

Fingerspelling P-r-i-v-i-l-e-g-e: American Sign Language (ASL), Embodied Voices, and  
Spectacular Performances as Communication

By

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**Abstract**

This thesis explores how American Sign Language (ASL), as an embodied form of communication, enriches dominant understandings of voice and body within the field of communication studies. By interviewing hearing students learning sign language for the first time, several rupture moments within the signed classroom are instanced and exposed: the dislocation that hearing signers feel while being rendered speechless; the transitional spaces students occupy during embodied performances; and the disruption of privileged spaces when signers use this form of speech in public. The findings indicate that, through communication breakdowns, communication studies may expand its notion of voice, body, silence and noise, and communicative privileges that are displayed through the use of sign language in public. Finally, this paper will show that sign language is a valid vehicle for studying communications.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

Lingering outside the slightly ajar office door, I take a deep breath, raise my clammy fist up to knock on the door, and then lower it in hesitation. *Do I knock? Would he be able to hear it? Is this even the right office?* I take another look at the office number, crosscheck it with my barely legible hand-scribbled notes, and then scour the timetable pinned to the door for the professor's name. Confirming that it is indeed the right place, I take another deep breath, knock on the door, and then poke my head in the office to get the instructor's attention.

Sitting at his desk with his lunch unpacked before him, the instructor looks up from his desk, pushes up the dark plastic frames resting low on his nose, makes eye contact, and nods so as to greet me. While I had anticipated that I would need to sign at some point in this meeting, however unsuccessful it may have been, I immediately became uncomfortable at the thought of *having* to do so. After setting both my notepad and keys down on the desk, I make a feeble attempt to sign. Awkwardly, I sign that I am seeking permission from the instructor to audit his sign language class, in order to help with my research and to also re-acquaint myself with the language:

"Hi. Name me A-n-d-r-e-a. ...Email you about," I sign by making the air quotes that I learnt earlier and by forming a backwards "C" shape with my right hand, and while using my other index finger, slice through it, away from me toward the instructor.

"Not about. English word. English sign," the instructor corrects abruptly then waits for me to continue.

"Email you....T-h-e-s-i-s?"

After discerning what I timidly fingerspelled in lieu of knowing the proper sign, he shrugs his shoulders, amends my word choice, signals two air quotations, and utters the word “topic.”

“Email you topic,” I sign putting all the corrections together. “A-S-L class... me want... study sign language.... I h-o-p-e? .... Student...ask question.”

Not sure what else to say or the manner in which to say it, I begin to panic. While rubbing the palms of my clammy hands together and darting my eyes back and forth between the door and the instructor, I desperately look for any salvation from the conversation – or lack thereof.

“Me student ... communication. Four year... past... me learn sign language. You... sign language class... me want...a-v-b -... a -u-d-i-t.” Seeing the puzzled look on the instructor’s face after I waveringly fingerspell ‘audit’, I verbally cry out in frustration, “How do I say I want to audit his beginner sign language class this summer for my research?”

Perhaps recognizing my despair, the instructor flutters his hands in the air to get the attention of a woman sitting on the other side of the office. After signing something to the woman, she stands up from her chair, walks across the room, and repositions another chair in the far corner, forming a triangle between the three of us.

“Come sit here instead,” the woman verbally instructs. “This will help me see both of your faces. Don’t be nervous. Just practice signing. I’ll be here to help if you need.”

Encouraged by her words, I walk across the room, sit, and attempt to again sign my reason for coming with the few signs that I can recall. Using the woman as an interim interpreter for the rest of the conversation, I manage to get across to the instructor what I came to speak to him about. After some discussion on my pending research project, my previous experience with sign language, and my

expectations for the potential research, the instructor gives his consent, with some qualifications, for me to participate in both classes of ASL during the summer and use the two classes to find research participants. Using his voice to emphasize his expectations while signing, the instructor explains how I may—or may not—communicate with students. Declaring his classroom a Deaf environment, he requested that I only recruit students for my project via email during the first week of class. Because ASL has no written form and is not a verbal language, introducing my project in class to the students orally or by passing out leaflets would circumvent the no-voice policy in his pedagogical environment. Further to this, he warns that because I am participating in every aspect of the course, I am “on my own” in terms of learning the language and also in terms of my research. Slightly stunned by the implications that the no-voice policy will have for both my ability to communicate with and recruit participants in class, yet not wanting to jeopardize the opportunity being provided, I nod my head in agreement and begin looking for the next opening in the conversation to depart. After a momentary pause and some last-chance glances around the room, I stand up, thanked both the instructor and woman for their time, tell him that I will see him the following month, and leave the office.

As I walk away from the instructor’s office, unpacking the communicative event that had transpired, I cannot help but replay the encounter in my head and wonder what I am about to get myself into. Indeed, I do have some experience with sign language. After four years, I remember certain signs. I can recall how to structure the signed sentence. I know the importance of the face to articulate and emphasize meaning. Speed and

accuracy aside, I know enough that I can default to fingerspelling and spell out an unknown word or sign. Yet, even with that experience, everything about signing in this social context felt unsettling. Despite having the basic tools to communicate with the instructor using sign language, I felt that I was unable to say what I intended to without speaking or relying on the woman to interpret for me. Not being able to speak or use my preferred mode of communication was disquieting. Using my body felt awkward, strained, forced, and ineffective. And despite being given the opportunity to sign, I wanted to speak. I needed to speak. Anything else was intimidating, uncomfortable, frustrating, and disempowering.

The hesitation I felt toward my research – and the extent to which I needed to communicate with my body instead of using speech or written English – not only exposes the epistemological underpinnings of my methodology, it identifies certain assumptions that exist within communication studies, within me as a communication studies student, and within me as an oral communicator. Sign language offers another way to communicate. However, despite being somewhat familiar with this other mode of communication, at the first sign of difficulty I immediately resorted to using my voice. While it can be extremely challenging to learn any new language, learning a non-verbal language may reveal the power dynamics that exist within communication. This is especially true if one is accustomed to working in a verbal language and is suddenly unable to communicate verbally. Thus, sign language offers a powerful lens with which to observe, and perhaps reconsider, how people communicate using their bodies, the place of their bodies in the process, and the communicative habits and/or defaults people fallback on.

American Sign Language is the mode in which the majority of Deaf persons in North America communicate.<sup>1</sup> It is recognized both by linguists and members of the Deaf community as being a separate language from English. Accordingly, it is not a word-for-word translation of English. While it is possible for an expression in sign to be exactly parallel to an expression in English, the English sentence may have words for which the sign sentence has no equivalent sign (and *vice versa*). Sign language grammar has its own rules as well as its own lexicon, and most notably, sight instead of hearing is the sense that conveys meaning (Stokoe, 373). American Sign Language is a visual-manual communication system, as opposed to an oral-aural communication system, and, as such, the most noticeable effect of sign language is that it makes Deaf persons using it publicly immediately visible and visibly different.

What about sign language, however, makes it “different?” What is it considered “different” from? The act of comparing or contrasting sign language with spoken and written English demonstrates certain underlying assumptions that exist about language and communication. Even though ASL is established as an independent language from English, it has been defined and identified with a comparative emphasis on spoken and written languages.<sup>2</sup> Those using ASL are visibly different because there is an understanding – however implicit – that the mode in which most people communicate is through verbal or written language instead of embodied, visual movement. As a review of

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<sup>1</sup> Some deaf or hard-of-hearing individuals communicate using Signed Exact English (SEE), which is closer to English in both structure and form. To be clear, I use the term “d/Deaf” in order to be sensitive to the extent that individuals self-identify with the deaf culture. The “small d” deaf generally do not associate with other members of the deaf community, strive to identify themselves with hearing people, and regard their hearing loss solely in medical terms. Moreover, Deaf people identify themselves as culturally deaf, use American Sign Language (ASL) as their primary mode of communication, and have a strong deaf identity (Napier, 2002; Woodward, 1972)

<sup>2</sup> This thesis does not assume that English stands-in for all spoken languages. However, because ASL is predominately used in North America, for the purposes of this thesis, I often interchange English for verbal language but understand English in an Anglo-American cultural studies sense.

the literature will demonstrate, oral communication and verbal languages are privileged above practices of embodied communication. While there has historically been some recognition of bodily forms of communication (whether it be gesture or body language), such forms are considered nonverbal, unintentional acts, and supplementary to the meaning produced through speech (Kendon, 2004; Lucas *et al.*, 2001; Parril, 2005; Sanders, 1989). The voice is privileged in communication; it is dislocated from the body and weighted within communication studies as *the* primary mode of communication. This, then, simultaneously renders voice or speech the dominant mode of communication.

Since the voice and written word are distinguished from the body and reinforced as the proper and desired modes of communication, sign language provides an opportunity to challenge and perhaps rethink how voice is perceived in relation to the body. The term voice is generally used in two contexts. First, voice is often interchanged with speech. When stating that an individual “has a voice,” the use of the term voice in this context describes a person’s physical ability to speak. Moreover, when stating that an individual “voices her opinion,” the declaration or articulation of such opinion is presumed to be verbal. Secondly, voice is construed to denote agency. When stating that an individual “has a voice,” the term voice is used to imply empowered actions or expressions of individuality. In effect sign language, as an embodied form of communication, challenges the idea that the metaphysical voice is housed in verbal speech, that speech is required to have a voice, or that speech is necessary to articulate or communicate thoughts, ideas, meaning, and identities. Correspondingly, sign language challenges the idea that, in order to understand meaning, and further validate the people

expressing that meaning, the ability to hear is necessary, and those that do hear, actually listen.

By studying hearing students learning sign language for the first time, I am exploring the relationship between voice and body in communication. How do these students experience their bodies in learning American Sign Language? Do they experience a disjuncture between their voices and their bodies? If so, how and when does this disjuncture take place? How do hearing students, taking a beginner American Sign Language course, understand the role of the voice and the body within communication? Do the students' understanding of the role of the voice and body reproduce the privileging that takes place in communication studies? And to what extent do their understandings about language and communication change as they become more acquainted with an embodied language and actually use this embodied language in public? These questions help frame my analysis in the next three chapters and contribute to my overall exploration of how sign language, as an embodied form of communication, contributes to communication studies.

While the purpose of this project is not to champion sign language above that of written or spoken communication forms, I suggest that sign language exemplifies a different relationship between voice and body that we can learn from. Indeed, verbal communication occurs through the body. There is a conscious physicality when applying volume, stress, and timbre in the vocal chords. Moreover, while the repertoire is reduced from gestural expressions used in ASL (except in extreme cases), gestures are used while accompanying speech. Signed language, however, offers a specific example in which this voice-body relationship is inverted. In order to communicate with sign language, the use

of gestural expressions is more important than sound for meaning making. Audible noises are sometimes used in signed conversations; however, these noises carry meaning as the purpose of these sounds is to create visual emphasis or visual noise for manual signs.

Leaving the relative privileging of voice behind it is important for communication studies, in theorizing sign language, to consider these voice/body differences, make space for other forms of communication, and to use these differences to enrich current understandings of communication. Building on other calls to expand the field of communication (Carey, 1975; Derrida, 1979; Krippendorff, 1989; Loenhoff, 1997; Peters, 1999; Pinchevski, 2005; Ramsey, 1998; Shanker & King, 2002), I suggest that communications as a practice has a blind spot when it comes to visual, embodied languages and, more generally, a longstanding problem in assimilating and unfairly excluding otherness. In theorizing sign language as a visual, performative, embodied practice, I seek to reposition the role of the body in communication and consider the body as a cultural text – instead of only a biological being – that publicly constructs, displays, and at times, disrupts meaning. By using this “other” form of communication as my means, I explore some of the biases in communication and offer signed instances where such differences are in tension and on display.

## Literature Review

As mentioned earlier, American Sign Language is the manual-visual communication system used by the Deaf in both the United States and parts of Canada.<sup>3</sup> While the

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<sup>3</sup> In Canada, while ASL is predominantly used among Anglophone members of the Deaf community, there are other sign languages used to reflect regional diversity. According to the Canadian Association for the Deaf (CAD), there are two “legitimate” sign languages in Canada: American Sign Language (ASL) and la Langue des Sourds du Quebec (LSQ). In addition to these two languages, however, there is also the

development of ASL in North America has a rich and extensive history, the foundation of ASL and subsequent understandings of this language are continually shaped by deep-seated debates between oralist and manualist thought. ASL and the role ASL plays in the Deaf education system in North America has been, and remains, dependant on whether spoken language (consisting of lip reading, speech, and observing mouth movements) is preferred to, and endorsed above, that of the use of sign language. Despite there being a keen interest and study of sign language in the early 19<sup>th</sup>-century, such interest declined, and then was revived over the course of the next one hundred and fifty years. While the majority of this literature review examines the academic literature engaged with sign language or gesture as language after the 1960s, understanding the oral-centric tendencies of this literature cannot occur without understanding the manual-oral tensions pre-dating it.

ASL developed in the early 19<sup>th</sup>-century from combining home signs, or natural signs used within families, with aspects of French Sign Language (FSL) (Wilcox & Wilcox, 1991: 13-18). The two individuals often accredited for developing American Sign Language and establishing the first school for the Deaf in North America are Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet (1787-1851) and Laurent Clerc (1785- 1869). In 1815, on behalf of an affluent family who wanted an education for their d/Deaf child, Gallaudet journeyed to England to learn a method for educating the Deaf in his community of Hartford, Connecticut. As an American in England shortly after the War of 1812, Gallaudet was met with residual resentment and was unable to study at the London School for the Deaf. Subsequently, he travelled to France to visit and learn from Laurent

Clerc, a Deaf educator in a Parisian school for the deaf. Offering Clerc a teaching position in America, in exchange for being taught sign language himself, both Gallaudet and Clerc returned to Hartford, successfully lobbied the government for funding, and in 1817, established the American School for the Deaf. Integrating the home signs already in use with FSL, Gallaudet and Clerc adapted the sign language used in Paris and began using what is known as American Sign Language within the classroom (Tabak, 2006: 1-41; Wilcox & Wilcox, 1991: 13-18).

Interestingly, John Tabak (2006) identifies Gallaudet as one of the first individuals to theorize and experiment with American Sign Language (24-25). Between 1820 and 1847, Gallaudet founded a journal, *American Annals of the Deaf*, and developed his theory on the natural language of signs. In this journal, Gallaudet describes the “natural language of signs:”

The natural language of signs is abundantly capable of either portraying or recalling...objects and circumstances. The life, picture-like delineation, pantomimic spirit variety, and grace with which this [signing] may be done...constitute a visual language which has a charm ... that merely *oral* language does not possess. (Emphasis in original; in Tabak, 2006: 33).

Not only does Gallaudet argue that natural sign language is universal, despite people from different cultural backgrounds using different signs for words or objects, he asserts that signed language is “more expressive” than spoken languages (Tabak, 2006: 33). “Effective sign,” according to Gallaudet, uses body language and facial expressions in addition to the formal signs within the language (Tabak, 2006: 30-33). Providing a basis for subsequent theorizations of sign language, especially the language origins debate, Gallaudet’s theories significantly influenced the Deaf education system and, most importantly, his theories were the first to champion the specificity of sign languages

(although, as I later demonstrate, both Gallaudet and the more recent literature use oral languages as the basis for comparison).

Over the next one hundred years, educators and educational theorists “challenge[d] virtually every assertion made by Gallaudet about signed language and its value to the Deaf” (Tabak, 2006: 42). Throughout the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, deaf educators argued that in order for the deaf to be integrated into hearing society, emphasis should be placed on oral, rather than signed, modes of communication (Tabak, 2006: 54-55). These educators<sup>4</sup> influenced social and educational policies to prevent the public use of sign language: isolate already signing Deaf from the orally educated; isolate the Deaf from one another; and assimilate the Deaf into hearing society from an early age (Tabak, 2006: 56-64). Oralist scholars and educators founded their own journal, *The Association Review*, to publish material sympathetic to their philosophy (Tabak, 2006: 64). These practices, were not only successful in othering those that signed and suppressing Deaf culture, they simultaneously rendered verbal languages the dominant mode of communication. By adhering to an oralist tradition, sign language was not endorsed, nor was it, according to Tabak, “seriously analyzed as a linguistic phenomenon again until the 1960s” (2006: 42). However, as the rest of this literature review suggests, even as interest in sign language was revived, the eminence of oralism persists and underlies current understandings of nonverbal communication.

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<sup>4</sup> Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone was, most notably, a proponent of oralist philosophy. Married to a deaf non-signing woman, Bell was interested in both issues associated with deaf education and eugenics, lobbying for the Deaf to be isolated from one another and preventing Deaf inter-marriages (Tabak, 2006:43-67).

As a founding scholar in the more recent study of signed languages, and subsequent founder of the academic journal *Sign Language Studies* in 1972, William C. Stokoe helped to recognize sign, and ASL in particular, as an organized language and further re-established signed languages as an innovative area of study. Where they once condemned signed languages as “vague, virtually worthless, and pernicious” (Stokoe, 1991:102; Tabak, 2006; Wilcox, 2001: 333), psychologists, anthropologists, educators, and linguists eventually reincorporated sign language into their disciplines. By doing so, they re-established the work started by Gallaudet over one hundred years before and implicitly recognized that “sign language has a structure just like any language has and that it should not be despised or ignored as it had been from 1880 through 1960 and beyond” (Stokoe, 1991: 103). While continuing to underscore the importance of sign language research to the development and understanding of both spoken and non-spoken languages, this literature review will explore how sign language has been theorized and the assumptions behind such theorizations. There are two predominant areas of research that inform how sign language is conceptualized: linguistic studies and gestural studies.

Clearly, the linguistic characterization of American Sign Language as a distinct language is an important step to challenging the nature of language and its biological origins (Wilcox, 2001: 335). The contributions of scholars have transformed how we conceptualize sign language both in relation to spoken language and other signed languages. Moreover, as nonverbal signs or gestural expressions are the mode of communication for signed languages, the literature on gesture provides an opportunity to understand sign language as a nonverbal form of communication. However, the linguistic emphasis found in studies examining sign language necessitates a more complex

characterization of signed language – one that is dynamic, interactive, and one that does not naturalize gesture in relation to orality. While sign language research must draw upon these bodies of literature, sign language research – and communication studies more broadly – need to encapsulate the dynamic nature of the language while further challenging dominant oral-centric language narratives and the subsequent naturalization of gesture.

### **Linguistic Studies**

Since Stokoe's (1960) initial article arguing that sign language is in fact a language with its own linguistic structure, there has been substantial development within the field of sign language research (Taub, 2001: 222). Earlier sign language research concentrated on establishing that ASL, along with other signed languages, was indeed a language, comparing and contrasting the structure of signed languages to that found in spoken ones. Accordingly, researchers sought to counter the prevailing myths indicating that signed languages are not languages, that signed languages are merely proxies for speech, and that signing is a single, universally understood system (Stokoe 1960; Stokoe, Casterline, and Croneberg, 1965; Kilma and Bellugi, 1979; Taub, 2001: 222; McNeill and Duncan, 2005: 506; Vermeerbergen, 2006: 168-169; Wilcox, 2001: 335). Initially emphasizing the structural differences between ASL and spoken language, formalist linguistics stressed the “simultaneous nature of signs” – arguing that the components of hand shapes, location and movement occur simultaneously unlike the sequentially occurring components of spoken language (Taub, 2001: 222; Vermeerbergen, 2006:169).

The aforementioned scholars appropriately acknowledge that American Sign Language is a language in its own right, distinct from spoken English, and should be

treated as such. Moreover, they acknowledge the importance of sign language and explicitly challenge the idea that speech *is* language when demonstrating that American Sign Language, like spoken languages, has its own linguistic structure. While these assertions are important, the research is problematic in that it presents a false dichotomy between signed nonverbal languages and verbal ones. Essentially, it makes its claim about signed language *in relation to spoken language*, thereby placing comparative emphasis on spoken language.

In the late 1980s and into the 1990s, sign language research became more about examining the similarities between signed languages rather than examining the differences between sign languages and oral ones (Taub, 2001: 222; Vermeerbergen, 2006: 175). Like Gallaudet years before, scholars became interested in the commonality, or universality, of the grammar among signed languages and determined that cross-linguistic aspects of sign languages “reveal striking similarities” (Vermeerbergen, 2006: 175). However, as Myriam Vermeerbergen (2006) suggests, because scholars no longer felt the need to defend the ‘real’ linguistic properties of sign languages, the research began to shift back to looking at the unique characteristics of sign language (177; see also Taub, 2006: 223-231). Accordingly, Vermeerbergen (2006) and Taub (2001) assert that the visual-gestural nature of sign languages, iconicity of signs, sign language acquisition, and the linguistic properties of sign language potentially provide a stepping stone for future sign language research. They challenge scholars to “turn their attention to the areas in which signed languages are *different* from spoken languages” and offer linguistic properties to redirect the academic gaze (Taub, 2001: 223). This thesis focuses on sign language, and does so in a manner that extends beyond the scope of linguistics, by

examining this language in its own right. Without comparing sign language to orality, this thesis draws on other bodies of literature to help identify and theorize sign language's properties to thereby develop how we understand communication more generally.

By using terminology (e.g. lexicon, syntax, etc.) that is specific to the field of linguistics while studying signed languages, linguistic scholars potentially limit (signed) discourse on the subject as it requires "insider knowledge" to engage with the texts. Moreover, a linguistic analysis renders the study of signed language to be purely textual and static in use – a mode of communication that is not used within the manual-visual language itself. By limiting the focus to the text or sign, linguists fail to capture the dynamic visual presence that takes place with sign language and between those who sign, the same visual presence that Gallaudet highlighted – albeit, romantically – over a century and a half ago. Even with the use of sketches to identify nouns, verbs, and other sentence structure, the focus on textual analysis does not do justice to the language and how it is used. It removes signed language from everyday life, from the everyday power relations that take place among the hearing and non-hearing alike.

More recently, some scholars have insisted that "language [cannot] be studied by itself, in isolation, but must be looked at in direct connection to the people who use it, the things they use it to talk about, and the view of the world that using it imposed upon them" (Trager and Lee Smith quoted in Lucas *et al.*, 2001: 61). While there is a recognition that language needs to be examined in its broader context, the majority of the literature on sign language seems to be more concerned about the language's structure and not the world or the visual-manual manner in which the language is used.

### Gestural Studies

Most scholars that study gesture contextualize the use of gestural expressions in relation to verbal utterances. However, the body of literature on gesture differs from sign language studies or linguistics in that it does not acknowledge nonverbal expressions as distinct forms of communication. Karen Emmorey (1999), for example, argues that there are certain aspects of gesture that are not found in signed languages. She asserts that gesture is idiosyncratic and has no agreed upon standards of form, that gesture is rarely produced by listeners, and that for gesture to perform its communicative function, it must be seen to facilitate speech production (139-144). While I will later discuss why such claims are somewhat problematic, Emmorey's assertions demonstrate the fundamental differences in how nonverbal expressions are examined by the two bodies of literature. While linguistic scholars emphasize that nonverbal expressions are in fact languages in structure and use, gestural studies understand nonverbal expressions to be natural and secondary to speech production. For McNeil (1993) spontaneous gesture is deemed "primitive" because it emerges naturally by only being grounded in the physical and psychological (162-166; Emmorey, 1999: 144). Essentially, gestures have been theorized to be natural occurrences and are not created, embodied, nor performed; there is "realness" or authenticity to the gestures (Stokoe and Marschark, 1999: 166).

In *Gesture and the Nature of Language*, Armstrong, Stokoe, and Wilcox (1995) reiterate their defense that sign language is a "natural human language" (5). While exploring both spoken and signed languages as systems of gestures, these scholars collectively argue that language is based in gesture or "bodily movements to which human beings attach meaning" (1995: 3). Traditionally, gesture has been defined as

primitive, unconscious, and biological (Armstrong, Stokoe, & Wilcox, 1996; Kendon, 2004; McNeill & Duncan, 2005); it is seen as secondary to speech production rather than being communication in its own right. Specifically, communication once consisted of “an inferior system of tone, gesture, and grimace,” and it was through the “process of natural selection and survival of the fittest that the voice has gained the upper hand” (Bayton, 1996: 40). The purpose of gesture or the use of a signed language was for “less cultured tribes, while the spoken language is seemingly in its highest phase among the more civilized” (Bayton, 1996: 42). While these studies examine language variance between spoken and sign language and language acquisition, they are based on conceptions regarding the naturalization of gesture by way of the gestural origins of language and define sign language in relation to orality.

There has been a clear shift in the literature on gesture, troubling the view that gesture occurs naturally and is independent from speech production or verbal language. Robert Sanders (1989) takes up gesture or “nonverbal displays,” arguing that until recently, communication theory, linguistics, and semiotics have treated utterance meanings and nonverbal meanings as discrete and independent from each other (1989:141). Nonverbal expressions were traditionally viewed as providing independent kinds of information from those of utterances and the information supplied from the former could either be complementary or contrary to information presented by the latter (141). However, the relationship between verbal and nonverbal expression is “misleading” because interpreters understand meaning by adjusting their understandings of utterances and nonverbal displays in relation to each other, especially when they appear inconsistent (Sanders, 1989: 142).

For Sanders, the interpretation of an utterance is contingent on the interpretation of the speaker's nonverbal display and *vice versa* (1989:143). Moreover, because interpretations of nonverbal displays vary depending on how the utterances are understood, there cannot and should not be any fixed or universal signal-values empirically attributed to nonverbal displays (Sanders, 1989: 144). Sanders emphasizes that individuals consciously reflect and alter their initial bodily reactions to adhere to societal norms and expectations. In doing so, their “nonverbal displays” or “expressive-responsive bodily activities,” respectively, are not equivalent to the traditional understandings of gesture, and in this manner, exclude and challenge any “naturalness” or physicality that gesture implies. In *Gesture: Visible Action as Utterance*, Adam Kendon (2004) also argues that gesture is a partner to speech but restricts his definition of gesture “to actions that are intentionally produced and overtly communicative” (see also Parril, 2005: 117). While this shift in literature better reflects signed languages, in that gesture is intentionally produced and used for communicative purposes, gesture is still theorized as secondary to speech production. Thus, even though the research on gesture is pertinent for understanding signed languages, it is also limiting and limited in that it presumes the superiority of speech and continues to push an oral-centric narrative.

In order for communication research on sign language to develop, it is necessary to acknowledge how these bodies of literature define and understand language. Sign language studies and linguistics posit that sign language, and ASL in particular, is distinct from spoken language. They differentiate nonverbal and verbal languages and further argue that sign language is a language in its own right, thereby demonstrating a broader characterization of what a language is. Until the shift in the literature on gesture, gesture

was not theorized as a language. Rather, speech was considered language and gesture either upheld or betrayed said language. However, both bodies of literature eventually align in that they begin to look to study sign language and/or gesture within the broader context of how it is used instead of examining it in terms of its spoken counterparts.

Rather than think of gesture, and later sign language, as oppositional to spoken language, Stokoe argues that the *versus* in his article titled “Sign Language Versus Spoken Language” should be used in its original sense (1978: 407-408). For Stokoe, the Latin term *versus* meaning “turned in the direction of,” “towards,” and “facing,” prevents thinking of language-origins as discontinuous and oppositional from biology (1978: 408). Signs and gesture “turn in the direction of” or evolve into signed and spoken language. In this conceptualization of language and its transmission systems, it is “possible to see continuity from signing to speaking, from presentation to representation in linguistics encoding, and from mammal to primate to man” (Stokoe, 1978: 408). Corballis (2002) extends Stokoe’s claim by insisting that gesture was not simply replaced by speech; rather, gesture and speech have “co-evolved in complex interrelationships throughout their long and changing partnership” (Capirci *et al.*, 2005: 158). Stokoe correcting the term *versus* from being opposition to an evolving process and Corballis’ “co-evolution” is important because it shifts the focus from asking “what came first and how do we prove it?” to “how are gesture and speech used in contextualized social settings, how do they change over time, who transmits meaningful language from generation to generation, and finally, what power relations exist in the communication of that language?” (2002). While this shift is important for conceptualizing (signed) language in use, this shift in focus replaces one linguistic narrative with another. It substitutes the oppositional

narrative between nonverbal and verbal languages with a narrative that is both unidirectional and teleological. While this project does not seek to place nonverbal languages in opposition to verbal ones, it also wishes to resist advocating for a linear, verbal end.

For these theorists, language begins to shift from being static in structure to constructed in use; “the most valuable places to look for linguistic precursors are social behavior, social interaction, and the comprehension and coordination of activities” (King, 1999). In this sense, more recent understandings of gestural theory challenge the assumptions that “language is biological adaptation, and that an unbroken, linear chain of genetic descent is what must have necessarily led to [language’s] emergence in man” (Katz, 2007: 181). By thinking of language as use and interaction, these theorists allow human languages to be examined within the settings in which they are used (King, 1999: 12-13). Thus, these scholars’ definition of language is not only vital to their position of where such language originates, but it is necessary for future research – and my research – in communication to put aside biological understandings of language in favor of study of the cultural context and communicative interactions that take place with and by those who sign.

Conversational Analysis (CA) offers one paradigm to examine how language is used in practice. The focus of conversational analysis tends to be spoken languages, including the body language accompanying spoken languages. However, CA is useful because it “examines the practices and competencies by which people organize social interaction, and discovers how interaction is locally ordered by participants, moment-to-moment” (Nevil & Rendle-Short, 2009:76). Adopting a communicative view of CA,

Maurice Nevile and Johanna Rendle-Short (2009) examine everyday verbal language-in-use, identify communication as social interaction, and emphasize the importance of context – a context that is both shaped by and shapes verbal conversation (78). In their article, “Turn-Taking Patterns in Deaf Conversation,” Jenifer Coats and Rachel Sutton-Spence (2001) conduct a conversational analysis, exploring the turn-taking patterns of Deaf signers. Comparing their findings to spoken interaction, Coats and Sutton-Spence determine that the visual nature of the language necessitates conversation, conversation that has a “collaborative floor.” Instead of there being “one-at-a-time” mode of talk, interruptions were present, permissible, and the conversational floor was shared by all signers even as gender dynamics were in play (2001: 526). While Coats and Sutton-Spence identify some scholars that use CA to examine Deaf conversations (Mather, 1996; Smith 1999), their article demonstrates the cultural differences between signed and spoken conversations and the need for further research on Deaf conversations, especially since sign language generally implies face-to-face conversation (Coats and Sutton-Spence, 2001: 512)<sup>5</sup>. Indeed this research shapes my exploration in Chapter Four of the use of signed conversations in public. However, what is apparent, and what my analysis is conscious of, is the unfailing tendency to compare communicative aspects of sign language to its verbal counterparts.

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<sup>5</sup> Coats and Sutton-Spence (2001) exploration of Deaf conversations primarily focuses on face-to-face conversation where signing is interactive and occurs in the vicinity of other signers. While my focus also examines sign language use and interaction in public, this project acknowledges that sign language use is not always conversational nor does it necessitate “face-to-face” interaction or the (close) physical presence of other signers. For example, video technology and video conferencing enables dissemination-based models of communication in ASL and provides a means for “face-to-face” communication to occur despite signers being in different locations. Thus, while being “face-to-face” is important for the linguistic, social and cultural significance and practice of this language, I recognize an expansion beyond what is usually meant by face-to-face in a signing context and suggest that future research explore this tension more closely.

Arguing that the founding principle for research on sign language in the journal *Sign Language Studies*, is a “new perspective,” Stokoe has been instrumental in conceptualizing and establishing a basis for subsequent theories of signed languages (1986:171). Building on the existing research on sign language and gesture, communication studies may perhaps provide a “new perspective” on sign language by offering other theories and methodologies for understanding its use and context. What happens when scholars expand the study of sign language, and ASL in particular, from being focused on whether sign language is in fact a gestural language – with all its accompanying assumptions – to looking at sign language as an embodied communication event? Perhaps by changing the terminology of “signed language” to “signed communication” it opens the study of ASL to other bodies of literature and methodologies that can better encompass the visual-manual language. By identifying and theorizing sign language not only as language but as an interaction, a manual-visual conversation, and a dynamic embodied process in its own right, it offers a means to reframe voice and body in communication studies, shift the communicative emphasis from orality and toward corporeality (Loenhoff, 1997), and further complexify how we consider communication. My research suggests that it is mutually beneficial to examine sign language through a communications studies lens. Communication scholars can use various bodies of literature to further theorize sign language research, and most importantly, sign language offers a case study to extend and perhaps disrupt dominant understandings of communication. What is important, however, is that future understandings of sign language, and communication more generally, refrain from

maintaining the subsequent naturalization of gesture and offer a narrative that is not oral-centric.

### **Framing Signed Communication: Moving Bodies and Visual Performances**

The aim of this project was first: to begin a dialogue with hearing students about how they understand the roles of the body and voice in communication; and second, to use such dialogue to critically explore how sign language (learning) enriches both understandings of and tensions within communication. This discussion involves the incorporation of three perspectives: the various bodies of work that inform and theorize the communicative elements of signed languages, the views and subjectivities of the students I interviewed, and finally my own subjectivity as both a learner of sign language and a communications scholar. The construction and design of this discussion is deeply structured by my understanding of sign language as a *conversational, visual embodied performance* between *moving bodies*. In this section, I detail how perspectives in visual studies, performance studies, and dramaturgical sociology contribute to my conceptual framing of this thesis and explore the particularities of this dialogue that will be discussed in further detail in later chapters.<sup>6</sup>

My first experience with, and instantaneous attraction to, sign language did not take place within the classroom. Rather, it was in a local coffee shop that I was unknowingly introduced to sign language and to Deaf culture. While I did not know what

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<sup>6</sup> I am deeply indebted to my friend, Robin Desmeules, who helped frame this project as a discussion in its own right.

signs were exchanged between the two signers, my recollection of that moment entails the sheer thrill and captivation with what I saw before me. It was, in a word, fascinating. At the time I was at a loss to articulate what about that experience made it so fascinating. Indeed my interest was, in part, because of the novelty of what had transpired. I was admittedly, enthralled by the ability of people to be able to communicate without words. But I – and others within the coffee shop – were also enraptured with the display. I was captivated by the use of the speakers' hands, the flow in which the movement took place, and the use of their faces to display emotions. Unlike what I had seen or what I had previously encountered of sign language, the communicators' facial expressions and movements were fluid, animated, and perhaps, occasionally exaggerated. Despite using no words as I knew then, their conversation was full of visual noise. It was, in fact, the “loudest” conversation in the room.

While the foundation of visual communication is the eyes, eyes that are embedded within the physical body (Jamieson, 2007: 12), signing bodies are cultural spectacles that are both products, and producers, of social understanding. While an individual produces and presents meaning by way of words and to some extent nonverbal displays in spoken languages, messages in sign language are communicated primarily through visual signs or expressions. Accordingly, ASL is a visual medium where the “primary output is bodily activity” (Stokoe, 1976: 373). Even as the sense of smell, touch, taste and sound, to a limited extent, informs an individual’s communicative experience, vision in ASL enables interpersonal communication to occur.

Within the modern era, sight or vision is identified as the source of truth and knowledge, thereby discounting and deflating the authority of the other senses (Smith,

2007).<sup>7</sup> However, while vision is the primary sense that conveys meaning in sign language, tactile and sound practices are necessary to create specific visual noises – visual noises that are required to convey meaning. Although I emphasize that sign language is a visual language, it is not exclusively visual or biological; that is, the use of vision in sign language should not be thought of as removed from the other senses, nor should it be thought of as an entirely or purely physical process (Schilling, 2003).

According to Jamieson (2007):

Visual awareness and visual knowing is [*sic*] composed of a number of tributaries, at its source it is biological, to which psychological and socio-cultural forces join to produce, what we might term personal understanding or interpretation of that which is given to sight (12).

By identifying and considering sign language as a visual form of communication, this thesis directly challenges the oral-centric narrative that exists within communication studies, as established in my literature review. However, the use of visuality to characterize sign language must leave certain assumptions behind; assumptions that equate vision with objectivism and conflate vision with visuality (Jay, 2006). As Hal Foster (1988) explains:

Although vision suggests sight as a physical operation, and visuality sight as a social fact, the two are not opposed as nature is to culture: vision is social and historical too, and visuality involves the body and the psyche. Yet neither are they identical: here, the difference between the terms signals a difference within the visual – between the mechanisms of sight and its historical techniques, between the datum of vision and its discursive determinisms – a difference, many differences, among how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing or the unseen therein (ix).

In distinguishing the two terms, Foster (1988) suggests that understandings of what is seen are not just a physical process, but a culturally relative one; meaning and

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<sup>7</sup> Smith (2007) further explains, “Vision also became increasingly distanced from the other senses in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as it became handmaiden to rationalist science, knowledge was gained through the gaze of the scientist and verified through the eye” (23).

understanding are not removed from the person who is looking and/or signing, and the socio-cultural constructs in which that person's character is derived.

In addition to being visual, sign language is an *embodied performance* between *moving bodies*. I use the term *moving bodies* to denote bodies that are both interactive and affective. Although hand shape and palm orientation help establish a sign and its meaning, it is the movement and fluidity of the sign that most importantly conveys the meaning. The signed movement is appealing to the eye. However, a certain level of physicality is required to communicate what is meant and to identify whether the other signer or interlocutor<sup>8</sup> shares and understands the context in which the signed discussion takes place.

As I indicated earlier, signing bodies are cultural spectacles. Signing causes its subjects to be immediately visible and visibly different in public. In “Dares to Stares: Disabled Women Performance Artists and the Dynamics of Staring,” Rosemarie Garland Thomson (2005) argues that the act of staring is “a kind of potent social choreography that marks bodies by enacting a dynamic visual exchange between a spectator and a spectacle” (31). Using the context of visible disabilities, Thomson furthers states that “staring, then, enacts a drama about the people involved” (31). While I do not propose that Deaf signers have a medical or communicative disability, such dominant understandings of sign language and Deafness more generally, however unintentional, may inform the reasons why (hearing) people stare, or why they are so enthralled when they encounter deaf people signing. Interlocutors exhibit both an aesthetic performance, by way of the fluid movement and expressions used, and perform cultural realities informing the language and those who sign.

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<sup>8</sup> Within the Deaf community, an accepted term for a signer is ‘interlocutors.’ I use both interchangeably.

Beyond the physicality, signing bodies induce emotion with both the person and with whom they are communicating, and perhaps, with the (hearing) spectator that gazes from afar. While speaking more generally about the inherent role of affect in communication, Nick Crossley (1997) argues, “Communication is a sensuous and affective process. It is always already mooded and speakers aim to affect their other in the full sense of the word i.e. their communications make an emotional appeal and are ‘designed’ to call forth certain affects” (19). Suggesting that communication also encompasses the feeling of emotion in addition to the articulation and reception of thoughts and ideas, the use of emotion in sign language falls into Crossley’s understanding of communication.

Similarly, in discussing the affective qualities that bodies have in sport, Bromley (1997: 111) argues that sociological studies do not incorporate affect into their theorizations. More specifically, he argues: “What is missing is the aesthetic, the non-rational- ‘magic’, even; those qualities, in other words, which belong to the body other than as machine or instrument” (Bromley, 1997:111). It is this aesthetic or the potential non-rational “magic” that I hope to make visible through my interviews with the sign language students. Rather than focusing on the body as an entity – thereby asking “what is a body?” – Bruno Latour (2004) suggests that theorizations of the body should explore the affective processes that occur in communication by instead asking “What can a body do?” (206-207; see also Blackman, 2010: 3-4). This project highlights how signing bodies are communicative; “how [signing] bodies are always thoroughly entangled processes, and importantly defined by their capacities to affect and be affected” (Blackman, 2010: 3-4). As the hearing students interviewed speak from their experiences before and after

learning sign language, consideration is given to what happens in a communicative process:

One of the main considerations in this discussion is the way in which both forms of participation—and watching—offer opportunities for us to ‘lose’ our bodies, or more accurately perhaps, to become, for a rare instance, *at one with our bodies* – embodied affectively and emotionally so that, in Yeat’s terms, it is no longer possible to tell the dancer from the dance (original emphasis; Bromley, 1997: 113).

As learning to sign provides a context for thinking about how bodies communicate and how that feels, it is important that this project shifts “away from an emphasis on objective observation and toward one on embodied participation” (Ness, 2004: 124). Sally Ann Allen Ness (2004), who examines the embodied methods of studying dance, argues that the above aspects of human movement are best “studied through thoughtful, intellectual, bodily practice” (2004:124). Accordingly, with embodied practice and movement, a better understanding of the culture in which such interaction occurs should develop. Quoting Novak (1998), Ness maintains that:

Culture is embodied … Movement constitutes an ever present reality in which we constantly participate. We perform movement, invent it, interpret it, and reinterpret it, on conscious and unconscious levels. In these actions we participate in and reinforce culture, and we also create it (Novak, 1990: 8).

Taking a dramaturgical-interactionist understanding of movement and performance, both Novak and Ness identify performance not as aesthetic, but as everyday life. Ultimately, the cultural and affective aspects of signed movement are interconnected and work together to support my understanding of sign language as an embodied performance. For this project, I adopt a dramaturgical understanding of movement and embodied performance, in that performance *is* communication (Crow, 1988: 24; Jarman, 1996: 337) and the signing body is “systemically produced, sustained, and presented in

everyday life and therefore the body is best regarded as a potentiality which is realized and actualized through a variety of social regulated activities or practices” (Turner, 1984: 24; Waskul and Vannini, 2006: 6).

Judith Hamera (2006) asserts that reductive conceptions of performance or everyday life both ignore the social, historical, and political realities that enable and constrain communication; and separate the processes of producing culture from those consuming it (14-17). Thus, when engaging in the everyday communicative practices of ASL, it is important to recognize that social meaning in ASL cannot be independent from the cultural realities that inform sign and those who are signing. Moreover, as ASL suggests face-to-face communication when used in public, the producers of ASL are also consumers. Everyday communicative practice (re)produces its subjects even as it is consumed by them (Hamera, 2006: 18-19). As conversation in sign language requires engaged interlocutors for mutual understanding, it challenges the privileging of texts or the “authoritarian production of literal meaning versus passive, subjugated consumption” (Hamera, 2006:18). Moreover, by applying a broader definition of performance to ASL, it challenges the exclusivity of objects in the production of performance. A broader definition of performance “opens up cultures, actions, and identities as complex processes, rather than isolating them as things” (Hamera, 2006: 1).

While performance is generally defined as a form of interpersonal communication, Diana Taylor (2003), like Ness (2004) and Novak (1990), asserts that “performance” should extend beyond its communicative conception:

On another level, performance also constitutes the methodological lens that enables scholars to analyze events *as* performance. Civic obedience, resistance, citizenship, gender, ethnicity, and sexual identity, for example are rehearsed and performed daily in the public sphere. To understand these *as* performance

suggests that performance also functions as an epistemology. Embodied practice, along with and bound up with other cultural practices, offers a way of knowing. The bracketing for these performances comes from outside, from the methodological lens that organizes them into an analyzable “whole” (3; Hamera, 2006: 5).

Using Taylor, I suggest that ASL is not only a way of communicating. Signing can be characterized *as* performance, in which its embodied practices – bound up with other cultural practices – are also rehearsed and performed.

Equally, Schechner’s well-known *is/as* distinction mirrors Taylor’s argument. He argues that performance research focuses on objects that *are* aesthetic performances (for example, dance or theatrical performances). The object of analysis is not the aesthetic performance but the object is analyzed *as* a performance (of culture or of identity, etc.) (Fenske, 2007: 357). Indeed, aesthetic considerations should be given to Deaf poetry or theatre and the aesthetic is an important component to the spectacle of everyday, signed communication events; however, consideration of sign language will not be limited to its aesthetic understandings. By extending the definition of ASL beyond communication to include sign language *as* performance, Schechner and Taylor offer a way of isolating cultural practices – especially ones that exist within language itself (2003: 3). According to Hamera (2006):

Performance is both an event and a heuristic tool that illuminates the presentational and representational elements of culture. Its inherent ‘eventness’ (in motion) makes it especially effective for engaging and describing the embodied processes that produce and consume culture. As an event or as heuristic, performance makes things and does things, in addition to describing how they are made or done (5-6).

Thus, sign language as performance would enable a closer examination of the social, political, and cultural realties that inform and (re)produce ASL and the communicative practices within the language, all of which are tied to the body. Ultimately, by isolating

and exploring these practices within this language, it offers a way to understand similar practices in communication studies more generally.

## **Methodology**

With the above literature on sign language and gesture in mind, this thesis assumes that there has been asymmetrical attention given to speech and verbal languages in linguistics, and communication studies more broadly. While the body has been taken up within these traditions, it has been theorized as being immaterial or a component of verbal communication. In essence, the signing body, as a means of communication, is taken for granted and not studied as a mode of communication in its own right.

Taking a social constructivist approach, this thesis purports that bodies are socially constructed, embodied agents; in effect, bodies are in flux as they ascribe and are ascribed by cultural meanings or exchanges. However, the understanding of a body in this context has two problems in need of consideration: first, it essentializes the body as being entirely cultural, or alternatively, entirely physical; and second, if the body is considered as constantly in flux, then how can a discipline really study it (Schilling, 2003)? When considering the body in terms of its social, cultural, and communicative significance, however, I do not intend to remove the physical body in its entirety (Schilling, 2003). As discussed in my conceptual framework, material bodies are needed as a basis for our knowledge and for embodiment to even take place. Keeping a more balanced approach, I will not expunge the *mind/body*, *culture/nature*, and *oral/manual* binaries that inform this project. Rather, using sign language as my means, I hope to explore these fissures more closely.

Because bodies are in flux and are both physical and cultural sites, American Sign Language, or sign language more generally, provides an isolated opportunity for communication studies to examine bodies as these negotiations occur. Indeed, sign language is a visual, embodied performance that necessitates conversation. Undeniably, these attributes – and the underlying tensions that inform these attributes – need more theorizing. Studying signing bodies provides a vehicle for communication studies to theorize, and perhaps, better understand the process of communication, in addition to providing an environment in which people who are newly introduced to this (signed) mode of communication might negotiate the tension between their voice and body. Thus, this thesis studies hearing students and examines their experiences and/or relationship to their embodiment, as they learn about American Sign Language and Deaf culture, learned how to converse using sign language, and actually communicated with it.

Upon leaving the sign language instructor's office in the initial stages of my research, I was emotional because of the dislocation I felt trying to communicate in a nonverbal language. However, my concern as a learner of sign language was overcome by the concern I had as a researcher and of the impact that my limited knowledge of sign language would have on the project. More specifically, I wondered how I would communicate with other students in the class, especially about my research, when I could barely sign two sentences without depending on another person to facilitate conversation? What implications would there be for my project if I were unable to speak or write about the aspects of my research while recruiting potential research participants? Would it even be possible to communicate with others without using my voice or writing down what I needed to articulate? Moreover, would I be able to articulate my thoughts and ideas

clearly, and perhaps most importantly, be understood? While I initially thought that my experience with sign language could potentially detract from the findings of this thesis, the anxiety I felt as both a learner and researcher of sign language inspired my methodological program of study. That is, I experienced sign language by *doing it* in addition to observing it and asking about the experiences other students learning to sign.

In “Hand Drumming: An Essay in Practical Knowledge,” Shawn Lindsay (1996) argues that in order to study a specific culture a researcher needs to enter it. Using the term “bodily praxis,” Lindsay calls on ethnographers to incorporate practical knowledge in their “disciplinary tool kits,” expand their customary approaches to thinking and writing about culture, and learn what it is they are studying (1996: 197). By being engaged in the activity or culture that is being examined, Lindsay maintains that *doing* would “provide a ground for investigating issues in the anthropology of embodiment and practice”(1996: 197). Similarly, Vincent Berdates (2004) maintains that knowledge is doing or living.

Human embodiment is presumed by all knowledge in the dual sense that the body is the constitutive nexus that makes possible the existence of facts, and the body inextricably links knowledge to the practical concerns of human beings. All knowledge, even that acquired through the use of sophisticated scientific instruments, arises from a practical disposition of the body within the world. The human body supplies the possibility for the existence of any fact, and additionally correlates all facts with meaningful human ends. Knowledge is always praxis (Berdates, 2004: 3).

Thus, if we think of knowledge as praxis, knowledge and the things we learn to know become a process, a course of embodied action, and not a fixed entity or end. Negotiations – and the context in which such tensions are derived – are lived, acted and can be explored in the moment.

With the permission of the professor, I was present and participated in all classroom activities for the duration of the course. The purpose of this participatory observation was not to be obstructive to the instruction that took place. Rather, my presence and participation in the course was to allow me to *do* the language, familiarize myself with the process of learning ASL in this specific context, and help provide a level of comfort for participants to share information during the interviews. Moreover, it allowed me the opportunity to examine when students used their voice in the classroom – if at all – and under what circumstances they did so.

In order to conduct this research, I interviewed hearing students who had limited or no experience with American Sign Language (ASL) or designated and predominantly used spoken English as their primary mode of communication. While studying Deaf people would most likely have given me the best insight into sign language, they do not have the privileged oral perspective that informs dominant understandings of (sign) language, and communication more generally. That said, I identified a sample of research participants through two sections of a first-year American Sign Language course (ASLA 1010/1020) offered by the School of Linguistics and Applied Languages at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada during the spring and summer 2010 terms. With the permission of the instructors teaching during each term, at the beginning of the first course, I made a verbal announcement at the beginning of each class and provided all students with a copy of a letter of information via WebCT, explaining the nature of my research and asking participants to supply their email addresses if they were interested in participating in my research project. In order to respect the wishes of the sign language instructors, I only used WebCT to distribute my letter of information and explanation of

my research, posted a call for participants within the department, and provided my research and contact information to the teaching assistant to pass along should any current or former sign language student wish to participate in the study.

Gathering participants to take part in my study was indeed a struggle. After my classroom announcements, I managed to get contact information from two interested students (out of the thirty-two students in both sections of the course). While it can be difficult to gather participants for any study, my limited success was especially concerning as I did not want to miss the important window of time to interview students in the beginning stages of the course. Attending every class, I used every bathroom break and pause in the lesson to converse with fellow students and tell them about my research. To my benefit, the lesson plan in the first two weeks was aimed at signing introductions and reasons for taking the course. Built into the lesson plan were perfect opportunities for me to share that I was there to research sign language and that they were the potential participants in my study.

Two weeks into the course, nine students were interested in participating in my project and I conducted interviews accordingly. As the nature of my research was somewhat exploratory and taking place throughout the duration of the course, I had intended to conduct two interviews, one at the beginning and one at the end of the course, and they were semi-structured in that the interviewee had the opportunity to impart whatever information they felt was important to share. Using an in-depth interview style with each of the participants, I aimed to achieve a better understanding of the participants' views by using open-ended questions and probing techniques. Interviews were done face-to-face, mostly in spoken English (in order to ensure participants could

clearly communicate what they wished to share), and they were held in informal settings on campus, such as coffee shops or common rooms, so the overall feeling of each interview was relaxed and friendly. The first round of interviews focused on the no-voice policy, the students' expectations coming into the course, and their initial experiences learning sign language and about this form of communication more generally. The students offered informative – albeit, somewhat rigid – responses to my questions (see Appendix A for some sample questions), and after the initial set of interviews, I felt as if I could adequately answer most of my research questions.

### **The Ones That Got Away**

July 18, 2010  
Email to Supervisor  
Subject: Help!

Hi there,

As I am preparing to go into my some of my second interviews this week, I discovered that the recordings from my last interviews are corrupt. The recordings (including but not limited to) cut out, repeat three seconds over and over and over, or cut into other interviews. I really don't know how to salvage this or move forward. I took some notes during the interview but lost some good content.

How do I move forward? Do I ask participants to re-answer some of the questions? I just don't know what to do....

The devastation I experienced when discovering that my audio recorder corrupted all of my interview files is indescribable. Panic-stricken and stunned with grief, I played what was audible over and over in hopes that it would magically go back to normal, reached out to any one that could help me recover my files, and thought of any possible

way to salvage what was lost. After researching the audio recorder for similar situations and potential solutions, it became quite clear that what had happened was a technological glitch quite common with this particular recorder, that others too have lost essential data, and that there was nothing that could be done to recover the files.

In retrospect, it is ironic that a project aimed at problematizing the privileging of orality in communication relied so heavily on an audio recording device to preserve data. Although I took notes during the interviews and kept a journal detailing key points or themes of what transpired, I depended on the recorder to accurately detail my conversations with participants and to aid in later transcription of the data for my analysis. Despite being absorbed with the several hours of sign language class, as both a student and researcher, prepping for interviews, in addition to taking a graduate level class, my “I’ll transcribe later” attitude, while understandable at the time, left me with nothing but regret.

Upon consulting with my supervisor, we both decided that I would carry on as usual, finish the interviews as I had planned, without indicating to my participants what had happened, and if they were willing, follow up with questions similar to what was asked in the first interviews. My main objective was to honor the commitment they had originally made and do my best not to anger them. The following day, I walked into the next class, completely disheartened, and did my best to carry on with a business-as-usual attitude. I did a pretty good job doing so, so I’d like to think, until Laura asked me how I was doing and did not take “I’m fine” as an adequate response.

In sign language, when someone asks how you are, by answering “fine” it immediately shuts down conversation and, by my own observation, goes against

pragmatic norms of ASL. The learning process of ASL, and the language more generally, necessitates sharing, emotional vulnerability, and in so doing, cultivates intimacy between signers. From the beginning, students were encouraged to sign their personal experiences and feelings about lived encounters. Doing so enabled fluidity between the signs and resulted in lived narration as opposed to memorized, rigid recitation. As a result, signers became invested in one another's lives and friendships were formed.

As friends and perceptive interlocutors, my fellow signers saw through my feeble attempts to pretend that things were okay and questioned me further. When I eventually shared what had happened, the students were empathetic, immediately got out their day planners, and informed me as to when they were available for future interviews. Six students who did not participate in the first round of interviews volunteered their time. Five of nine students who participated in the first round of interviews offered to re-answer similar questions in addition to the new set of questions (the other four did not continue with the course and did not respond to my attempts for final interviews). By the end of that week, eleven participants had (re)scheduled an interview time. A total of twenty interviews were conducted throughout the course (nine before the loss of my interview data and eleven after). Each interview was approximately one hour in duration and the new set of interviews were all-encompassing in asking all of the questions in one sitting as opposed to two. Moving forward, I decided to keep the previous interviews in mind when framing my thoughts around my research. However, the data that I use in my analysis chapters is a direct result of the new interview responses, my honesty with them, and their kindness.

### Negotiating the Ethics of “Friendship as Method”

In “Friendship as Method,” Lisa M. Tillman-Healy (2006) explores the interconnectedness of friendship and fieldwork and argues that friendship is not only a consequence of fieldwork, it is also a means to research. Arguing that friendship and fieldwork “are similar endeavors” in that “we must gain entrée” (276), Tillman-Healy explains:

Through authentic engagement, the lines between researcher and researched blur, permitting each to explore the complex humanity of both self and other. Instead of “speaking for” or even “giving voice,” researchers *get to know* others in meaningful and sustained ways.... Researching with the practices of friendship means that although we employ traditional forms of data gathering (e.g., participant observation, systemic note taking, and informal and formal interviewing), our primary procedures are those we use to build and sustain friendship: conversation, everyday involvement, compassion, giving, vulnerability.... Friendship as method is neither a program nor a guise strategically aimed at gaining further access. It is a level of investment in participants’ lives that puts fieldwork relationships on par with the project (277-9).

As a participant in this learning process, I got to know my fellow signers on a personal basis – and they me. At the point in which I lost my research, my participant observation included attending sixteen hours of class each week for several weeks; journaling about the day’s events, especially after class and scheduled interviews; joining additional study groups formed throughout the course; regularly meeting one-on-one with my signing partner(s) to practice and prepare for weekly tests; socializing at the campus pub most Tuesday and Thursday evenings throughout the duration of the course (and after!) with both students and instructors. On test days, students would arrive two or three hours before to “warm up” – which normally consisted of some preparation and practice but more (verbal) chatter. Moreover, every few weeks I would join some of the more advanced (and confident) first-year signers at Deaf socials, and during these events, while

we would socialize with Deaf signers, there was a tendency to keep close and sign among ourselves. Throughout the semester, social and academic aspects of class, and personal and professional aspects of my life, intermingled.

By spending time with these fellow signers every day, we not only became involved in one another's scholarship, we were present and sincerely invested in each other's daily life. The "total immersion of both our academic and personal selves foster[ed] multifaceted bonds" (Tillman-Healy, 2006: 281); I was afforded an opportunity to build relationships and openly reveal my personal and academic successes and failures. Participants and instructors were supportive of my project and genuinely asked me about the progress of my research. Moreover, they offered refuge and support after a greater loss: the passing of my grandmother. Indeed, my research was extensive and exhausting. However, it was also intimate and rewarding. I significantly improved my signing ability; gained a strong appreciation of this form of communication in use and the people using it; and I had a better understanding of my participants' motivations and responses. Moreover, because of my research, some members of this signing community "became (and remain) my best friends, my [signing] family – and I theirs. Our relationships ripple through every dimension of my life" (Tillman –Healy, 2006: 281).

In this case, friendship not only offered an unexpected solution to the circumstances surrounding the loss of my data, it, arguably, attributed to the extraordinary vulnerability in my participants' responses. As a result of the genuine bonds formed both in and outside of the classroom, and the openness necessary to converse using this form of language, the responses in my analysis chapters were presented honestly and openly. While such vulnerability offered exceptional content for

my analysis, as a result of these friendship bonds, I was required to constantly negotiate and critique my role as a researcher, student, sign language partner, and friend.

Describing this negotiation as an “ethic of friendship,” Tillman-Healy argues that as both friends and researchers, “we consider our participants an audience and struggle to write both honestly and empathically for them” and “strive to ensure that our representations expose and contest oppression” (2006: 280). As researchers deepen ties with participants, Tillman-Healy reminds that we must “navigate membership, participating, observing and observing our participating;” we must negotiate “how private and how candid we will be, how separate and how together, how stable and how in flux” (2006: 276).

The ethical negotiation of friend and researcher is revealed in my naming of participants, in the interviewing my participants and my subsequent analysis of their narratives, and in my interaction with them during classroom activities. Despite most students openly informing others about their participation in my study, I used pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of their honest reflections. The pseudonym names chosen for each participant were Anglo-American (to not reflect ethnic-minority status), gender-matching (as gender informs these students’ relationship to their own embodiment), and names of close friends or family members who – while not directly participating in my research – were instrumental in the realization of this project (to create a more personal account of what they said and best reflect my appreciation for these newly formed relationships).

Cautious of the role that friendship could play in the sharing of information, I ensured that participants were comfortable in disclosing what they wanted to share, that they had a choice to not respond to questions, without repercussions, and that they had up

to three months to withdraw any or all comments made in the interview. Friends may not reveal everything, especially if it was previously discussed or assumed that the other understands the context of the conversation. During the interview process, I mostly asked open-ended questions and urged participants to explain themselves further if they presumed my awareness to things or made vague references to events where I was present (or responses to their previous interview). Moreover, should they interpret a question in a way that I did not intend to ask, I allowed them to continue responding, without correction, to not influence their responses.

In terms of classroom activities, it became clear early on that I had to be a chameleon in terms of having to mimic the signing abilities of my target audience. I recall during the third class of the semester, I was signing with two other students when the instructor verbally called me over. While watching us sign, she had noticed that I had used a sign that – while applicable to the conversation and not advanced in terms of content – was not taught by her. Acknowledging that I did not intentionally undermine her curriculum, she did caution me to only use signs taught in class. She informed me that I had to be regressive in terms of my signing ability; that is, I had to “unlearn” what I had previously learned and pretend that I have the same skill level as other students.

Despite feeling uncomfortable with my signing ability before entering the course, I indeed was an advanced signer entering the class, and as I got to know some students, I noticed that some started to use me as an external source to help them with their learning experience. The learning experience within the classroom was immediately collaborative. As there was no textbook or learning resource outside of class, signers were expected to share knowledge and there was a level of trust that we would correct each other should

one person not know a sign or use it incorrectly. Students would approach me both in and outside of the class and ask me the signs for words, run their ASL phrasing by me, invite me to practice sessions, and even if I was not their signing partner, ask me about their content for upcoming tests. As an advanced student in a beginner sign language class, it required me to strip my previous signing knowledge, deflect where possible, and only use the signs and lessons taught in class.

As a friend and signing partner, my peers would trust that I would correct them, provide feedback on their signing ability. However, I was unable to fill in the gaps unless what they were asking was already taught in class. Despite the class having a collaborative component to the learning process, as a researcher, I could not overstep those bounds and I needed to let them struggle. These students took me in as a friend, as a fellow signer, as a signing partner. And yet, despite wanting them to succeed, my behavior as a researcher contradicted that. It indeed was a challenge to allow students to discover and experience the language on their own. By balancing these roles, however, the respondents' narratives are honest and, from my own experience, a genuine reflection of the learning process of ASL.

## Preview

This thesis builds on existing literature in communication studies by exploring how sign language, as an embodied form of communication, contributes to the complexification of communication studies. While several, often interconnecting, themes are revealed in discussions with my respondents, my three analysis chapters are structured around key rupture moments as a result of learning ASL: the dislocation that

hearing signers feel while being rendered speechless; the transitional (identity) spaces students occupy during embodied performances; and the disruption of privileged spaces when signers use this form of speech in public. By centering my dialogue and analysis around these themes, I explore how these communicative events shape the ways that *silence/speech, body/voice, and private/public* tensions are figured in communication.

In Chapter Two, I discuss the experiences of beginner sign language students as they wade through being in a ‘silent’ classroom. Chapter Three explores the negotiations students experience with their own embodiment as they move between their speaking and non-speaking worlds. Chapter Four examines the privileged spaces that signers occupy when making noise in public. In the concluding chapter, I put forward a number of themes emerging in this project. These themes involve questions about power relations, the ways in which dominant culture navigates disability, and the ways in which dominant understandings of communication other members of the Deaf community.

## **Chapter Two: Signed Happenings – Noisy Silence and Silent Noise as Communicative Events**

Walking into my first sign language classes, I encounter a handful of female students who are already sitting around large circular tables in the center of the room. Most of the women glance up from checking their phones, reading their novels, or rummaging through their bags to greet my existence with an unsure smile or curt nod, and then return to what they were doing, in silence. Not really sure where I should sit, I scan the room for a friendly face, ignore my usual tendency to sit away from other students, and plunk myself down right beside one of the students. I open up my notebook and survey the class, and after few minutes of restless quiet, one student ironically interrupts the silence by stating that she read the syllabus and saw that “we are not allowed to talk in class.” After a short pause to which no one seemed to want to respond, another student, while not directly responding to the no-talking comment, mentions that she didn’t know that the course outline was online and that she had not accessed it yet.

After a small group of women enter the room and settles in, a tall slender male, wearing a plain white t-shirt and blue jeans strides into the room, notices that the class is comprised entirely of women, freezes in place, then slowly asks, “I am in the right place... right?” A female student, recognizing the concern on his face, laughs, and lightens the room when she jokingly responds, “this is actually women’s studies.” Not really sure what to make of her comment, the male student shrugs his shoulders, settles in across from me, and as two other women enter the room after him, he sullenly states, “come join the party.” Instead of the two women joining the main table, they perch themselves on a table along the windows, whisper “hi” to the group of students, identify

themselves as teaching assistants, then proceed to ask the students about why they took the course and what other classes they are taking this summer. But before anyone can really answer, a petite red-headed woman walks into the room, flicks the lights on and off to get everyone's attention, waves to the teaching assistants, hands out a fingerspelling chart of all the letters, writes her name on the black board, points to herself, then back to the board, then proceeds to start the first lesson of ASL by fingerspelling her name slowly: the alphabet.

While it has been a few years since I last entered a classroom as a student, I did not anticipate – or perhaps I forgot – the labourious silence within this classroom. Understandably, most people are not very social in the early morning, and, especially if people don't know each other, I can imagine that it is difficult to strike up a conversation with a complete stranger. However, the awkward silence that clouded the room was inescapable; so much so that all I could do was scratch – and underline multiple times – “painful silence” in my notebook.

What was odd with this silence was that it was more noticeable in the first sign language class than in the second section of the course. Upon entering the afternoon class, more students were present, including a greater number of male students, and there was more chatter – albeit, a dim verbal chatter – among these students. As the initial introductions took place between students, one student turned around in her seat and asked the student beside me, “do you know what we were supposed to bring for this class? Is there a text book?” The woman next to me scoffed under her breath, “I think you already brought it. Just your body and your hands.” Even as the sign language instructor walked into the room and began to teach, the level of noise or conversation among

students did not dissipate and carried on throughout the first class of the second section of the course.

Perhaps the different tone can be attributed to the different seating and different sign language instructors in the two sections of the class. In the morning section there were fewer students sitting in a closed circle, where if one spoke, everyone would be privy to that conversation. The students in the second section were seated two or three per table, arranged in several rows, facing the Deaf instructor. Moreover, as was evident in my interviews with students, most students knew about the course and the instructor before class began – including the no-voice policy in the class, whether their instructor was deaf or hearing, and whether their instructor would be able to hear them if they broke the no-voice rule. It seemed that there was a conscious awareness – if not complete disregard – for the Deaf instructor and for maintaining an inclusive, “silent” environment. While this will be taken up in more detail in the fourth chapter, the enactment of Deafness in public – in addition to the assumption that an audience does not understand (or hear) what is being communicated – enables oppressive behavior. That being said, having such knowledge did not necessarily prepare these students for, or mitigate, the “problems” they experienced while learning sign language and while communicating.

The purpose of this chapter is to look at some of the communicative events that occur both within and outside of the ASL classroom, as these students waded through this course and grappled with learning a nonverbal mode of communication. In this context, the communicative events examined are the rupture moments where there is a perceived failure or a professed inability to communicate. Such breakdowns – including, interruptions, noise, and silence – are intrinsically informed by the varying presence or

absence of verbal speech, misunderstanding, and affectively, they invoke a strong emotional response. By exploring the supposed breakdown moments in learning a signed mode of communication – especially, the students' tellings of these moments – this chapter both highlights and enriches traditional understandings of – and “problems” within – communication.

In communication studies, and in society more generally, there exists an idealized narrative that conceptualizes communication as either dissemination or a dialogical exchange that necessitates and produces mutual understanding and togetherness. Accordingly, ideal communication is an end and a means to that end; it seeks an “accomplishment of interaction,” and through such accomplishment, it creates a utopian community where there is a “reduction or transcendence of differences” (Pinchevski, 2005: 7). Moreover, any and all barriers or interruptions to this communicative process are problematic and require repair. In effect, silence, interruptions, and noise are enemies of perfect communion, and as such, silences need to be immediately filled, interruptions need to be thwarted, and disruptive noises, compromising mutual understanding, need to be muted. In his evaluation of this communication model, Amit Pinchevski (2005) explains:

Modern communication models prescribe that proper transmission and reception of messages require subtraction of interruptive noise, that purging disruptive pollutants is crucial for maintaining the coherence of a message as well as for recovering its original meaning. A community adhering to an ideal of translucent communication would therefore be one in which members not only partake in the production and consumption of messages but also subscribe to a common endeavor of reducing the interruption of noise, babble, and silence (249).

In *Speaking Into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication*, John Durham Peters (1999) details the history of the idea of communication, critiques prevailing

understandings about what communication is, and provides another perspective by which to re-think “problem” communication. Peters argues that we have in effect distinguished communication as both “bridge” and “chasm” (5); meaning, communication is considered a path to real understanding or, as Pinchevski (2005) also identifies, miscommunication is a problem to be fixed in order to unify people. Instead of thinking of (mis) communication as a chasm that needs to be mended, Peters challenges how we think about miscommunication and asserts that it is through the “problems” in communication we can then begin to accept and appreciate our “unfixable” differences (266).

Accordingly, Peters maintains:

The problem of communication is not language’s slipperiness, it is the unfixable difference between the self and other. The challenge of communication is not to be true to our own interiority, but to have mercy on others for never seeing ourselves as we do (1999:266-267).

Instead of conceptualizing communication failures and breakdowns as something to be expunged or corrected, Peters challenges us to re-think and appreciate these communicative “problems” as they are revealing both of ourselves and others.

In his critique of modern communication models, Pinchevski (2005) builds upon the work of Peters (1999) and also reframes how we think about “problem” in relation to “successful” communication. Arguing that the “dream of successful communication” creates impossible binaries that need dislocating, Pinchevski maintains:

“Successful” communication is thus nothing but the expansion of the selfsame, its ideas, understanding and agenda. Once communication is centered around the subject, any resistance from “out there” hindering the incessant flow of messages to and from sender and receiver(s) would mean a “failure” that requires a “solution”. This brings modern communication theories to valorize identity over difference, selfsame over alterity, and understanding and sharing over misunderstanding and breakdown (2005:18).

Identifying the privileging in modern communication theories, Pinchevski calls on the displacement of these binaries and further argues that it is during communicative disruptions – or instances where communication fails, falls short, or even goes off track – that we learn about communication, our relationships with others, and our differences.

Basing my analysis on both Peters and Pinchevski's understanding of communication failure, I wish to examine, and perhaps trouble, the communicative events that occurred while learning sign language. Ultimately, the ASL classroom is unique in that it “provides a physical and conceptual space in which recurring issues and tensions of communication are revisited and reworked” (Hawson, 2005:20). I argue, more specifically, it provides a space where students are *set up to fail at communication*. Within this classroom context, silence is valued and oral communication is outlawed. As a result, there are observable ruptures between non-verbal and verbal forms of communication, where both breakdowns and breakthroughs in communication are prevalent, and arguably, heightened, and where the people who encounter these communicative breakdowns (or breakthroughs) are exposed. Not surprisingly, as students both experience and produce “problem” communication, they cling to the normative dream of communication. They cling to the ideal that by learning sign language, they will be able to perfectly communicate with the d/Deaf or hard-of-hearing, that the ability to communicate implies the ability for perfect understanding, that noise – in whatever form – is disruptive, and that silence – especially in the beginning – is uncomfortable void that needs to be filled.

### **The Desire to Communicate**

In American Sign Language, the sign for “hunger” is created by forming a letter “c” with your dominant hand and dragging it down the body, starting at the chest and ending with the stomach. While the use of this sign is body anchored and more commonly associated with a physical need for food or drink, the sign also signifies a metaphysical thirst, wish, craving, or desire depending on the context in which it is used. Interestingly, while interviewing the students, there are common narratives in terms of the reasons why these students elected to learn this non-verbal language. While responses did vary, at the very core of their responses, exists a desire or hunger to be able to communicate – thereby, highlighting ideal understandings about what it means to communicate. Indeed some students admitted to taking the course because they thought it would be an “easy credit,” that it would be “more fun to learn than French,” pretty girls were learning it, or that their increased facility with languages would amount to some sort of personal gain in terms of job employment or marketability. However, an underlying reason for taking sign language was so that they could maintain what Peters calls an ideal of communication: to “impart, share, or make common” (1999:7).

Upon detailing that her two reasons for learning sign language were because she is “passionate about languages” and has a “personal motivation” to better communicate with her two friends who are deaf and hard-of-hearing, Liz establishes sign language as her answer for less-than-ideal communication:

And so my one friend who is deaf, I mean, when it was just the two of us, we would mostly do miming or I could fingerspell. We would fingerspell or use pen and paper. I knew a few signs like ‘friend’ and stuff. But she would use signs but I wouldn’t understand them much...I wouldn’t know what she was saying. If I wanted to tell a story or ask a specific question, and if her parents were around to translate, that was always the best option because they could do it quickly.

Otherwise pen and paper...but pen and paper was so slow. It would get frustrating for both of us after some time (2010:1).

Understandably, Liz is frustrated because she couldn't always understand her friend or express herself fully and in a timely manner. While she was still able to exchange information with her friend by way of fingerspelling, pen and paper, miming, and relying on her friend's family to interpret what she wanted to say, she identifies the "problems" that these modes of communication carry and takes up sign language for a viable "solution" to reduce their difference (Pinchevski, 2005:18). For Liz, learning sign language was a means to "communicate better" with her friends in terms of ensuring mutual understanding and further developing or improving upon established relationships in her life. Sign language was her means for perfect understanding and her means for ensuring reciprocity.

In a similar ideal "process of reconciling self and other" (Peters, 1999:9), another student wanted to learn sign language to be "in the know" of what people were saying or to be included with what other people, especially her mother, were learning. The student explains:

When my mom was going through college...how old was I? I was eight when my mom was going through college. She wanted to help people that have developmental delays and some of those kids can't speak so she would have to teach them sign language. So she picked that up by taking a course and she would come home and I would see her practicing. I was like, "oh! What's that? That's cool" and then she would give me a little sheet of fingerspelling, or the letters, and every time she would do it, I would sit there and I would copy her then look at it and see what it was. Oh yeah! And at the end of it, she gave me a little pocket book of sign language so every now and then, I would open that up and start signing to absolutely nobody [nervous laughter] .... When I came here, I saw people signing and I was like, "Oh, that's so cool. What are they saying?" It has actually happened when I was younger too. I would see people signing and be like, "I want to do that! I feel so left out!" (Robin, 2010:1)

In this sense, learning sign language was a means to interact and relate to what her mother was learning, to be informed by what was being said around her, and to gain access to a larger community. Interestingly, Robin's desire for interconnection with another being (whether it be her mother and the people that she would see signing) demonstrates a dialogical understanding of communication. Not only does she identify solitude as a problem in terms of being "left out," Robin also demonstrates her unease, by way of nervous laughter, upon admitting to signing with "absolutely nobody" (2010:1). Accordingly, the possibility of communication is dependent on another being present.

Finally, some students expressed a desire to learn sign language in order for faultless interactive "exchange" or "reciprocity" to take place with someone from the Deaf community (Peters, 1999: 8). Upon encountering a deaf person in her work environment, Whitney describes:

I have been at work and have had a deaf person come in and I really wished that I could communicate with him. I knew that I couldn't talk to him because he signed to me right away. So I knew I wasn't going to try and talk to him because, well, what's the point? He was signing and I was like, "Oh, I wish that I knew...I wish that I could talk to him." I actually think I mouthed something to him but I felt bad that I couldn't talk to him and because I was at work, I was supposed to be serving him. I was supposed to be giving him the best service that I can but I was unable to do that because I couldn't talk to him. It would be so crappy to go somewhere and have somebody that doesn't even speak your language. I work at a movie theatre. And at the end, when we are done a transaction, I wanted to say "enjoy your show" but I couldn't even tell him that because I didn't know how to say it. So I just waved to him (2010:1, 3).

Defeated and frustrated with her inability to "talk" to and provide service for a deaf person, this student not only identifies communication as reciprocity or the ability to have a conversation with someone, she, despite waving to the patron, limits her understanding of communication to verbal communication. This communicative breakdown implies that good communication necessitates verbal exchanges and mutual understanding, that

being understood is the same as being heard and acknowledged. Moreover, because of her ideal understanding of communication, it presumes that should Whitney learn sign language, she would be able to communicate, or will want to communicate, with the d/Deaf or hard-of-hearing. It also presumes that they will want to communicate with her.

Interestingly, in the example above and the two that will follow, there is an increased awareness of the students' communicative privilege after these breakdowns in communication. Moreover, there is a belief that, should the student learn sign language, there will be reconciliation between the self and other or that privilege would be remedied. In describing his first experience meeting a deaf person at work, a male student explains his desire to sign:

I remember that a deaf person came into the [liquor store] before I started learning sign language and they were just writing down what they wanted and handing me that piece of paper. It took a while. After that, I wished I could talk to this person. I felt like I was being demeaning to them. But that was the only way that I could communicate with them at the time. It opened up my eyes I guess to this deaf world...that I kind of knew was there...but I didn't realize...I never really interacted with one before, right? So interacting with a deaf person made me feel...not better than them...but the fact that I had to give them tools so they can communicate with me, made me feel that they probably didn't like it or I was demeaning, unintentionally demeaning (Michael, 2010:6).

Even though Michael is able to use pen and paper to communicate with "one," he acknowledges that it was arduous to do so. Moreover, by having to provide the means for which the conversation took place, it was debasing for the deaf person, and arguably, uncomfortable for him.

Similarly, upon recognizing the "struggle" of his "very very very deaf" instructor when having to communicate through lip reading, Nick argued that he not only wanted to learn, there was a necessity to do so:

But when you first get up the guts, at least for me, to actually ask him a question through lip reading, you can see him struggle. It is not a fun experience. It is not like you and I where I talk and you nod and everything is getting through. I don't know if you understand what I am saying but you sure as hell look like you understand what I am saying. And you don't look like you are struggling hard to do it. He struggles hard to do it. And at least for me, because I am so sympathetic, that was a good enough deterrent for me to try doing that [lip reading] means of communication again. Which meant I *really* had to learn (2010:5-6).

While this student comfortably presumes that there is a mutual understanding in our interview, or in verbal communication more generally, his narrative identifies a requirement on his part to learn sign language to alleviate the “struggle” his instructor faced while “attempting” to converse. Within the telling of this struggle, a greater communicative awareness and appreciation is produced of the deaf experience and of the hearing person’s eagerness to connect and reciprocate.

While both Michael and Nick intend on learning sign language for a reciprocal exchange with the deaf that they encounter, their tellings of these ruptures posit hearing and non-hearing subjectivities differently. Deaf individuals are constituted as disprivileged “others” that lack communication and, if not in the presence of other deaf signers, they live in silence. The discourse in these narratives deny d/Deaf agency and presume that in order for mutual understanding to occur, the capacity – and therefore, the onus – resides with the hearing. These students not only assume that breakdowns in communication are problematic –thereby idealizing communication – they also presume that the problem of deafness, while it cannot be “solved,” is something that *they* can – and *they do* – overcome. Ultimately, power relations and hearing privilege are revealed in these communication breakdowns and the subsequent desire to better communicate with members of the Deaf community using ASL. Interestingly, as the fourth chapter

demonstrates, while students gain more facility with this language, their (privileged) narratives shift from that of communicative breakdown to communicative transcendence.

### **The Fallback of Sign Language?**

Have you ever seen two dogs fight? You know the smell? The smell of fear? It is the fear smell. We can smell theirs and they can smell ours but we can't smell [our own]. That is what that class was like. Maybe it was just me and maybe I am just very nervous ...but.... You go into Japanese and you are a little bit nervous. It is like, "oh this will be hard. I heard Japanese is really hard language to learn..." but it is not so different. It is nothing *so* different about what you are already doing. It is like, "okay, I don't know how to pronounce it. I don't know how to read it but that is what I am here to do." Even with a Japanese speaker that isn't particularly fluent in English, which is true for some of the teachers here, at least you can fall back because they live here. They've got to speak a little English. And they have been teaching here for a while so you know they have to speak a little English. You know you can fall back. And this [sign language class] is sort of like... I don't know what. I have no idea. I have seen him [the deaf instructor] lecture...but this guy is deaf. How do you fall back? How do you fall back?  
(Nick, 2010:5)

The sign language classroom provides a site in which there is an immediate collision between non-verbal and verbal modes of communication. In any classroom, there are communicative breakdowns or prolonged moments of silence. As the above quote demonstrates, in any second language classroom, there are moments of uncertainty and moments where students are concerned or a little nervous about their ability to communicate in the new language. Such moments are part of the learning process and are to be expected. However, in any other language classroom or environment where one needs to communicate in another language, verbal speech remains the primary mode of communication, and should misunderstandings occur, English (or the person's first language) is still expected to be a contingency plan, the "fall back," or safety net over silence.

With sign language and within the sign language classroom, however, these students are (temporarily) removed from the dominant model of communication. Because of the no-voice policy within the classroom, their “fallback” or communicative rug is ripped right out from underneath them as they are forced to express themselves by way of their bodies. Most students were aware of the no-talking policy within the classroom and some even knew whether their instructor was either Deaf or hearing. However, despite this knowledge, there is still some expectation that there would be a fall back, that instructors would still talk using English to introduce themselves, the class, and key concepts. As the following narratives will demonstrate, their experiences, in comparison to how they thought the first class would unfold, create powerful communicative events.

Upon asking students to tell me about their experience in class on the first day, students explain their experience and describe the atmosphere in the class as “intense,” “nerve-racking,” “terrifying” and out of “my own comfort zone” (Shawn, 2010:2). Moreover, during the class, some recount feelings of self-doubt and regret in their language class selection. Most students admit to wondering if there “is another elective that [they] can take,” questioning “how badly [they] want to know ASL,” or thinking about the consequences of “just walk[ing] out” of the class (David, 2010:10). One student explains:

I hated that day. First of all, when I came into class I was like, “Okay – definitely she’s not just going to just come and start signing to us. She’s going to be like, ‘okay – this is this, and this is that.’” But the professor comes in, she goes to turns on the lights and there is not a sound that comes out of her mouth. I freaked... my eyes came out of my head...like, “what am I going do? How am I going pass this course?”.... When I saw the professor just signing I was like, “what is going on? It is obvious we don’t know how to sign! Why is she coming in and signing to

us?" That day, I was like, "that's it; that's my last day. First and last day. I'm going to drop [this] class" (Kim, 2010:1-2).

The experience of this student exceeded mere first class jitters. Not being able to speak, or have any basis for understanding what is going on through verbal explanation, left students feeling unnerved, angry, and even terrified. While some of their initial concern was focused on their ability to pass the course or get a good grade, their recollection of the early classes is occupied with their inability to orally communicate and having to learn an entirely "new," silent, mode of communication.

The first day...um...I walked in and knew that I didn't know anybody in the class. It was kind of scary. But you walk in and you are excited because you feel like you are going to learn something new, and all of a sudden, the teacher walks in and he slams the door. And he's signing. And none of us know what he is signing. And all of a sudden, he speaks a little and says, "this is now a silent atmosphere; you cannot talk." And so, immediately you are terrified cause the one way you know how to communicate has been taken away. It was just absolutely terrifying. It's just like...I don't know...we had to start from scratch. I don't think I talked for like two hours after the class. Like, I thought it would be fun, learn our ABCs, but talk at the same time. So to have that one voice of communication taken away... and then you have to learn this alternate way of expressing yourself [gestures to hands] ...the body part that you take for granted basically, and just use for writing ...it was so different and kind of scary (Laura, 2010:2).

Aware that they have been totally removed from any semblance of a situation that they have been in before and that any communicative know-how has been stripped upon entering the classroom, these students are literally ex-communicated, and as a result, they must encounter their assumptions about communication and how people communicate. Both uncomfortable and fearful of having to communicate only using their bodies, the experience rendered these students initially isolated and frozen with speechlessness:

I was really nervous going into it at first because I didn't know anyone in the class. None of my friends were taking it or anything so when I got into the class, I sat beside...I actually don't know who I sat beside but I sat beside a friendly face....I remember that no one talked at all in the beginning. No one said anything because everyone was like, "what do we do?" [The instructor] walked in and everyone just sat there. She put up the alphabet and got everyone to try and learn

it. Everyone was really nervous. And then when we had our first break, everyone just sat there. No one left. Everyone just sat there and no one talked or anything because no one knew what to do (Whitney, 2010:1).

Despite voluntarily shutting off their voices by registering for this class, during this communicative rupture, students are left unsure and speechless. While these students are mindful of this bodily form of language, or as Laura indicates, “this alternate way of expressing yourself” (2010:2), their words and reaction to the inability to use their words demonstrates some deep-seated assumptions about language and voice. To be clear, these students presume language and voice as constituted not only through speech, but through spoken English. By students referring to spoken English as their “fallback” (Nick, 2010:34) or as the “one voice of communication” (Laura, 2010:2), they suggest a dominant model of communication. That is, these students establish sign language as an “alternate” to that of English and place the Deaf that sign as “Others” to those that communicate by way of spoken English.

Interestingly, this dominant model of communication also manifests when students discuss their “turn around moments” or reasons why they continued with the course. While some students contemplated quitting the class (David) and even go as far to describe their initial experience as their “first and last class” (Kim, 2010:2), some students remain in the class because of this sense of bewilderment or awe upon seeing or experiencing communication take place in this “alternate” way. Upon describing what it was like for her to see two people signing, Kim explains:

I was actually really amazed. I’m like, “that’s so cool [that] hands, ten fingers can do a whole language.” That was really cool. I never even knew there was such thing before, and then when I saw them, they were having a full on conversation and laughing and stuff. We use our hands, our facial expression, our voice, our tone of voice, our body language and then they just use their hands as their voice. That’s something really neat. It is something really really cool (2010:1)

Sincerely awestruck by seeing a conversation take place with “just the use of their hands,” this student appropriates “us” and “them” language to describe her respective experience with speech in relation to sign. Identifying the many components that help “us” verbally communicate, she complexifies speech with its supplementary components and reduces “them” and then objectifies “their” use of sign language to be less sophisticated, merely of the hands or fingers.

Upon describing the deaf instructor and his signing throughout the first class, David recounts:

I just remember ...like, the whole thing was just so cool. The signing. Him. I don’t know. I don’t know what about him is so cool. Just the whole experience. I am not sure I even talked to anybody in class. But, I remember leaving and being like “the coolest class I will ever take” (2010:2).

Overcome with amazement and fascination, David describes his experience of watching his instructor sign as a spectacle of the other. While this student did not know why he was so fascinated with the instructor and the course more generally, it seems as though his interest was result of watching a different mode of communication – however silent – take place. In a more detailed account, Laura concedes her limited exposure to difference and subsequent captivation from it:

I grew up in a really small town where there weren’t many varieties of people. The first time I noticed sign language was when I was working at a grocery store. A couple came through and the husband was deaf. So the wife was signing to the husband. And the wife was talking to me and communicating what I was saying to the husband. And for some reason, just the way her hands moved and the expression she had on her face, the way that the man received it and then the man could communicate back and react to what she had said, it was just fascinating. (2010:5).

Through this bewilderment process, these students are exposed to “other” modes of communication and the people that use them. Originally equating sign language as “primal” or akin to a childlike “natural affinity to play with our bodies, make noises, and

move our hands,” Nick distinguishes unintentional movement from articulated meaning, innate signing from “communication [as] something in particular” (2010:6-7). During the students’ exposure, however, they are challenged to rethink how they consider sign language and what they consider as “good communication” (Nick, 2010:6). As established in the above examples, good or ideal communication for these students is spoken English, and the end of such communication, accomplishes mutual understanding.

Indeed, sign language, and the communicative failures that result in learning sign language, influence students to begin to include this nonverbal language into their conceptualization of communication. However, these students are still fixed on the dream to be able to communicate and to perfectly understand what is communicated. Even though there is no “fallback,” these students remain in the course because they commune. That is, they experience the “explosive happiness when you understand something that somebody else communicates” (Nick, 2010:6). Nick further explains:

I don’t think you start noticing this thing until you start taking another language where you start off not understanding. And then you start noticing that you *are* understanding. And every time you understand, you get a little buzz of glee. And I think that glee happens whenever we are communicating. So based off of that notion, when I was listening to him, or when he was signing something to me, I would watch for that glee. And I trust the glee. I think the glee is right. I think the glee is your sign that you understood. Did I understand every connotation? No. I am not nearly fluent enough. I am not nearly practiced enough. But that is fine. Because most of the time you understand enough for communication to not breakdown....But there were times that I knew that I understood what he was saying (2010:6)

Upon describing his interactions with the instructor, Nick maintains the ideal understanding that the purpose of language and communication is mutual understanding. Moreover, he asserts that even though he is still a learner of the language, what is important in the process of communication is that it is removed from failure or

breakdown. What is apparent, however, is that these students still cling to the idea that in order for communication to occur (and for them to be part of such communication), mutual understanding is necessary and sought after. Yet, as the next chapter will demonstrate, because of these communicative breakdowns, these students come to learn about themselves, their peers, the Deaf community, and perhaps most surprisingly, they come to enjoy what silence brings while *embodying it*.

### **Speaking Silence, Silent Speech, and Visual Noise**

After the initial worry of not being able to communicate by way of speaking in class, there was demonstrated fear and frustration among students because of their inability to speak or use their voices within the classroom. Throughout the term, there were three visible in-class displays of students frustrated with not knowing the proper sign or having to fingerspell, sometimes lengthy, responses to the instructors' questions. On two of those occasions, the students snapped and shouted out "can I just say it?" within the class. On the third occasion, in response to multiple failed attempts to sign a question to her instructor, a student shrugged her shoulders, flippantly brushed her hands back and forth over each other to denote the sign for "no matter," and then returned to her seat, the question unanswered.

As new sign language learners, it is no surprise that students found the class – and the ability to keep their tongue-tied – "a struggle," "frustrating," and "challenging" (David, 2010:9). While like most new languages, there "is still that component that you are still trying to learn new things and they are not at your fingertips" (David, 2010:9). However, the fact that students try their best to not resort to using their voice to immediately communicate what they want to say – as doing so would be a show of

failure and draw unwanted attention to themselves by the instructors and their peers – makes this environment unique in terms of the inverted role that silence, speech, and noise play both in the classroom, and within communication more generally.

Constituting silence as the “imposed absence of speech and the theft of voice” (Acheson, 2008: 537), one student explains her frustration in not being able to use her voice:

It was frustrating. Frustrating. I've been for twenty years of my life using my voice. Well, not when I was one year old, but my whole life I was using my voice.... But when it came to this class it was like you can't. And it came to moments where I actually wanted to speak out but I remember in our ...syllabus that [the instructor] wrote down that you can't speak or whatever. There is no talking. There is no this. There's no that....It was so terrible cause I couldn't express myself; it is a whole new language. I don't know how to speak in sign. And she was asking us to express ourselves through that. The teacher would look at me. I'd ask a question and she wouldn't understand and I'd ask another question and she wouldn't understand. I'd try forming it in a different way and she wouldn't understand. I'm like, “Okay. Can I please speak?” She said, “no.” And it was just so frustrating. So I hated that. I hated it. I hated those days [laughs](Kim, 2010:3; 11).

While in this instance speaking out in class is a means to avoid the speechlessness or the frustration of being tongue-tied, the student understands her silence, and her frustration in being silent, to be in direct opposition to speech and imposed upon her. For this student, she was either silent (and unsuccessful at communicating what she wanted to sign) or she tried to speak (and potentially faced reprimand from her instructor). As with other students, Kim's understanding of speech *as* communication is evident in her explanation of her communicative options: she could either speak, unknowingly “speak in sign,” or keep silent (2010:3, 11). Either way, the expression of her metaphysical voice demands speech; speech is considered dominant in communication, and silence, for this student, was a frustrating, passive substitute, or the in between of speech.

In “Silence as Gesture: Rethinking the Nature of Communicative Silences,” Kris Acheson (2008) examines the interconnectedness of silence and speech, arguing that both are “inescapably intertwined” and both frame understandings of each other (535). Accordingly, both exist in “tension” and are traditionally understood as “an either/or pair of phenomena with very different faces that cannot co-occur” (Acheson, 2008: 536). Arguing that “silence can function semantically in its own stead and … it can carry meaning independent of unspoken speech” (537), Acheson expands current understandings of silence by arguing “that silence and speech, paradoxically, are parallel communicative events in addition to opposite poles of a binary” (543). By thinking of silence as parallel to speech, he argues that silences, then, also intentionally *mean* something and are *felt* instead of merely being heard:

Silence, too, is unavoidably an embodied phenomenon. We only know it to be present because we sense it, and I do not mean to limit this sensing to what we hear, for silence is more than heard. We feel it in our bodies. Silence produces emotional and physical symptoms in our phenomenal bodies, both when we encounter it and when we ourselves produce it. “Sepulchral silence,” “deathly silent,” and “silent as the grave”—such statements describe more than a lack of sound. A space that is intensely silent (especially in a society uncomfortable with the notion of death) is one that invokes a visceral reaction—certainly of acute attention but perhaps even of fear or claustrophobia—in its occupants (Acheson, 2008: 547).

For Acheson, not only can silence co-occur with speech, it can be studied as an embodied communicative event; it is actively created and can be studied in its own right (2008: 537). By considering silence as “filler” for or “in the absence of” speech, Acheson warns against reifying “the speech-silence binary and the primacy of speech within that binary” (2008:537). Acheson maintains:

These conceptual limitations placed upon silence result in limitations of our understanding [and] promotes the misconception that, unlike speech, silence is not actively produced. An apt metaphor would be a white canvas, visible before

paint is applied, of course, as well as in any spots the artist missed, intentionally or otherwise. The canvas, the silence, just *is*. It is the paint (speech) that requires human agency. Yet, what of silence that does not come naturally—biting the tongue, taking a deep breath and counting silently to 10? What of silence that we must train our bodies to produce—to listen intensely or extensively, to meditate? What of silence that defies cultural norms and/or power structures, such as refusing to speak a colonial language or to participate in oppressive discourses? While environmental silence-as-field does, of course, exist independently of human effort, conceptualizing all speech as active and all silence as passive would be amiss (2008:537).

His conceptualization of silence, including his interchangeable use of “speaking silence” and “silence speech” (2008:538), can be applied to the signed happenings or silences within the classrooms I studied. While “speaking silence” and “silence speech” are not entirely representative in conceptualizing what sign language is, sign language is a mode of communication where silence and speech conceivably co-exist. Moreover, sign language provides a means to examine the “unnatural” silence that Acheson speaks of within his parallel and oppositional silence-speech relationship. While silence may have been thought of as a necessity in order to follow the no-talking rule, the students had to break that speech-silent binary in their minds to grapple with the language. Most students demonstrated a deliberate attempt to communicate while being, and remaining, silent, however easy or difficult it turned out to be.

Acheson’s understanding that people “perform silences” (539), use silence as a communicative tool for expression, or that silence is a precise form of communication is reflected in the narratives of the students. There comes to be a level of comfort and enjoyment of the silence among some students. Moreover, some students even find that they are able to express themselves and their feelings “better” (Nick, 2010:7). When discussing her *doing* of the silence, Whitney explains:

It actually doesn't feel that weird doing it. I don't know. It is not natural for me because, obviously, I talk [notices the irony of the statement and laughs]. But it wasn't as unnatural of a feeling as I thought it was going to be. I kind of like it. It is a little bit of a break from your own voice, I guess (2010:2).

Laughing at her unnatural identification that speech is her dominant mode of communication, Whitney imposes a silent/speech binary when considering silence as being a welcome break from her own voice. For this student, silence is defined by the absence of speech. While such a distinction posits speech and voice in opposition to silence, she does begin to push back on the speech-silence binary in her acknowledgement that silence is something that she does or actively constructs. As such, silence is not done to her but something she actively does.

In a similar sense, the following two examples define silence as the absence of verbal speech. What is interesting, however, is their inclusion of noise in their responses and in their understanding of silence. Responding to his enjoyment of not-speaking, David first pauses then explains:

...[rolls fingers on the table and laughs]...lack of words...imagine that!...I don't know. I have always had this weird thing about speaking in front of people or in front of groups or...I don't know... in a group of people ...this is deep... When people are talking and I just want to say something to one person, I feel like I am drawing everybody's attention if I want to talk to that person. I want to have a private conversation – not a private conversation – I have something I want to say to *them* and if there is other people around, I draw attention as soon as I have to say something. So I *love* the not-speaking aspect or generally not-speaking aspect of ASL because, I mean, once you got their attention –which can sometimes end up drawing as much attention from everybody else anyway – but, once you get their attention, it feels subtle and discreet. You are signing back and forth, and yeah the signs are big, but I feel like it is more direct between you and that person you are talking to. And so, I like that part about not talking (2010:4).

Highlighting his enjoyment of the quiet and the intimacy it brings, David argues that signing creates a space in public where private or more personal conversations can occur. Even though he identifies sign language as a spectacle or, perhaps, noisy in terms of

drawing attention, signing is preferable so that he can carry out a one-on-one conversation. Indeed, David's presumption that others will not be able to understand his private conversation if he should publicly sign will be explored more in the fourth chapter. However, his understanding of silence and quiet in this context mutually informs his understanding of noise.

While quiet or silence occurs with the absence of verbal speech, he does not presume that the absence of speech entails the absence of communication. Moreover, it is during the quiet or silent conversation, that he provides another definition of noise. Rather than conceptualizing noise as disruptive incoherent sound, he shifts his understanding of noise to include incoherent, but still communicative visuals. For David, quiet depends on the person's role or visibility in terms of the spectacle. Moreover, as evident in my noticing of David's rolling his fingers over the desk while he experienced a "lack of words," it is in this "silent" space that we become attuned to what is (un)said and the visual or auditory noise that is present.

ASL classrooms are a joy to be in for that very same reason. The noise level is significantly lower than other classrooms and it is a pleasure to be in the quiet. Especially, being in the quiet with a flurry of communication going on. Because, I really like to communicate...and I love their ideas and thoughts and so on...but the noise... I can do without the talking (Nick, 2010:9).

While understanding noise in a traditional disruptive auditory sense, Nick echoes David's thoughts and states that his level of enjoyment is linked to the ability for communication to occur within the silence. Most importantly, these students are aware of the silence – or the noise – that they make, especially if their signing fails them.

While comparing the signed classroom to other language classrooms, Liz seemingly highlights the visibility of sound within the ASL classroom. While any

speech-act would typically be drowned out by noise within a verbal language class, sound within the signed class cannot only be heard, it is seen. According to this student:

... I think it was more frustrating than learning another language. I am going to compare it to learning another language, like Italian or German, because we might be having mini-conversations, you know, me and my classmates, in Italian or German, but we can throw in English sort of quietly and maybe the teacher wouldn't hear (which that could be cheating or could be whatever you want to call it). Whereas, in this class, any speech-act : a) is going to be heard by other students or by the TA and ; b) is going to be seen by the teacher. So it's almost like it is more noticeable. If you are teacher in Italian class ... everyone is in partners or in groups of three and they are having a conversation, you are not necessarily going to hear all the English that is happening. There is a dim sound. Everyone is talking all at once, right? So I feel like there is more flexibility with those other languages. You can throw in some English. It is more lax. Whereas, in the ASL class, you are really not supposed to use your voice. So that was a challenge. It, at times, was frustrating because you can't express yourself fully (Liz, 2010:4).

Describing the restrictive use of voice in the ASL classroom as challenging, and perhaps, unnatural, the student identifies loudness or the communicative noticeability of sound in a silent classroom as both audible and visual – thereby challenging what it means to be noisy or quiet. Similarly, understandings of silence and noise are revisited when Robin, who was late in registering for the course, considers the signed happenings going on around her, including her overwhelming lack of understanding, to that of this deafening, visual noise:

I went in thinking that every one was going to be way ahead of me. I am going to be the little foreign kid in the room and not know *anything* . So I went in and people were signing to each other and I would sit there. It wasn't like I was watching the daughter and the father signing, or son...whoever it was... It was like I was thrown in and people were signing all around. And it's what they call "noise," right? To me, it all looked like noise. I had no idea what was going on. So to me, I was completely lost. It was like trying to understand someone who came from different country, trying to speak English for the first time...and you are not quite sure what they are trying to say. You *don't* know what they are trying to say at all, really. ...So all the signing to me was like that. I was looking at their faces so I could sort of infer their face, like happy or sad, but everything

they were saying about being happy or what made them happy or sad, I had no idea what was going on (2010:2).

Unlike Robin's experience in seeing two people signing with one another as communication, her first classroom experience is compared to being the "Other" within the classroom and having no ability to discern overwhelming "noise" from that of "communication." Despite being in a "silent" environment with communication going on all around her, this student deems such happenings to be both isolating and noisy in her inability to discern what is going on. Moreover, noise, in a cybernetic sense, is being construed as disrupting effective communication and understanding.

Interestingly, while sign language is often identified as nonverbal, a "silent" communication or "silent speech," noise and sound are actually used within the language to articulate meaning. As one student articulately describes the role of sound within the language, he defines sign language as being:

Communication without speaking. Whatever the mode, it is just not speaking. And I specifically don't say without sound because it does have sound. Regardless of whether the people using it can hear the sound or not, sounds are important. For certain signs, you have to make that noise, no matter how silly they may sound to you, to make your face and your mouth do the right thing. So there are sounds in it but the sounds are not the important part. (Nick, 2010:13)

Sound in sign language is meant to create a certain visual noise or visual expression on the face. Without the use of audible noise allowing for the mouth or face to be a certain way, the meaning of a sign changes, even though its movement and hand shape may be the same.<sup>9</sup> Essentially, sign language is a communicative practice where both silence and speech, as Acheson professes, are both in opposition to each other and co-occur (2008). Instead of thinking of sign language as purely "silent," nonverbal, or in opposition to

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<sup>9</sup> For example, signing "success" and "finally" both entail pointing the index fingers at the chin and then moving the fingers in an arc out and away from the body. The meaning of the latter sign is produced upon making a "pah!" sound with the mouth.

speech, the use of noise and quiet within sign language – and within communication – are intentional and do carry meaning.

## Conclusion

While the normative dream of perfect communication pushes these students to continue with the course, they begin to welcome and re-think what they deem to be “problem” communication and they begin to include silence and noise in their conceptualization of communication. As these classroom interruptions demonstrate, silence and noise are actively constructed, are both communicative, and simultaneously occur. Moreover, in moments where there is an absence of verbal speech, or in moments where dominant understandings of communication momentarily fail or breakdown, there seems to be an attunement to, or an increased awareness of, the doing of silence and the making of noise.

The juxtaposition of noise and quiet within the sign language classroom provides a means at examining what about silence “is akin to, as well as opposed to, speech” (Acheson, 2008: 538). More broadly, these rupture moments create a space for communication studies to consider what these communicative silences (and noises) mean, including who or what does them. Indeed, my respondents initially suggest that there is no “fallback” or recourse to the supposed silence that corresponded to learning this visual language. However, at their first experience of silence, they begin to seek unspoken ways to rectify their communicative impairment. These students are “signaled by a pressing ‘feeling,’ an urgency to find words, a summation to develop ways of expression that do not yet exist” (Pinchevski, 2005: 233). While their narratives implicitly suggest the inclusion of silence and noise into a broader understanding of communication, in the

context of my participants' summations, it becomes clear that the doing of, and subsequent attempts to mitigate, silence and noise has social implications. It exposes privileges that exist in communication and further reveals how (hearing and non-hearing) subjects are determined by their ability to communicate by way of spoken language.

While these students are set up to fail at communicating in the removal of verbal language, their narratives suggest that they perform silence, and if need be, they can still fallback on spoken English. Indeed, these reactions seem to posit sign language – including the individual that uses said language – as an ineffective alternate. However, as Pinchevski (2005) suggests, these privileges can be re-framed if speech or verbal languages were not delineated as communication but merely an instruments of it (233). By encompassing other communicative forms in understandings of communication, it asserts a “political commitment to expose politics to the horizon of alterity, to preserve a space for articulations [and people] that do not conform to restrictions imposed by dominant discourses” (Pinchevski, 2005: 235).

As I will go into more detail in the next chapter, rather than fight against the presence of communicative “failures,” students begin to negotiate their presence, and at times, revel in it. By understanding communication as an embodied performance, the “problems” of communication are not only be included in understandings about communication, they are seemingly valued.

### **Chapter Three: Embodied Negotiations: Voice, Body, and Shifting Performances**

To view communication as the marriage of true minds, underestimates the holiness of the body (Peters, 2001:270).

In dominant understandings of language and communication, the voice and body are figured in different, if not oppositional, ways. More specifically, voice is privileged; it is extracted from the body and weighted within communication studies as *the* primary mode of communication. Essentially, the term “voice” is used in two senses. First, “voice” is often interchanged with speech or is used to describe a person’s physical ability to speak. Second, ‘voice’ is construed to denote agency or any empowered (verbal) expressions of identity. Representative of Cartesian mind-body dualism, the capacity for language and the ability to verbally articulate one’s thoughts is a mindful process. That is, the voicing one’s self or interiority is introspective, controlled, and done in spite of the “unruly” body. While bodies do impart communicative meaning, in terms of either supporting or betraying that which is said, such bodily displays are deemed “natural,” “irrational,” or “unconscious” gestures that require regulation in order for effective (verbal) communication to occur. Thus, “if the mind is rational and the site of agency and transcendence, then the body must be irrational and the site of passivity and immanence” (Ahmed, 2004: 287).

In *I See a Voice*, Jonathan Ree (1999) argues that “metaphysical notions about the human voice” in Western philosophy influence normative attitudes toward the deaf and deafness more generally (382). Tracing the philosophy of the voice and its relation to speech, the body, and the senses, Ree maintains that our subjectivities and bodies have been defined by our preoccupation with hearing and speech. Arguing “it is primarily

through the voice that people make known their inwardness;” voice is identified as the key instrument for the outward expression of identity and human emotion (1999: 60-61). Beings become social through voice, (in)validated through hearing, and bodies are material containers of the mind, the will, and the voice that need to be overcome.

Each of us, we imagine, is essentially a self or soul, contained by our bodies like wine in a bottle, or cooped up inside our heads like a poor bird in a little cage. We think that we are essentially an inner self, and conceive our emotions as accumulations of energetic animal spirits, which, if we do not discharge them regularly, will build up inside us until the pressure can no longer be contained. Or we picture ourselves as vulnerable little creatures who can either stay cowering apprehensively within our bodies, or stiffen their resolve and step out boldly into the dangerous traffic of the real objective world (Ree, 1999: 58).

Without rational voice or our “resolve” over bodies and emotions, we are disengaged from the social world and are deviant subjects that lack bodily control.

As subjects are constituted in their ability to verbally and rationally communicate with their social surroundings, Ree maintains that we learn about voice through those that are presumed not to have it. For Ree, the “phenomenon of the voice can be approached by way of the history of voicelessness – of the experience of the mute or the dumb, that is to say, or more accurately the deaf” (1999:8). Questioning the extent that we have transcended these normative understandings of voice and the people that “lack” it, Ree suggests that such attitudes and understandings of voice in relation to bodily gestures remain unchallenged. Accordingly, “many language theorists continue to insist on a fundamental discontinuity between nonverbal communication and language” (Shanker, 2000: 98). The placing of the capacity for language and voice in direct opposition to the body or nonverbal communication reduces the significance of the body to its mere physicality, devalues the role that the body plays within communication, and positions “voiceless” bodies as disembodied, lacking, others.

ASL offers a specific example in which this voice-body relationship is inverted. In order to communicate with sign language, the use of facial and gestural expressions is more important for meaning-making than oral/aural sound. The body, rather than verbal speech or voice, facilitates the articulation and enactment of identities. In effect, sign language, as an embodied form of communication, challenges the idea that the metaphysical voice is housed in verbal speech, that speech is required to have a voice, and that speech is necessary to articulate or communicate thoughts, ideas, meaning, and identities. At the same time, sign language further challenges the idea that, in order to understand meaning, and further validate people expressing that meaning, the ability to hear is necessary.

The process of learning sign language and the “voicelessness” that each student experiences not only provides a means to learn about voice – and thereby challenge its preoccupation with speech and hearing – it offers a way to refigure the body in communication. As students “turn off their voices,” learn to communicate by way of their bodies, then actually communicate with them, they shift their understanding about what sign language is, and what it means to sign, and what it means to be communicative. They begin to identify their bodies not as barriers to communication but vehicles for communication to occur. Some students even go as far as defining the body *as* communication.

Interestingly, this negotiation of voice and body is evident in my respondents’ discussions of whispering, talking with their hands, and their use of body shifting to tell stories in sign language. By exploring these three communicative practices, this chapter will demonstrate that these students not only expand their definition of communication to

include the body, they identify signed communication as being both *embodied* and *performed*. While the students refer to performance in the theatrical sense by arguing that sign language necessitates the use of the body, facial expressions, and both the *display* and *feeling* of emotion, it is clear that these students experience their bodies and embodiment as *performative*. Not only do these students enact social roles, through greater awareness and further practice of sign language, they suspend, if not begin to resist, the roles that are inscribed on them and their hearing, gendered bodies. As students shut off their voices and learn to communicate by way of their bodies, they figure the body as both a social canvas and a paintbrush for them to (re)sketch their own subjectivities.

### **PSSSST! Whispering “Communicative Relief” and “Communicative Limbo”**

As students learn to sign and use their bodies within the classroom, they unsurprisingly experience difficulties with not using their voices to communicate. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, students would initially speak out in frustration because they were unable to get across what they wish to say. However, as sign language instruction progresses, such verbal outbursts in the classroom are replaced by the use of whispering. Indeed, the role of the whisper in the classroom also presents as a sense communicative relief for students, in that they briefly whisper when they cannot express themselves with sign. However, it also reveals a physical state of limbo, an interruption between, and negotiation of voice and body, as students navigate between speaking and non-speaking worlds.

Upon asking students if they speak in class and under what circumstances they do so, some students describe speaking verbally during particular classroom lessons (such as

complicated theory, grammar lessons, or lessons in Deaf culture) where speaking is encouraged by their hearing instructor. In addition to these lessons, many students identify speaking in class when they need to express a thought or idea that they do not feel capable of doing in sign language. David describes his use of voice within the classroom:

There are times when I sit far enough from [the teacher] where I can get away with something. But it is usually in the context of “okay, so what does this mean” or something that feels completely out of my ability to sign. I think if I thought I could communicate everything that I wanted to say in sign, then I would. But there are lots of those things that you just like, “ah this isn’t going to happen …psst psst psst psst [makes whisper sound] …” and then go back to signing or something (2010:3).

While David explains his desire to communicate exclusively with sign language, he takes a matter-of-fact perspective when it comes to speaking in the classroom. Accepting that speech within the class is inevitable, he rationalizes its use, inserts it where necessary, and then moves forward with his use of sign. His use of the whisper is during a communicative blip, or in between signing and speaking, and during circumstances that he controls. What is interesting, however, is his re-telling of these moments is done in a very unemotional fashion – especially, in comparison to the next female student – and he presumes that as long as he is out of earshot of the instructor, his voice cannot be heard or seen.

Upon describing her “relief” after another student spoke out in class, Kim explains her shared desire to speak:

I remember there was this one girl [who] did not know how to express herself. I think she was new to Canada. She didn’t know how to express herself and she did not understand what we were doing. She would speak and then the professor would be like, “No – speak [sic] in sign language.” I would look at her and I’m like [whispers], “don’t talk! Your mark is suffering.” But at the same time when she spoke out I felt a relief cause she was speaking for all of us. We were all

feeling the same feeling. So when she spoke I felt like I was speaking. It was a sign of relief for me because there [were] questions inside that were burning me that I wanted to ask, but I didn't know how to ask it. I had no knowledge of sign language to ask that question and [the instructor] wouldn't let us speak. I don't know what the concept was of us not speaking, so I was just sitting there frustrated, my blood [was] boiling and I'm like, "ok – how do I ask this question? What do I do?" I'm just moving my hands randomly (2010:3).

In the re-telling of this story, Kim restrains herself but compromises by substituting a sympathetic whisper for verbal speech. Understanding that speaking in class might affect her or others' grade, her "burning" questions are kept inside. As a result, her blood boils and she is both frustrated in her inability to express herself and somewhat relieved at someone else having done so. In this instance, Kim's use of the whisper demonstrates her implicit negotiation of mind or voice over that of her body. While she still speaks out in some capacity, the whisper for her is a controlled compromise, a justifiable noble act, before returning to silence. Upon referring to her signing as irrational, random movements, she naturalizes her body and further privileges the faculty of speech over the use of her body to communicate. Moreover, she maintains mind-body dualism by implying that her emotions stem from her (female) body and must, as Deborah Lupton (1998) asserts, "be subject to greater mental control" (88). In this context, her "use of language recalls the dam metaphor, where the body is conceptualized as an inner, fluid, or gaseous mass of emotions that are held back by the external skin and the will" (Lupton, 1998: 90-91).

The above two examples frame the use of the whisper as providing communicative relief to those unable to articulate something with sign language. While this level of frustration in learning any new language is expected, what my research did not anticipate was the repeated use of the whisper for students transitioning between their speaking and non-speaking worlds. As students become more comfortable

communicating with their bodies in a nonverbal environment, and more comfortable with the quiet, their moving between the signing classroom and their everyday lives requires negotiation.

While Kim found the non-speaking aspect of the class difficult, it is noteworthy that her struggle is not limited to her classroom learning experience:

As soon as I left sign language class – I went to some place, someone's office. I could not say a word. I was literally speechless. The girl was looking at me she's like, "how can I help you?" I'm like, "I wish I could say something." I am actually out of words and I was trying to sign to her and I was really hoping she would understand what I was saying and I was trying to get my hands out there with no sound and she's like, "take your time." She thought I was an idiot because I was going crazy trying to get my words...Because I have this restraint in class I can't say anything and when I came out [of class] I have to *not* use sign language. I have to speak. And it was so frustrating trying to get out of that mode. And she's like, "take your time." And I'm like [whispers], "I just came out of sign language. Please, please just bear with me" (2010:12).

Explaining her internal dialogue as if she actually said it out loud is interesting in and of itself, as it attributes a literal voice to her internal motivation, Kim emphasizes the difficulty in transitioning between the two spheres. Again, she is understandably concerned about how she is perceived – especially when she is flailing her body and senselessly trying to express her thoughts through words. When she is finally able to say something, anything, she whispers as a means to mitigate the tension in transitioning from seemingly erratic nonverbal to verbal communication and to control or limit her embarrassment.

The transitional stutter is evidently stressful for the above student, as she is concerned about how others are assessing her (in)ability to express in either language. While Kim is more concerned about how she is being perceived externally, the following three examples demonstrate an internal desire to extend the signing experience outside

the classroom and blur what students perceive as very distinct signing and non-signing worlds. As Laura explains:

When you get out of the classroom, especially if you are walking with people from the class, you instinctively want to sign. You don't want to talk...and if you do talk, you are very quiet. You get so comfortable in that environment that you just want to keep it going. Yeah... it does follow you. A lot. (2010:11)

Understandably, her desire to sign is partially dependent on the presence of her classmates and relating her signing experience with the other people she is learning with. In this instance, Laura would rather keep her signing going, but if that is not possible, whispering or quiet talk is preferable over "regular" talk. Even as Laura identifies her preference to sign, however, she maintains the mind-body split by understanding the body as innate and natural. Regardless of the people Laura is around, she naturalizes signing and the use of her body as "instinctive" and "comfortable." Moreover, despite an evident appreciation of sign language, she describes her signing body as something that follows her, instead of being embodied in her.

The naturalization of the body and of gesture is also highlighted in Nick's discussion of transitioning from the classroom into his everyday life. After stating that the quiet of ASL classrooms are a "joy" to be in, Nick discusses leaving the signed space as something that he liked least of learning sign language.

What I actually find, the transition for me... is actually stopping signing. It is very natural for me. I am a hand talker. I have always been a hand talker, from the point of view when I speak in spoken language, I always move my hands and my body. So doing everything through that is very natural for me.... I leave the class then I see people outside and they say hello...and it takes me some time a few times to realize that I haven't stopped signing when I leave the class. So there would be a three-hour period where I would not hear the sound of my own voice. And then I would suddenly start speaking to someone and I would go [speaks in a lower register], "Oh. That's weird." Because you do hear your own voice when you are speaking ...and I like the quiet of my voice not being there (2010:9).

Declaring himself a “hand talker” and referring to his use of gesture as something in addition to speech, Nick naturalizes his use of his hands and body and maintains a speech-body distinction. While the notion of talking with one’s hands will be discussed more in the following section, it is interesting that through his enjoyment of the quiet and the extent that he uses his body to communicate, Nick re-affirms that bodily modes of communication – however, conscious – are deemed “natural.” Moreover, by describing his use of speech as being “weird” indicates, he is re-imagining what is “natural” and “unnatural” both in relation to the body and what he accepts as be dominant forms of communication.

Mirroring Nick’s feelings of unease when speaking outside of the classroom, Liz also begins to expand her understanding of voice in relation to her body. It is through moments of tension, moments where she and her fellow classmates whisper, that Liz becomes aware of her voice and grapples with what voice means.

I am constantly more aware of my hands, for sure. Even at break and stuff, and I have talked to other students about this, we are on break and leave the classroom and we are still quiet. We say [whispers] “whoa, it is so weird to use our voice right now”. So if you think of voice as an element of your body in that way, I am more aware of my voice. When I choose to use it. When I am not using it. So it has become more of a thing I can turn on and off. I am more conscious about it. But, not a hundred percent, I mean, we are kind of forced to turn it off in the classroom, and sometimes you forget and you do speak English, and so on that level it is unconscious, but then there is those trips to the bathroom and outside the classroom where we are like “whoa, it’s so weird” [whispers] (2010:13).

Interestingly, this response about voice arose after I asked Liz how she felt about her body while learning sign language. The explicit use of her body while signing makes this student more conscious about what her hands do. It muddles *mind/body*, *voice/body*, and *conscious/unconscious* understandings in communication. Considering her voice as being part of her body, Liz implies that her voice is more connected to her body, if not

embodied, and that both voice and body are consciously controlled. Through its use, these students become more aware of the body, how it communicates, and the extent that the voice is disembodied.

### **Less Say, More Do: Hand Talking and Body as Communication**

As an outcome of learning sign language, many students claim that they use their hands more when speaking, or in the very least, they are more aware of doing so. Defining “talking with their hands” as adding emphasis, movement, or an addition to what they are verbally saying, their understanding of what hands do while verbally speaking reflects most of the literature on gesture or body language. That is, their musings over hand talking adopt gesture and body language as being natural, unconscious, and secondary to speech production. Upon further discussion, however, it becomes clear that these students disagree with reducing understandings of sign language to be merely “hand talking” or “hand speak.” After asking these students if the phrase “talking with their hands” can be used to describe sign language, all students conclude that there is much more to the language than speaking with one’s hands. While some students do initially agree that sign language is a language that uses just hands, those students during their interview retract their previous statements and add other elements that comprise the language.

For these students, the practice of sign language is less about hands, more about facial and body expressions, and most surprisingly, they mostly compare sign language to acting or theatre. As this section will explore, through discussing whether “talking with hands” best explains sign language, students identify what sign language is through what it is not. Moreover, students not only recognize the importance of the body to

communicate, they define communication as an embodied performance. Their responses indicate that these students not only experience their embodiment differently, they understand the process of learning sign language as a means to perform and resist their culturally inscribed identities.

During the interviews, some students admit that while they didn't talk with their hands before, they do so "a whole lot more," "big time," or they "can't stop from using [their] hands" since learning to sign (Michael, 2010: 4; Jessica, 2010:4; Kim, 2010: 5; Liz, 2010: 13). While taking sign language, they become more aware of when they use their hands when speaking and assert that they are more aware about the extent that their hands signify meaning. Upon describing how he came to know that he uses his hands to supplement what he says, David explains:

... Normally, I am not much of a hand talker. Sure, if I get excited, it gets bigger. Although, I have had my friends point out that I am using my hands more now. And it is hard to analyze what I am doing with my hands, like if I am saying 'good' whether I do the sign for "good," but I am definitely incorporating the spatial aspect of the language, like pointing to locations with my hands. But, yeah ... my friends have definitely pointed out the fact that I am using my hands to help tell the story. And they think it is funny because I never did that before (2010: 5-6).

Implying that using hands when speaking emphasizes what is being said and reveals emotion, David – or David's friends, rather – notice an increase in the amount that he uses his hands to communicate. What is evident in this instance, and the three examples to follow is an increasing awareness that the movements their hands make actually mean something. While David is uncertain if he in fact signs when he speaks, he does indicate that when he gestures or points, it is intentional and shares meaning. Similarly, Laura shares how movements that she makes with her hands are more controlled and are significant:

Well, now I know that, like, the movements I make with my hands when I talk...now they have meaning to someone else. Before, it would be like one hand would fly this way and the other would fly that way. I would make weird movements but now, I know the words that relate to the signs so I make the signs. I don't know. I guess it gives a feeling to me that I am understanding what I am saying even if the person I am talking to doesn't (2010:2).

For Kim, however, her experience with using her hands to communicate is a cultural one. In her culture, people would talk with their hands – even when “they are on the phone or if there is a wall between two people” – as it “is the number one thing in [their] communication” (2010:6). Revealing that she thought sign language would be an easier transition because of the extensive use of her hands in her first language, Kim thought of sign language as an immediate transfer of the cultural practices she grew up around. However, rather than “throwing [her] hands out [to] emphasize things,” she distinguishes sign language from that of hand talking by stating that she took sign language “to know how to control [her] hands” (5-6). For Kim, using hands in sign language is intentional, conscious, and controlled – as opposed to how she uses her hands when she communicates in her first and second languages. While she has always been aware of her hands moving while she speaks, her hands now have communicative value. Instead of just “flailing [her] hands,” she would use her hands to “sign some things out and [others] would actually get it” (5).

While most students share that they believe that they sign or hand talk more now than they did before learning sign language, Nick argues that it is “quite the opposite, in fact” (2010: 9).

I am a hand talker. I have always been a hand talker, from the point of view when I speak in spoken language, I always move my hands and my body. So doing everything through that is very natural for me. Once I started figuring out ....I was taught explicitly that you have to be careful with what you do with your hands because there really is no such thing as a random hand movement. So I don't

really talk with my hands anymore when I am speaking. Unless I am becoming very heated about something, then they come out because it is sort of expressing emotion through my hands. But, no...it is much much less (2010: 9).

Even though hand talking is “natural” for this student, this example perfectly illustrates how students are reconsidering the role that the body holds in communicating and the role that emotion plays in gesture. In addition to their greater awareness of when they use their bodies to communicate, the students’ discussions about hand talking exposes their assumptions that bodily movements when partnered with speech are secondary, unconscious, erratic, and intuitive. Upon learning a nonverbal language, however, they imagine that bodily movements do in fact carry meaning – irrespective of speech being present.

While discussing whether or not they talk with their hands, the students identify what sign language is in relation to both speech and gesture. Hand movement carries meaning even if such movement emanates from the body. They see their bodies not as supporting or betraying what their voices say, but as actively participating in culture and communication. When asked if they feel that the phrase “talking with hands” best describes sign language, students explain that there is “so much more” to the language. Explaining how she understands the phrase, Whitney distinguishes signing from that of gesture:

I guess to just use your hands while you are talking. The English perspective, I guess, is to use your hands while talking. But talking with your hands for a person that is [deaf] would just be signing. I think that sign language is more than talking. It is more than a way of communicating. It is actually part of their culture. So I feel that saying “talking with their hands” is a bit of an understatement when it comes to sign language. You do more than just use your hands. There is facial expressions and everything. There is so much more to it than just using your hands (2010:3).

Even though Whitney delineates speech as English, thereby positing one verbal language above others, she makes an interesting distinction. Instead of interchanging signing for talking, as many students did throughout the interviews, Whitney extends her understanding of sign language to be a cultural and distinct nonverbal mode of communication involving various forms of expression.

In a similar fashion, Robin differentiates signing from speaking and deaf from hearing understandings about the language. Although Robin demonstrates a richer awareness of what sign language is, she admits that when she explains sign language to other (hearing) people, she uses “talking with hands” as a descriptor.

If they have no idea what it is, I have done it before. Some one asked me at Carleton “what do you mean sign language?” I said, “You know, American Sign Language?” and they said, “no. I don’t know what that is.” I said, “well it is a language” and they responded, “what is it though?” …so I said, “talking with your hands. When someone is deaf or hard of hearing, they use sign language. They talk with their hands because they can see it and they don’t need to hear you.” And then they go, “oh okay! I understand.” But I have a feeling that if I said that to someone who was deaf or hard of hearing, they would be insulted. To them, they wouldn’t even consider it talking. It is called American Sign Language. It is signing and not American Talk Silent Language (2010:4).

Aware that her detailing of American Sign Language is insufficient and that it knowingly gives credence to orality, Robin perpetuates common understandings that sign language can be compared to speech and is akin to “talking with the hands.” However, even as she frames sign language in relation to oral speech, she is reflecting on her privilege. Like Whitney, Robin demonstrates that she is rethinking these assumptions by implying that there is “more” to ASL than it being just silent talk.

Similarly, in his definition of what sign language is, Shawn initially states that sign language is a language done “ all with your hands” (2010:2). Originally thinking that ASL is a language that stems “right out of English” (2), his understanding of sign

language changes throughout the interview to be a separate language that combines “hand motions, facial expressions, and body language [for] communicating with other people” (4). Upon considering what sign language is not, Shawn along with other students open the dialogue as to what it actually is.

If someone was referring to ASL as talking with your hands in that classical sense, it does minimize the language. To just say “talk with your hands” you leave out the expressive nature of it. Your face, during all of that, that conveys that much more information. Yeah, despite the fact you are using your hands, the face is a very expressive element of ASL and it is a necessary element. To be properly expressive, I would say that the face is a required element. You could probably get away without it but the quality of the communication would be severely reduced. And I think that is the reason that you can look on a book or on a page, see a sign shown with the hands, and you can be like, “okay, that is probably this sign.” But you don’t know anything besides the fact that it is this object. Like if they are talking about a cookie, you don’t know how *they feel* about that cookie. You don’t know its size, its qualities, any of those details. You only know about the object (David, 2010:5-6).

Arguing that the significance of a sign is not necessarily fixed or transparent, David identifies that “quality” communication requires feeling, contextualization, and subjective involvement (Hall, 1973). Extending their consideration to the body, sign language incorporates “other body parts” or “different body parts of your person” (Laura, 2010:4). Although signers “have to use their hands,” it necessitates that faces and bodies “be more expressive” and “feel more connective” in terms of sharing how they feel about their circumstances with others (Laura, 2010:4). Instead of the body being passive entities, feelings surface on, are produced through, and are communicated by the body. As Laura explains:

I think the body is basically everything in communication because what you say is actually only a small part of what you are trying to convey to a person. Your body language and your body gestures, they speak louder than your words. And sign language incorporates that. So they can get across more of a meaning without their voice than we could with a voice (2010:7).

Not only does sign language use facial expression in addition to the hands, it is a language that encompasses the whole body. While body language and nonverbal communication has been traditionally thought of as secondary to speech, Laura rightfully claims that speech is not necessary to communicate.

While these students identify what about sign language is different, and at times compare sign language to verbal languages, it is important to emphasize that these students, nor this project, posits sign languages above verbal ones. Rather than claiming one mode of communication is preferred to another, these students begin to understand that there are different modes of communicating and such modes use varying components of the body. As Laura clarifies:

I don't think of talking any less. It is more so that we have more options or I have more options of how I want to communicate. I don't think talking is any worse because there are a lot of people who can only communicate through talking. But when you are given that little extra skill, you just want to exploit it, use it, and just elaborate on it. I don't think that talking is a bad way of communicating and I don't think that it is second-rate now that I know sign. I think that different situations call for a different way of communication (2010:11).

As these students learn about the role of the body in communication, most see the body as an “extra tool” or “extra skill” to communicate with. By considering the body as an “extra tool,” however, it positions the body and bodily communication as additional to that of speech and thereby maintaining the voice-body binary. Moreover, as the fourth chapter explores in detail, their consideration of ASL as an “extra tool” to “exploit” demonstrates a privileged use of this language over that of Deaf signers. That being said, instead of voice and body being oppositional, sign language offers a specific example where voice is embodied.

What [sign language] is people talking with their faces and using their hands to clarify. But the moment you extend it to the body, you are taking in account the

hands. So if you want to be fair, it is people talking with their body. Now that is a weird kind of distinction because the vocal chords, the lips, the tongue, the teeth are all part of the body. So really, everyone communicates with their body. That is what language is: communicating with the body. (Nick, 2010:4)

By discussing sign language as “talking with one’s hands,” they re-think the role of voice and body to communicate. It is not speech. It is not hands. It is body. In sign language, and communication more generally, the body is paramount. Extending their understanding of sign language to be of the body, they, arguably, extend their understanding of communication to be embodied. Being expressive, affective, and necessary for articulating meaning, voice is embodied and the body, then, becomes both the site and means for communication.

### **Feeling Limber: Storytelling, Body Shifting, and Performing Embodiment**

We had to do a presentation for our final thing in first year. We had a choice of doing a song, doing a children’s nursery rhyme, making up a fake news report, or telling a story. My partner and I, we did *The Tortoise and the Hare*. It is a very simple story. So we did sign, we told the story, we set up the scenario. We did a little sarcastic back and forth of mocking each other. But most of it was non-manual: just face and body. I was full out body. It was just this weak, slow little thing making its way. I didn’t know you can sign in slow motion to express something moving slowly or falling slowly or just to exaggerate an experience by lengthening the time it takes. I did it naturally because I felt that, compared to the hare, who had to move across the classroom quickly but slowly, slow motion was the only way to express the difference that was going on. So I just over-exaggerated the slow motion. I looked like a buffoon, which was fine because really, who cares? It is supposed to be funny. So it was freeing to know that I was allowed to do that with my body. That it was okay and it was fun and that would appeal to people. And that freed me up to do the smaller things, the things that weren’t quite so exaggerated but necessary: embodying, taking on a character, showing things, showing emotions, that sort of thing ...that weren’t necessarily what I was experiencing right at the moment that I was communicating it but were appropriate to the story at the time (Nick, 2010:15-16).

As students learn sign language and communicate through their bodies, they shift their understanding about what sign language is, what it means for them to sign, and what communication is. When asked how they would describe sign language, they respond that

sign language encompasses facial expression, body, and movement. As demonstrated in the previous sections, throughout their responses, students expand their understanding of communication as not talking, but moving and communicating by way of their bodies. There is an evident shift from conceptualizing language and communication as voice to communication as body, or as I suggest, embodied voice.

While students do highlight the use of facial and bodily expression in their conceptualization of sign language, almost all students interestingly refer to sign language as “like acting” or “theatre-like.” Upon further explanation, they maintain that sign language is an embodied performance because it necessitates the use of the body, facial expressions, and the presentation of emotion. While I agree with the description of the practice of storytelling in sign language as performance, the practice of storytelling, and sign language more generally, is also performative. Building on Judith Butler’s theorizations of performativity, I suggest students not only perform tales through ASL body shifting – thereby, recreating the story and embodying the people in it – they resist their own gendered communicative experiences. To be clear, despite female and male students experiencing their embodiment differently, all students credit the process of learning sign language for feeling more comfortable with their bodies or being able to emote or express themselves freely.

Judith Butler (1990a) argues against a view of the body as pre-existing cultural inscriptions; she claims that “the body cannot be taken as a passive medium on which cultural meanings are inscribed or as the instrument through which an appropriative and interpretive will determines a cultural meaning for itself” (129; Halsema, 2006: 156). Essentially, Butler maintains that the body both consciously and unconsciously embodies

meaning while also (re)producing it; and thus, the mind and body are not distinctive entities in the production and understanding of meaning. For Butler, “acts, gestures, enactments … are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporal signs and discursive means” (1990a: 136). In this view, the body is not only formed in normative practices, but is a living, existing body that gives meaning to the world (Halsema, 2006: 159).

Butler's theory of performativity provides a post-modern feminist response to intersections of the body, discourse, social interaction, power, and identity. Based on the scholarship of J.L Austin and Derrida, Butler proposes that the performative “enacts or produces that which it names” (1993: 23). Performativity operates through the “reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains” (1993: 2). Stressing the significance of the body, Butler argues that only ‘bodily gestures, movements and styles constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self (Butler, 1990a: 190, 140). She further emphasizes that there is no autonomous individual that authors performative utterances; the (gendered) self “has no ontological status apart from the acts which compose it” (Lloyd, 1999: 197). Embodiment “[is] not stable or a-historical, but as a constant process of redefining [meaning and] one's relationship to the world and to others” (Halsema, 2006) and the subject, for Butler, is constituted through re-citation and repetition, or the required performance of dominant discourses (Lloyd, 1999: 197).

In the interviews, I did not anticipate almost all students referring to sign language and the practice of telling stories in sign language as a performance. Calling sign

language “like acting,” “theatre-like,” or “like watching a movie,” the students identify the language as being visual, playful, and necessitating bodily expression and emotion. In his explanation Nick maintains that, through embodiment and the showing of emotion, sign language *is* acting:

I don't think that there is a distinction. When I tell you a story when I am speaking. I say, “you know, my mom called me up and she gave me shit about what I was doing in school. I was so pissed off.” I have communicated the story to you. You know what my emotional states were at the time but I didn't embody them. In ASL, you can't communicate that story without embodying the emotional connotations at the time. If you do, people look at you and go, “what? You just signed mad but your face didn't match it. Were you mad or not?” You have to show it. That is acting. It may be a little bit more exaggerated than screen acting as screen actors tend to be doing the subtlety of the emotion rather than showing it forcefully but it is the same thing. You have to evoke them and then emote them (2010: 15).

Characterizing sign language as acting, Nick is clear on not needing to distinguish between the two. Arguing that there are “no factual stories in ASL” as all ASL stories embody emotion in addition to describing the timeline of events, Nick highlights the temporal aspect of sign language and the importance of the body to not only tell, but show, narratives. Interestingly, his understanding of sign language and the importance of the body changes throughout the learning process. While Nick in the second chapter questioned how one would “fallback” should communication breakdowns occur with sign language, he now asserts that mime and the body are resources for communication:

But, from an emotional point of view, from a contextual point of view, [the body] is very immediate. On top of which, no other language has something to fall back on that everyone understands. Whereas, in sign language, if signing breaks down, if fingerspelling breaks down, you can always mime. You can't do that with any spoken language. There is no spoken language that has a basic fallback that ASL does. And it is not just a fallback; it is integral to the language (Nick, 2010:2)

Not only does Nick define language as communicating with body, the use of the body and the performance, for Nick, is the ultimate fallback in order for “successful” communication to occur.

Dubbing sign language the “most-fun language” that she has ever learned, Whitney describes the performance of signed story telling as immediate and visually expressive.

It is so much more interesting to watch someone sign a story than for someone to tell the story. If someone tells you a funny story, it doesn’t really seem that funny. But if someone signed it, they actually do the motions, they do the facial expressions that each person would do, or what the dog did...they actually show it. You can actually see it visually. It is so much more fun to watch.... It kind of feels like you are watching a movie...not exactly a movie...but they are actually describing everything.... You know, when someone tells a story and says, “you had to be there”? I feel that when someone signs a story, you *are* there (2010: 4).

Because story telling in sign language necessitates the reenactment of events and expression of emotion, Whitney makes an important distinction between telling and signing stories, between listening to and engaging with them. The expression of emotion is both immediate and visual in sign language, so by going through the motions and what was felt at the time, it is not only fun or entertaining to watch, what is being signed is (re) produced in the moment. What is more, the re-creation of the event and showing of what transpired is arguably fun for the person “watching” because they become active participants in the narrative. Instead of “taking their word for it” or hearing that “it was hilarious,” the “listener” is able to see laughter, feel happiness, and actively engage in the events as they transpire.

In English I can say, “yeah, it was hilarious, my friend fell down the stairs and it was the funniest thing I have ever seen.” You might have a smile on your face and might be talking casually, but to me it is not going to be as obvious, visually obvious, as a deaf person signing it was funny because they are going to be laughing and going to be showing it on their face. I think the emotion of what is

felt in the story... I think it is more important that you show that on your face in ASL. So you tell a story, you tell it in chronological order, and those feelings that were felt at that time in the past are going to be shown in the face of the person (Liz, 2010:9).

In both the above examples, the students highlight the use of the body, the physical show of emotion, and frame storytelling as similar to watching a performance. While certain assumptions in terms of objectivity and visuality will be taken up in greater detail in the following chapter, both Liz and Whitney identify how visual expression or visually detailing nuances in ASL are important for linguistic validity. Indeed the message that is signed is arbitrary; however, through visual expression, meaning is more transparent.

What is important, however, is the use of the body to (re)produce narratives of the past. In ASL, temporality is located on that body. While temporality in English is generally represented by tense suffixes or with the conjugation of verbs, in ASL, time is always established first (before the topic at hand and then the comment or story) and the location of a sign in relation to the body establishes the time frame that the narrative is taking place. That is, the body represents the present, and signs moving behind or in front of the body indicate the past and future tense, respectively. In the context of storytelling, the time period would be established first to demonstrate the tense that will be used throughout the story, and while the story would be generally embodied in chronological order, the emotion and details of the story are (re)lived in the moment. That is, narratives are (re)performed in the present according to a script of the past.

Upon clarifying what she means when using “theatre” to describe sign language, Robin enacts her experience performing:

You have to use your body, your facial expressions, which I do anyways, and your hands. Whenever I tell a story, I use my hands. I use my facial expressions. I do the “he said this” and “she said that” and “then this happened” and “I was like

this!" and "whoa!".... I then become that character. I switch sides when I am telling a story. So when I tell a story, it is like a script and I set the scene because I say where I am, what it looked like, and things like that...how I felt and what this person felt and what I was thinking, what they were thinking. So when I tell a story in sign language, you have to switch those roles and be different characters to tell a story. So, to me, it is pretty much the same as acting...except you don't speak. (2010: 3-4).

Vividly describing sign language as a performance of emotion, Robin physically demonstrates the practice of role shifting in sign language even as she verbally describes it. While acting entails the body and use of facial expression, she introduces body shifting or the embodiment of different people – all to stage how sign language has theatre-like properties. For instance, in order for Robin to relay a conversation that she had with her friend, she would orient her body to face the right when signing for her, and then left when signing for the other person. As her body transitions from the right to the left, she would interpret and embody selective components of her friend's personality by re-enacting his/her words, disposition, expressions, and actions. The orientation of her body enables Robin to convey to her audience the sentiments of her friend; that is, in order for someone to understand the story, sign language compels Robin to take on or transition into another identity. With this in mind, performance acts within ASL provide a unique opportunity to *see* and *feel* the production and presentation of identities.

In "Storytelling in the Visual Mode," Jennifer Rayman (1999) examines the spatial and visual differences between how ASL users depict events when telling stories compared to similar stories that English speakers tell. When recounting a children's fable, ASL users included more detail depicting the actions of the characters in the story, used role-shifting to depict aspects of the person's personality, and relied heavily on space to indicate tense, gender, and time (63). According to Rayman, ASL role shifting is a vital

linguistic resource to depict action, to impersonate characters, to illustrate what happens and in what manner it happens, and to perform a vivid depiction and context of the events (64-65). ASL interlocutors in Rayman's study used role shifting to represent the characters' personalities and behaviors through facial expressions, attitudes, and body movements (78). According to Rayman, deaf storytellers elaborated, performed, and "embodied the characters in their role shifts" (1999: 78-79). In the students' interview responses, body shifting takes place quite often in their re-telling of their experiences.

As these students transition between identities in the re-telling of their stories, they do so in a manner that reflects what I call *body shifting* in ASL. According to Goffman (1961), "role distance" is a means for individuals to take on characters while at the same time distancing themselves from them (229). Instead of embodying the characteristics, mannerisms, and identities of others, Goffman suggests that the individual can be removed from that which he/she enacts: "actors [have an] ability to drive a wedge in between themselves and the socially situated role; or rather, themselves and the actual self the role implies" (229). In the case of storytelling in sign language, and the signed performance more generally, I suggest otherwise. As these students transition between identities in the re-telling of their stories, they embody and take on other identities – including the social, political, and cultural implications such embodiment implies. In order to describe their feelings and experiences upon learning sign language, these students shift between first- person and third-person omniscient points-of view. Arguably, body shifting is a physical display or a performative negotiation of voice and body and of the identities enacted in the performance.

While this study re-emphasizes that sign language's primary mode of communicating is a visual-gestural system rather than an aural-oral system, this study also demonstrates that communicative practices in ASL, and sign language in general, necessitates performance. To be clear, while conversing using sign language is a performance in its own right, there are specific communicative practices within sign language, such as personal experience narratives or storytelling, that are embodied performative acts. When the interaction with others involves the relaying of events or actions to an audience, individuals are "seen imitating the speech or movements of other people or inanimate objects" (Goffman, 1974:15; Jarmon, 1996: 337). In her examination of the use of storytelling in spoken conversation, conversation analyst M.H.Goodwin, explains:

While telling a story, a speaker not only portrays events, [s/he] animates figures within them... thus, a single person, the present speaker in relaying past experience, maintains both the identity of teller to listener in the present and animator or "cited figures"... (quoted in Jarmon, 1996: 337).

However, as Rayman's (1999) study helps indicate, when interlocutors relay stories, they embody the movements and signs of other individuals when recounting a conversation for others, embody inanimate objects when setting up a scene, and use sign and facial expressions to descriptively reference nouns and verbs. Essentially, storytelling in sign language has visible performative qualities. Through the use of space and the repetitious, embodied shifting back and forth, identities are in flux and thus, they are reproduced and redefined through performance (Butler, 1990b: 270-271). As introduced in the first chapter, the very details of the features of interaction studied by conversational analysts "are instanced in ASL *embodied performances*; that is, as a manual-visual language with

no written form, ASL literature exists spatially and temporally, through the body and through performance” (Jarmon, 1996: 348).

In “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory”, Butler (1990b) maintains that identities are not stable or fixed; rather, they are fluid and both determined and constituted through a “stylized repetition of acts” (270). According to Butler, through performative acts, individual identities are gendered, constructed, and ascribed according to societal expectations and norms. Making an important distinction between performance and performativity, Butler cautions against using “performance” to describe everyday interactions. She argues that by theorizing daily interactions as performances, it dismisses the systemic production of identities as merely being part of the show. By students claiming that sign language is theatre-like, or is like acting, “one can say, ‘this is just an act’, and de-realize the act, making acting into something that is quite distinct from what is real” (1990b: 278).

While communicating with sign language is a performance in its own right, and the following chapter will examine the spectacle of such performance in more detail, I am careful to not theorize sign language as “exaggeration” or as a performance in the theoretic sense – opposed to being performative – as it “allows strict lines to be drawn between the performance and life” (Butler, 1990b: 278). Indeed students compare sign language and the practice of storytelling to that of a theatrical performance. However, some students do make it clear that what is being performed is not “fake” or separate from those living then re-telling the stories.

You are still being yourself. I don't know how to explain it. It is just more of using your body or showing more expressions in your face. Not necessarily, “Oh, I can change who I am today.” Not that sort of thing. ...Not being fake but having a different persona or whatever. What I mean is you have to really show what you

are trying to portray .... You are trying to portray what this person is feeling when you are acting. And people do things with their body to try and show that story. I don't really know how to explain it but they have to get into that character and they have to try to portray what they are trying to say or express. (Lesley, 2010:7)

Arguing that within sign language and the manner in which stories are re-told, this student tries to explain that there is a certain amount of emotional authenticity that grounds the performance acts. Instead of being “fake” or inventing stories, one is expressing what actually happened in real life, including the feelings that were felt at the time and are being felt in the moment. Not only do these individuals live that experience, they sign their own realities and do so in terms of how they saw it or felt it. So while the content of the story may have “fake” – or as I argue, subjective – elements to it, the re-signing of narratives requires both interpretation and judgment of what was felt then reproduced in the moment. Thus, irrespective of what is being signed, in the process of body shifting or signing narratives, subjectivities are both lived and revisited.

### **Communicating Gender Embodiment Differences**

Sign language not only enables students to embody other identities, it provides a space for them to negotiate and resist their own gendered subjectivities. By having to communicate with their bodies instead of verbal speech, students are not only more aware of their own embodiment, they are more comfortable with their bodies or feel that they are able to freely express themselves. Suggesting a connection between knowledge and comfort, and later comfort and noise, these students’ narratives imply that as they become more aware of their embodiment and embodied voice, they feel more comfortable using their bodies to make noise. While both male and female students cite learning sign language as the reason for feeling more limber with their bodies or with expressing

themselves, it is clear, however, that the men and women perform transcendence and experience their embodiment differently. Female students state that they start to feel more comfortable “in their own skin,” with their sexed bodies, and within the space they occupy. Men, however, assert that they are more comfortable emoting, expressing their feelings, and begin to see themselves as expressive beings. Because sign language necessitates bodily communication, in doing so, these students naturalize sign language and romanticize its role in transcending communication differences: they narrate that they are more comfortable with themselves, with sharing who they are, and communicating with their own embodied voice.

After asking all students how they feel about their bodies while learning sign language, the male students primarily discussed their ability to be more expressive. Initially responding with a curt “I don’t understand the question,” arguably highlighting male mind-body privilege where men are “all mind” and women are “all bodies” (Holliday and Hassard, 2001: 4), Michael supplements his answer by stating, “I never use to be a very expressive person in terms of facial expression. But since doing sign language, I even add those expressions into spoken words” (2010:6-7). Articulating a clear shift in how he expresses himself now, Michael and the other three male students both understand and portray their embodiment as rational, controlled, and of the mind. Upon learning sign language, however, the men suggest learning ASL is a feminizing process in that they not only become more comfortable using their bodies to communicate, they incorporate emotion and communicate their thoughts more generally. Describing his initial discomfort emoting while signing, Nick explains how he felt his

body to be a container – entrapping his voice, his will, or his mind – instead of an embodied means for expression:

Right at the beginning because I was so blocked about showing. Have you ever had an experience where you needed to tell someone something? I am not talking about a language barrier. Just there was something brewing in you that you needed to get out but you didn't want to hurt their feelings or there was a reason why you couldn't tell them and you are sitting there trying to tell them and it is like you are trapped in your own body. Like there is a wall that is your skin. You are inside and you are your feelings. So that is a very uncomfortable experience. For me, it usually ends in bawling and I eventually get it out. But that is how far it has to go. I have to literally breakdown. That is how much of a barrier it is. I have to breakdown before I can actually say it. So imagine trying to do that when you are having a normal day-to-day conversation [laughs]. That is what it was like before I got more comfortable emoting. That is the closest I can come to describing the experience. So before I got better at it, it was very uncomfortable to do it (Nick, 2010:11)

Identifying his embodiment as being of the mind and restrained by the body, Nick's response demonstrates the male gendering of communication to be rational, removed from emotion, and in control. Upholding an *inside/outside* or *mind/body* binary, these students' emotional responses mirror Lupton's claim that "maintaining control is understood to involve 'holding onto' or 'in' an emotion" (1998:89). Not only did learning sign language allow Nick to feel more comfortable emoting, he asserts that sign language has given him more confidence and an opportunity to resist his embodied experience. Accordingly, "when you don't feel as held in, you don't feel as held back" (2010:14).

Similarly, Shawn explains that by learning sign language, he has learned "to be more relaxed and communicate with [his] body more."

I was always a shy guy so I would always sit there rigidly and just had my hands down by my sides ...you know like this [shows me how by placing his hands to his sides underneath the table]...and you know, I now have more body language, I have more hand movements, [and] I think it keeps people's attention. I really do (2010:5).

Arguing that he is less “boring” and that he is more expressive when communicating with his body now, Shawn asserts that his shyness or inability to express himself was a barrier for him to get to know other people. His shyness was notable in classroom interactions – especially in the few moments that he spoke or signed during class. Despite being a skilled signer, his hands would always tremble nervously. What is fascinating, however, is that his trembling hands correspond to the quiver in his voice while speaking!

Irrespective of how Shawn communicates, his shyness is revealed in a quiver. Now “feeling more comfortable in front of people, especially in groups, with sign, [I am] becoming more and more comfortable just because [I have] to be loose in order to do sign” (2010:5). Most notably, however, as Shawn is more comfortable signing, he is “a better communicator” (2010:8) and more comfortable speaking up and speaking out.

[My friends] have actually said that I talk a lot more now. On top of me using hand signals or talking with my hands, they say that I talk a lot more now. I notice that I talk a lot more now. And I think that it’s weird that an American Sign Language course would make you talk more and I don’t know why that is.... (2010:7).

By doing a nonverbal language, not only does Shawn feel more comfortable signing, he gains more voice. In becoming more aware of their bodies, and then more flexible in how they use their bodies, Students like Shawn see their bodies as being less of a barrier and more a vehicle for embodied communication to occur. More specifically, male students become more comfortable emoting, expressing feelings, and start talking about themselves as expressive beings.

While male students experience their embodiment as regulating the display of emotions, female students experience their embodiment as regulating the display of their sexed, objectified bodies. Concerned and body-conscious, these women feel that their

bodies are barriers for them to communicate. Having to use their bodies while learning sign language, however, they not only demonstrate an awareness or sense of presence, they assert that they feel more comfortable and more limber with the bodies that they have.

Because you have to use your body in sign language, you can't be afraid of what you look like. Before, I was shy. I didn't want to move a lot, to use my body to get things across. I didn't like the fact that people were looking at me and judging me based off of what I look like, how I am moving and my body type – which I really, really do not like. We look at magazines that show this is the perfect body to have. I definitely don't fit into that category. Short. Too skinny. No boobs. I felt like I didn't want to use it because I felt like people would be drawn to look at it. Would they be judging me the way I judge myself? Which, by the way, I don't do anymore. Thank god. (Robin, 2010: 9)

Understanding the space that her body occupies in society, including that her body does not match social expectations, Robin internalizes how her body – and thus, her female subjectivity – is determined. Afraid that by using her body she would be objectified and be subject to a communicative gaze, she credits sign language and having to use her body in sign language as a reason for feeling more comfortable with her body and for being less judgmental of the space that she occupies. Similarly, Stacey admits to being self-conscious and more aware of how much space her “clumsy” body takes up:

I've never been very comfortable with it, but I definitely pay more attention to where I am standing so I don't knock anything over. It happened in class too, that's the embarrassing thing. I knocked over Liz's water bottle [Laughing in recollection]. And [the male instructor] said that me learning sign language was a dangerous thing so.... But yeah I definitely pay more attention to where I am standing, but it seems that I have also grown more of a space bubble since that. Before, I really didn't have much of a space bubble really, just enough to get around, but now I sort of have a certain space. It's sort of like a sign space. If I turned around and I was doing something that nobody would bump into me. So I try to watch for that area. So my space bubble has definitely grown a bit (2010:11).

For Stacey, the body is something that “you don't have much control over” (2010:7).

That being said, learning sign language and using her body is perhaps a way to reclaim

space and perhaps view her body as something other than “unruly.” While she identifies that her “space bubble” was “just enough to get around,” it becomes a larger space or a sign space for her to communicate freely without unwanted interference.

While Stacey does not explicitly state that she has more confidence as a result of learning sign language, she does claim that it has challenged her to look people in the eye and gives her a “fallback” or another form of communication to assert herself (2010: 7-10). The necessity to communicate with their bodies in sign language creates a limberness or “physical confidence” (Laura, 2010:7) in these women. Upon explaining the “looseness” she experiences with her body, Lesley explains:

I feel that it is more loose? [Laughs at word choice]...I don’t even know what to say about that [word choice]. I feel confident in my own body. I am more comfortable in my own skin. I guess in that class, it is okay to do gestures or to really use your body to express yourself, and because it is okay, I feel like that everywhere I go and it is better I feel better. I feel more confident using my body... and using my hands... and saying or talking different things (2010: 2;8).

By doing and acting, the narratives of these women suggest that they are more limber with their bodies and they begin to resist or become aware of resisting those binds placed on their bodies. Because sign language requires embodiment and expression of emotions, students of sign language are challenged by their own socially constructed and gendered subjectivities. Sign language bring these subjectivities to their conscious awareness, which provide a platform resisting social norms, and *voice-body*, *nature-culture* and *mind-body* binaries that inform these gender roles. As Laura eloquently states:

[Smiles] Actually, I am a lot more comfortable in my own skin. I feel like it is not necessarily just my voice that I can communicate with. Having that freedom to be able to communicate with other parts of your body just made me so much more aware of my body and a bunch more confident in social situations. I am aware of how I am orienting my body. I am just more aware. Of my body and the space I take up. Of my presence, basically. Sign language is like a freedom tool, I feel. It

is a way for someone to break free of the stereotypes we are faced with every day and just get down to the person that they really are (2010:7-8).

### **Conclusion**

The process of voicelessness that these students experience not only enables a broader understanding of communication by extending it to the body, it reveals how bodies are made communicative in a politicized sense. By way of having their voices removed and having to communicate using their bodies, hearing signers indeed learn about voice – including what it is and how it is used. They begin to identify their bodies not as barriers to communication but vehicles for communication to occur. Moreover, they assert an understanding that identities can be performed and negotiated in a visual language as well as a verbal one.

I think voice is someone's identity, basically. Voice is a way that someone can express themselves, a way that someone can give opinions, explain a story, or teach someone something new. Sign language has given me an opportunity to express a voice I didn't know I had. It has given me a lot more courage to express who I am as a person, my interests, my hobbies, things that make me unique as a person (Laura, 2010:8).

As these students negotiate the roles that voice and body play in communication, and in how they use their own voices and bodies to communicate more specifically, there seems to be a conscious relaxing – if not suspension – of orality in favor of this embodied form of communication. While the transitional stutters discussed in this chapter demonstrate a conscious navigation between their signing and non-signing worlds, my respondents' narratives display a level of acceptance and appreciation for the ability to sign, to communicate with their bodies in a quiet yet empowering way, and to consider the differing spaces they occupy as communicators.

In conceptualizing body as voice and communication as embodied voice, sign language provides space to expand on the physical aspects of voice and observe how identities are performed and constantly in flux; how voices are being felt and lived; how embodied voices are used as a means for resistance and oppression. As demonstrated in this chapter, students cite sign language as a tool for resisting their gendered and embodied communicative experience. However, as the next chapter will address, sign language for these students is also used as an instrument for oppression and tool for asserting communicative privilege.

#### **Chapter Four: Amplifying Power Relations and Spotlighting Privileged Spaces: Looking at the Spectacle of Signing in Public**

After three weeks of class, I entered the Friday lab component thinking that it was going to be like the others. The two-hour lab portion each week is intended for students to practice the material that they have learned that week, practice for upcoming tests, and socialize with each other using sign language. As students entered the classroom and settled in their seats, the instructor signed for every one to stand up, leave their things in the room, and follow him outside. A rumble immediately erupted within the classroom, as students shared their excitement to be able to spend the class outside in the warm weather and further expressed wonder as to what we could possibly be doing.

The instructor led us to an outdoor amphitheatre, tucked between two buildings on campus. Motioning for all of us to sit down in one section of the concrete, semicircular bleachers encasing over 500 feet of uncut grass, he proceeded to quickly review what we had learned that week. After his review and subsequent demonstration with a student, the instructor then asked us to find a partner and practice asking and answering questions using the vocabulary we had learned thus far. Without hesitation, I looked to a student on my right, made eye contact with her, and shrugged my shoulders to suggest that we might as well become partners. Nodding in agreement, we stood up, found a patch of grass close to the bleachers, turned to face each other, and then began to practice our signing. While I tried to not let it distract me from figuring out what my partner was signing, I did notice that off into the distance, a small crowd had gathered and were watching our class from a point overlooking the amphitheatre. Yet before I had a chance to even tell my partner about their presence, the instructor interrupted, bowed to each of us while signing “good,” signed “stay” to my partner, then rested his hands on my shoulders and walked

me backwards across the field to the tiered bleachers on the other side. Pointing to my partner across the way, then looking at me, the instructor, with an amused smirk on his face, signed for me to *now, practice*. Unsure of what was happening or if he was serious, I leaned forward, raised my eyebrows, and then responded in disbelief:

“Really?”

“Yes,” he confirmed while smugly nodding his head. Upon seeing my unwavering state of confusion, he verbally provided a (seemingly unrelated) explanation: “Do you think D/deaf people freeze their hands in the winter? That they don’t wear mittens?”

“...I don’t know. I guess ... not?”

“Having to wear mittens or sign over great distances doesn’t bother d/Deaf people. D/deaf people have to find a solution and compensate for things missing. Fingerspelling can be read up to 300 feet away. Signs can be visible up to 1300 feet and in many conditions. Signs have many parts and some are better in certain circumstances than others. To sign over great distances, signs get slower and bigger. More space is taken up and more body is used. Establishing the context for your partner and pausing for confirmation of understanding is always important. So is the movement of the signs. We are forced to improvise for different eyes, for different perspectives, and for different spaces. Now, practice.”

The rest of class was spent in the amphitheatre, projecting to one another with varying distances between us, from different perspectives. Signing was not limited to our partner directly across from us; we continually switched partners without moving – forcing us to sign to one another at varying angles, and even, perpendicularly without being able to turn our heads! After much miscommunication and confusion, the exercise demonstrated that communication is dialogical, that the onus is on each person to understand what is being communicated, and that the role of the “listener” to confirm understanding is as equally important as the role of the signer in awaiting such confirmation. Indeed, this exercise also highlighted the visual loudness of the language. Although being audibly quiet, signing is loud and can permeate – and perhaps, interrupt –

both public and private space. While I did not know this at the time, the instructor's motivation for this exercise was to also throw us out of our comfort zone. Up until that point, all of our signing took place in close proximity, in a closed environment, in the bubble that is a classroom. In taking us outside and out of the classroom, it was later explained to me that the instructor wanted students to face the unavoidable reality: that as users of the language, we will have to sign in public; that signing in public will bring attention to us; that such attention would make us feel "different;" and that distance, or onlookers, should not interrupt our communication from taking place. Simply put: the instructor wanted us to familiarize ourselves with being noisy and making noise in public, with both being part of a spectacle and being spectacular.

My experience signing outdoors in the amphitheatre is monumental for understanding the unique properties of sign language use and communication in public, more generally. As a dedicated learner of sign language, I immediately became aware that this sophisticated language enables communication to occur across physical spaces where it may be difficult or untimely to use speech. As a woman who takes pride in her ability to be a skilled oral communicator, I was reminded that communication is reciprocal and that being a "good listener" is as important as being a transparent conversationalist. Finally, as a communications scholar, this lesson has highlighted my own privilege, my sheer ignorance of the different perspectives and potential compromises the Deaf make when conversing in public. Admittedly, I was upset with the instructor's apparent delight at my distress. At the time, I initially felt uncomfortable in being singled out among my peers. Upon personal detachment and critical reflection, however, he purposefully wanted to create instability, to provide new signers a sense of

the discrimination or gaze that Deaf people may feel when they sign in public. He intentionally used the amphitheatre to orchestrate a spectacle – and thereby, magnify the power relations that exist when signing is done in public.

After defining the spectacle and differentiating it from that of a signed spectacle, this chapter will explore some of the personal, social and political consequences of signing in public. Indeed hearing signers are aware of the attention that the enactment of this form of communication affords them. While it is presumed that these students would be uncomfortable with being part of the spectacle, with the normative gaze, they alternatively take pride in the signed spectacle and welcome the regard and exclusivity that it brings. I suggest the use of the term *successful spectacle* as a marker for the inverted power relations occurring. This refers to the ability of interlocutors to disrupt or re-order the power relations that are inherent in a spectacle. That is, hearing signers assert their privilege over that of hearing, illiterate onlookers, and in doing so, the spectacle offers observable spaces for these students to control the linguistic, dialogic, and some (but not all) social meanings in the encounter.

The signed spectacle is spectacular in that it opens up occurring power relations and, if successful, makes the signing minority momentarily and contingently more powerful than the majority. Consequently, the hearing students suggest a second privileging within the signed spectacle. Not only do they assert a privilege over their hearing peers in being able to behave as a minority in public, they assert a privilege over Deaf signers in being able to choose when they use this language and enact Deafness in public. As introduced in Chapter Two, the failure to communicate revealed a communicative privilege over that of Deaf signers. Despite having good intentions to

mend this privilege by taking up sign language, the power relations continually operate and are unknowingly reapplied in public space. Ultimately, these students frame their successful spectacle as temporary, their sign language use as a secondary communicative tool that can be invoked as required – as opposed to a lived language that is socially associated with disability and integral for communication among members of the Deaf community.

### **Speculating on the Signed Spectacle**

In order to explore what makes the public enactment of sign language spectacular, it is necessary to characterize and identify the components both of the signed spectacle and the spectacle more generally. I assert that a spectacle is a performance with power relations inherent in it, where its meaning is both defined and perpetuated by the social norms informing it. Considering the common phrase “don’t make a spectacle out of yourself,” the spectacle is often thought as a negative social offense or transgression. Accordingly, there is an intrusion in terms of the outward glare and subsequent internalization of shame or embarrassment. It is put upon the person being glared at, the spectacle, to alter or manage whatever societal shortcomings they may have, to be on par with what is socially expected of them, and to govern themselves accordingly. As such, the audience presumably establishes or ascribes normative value to what transpires and, those taking part in the performance, internalize and then govern their behavior according to these norms. In more traditional understandings of making a spectacle of oneself, and subsequent implications of that spectacle, both the discrimination and onus is on the object, the thing, or person to avoid alterity; to avoid doing that which people look at you,

notice you, and then think you are different (Elias, 1994; Foucault, 1977; Goffman, 1959; 1969; 1971; 1974).

Using a performative and dramaturgical understanding of performance, in that they can be both theatrical *and* occur in everyday life, there is a broad range as to what performances are included in a spectacle. For example, a performance could be as spectacular as a couple fighting in a coffee shop, laughter at a funeral, nudity in a public place, or as grotesque as others exhibiting their extreme body modifications. For the performance to be a spectacle, there needs to be some novelty in what transpires, it must interrupt the flow of daily life, and existing power relations must be revealed, thereby exposing normative understandings of who or what is an (in)appropriate public display. While all spectacles carry social meaning, not all occurrences with social meaning are spectacles. That is, a spectacle is unsuccessful when it fails to highlight the politics or power dynamics in play. As introduced in the first chapter, cultural spectacles are both products and producers of social understanding (Jamieson, 2007; Turner, 1984: 24; Novak, 1990: 8). They are not removed from the social, historical, and political realities that enable or constrain communication to occur (Hamera, 2006: 14-17). Most importantly, however, spectacles are observable and employ public space so that we may then observe the hegemonic, subliminal “practices and competencies by which people organize social interaction, and discover how interaction is locally ordered by participants” (Nevil and Rendle Short, 2009: 76).

In *Publics and Counterpublics*, Michael Warner (2002) defines this public space and discusses its political implications for those occupying it. While acknowledging its contextual occurrences, he asserts that a public is a social space that is organized by

dominant forms of discourse (2002: 67, 90) and comprised by strangers that are “normal [and normalizing] feature[s] of the social” (2002: 75). Accordingly, “publics have been understood as mediated by cultural forms” and as such, they “do not exist apart from the discourse that addresses them” (2002: 72).

Warner’s theorization of publics (and counterpublics) is important for contextualizing the social and political surround in which spectacles derive and (co)operate. Recognizing that publics are not homogeneous, he argues that subaltern or counterpublics form “because they differ markedly in one way or another from the premises that allow the dominant culture to understand itself as a public” (2005: 113). Essentially, Warner differentiates between a public and counterpublic in that a “counterpublic maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status. The cultural horizon against which it marks itself off is not just a general or wider public but a dominant one” (2005: 119). Not only are members of counterpublics aware of their subordinate differences, the existence of counterpublics simultaneously resist, are constituted by, and give prominence to, the dominant public they must continually engage with. Using Warner’s understandings of (counter) publics, I suggest a similar demarcation with spectacles that occur in everyday life. That is, spectacles are negatively constituted by and operate within dominant discourse. In their difference, however, they have the potential to be potential subaltern spaces where “members of subordinated social groups [can] invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (2005:188).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Michael Warren employs the work of Nancy Fraser (1992)’s seminal article, “Subaltern Counterpublics” to help frame his analysis.

Michael de Certeau (1984), in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, also maps social interaction within everyday cultural spaces. More specifically, de Certeau explores the “strategies” employed by dominant culture to sustain asymmetrical places and the spaces or “tactics” that others occupy to resist and evade dominant (and invisible) power structures operating in everyday life. While de Certeau suggests that the places that people occupy – or the hierarchical social ordering of subjects – are stable, his interest lies in the “ensemble of moments deployed” or the tactical interactions used by subordinate members within these everyday spaces (1984:117). Exploring the everyday practices or “ways of operating” as a means for resistance, de Certeau argues: “The place of tactic belongs to the other. A tactic insinuates itself into the other’s place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance” (1984: xix). While positing strategies as majoritarian operations in being able to “produce, tabulate, and impose these spaces [and] when those operations take place,” de Certeau suggests that tactics or ways of operating are temporary behaviors that “can only use, manipulate, and divert these spaces” (30). While everyday tactics offer a means to resist power relations in dominant culture, the dominant discourse and operating power structures ultimately, as de Certeau suggests, control the terms of the encounter.

Essentially, the role of the spectacle makes “everyday practices, ways of operating or doing things no longer appear as merely obscure background of social activity” (de Certeau, 1984: xi). In addition to exposing the (invisible) everyday practices in dominant culture, the spectacle is a space where others make themselves – including the subordinate social locations they occupy – visible (de Certeau, 1984; Driscoll, 2001). For de Certeau, the everyday is the assumed or unexamined aspects of cultural production

(1984: xi). It is the unconscious “practice of culture without reflection on its productivity or its meaning” (Driscoll, 2001: 387). However, upon examining the “tactics” or the “ways in which users – commonly assumed to be passive and guided by established rules – operate,” de Certeau suggests that spectacular behaviors reveal, and perhaps, resist operating power structures (1984: xi). Such resistant practices, however, are limited in that they are temporary and do not seemingly “reappropriate the space organized by techniques of sociocultural production” (1984: xiv).

Building on both understandings of performance as communication and the aforementioned theorizations regarding the spectacle, a signed spectacle is conversational, requiring the participation of two or more interlocutors, and it involves publicity, both in terms of being a communicative event taking place in public space and an event that commands public interest or spectatorship. Most importantly, however, it too highlights the dynamic power relationships between spectators and the spectacle. As these new interlocutors suggest, the difference between regular and signed spectacles is that the former presumes that the audience has power over and controls, in the very least, the (negative) social meanings of the spectacle. However, the signed spectacle is spectacular in that it disrupts – or in the very least – interrupts the power dynamics we assume normally take place in a public encounter between the spectator and the performer.

After turning to look at three of the necessary components for a signed spectacle to occur – namely, first its enactment in public, quotidian spaces; second, the need for other signers; and third, the need for (perceived) spectatorship being present – I will then examine the (different) power relations that operate within, and are made visible by, a

successful signed spectacle. Indeed the signed spectacle employs “resistive or evasive creativity, [taking] place in the tears in the fabric of power” (de Certeau, 1984:52). However, I later suggest that the signed spectacle operates not only as a “tactic,” but a “strategy” of dominant culture (de Certeau, 1984). It is both a means of (re)appropriating communicative privilege and a means of sustaining it.

Upon asking students to describe some of their experiences signing, most of the students’ responses locate their experiences outside the classroom, and thereby, highlight the public nature of this form of speech. Describing two separate experiences signing with a friend, Kim highlights the public nature of using sign language and its ability to transcend physical space both in and out of a classroom:

We were on the bus and she was at the very end and I was at the very very beginning. I couldn’t get through so I signed to her, “Okay we will leave at this stop.” She didn’t have her phone on her so it was something pretty cool. And … I was in class and she was outside. She was making fun of me that I was in class and I was just yelling at her in sign language. So I felt that [it was] pretty cool that I didn’t have to say anything and I just had to [sign] through glass walls. (2011: 11)

Not only does this passage demonstrate how sign language enables communication to occur without speaking or without having to be in close proximity to “hear” what is being said, the public enactment of this form of speech permeates physical space, and alternatively, potential sound barriers in public. In Kim’s first example, despite having no phone and there being too much distance for her to verbally communicate with her friend on a public bus, sign language enabled them to still share time-sensitive information with each other. Interestingly, in the second classroom example of Kim “yelling” at her friend while she was in class, sign language not only enabled the two friends to communicate while in two distinct and separated spaces, it enables deviant or inopportune behavior to

occur less obtrusively in a public environment. That is, signed communication is seen rather than heard, and as such, it has the ability to be visually loud and to create a public display irrespective of the space and what is said (or yelled) within that space.

The above example emphasizes the public nature of the signed spectacle. In order for signing to be considered a spectacle, it must interrupt everyday spaces where people gather and engage in quotidian talk. Whether it is a coffee shop, restaurant, or a shopping mall, everyday spaces have ambient noise and people generally do not expect signing to happen. It is not enough for the signed spectacle to take place in a silent room, because anything that interrupts such silence – whether it is verbal or nonverbal – would then be considered a spectacle. Rather, blended, non-visible and seamless (verbal) conversations would provide a setting for anything different or anything visually loud to be disruptive and interrupt the space. For the signed spectacle to be spectacular, it needs to take place in a public, interrupt everyday spaces, and disrupt everyday (verbal) conversations (de Certeau, 1984).

While it is assumed that ASL is a silent language, it is visually quite loud, inherently public, the second component of the public nature of the spectacle necessitates spectatorship. I am conscious of Dennis Kennedy's (2009) distinction between spectator (those who look) and audience (those with hearing) when conceptualizing spectatorship and the signed spectacle. As I will discuss more in detail, even though students presume that onlookers are in fact hearing individuals and non-literate when it comes to sign language, I define the audience as spectatorship to not only highlight that the signed spectacle necessitates seeing, the public enactment of this form of speech requires both witnessing and remarking of its social and/or linguistic meaning. Describing her first

experience signing in public, Laura identifies not only the public display of sign language; she identifies the spectatorship(s) occurring within the signed spectacle:

I actually saw a third year student signing to a few people on the bus. I was on [sic] the back of the bus and I got their attention and starting signing to them...the entire bus was watching us having a three-way conversation and it was exciting .... It is just exciting to see someone sign when you know how to sign and you understand what they are saying ... and they underst[and] what you are saying. It was also kind of exhilarating because you are being looked at not because of something you are wearing of something you said. You are being watched because it is fascinating to somebody else and maybe, it is giving someone else the idea that they want to learn sign language, that they want to understand what you are saying back and forth to these people (2011: 8-9).

Despite equating her spectatorship to “seeing” or “watching” a signed conversation taking place, Laura reveals that spectatorship requires both interruption and conscious observation. Indeed, sign language is used both in public and private space. Moreover, anyone can potentially see signing taking place. However, for the public enactment of this speech to be considered a spectacle, it needs to both interrupt the spectator’s line of sight and draw attention. Additionally, there needs to be a witnessing, a noticing, or remarking from the spectator that sign language is being used. In the above example, the two signers at the front of the bus interrupted Laura’s space and caught her attention so that she not only noticed that they were conversing using sign language, she was able to understand and then remark on what they were explicitly signing. While the other bus riders were not directly involved in the conversation, by her account, they also watched long enough to witness, and perhaps, appreciate, the signed spectacle take place as opposed to ridicule it.

Implying that all the people on the bus were part of the audience but few were privy to the linguistic meanings of this public spectacle, Laura unknowingly identifies some of the characteristics of the spectator and further distinguishes her spectatorship –

and her relationship with the other signers – from the spectatorship of the other bus riders. While the other onlookers may be aware that signing is taking place and appreciate the social importance that such an event entails, they are presumed to be hearing, illiterate, non signers that are linguistically excluded from her “three-way conversation.” While she doesn’t explicitly define the different spectatorships, including the relationships or varying degrees of closeness that these spectators have to the signed spectacle, the differentiation between Laura and her fellow bus riders in relation to the other signers results from the extent of their participation in the spectacle and the level of comprehension of the signing taking place.

In *The Spectator and the Spectacle*, Dennis Kennedy (2009) examines spectatorship within contemporary culture. Identifying the spectator as a “corporeal presence but a slippery concept” (3), Kennedy highlights the difficulty in discussing the spectator in relation to the performance activity without essentialising an audience as a homogenous group (3). Recognizing his limitations in mapping the spectator, Kennedy argues that spectators are active participants in that they are “present at a performance” and they “assist the spectacle” for the spectacle to even occur (5). Interestingly, Kennedy identifies two types of spectators: those who assist and then those that volunteer at the spectacle (14-15). The former suggests a performance where “a person’s attendance is close to obligatory” and the latter, while still important for political, social, or psychological life, suggests a performance where “its address to its audience is usually in the realm of the voluntary” or a leisure activity (15).

Mirroring Kennedy’s two forms of spectatorship, including the different contribution that each spectator plays in establishing a (successful) spectacle, this project

conceptualizes the signed spectacle as having two forms of spectatorships. That is, there are literate spectators that must be present at the spectacle for it to have both linguistic and social significance and then there are non-literate (hearing non-signers) spectators that volunteer or assist in establishing its social, political and psychological significance. While the consequences of both spectatorships will be explored in more detail in the next section, for the signed spectacle to be successful, it requires having both spectatorships present. More specifically, in order for the public enactment of this embodied form of speech to be spectacular or have an impressive character to those observing it, sign language compels another signer to be present and the others watching to be excluded from the nuances of the conversation taking place.

Upon asking Laura the extent that she is comfortable while signing in public, she responds, “If I am by myself and nobody else knows sign language? Not as much as when I am with someone that does know it” (8). Answering my question with a revealing question, she identifies that sign language is implicitly conversational and that in order comfortably sign, two conditions need to be in place: another person to be able to sign to and enough familiarity by the volunteering spectator to assess that what is being done is in fact sign language. Similarly, Robin establishes that in order for sign language to hold social significance for non-signing spectators, a signing partner, and thus, linguistic mutuality is ideal:

I remember I was on the O-train one day, coming to one of the first sign language classes of the summer. So I sat down, I was by myself, and I started signing. I felt okay, and then someone came and sat beside me. I felt a little uncomfortable because I thought, “Oh god. Is this person going to think I am crazy?” And then I felt bad because I thought how D/deaf people would feel. Do they always feel that people think they are crazy? Not everyone knows what sign language is so they might think that someone is crazy. I needed to practice anyway so I just went ahead and did it. Before the train stopped, I looked up, and

there was someone sitting across from me, staring at me. That was very weird. I thought: either they are staring at me because they thought something was wrong with me ... or they were interested ... or they know what sign language is and they are trying to figure out what I am saying with my bastardized version. I kept going and they kept staring. Because I wasn't signing with someone, I didn't have someone to share it with and people couldn't see that this was actually a form of communication. They just saw me using my hands.

While in this instance, Robin is not quick to presume that her audience is illiterate when it comes to comprehending what she is signing, this example best illustrates the role of both spectatorships in creating a successful, signed spectacle. Defining a “successful spectacle” as an ability of the signer to disrupt the assumed power relations in upholding both the linguistic and social meaning of ASL, the presence of two or more signers enables a conversation to take place – and thereby, making it less of an aberration or negative communicative offense and more of an accepted communicative skill or admired cultural performance. In the equation of the signed spectacle, the difference between gibberish and communication, communicative incapacity and performance, is another (hearing) signer being present. In having two or more signers, subjects are socially constituted as communicative as opposed to “crazy” deviants.

### **Spectacular Performances**

When the above three components of the signed spectacle are in play, it provides an opportunity to explore the striking individual, social, and environmental effects of signing in public. The spectacle nourishes a sense of pride and control that these signers have in terms of their performance. Confident in the communicative skill that they possess, my respondents do not seek to behave as if they are unaware of their (potential) audience; rather, while signing, they enjoy the performance and welcome the attention that comes with it. While it may seem as though the signer relinquishes privacy in terms

of the use sign language in a public setting, being on display for all to witness, sign language typically enables speakers to have a private conversation in a public setting due to literacy levels. That is, the publicity they experience is counterbalanced by the ability to have a secret language with other signers.

Being able to have a private conversation in a very public setting, these students assert that they maintain intimacy with their signing peers, all while distancing themselves from the broad and dynamic (hearing) spectatorship that they invite to look at them. As Warner (2002) suggests, “private and public are bound up with elementary relations to language as well as to the body. The acquisition of language is an education into public and private speech genres and their different social contexts” (25). Ultimately, the enactment of the signed spectacle folds understandings of private into public and collapses understandings of closeness into distance in the signed space and the relationships between those that engage in it. That is, by making a minority momentarily and contingently more powerful than the majority, the signed spectacle seems to invert or disrupt the hegemonic understandings of power that are assumed to take place with any spectacle.

Throughout the discussions with my respondents about having to sign in public, all students claim to be aware of the others watching their signed conversations taking place. When students explain this awareness, some students are understandably self-conscious about what others may think. However, as I previously discussed, these feelings depend on whether the person with signing alone or with someone else. Moreover, these feelings are also influenced by the student’s facility with the language. In the examples where students discuss unease in signing in public, they reference being

in the early stages of their sign language experience. On the other hand, a few students claim to not even care about those witnessing their signing in public. As Lesley explains: “I can see why for some people it would be like, ‘oh, I think people are watching me’ sort of thing. Like, ‘this is weird’ or ‘they are going to think that I can’t hear.’ But, it doesn’t really matter if you don’t care” (2010:6). Defining spectatorship in terms of negative forms of looking and discrimination, as opposed to interest, Lesley personally claims indifference, if not complete disregard, toward the spectator. However, upon dismissing the role the spectator plays in ridiculing (and reinforcing) the spectacle, her evaluation of the spectacle is misplaced as it presumes that the spectacle – including those signers creating the spectacle – operate independently of spectatorship.

The signed spectacle, however, and the spectators that are interested in it, can endow the signer with a sense of pride and ownership in their performance. Aware of the attention that comes with their signing in public, students internalize and frame their public enactment of this form of speech as a skilled performance and further invite others to look.

I got a real good sense that other people were watching me because it is ... all about the movement and I think people are drawn to that. Because it is so interesting. It is so out of the norm. It made me feel, like, I don’t know, talented [laughs]. It was like I was juggling. People were looking at me like I was performing a magic trick right there or something. Because it was a skill that nobody else could do, right? Well, that I know of (Shawn, 2010: 6, 12).

Upon referring to himself as a magician, performing a trick for others to entertain, Shawn demonstrates a social awareness of the performative roles that both signers and spectators have in creating a public spectacle. Acknowledging the exposure that “out of the norm” movement provides, he expresses pride in his ability to both draw the public’s attention and keep it. Presuming that his audience is illiterate, for Shawn, his ability to sign is an

enchanting communicative skill that few possess – thereby, making the performance more powerful and empowering.

Also describing her awareness of people “staring” at us while we were practicing for an upcoming test in a coffee shop, Liz details a performance of her signing in public:

I would definitely say that I am aware of people staring – like that one time when you and I went to Francesco’s. The people behind you were definitely looking at us. I don’t know if we ever talked about it. [Really? I didn’t notice] Oh yeah. And in a way it is kind of cool. [I am] like, “oh yeah, that’s right. I am signing.” Like, it made me feel like there is a spotlight on us in the restaurant. But...maybe I am a performer. Maybe it doesn’t bother me. If it really bothered me, having people look at me, I might have stopped or made my signs smaller almost ...kind of shrink in on yourself. I might even speak [sic] louder sometimes. Kind of like, “In your face! That is what I am doing right now” (2010: 6-7).

While I was completely (and ironically) unaware of this happening at the time, Liz interestingly refers to our signing in public as having a “spotlight” on us. Despite describing her options to be discreet or avoid public attention, such as altering her signs or behavior to “hide” or “shrink” away from onlookers, she internalizes other people staring as empowering and intentionally makes noise by getting “louder” with her signs. Confirming the public nature of the signed spectacle, especially the publicity that it garners, her response suggests that signing in public is equivalent to shouting and taking up more space (even if it interrupts or encroaches on someone else’s). Not only do signers show that they understand and accept that there is a potential for them to be noticed, they enjoy and thrive on someone taking notice, on being a performer, and as Nick self-identifies, as being an “attention whore” (2010:15). In order to create the spectacle and bask in the glow of its aftermath, there is a conscious willingness to make noise, draw attention to them, and in doing so, and relinquish some – but not all – privacy.

As introduced in Chapter One, Rosemarie Garland Thomson (2006) in her article, “Dares to Stares: Disabled Women Performance Artists and the Dynamics of Staring,” follows three women who employ live performance art as a means to invite others to witness their disabilities to “appropriate the power of the stare” (32). Identifying staring as an intrusion that “thrusts uneasy attention on the object of the stare” (30-31), Garland Thomas discusses the significance of the performance to both highlight and alter the dynamic interactions between the spectator and spectacle. Not only does the performance call into question the extent that certain forms of looking are transgressive, it provides a means to rewrite “assertions and representations of the self in which the artist controls the terms of the encounter” (33). Accordingly, performance as a “work of art speaks, transforming from silent object of the stare to a speaking subject narrating her own exhibition” (37).

Interestingly, the above two examples and the ones that follow demonstrate an acceptance of the public nature of sign language and a personal reveling in the regard of others. Despite a few students suggesting otherwise, it is not as if these students completely disregard people “staring.” Rather, they acknowledge such forms of looking as validation both of their signing abilities and of their difference. In the signed spectacle, students not only are aware of the potential for people to watch, in fact, the act of signing in public invites them to. Instead of the spectator having a “positionality of power – one through which the spectator assumes the position of being able to be part of the spectacle and yet command it at the same time” (Swartz, 1998:9), these students seem to assert control over the spectacle, re-appropriate the gaze (and other negative descriptors of looking), and subsequently, become empowered by it. Even if spectators are encouraged

to both look at and participate in the signed spectacle, it does not necessarily mean that the spectacle is entirely public. As I will now detail, sign language provides a vehicle for a private conversation to occur in public. In fact, signers are able to maintain their privacy and control what spectators are privy to in terms of the linguistic, dialogical, and some of the social meanings of signed conversations. In doing so, these signers enact a successful spectacle. That is, they seemingly disrupt or invert the assumed power relations that are inherent in a spectacle and assert their privilege over that of hearing, illiterate onlookers.

### **Secrets on Display**

Despite asserting their comfortableness with signing in public and with the outward attention it brings, students ironically talk about learning sign language as a means to be more discreet with their friends and a way to have very private conversations in public. Upon asking why he liked signing over speaking, David shared that his motivation for learning how to sign was to have intimacy while using the language:

In a group of people, when people are talking and I just want to say something to one person, I feel like I am drawing everybody's attention as soon as I have to say it. I want to have a private conversation – not a private conversation. I have something I want to say to *them* and if there are other people around, I draw attention as soon as I have to say something. So I *love* the not-speaking aspect of ASL because, I mean, once you got their attention – which can sometimes end up drawing as much attention from everybody else anyway – but once you get their attention, it feels subtle and discreet. You are signing back and forth and yeah, the signs are big, but I feel like it is more direct between you and that person you are talking to (2010:4).

Although signing in public is not private in terms of being noticed, David explicitly acknowledges that using ASL prevents others from partaking in his personal conversation. As mentioned in the second chapter, signing is a way to be discreet with what is said, and while it makes visual noise with its “big” signs, it safeguards against

unwanted attention. Upon asking if there was any thing else that she would like to share about her sign language experience, Kim shared that her motivation for learning also was for the discreetness of the language:

One of my friends did a minor in sign language. She told me about it. So I found it pretty cool that if I learn sign language, we could communicate in class without anybody knowing or listening. So I was like, “Okay. We are going to both learn sign language and we are going to talk about anything we want in class.” We wouldn’t have to be noisy; we wouldn’t have to be anything (2010:11).

While this is not Kim’s only discussion about using sign language to circumvent classroom rules by assuming that no one would notice, she does highlight an interesting distinction students also make. Students render the signed spectacle as simultaneously exclusive and inclusive in that they feel comfortable signing with each other in public because they presume that the (hearing) outsider will not be able to understand their conversation – as such conversation is not heard. Similarly, after asking if she found it easier to not communicate using her voice, Laura describes how sign language is a resourceful “go-to” and “secret language” for hearing people.

Half of the time, I won’t want to talk to somebody. I would be like, “I wish you knew sign language so we can communicate this way.” Because if you are in a situation where you don’t want a lot of people to hear what you are saying, or you don’t want someone to hear a secret, and you don’t want to pull away for a few minutes, I find that sign is a go-to-kind of thing. It is like a secret language for hearing people who are learning it. But none of my friends are learning it. (2010:8).

Identifying sign language as a resource for gossip and sharing intimate, private conversations in public without someone overhearing, this example demonstrates their willingness to use sign language in public because of its exclusivity. For the few hearing people who know it, it is a means to gossip or share intimate conversations in public and

assert privilege or distance from that of other hearing peers, who while they may notice a repertoire of gestures taking place, do not know their linguistic meaning.

Equating knowledge and understanding to listening, students emphasize an embodied difference of eavesdropping; that is, they define eavesdropping as aural and specify that, for successful eavesdropping to occur, the person listening is normally secretive about it, knows what language is being used, and understands what is being said. While someone may overhear a conversation taking place in another language, perhaps be fascinated by the sound and guess as to what language it is, merely overhearing another's conversation does not necessarily mean that listening is taking place. As Lesley recounts:

After I was in the class, I realized that I could teach my sister if I am trying to tell her something and I don't want any one else to understand. We speak Spanish to each other on the bus. And it is funny because sometimes we will be sitting on the bus and we would hear someone trying to say something secretly in Spanish to someone else. And we would look at each other and be like, "Yeah. We know what you are saying." [Laughs]...I guess you bump into less deaf people who would understand what you are saying or less sign language speakers (2010:8).

Assuming understanding is equivalent to hearing, Lesley provides an example in which she and her sister were successful eavesdroppers, listening in on another verbal conversation and being able to know what was being said. Asserting that because there are "less" [sic] signers that understand or are in-the-know in terms of linguistic meaning, sign language is preferable when sharing sensitive information with her sister. Even though sign language is a visual language and creates a public display, the security that signers feel directly corresponds to an assumption that people will look, that is hard for people to hide the fact that they are looking, and the majority of the spectators looking are hearing and illiterate. Without the ability to look in secrecy and the supposed inability of spectators to perceive the nuances of a signed conversation, students seem to accept any

forms of witnessing not as a form of eavesdropping but as part of the communicative process. As Shawn explains:

I am always looking across the room and seeing what people are signing back to each other in their conversation. But it doesn't really bother me when I am signing to someone and that someone is looking at me from across the room. It would bother me if I was sitting here with you and if we were having a personal [verbal] conversation and someone was eavesdropping. Signing in general, anybody that knows how to sign. It is like a secret language. It is like a secret password. But you know, I want to let them in (2010:12).

Accepting that the receptiveness is through the eyes and that interest is inevitable, Shawn distinguishes gawking from that of a form of communicative looking, looking that is seemingly removed from predetermined evaluation or judgment. That is, the signed spectacle is a form of encounter that opens up the public performance and invites a series of responses, and as these hearing signers experience, such responses tend to be positive. Suggesting that negative evaluations are inherent with staring or gazing and are immediately applied, such evaluative attitudes seem to be suspended in the novelty of the signed spectacle. As such, the spectator is enthralled by the mystery of the gestures and the production of social meaning occurs as the spectator recognizes, and perhaps appreciates, the significance that what is happening is in fact signing.

### **Community as Club? Privileging Hearing Membership in the Signed Spectacle**

As there “is a much smaller community of people that can communicate in [this] different way,” these students claim to “feel part of something, something different” (Laura, 2010:8/9). Among the students that sign, there is a level of comfortability and mutuality in sharing this “secret” language or skill. All of these students initially were in the “same boat” by being forced to fail at communication. However, as they became

familiar with the language, and were required to share their personal lives and feelings with one another while signing, they developed a level of intimacy. As Shawn describes:

I didn't think that there would be this community with the class. I am so used to psychology where I would walk into a class, I sit down, and I don't talk to anybody. I look at the lecture and then I leave. With ASL, you are going to meet people and everybody is learning this new language. It is really a community. You are coming together as a group of people and experiencing something new (Shawn, 2010: ).

This community Shawn speaks of originally manifests in an exclusionary way. Students assert that they want to learn sign language, to have this “secret language” with a few other people while others observe. Although spectators are invited to look and participate in the spectacle at their leisure, it does not necessarily mean that they understand the language or that they are granted access to the entire experience. Indeed, the spectator’s participation is important for establishing and validating personal, social and political significance of the spectacle. However, spectators exist on the periphery. They are bystanders not privy to the message, given superficial access by the signers, and merely observing the repertoire of gestures taking place.

Interestingly, most students identify a level of frustration with not being able to share this “sweet language” with others or communicate with others people with it. They reference this need or noble attempt to “pull in” (hearing) outsiders into their community, to teach them the language, even if so others can only selectively understand it. Mirroring what Creed (2006) calls the “seduction of community,” these students describe their signing community as “an aspiration entwined as identity [that] has the power to empower and burden” (22). While students like the idea of having this private, secret language with their friends, there is an explicit desire for more people to learn this language and to let others in. Indeed, this private conversation allows these students to

really perform, to be out in public because they have this special skill that nobody else has. However, it is not enough for just *them* to have it. They need more people to not only watch them sign but to be able to partially understand its linguistic meaning. Seeing the contradiction and irony in his original motivation to learn sign language and the need for more people to know it, David explains:

Now that I have learned it and I am excited that I have this new way of communicating. I guess I am almost frustrated that all my friends don't also know it...like, "oh, if you knew it I could say this to you and that would be great.".... Which is ironic because originally, I wanted to know it so I can have just one other person that knows and everyone else would not be able to understand it. And now I am frustrated because I have this sweet language and I really want other people to know it so I can talk to them...except that nulls out the people not understanding part. So I need them to selectively understand it (2010:11)

The above example reveals a tension between private and public space, between the desire to maintain intimacy and the desire to open the signing community. While some students like David wanted to learn sign language to be able to privately converse with few people in public, as students become familiar with the language and enjoy using it in public, they feel limited in the amount of people that they can use it with. Even as Laura enjoys how sign language enables her to "have secret things with her friends" (2010:1), she later discusses how the exclusivity of the language is what she likes least about learning sign language:

I don't like that not a lot of people know it because you want to practice it with people but not a lot of people know it. When you want to express yourself to your friends who don't know it, I get very frustrated. If I don't want to say something out loud, I will sign it to somebody and they will look at me and say, "I don't know what you are saying." It is more that I can only communicate with a certain few people who will understand rather than just everyone if I was just to talk.

Despite enjoying their performance and having pride in their communicative abilities, students want to “let others in” to share the language and be further recognized in having this special skill.

To be clear, these hearing signers are empowered by signing in public and can claim ownership and control in and through the signed spectacle. However, they do not control all the social and political meanings of a signed encounter and are impervious to the political and social consequences inherent with its use. Upon asking Laura to explain how she would describe sign language to a friend who does not know what it is, she asserts:

First of all I would say that it is really cool. And second, I think I would say that it is a form for people who we suspect to have a disability to be on the same level. So they can do the same jobs, they can experience the same things. Learning sign language is a way to equalize people or get people on the same level ...that generations thought as disabled. Any sort of language gives people a common ground, a community basically. It gives them the same opportunities that hearing people have in a hearing world. Earth is a hearing world so the deaf have a disadvantage. But they don't let it stop them. But they have a different skill, a different form of communication. They have a skill where we have a voice (2010:6).

By referring to sign language as a “skill” or “pass code” that, if learned, grants equal access, these students negate the communicative validity of the language and remove it from the social and political contexts in which it is used. Not only is her response patronizing about the possible struggles encountered by members of the Deaf community, the above example demonstrates the privileged standpoint that hearing signers have towards public sign language use. These hearing signers emphasize the secondary or supplementary aspect of sign language in their lives – above that of their voices – and they assert a view that sign language is a “skill” or linguistic means for “disabled” Deaf signers without a voice to “make do” in a hearing world.

Indeed, there still exists a possibility for all signers – hearing or Deaf – to be discriminated against when signing is done in public. The signed spectacle can fail if others do not understand the use of gestures to be a formal language and think someone is just moving their body irrationally. As discussed earlier, if that level of understanding does not take place, the power relationships between the spectator and those signing are not disrupted and those signing look merely foolish and make a spectacle out of themselves in a public space. However, even in a successful spectacle, where those watching at least have some form of understanding that signing is taking place and are linguistically excluded from the conversation, the spectators may justify their limited access by identifying those signing as deaf and/or as an undesirable “disabled” minority. Even though the hearing majority may be initially in awe of the beauty and coolness of this different form of communication taking place, they can apply deafness – and thus, disability – as means to cope with being an outsider.

Interestingly, by being able to flip-flop between verbal and nonverbal languages, it seems as though hearing singers invert the power dynamics, as opposed to interrupt them, and command even more attention from their spectatorship. In the many times that I have signed in public, or watched the interactions between other signers and their audience, spectators seem to get uncomfortable if hearing signers continually switch between their “inside” and “outside” voices, between signing and spoken language. In one instance, I was working on a paper with a friend and fellow signer in a coffee shop. We both were listening to music while typing and, while we would take out our earphones to converse, there would be times where we just shared what we needed to say by using sign language. In this particular instance, I could see that the woman on my left

was observing our interactions with some unease. Aware of her exclusion, it was as if she was concerned that we were using sign language, our “quiet voices,” to secretly talk about *her*. Fueling feelings of exclusion and the need to be “let in” on the conversation, this woman actually approached us as she was leaving and stated that what we were doing was “neat” and she tried her best to figure out why and what we were signing. Because we jumped between verbal and nonverbal conversations, and were using earphones, she accurately deduced that we were not deaf (or “disabled”) and then proceeded to ask how we came to take up sign language and whether we knew someone that was Deaf as a (noble) cause for us to sign.

This example demonstrates that spectators are compelled to approach (hearing) signers about the spectacle to rationalize or assess reasons for their exclusion. In doing so, they relinquish more power by claiming ignorance about what is taking place or the language itself. Moreover, because hearing signers can be more selective in when they sign and when they do not, they perhaps command more attention and seem to be more accessible in terms of garnering personal responses from their spectatorship. As they break out of character, stop signing, and stop enacting (assumed) Deafness in public, hearing signers still invert the power dynamic with other hearing spectators and they challenge normative thoughts in their ability to sign – especially if they are not deaf, or alternatively, they sign despite not knowing someone who is.

The signed spectacle not only reveals the visible privilege that signers seem to have over other hearing spectators, it exposes tensions between Deaf and hearing signers, between those that are a minority and those that selectively behave as one. Hearing signers employ strategies of oppression in their ability to manipulate space (de Certeau,

1984: 119). By referring to sign language as a “neat,” “cool,” and “secret password” to be shared with hearing friends, the signers patronize the use of the language, assert ownership of it in their presumptuous ability to teach their peers, and adopt a production of community that is more characteristic of a club – where membership is selective and controlled, as opposed to a minority group whose membership is presumably automatic (in being deaf), subordinate (in being “disabled”), and dependent on this lived (as opposed to politically hollow) language.<sup>11</sup> By being able to flip back and forth between speaking and signing worlds, my respondents “postulate a place that can be delimited as its own and serve the base from which relations with an exteriority composed of targets and threats can be managed” (de Certeau, 1984: 35-36).

Even though Deaf and hearing signers both interrupt assumed power relations in a spectacle, the hearing signers are able to inhabit a more temporary (successful) spectacle and can control when they do so. By again speaking or partaking in quotidian verbal talk, they have the option of breaking the spectacle, of re-entering the hearing world, and of dismissing any potential claims of deafness and/or disability. As such, their successful spectacle is provisional on their invoking both quiet or loud voices, signed or verbal languages as they see fit. The success in the spectacle for Deaf and hearing signers is based on maintaining linguistic and dialogical secrecy; however, hearing signers also suggest a successful spectacle that disrupts societal assumptions by removing aspects of disability from the (hearing) use of sign language.

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<sup>11</sup> I use the word “presumably” here to acknowledge that membership in the Deaf community is far from being homogeneous and automatic. For critical summation of the politics surrounding Deaf identity, and its relationship to perceived understandings of disability, refer to Jemina Napier’s (2002) article entitled “The D/deaf-H/hearing Debate.”

## Conclusion

By assuming that “any sort of language gives people a common ground, a community basically” (Laura, 2010:6), hearing signers depoliticize the use of this language and downplay the role of spectatorship in establishing social meanings of the spectacle. Indeed, Deaf and hearing signers have the same opportunities to have a private conversation in public, to command and control the signed spectacle in terms of its linguistic and dialogical meaning. However, as the signed spectacle indicates, the leisurely use of this language among other hearing signers both ignores and alters the social and political contexts of its use. While the signed spectacle makes the signing minority momentarily and contingently more powerful than the majority, the use of sign language in public divides the signing community into a privileged (hearing) minority and a disprivileged (Deaf and/or “disabled”) minority.

Upon reflection, the instructor in the amphitheatre sought to create instability in us as new signers, to disrupt our privilege, and to give students an awareness of the disempowerment or discrimination that Deaf people potentially feel when they open themselves up and sign in public. However, as the responses of hearing signers indicate, they do not occupy the same space, the same spectacle that he does. While their privilege may have been disrupted in the beginning – in the initial moments of the silent classroom and in their first moments of having to make noise or sign in public – these students fully recoup their privilege and assert it both over deaf and other hearing non-signers. Ultimately, these hearing signers can choose the terms of the encounter, when they use the language and with whom, and by re-entering the hearing world by speaking, they influence the social significance of the spectacle by removing any aspects of disability.

While signing in public, hearing signers can behave as a minority without having to identify—or associate—with one.

## Chapter Five: Conclusions

Even if sign language wasn't taught across the board, the reasons for it, the way it works, should be taught. What is wrong with understanding and exposure to it? Hey! Guess what? There are deaf people out in the world and some of them, not all of course, use a language that uses the body, hands, and face to communicate rather than the voice. This exists. It is not the same as our language, but it is a language in its own right. And then it leaves people with a sense of understanding that this is what is going on. That it is not weird or inappropriate or strange or stupid or retarded or oafish or apish. The people that believe it is apish don't spend enough time looking at it. As much as there is a humorous level of emotion, it is also gorgeous and fluid and dynamic. That is definitely not apish. We don't have that in spoken language. We do have people that have the ability to be eloquent, with a meter to their voice that is enrapturing. Even singing can be amazing. But I don't find it as involving as the dance of hands that sign language is (Nick, 2010: 17).

Inspired by my own experiences learning sign language, this thesis examined the experiences of beginner students learning sign language with respect to three major themes: the dislocation that hearing signers feel when they fail at communicating; the transitional spaces of embodied performance as a site for identity formation and articulation; and the disruptive politics of the spectacle when signers use this form of speech in public. Through my research, I have sought to understand the ways that sign language informs understandings of voice and body, and that of communication more generally. Chapter Two of this thesis examined the dislocating experiences of the students I interviewed, detailing the different ways their particular experiences were affected by the “problems” of communication – that is to say, interruption, silence, and noise. Chapter Three discussed the possibility of performing embodiment and the reflection such performances provide in identity (re)formation. And Chapter Four discussed the privileging of hearing signers over Deaf signers when making visual noise in public.

Within and between these chapters are a number of recurring themes. For one, tensions between voice and body, speech and silence, respectively, were both revealed in the breakdowns of (signed) communication. A second intriguing theme, closely related to this, was that male and female communicative embodied performances were gendered and reflected the assumed split between voice (male) and body (female). As participants acquire greater facility with this embodied language, their narratives demonstrate a (re)negotiation in how and when they communicate. Thirdly, the signed spectacle creates a space where difference – in particular, the public enactment of Deafness, which is a source of discrimination in other contexts – is both amplified and privileged. These themes highlight the complexities of ongoing struggles to dismantle oral conceptions of communication and the impacts such dismantling hold for identity (re)formation.

Together, these chapters explore how dominant culture navigates disability; how dominant culture navigates communication failure. In the case of the signed classroom, students were set up to fail at communicating. Displaced from their oral-centric assumptions of communication, they were purposefully disadvantaged and debilitated in their inability to communicate with much proficiency sign given the ban on voice and limited knowledge of sign language. However, as these students gained more facility in the language, they not only re-framed their communicative disability into a skill, decidedly reverted back to speech, and they recouped their communicative privilege. While these students claim transcendence over their communicative failings and re-assert privilege over members of the Deaf community, their narratives suggest that the construal of Deafness as disability is not simply a “lack” (Ree, 1999) but instead produced by the instantiation of certain theoretical assumptions regarding the centrality of voice. In this

end, “disability” and “failure” seems to be produced by social context – a context informed by the “discontinuity between nonverbal communication and language” (Shanker, 2000:98) and by the placing the capacity for language and voice in opposition to the body and nonverbal communication.

The students’ narratives reaffirm that in communication, necessary power relationships – between individuals, speakers and their environment, and in societal norms – are present and require further study. While the power dynamics may not always be oppressive, this thesis suggests that in order to *witness* the power inherent in communication we must look to the disruptions, the spectacles, and the communicative events that arrest us. ASL, as a visual performance and embodied form of communication, exhibits power relationships and offers instances where these disruptions can be produced and examined. While in everyday life, it is harder to see power relations or discern them over dim noise, the best place to see operations of power are in personal or social breakdowns, in the noisy interruptions that disrupt quotidian talk. Thus, signed communication is not only a valid field of inquiry; it is a means to reveal tensions in communication and the negotiable spaces that communicative bodies occupy.

This thesis has makes a number of contributions to the study of communication, which point to future directions in research. For example, further research on sign language should continue to theorize sign language as signed communication, as a communicative practice as opposed to a linguistic end, and thereby encompass the social and political significance informing its use. Using a communicative lens and drawing on other bodies of literature to theorize sign language, and other forms of communication more broadly, it provides a space to analyze the inherent power dynamics present. In the

context of hearing signers learning a language of a minority group, it would be interesting to conduct a longitudinal study. As students become more versed in the language and immersed in the Deaf culture that it is derived, how do the power relations change in the production of the signed spectacle and their identification with the Deaf community.

The discussion of the whisper in Chapter Three also opens up some new lines of inquiry. In the context of these hearing signers, the whisper was a physical manifestation of the tension between voice and body, and at times, manifestations of transgressive and privileged behavior while these students move between hearing and signing worlds. With a limited body of literature on the whisper, it would be interesting to see in what other ways the whisper reveals itself in communication and the extent that whispering is privileged. The discussion of eavesdropping in Chapter Four implies that listening – in or witnessing another conversation occupies transitive space and carries with it social and political implications. While my research reveals a need to re-term eavesdropping for a non-hearing context, theorizing different forms of communicative receptiveness may provide an avenue for incorporating all of the senses instead of privileging one or two.

By framing “listening” or “eavesdropping” in terms of communicative receptiveness, it also opens avenues to then explore what the Deaf do hear. As acknowledged in some of my participants’ responses, the deaf are presumed to live in silence. However, if the “silent” classroom was any indicator, the constructed silence revealed other communicative events not normally considered as communication. In any event, examining whisperers and eavesdroppers may provide a wider scope to further examine negotiations between public and private spaces including the communicative bodies that occupy them.

By thinking of language – and the capacity for language – as a mindful process,

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## Appendix A: Sample Research Questions

- What is your experience with sign language or American Sign Language (ASL) ?
- Why did you choose to take this beginner sign language course?
- Before taking this course, have you come across d/Deaf or hard-of-hearing individuals signing to each other? If so, in what context and what was that like for you?
- What were your thoughts or expectations when you first registered for the course?
- How did you envision the course to unfold and what is your experience compared to this?
- Is there anything about the course (such as difficulties, learning experiences, etc.) that you did not anticipate?
- Has learning sign language been as hard or as easy as you have anticipated? What about your experience has made it easy or hard?
- How did you expect you would communicate with other students or the professor before arriving to your first class?
- Do you speak during class? If so, why and under what circumstances?
- During the class exercises when voice is not necessary, what was it like for you to not use your voice to communicate? Do you feel that you are able to get your message across and be understood?
- Have there been other times (ie. being in a foreign country, a concert, an overcrowded room) where you have not been able to use your voice? How did you communicate? In your opinion, is this experience comparable to learning ASL?
- When you verbally communicate to others using spoken English, do you also ‘talk with your hands’?
- In your opinion, what does it mean to ‘talk with your hands’? Would you say that this phase best describes sign language? Why or why not?
- In your opinion, how would you define language? Has your definition changed now that you are learning American Sign Language?
- How would you describe sign language to a friend or colleague who is not familiar with what it is?
- Do you know any other languages? Which ones? And how has learning sign language compared to learning these languages?
- In your opinion, what is the importance of the body to communicate?
- Was there any point in class that you felt uncomfortable to sign? If so, why?
- Have you been signing in public and what has that experience been like?
- Are you comfortable signing in public? Why or why not?
- Where do you practice to sign? Are others involved? If so, who and do they have any experience with sign language?
- What is your favorite/ least favorite part of the class?
- Is there anything you would like to share about your experience learning sign language?