

## AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT OF KNOWING BY NOT SINGING

As I sat with George in the East London pub, the late afternoon light made geometric shapes on his visibly tired face. He had just come from an audition for a well-known theatre company to which he had gone energised, excited, ready for action. However, though the audition had been publicized as accessible, all the casting people were non-deaf, non-signers, and no British Sign Language (BSL) interpreter was provided. George explained that they'd said: "*just speak the English lines on the page.*" This request was both ignorant and insulting. Though George has written for theatre, television and film, though he has performed on the BBC and at the Globe, and though he is an outspoken and articulate artist, George does not express himself using speech. Without a BSL interpreter present, George's audition was an exercise in exclusion, not accessibility. He threw down the script and told them how unprofessional their behaviour was, but because none of them understood BSL they did not know what he was saying. George grimaced at the confused faces, threw up his arms in exasperation, and walked out.

I had known George for several years and I knew this was not the first time this had happened during his decade-long career nor throughout his life as a deaf, sign language user. We had both worked at the same Deaf-led theatre company where I was employed as an administrator, he as an artist, and where I later also conducted field research. And though he had been mostly patient with my halting attempts at signing over the years, he had discussed with me more than once the problem of hearing sign learners like me.<sup>1</sup> He said that deaf people's inclusion in the arts, in learning and in wider society had been impeded by the disproportionate focus on hearing BSL learners relative to the lack of resources for deaf children and their families. By way of further explanation, he added:

*"It's the fucking choir all over again."*

As a child, the only time during his school year that his teachers had focused specifically on him was in their annual insistence that he perform in their sing-and-sign choir. George had attended a mainstream school with an "Oral-deaf" unit where speaking was framed as paramount for proper knowledge-making. 'Oralism' refers to not only to a pedagogical approach, but also the linguistic regime which since the 1800s had compelled many deaf people to use speaking and lip-reading as key elements in communication and learning, a protocol which historically was often accompanied by physical and psychological mistreatment or abuse. It is a controversial practice which has been proven to have proscribed deaf people's learning, language (Conrad 1979) and heritage for more than 150 years (Ladd & Lane, 2013). George remembers that interpreters were not provided in the classroom and that his teachers told his parents he was "*best suited to desk work.*" George's performance skills went unrecognised while he was at school, and yet, year after year he was told he must sing and sign along with the choir in order to show the school's inclusivity, even though the 'signs' used were

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<sup>1</sup> *A note on researcher positionality:* I am a hearing, non-fluent BSL-user with a NVQ Level 6 qualification and am also a daughter of an Oral-deaf parent. The quotes in this article represent my understanding of my signed conversations with my interlocutors, as written in my field notebook. I represent these as italicised quotations. My conversations were verified via email with the man I have anonymised and call 'George', however they tell the reader as much about me as a researcher as they do about him, something George himself has pointed out to me on multiple occasions.

nonsense, incomprehensible. He became so fed up that he signed “*go fuck yourselves*” throughout the concert as the audience and teachers smiled and clapped along. The situation exemplified George’s belief that song-signing signalled a trend of “*cultural appropriation of deaf traditions and language*,” in the name of so-called access at the expense of inclusion for deaf people. His recent audition was just another instance of this appropriative pattern: the audition benefitted from its supposedly “accessible” format, even as it excluded those whose needs ought to have been thoughtfully anticipated.

Having told this story, George then turned to an example of song-signing on YouTube.<sup>2</sup> That year, there had been a controversy within deaf creative circles on social media surrounding a video of three Amy Winehouse impersonators ‘signing’ a rendition of her song “Tears Dry On Their Own.” The ‘signed’ Winehouse-tribute offended George as much as the choir because throughout the video no mouth patterns or facial expressions were used. Their absence flattened-out the signing-grammar by removing both its affective dimension and key vocabulary indicators usually depicted through facial expression, rendering the song largely unintelligible to BSL users. One heated social media re-post<sup>3</sup> on George’s feed said it exhibited:

*... a lot of ego in hearing people, who are not yet fluent in BSL, in wanting to show-off what they have learnt at the earliest possible opportunity and of course friends and family who don't have any knowledge of BSL say 'oh that's marvellous, oh that's lovely' when it is actually totally inaccurate. This behaviour shows disrespect for deaf people and their language.*

George told me: “*The whole thing is just so wrong – these signed songs, that choir I was in – they act as a vehicle for non-native, non-deaf “signers” to show-off their signing which is usually incoherent.*”

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As George proposes, at issue is what song-signing enables non-deaf people to understand (or not understand) about deaf-centred epistemologies and life-ways. As part of this special section on ‘Knowing by Signing’ as one commentator noted,<sup>4</sup> my contribution aims to “force a confrontation” between so-called mainstream anthropological theories concerning epistemologies and ontologies, with the growing body of work which specifically foregrounds deaf ways of knowing and being. Deaf anthropology is already an established and robust subfield (*see* Friedner & Kusters, 2020), but it has been underacknowledged within our broader discipline. Here I bring into conversation literature from across Deaf Anthropology, Critical Access Studies, Philosophy, Acoustemology, Discourse Ethnography and Sensory Anthropology to argue that by attending to rigid preconceptions concerning ways of listening, particularly as regards hearing-centred expectations of song experiences, we have a means for exposing invisible epistemic bias and injustice against deaf people.

Through ethnographic appraisal of signed versions of songs – ‘song-signing’ – I argue that we witness how language and listening assumptions concretise rigidities which are built into the architecture of

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<sup>2</sup> This video can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MWMMO8L5uRc> As seen on 07.05.20

<sup>3</sup> Facebook, author unknown

<sup>4</sup> I am indebted to George, Clare Louise and the other research participants who have supported my research, as well as the generous critiques offered by my AA reviewers which have transformed my approach; the support of the SARA at Cambridge; the CWWG, and the ESRC/AHRC funding which made this research possible.

British social behaviours and public systems. Though this article is written in large part to recognise the ways that deaf colleagues, friends and research participants have taught me how to listen and learn for more than a decade, it is also written to address those people who have not yet been privileged with this particular kind of epistemic perspective. Throughout this text, it is ‘hearing’ readers who are asked to alter expectations concerning sensory perception and definitions of listening in order to better understand DEAF knowledge-making processes. By doing so, the concept of ‘access’ emerges as the nexus of a conflict between English-speech-based ways of knowing and deaf knowledge production, exposing consistent lack of value attributed to deaf knowledge-making processes by non-deaf majorities. This article unpacks the ways that a particular kind of sensorial bias can become embedded in knowledge-making to the exclusion of other possibilities. What this article ultimately explains is why what may seem to non-signers to be an anodyne creative act of “song interpretation” in fact feeds into a political landscape that is divisive along sensorial and therefore epistemic and ontological lines as well.

In the first section I refocus the reader’s attention on the ways that deaf-centred listening practices can highlight and frame alternate ways of knowing. I then turn to how deaf-centred listening can be seen to serve as means of resistance to “compulsory ablebodiedness” (McRuer, 2006; Hamarie & Fritsch, 2019), an embracing of intentional social rupture as key to overcoming too-common experiences by deaf people of *epistemic injustice* (Fricker 2007), addressing why hearing-centred access accommodations often miss the mark of true inclusion. The value of deaf-centred listening makes much clearer why George and countless others on social media were so fed-up with song-signing, and why many interlocutors described the need to reconceptualise DEAF signing as a form of authority *away from* auditory dominance and practicable on its own, DEAF-centred terms (*sensu* Gulliver 2009). This argument therefore also has implications for many people for whom knowing is not achieved primarily through English-speaking or singing. It offers a potential pathway to transformation of the hegemonic, speech-text rigidities that persist in driving knowledge-making practices, education and governance in the UK and beyond.<sup>5</sup>

I invoke throughout the text the sign language convention of CAPITALISING words when they are intended to evoke DEAF-specific meanings (e.g. DEAF, ACCESS, INCLUDE), as a way to textually contrast DEAF-centred definitions with hearing-centred notions of the same words. This is unconventional in scholarship on deafnesses, but it necessarily provides the reader with a visual cue to step back from hearing-centred semiotic expectations, to problematise the exclusions typified in the choir, the Winehouse and audition examples. Through unpacking DEAF listening practices sensorially and socially, this article makes an important contribution to the central aim of Deaf Anthropology: “to explore what it means to see, hear, listen, communicate, and inhabit the world through differential sensory configurations” (Friedner & Kusters 2020:32 *sensu* Hartblay 2018).

I highlight these moments of George’s anger not to consign him to the pejorative ‘Angry & Frustrated’ deaf stereotype described in Baker-Shenk & Kyle (2007:69). Rather I take seriously George’s critique that ‘access’ is a truly contentious concept, one that exposes what was at stake for George and many other of the interlocutors and colleagues with whom I have worked. This was not

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<sup>5</sup> This article focuses primarily on the ways hearing and voicing delimits listening, attempting to instead reconceptualise aural connection as one amongst many ways to listen. I therefore look to BSL as a pivotal counterpoint. Much further exploration can be done within other sensory deployments such as DeafBlind contexts, this receives limited attention (pp5) because of spatial restrictions.

only an exclusionary audition (ironically even its moniker was hearing-focused), or a poorly signed song on YouTube or a choir that didn't use real signs; these instances served for him as evidence of a refusal of deaf-centred ways of communicating, knowing and being in the world. This article therefore takes as its centre of gravity George's argument that such faulty ticking of accommodation boxes leads irrevocably to "*cultural appropriation of deaf life-ways*"<sup>6</sup> and the resulting refusal of deaf ways of knowing and being.

The connection George makes between issues of (in)accessibility, social exclusion and practices of song-signing aligns with De Clerck's concept of *deaf epistemologies* as an 'anthropology of deaf flourishing' (2016:256), requiring analysis which holds up to inspection the power and value of DEAF knowing as a critical component of societal inclusion and thus a means of life-way recognition. I mobilise signed-songs as cyphers through which specific logics of epistemic value, access, and inclusion come into focus. His position squares why what may seem to non-signers to be an anodyne creative act of "song interpretation" in fact feeds into a political landscape that is divisive along sensorial lines. My aim is to visibly unpack over-simplified hearing-DEAF dividing lines through a lens of DEAF-centred viewpoints on song-signing and related concepts like DEAF 'INCLUDE'. However, before considering song-signing as an exemplar, a comprehensive refiguring of listening, meaning-making, and being-as-DEAF is required.

#### KNOWING BY DEAF LISTENING

When George positions the song-signing choir alongside his (inaccessible) 'accessible' audition, he advances a crucial critique against hearing-centred definitions of listening that consistently legitimises exclusionary social practices. Following Friedner & Kusters (2020; 2015; also Scott-Hill 2003), who suggest that delimiting 'culture' as 'deaf' "overdetermines deaf difference from hearing people and assumes similitude between diverse deaf people" (pp.33), this section unpacks related over-simplification of assumed sensorial hearing-deaf binary opposition, which disregards the iterative, complex, and non-static nature of the senses in sense-making. This approach aims to open up a broader move toward mapping the vast heterogeneity of sensory-deployment in epistemic-construction via listening, to music and to songs but also listening as a means of world-making, avoiding an essentialism that "arises out of audism [hearing prejudice] and hearing privilege [which] can easily exacerbate it. Polarizing opposites then trap deaf people within the very ideas they wish to challenge" (Fernandes & Myers 2010; see also Kusters et al 2017[a]). We are reminded, "the body itself is a condition and a premise in the experiences made" (Haualand 2007:121); we "gain knowledge about [the world] through using our senses" (pp114). Deaf-centred ontology underpinned by visual-tactile rather than visual-aural sensorial dominance (Robinson, 2019) is thus key to apprehending deaf-epistemologies as unique and important ways of generating knowledge as well as key to understanding DEAF life-ways.

Regardless of the 'many ways to be deaf' (Monaghan et al, 2003), visual-tactility plays a distinct role in all kinds of everyday deaf-informed life-ways. While I focus on George and other sign-using deaf people in this article (excepting Clare-Louise's story), it is important to understand that listening provides a common frontier across different kinds of deafness despite such distinctions. I have therefore co-opted Feld's *acoustemology* as a foundational premise, centring on "acoustic ways of knowing [toward a relational ontology]" (2015). This section outlines the visual-tactile foundation of

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted from George

DEAF listening before unpacking how it is received and valued in the context of song-signing practices, leading toward implications of non-deaf recognition of DEAFness more broadly. In this section I foreground the sensorial component which impacts upon debates concerning song-signing. Through thinking analytically and empirically about different ways of listening, I present why a total refiguration of attentive modes re-situates how one understands and thus undergirds 'being' itself.

Deafness disrupts expected hierarchical ordering of sensory deployment when listening, demoting aurality. In fact, deaf people receive visual information such as lip patterning, sign language, gestures, facial expressions and other visual cues by seeing them, and then processing that information as equivalent if not semblant to aural events (Finney et al, 2001). While this capacity is most frequently represented in research featuring deaf, sign-using people, even pointing to heightened capacity for peripheral visual attention (Holmes 2017; Codina et al 2017; Bavelier et al 2007; Bosworth & Dobkins 1999), it has also been observed in deaf people who do not sign. This was consistently exemplified by the Hard of Hearing (HOH) research participants who had become deaf in older age or because of illness. They labelled vision and touch as listening '*superpowers*'.<sup>7</sup> A fantastic articulation of this is found in Ghassan Hage's autoethnographic account of late-onset deafness, a state of being which he in part attributes to his lifelong-love of very loud rock music and drumming (2013:76). When Hage discovered he could no longer eavesdrop using hearing, formerly his favourite pastime, he nevertheless continued to 'listen-in' by looking. Though his *capacity* has shifted from aurality to a visually-centred listening attention, his *disposition*, the state that inclined him toward eavesdropping action (in essence: his voracity for knowing), remained unaltered (Hage 2013. Bourdieu 1977). In this example visual-centric listening may be seen as immanent to deafness, whether the skills to execute signing or other DEAF modes of expression are developed or are not.

However, vision is not the only sensorial mode prioritised and mobilised during deaf-listening, particularly when listening to music; touch is also instrumental. Besides, as Taussig wrote in 'The Eye as Organ of Tactility,' what we think of as *seeing* can actually be seen as a mode of *touching* what we view:

“light [...] makes contact with the retinal rods and cones to form, via the circuits of the central nervous system, a (culturally attuned) *copy* of the rising sun [...] seeing something is to be in contact with that something” (1993:21).

Terra Edwards describes an even more directly palpable connection, charting how the incorporation of tactility in DeafBlind listening and the use of Tactile American Sign Language (TASL)<sup>8</sup> allows for flexibility in communication which does “not demand identical sensory experience or forms of language-use among its members, but shared ways of accommodating changing and nonreciprocal sensory orientations” (Edwards 2012; 2014). Such flexibility enables Edwards' DeafBlind interlocutors to listen across sensory divisions between DeafBlind signers and Deaf signers. This capacity to combine tactility with vision is relevant to listening across the wider deaf population as well. For Clare-Louise, a film and theatre-maker, it was a literal access to tactile resonance that was

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<sup>7</sup> Robinson fieldnotes (2016)

<sup>8</sup> Tactile American Sign Language or TASL, Edwards argues, is an emergent language shaped by and through DeafBlind lifeways “as a result of the pro-tactile movement, forms of authority accrued to pro-tactile social roles and legitimacy accrued to tactile modalities” (2014:22).

required to listen to music, something she was unable to do when she first became deaf as a teenager. She had been prone to severe ear infections from a young age, leading to surgery at age nine that removed a large part of her infected middle-ear and leaving her deaf on one side. A few years later, another surgery was performed on the other ear:

*From the [second] operation I could no longer hear. I was just plunged into silence. Quickly and without warning ... I went to sleep as one person and I think I woke up as a different person. Changed forever [...] As if I was underwater... as if I was in a glass box...*

Following the surgery, Clare-Louise returned to her dance-training school to meet with the head teacher. The teacher never spoke directly to Clare-Louise, instead directing information only towards her mother. The meeting was a struggle on both sides as were all her speech-based taught courses, however the true battle occurred in the dance studios. Though the movements were still in her muscles' memory, she no longer knew how to listen to the music. She became exhausted from straining to watch everyone, to read lips or to gain context clues – anything to communicate, to access the music and the lyrics, the jokes, the basic life that had been her world only one month before.

*I could see the world carrying on around me, but I felt completely removed, closed off.*

Clare-Louise describes the one dance instructor who took time to find out “*how to make the listening easier.*” Together they established patterns, particular pitches at which the music was accessible through vibration from the piano through the soles of Clare-Louise’s feet, and at frequencies that might reach Clare-Louise’s newly-fitted hearing aids. The instructor ensured eye-contact was maintained during explanations, and carefully articulated her mouth patterns when issuing instructions, demonstrating the dance movements to be emulated. Clare-Louise’s glass-box-feeling was somewhat mitigated by these revised modes of connection.

These rudimentary adjustments set a template which allowed Clare-Louise to reorganise her listening throughout her time at school and university, into adulthood. Through thousands of intensive, exhausting methods, Clare-Louise now automatically adapts to situations and listens to music using her “*usual coping strategies*” – visually associating lip shapes, facial expressions, and body language, in combination with some aural-access from hearing aids, constructing meaning from the resulting composites. Deaf Studies scholar Benjamin Bahan (2009) refers to such ‘strategies’ as deployment of ‘visual-tactile reach’ to listen and know. He explains tactility through a story of a deaf mother teaching her deaf two-year old about vibratory cues. By feeling the side of a bin as it is shaken the child links the sensation of vibration with the unseen toy inside. Extension between the source of the vibration, and unseen-but-known doll links the sensual witnessing of that ensuing sensory ripple, manifesting as tactile ‘reach’, thereby becoming a critical means of learning and knowing. Tactile vibrations can in this way be seen to be structurally equivalent to auditory reception, for instance the experience of felt vibration from the strings on an instrument (Fulford 2011); the resonance once felt by various surfaces and spaces of the body activates tactile reception, commanding attention which, like audition, can be ignored or acknowledged. Felt-resonance can be joined with visual cues by an attentive listener: linking a pointing finger with the jolt of the pianist’s body as he rises to begin the next chord signifies action, linking felt action to its source. Listening “reaches out toward the source of the sound [...] the sound from the object is “*a dimension of experience in and of itself*” (Hualand, 2007:116-117; *citing from* Feld, 1982), seen with the eyes, felt in/on/through the body. It offers the context which enables Clare Louise to listen in large rehearsal studios as well as they can in intimate spaces. She laughs when she says: *I guess I can listen better because I can’t hear.*

Clare-Louise's sentiment has been corroborated for more than 100 years by scholars of deaf listening; vision followed by touch have been cited as the primary and secondary channels of communication and knowledge access for deaf listeners (Power & Hyde, 1997; Elmer et al, 2002; Loomis et al, 2008; Holmes 2017). Whether people are born deaf, were deaf since childhood, are sign language users like George, or have more recently become deaf and primarily use speech like Clare-Louise, visual-tactility shapes to greater or lesser degrees deaf socialities and language via a life-way "of the eye" (Veditz, 1913; 2013), though we can add also 'on the skin'. Regardless of whether they are signers, when deaf people are at the centre of one or both sides of communicative exchange, the rules and spatial formations must accommodate the imperatives of seeing, being seen and feeling.

Though some anthropology colleagues have challenged the existence of deaf listening on the basis that deafness refers to "a *lack of hearing*" and listening is often defined as "to give [attention](#) to someone or something in [order](#) to [hear](#) him, her, or it,"<sup>9</sup> the core definition and understanding of 'listening' is not at odds with deaf/non-hearing-centred listening processes.<sup>10</sup> As Glenn's comparative review of fifty definitions of listening (1989) explores, only eight definitions included in her in-depth literature review make any mention of speech.

[Insert Image 1 here]

#### FIGURE 1 - GLENN'S TABLE OF LISTENING SOURCES (1989:26)

Based on the remaining definitional categories: *perception, attention, interpretation, response, memory, and visual cues* (1989:26), 'listening' (whether deaf or hearing) emerges as more accurately understood through *multimodal, social semiotic* engagement (Bezemer & Kress, 2015), an act in which all listeners receive information via their various ways of paying attention and processing differing feeds of information accordingly.

Michael Halliday originally used the frame of social semiotics to better understand meaning-making as "the individual's language potential [...] interpreted as the means whereby the various social relationships into which he enters are established, developed and maintained" (1978:16). More recently scholars on semiotics in deaf contexts, from Deaf Studies and Deaf Anthropology (Robinson, 2019[b]; Kusters, 2019; Kusters et al, 2017[b]), and Sign Language Linguistics (Young et al, 2020; Tapio, 2019, Holmström & Schönström, 2018) have acknowledged that a situational understanding of semiotics must also take into account the multiple intersensorial elements or 'modes' that comprise communication, hence *multimodal*. In the context of deaf people it emerges that conditionality and sensorial hierarchy utilise vision and touch as central channels in systems of meaning-making. These may include "the resources of music/sound (van Leeuwen, 1999; [also Maler, 2013;2015; Fulford et al, 2011; Holmes, 2017; Turner & Pollitt 2002]), action (Martinec, 2000; Kress et al., 2001), visual communication (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996) and their arrangement as multimodal ensembles" (*in* Jewitt, 2007:275 [also Kusters, 2017[b]; 2019. interruptions mine]). By extension, work connecting Sound Studies with Deaf Studies (Friedner and Helmreich, 2009:164) argues that scholarship and

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<sup>9</sup> <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/listening> As seen on 20.07.20

<sup>10</sup>Feld has corroborated the veracity and importance of deaf-listening (personal communicae)

society are “overly tuned to hearing and voicing as key modes of describing human sociality.” Within the context of deaf-centred information processing, in particular organisation of the visual and auditory cortexes (*in* Eimer et al, 2002; Loomis & Klatsky, 2008; Kusters et al, 2017[b]) and experiential *seeing/feeling-to-listen* as Clare Louise described, deaf communication and knowledge-making emerge as intertwined with a core sense of self rather than separable concerns.

Though ‘deaf’ is “a hybrid and intersectional identity” (Nakamura, 2006 *in* Friedner & Kusters, 2020), such vast heterogeneity can be unified as ‘DEAF’ via the common-thread of listening orientations and experiences. ‘DEAF’ emerges as an orientation which accesses ‘world’ on its own terms, an authority colloquially known as deaf ‘way’ or ‘world’ (Bauman & Murray, 2009. Kusters & De Meulder, 2013). Friedner & Cohen have employed this idea to broach concepts of ‘deaf ontology’,

approaching bodies and senses through the lens of inhabitable worlds, [aiming] to further inquire into age-old scholarly investigations about embodiment to think through a current fascination with the senses and to trouble social categories such as “*disability*,” “*debility*,” and “*ability*” (Friedner & Cohen, 2015).

Through understanding these elements of DEAF listening, one gains traction within the concept of DEAF inhabitable worlds. Unfortunately, also at issue are the ways that visual-tactile listening and knowledge-making practices persist in being perceived as lesser-than-hearing, primarily because deaf listening is in constant tension with dominant speech-text norms in society, and this is incorporated into practices which dictate and delimit models of ‘access’ as I will explore in the next section. For this reason, instances of song-signing, considered benign acts of creative/artistic output by their often (though not always) non-deaf makers, in fact contribute to much broader debates concerning access and inclusion, as is typified by George’s choir and by the Winehouse impersonators. When considering mobilisations of vision and touch as central to message reception and understanding, the offense caused by the Winehouse impersonators through their removal of crucial grammatical elements by eliminating visual cues of mouthshapes and facial expressiveness, is brought into sharper focus. Such ‘signed’ accommodations do no such thing; they excise meaning from the making. They are illegible to many deaf sign language users, so they may appear to be inclusive when they are in fact profoundly exclusionary to a large proportion of the signing population.

#### ‘INCLUDE’ IN CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF SONG-SIGNING

Framing ‘DEAF’ as a visual-tactile ontology on which experiences of world are predicated prompts a necessary refiguring of communicative and knowledge-making norms. Bakhtin’s *heteroglossia* suggests that every communicative act contains a polyphonic cornucopia of perspectives, politics, and resulting meanings, “ideologically-infused indexicality, tension-filled interaction—especially stylization and hidden dialogicality, and hierarchically-layered multivoicedness” (Hornberger, 2013 *in* Blackledge & Cresse, 2014:v, *emphasis mine*). Maler writes about similar polyphony in the genesis of song-signing, drawing on a multi-historical and politically fragmented set of practices. Song-signing emerged in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a poetic praxis consisting “mainly of hymn interpretations in religious settings and simple rhythmic signed songs” (Bahan, 2006 *in* Maler, 2015); and later as a 21<sup>st</sup> century by-product of hearing-learners making increasing use of online video portals and social media to test and exhibit their burgeoning signing knowledge (*ibid*). Both grew to some extent out of deaf-hearing sociality and intercommunicative access. However “although the American signed song developed out of the ASL poetic tradition [...] it has since distinguished itself as a separate, though related, art form” (*ibid*). The latter form has proven so divisive in part due to its popularity as a learning tool amongst new, non-proficient hearing sign language learners (Peters & Seier, 2009; Maler, 2013), a

debate to which I will return. These divisions in song-signing practices represents related though different forms of knowledge production, one form celebrating DEAF-centred poetic heritage, the other form potentially proliferating practices of non-deaf sign language appropriation. These practices mirror divergences between the deaf-centred concepts of ‘ACCESS’ versus non-deaf, non-signing conceived provisions of ‘access’ as I will now explain.

As this section will show, ACCESS (deaf-centred concept), access (non-deaf-centred concept), can be conceptually delineated on the basis of how listening-attention is directed. ACCESS and access are not oppositional poles, but instead comprise contrapuntal elements of an epistemic system. ACCESS as it is represented in BSL is most often a breaking through of expected norms to generate connection. This is held in tension with non-deaf ‘access’, which most often addresses legal requirements to show ‘reasonable adjustment’ or ‘accommodation’ for people who would otherwise be excluded and thus treated unequally. In English, ‘access’ is a word that incorporates: *physical access* (e.g. wheelchair ramps, adjusted keyboards); *communicative access* (interpretation, palantyping/text-based communication solutions); *social access* or networkability (gaining access to a group or person); and policy-related, *utopian access* which most usually refers to access as an idealistic end-goal rather than a form of action. By contrast, signed use and interpretations of ‘ACCESS’ as I have witnessed them in the field are primarily construed in an experiential or action-oriented way, often taking the form of rupture of social patterns. Song-signing offers highly visible ways to witness these contrasting meanings in action.

For example, in the lead up to one ‘accessible’ indie-rock concert, the sponsoring organisation held a steering group on ‘access’ provisions at a local venue. The group was peopled by non-deaf, non-signing contributors, though an earlier consultation with a prominent deaf activist and music enthusiast had already fed in a prescribed course of action centred on providing BSL interpreters at the upcoming gig. One group member suggested that the presence of BSL interpreters seemed positive even if no signers actually attended because it signified that a venue was “*taking access seriously*”. It therefore represented what he called “*a political act of inclusion.*” This was unanimously agreed. In the weeks leading up to the gig, the organisers followed the advice of the deaf activist, providing the event with captioning and BSL interpreters offered, and a specific viewing area to ensure deaf patrons’ as well as those with mobility requirements had increased stage visibility. The setup offered truly excellent communicative access.

My guests, both of whom were native BSL-signers, came along to the gig. As the bands began to play, they both watched the interpreters and danced for a while, visibly enjoying themselves, frequently giggling. But about ten minutes into the first set, they returned to their own signed conversation, facing one another rather than the stage or the interpreters at the side, dancing nearer to a giant speaker. When we spoke after the gig, they both said they were amazed by the efforts the venue made to enable greater communicative access for deaf people. They were especially impressed with the visibility of the BSL interpretation, and said they hoped for more events like it. However, they also said the best part for them was their proximity to the giant speakers, explaining that this was how they liked to “*listen to the music.*”

When I asked about the interpreted lyrics, they said these were excellent too but: “*completely separate [...] more like poetry,*” an entirely different event. They enjoyed the interpreter, but (and here was the source of the giggling) they felt that the singer-guitarist – who they claimed had the appearance of being “*wild, sexy, and cool*” (sic) – did not visually align with the conservative-looking, middle-aged interpreter. Placing this alongside the Winehouse example which appealed to the visuals of the look of Winehouse but did not attend to accuracy in the signing, at the gig the opposite occurred. Though

communicative access was undeniably achieved, the ‘look’ of the interpreter created a noticed dissonance between him and the band’s frontman. These examples seem to indicate that though both were aiming at access of a kind, the access was primarily guided by non-deaf-centred aesthetics and sensory considerations. In effect they were both based on ‘not-hearing’ rather than on deafness. The heterogeneity of deafness means that the setup for the gig would serve some deaf people perfectly well for a host of different sensory and social reasons (Holmes, 2017). These ethnographic cases, however, offer further illustration of the division mentioned by Maler between song-sign forms: the lineage of visual poetry versus hearing-led, sign-interpreted pop songs. As actor, comedian and ‘SignSong Diva’<sup>11</sup> Caroline Parker has frequently commented, full integration in song-singing is uncommon because it is hard to do, but she also points out that providing partial access does not necessarily preclude participants’ enjoyment of the performances. Rather, as my interlocutors described of the gig, it frames interpreter and the music as separate events, each valued differently by different listeners leading to ‘*doorway access*’: “As an audience member [...when they] have an interpreter at the side, that’s great, but I feel like I’m sitting in a doorway. The theatre is in one room and the access is in another room and I’m jumping from being an audience member to being a deaf person. They are separate,” Caroline explained

This is an issue which plagues ‘access’ events and meetings more generally: the mainly non-deaf organisers have the unified aim across most of the meetings of ‘communicative access’, which is declared in the text-based emails, invitations and agendas. The deaf delegates like my friends at the gig, are for the most part seated centrally, often on a raised platform to increase interpreter visibility, or if captioning is provided, visibility of large screens, but the deaf delegates must look back and forth between the presenters and the interpreters, or sometimes only at the latter, and often end up having an almost entirely separate experience. Meanwhile, hearing audience members are catered for with voiceovers accompanying each sign-using presenter; because they can hear while they watch they have a singular focus. These forms of communicative access appear genuine in their attempts to offer a form of inclusion and organisations are often advised by deaf leaders to address these as priority. In the words of one former head of the British Deaf Association, “let’s focus on the signing and figure out the rest later.” Nevertheless, this approach means the deaf and hearing delegates are effectively sitting in different meetings. In such meetings, deaf-signing delegates will often step to the front of the room mid-event to tell stories in BSL about the service failures that had occurred in their lives or in those of friends and family. This derails the expected agendas of the organisers but makes sense in the deaf-centred meeting occurring on that side of the ‘doorway’. At the gig the BSL interpreters signalled to non-deaf gig-goers that the venue took access seriously, and yet regardless of this intention, the two deaf signing audience members I saw were listening in a different way, facing away from the interpreters, dancing next to the giant speakers and their emanating vibrations.

Various deaf research participants have explained that interruptions often emerge as a response to doorway-access, intentional attempts at *breaking through* – the agenda, the red tape. And in fact, BSL signs for ‘ACCESS’<sup>12</sup> and ‘INTERRUPT’<sup>13</sup> are strikingly similar; both incorporate the bisecting of the non-dominant signing hand by the signing hand, whether by chopping downward or pushing

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<sup>11</sup> So named because of her sign cabaret shows <https://vimeo.com/126735188> as seen on 06.10.2021

<sup>12</sup> <https://bslsignbank.ucl.ac.uk/dictionary/words/access-1.html> as seen on 09.04.21

<sup>13</sup> <https://bslsignbank.ucl.ac.uk/dictionary/words/interrupt-1.html> as seen on 09.04.21

through the middle and ring fingers (*see* Figure 2)<sup>14</sup> enacting *rupture*, as was pointed out to me by one interlocutor who frequented these kinds of events. In these cases it is apparent that the mainly non-deaf organisers *are* attempting to address the central theme of ‘access’ and to a significant extent achieve access in terms of how it looks, what it entails and, perhaps more importantly, what it should perform. However, oftentimes consultation with ‘the deaf community’ is completed well before the event, often with a select few or even just one deaf representative (like the deaf activist consulted ahead of the gig). This then largely precludes actionable inclusion of the live delegates. Additionally, because the litmus of successful access is typically based on deafness meaning ‘*not*-hearing’, it is fulfilled by communication access provision. This is conceptually different from deaf-centred ‘INCLUDE’,<sup>15</sup> meaning co-constructed action based on DEAF listening forms as earlier described. This definitional discrepancy between non-deaf access and ACCESS leads to distinct divergences in the ways that deaf and non-deaf people understand the desired intentions, attentions, and intended goals required in order for it to have been seen as productive. This constant negotiation aligns with what Hamraie labels “critical access studies” (2017) in which the ‘architecture of inclusion’ (Hamraie, 2018:455) focuses “not only on access *per se* but also on how access is perceived, made sense of, denied, and continually negotiated” (Dokumaci, 2018).

To further illustrate, if the Winehouse impersonator video is placed alongside Caroline Parker’s song-signing, the disparity between inclusive elements of each of these practices is immense. The Winehouse performances mimic the look of signing without its efficacy. By contrast, Parker *joins* DEAF-message-making and aural-listening, creating visual gags and ironic situational juxtaposition using the stories from the songs and humour drawn from deaf-hearing disconnection. The performances she makes are integrated events, listenable regardless of sensorial difference and therefore invoke what my interlocutors often describe as ‘INCLUDE’ measures.<sup>16</sup>

[Insert Image 2 here]

**FIGURE 2 – A CREATIVE RENDERING OF THE SIGN FOR ACCESS/INTERRUPT;<sup>17</sup> WITHOUT THE MOVEMENT AND MOUTHSHAPE THE INTENDED MEANING IS UNCLEAR, BUT THE CONCEPT OF BREAKING-THROUGH IS VISIBLE**

According to several interlocutors including Parker and demonstrated by the two women who went with me to the gig, the purpose of attending these events is at least in part to listen to what is on offer, but it is also to be witnessed by other deaf, sign-using people, telling stories about commonly held DEAF experiences. The Winehouse video, based on feedback by George and others, precluded this connectivity by removing a key part of the visual channel, rendering the video illegible. The goal for DEAF ACCESS is not only about *being seen*, but also *being scene*, a form of action designed by and for fellow DEAF audience members, whether live or virtual. Two seemingly intentionally divided

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<sup>14</sup> There can also be further variation in the forms the two signs take, but these represent a typical approach

<sup>15</sup> <https://bslsignbank.ucl.ac.uk/dictionary/words/include-1.html> as seen on 09.04.21

<sup>16</sup> <https://vimeo.com/126735188> as seen on 21.07.20

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.hearingdogs.org.uk/news/the-dog-blog/learn-british-sign-language-bsl-level-2as> viewed on 23.09.15

modes of knowing therefore happen concurrently during these ‘accessible’ events, often without the organisers’ awareness.

‘Doorway access’ measures are most often constructed based on aurally-centred processes of listening and more broadly on non-deaf, speech-text knowledge-making systems. A particularly common incidence of doorway access occurs during televised events for which sign language interpreters are filmed off-frame, placed in a ‘bubble’ alongside the action of the main event. Schmitt (2017) argues that side-lining of deafness by placing it in ‘the proverbial bubble’ results in “unequal distribution of the visual space [... relegating] the status of sign language to a language whose only usefulness is in interpretations of spoken messages” (2017:458). In both the ‘bubbling’ and in other doorway-access, we see the root differences between *access* and *ACCESS* is founded on the ways that signers and non-signers differently profess, listen to, and value/evaluate one another’s communicative products, which mean fundamentally different things to non-deaf non-signers and deaf-signers.

Song-signing has nevertheless proliferated, particularly as a pedagogical tool<sup>18</sup> largely because the democratic nature of video-based social media has meant that anyone can post a ‘signed’ version of a song (Peters and Seier, 2009). These videos pursue entirely different epistemic goals from INCLUDE, a fact comprehensively revealed by the lack of coherence of ‘sign interpretations’ like the Winehouse tribute. Videos like this had at one point become so popular that some had been picked up by international and internet publications,<sup>19</sup> heralded as evidence of “*inclusion* of deaf people in pop music (*emphasis mine*).” George argued that the ‘inclusive’ creativity the broadsheets were covering was not about inclusion but “*hearing-centric ego*.” These videos were “*missing the entire point of sign language and the role it plays for deaf people*.” George believed that these videos actually detracted from “*listening to and working with deaf people*,” signalling an inclusivity that wasn’t there, leading to programmes like the audition he attended with no interpreters and the command to “*just speak the English*” as equivalent to stepping along the same path as the Winehouse sign language pastiche. This leads to the eventual exclusion of deaf people not just from songs, but from deaf language and thus from public debates thereby eliminating representation and ultimately removing DEAF as a recognised knowledge form and life-way.

For this reason George explained that these so-called song-signed interpretations weren’t about access at all, especially given that they are often performed by learners, are often grammatically incorrect, illegible to deaf-signers which is “*damaging and therefore dangerous*.” George viewed his school’s choir and the Winehouse tribute as: “*pantomime, and not in a good way...*”

*When you turn off the sound, can you still understand what they’re talking about?*

I conceded that, no, I could not.

*The problem is that not only are these things out there – they’re out there and then a teacher turns to a deaf kid and says – hey! You should do that! That’s beautiful. And the deaf kid is like – what the hell? That’s wrong – it makes kids feel like they should be focusing on things that they can’t do instead of doing things that they can do.*

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<sup>18</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/teach/bring-the-noise/hands-in-the-air-bsl/z4rdd6f/> As seen on 28.07.20

<sup>19</sup> including Time Magazine, BBC news, US Magazine, the Daily Mail, the Mirror, and online aggregates Huffington Post and BuzzFeed

This, George explained, exacerbates learning dissonances, facilitating situations like his experiences at his school where no in-class signing-support was offered, but the song-signing choir was always mandatory. As another interlocutor suggested, practices like these exhibited in real time the lack of value attributed to DEAF, signing ways of knowing, rendering apparent that rupture *had* to be imposed on the process because: “‘ACCESS’ means breaking through!” Critical access studies anticipates such friction as part and parcel of true inclusivity, formulating ‘access’ as an opportunity for connection via disruption, “a kind of attack” (Hamraie & Fristch 2019). Understanding access as an ‘attack’ reveals access-making as a site of political contestation, fostering the re-formation of the social shape of ‘access’ by insisting on visual-centric, co-constructed knowledge-making (INCLUDE) rather than reducing the deaf role to passively witnessing hearing-centred punchlines about outcomes intended for deaf people.

#### CONCLUSION: APPLYING EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE TO EXCLUSIONS OF DEAF

As George intimates, this article’s exhumation and critique of ‘access’ in song-signing and beyond leads one inevitably to unacknowledged hierarchies of knowledge, fundamental power differentials that serve political agendas while also relegating particular epistemologies to a position of lesser than others, transforming instances of epistemic dissonance into injustice (*sensu* Fricker, 2007). Navigating the gulf between attempts at access and true INCLUDE enables one to begin to conceive of ways that equality is stymied by listening differences, establishing root impediments to deaf-centred participation within British society. It aligns with the idea that

concepts of inclusion and exclusion press for much closer conscious and self-conscious consideration of identity and role: *who* is doing the excluding and including, *who* is choosing the excluding and including, *how* are these processes of inclusion and exclusion facilitated, and *what* are the dominant views and relations of social, economic and political power” (Sayed, Soudien, & Carrim, 2003 in Bagga-Gupta, 2003:1).

Lack of listening at an institutional level results in higher-stakes removal of ‘DEAF’ from processes of governance, and is recognised by deaf people as a witnessable mark of the majority’s undervaluing of DEAF knowledge, providing a basis for injustice.

In the same year that the Winehouse tribute defied DEAF inclusion, a policy debate occurred in the House of Lords which purported to focus “specifically [on] British Sign Language (BSL) using deaf people's lack of access to appropriate healthcare and healthcare information.”<sup>20</sup> Lack of information on mental wellbeing was reasoned to be key to why deaf people’s mental illness occurred at an exponentially higher rate than for those in the non-deaf population,<sup>21</sup> compared to hearing people: 50% incidence or higher in deaf sign-users; 40% incidence or higher in the broader deaf population. Though this particular debate purportedly centred on systematic failure of mental health support *for people who use BSL*, the debate was not captioned or interpreted into BSL on the floor at the House of Lords, nor when it was televised. The total lack of linguistic access for deaf people and the fact that

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<sup>20</sup> taken from the online transcript written after the event (<http://www.theyworkforyou.com/lords/?id=2015-02-02a.517.1>) as seen on 22.10.15)

<sup>21</sup> (<http://www.signhealth.org.uk/health-information/sick-of-it-report/sick-of-it-in-english>) As seen on 23.10.15

no deaf peers participated meant that the live debate was inaccessible to the people about whom it directly concerned. Reflecting on the lack of access, one blogger<sup>22</sup> posted:

*...deaf people emailed about this and got a stock reply saying there would be no verbatim subtitling [...] The hearing ally called the House of Lords phonenumber and escalated this issue to a named manager who agreed it was ironic, inaccessible, insulting...*

This moment had had the potential to conceptually reorient Parliamentary process by adhering to a DEAF-centred set of communication rules and listening parameters, offering real potential for INCLUDE, “[conjuring] frictional practices of access production [...] used to both produce and dismantle injustice” (Hamarie & Fritch, 2019:3). Given that the debate concerned the lacking provision for supporting the mental-health of deaf, sign-users, it seemed there was a mandate to do so. However DEAF social forms and sign language usage do not adhere to expected Parliamentary speech-text norms, particularly the spoken call and response format common in hustings and debates. Implementation of sign language interpretation and live captioning during the debate was thus dismissed as both expensive and ‘difficult’ to coordinate.<sup>23</sup>

In the face of pre-existing communication speech-text dominance, standardised processes of knowledge-making, and institutional procedural precedents, exclusion was, one commentator said, *inevitable*. As scholar and activist Jackie Scully has written: “social and material power also confers *epistemic authority*: some people can legitimately establish and enforce epistemic practices [...]disabled people are commonly denied both epistemic credibility and authority, and suffer the consequences” (Scully, 2018:5-6). Rigidities in knowledge-making practices increase the likelihood that deaf and disabled people, when confronting institutions of education, government or social care are vulnerable to exclusions and open to epistemic injustice.

In light of these systemic exclusions from public participation, the Winehouse tribute and George’s school choir are brought into harsh relief. Though they may seem to non-deaf, non-signing people to be a means to making sign language more visible and by extension making the requirements of deaf people more visible, and by the same token seemingly cover ‘reasonable adjustments’ required by British law,<sup>24</sup> in starker terms, these instances promote incorrect sign language usage and erasure of DEAFness from British public life. By contrast, English-speech-text pathways, presumed by most non-deaf people to be the proven way to achieve shared knowledge with centuries of precedents in place, rest secure in their correctness and continuance. What becomes ever-clearer is why differently valued communication and knowledge-making practices often cause social collapse within everyday interactions between non-deaf speakers and deaf signing people, given such clear disparities between their epistemic weighting.

In the face of speech-text rigidity, George lives the contrast of his visual-tactile performance work, exhibiting and describing this as the core ontological predicate of his life, and through which he

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<sup>22</sup> (<https://natalyad.dreamwidth.org/9511.html>) As seen on 19.05.17

<sup>23</sup> Though it was deemed “*infuriating*,” this lack of adjustment was unsurprising to many deaf interlocutors who indicated that current sign language policy persists in being drawn from the 150-year lineage of Oralism.

<sup>24</sup> A mandate in the Equalities Act 2010 is that ‘reasonable adjustment’ must be attempted in order to uphold access requirements – in this case, sign language or captioning represent the adjustment made to accommodate deaf people’s communicative access.

locates the potential to transform DEAF futures. INCLUDE is an iterative process, and although spoken word authority leaves little room for alternate modes of listening and knowing, the possibility for rupture, for walking out, for refusing to song-sign along remains. He has necessarily pursued a life-long process of visual-tactile knowledge acquisition and composition despite its dearth in his upbringing. Clare-Louise, the HOH interlocutors and Hage further this point; despite acquiring conditional deafness later in life and without lengthy cultivation of visual-tactile habits, nevertheless conceive of and move through life using vision and touch as foundational communicative channels.

In ways less obvious than the House of Lords example but no less corrosive, song-signing performed for the benefit of hearing sign-learners at the expense of INCLUDE is another instance wherein a lack of recognition of epistemic authority can lead to disempowerment and ultimately to unjust treatment. Epistemic dissonance due to knowledge-making biases are not limited to cases involving deaf and disabled people (*see* Medina, 2013), but deaf and disabled people are still largely excluded from these discourses (*few exceptions include* Scully, 2018; Peña-Guzmán & Reynolds, 2019), unrecognised and under-valued and frequently rendered invisible even in anthropological debates about marginality and alterity. In these ways, refutation of deaf-centred listening is akin to refutation of the validity of DEAF being itself.

In the cases of pop song-signing, one witnesses an exemplar of the exclusions deaf-signers experience, even from discussions and decisions *about* deaf-signers. Because people are all “carriers of our own, always unique, collective-cum-personal histories” (Toren 2012:64), each person’s unique experiences consequently lead to different definitions and aims of simple terms and concepts (e.g. *access* versus *ACCESS*). Communication breakdown can be seen as an inability or unwillingness (*see* Pohlhaus, 2012) to recognise and engage with alternate modes of knowing because of simultaneous but contrasting ‘shapes’ given to each communicative component based on different foundational affordances (Keane, 2018. Ingold, 2018). Wanderer (2017) focuses on shared processes of listening and knowledge-making in testimony, arguing that the message-maker is reliant on a listening audience, one which can only truly listen and understand through having enough in common to enable mutual comprehension to generate conjoint knowledge. He adds: “Speaker and Hearer live in a society in which certain social groups are systematically deprived of decent educational opportunities, and the Hearer takes the use of standardized grammar as a marker of education, and hence of credibility” (Anderson *in* Wanderer 2017:33).

That this argument, so relevant here, is framed within metaphors of ‘speaking-hearing’ frustratingly drives the point home: meaning-making may be generated by those who possess differing socio-sensorial semiotic tools of message production from those of their listener only if they are similarly acknowledged and valued. This adds another dimension to deaf-hearing disconnection: that credibility can be hidden under a veil of accommodation and cannot change because it remains an entirely invisible possibility for dominant listeners. The relative hiddenness of such exclusions provokes George to cry out against the same old inflexible majority-biased epistemic frameworks through which access is conceived and not achieved. The Winehouse tribute and the choir matter to him so much because deafness is too often still equated to ‘impairment’, leading to an extended view that deaf people are unable and unknowledgeable, thereby allowing for continued exclusion of DEAF ways of being in the world. George’s characterisation of the “*danger*” of his school choir experiences is not hyperbole; it is drawn from experiences which indicate DEAF exclusion is not only possible but probable and harmful, permitting focus to remain on what deafness cannot do rather than what it can.

Non-deaf ‘access’ efforts can be expiatory and important from the perspective of political visibility and in supporting communicative access, but they reflect a society providing minor adjustment to

existing inequalities while failing to reflect deaf-centred expertise, values and needs. Issues of central importance such as employment access, welfare support, mental and physical health inequity, and lack of access to education are still being decided upon without deaf people INCLUDED in such discussions. A re-rendering of Winehouse's video in 'sign' might seem like a harmless creative endeavour, however the omissions contained within that act ultimately serve to undermine rather than empower deaf sign-using people, and reveal the value persistently denied by non-deaf majorities to DEAF ways of knowing and being. To quote George:

*There's some guy signing another song incorrectly on YouTube and it's all over the news. Meanwhile we can't even get an interpreter for a job interview.*

*It's bullshit.*

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