNYC Disability Forward grant, Rushton proposed a plan in which each creative team member would be paired with a Deaf counterpart—similar to the deaf-hearing pairs in the cast. Kessler describes this as their "associate" model:

> So for instance, our director of artistic sign language is deaf. She'll have a hearing associate. The associate can really learn what it is to create an artistic sign language for a play, or a musical. And then we have a deaf lighting designer and she'll work with a hearing associate, so the hearing associate can really learn how to light hands. So, [for] a hearing director, we have a deaf associate director. So, the community that we're building here is really important, and it's a wonderful learning experience for, I think, everybody—for both hearing and deaf communities to unify and come together to do this type of work. ("#153: Stepchild")

The innovativeness of this associateship model cannot be taken lightly. During an era in which the individual creator is most frequently given the spotlight, *Stepchild*'s creative team actively and eagerly sought a way not only to generate collaborative partnerships in ways unique to current industry standards, but also to meet the needs of the cast, who felt that they were not equally represented among the production's leadership. Furthermore, the point of *Stepchild*'s

deaf-hearing partnerships is not merely to collaborate on the piece itself but also to teach and model how to work in the theatre in the future, specifically across the deaf-hearing divide. At a time when more and more Deaf talent is joining the musical theatre industry, as more and more Deaf musicals are being written and produced, the creative team's decision to generate partnerships demonstrates through positive action that it is not enough to make opportunities available (to write Deaf stories and characters, to make available Deaf roles and creative positions); but it is also imperative for Deaf and hearing creatives to have opportunities to learn from each other about how to communicate and navigate these new creative journeys and partnerships together.

Though different in intent and structure, *The Black Drum* also has a similar mentorship model. When asked about their next steps, Cripps explains:

> We've developed a training package, and we're now applying for a grant, which means all of the actors—as Mira explained, you know, the production team that we worked with was largely hearing, and the crew and actors were deaf, so they become our mentors in a sense, and our crew and actors were the mentees. And so this training package will allow our deaf actors and crew members to become the mentors now, and we can bring forward other people in the community, in the Deaf community, who want to learn theatre, and they can go through this training process. So, I think, you know, it's open. The world is wide open for us. ("The Black Drum: Talk Back with the Crew!")

Cripps' description is familiar in that there is a clear need and desire to increase knowledge of how to work in theatre for the Deaf community; after all, most theatre and music training programs are paradigms of compulsory able-bodiedness and compulsory hearing—a similar Catch-22 to that of musical training. Unlike with *Stepchild*, however, the goal for those involved

with *The Black Drum* is insular instruction and development, i.e. to pass on knowledge within the Deaf community itself and to train the next generation of artists and leaders to be involved in and put on productions. In the process, revisions and modifications to the techniques may be made based on Deaf needs. *Stepchild*'s associateship model is, by comparison, focused on generating relationships between worlds—an off-stage manifestation of Deaf futurity.

Both Rushton and Kessler's narratives of the associate process for *Stepchild* seem uncomplicated on the surface: the cast requests more representation, so more people are found and added to the team. But as many will attest to, creative partnerships, even in—or especially in—the theatre are not always so simple. In this particular case, such partnerships come with even more complexities, given the language barriers between ASL users and English speakers. In addition, economic considerations are an obstacle, as it would have been for Rushton and IRT Theatre without the Disability Forward grant. Just as Deaf performance requires a reconceptualization of rehearsal time and musical time, Deaf-hearing creative partnerships will require a reconceptualization of the industry's financial structures so as to include associates, interpreters, and more. Whereas *The Black Drum* serves as a model of musical theatre primarily by, with, and for the Deaf community, decolonizing the space from within the performance, *Stepchild* deliberately models bridge-building across cultures and communities, decolonizing the very structures of musical theatre production.

Forging Community: Deaf Digital Dramaturgies in Disconnected

Like many others, Deaf musical creators have also begun harnessing the power of the internet as a modality for collaboration, development, and delivery, especially as prompted by the Covid-19 pandemic. While the May 2021 release of Dickie Hearts' *Disconnected: the Musical* signals

continued fervor and an important step for Deaf musical development, an earlier event within Deaf musical history merits attention: Deaf Broadway, formed in April 2020 under the co-leadership of Garrett Zuercher. Entirely Deaf-run and initially intended as weekly releases of ASL-accessible musicals, Deaf Broadway released six streaming productions over the course of seven months, each for a limited three-day viewing window and featuring a plethora of Deaf talent from around the country. In keeping with their community-centered mission, all streaming productions were free and unpolished, meant not as fully-staged productions but as "a chance to emulate the experience of live theater while providing accessible content for the Deaf community" ("About – Deaf Broadway"). Most strikingly, the formation of the company is itself a product of a *Sweeney Todd* watch party held by a group of Deaf and hearing friends for Stephen Sondheim's 90th birthday. As is common for musical theatre fans, the participants began singing and signing along, but they quickly realized that captions alone were not sufficient to understand the many complexities of Sondheim's musical compositions:

> Sondheim is famous for his overlapping, rapid-fire lyrics, which can make captioning incredibly difficult - if not impossible - since so much information is omitted. With this method of access, Deaf viewers only get the bare bones, so to speak. A notable example is the overlapping of "Kiss Me" and "Ladies in their Sensitivities." When providing captioning access, only "Kiss Me" was typed out and the nuance of "Ladies..." happening at the same time was omitted completely, the lyrics left uncaptioned. ("About – Deaf Broadway")

In September 2021, Deaf Broadway was asked to join the Lincoln Center's Restart Stages series, an initiative to help New York City reopen, bringing together community organizations, artists, and audiences for live, outdoor performances. What does this anecdote have to do with

Disconnected, exactly? Briefly taking Deaf Broadway and *Disconnected* together, I read these two as directly connected milestones within the history of Deaf musicals. Deaf Broadway's success reiterates the lack of representation (content and casting), accessibility (form), and community (performers and audiences) within musical theatre spaces for the larger Deaf community—concerns that the release of *Disconnected* helps to resolve, even if indirectly.

Considerably shorter than the full-scale productions of *The Black Drum* and *Stepchild*, *Disconnected* is 20-minute mini-musical commissioned by the Communication Service for the Deaf (CSD) and released on the Vimeo platform in May 2021. The musical is presented entirely in American Sign Language (ASL), save for one hearing character who verbalizes and sings, and uses full captions, offscreen vocals, green screens, and additional screen effects to enhance the overall "stage picture"—or screen picture, in this case. *Disconnected* builds upon the dramaturgical frameworks developed within previous Deaf musical productions, attending to content, form, and casting, as well as employing digital dramaturgies that present innovative Deaf expressions of music. In addition, through audience engagement, *Disconnected* advances a Deaf futurity built upon community resources and demonstrates the futures of Deaf musical theatre production and performance.

Disconnected was one of five films in the CSD's Human Actually video series, for which they commissioned Deaf filmmakers to produce. Each film addresses one of five basic human needs, based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs: self-actualization, esteem, love and belonging, safety, and physiological needs. Filmmakers were challenged to create a "computer screen film," a visual storytelling and camera technique in which the events on the screen emulate the behavior of the screen device, be it a computer, smartphone, or tablet, or via specific software, such as a live stream video—or, in the case of *Disconnected*, Zoom meetings, text messaging,

and FaceTime applications. For audiences, the effect is of watching a story and its characters take place *through the computer screen* and digital apps.

As the third installment in the Human Actually series, *Disconnected* follows Mac, an aspiring filmmaker who is Deaf, and Pete, a hearing comic book artist and shop owner, who meet when Pete accidentally Zoom-bombs Mac's Deaf "Zoom brunch." What ensues are the highs and lows of finding love and belonging online during the pandemic: Mac and Pete match on dating app, FlamR, and immediately hit it off, but are quickly "disconnected" just before they have a chance to exchange numbers. Mac's friends work together to find Pete online, and the two eventually reconnect and declare their intentions to create their own little Covid "bubble." The musical is writer-director Dickie Hearts' way of addressing the need of "love and belonging." Employing over 25 people, plus volunteer interpreters, and filmed remotely in over seven states using a mix of smartphones and professional cameras, the mini-musical strives to convey the different types of love, belonging, and acceptance that humans can have and, at the same time, highlights a Deaf, queer, and BIPOC narrative. *Disconnected* is specifically musical in form, while the other four creations in the Human Actually series are films with dialogue only. The framing of the musical through the computer screen film is thus distinctive, responding directly to the current times. Thematically, Hearts' use of musical structure for "love and belonging" also parallels an understanding of the musical as a space of belonging, community, and pleasure, *à la* D.A. Miller.

Simultaneously challenged and constrained by Human Actually's "computer screen film" requirement, *Disconnected* draws on digital dramaturgical practices[64] to enrich and inform the

[64] *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy* (edited by Magda Romanska, 2015) includes several chapters on the role of dramaturgy in a digital age, including Randi Zuckerberg's "10 ideas" for using social media to reach more fans, creators, and performers; Ilinca Todoruţ's dramaturgical examination of digitally-informed performances; Tanya Dean's chapter that highlights methods for harnessing the internet to facilitate critical dialogue about theatre

presentation and performance of the work. *Disconnected* features two full musical numbers, plus a short musical interlude and a reprise of an earlier number. The first full song, which opens the musical, is "Brunchin' Time/Brunchin' in Quarantine," a number that generates dramatic exposition and establishes the tone of the work—aesthetically and narratively, as a fun, joyful, queer, and digitally-framed musical. As the piece starts, Mac meets his friends for a weekly Zoom brunch: we see a computer cursor floating on a desktop, a video editing software window is minimized, and a rectangular frame appears with the main character Mac. Mac's window glides into a 3-by-2 array of video-camera images, evoking the familiar arrangement of Zoom's gallery view. Together, these elements immediately set up the theme of community. In addition, the Zoom attendees and friends each have a different color scheme, suggesting the colors of the rainbow, and a wide range of performed identities, including queer and non-binary. Though this is a Zoom meeting, Mac looks up and to the sides of his rectangle, as if he can momentarily "see" beyond his individual window—like a character in the opening credits of *The Brady Bunch*.

It is during this scene that the show's overarching conflict is introduced, with Pete accidentally Zoom-bombing the meeting, looking around, and then singing an apologetic and ballad-like, "Wrong room, wrong Zoom." Unlike the other characters—who "sing" in ASL and whose vocals occur non-diegetically—Pete sings for himself and does not use ASL. In these few seconds, the musical establishes its main narrative tension: the formation of Deaf-hearing relationships. From there, the rest of the show follows Mac and Pete's connection, disconnection, and reconnection.

The second full musical number, "Bubble," along with its later reprise, functions as a

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and performance; Jodie McNeilly's essay on dramaturgy and digital dance; and LaRonika Thomas' essay on digital dramaturgy tools and techniques.

musical theme for the characters' first and second encounters. Whereas "Brunchin' Time" introduces the initial tension between Deaf and hearing characters, "Bubble" heightens then subverts those tensions in both narrative and performative ways. "Bubble" immediately follows a scene in which Mac and Pete have matched on FlamR and begin messaging each other; narratively, "Bubble" is a declaration of the two characters' strong and immediate attraction to each other, as well as Mac's direct proposal that they create their own "cute little bubble of two." This is also when Mac confronts Pete about being d/Deaf, to which Pete responds by assuring Mac that he has always wanted to learn ASL and now has a good reason to do so. In this way, the song resolves the initial conflict presented by the possibility of their Deaf-hearing relationship.

Performatively, "Bubble" musically transports the characters from their written conversation into a hyper-digital, or hyper-visual, reality. Prior to the song, and depending on who is typing, text-like bubbles appear on the screen to denote their "live" conversation, which does not include any spoken dialogue but uses a light musical underscore. After a few messages back and forth, the scene transitions into the song—musically, by adding a piano track, and visually, with the screen fading to black, Mac and Pete's "windows" then reappearing next to each other on the screen. The actor playing Pete sings, and the actor playing Mac performs the song in ASL, with a singer's voice accompanying him non-diegetically. Here, the text bubbles have disappeared; instead, viewers see the lyrics as captions for both characters—blue font for Mac, yellow for Pete, and green when the two of them "sing" in unison. The dramatic effect of these choices, though each subtle in its own right, converts their written messages to a musical conversation between the two: it is as if Mac and Pete are singing directly to and looking right at each other. Briefly during the song, the text bubbles appear again to suggest spoken/signed

dialogue, but quickly return to their musicalized and visualized depictions. The combination of music and technology fashions a performative medium through which the two characters can communicate freely, momentarily sidestepping linguistic barriers that exist, such as the fact that they cannot yet communicate in signed/spoken form to each other. As well, rather than seeing or reading 2-dimensional messages, the musical number produces an expressive, three-dimensional quality to their messages for audiences.

For the musical's finale, after Mac and Pete are abruptly disconnected and then subsequently reconnected online, "Bubble" returns in reprise, this time as a state of "reality," rather than the song's initial function as hyper-reality. Thanks to the internet savviness of Mac's friends, Mac and Pete reconnect over FaceTime, and Pete practices communicating to Mac directly in ASL. The two perform "Bubble" together once more, but this time, the song is rooted in their actualities: they are now, to an extent, singing and signing directly to each other—a final resolution of the digital dis/connections they have previously experienced.

Many of these strategies are digital dramaturgies that can be found in a number of theatrical productions produced during the pandemic. These include Deaf dramaturgies for the Deaf-World—that is, we witness the story from Mac's point of view, literally experiencing the musical through his computer screen and smartphone—and the forming of Deaf-hearing partnerships in the development and rehearsal process. As a pre-recorded work, *Disconnected* also uses two "voices"—the actor playing Mac, and the singing voice of Mac—but it does away with the need to have both performers "on stage" as in live performances. Although the show involves vocalists for its musical numbers, those vocalists are non-diegetic—only heard and never seen. This directorial choice, which is in part supported by the digital format, means that scenes can take place entirely in ASL using English captions, thrusting the auditory idea of

"voice" into the background, and re-centering Deaf identity and language. (As a result, I question the need for vocalists to be on stage in live Deaf musical performances at all, except in cases where hearing characters specifically exist.)

As one final dramaturgical decision, compelled by the Human Actually series structure, *Disconnected* invites audiences to engage with the content beyond the musical itself. Each of CSD's films, posted to Vimeo and the Human Actually website, is followed by three digital "Conversations": the first is a vlog created by National Deaf Therapy, a team of therapists who provide mental health services for the Deaf community; the second is a CSD interview with the filmmakers; and the third is a talkback with the films' creators and artists, hosted by Melmira, a Deaf advocate and social media personality. In addition, a list of resources provided for *Disconnected* links to different communities and organizations, such as Deaf Asian Connection, the DeafBlind LGBT Community, and the Deaf Trans/Diva World groups ("Love & Belonging Needs"). Together, these Conversations demonstrate active engagement with audiences beyond the production itself. These Conversations also enact an intersectional and dramaturgical model of community for *Disconnected* in a literal sense, prompting a social responsibility to address the show's content for its Deaf audiences in particular. In the digital environment, CSD can permanently house these resources on the Human Actually website, making the items accessible at any time.

Hearts explains in his interview with CSD that, through the process of creating *Disconnected*, he has learned that music is subjective for both Deaf and hearing listeners ("Human Actually: Vodcast")—what one person likes, another person may dislike. It is within this subjectivity that I believe Deaf musical theatre truly thrives and pushes the conventions of hearing-created work and hearing (prodigious/normal) norms. By collaborating directly with a

composer and lyricist, and by "borrowing the ears" of his hearing friends ("Human Actually: Vodcast"), Hearts enacts a different partnership model for music-making from *The Black Child* and *Stepchild*. For Hearts, it was important to collaborate with someone who specializes in music; while some may criticize this decision as still reliant on prodigious/normal structures of hearing, Hearts' piece is based in realism—i.e. Deaf and hearing worlds exist in tandem. As the playwright, he retains ultimate power over all aspects of the work, including its music. *Disconnected* thus illustrates how Deaf creatives and visions can greatly expand the possibilities of musical expression and performance—in this particular case, and with the help of digital technologies, having Deaf and hearing artists working together produces a unique and innovative musical presentation that serves the Deaf community, first and foremost, without isolating hearing viewers.

Deaf-World Building: Pasts, Presents, and Futures in Signs of Freedom

It may come as a surprise to most readers that a full-length Deaf musical, Paddy Ladd's *Signs of Freedom*, was conceived in 1999, nearly two decades prior to the creation of the musicals discussed above. Though much has certainly changed since then, particularly in terms of technological advances and a newfound urgency for diverse and inclusive representation on stage and screen, many of the same theatrical and Deaf-driven impulses that influence *The Black Drum*, *Stepchild*, and *Disconnected* can also be found in Ladd's work. This includes the move away from "'hearing peoples' songs, translated into forms of signing" (Ladd, *Signs of Freedom* 12) and, instead, emphasizes Deaf-created music, what Ladd calls "SignSongs written and performed by Deaf people" (*Signs of Freedom* 12). But, much more prominently than its successors, *Signs of Freedom* challenges and decolonizes the space of musical theatre through its

very cosmopolitanism and composition.

Signs of Freedom is a celebration of Deaf cultures, sign languages, and what Ladd refers to as Sign Language Peoples, or SLPs. Since 1999, the musical gone through several developments and iterations, including an hour-long film script and, later, an extended version that responds to the eugenics movement, which gained new traction in 2006. The published version is said to be the film version of the musical, around three hours long, though a stage version would essentially follow the same script and content (Ladd, *Signs of Freedom* 18). Distinct from the other Deaf musical productions addressed here, *Signs of Freedom* has not yet been produced, existing (for now) in script form only. The musical borrows from contemporary genres such as "trip hop, hip hop, electronica, soul, funk, and 'dance music'" (Ladd, *Signs of Freedom* 19). Ladd insists on the show's musical shape due to the ways in which music has historically been a mode of protest and resistance: "Minority groups have had to be especially imaginative in finding ways to bring their oppression to public attention in order to gain support" (*Signs of Freedom* 16). Accordingly, *Signs of Freedom* is, like other shows explored here, a show about the Deaf community's struggle against hearing society's oppression.

Spanning a vast period of time between the 18th and 21st centuries, beginning in Revolutionary France, the show fleetingly traverses major Deaf geographies, such as Paris, London, and the United States. However, the true focus of the show is on the edification and commemoration of Deaf histories and Deaf rights movements—specifically prompted by the Milan Conference of 1880, the rise of oralism, the rise of the eugenics movement, and the invention of cochlear implants (CI). At each moment of oppression, the Deaf community is denied a seat at the table, with hearing society making all of the decisions; Deaf groups and leaders emerge in response, and this cycle of oppression and protest becomes part of the

musical's overall dramaturgical structure.

In addition, the enacting of a global lens, rather than the honing in on any one geographical place, aligns with Lane et al.'s conception of the Deaf-World, wherein "Deaf culture is not associated with a single place, a 'native land'; rather, it is a culture based on relationships among people for whom a number of places and associations may provide common ground" (*A Journey* 5). In dramaturgical material that frames the script, Ladd includes a similar note about SLPs' global reach due to International Sign (IS), which enables Deaf peoples to "go almost anywhere in the world and, through our local Deaf guides, learn about and enter into those cultures" (*Signs of Freedom* 15); thus, SLPs "actually model a global identity citizenship of the world, able to transcend the boundaries of petty nationalisms – a Global Nation" (*Signs of Freedom* 15). The show's lack of a specific or fixed setting therefore gives emphasis to the Deaf-World's cosmopolitanism.

As well, *Signs of Freedom* does not involve specific protagonist or antagonist characters; instead, the work includes a troupe of ensemble members who, based on each given scene, stand in for groups of people, such as doctors, children, adults, Deaf leaders, and Oralists. Only momentarily do performers embody specific Deaf leaders, such as Laurent Clerc, Jean Massieu, and Pierre Desloges, though there is a young, unnamed Deaf girl and a narrator who return across several scenes. On the one hand, the lack of characters and characterization may be a product of the looseness of the script, discussed below; on the other hand, the absence of characters can produce a heightened concentration on the systemic and institutional issues at hand, such as how "everyone has been damaged by audism and Oralism – Deaf and hearing alike" (Ladd, *Signs of Freedom* 90). That is to say, as a show about protest and resistance, and one that spans such a large timeframe, *Signs of Freedom* does not place blame on specific people

throughout history but instead on whole societal structures and institutions that have continued to oppress the Deaf community.

Most unexpectedly is Ladd's "script," which is not presented as conventional line-by-line dialogue but as prose descriptions of actions and goals for each scene. As Ladd describes,

> The text is unusual in that the dialogue for each scene is not scripted conventionally, but summarized. There are two reasons for this. One is that authentic Deaf theatre dialogue should be developed in sign language first, and only later translated into English. The other is that summarising the content leaves plenty of scope for creative development by theatre directors. (*Signs of Freedom* 18)

This approach may be similar to Pottle's method for writing *The Black Drum*, allowing for flexibility between his written English and the performed ASL, or New York Deaf Theatre's use of Viscript technology for their upcoming new musical, which enables the building of a script in ASL, rejecting the need for an English-to-ASL translation altogether (@nydeaftheatre). Yet, I also read Ladd's script as a more radical or intense model of malleability and creative collaboration, in that he does not include any dialogue whatsoever. For example, in Scene 5 of *Signs of Freedom*, "Persuading The Revolution," Ladd starts by explaining the tone of the scene as "happening in wartime" and provides possible examples of how lighting and sound can produce that tone. In the next paragraph, the script merely notes topics that characters' discourse should address. Besides musical numbers, each of the show's 42 scenes are similarly description-heavy and goal-oriented. It is entirely up to the director, designers, and performers to decide how best to convey the ideas, which may indeed allow for more organic and natural conversations on stage. This also means that each production of the show will differ greatly from the next, depending on each individual team's vision.

Musically, Ladd maps out the lyrics to each song in written English, but the numbers themselves are still in development; currently, demos for three songs exist. Absent any specific characters, most songs appear as ensemble numbers, except for songs like "They Can't Kill the Spirit" (Scene 18), where the script specifically indicates "Adults sign 1st chorus, verse, breakdown and first part of 2nd chorus. Children sign bridge and end of 2nd chorus" (*Signs of Freedom* 50). It is possible that this, too, might eventually depend entirely on each specific production team. Taking as one example the electronica/dance number "Sea of Hands" (first performed as Scene 2 and later reprised as Scene 40), the show often emphasizes a struggle between nature, science, and medicine, while ultimately showcasing the embrace of Deaf pride and identity. The chorus of the song reads, "Wouldn't you like to ride on a sea of hands, / Bearing you on upward to the land? / Wouldn't you like to try it just one time, / Closing down your mouths to heal your minds?" (Ladd, *Signs of Freedom* 26). The "rid[ing] on a sea of hands" reference has a quality of community support and, of course, alludes to natural signed languages. "Closing down your mouths to heal your minds" requests hearing society to stop speaking and listen, and the rest of the song includes verses and bridges that emphasize how a return to the natural, physical body and the use of one's hands can be liberating ("Waving your arms, born to fly free, as you come running to me" and "Ride upon the signs"). The musical as a whole, through songs such as this, aspires "to help hearing people make meaningful contact with the potential of their bodies, put them back in touch with their 'natural' selves" (Ladd, *Signs of Freedom* 92-93).

The cultivation of Deaf futurity is also readily apparent in the later reggae song "You're My Future," which immediately follows a scene that celebrates the Deaf Resurgence beginning in the 1970s, including the return of sign language, Deaf education and activism, an outburst of

Deaf culture and arts, the Deaf President Now movement, and a (hearing) interest in sign language. In the song, a Deaf character refers to the initial inability to find their way, "passing through so many worlds since I'd been born" but eventually seeing others "opening a door onto a world that could be mine" (Ladd, *Signs of Freedom* 59). A group of oralists repeatedly warn against leaving the (hearing) world—to "Be normal!"—but the Deaf characters continue to sing to each other, "You're my future" and "I'm your future." These lines stress the importance of world-building in the present—or, to use the cliché, the future is now. This also exemplifies Kristin Snodden and Kathryn Underwood's definition of Deaf time, as mentioned in Chapter 4; referencing Jack Halberstam and Robert Hoffmeister, Snodden and Underwood characterize Deaf time as "involv[ing] 'strange temporalities' and 'imaginative life schedules'" due to the fact that "sign language acquisition and socialization into Deaf communities is a horizontal (within generation) and not vertical (across generation) process" (1402). As well, "You're My Future" thematically reinforces the remainder of Act Two, which centers on the symbolic fostering of Deaf children, who find it difficult to find a sense of belonging within majority hearing families, and in the face of ongoing biomedical emphases on cochlear implants and eugenics; these neoliberal approaches at once erase or "render invisible" ableism and audism (Snoddon and Underwood 1404) and directly threaten Deaf survival and existence. By bringing these issues to the forefront, the musical rehearses cultural activism through future-oriented rhetoric.

Some would call *Signs of Freedom* an idealist Deaf musical in its current state; since it has yet to be realized on stage, the film/stage descriptions are quite elaborate, such as the desire for three large screens and a combination of pre-recorded film and special effects. Still, the musical displays great optimism for its own magnitude and potentials—"aim[ing] to give a sense of hugeness of scale, partly because of the epic dimensions of the subject matter, and partly

because SLPs are so often perceived as less than fully human" (Ladd, *Signs of Freedom* 19). Crucially, the show shines a light on Deaf history, its past and present, and also imagines a future in which Deaf and hearing peoples unite. In this version of the future, hearing peoples are "liberated from their audist inhibitions, learning to make full use of their bodies, hands, eyes and faces [and] becoming more whole" (Ladd, *Signs of Freedom* 90).

Conclusion

Vastly different in narrative and design, *The Black Drum*, *Stepchild, Disconnected*, and *Signs of Freedom* nevertheless have one important aspect in common: the re-envisioning of a future in which Deaf identity, community, and culture are celebrated and (re)centered by all. Seeking instead to generate cross-cultural relationships through mentorship and partnership models, original Deaf/sign language musicals practice world-building in the present—fostering an immediate future in which both hearing and Deaf communities can exist in tandem, devoid of the uneven societal and institutional hierarchies that currently govern humanity. Each show takes part in the decolonizing of musical theatre's hearing-centric content and form, working from within to disentangle the performance of music from its audist prejudices and auditory dependence and the theatre from its traditional commercial, dramaturgical, and individualistic structures. Deaf art such as musical theatre performance is a utopian-oriented project that seeks to reshift and rebalance the present; at the same time, Deaf musicals reject the notion of utopia as a future free of disability and difference, instead projecting a future that is based on interdependence and community and that brings together Deaf and hearing worlds.

For musical theatre at large, the industry's encounter with Deaf musicals is perhaps most affected by an anti-finality, or a resistance towards closure and an expression of Deaf temporality

that rejects the commercial Broadway timeline. Significant to my analyses is that the majority of these musicals are ongoing works-in-progress and works-in-process. *The Black Drum* and *Stepchild* are in continual development, taking new shape with each iteration and with each production team, while *Signs of Freedom* has yet to be actualized on stage, though it exists as a physical manuscript and through audio demos. Although some production teams have expressed hope for a future on Broadway, the musicals themselves are continually being (re)fashioned, existing in different stages of development and, as teams have also noted, frequently incorporating and experimenting with new approaches and techniques. On the one hand, Deaf musicals still exist under the working conditions of commercial theatre production, dependent on the financial, physical, and temporal resources that dictate a show's development. On the other, the full lifecycle of Deaf musical productions, so far, remains to be seen. Will Deaf musicals, under the current standards of musical development, reach a stage in which a cast recording, archival recording, or published libretto is yielded? Even so, do these states of materiality indicate a fixed and rigid product? And will there be a point at which Deaf musicals themselves become the ghosts that haunt future productions?

As of this writing, Deaf West Theatre and New York Deaf Theatre have announced new stage musicals in development that, I anticipate, will give birth to new theatrical techniques and approaches not yet conceived of or even imagined. As more of the Deaf community receive access, training, and mentorship within the field of musical production, these unimagined processes will no doubt offer future scholars other dramaturgical, musical, economic, and structural considerations to discuss. If, as Kurs suggests, "the art form of signed musical theater is still in its infancy" (qtd. in Paulson), then the future of Deaf musical theatre is indeed limitless.

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CHAPTER 6 / CONCLUSION: A Re-Turn to Deaf Music's Futures

We would have to meet in another place; not in silence or in sound
but somewhere else.
Sarah to James, *Children of a Lesser God*[65]

Through this dissertation, I have hoped to demonstrate how the staging of d/Deaf musical performance is not merely a merging of sign language and song but, rather, an expression of Deaf identity, culture, and community. These musical performances are an amalgamation of multiple factors including visual, aesthetic, and sometimes kinesthetic decisions, as well as contextual and dramaturgical considerations regarding characters, narratives, translations, and meanings. All of these elements are further influenced by Deaf realities, experiences, and histories. Across television, music video, and musical theatre, the creativity of Deaf artists fuses with the performance medium itself to produce a musical text that is both highly artistic and accessible. Additionally, each text generates a critical revising, or remixing, of the source material through Deaf perspectives. Focusing on the presentation of song signing practices on stage and screen, I argue that Deaf musicking decenters and decolonizes the Hearing values, or audism, that dominate and inform most musical spaces, while ultimately generating a bridge-building ethos across Deaf and Hearing communities.

Today, much of this work occurs on Deaf terms, but, as with many sites of identity and culture, there is still much more to be accomplished. There are, even now, many who have yet to experience a d/Deaf music performance and to experience the beauty and artistry of ASL and music in tandem; many musical pieces that continue to ignore or dismiss the existence of d/Deaf bodies or, at the other extreme, that appropriate Deaf culture by claiming song signing and Deaf musicking for entertainment, personal gain, profit; and, many who have yet to meet a d/Deaf

[65] Medoff, Mark. *Children of a Lesser God*. Penegrine Smith Book, 1980.

person, to understand the linguistic properties and complexities of sign language, to acknowledge the existence of a Deaf-World altogether.

In April 2022, a new Deaf turn occurred, this time in the world of opera. A production of *Fidelio* (Beethoven's only opera, originally premiering in 1805) took place at the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, performed over the course of just three days. The opera is a ground-breaking collaboration between Gustavo Dudamel and the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Venezuela's Coro de Manos Blancas (White Hands Choir), and Deaf West Theatre, bringing together 135 artists from Los Angeles, across the United States, and internationally—a diverse mix of bodies, identities, and cultures, to say the least. Most intriguingly, the endeavor asked of its company to take part in a complex collision of languages: *The New York Times*' Adam Nagourney writes of the rehearsal process that "[e]ach day was a mix of languages, movement and simultaneous translations — between voiced German, Spanish and English and signed American Sign Language and Venezuelan Sign Language." On stage, the production similarly tasked its audiences with mentally, sonically, and visually negotiating between sung German, ASL, and VSL, as well as written English surtitles. This modeling of global and transnational cooperation and participation is not unlike the type of cosmopolitanism pursued within the notion of Deaf futurity. In addition, the sheer amount of time and interpreters it takes to carry out such an opus gestures to a strong regard for Deaf temporality and the ways in which d/Deaf bodies move and interact differently within the operatic space.

I attended two of the performances; each night, while waiting in line to get in, I wondered how the Downtown LA venue's audiences would receive the work—indeed, the demographics of the Walt Disney Concert Hall would be different than Deaf West's other theatrical partnerships across Los Angeles, which most recently includes the Pasadena Playhouse, The

Wallis in Beverly Hills, and Inner-City Arts in Skid Row, where their version of *Spring Awakening* first debuted. As well, even though I had been fortunate enough to attend a behind-the-scenes rehearsal and conversation with the company, I wondered what the finished product would look, feel, and sound like on stage and within the enormous site of the Walt Disney Concert Hall. Each night, I eagerly took in the performances, using the very frameworks I have offered in this project; I surged with question after question, idea after idea, about the decisions regarding double-casting, costumes, and staging, how the translated signs in ASL affected and were affected by the original German, and how the production was readily challenging the conventional demands and structures of the opera industry. And, too, I was curious how Beethoven conceived of the piece—if he, already growing increasingly deaf himself, would have ever imagined a company of d/Deaf and hearing artists returning to his piece 200 years after its conception. During each curtain call, the Hall erupted with cheers, applause, and Deaf applause—a twisting of both hands in the air (undoubtedly, this was a collective knowledge stemming from Troy Kotsur's Oscar win just three weeks earlier). The image of this moment sticks with me as a reminder of the exciting future(s) that lay ahead for Deaf musical performance and, indeed, for the growing connections between Deaf and Hearing worlds.

The image returns me, as well, to the beginnings of this project; not on page one, but in 2009, during my first encounter with Deaf musical theatre: Deaf West's production of *Pippin* at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles. I was an undergraduate, transitioning from Information Technology to English Literature, only just developing what would become my full-blown obsession with musical theatre—and many, many years away from so much as the thought of attending grad school. Watching *Pippin*, I recall being most struck by the fact that I had seen two other productions of the musical, each markedly different than the next. Still new to the world of

musical theatre, I was intrigued by the integration of ASL but did not realize its rarity at the time; instead, I thought, musical theatre could do *this*. Thus began my fascination with comparing productions and their (Deaf and ASL) afterlives. Since that original moment, I have been fortunate enough not only to experience many performances of Deaf musicking but also to meet the many d/Deaf and hearing theatremakers who are contributing to the form's growth and expansion and, too, to devote my decade-long grad school journey to learning about Deaf culture and community and about how this continually emerging artform is both taking shape and shaping the sites, and people, it comes into contact with.

While the joining together of Deaf bodies and music is, as DJ Kurs puts it, "clickbait to the uninitiated public," "[t]o the Deaf community and to the people familiar with it, Deaf people have been dancing and performing"—and, I would add, musicking—"for as long as we remember." It is my hope that these cultural histories are brought to the forefront as Deaf musical and artistic practices continue to gain interest and attention in American popular culture and beyond. Though this project attends specifically to understanding music through the eyes and hands of the Deaf community, I also look forward to a future in which music is made accessible and imaginative for all.

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