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**Thesis Title: The Space Before Us**

My senior thesis is a collection of braided essays and vignettes about American Sign Language (ASL), Deaf culture, and ASL arts.<sup>1</sup> It features Deaf artists, poets, and academics, as well as hearing individuals intimately and peripherally connected to the Deaf community. I also interviewed Children of Deaf Adults (CODAs), and individuals who are hard of hearing or deaf, but don't identify with Deaf culture. I mainly interviewed members of Deaf communities in New York City, New Jersey, and Washington D.C. (associated with Gallaudet University). This project is the culmination of eight years of exploring ASL, three formal years of studying the linguistics and literature of ASL under Noah Buchholz at Princeton, and one year of interviewing for the thesis. Since the work is a creative thesis and rendered from my own perspective, and because I included reflections on my own connections to the Deaf community and ASL, I represented the interviews I conducted in ASL as I understood them, and sought advice from Deaf friends and teachers about my translations.

I am a hearing ally of the Deaf community. Coming from a bicultural family, I seek work that attempts to bridge disparate cultures, languages, and traditions. My positionality as a hearing writer of course affects my own impressions of signed language and of Deaf cultural arts. It has from the first time I encountered signed language, when I was only twelve, at a school for the Deaf and Blind in Chennai, India. Though the children there were signing Indian Sign Language, not ASL, I was immediately drawn to this three-dimensional communication. I started learning about ASL in New York City at the Sign Language Center in 2012. My thesis is an attempt to chronicle the points

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<sup>1</sup> Generally, "Deaf" with a capital D refers to culturally Deaf people who primarily use signed language to communicate, are involved in the Deaf community, and consider their deafness a sign of cultural identity. In my thesis, I primarily use "Deaf" because the majority of Deaf people I interviewed consider deafness a sign of their cultural identity. When "deaf" appears in my thesis, it is either within a quote or I note why I have used it. When I write "deaf," it is typically because of the individual or historical context, which I explain in a footnote.

of entry that have stirred me emotionally, creatively, and intellectually, and to present, to a hearing-majority world, considerations that might enrich communication and art for all. The thesis also explores whether engaging deeply in the communicative potential of the entire human form can engender more empathy in interpersonal interactions and build community across difference.

The thesis I submitted represents only an initial attempt to reckon with large questions about what conventional norms of communication expect and demand, and how our majority hearing world might limit our own languages because of such norms. I view the people I interviewed not as sources, from which to extract quotes or information, but as narrators. And I view the exchanges we had as co-constructions, not as a string of my questions and their answers, but rather as an organic and developing human history, an ever-changing conversation and reflection.

The thesis is genre-bending for a few reasons. Its task is in part to describe ASL, a visual, tactile, dynamic language in English writing, a printed, static medium. That creative challenge excited me as a writer. It also inspired me to embrace a more experimental form. To "responsibly" attempt to convey a language that has been marginalized and commodified by a hearing-majority world, I had to deviate from a normative structure. Therefore, the thesis includes historical writing, literary analysis, poetic interruptions, reported testimony translated from ASL, and instructional/invitational passages that invite a reader to sign ASL vocabulary.

I was transparent with all the Deaf people I interviewed about my level of ASL and asked before each interview if they would like an interpreter present. They all preferred to meet without one. All the interviews I translated from ASL are in a video appendix. It was deeply important to me to be transparent about my translations, since I am not a professional translator. One of the threads in the thesis devotes attention to how inadequate translation has proliferated in the hearing world's use of ASL. Many theater productions incorporate signs to make the show a novelty for hearing audience members, but in doing so sacrifice clarity for Deaf audience members. I interrogate this

issue in my thesis, posing questions about using ASL for "aesthetic" purposes as opposed to enabling access.

There are several tangible social outcomes I hope my thesis will contribute to. First, I hope my work will join other scholarship that has affirmed ASL as its own language with a complex linguistic structure as opposed to the widespread misconception that ASL is manually-coded English. Even though the linguist William Stokoe proved the distinct grammatical system of ASL in the 1960s, the falsehood that ASL is not a full-fledged language persists.

Second, I hope my thesis will join the work of advocates who believe that ASL literature is a burgeoning field, and that non-written storytelling practices are extant traditions (Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, Ancient India's *The Ramayana*, and Ancient Mesopotamia's *The Epic of Gilgamesh* are just a few extraordinary works of literature that were initially unwritten). I cite these works as precedent for the recognition of ASL literature by mainstream academia.

Third, I hope my thesis will problematize the flippant integration of signed language into entertainment for hearing audiences. It is vital to incorporate Deaf talent, Deaf perspectives, and Deaf translators when using Deaf language. In this way, I believe that artistic endeavors can be valid and valuable opportunities for hearing members to discover ASL and then delve into a deeper education about Deaf culture and Deaf history.

Fourth, I hope my thesis will engage hearing readers through ASL and spur more advocacy for Deaf rights. In one section of the thesis, I discuss the monumental 1988 Deaf President Now (DPN) protests at Gallaudet University. These protests were catalyzed by the selection of Elizabeth A. Zinser as the new president of Gallaudet University. Not only was Zinser hearing, but she was also unable to communicate in ASL. Following six days of protests, the board conceded to the Deaf students' demands and Dr. Irving King Jordan was appointed as the first Deaf president of the university in its 124-year history. Following DPN, what many regard as the Civil Rights movement

of the Deaf, new legislation was enacted. Notably, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was passed two years later in 1990 with provisions that included media accessibility for the Deaf.

But many Deaf people were unsatisfied and frustrated that ADA did not focus enough on education. Due to misinformation that thrived for nearly a century, many people believed that "oral education" (requiring Deaf children to speak with their voices and read lips) was preferable to signed language. This misunderstanding has endured despite the 1964 Babbidge report issued by Congress, which deemed "oralism" a "dismal failure." Today, education is an urgent priority for Deaf communities in the United States. Research demonstrates that "the cognitive factor that correlates best to literacy among deaf children is the foundation in a first language."<sup>2</sup> But because many of these children are still denied access to signed language and struggle to acquire speech, their literacy lags behind their hearing peers.<sup>3</sup> In my thesis, I discuss at length how ASL came under siege at the Milan Conference, an international gathering of educators of the Deaf in 1880. What followed is known as the Dark Age of Deaf history: decades of hands tied behind backs and forced speech, of stunted education because of ignorance around language acquisition. I hope readers of my thesis will learn about the collective trauma the Deaf community has faced, and be motivated to advocate for Deaf children who continue to face inequities in education today.

There was also some backlash to the ADA because many Deaf people do not consider themselves "disabled." Many Deaf people I interviewed made the distinction between going deaf (due to advancing age, injury or disease) and being culturally Deaf from birth. I hope my thesis will continue to raise awareness about the Deaf community's nuanced understandings of the term "disability" and how legislation under that title can be both politically/practically useful and culturally insensitive. This discourse is ongoing, and one can learn more about it [here](#). I hope that in

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<sup>2</sup> Tom Humphries, et al. "Ensuring language acquisition for deaf children: What linguists can do." *Language*, vol. 90 no. 2, 2014, p. e31-e52. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/lan.2014.0036.

<sup>3</sup> The lack of exposure to ASL is also in part because approximately 96% of deaf children are born to hearing parents (Moore 2001) who have no family history with signed language.

reading about the stories of Deaf artists, scholars, and poets, who celebrate deafness and ASL, hearing people will be motivated to continue educating themselves about the Deaf community, as I have.

Fifth, I hope the effect of my thesis will start locally, and then expand. We can begin our work here, in Princeton. While I have been encouraged by the fact that the Department of Comparative Literature has recognized ASL for non-English language requirements, the University still does not recognize ASL for its general language requirement. I hope my thesis will serve to promote the development of an ASL program at Princeton University. If the University hires more Deaf instructors, more ASL courses can be taught—in ASL literature, translation, and Deaf history. When I say, I hope the impact of my thesis will "then expand," I mean that I hope one day ASL is taught throughout the country at high schools and colleges alike.

On a final, broader note, I hope people reading this thesis will think more deeply about communication at large. How can encouraging the study of new languages allow us to make a new friend, discover a new art form, or fall in love? What humor, nuance, and discoveries lie in the next language you decide to engage with? And what inventive and empathetic impulses might flourish from learning a language in a different modality: signed as opposed to spoken? I hope that my thesis will spur artistic, intellectual, and social progress. I hope it will initiate vital conversations and illuminate stories that have been sidestepped, overlooked, or ignored. The poet Ilya Kaminsky, who identifies as hard of hearing, said at the 2019 National Library of Congress Book Festival that if you ask the Deaf and hard of hearing if they believe in silence, they say, "no." Later, he added, "silence is an invention of the hearing." As I wrote in the conclusion of my thesis, there is an Arundhati Roy quotation "There's really no such thing as the 'voiceless.' There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard." And even in a statement that seeks to restore agency to marginalized communities, there is a reliance on idioms that exclude. If silence is an invention of the hearing,

what does it mean, even metaphorically, to be silenced? If "hearing" is an identity you have not considered, what does it mean to be "unheard"?

Confronting these, and other questions, is the space before us. It is a figurative space, of scholarship, research, art, advocacy, and education. Let us also make language in the physical space before us. Learning even the 26 signs of the alphabet in ASL might enable initial communication between a hearing person and a Deaf person. And what renders human beings a community and not just disparate parts is communication. My thesis seeks to underscore Deaf individuals' experiences and unheeded questions. I believe that if we collaborate and communicate, Deaf and hearing communities together, can answer them.