Knowing by DEAF-listening: Epistemologies and ontologies revealed in song-signing

Kelly Fagan Robinson

Leverhulme ECR Fellow and Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, United Kingdom

Correspondence
Kelly Fagan Robinson Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge, United Kingdom. Email: Kr474@cam.ac.uk

Abstract
English speech and hearing are perceived by many in the UK population as the key ways that people listen, learn, and know. This often-invisible assumption quietly colors almost every element of social interaction—within schooling, health, governance, social care, or in art and entertainment. This article unpacks the ways that a particular kind of sensorial bias can become embedded in knowledge-making practices to the exclusion of other possibilities. Through ethnographic appraisal of signed versions of songs—“song-signing”—one can witness how language and listening rigidities are built into the architecture of British social behaviors and public systems. I argue that attending to rigid perceptions concerning ways of listening as regards expectations of song experiences, and more broadly, presents a means for exposing invisible epistemic bias and injustice against deaf people. Throughout this text, readers are asked to alter expectations concerning sensory perception and definitions of listening. What this article ultimately explains is why what may seem to nonsigners 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.

Keywords
sign language, listening, acoustemology, epistemologies and epistemic justice, DEAF world

Resumen
Habla y audición en inglés son percibidos por muchos en la población del Reino Unido como las formas claves en que las personas escuchan, aprenden y conocen. Esta asunción a menudo invisible silenciosamente colorea casi cada elemento de la interacción social –dentro de la escuela, la salud, la gobernanza, el cuidado social, o en el arte y el entretenimiento–. Este artículo descifra las formas en que un tipo particular de sesgo sensorial puede llegar a estar embebido en las prácticas de crear conocimiento para la exclusión de otras posibilidades. A través de la evaluación etnográfica de versiones firmadas de canciones –firma de canciones– uno puede atestiguar cómo las rigideces del lenguaje y del escuchar son construidas dentro de la arquitectura de las conductas
As I sat with George in an 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 theater company to which he had gone energized, excited, ready for action. However, though the audition had been publicized as accessible, all the casting people were nondeaf and nonsigners, and no British Sign Language (BSL) interpreter was provided. George explained that they’d said, “just speak the English lines on the page.”¹ This request was both ignorant and insulting. Though George has written for theater, television, and film; though he has performed on the BBC and at Shakespeare’s 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 behavior 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. We had both worked at the same Deaf²-led theater company, where I was employed as an administrator and he as an artist, and where I later also conducted field research; I knew this was not the first time something like this had happened during his decade-long career, nor throughout his life as a deaf sign-language user. Though he had been mostly patient with my halting attempts at signing over the years, he had also discussed with me more than once that a part of the problem was hearing sign learners like me. 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 a pedagogical approach but also the linguistic regime that since the 1800s has compelled many deaf people to use speaking and lip-reading as key elements in communication and learning, a protocol that historically was often accompanied by physical and psychological mistreatment or abuse. It is a controversial practice that has been proven to have proscribed deaf people's learning, language (Conrad 1979), and heritage for more than 150 years (Ladd and Lane 2013; Lane 1984).

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 unrecognized 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 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, George explained, was comparable to online song-signing posts by hearing learners that had been all over the recent press, a practice that signaled 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 benefited 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 a specific example of song-signing on YouTube. 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 repost 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.

***

As George proposes, at issue is what BSL learners' song-signing indicates about nondeaf people's failure to understand deaf-centered epistemologies and lifeways. As part of this special section on "Knowing by Signing," as one commentator noted, my contribution aims to "force a confrontation" between so-called mainstream anthropological theories concerning epistemologies and ontologies with the growing body of work that specifically foregrounds deaf ways of knowing and being. Deaf anthropology is already an established and robust subfield (Friedner and 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 regarding hearing-centered expectations of song experiences, we have a means for exposing invisible epistemic 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 concretize rigidities that are built into the architecture of British social behaviors and public systems. Therefore, though this article is written in large part to recognize 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 shift expectations concerning sensory perception and definitions of listening in order to better understand DEAF knowledge-making processes.

I invoke throughout this text the sign-language convention of CAPITALIZING words when they are intended to evoke DEAF-specific meanings (e.g., DEAF, ACCESS, INCLUDE) as a way to textually contrast DEAF-centered definitions with hearing-centered notions of the same words. This is unconventional in scholarship on deafnesses, but it provides the reader with a visual cue to step back from hearing-centered semiotic expectations and to problematize the exclusions typified in the choir, the Winehouse, and the audition examples.

This article unpacks the ways that a particular kind of sensorial bias can become embedded in knowledge-making to the exclusion of other possibilities. By doing so, I argue that the concept of "access" emerges as the nexus of a conflict between English-speech-based ways of knowing and deaf knowledge production, exposing a consistent lack of value attributed to deaf knowledge-making processes by nondeaf majorities. What this article ultimately explains is why what may seem to nonsigners 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. 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 and Kusters 2020, 32; sensu Hartblay 2020).

In the first section, I refocus the reader's attention on the ways that deaf-centered listening practices can highlight and frame alternative ways of knowing. I then turn to how deaf-centered listening can be seen to serve as means of resistance to "compulsory ablebodiedness" (McRuer 2006; in Hamraie and 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-centered access accommodations often miss the mark of true inclusion. The value of deaf-centered 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 reconceptualize "DEAF" signing as a form of authority away from auditory dominance and practicable on its own DEAF-centered 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 United Kingdom and beyond.

I highlight these moments of George’s anger not to consign him to the pejorative “Angry & Frustrated” deaf stereotype described in Baker-Shenk and Kyle (1990, 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 interlocutors and colleagues with whom I have worked. This was not only an exclusionary audit (ironically, even the moniker “audit” is hearing-focused), or a poorly signed song on YouTube, or a choir that didn’t use real signs; these instances served for George as evidence of a refusal of DEAF-centered ways of communicating, knowing, and being in the world. This article therefore takes as its center of gravity George’s argument that such faulty ticking of accommodation boxes leads irrevocably to “cultural appropriation of deaf lifeways”7 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 (2016, 256) concept of “deaf epistemologies” as an “anthropology of deaf flourishing,” requiring analysis that holds up to inspection the power and value of DEAF knowing as a critical component of societal inclusion and thus a means of lifeway recognition. I mobilize signed songs as cyphers through which specific logics of epistemic value, access, and inclusion come into focus. My aim is to visibly unpack oversimplified hearing/DEAF dividing lines through a lens of DEAF-centered 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-centered definitions of listening that consistently legitimizes exclusionary social practices. Following Friedner and Kusters (2015, 2020; see also Scott-Hill 2014), who suggest that delimiting “culture” as “deaf” “overdetermines deaf difference from hearing people and assumes similitude between diverse deaf people” (Friedner and Kusters 2020, 33), this section unpacks related oversimplification of assumed sensorial hearing/deaf binary opposition, which disregards the iterative, complex, and nonstatic nature of the senses in sense-making. This approach aims to initiate 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 deafness [hearing prejudice] and hearing privilege [that] can easily exacerbate it. Polarizing opposites then trap deaf people within the very ideas they wish to challenge” (Fernandes and Myers 2010; see also Kusters. 2017).

We are reminded that “the body itself is a condition and a premise in the experiences made” (Hauaaland 2007, 121); we “gain knowledge about [the world] through using our senses” (114). Deaf-centered ontology underpinned by visual-tactile rather than visual-aural sensorial dominance (Robinson 2019, 2019b) is thus key to apprehending deaf epistemologies as unique and important ways of generating knowledge as well as key to understanding DEAF lifeways.

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 lifeways. While I focus on George and other sign-using deaf people in this article (except in Clare-Louise’s story outlined in the next section), it is important to understand that listening provides a common frontier across different kinds of deafness despite such distinctions. I have therefore coopted Feld’s (2015) “acoustemology” as a foundational premise, centering “acoustic ways of knowing [toward a relational ontology].” This section outlines the visual-tactile foundation of DEAF listening before unpacking how it is received and valued in the context of song-signing practices, leading toward implications of nondeaf recognition of DEAFness more broadly. In this section, I foreground the sensorial component that impacts debates concerning song-signing. Through thinking analytically and empirically about different ways of listening, I present why a total refiguration of attentive modes resituates how one understands and thus undergirds “being” itself.

Deafness disrupts expected hierarchical ordering of sensory deployment when listening, denoting 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, Fine, and Dobbins 2001). While this capacity is most frequently represented in research featuring deaf, sign-using people, even pointing to heightened capacity for peripheral visual attention (Bavelier et al. 2007; Bosworth and Dobbins 1999; Codina et al. 2017; Holmes 2017), it has also been observed in deaf people who do not sign. This was consistently exemplified by the Hard of Hearing (HOH) research participants with whom I worked who had become deaf in older age or because of illness. They labeled vision and touch as listening “superpowers.” A fantastic articulation of this is found in Ghassan Hage’s (2013, 76) autoethnographic account of late-onset deafness, a state of being that he in part attributes to his lifelong love of very loud rock music and drumming. When Hage discovered he could no longer eavesdrop using hearing, formerly his favorite pastime, he nevertheless continued to “listen in” by looking. Though his capacity had shifted from aurality to a visually centered listening attention, his disposition, the state that inclined him toward eavesdropping action (in essence, his voracity for knowing), remained unaltered (see also 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 prioritized and mobilized during deaf listening; particularly when listening to music, touch is also instrumental. Besides, as Tausig (1993) writes 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:
Terra Edwards describes an even more directly palpable connection, charting how the incorporation of tactility in DeafBlind listening, use of Tactile American Sign Language (TASL), and the emergent protactile movement’s “forms of authority accrued to pro-tactile social roles and legitimacy accrued to tactile modalities” (Edwards 2014, 22) allow for flexibility in communication that 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). Such modal and social flexibility enables Edwards’s 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 English, a film- and theater-maker, it was a literal access to tactile resonance that was 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 toward her mother. The meeting was a struggle on both sides, as were all her speech-based school to meet with the head teacher. The teacher never spoke directly to Clare-Louise, instead directing information only toward her mother. The meeting was a struggle on both sides, as were all her speech-based education sessions at university and 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 unsee-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, Ginsborg, and Goldbart 2011). The resonance once felt by various surfaces and spaces of the body activates tactile reception, commanding attention that, 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 they rise to begin the next chord signifies action, linking felt resonance 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’” (Feld 1982; cited in Haukland 2007, 116–17; emphasis in original), seen with the eyes, felt in/on/through the body. It offers the context that enables Clare-Louise to listen in large rehearsal studios as well as she 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 one hundred 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 (Avraamides et al. 2004; Elmer et al. 2002; Holmes 2017; Power and Hyde 1997). 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 lifeway “of the eye” (Veditz 1913), though we can add also “on the skin.” Regardless of whether they are signers, when deaf people are at the center 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,” the core definition and understanding of “listening” is not at odds with deaf or nonhearing-centered listening processes. As Glenn’s (1989) comparative review of fifty definitions of listening explores, only eight definitions included in her in-depth literature review make any mention of speech (Figure 1).

Based on the remaining definitional categories—perception, attention, interpretation, response, memory, and visual cues (Glenn 1989, 26)—“listening” (whether deaf or hearing) emerges as more accurately

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. (21; emphasis in original)
understood through multimodal, social semiotic engagement (Bezemer and Kress 2014), an act in which all listeners receive information via their various ways of paying attention and processing differing feeds of information accordingly.

Michael Halliday (1978, 16) 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.” More recently, scholars on semiotics in deaf contexts, from deaf studies and deaf anthropology (Kusters 2019; Kusters et al. 2017; Robinson 2019a), and sign-language linguistics (Holmström and Schönström 2018; Tapio 2019; Young et al., 2019) have acknowledged that a situational understanding of semiotics must also take into account the multiple intersensorial elements or “modes” comprising communication, hence multimodal. In the context of deaf people, it emerges that conditionality and sensorial hierarchy utilize vision and touch as central channels in systems of meaning-making. These may include music/sound (Fulford, Ginsborg, and Goldbart 2011; Holmes 2017; Maler 2013, 2015; Turner and Pollitt 2002), action, visual communication, “and their arrangement as multimodal ensembles” (Jewitt 2016, 275; see also Kusters 2019). By extension, work connecting

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 and Cohen 2015; emphasis in original)

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 that 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) nondeaf 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 mobilizations 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 CONCEPTUALIZATIONS 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; cited in Blackledge and Creese 2014, v; emphasis added). Maler writes about similar polyphony in the genesis of song-signing, drawing on a multihistorical and politically fragmented set of practices. Song-signing emerged in the twentieth century as a poetic praxis consisting “mainly of hymn interpretations in religious settings and simple rhythmic signed songs” (Bahan 2006; cited in Maler 2015), and later as a twenty-first-century byproduct of hearing learners making increasing use of online video portals and social media to test and exhibit their burgeoning signing knowledge (Maler 2015). 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” (Maler 2015). The latter form has proven so divisive in part due to its popularity as a learning tool among new, nonproficient hearing sign-language learners (Maler 2013; Peters and Seier 2009), a debate to which I will return. These divisions in song-signing practices represent related (though different) forms of knowledge production, one form celebrating DEAF-centered poetic heritage, the other form potentially proliferating practices of nondeaf sign-language appropriation. These practices mirror divergences between the deaf-centered concept of “ACCESS” versus nondeaf, nonsigning conceived provisions of “access,” as I will now explain.

As this section will show, ACCESS and access can be conceptually delineated on the basis of how listening attention is directed. ACCESS and access are not oppositional poles but instead make up 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 nondeaf “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 leadup to one “accessible” indie rock concert, the sponsoring organization held a steering group on “access” provisions at a local venue. The group was peopled by nondeaf, nonsigning contributors, though an earlier consultation with a prominent deaf activist and music enthusiast had already fed in a prescribed course of action centered 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 upon. In the weeks leading up to the gig, the organizers followed the advice of the deaf activist, providing the event with captioning and BSL interpreters 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”—did not visually align with the conservative-looking, middle-aged interpreter. Placing this alongside the Winehouse example, which appealed to the visuals 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-centered 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”12 Caroline Parker has frequently commented, full integration in song-signing is uncommon because it is hard to do, but she also points out that providing partial access does not necessarily prelude 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 theater 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 that plagues “access” events and meetings more generally: the mainly nondeaf organizers 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 organizations are often advised by deaf leaders to address these as a 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 organizers but makes sense in the deaf-centered meeting occurring on that side of the “doorway.” At the gig, the BSL interpreters signaled to nondeaf gig-goers that the venue took center of the live delegates, and “access” is thus also differentiated from DEAF-centered “INCLUDE,” a co-constructed course of action based within DEAF listening forms throughout the process. The definitional discrepancy between nondeaf access and ACCESS leads to distinct divergences in the ways that deaf and nondeaf people understand the desired intentions, attentions, and intended goals required in order for it to have been seen as INCLUDE. This constant negotiation aligns with what Hamraie (2017) labels “critical access studies” 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; emphasis in original).

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 with features of aural listening, creating visual gags and ironic situational juxtaposition using the stories from the songs and humor drawn from deaf/hearing disconnection. The performances she makes are integrated events, listenable regardless of sensorial or linguistic difference and therefore invoke what my interlocutors often describe as “INCLUDE” measures.17

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 from 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 about being scene, a form of action designed by and for fellow DEAF audience members, whether live or virtual. Two seemingly intentionally divided modes of knowing—the “doorway access” described by Parker—therefore happen concurrently during these “accessible” events, often without the organizers’ awareness. 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, 458) argues that sidelining 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.” In both the “bubbling” and in other doorway-access examples, we see the root differences between access and ACCESS is founded on the ways that signers and nonsigners differently profess, listen to, and value/evaluate one another’s communicative products. These communicative products, the
generation of knowledge, mean fundamentally different things to nondeaf nonsigners and deaf signers.

Despite persistent doorway divisions, song-signing practices have nevertheless proliferated, particularly as a pedagogical tool, 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 media and internet publications, heralded as evidence of “inclusion of deaf people in pop music” (emphasis added). George argued that the “inclusive” creativity the broadsheets were covering was not about inclusion but “hearing-centric ego.” These videos were, George believed, “missing the entire point of sign language and the role it plays for deaf people,” that these videos actually detracted from “listening to and working with deaf people.” They signaled an inclusivity that wasn’t there, leading to situations like the audition George attended with no interpreters and the command to “just speak the English,” further steps along the same path laid by the Winehouse sign-language pastiche. Such paths lead to the eventual exclusion of deaf people not just from songs but from DEAF language and allow for further exclusion from public debates, eliminating representation and ultimately removing DEAF as a recognized knowledge form and lifeway.

For this reason, George explained that these so-called song-signed interpretations weren’t about access at all, especially given that they were often performed by learners and were often grammatically incorrect and illegible to deaf signers. They were, he said, “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. George continued,

> 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.

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 and Fritsch 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-centered 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 being 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 misapprehending listening differences, establishing root impediments to deaf-centered participation within British society. It aligns with the idea that

> Lack of listening at an institutional level results in higher-stakes removal of DEAFness from processes of governance, an issue recognized 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.” Lack of information on mental well-being was reasoned to be key to why deaf people’s mental illness occurred at an exponentially higher rate than for those in the nondeaf population compared to hearing people: 50 percent incidence or higher in deaf sign-users; 40 percent incidence or higher in the broader deaf population. Though this particular debate purportedly centered 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 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 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 phoneline 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-centered 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” (Hamraie and Fritsch 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.23

In the face of preexisting communication speech-text dominance, standardized processes of knowledge-making, and institutional procedural precedents, exclusion was, one commentator said, “inevitable.” As scholar and activist Jackie Scully (2018, 5–6; emphasis in original) writes, “social and material power also confers epistemic authority: some people can legitimately establish and enforce epistemic practices . . . [d]isabled people are commonly denied both epistemic credibility and authority, and suffer the consequences.” 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 experience are brought into harsh relief. Though they may seem to nondeaf, nonsigning 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,24 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 nondeaf 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 nondeaf 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 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 lifelong 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, they 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 dismantlement and ultimately to unjust treatment. Epistemic dissonance due to knowledge-making biases is not limited to cases involving deaf and disabled people (see Medina 2013), but deaf and disabled people are still largely excluded from these discourses (the few exceptions include Peña-Guzmán and Reynolds 2019; Scully 2018), unrecognized, undervalued, and frequently rendered invisible even in anthropological debates about marginality and alterity. In these ways, refutation of DEAF-centered listening is akin to refutation of the validity of DEAF being itself.

In the cases of learners’ song-signing, one witnesses how exclusion of deaf signers from their own language leads to discussions and decisions about deaf signers without deaf signers. Because people are all “carriers of our own, always unique, collective-cum-personal histories” (Toren 2012, 64), those who remain—mainly nondeaf nonsigners—determine which are the accepted definitions and aims of terms and concepts (e.g., access instead of ACCESS). Communication breakdown can be seen as an inability or unwillingness (see Pohlhaus 2012) to recognize and engage with alternate modes of knowing, a misapprehension that persists because dominant language use is ignorant of the contrasting “shapes” that could be attributed to each term based on differing affordances (Ingold 2018; Keane 2018). As Wanderer (2017) argues, the shared processes of listening and knowledge-making in testimony are reliant on a listening audience that can truly listen and understand through having enough in common with their listener to enable 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 2012; cited 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 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 characterization of the “danger” of his school choir experiences is not hyperbole; it is drawn from experiences that 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.
Nondeaf “access” efforts can be expiative 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-centered 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 endeavor. 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 nondeaf 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.

ORCID
Kelly Fagan Robinson https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4117-7622

ENDNOTES

1 A note on researcher positionality: I am a hearing, nonfluent BSL user with a UK NVQ Level 6 qualification (a vocational qualification typically recognized as degree equivalent) 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 notes. I represent these as italicized quotations. My conversations were verified via email with the man I have anonymized 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.

2 “deaf” (lowercased) signifies a physical condition related to diminished access to auditory reception via the ear apparatus; “Deaf” (capitalized; sensu Ladd 2003) signifies a cultural and inheritable identification with Deaf traditions and sign languages.

3 This video can be viewed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MWMMO85uRc.

4 Facebook, author unknown.

5 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, who transformed my analytical approach; the support of the SARA: the CWWG section editors Caroline Gatt and Valeria Lembo, who brought the Knowing By Singing discussion together; and my ESRC (ref: UKRI-1336699) and Leverhulme Trust (ref: ECF-2020-339) funding, which made this research possible.

6 This article focuses primarily on the ways hearing and voicing delimits listening, attempting to instead reconceptualize aural connection as one among 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, pro-tactile contexts, but this receives limited attention because of spatial restrictions.

7 Quoted from George.

8 Robinson fieldnotes (2016).

9 Tactile American Sign Language, or TASL (Edwards 2014, 22), is a language shaped by and through the authority of pro-tactile DeafBlind lifeways.

REFERENCES CITED


Robinson, Kelly Fagan. 2019b. “The Form That Flattens.” In Medical Materi-
alties, edited by Aaron Parkhurst and Timothy Carroll, 126–43. London: 
Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
Sayed, Yusuf, Crain Soudien, and Nazir Carrim. 2003. “Discourses of Exclu-
sion and Inclusion in the South: Limits and Possibilities.” Journal of 
Schmitt, Pierre. 2017. “Representations of Sign Language, Deaf People, and 
Interpreters in the Arts and the Media.” Sign Language Studies 18(1): 
130–47.
tity, Culture and Structure.” In Disability, Culture and Identity, edited by 
Scully, Jackie Leach. 2018. “From ‘She Would Say That, Wouldn’t She?’
to ‘Does She Take Sugar?’ Epistemic Injustice and Disability,” IJFAB: 
Tapio, Elina. 2019. “The Patterned Ways of Interlinking Linguistic and Multi-
modal Elements in Visually Oriented Communities.” Deafness & Education 
Toren, Christina. 2012. “Imagining the World That Warrants Our Imagina-
tion: The Revelation of Ontogeny.” The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology 
30(1): 64–79.

Literary Translation: English-BSL Interpreting in the Theatre.” The Trans-
videocatalog.gallaudet.edu/?video=2520.
Wanderer, Jeremy. 2017. “Varieties of Testimonial Injustice.” In The Rout-
ledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice, edited by Ian James Kidd, José 
Deaf Self, Ontological (In)Security and Deaf Culture.” The Translator 

How to cite this article: Robinson, Kelly Fagan. 2022. 
“Knowing by DEAF-listening: Epistemologies and ontologies 
https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.13746