

Spring 2013

"individual yet as one": Performing Deafness and Performing Community in Mark Medoff's Children of a Lesser God

Mariah Crilley

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dsc.duq.edu/etd>

Recommended Citation

Crilley, M. (2013). "individual yet as one": Performing Deafness and Performing Community in Mark Medoff's Children of a Lesser God (Master's thesis, Duquesne University). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/etd/443>

This Immediate Access is brought to you for free and open access by Duquesne Scholarship Collection. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Duquesne Scholarship Collection. For more information, please contact phillipsg@duq.edu.

“individual yet as one”: PERFORMING DEAFNESS AND PERFORMING
COMMUNITY IN MARK MEDOFF’S *CHILDREN OF A LESSER GOD*

A Thesis

Submitted to the McNulty College & Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts

By

Mariah Crilley

May 2013

Copyright by
Mariah Crilley

2013

“individual yet as one”: PERFORMING DEAFNESS AND PERFORMING
COMMUNITY IN MARK MEDOFF’S *CHILDREN OF A LESSER GOD*

By

Mariah Crilley

Approved April 2nd, 2013

Laura Engel, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of English
(Committee Chair)

Greg Barnhisel, Ph.D.
Professor of Physical Therapy
(Committee Member)

Magali Michael, Ph.D.
Chair, English
Professor of English

James C. Swindal, Ph.D.
Dean, McAnulty College and Graduate
School of Liberal Arts
Professor of Philosophy

ABSTRACT

“individual yet as one”: PERFORMING DEAFNESS AND PERFORMING
COMMUNITY IN MARK MEDOFF’S *CHILDREN OF A LESSER GOD*

By

Mariah Crilley

May 2013

Thesis supervised by Laura Engel, Ph.D.

In this thesis, I examine the relationship between deafness, women, and performance in Mark Medoff’s *Children of a Lesser God*. The play was a massive popular success, both in its run on Broadway and its movie adaptation. Deafness and deaf people had never been so visible in American hearing culture. More importantly, the play coincided with civil rights movements by people with disabilities, which culminated in the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Disabilities, including deafness, were called into being as part of a national identity. These movements posited self-determination but ultimately relied and thrived on a communal and relational sense of identity. I argue that the play challenges individualistic modes of identification through its protagonist, Sarah, a deaf woman whose “voice” is always translated through the audience. The play overtly and politically calls for a reconceptualization of American

identity along the lines of deaf or disability and female identity theories, which typically value community and interdependence over individualism. Moreover, the genre amplifies this call for community.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to offer my immense appreciation to all involved in the creation of this thesis. First, I would like to thank Duquesne University, McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts, and the English Department for helping me pursue graduate studies in literature. Without your gracious funding, I would not have been able to advance my education and without your academic integrity, I would not have been given the freedom to pursue my own research interests. To my first reader, Dr. Greg Barnhisel, I would like to say thank you for taking the time to read this colossal project and for offering clear and candid suggestions for this work and my writing in general. Finally, I would like to thank Dr. Laura Engel, my director. Dr. Engel has supported me in my interests since I began at Duquesne, and, despite being ridiculously busy, guided me through this process with encouragement and advice. Thank you to all.

Table of Contents

	Page
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: “As if there were no I”: Deafness, Ind/Interdependence, and National Identity.....	13
Chapter 2: “created in my image”: Disability, Gender, and Subversion.....	52
Chapter 3: “individual yet as one”: Genre, Audience, and Community	81
Conclusion	110
Works Cited	114

Introduction

In the spring of 1988, Gallaudet University, the world's only liberal arts institution for deaf students, hired a new president. Dr. Elisabeth Zinser, a Ph.D from the University of California at Berkeley (Green), spent years in “helping fields,” such as “nursing and educational psychology,” (*Mask* 187), was “an expert on language and communications” (Piccoli), and had previously held the prestigious position of vice-chancellor at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro (“Elisabeth Zinser”). By all rights, Dr. Zinser was more than qualified for the position and should have been welcomed by students, faculty, and staff alike at Gallaudet. Within the day of her appointment, however, she was being burned in effigy.

Unfortunately for Dr. Zinser, Deafness was not counted among her list of accomplishments. She was hearing. Unwittingly, but perhaps all the more dangerously, Dr. Zinser had accepted a position in an already volatile environment with little understanding of Deafness, its complex cultural aspirations, historical subjugation, resistance to a disabled identity, and, most importantly, its tongue, American Sign Language (ASL). Even before Dr. Zinser's official appointment, Gallaudet's campus was ripe with indignation. Despite going 124 years without a deaf president, the University's board seemed to be leaning towards the only hearing candidate of the remaining three potentials. Gallaudet's students, staff, and alumni were discouraged by the University's blatant paternalism—after all, these students were being taught to be self-sufficient and professional, “to excel in work and life” (Piccoli). The appointment of yet another hearing person to a position of power over some of the brightest Deaf people in the

world, to a position that should have always belonged to a Deaf person but never had, quite visibly demonstrated just how very little their higher education stood for when threatened by impenetrable misapprehensions and simple yet lethal stereotyping. Even in the 80s, the Hearing world still considered the Deaf unfit to manage their own affairs. In defense of the assignment, the chairman of the board said ““deaf people are incapable of functioning in a hearing world”” (qtd. in *Mask* 188). While the “chairman later claimed that her interpreter had misconstrued her statement” (*Mask* 188), the fact remains that the chairman needed an interpreter. Despite being the head of the only liberal arts college for D/deaf people in the world, she did not know ASL, and therefore could not communicate with those who she represented. In 1988, Deaf students at the premier—really the only—higher education institute available to them, couldn’t carry on a conversation with their chairman.

So, they revolted. After the announcement, students poured into the streets of D.C., illegally marching to the hotel where the board was meeting. The police attempted to halt the deaf students’ actions, but their dissent quite literally fell on deaf ears. The outraged students organized and effectively shut down the school’s campus, barricading entrances with school buses on flattened tires (*Mask* 188). They boycotted classes, held rallies, burned imitations of Dr. Zinser and the chairman of the board, and rallied for a “Deaf President Now!”—the eponymous battle cry of the revolution, often shortened to DPN. Led by Greg Hlibok, student body president, the students drew up a list of demands, which included,

1. Resignation of Dr. Zinser and selection of a deaf president.

2. Resignation of Mrs. Spilman [the chairman of the board, a hearing woman] and election of a deaf chairperson of the Board.
3. Change of the composition of the Board to a majority of deaf and hard of hearing persons.
4. Guarantee of no reprisals against the faculty, staff, administration, or students for their participation. (“DPN Fact Sheet”)

The administration eventually implemented all of these reforms. Dr. Zinser stepped down after a massive media blitzkrieg, the chairman resigned, Dr. I King Jordan was appointed President, the board was reorganized, and students suffered no repercussions (*Mask* 191).

In part, the success of the movement was directly contingent on media coverage and an overwhelming support from the public. The vast majority of America considered the Deaf students’ revolt just and necessary and support surged in from all over the country. Students marched with a “We have a dream!” banner, uniting the DPN protests with the Civil Rights Movement (*Mask* 190). In fact, many of the protests directly borrowed rhetoric, strategies, and goals publicized by Black Americans in the 1960s. The protests were not a matter of childish rebellion intended to miss a few classes, but a cultural landmark in the Deaf rights movement, a symbol of successful self-determination.

Jesse Jackson said of the protests, ““The problem is not that the students do not hear; the problem is that the hearing world does not listen”” (qtd. in *Mask* 190). Their passion, however, forced America to listen to their ardent signing and answer their demands. Deafness and Deaf people were perhaps never so visible in American history. The story was broadcast across the country through various outlets, including radio

programs, television specials, and newspapers. Americans became enamoured of the Deaf students, ushering in what Lane sardonically refers to as a “national lovefest with the deaf” (*Mask* 191).

The protests, however, cannot have been the sole impetus for the nation-wide “lovefest.” While the demonstrations certainly heightened Deaf people’s visibility and cited as “the high point of contemporary deaf history” by many deaf historians, including Harlan Lane (*Mask* 191), Gallaudet’s Revolution followed in the wake of another pivotal cultural moment for deaf people: the play and movie *Children of a Lesser God*. Two years before the protests, Marlee Matlin, a deaf actress, won an Oscar for her portrayal of the deaf protagonist Sarah and became the first and only Deaf person to have ever won such an award. Even before the protests, therefore, Deaf people became visible as they had never been. I argue that this play represents a critical moment in Deaf American history in that it promulgated the variegated and complex nature of Deaf American experience not only to Deaf people starving for anything like an accurate representation of themselves but also to the unaware Hearing public. Spirko uses the protests to initiate his argument, but only hesitantly refers to their correlation as “perhaps not coincidental” (16). While a direct, unified, and cohesive correlation between the play/movie and the protests cannot and could never be drawn, I would like to suggest that the play influenced both the Deaf students’ heightened sense of self-determination and the public’s overwhelming support.

The DPN movement offered a clear sense of group identity and of Deaf pride, but, before the 1960s, deaf people had very few ways to articulate who they were. For the most part, they were forced to rely on medical or scientific discourses to define

themselves. As Tom Humphries explains, “[u]sually this included a reference to the degree of hearing loss...[and] the functional abilities of the deaf person: Could he/she hear and understand words without seeing the speaker’s face and lips?” (3). According to Lane, “studies published in professional journals,” studies with purportedly “impartial scientific testing,” categorized deaf people as “aggressive” and “submissive,” “isolated” and “clannish,” “egocentric” and “unconfident” (*Mask* 39). Despite being absurdly paradoxical, this list of characteristics suggests how intractable prejudices against the deaf were. These “studies” both reflected widespread cultural assumptions and cemented them through the guise of science. Lane and Humphries suggest, therefore, how pervasive and naturalized the negative connotations of deafness were in the United States. Perhaps more importantly, these works reveal how little say deaf people had in how they were perceived and defined.

In 1965, however, the “narrative” framing of deafness began to evolve (Humphries 6). While ASL was considered useful by most deaf people, if not damnable by the majority of hearing educators, it was not until the publication of William Stokoe’s *Dictionary of American Sign Language* that ASL was defined as an authentic language. Humphries asserts,

This was shocking to both Deaf and hearing people not because signs were catalogued, but because Stokoe employed linguistic analysis and terminology to explain a finding—that sign language is indeed a language—which seemed to contradict all earlier scientific explanations. (6)

The validation of ASL not only overturned all previous conclusions, but also began to counteract those negative attributes ascribed to the Deaf. With their language no longer

denigrated as abstract or hieroglyphic, deaf people began to break free of oppressive stereotypes.

Linguistic validation proved critical, but this validation would have been inconsequential without the performances that transformed Deaf history and definitively created Deaf culture. With Stokoe's analysis, deaf people began to talk about themselves and their language. Humphries explains, "Deaf people began to perform the language in public" (7). Moreover, they took to performances as a way to articulate the growing sense of their identity, their language, and their differences from the hearing mainstream. They performed ASL to demonstrate its complex linguistic and signifying systems, and "ritualized explanations" became the means by which average deaf people performed and defined Deaf identities in everyday conversations (13). By this time, as Humphries argues, "Deaf had value" (16). In 1977 at the National Symposium on Sign Language Research and Teaching, Carlene Canady Pedersen and Carol Padden performed ASL for a diverse audience. First, the pair signed how to change a car's oil. The beauty of the visual imagery impressed people, but this demonstration seemed to support reinforce the belief that ASL could only articulate concrete concepts. Then, however, the two moved onto signing something more abstract than the physical act of changing oil. They "gave...a detailed and visually striking depiction of Crick and Watson's double helix and how cells reproduce, down to the smallest detail of the matching strands of matter" (11). This performance was so remarkable that "many confessed afterwards that they had not understood the concept of DNA before Padden's explanation" (Humphries 11). Manifesting the scientific validation of ASL through performance, this display counteracted the widespread notion that ASL was simple or abstract. These performances

ranged from theatrical endeavors and scholarly presentations to everyday, mundane conversations.

In the same year that Pedersen and Padden visualized DNA, astounding their audience, Mark Medoff met a deaf actress. He learned a few signs and attempted to write a leading role for the deaf woman. Over the course of three years, Medoff's well-intentioned but misguided seed of an idea germinated into the complex and award-winning play *Children of a Lesser God*. While the play went through many drafts, the final product chronicles a love story between a deaf woman and a hearing man, set against the backdrop of a school for the deaf and a movement for deaf civil rights, deftly considering gendered, disabled, and performed identities.

While Medoff claims that he “set out to write a love story” and that the play’s implications for deaf pride and hearing people alike were “accidental, though very pleasing” (“Introduction”), the play itself calls for a reconceptualization of American identity along the lines of deaf or disability and female identity theory which typically value community and interdependence over self-determination. The model of individualism, independence, binaries, and dichotomies that has long governed American ideals and dreams quickly falls apart in the complicated landscape of Sarah and James’ love and the political backdrop of the play. Most importantly, over the course of the play, Sarah undermines American individualism in what I dub her “individual yet as one” model. Towards the end of the play, in her most self-aware and unmediated speech, Sarah signs “the sign ‘to connect,’ a simple sign—but it means so much more when it is moved between us like this. Now it means to be joined in a shared relationship, to be individual yet as one. A whole concept just like that” (89). Articulated through a reference to an

ASL sign, Sarah expresses that she wants “to be individual yet as one,” to be acknowledged as a full person, an identity stripped from her as a disabled woman, and to connect meaningfully to other people. Aligning more closely with Deaf culture and practices of the theater, Sarah’s model is not only important for those disabled people who daily live dependence and interdependence but for every person living in a hyper individualized world. While people with disabilities are most overtly written out of the national narrative because of their practical and theoretical dependencies, all people and especially all bodies are alienated in a system that privileges independence and individualism at the expense of interdependency and community. Sarah’s model, therefore, a model explicitly enacted by Medoff in the space of the theater, works to revise the national narrative on disability for the benefit of all people.

What I see at work in the play, and what I argue over the course of this thesis, is a trilateral articulation of “individual yet as one.” First, the play’s emphasis on Deaf culture, which normally prizes community over independence, introduces the theoretical foundation for “individual yet as one”—a translation of a sign itself. Through Deaf culture, Medoff and Sarah offer an alternative to traditional, American identity. Second, the complicated relationship between disability and gender, particularly the immense subjugation that Sarah faces as a Deaf woman, refines this model to include reciprocity, that is, the respectful articulation, acknowledgement, and acceptance of personal needs and desires. Sarah’s dual alienation from American modes of identification highlight how truly untenable conventional, American identification is not only for the disabled but for everyone. Third, this model is visibly enacted through the “performance community,” activated through the generic conventions of the theater (Barr 16). When James fails to

become “individual yet as one” with Sarah, the audience forms this union with her, participating in both Sarah’s fruition as a character and the experience of the theater itself. In this way, Medoff both calls for and elicits the “individual yet as one” model, moving beyond a theoretical fantasy by offering the living experience.

While I have separated the model’s components, I would like to stress that this triad is not tiered but a pastiche, interlocking, jumbled, confused, and only extricated for the purposes of my own clarity and sanity. Over the course of this thesis, therefore, I attempt to untangle the web of identities, interactions, and articulations that inform and illuminate this model. Like any critical undertaking, however, I inevitably favor one identity at the expense of others, misplace, forget, or overlook important evidence, and commit those very same mistakes I warn against.

In the first chapter, I delve into the play’s representations of D/deaf identities, using Deaf history and contemporary Deaf and disability studies frameworks to understand characters and their motivations, focusing closely on the protagonist Sarah and her understandings of Deafness and identity. While a large portion of this chapter works to define Deafness, its relationship to disability, and its connection to mainstream, hearing America, a vexed agenda of its own, the majority of the chapter is spent on examining Sarah’s association with independence as it relates to Deaf and national identities. Here, I argue that Sarah champions a Deaf mode of identification—interdependence—particularly, through the “individual yet as one” speech. Her insistence on community is not only a central tenet of cultural Deafness but a direct challenge to notions of independence and individualism that are paramount to American identity. People with disabilities are not seen as “independent” and are therefore written out of the

national narrative. Part of my purpose in writing this chapter, then, is to closely examine the elevation of independence and denigration of dependence. Dependence and interdependence need not be negative but can be productive models of human interaction. If these definitions are expanded, then what it means to be American can also be refined as well and those with disabilities can become a part of the national identity and legacy.

From this emphasis on Deafness, I shift in the second chapter to closely examine the interaction between Sarah's disabled and female identities. While disabled men certainly encounter oppression and prejudice, disabled women are doubly persecuted. In this chapter, therefore, I focus on the intersecting systems of oppression, patriarchy, ableism/audism, and nationalism that actively work to suppress Sarah's revolutionary potential and her radical model of identification. While Sarah encounters trouble in defining and asserting her identity after she marries James, this psychologically harrowing embattlement with her female identity allows her to refine her exemplum. Here, she learns that it is not enough to merely be interdependent, but that this network of interactions must resist hierarchy and domination. While James wants to make Sarah over in his own, hearing image, Sarah discovers that no one has the right to define another person's identity, needs, or abilities. Instead, the "individual yet as one" model works through an interdependent network that acknowledges and respects how each of its members names and defines herself.

In particular, the form, a play, exemplifies Sarah's message. Throughout the third chapter, therefore, I argue that the genre illuminates and amplifies Sarah's model of non-dominating interdependence. The theater is not only a revolutionary space for demonstrating the performative nature of all identities, but also a living, breathing, and

working model of collaboration. The communal process inherent to creating live theater makes *Children*'s argument all the more potent. In particular, this chapter focuses on the staging of Sarah's ASL and its translation. While James typically translates for Sarah into the third person, Sarah's "individual yet as one" monologue is actually more of what I will call a "dialogue" as Sarah and James "speak" in tandem, Sarah signing and James translating in first person. Moreover, here I will focus on those moments that Sarah isn't translated for the audience. Incapable of understanding Sarah, the audience becomes the community Sarah yearns for not through simplistic audience-protagonist identification but through uniting through difference. Unable to understand, the audience briefly apprehends Sarah's position, but, more importantly, learns that pure accessibility is neither possible nor preferable. Just as Sarah's "individual yet as one" model expands to include reciprocity, here, the audience further refines the exemplum, showing that accessibility need not be a prerequisite for acceptance. While James fails Sarah, the theatrical experience and audience interaction fully realizes the play's model for identification and cooperation.

The "individual yet as one" model may seem a lofty ideal, a noble if impractical articulation of the possibilities of Deaf culture and the theater to transform injustices within contemporary American society—itsself a fashionable flourish in academia. While I certainly argue that this model is enacted in the space of the theater, Gallaudet's Revolution also represents the fruition of the model. For one, the DPN protests were, like other Civil Rights movements, a means of testifying to a history of degradation and oppression. The protests witnessed, as a communal event, individualized experiences with stereotyping, mistreatment, and prejudice. Protests that explicitly sought the

resignation of the hearing president also actively fought for deaf ancestors who couldn't and so that later deaf generations wouldn't have to. The DPN movement condensed an historical, worldwide struggle for recognition into a single event. It was, in many ways, "individual yet as one," attesting to the experiences of the deaf across time and nations.

Moreover, the protests suggest exactly what's at stake when one fails to become "individual yet as one." Separated by age, experience, audiology, and, most importantly, culture, the Board that elected Dr. Zinser certainly excelled at being "individual" but utterly failed at becoming "as one." Incapable of understanding their deaf student body, or, at the very least, unable or unwilling to accept that this student body understood itself, the Board never become one with them. Thus, the protestors, capable of joining together to articulate their desires, succeed. The DPN movement, therefore, visibly enacts that model *Children of a Lesser God* forwards—its practical implementation and its irrepressible power to change history and to transform lives.

“As if there were no I”: Deafness, Ind/Interdependence, and National Identity

In the most important monologue of *Children of a Lesser God*, Sarah pointedly defends her deafness, saying “my ability to communicate is as great as yours. Greater, maybe because I can communicate to you in one image an idea more complex than you can speak to each other in fifty words” (89). Her speech, of course, is signed and James, her hearing husband, translates. She continues, “For example, the sign ‘to connect,’ a simple sign—but it means so much more when it is moved between us like this. Now it means to be joined in a shared relationship, to be individual yet as one” (89). Here, Sarah proudly asserts both the efficiency and eloquence of ASL and the play’s refrain: “to be individual yet as one” (89). This theme resonates and proliferates throughout the play, from what Sarah says, to how she says it, through James, to the dramatic genre itself. Sarah insists that ASL and deafness, and by extension herself, are not only worthwhile but perhaps better than verbal language and hearing because of how community is evinced in the language. Sarah’s sign condenses much of what Deaf culture stands for: personal identity against conformity, pride against degradation, and community against individualism.

In this chapter, I will examine the ways in which the play explores deaf and disabled identities in relation to community. First, I plan to delve into the sometimes strained relationship between deafness and disability, including deaf culture’s tendency to disavow a disabled identity in favor of a cultural one. Here, I will explore modes of deaf identification and guidelines for membership in deaf communities, significantly how the play destabilizes a homogenized deaf identity. The larger portion of this chapter, however, will be devoted to exploring the sometimes antithetical relationship between

Deaf and American identities, particularly through their differing attitudes towards independence and community. Various forms of deaf and disabled communities are practically and theoretically embedded in networks of dependence and interdependence, each of which threatens that persistent and distinctly American ideal of independence. I will conclude the chapter by examining the same scene I began with, exploring Sarah's yearning for an independent identity, an "I" that has been systematically kept from her and other people with disabilities, and her call for community and interdependence. Deaf identity, specifically Sarah's Deaf identity, threatens American notions of individualism. Rather than polarizing independence and community, however, the play argues for an alternative, reciprocal framework for conceiving individual identity. Sarah's call to be "individual yet as one" suggests a different mode to define oneself, one that recognizes individuality but also posits a network of relations as critical to identity formation.¹ The play resists the seeming dichotomy of Deaf and American cultures, therefore, and offers a new paradigm for what it means to be Deaf and American.

Disabling Deafness: Defining D/deafness and Disability

Disability itself is a complicated term, with a vexed relationship to deafness. In his book *Signifying Bodies*, G. Thomas Couser considers a disability any "irregularity, defect, dysfunction, or anomaly in the body," an elastic definition that can encompass any kind of mental or physical condition (21). In many ways this coincides with the current legal definition: "a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities of such individual ("Americans"). Some of these disabilities might include,

paraplegia, quadriplegia, AIDS, multiple sclerosis, cerebral palsy, stroke, blindness, bipolar disorder, cancer, spina bifida, muscular dystrophy, spinal cord injury, asthma, polio, epilepsy, amputation, depression, cognitive disability, and alcoholism. (Fox & Lipkin 82)

This extensive catalog includes physical disabilities, mental disorders, illnesses, diseases, and deformities. Many businesses even categorize maternity leave as disability. The term disabled, therefore, is an expansive and fluid term, embracing a veritable taxonomy of impairments. It includes minor disabilities, such as asthma, transitory ones such as cancer, and poster ones like paraplegia and quadriplegia. Even those “regarded as having such an impairment” are protected by the ADA (“Americans”). Disabilities can be visible and invisible, finite and infinite, overwhelming or relatively insignificant. The word “disabled” defies strict categorization and resists concrete definition, lending the term a pliable fluidity that often goes unrecognized.

At some point in his or her life, therefore, everyone will be considered disabled, if even only through aging. In fact, people with disabilities represent the largest minority population in the United States (“Facts”). Despite the sheer numbers of those with disabilities, the able-bodied population and even those who fall under the category of disabled fail to acknowledge the term’s comprehensiveness. In part, this aversion derives from the colossal stigmatization of the label itself. As Adrienne Asch and Michelle Fine suggest, “[d]isabled persons...often elicit in non-disabled others powerful existential anxieties about their own helplessness, needs, and dependencies” (245). The disabled represent all that we fear and augur our own inevitable futures—entropy, lack of control, and death. People are not only terrified of becoming disabled but also of being considered

disabled by others. Disability is “not simply a physical affair,” but an “ontology, a condition of...being in the world” (Murphy 90), abruptly disrupting how the individual understands herself and the world around her and how that world perceives her.

One aim of the disability rights movement, therefore, has been to universalize and expand the term in order to destigmatize disability. In revealing the social construction of disability, that is the role that society plays in defining “ability” and “disability,” the disability rights movement has attempted to expunge blame and cultural prejudices that insidiously prey upon both the disabled and the able-bodied. Their purposes have been to show how all bodies and lives are damaged in a society that consider illnesses, diseases, and disabilities products of personal blame or only of consequence to the bearer.

Expanding the denotation of the word is therefore extremely helpful and critical to engendering social and legislative change. It may, however, create further factions within an already immensely diverse group. While the field “disability studies” is discussed, the term belies a group identity where no clear, easily accessible, and cohesive definition exists.

Where Deaf Americans differ, however, is in their distinct and clearly articulated group identity. As Harlan Lane writes, the “universalizing view” that is the mainstay of disability studies “is strikingly at odds with the *DEAF-WORLD*, small, tightly knit, with its own language and culture, sharply demarcated from the rest of society” (“Construction of Deafness”162).² Herein, lies one of the most important issues facing disability and

² Lane’s phrase “*DEAF-WORLD*,” is a transliteration or written version of an ASL sign. While there is no agreed upon method of translating ASL to the written word, I have maintained the integrity of Lane’s article and kept his original transcription. With other sources, therefore, I have opted to maintain the author’s original transcription. See “Signs of Their Times: Deaf Communities and the Culture of Language” (86-89) by Richard J. Senghas and Leila Monaghan

deaf studies: whether to identify as Deaf, and as a culture and linguistic minority, or as disabled. While the two terms are not mutually exclusive, they are frequently considered such, especially by culturally Deaf people. The situation is complicated, however, for to identify as disabled is practical, especially in terms of governmental benefits, but it may also elide the lived experiences of D/deaf individuals and minimize their claims to a cultural identity. If they allow themselves to be subsumed by the category disabled, the uniqueness of their language and identities may be reduced to a physical or biological impairment.

The threat that the identifier “disabled” poses to their culture is one of many reasons deaf individuals do not consider themselves disabled. In part, this resistance also derives from a history of misdiagnosis and misunderstanding. Throughout much of history, deafness was considered a cognitive disorder and people with varying degrees of hearing loss were lumped into other categories of disability. Because they were thought to be unable to speak, the deaf were also thought incapable of reasoning (Garnett 24, footnote 8).³ Even into the twentieth century, deaf people were misdiagnosed, routinely shuffled into mental institutions, and degraded as simpleminded. Sarah herself was misdiagnosed and considered “retarded” until she was twelve-years-old (28). While Sarah may not have been “retarded” in the sense that she was mentally handicapped, she is subject to the prejudices and cultural biases that conflate deafness with cognitive disorders. In the cultural psyche, deafness still correlates with stupidity. In this sense, the

for an extensive overview of the types, benefits, and drawbacks of various transcription services used in translating ASL to the written word.

³ For many eighteenth-century theorists, including John Locke and Samuel Heinicke, “[a]rticulate language” was considered the “one springboard for the mind to use in developing abstract thinking” (Garnett 24, footnote 8). Spoken language, unlike signs, was considered the only means to complex cognition. Heinicke, an early educator of the deaf, taught through what was known as the German method, or spoken language rather than a codified signed language.

Deaf's resistance to the category of disabled is a disavowal of many misconceptions of deafness.⁴ To continue to call the Deaf "disabled" may only reinforce those presumptuous yet trenchant misunderstandings of d/Deafness.

The underlying issue is that deafness has been pathologized or reduced to a biological issue waiting to be "fixed." In "Constructions of Deafness," Lane takes on what he labels the "Disability vs. Linguistic Minority" debate (154). While he recognizes the various factors that propel both movements, he definitively champions the cultural model of deafness. Lane suggests that the disability construction of deafness, as a problem awaiting amelioration, only serves to aggrandize the health industry and misrepresents central tenets of Deaf culture (155-59). He argues that disability advocates and the disability construction of deafness, though well-intentioned, only further obscure the cultural aspects of Deafness. For example, the desegregation movement so critical to the disability rights movement does not consider the exiguous role that schools for the deaf play in forming and promulgating Deaf culture and community (161-62). While Lane perhaps too easily denigrates the relative benefits of assuming a disabled identity, he reveals the true crux of the disabled-cultural debate: choice. Many culturally Deaf people resist the label of disabled exactly because it has been affixed to them without their consent.

⁴ Moreover, if deaf children were not diagnosed, they would frequently develop the cognitive disorders they were otherwise stigmatized with. While the modern medical establishment gauges an infant's range of hearing quite early, these kinds of tests did not exist throughout much of history. Busy, working-class and impoverished parents simply may not have realized their children were deaf. Because infant language acquisition is critical to higher cognition, forming important neurological links and bonds, deaf children necessitate more careful instruction than their hearing counterparts (Christiansen & Leigh 364-68). Without this knowledge, these children may have developed the cognitive disorders that were already ascribed to them, further blurring the line between deaf and disabled to the consternation of culturally Deaf people.

Most important, then, is how deaf individuals define themselves. Deafness, while officially listed a disability, is rarely conceived as such by members of the group. In Deaf culture, deafness is normal (Grushkin 118). Conversely, being hearing or speaking is considered “the marked condition” or abnormality (Grushkin 118). Paddy Ladd, a British Deaf rights activist, claims “Labeling us as disabled demonstrates a failure to understand that we are not disabled in any way within our own community” (qtd. in “Constructions of Deafness” 159). Frequently, this is the hardest tenet of Deafness for hearing people to understand. As Lane explains, “hearing people led to reflect on deafness generally begin by imagining themselves without hearing—which is, of course, to have a disability but not to be Deaf” (166). To even begin to understand Deafness as a culture, therefore, the biological state of deafness must be accepted as is rather than as lack, dearth, or tragedy. Instead, Deaf people are a linguistic and cultural minority, as Sarah and Orin, a deaf student and apprentice teacher, repeatedly assert throughout the play. Despite being constructed through a biological reality, Deafness is contingent on various cultural factors, as I will discuss below. The term disability, however, elides these cultural aspects of Deafness, such as language and education that will be discussed more concretely below, and stigmatizes a physical trait with no stigma within their own culture.

While numerous historical and critical reasons divide the D/deaf from the disabled, I argue that many more are shared. Given a history of misdiagnosis and total misunderstanding, the Deaf’s resistance to the term is understandable. I certainly favor the cultural model of Deafness that celebrates ASL and Deaf culture. I take issue, however, with what appears to be a limited and misinformed definition of disabled. In disavowing the term “disabled,” many Deaf individuals merely reiterate mainstream,

able-bodied society's prejudices against disabilities and those with them. Deaf culture's push for cultural validation is important but their polarization of such terms as "disabled" and "cultural" further elides the function of the social realm in the construction of disability, the role that society plays in defining normalcy and average bodies. Claiming the title of disability for deafness would not only connect Deaf people to a larger minority group, engendering greater political representation, but would also undermine the exalted position of the able-body. Both deafness and disability critique the normal or average body, revealing the socially constructed nature of every body. Despite the fraught history between deafness and disability, I maintain that the two categories inform and illuminate each other. Throughout this thesis, therefore, I use disability theory to discuss aspects of Deaf culture, particularly in respect to community in this chapter and gender in the next.

Deaf Variation, Identity, and Culture in *Children of a Lesser God*

Rosemarie Garland Thomson asserts that "In interpreting the material world, literature tends to imbue any visual differences with significance that obscures the complexity of their bearers" (*Extraordinary* 11). While many disabilities are visible, although certainly not all, deafness frequently "obscures" itself, an invisible, untagged state of being. Its presence is only discerned through a glimpse of a hearing aid or cochlear implant, tucked behind hair, through proud and emphatic signing, or through abnormal speech patterns. Deafness may be able to hide more effectively than paraplegia, but its cultural resonance similarly "obscures the complexity of [its] bearers" (*Extraordinary* 11). Just as other disabilities face their own specialized stigma, D/deaf people have been oppressed, repressed, and homogenized in lived experiences and in the

cultural psyche. While literary representations may create and compound negative correlations, these spaces can also be the arena for contesting and reclaiming disabled identities. In fact, rehabilitation must take place through representation. Part of Medoff's strategy in *Children of a Lesser God*, then, is to represent the richness and variegated nature of Deaf culture. Medoff resists the historical homogenization of a culturally, linguistically, and personally diverse group of people. Almost every character, whether she is hearing or deaf, understands deafness in different ways as can only be true in lived Deaf experiences. While the bulk of my analysis focuses on Sarah, and will occur below, here, I would like to examine the other two deaf characters, Lydia and Orin. Sarah and James are, undeniably, the primary emphasis of play, but Medoff's inclusion of Lydia and Orin begins to populate this "Deaf world." Although Medoff never explicitly interrogates Deaf culture or Deaf history, Lydia and Orin represent different points on the culturally Deaf spectrum. They vary in their actions, their goals, and in how they identify. Their presence in the play, therefore, suggests the variation within Deaf culture and attests to the visceral history and existence of that culture.

The first character, Lydia, appears on stage the least. Lydia is James' speech student and a peer of Orin and Sarah's. She wears hearing aids, abettors that are only useful if the user has residual hearing, and is learning to speak effectively over the course of the play. She watches television and has a crush on James, annoying Sarah (59). In other words, Lydia appears to be an average teenager. Moreover, the play seems to cast her as an average deaf person, somewhere between Orin and Sarah's polarities. Lydia is not an active protestor against the Hearing mainstream or belligerently independent and anti-speech, but a young woman trying to discover who she is and how to identify.

For deaf individuals, then, identity runs along a continuum. The “d”eaf community can be used to encompass all deaf individuals, but the “D”eaf community primarily indicates people who were either born deaf or who have lived most of their lives deaf, use manual communication, specifically ASL, went to a school for the deaf, and were born to or raised by Deaf parents (Grushkin 122). A person could be biologically profoundly deaf, or only able to hear over 95 decibels, as Sarah appears to be (49), but this does not mean that he or she is Deaf (Grushkin 116). Being biologically deaf does not automatically entail inclusion in culturally Deaf communities therefore. Rather, various factors including education, heritage, and language form Deaf identity along a spectrum. This does not mean, however, that those who do not fulfill each of these requirements are immediately disqualified from membership (*Recovering* 223). For example, a biologically deaf person who is taught orally may not have access to ASL and therefore the Deaf community. Conversely, a child of deaf parents or adults (CODA) who is not deaf can, in fact, be Deaf, if he primarily socializes with other deaf people through ASL. Donald A. Grushkin writes that audiological definitions, how much or how little hearing a person possesses, the impairment, “may serve well for bureaucratic purposes, but within the interpersonal realm... frequently possess little meaning” (116-17). In other words, deafness is relatively unimportant to Deafness.

While “Deaf” is a fluid term, a spectrum rather than an exact classification, there are authorized ways of performing Deafness.⁵ Despite being cast as average, Lydia embodies a potentially liminal position in terms of strict Deaf culture: Her hearing aids and capacity for speech make her nearly “oral.” An oral deaf person, who uses lip

⁵ In other words, Deafness is primarily a matter of choice, or performance, a line of inquiry I will pursue in the third chapter along with a close analysis of the genre.

reading, hearing aids and speech for communication and does not rely on any form of manual communication, is considered “*think-hearing*,” a deaf person who ““thinks like a Hearing person”” (qtd. in Grushkin 123). An oral person, therefore, approximates hearing and does not ascribe to Deaf notions of identity (Grushkin 123). Rather, those who are “*think-hearing*” may consider deafness, the biological condition, a plight rather than a way of life. Similarly, the ASL sign for “hearing” and “oral” are the same (*Recovering* 224). The language conflates speaking with hearing. As Lane concludes, “Deaf people call an acquaintance ‘ORAL’ who will not acknowledge his deafness. They say disparagingly that that person ‘ALWAYS-PLANS’ actions for every situation, in order to pass acceptably in a hearing world” (“Constructions of Deafness” 6). In strict Deaf culture, therefore, speaking and lipreading are congruent without selling out or attempting to pass as hearing.⁶ Sarah, therefore, fiercely resists speaking as a militant gesture of her Deafness, belittling both Lydia and Orin for their speaking. Lydia does not appear to be ostracized for speaking and wearing hearing aids and she certainly signs, but her presence in the play suggests that despite both the hearing and Deaf world’s attempts to quantify and categorize D/deafness, many d/Deaf individuals do not fall neatly into any category.

Like Lydia, Orin is learning to speak. Orin, however, is also a leader of deaf rights. In a scene between James, the hearing speech instructor, and Orin, his deaf pupil, Orin dutifully repeats James’ words. When he successfully pronounces “Sanction,” James congratulates him saying “Yes! Good for you. How did that feel?” (2). Orin, however,

⁶ While I do not have the time here, I find striking correlations between the term “pass” in both Deaf and African American cultures. Some disability theorists, including Couser, have likened disability memoirs to slave narratives (*Signifying* 44), however, none has offered a full analysis of the connections. Tying D/deaf and disability narratives into a minority cultural tradition may authorize their claims to culture.

counters with “How did it sound?” (2). Orin’s determination to learn how to speak does not derive from any kind of emotional need to connect with hearing humans or from a sense of inadequacy, but from a desire to “change [the] system” (22). His purposes in learning English are purely practical. In order to combat the hearing mainstream, he must know their language. Orin declares, “One of these days, Mr. Leeds, I’m going to change this system” (22). Orin’s driving impulse is to overturn the audist establishment, a system that denigrates deafness and attempts to instill hearing tenets and practices into each of its students.

While the play’s school for the deaf seems to allow ASL, Orin’s statement belies a history of oppression and degradation. Because deafness was considered a pathological condition, one to be assuaged through any means necessary, whether through ear trumpets or hearing aids, many important people and groups throughout history have actively worked to extirpate the “blight.” Men like Alexander Graham Bell overtly supported a eugenics movement against the deaf, which included “isolating the deaf through intermarriage, culture, and residential schools” in order to root out the disease (Lou 83). Similarly, the Nazi regime forcefully sterilized 15,000 people with hereditary deafness, while an even greater, unknown portion was euthanized (Monaghan 11). Pathologized deafness posits that the inability to hear begets a low quality of life, and, in this framework, needs to be cured. Perhaps more insidiously, this pathology suggests that it would be better to be unborn than to be born deaf.

Overt eugenicist movements against the deaf are certainly not a part of contemporary American life, but less subtle methods of denigrating Deafness still proliferate. For one, ASL has been routinely devalued by hearing educators and the larger

public. For many years, ASL was widely considered a hieroglyphic language that did not and could not encompass abstract or metaphysical ideas, a mindset that numerous institutions and people in positions of authority validated. Bell vehemently opposed signed language because he believed “it would hamper, if not prevent, the development of oral skills, as well as limit intellectual development” because signed language was “less abstract than spoken language” (Lou 83). If deaf people wanted to live in the world, marry, have children, work, and generally lead a beneficial and wholesome life, they needed to learn how to speak. Oral-only pedagogy, or the instruction of the deaf through completely oral/aural means, therefore, dominated until the mid-twentieth century. Students at oral-only schools were forbidden from using sign language and forced to communicate expressly through speaking and lip-reading (Baynton 137). Oral-only’s implicit assumption is, of course, that the d/Deaf want to live in the hearing world. While this methodology no longer prevails, many schools for the deaf still operate under the presumption that English is more grammatically complex and abstract than ASL, and many more average Americans consider ASL a simple visualization of English (Newman 89-90).⁷

⁷ Many other contemporary policies and technologies work to colonize deaf individuals and strip them of Deaf identities in much the same fashion oral-only pedagogy did. Mainstreaming, or sending deaf children to hearing schools, hearing aids, and cochlear implants have all been considered insidious tools meant to extirpate D/deafness. In each of these examples, deaf people are removed from any sense of Deaf community. Currently, however, the cochlear implant (CI), and, in particular the pediatric cochlear implant, is considered the most dangerous technology to Deaf culture. For those with sensorineural hearing loss, CIs replicate hairs that stimulate the auditory nerve, which in turn conveys sound to the brain (Christiansen & Leigh 363). While CIs replicate the actions of the hairs in functional hearing, stimulating the auditory nerve, they cannot fully reproduce hearing. Because language acquisition occurs during infancy, the optimal time for implantation and for the technology’s success is between twelve and eighteen months. Still, cochlear implants do not “cure” deafness (Monaghan 19). CIs can improve hearing, although children often still need additional aid, including sign language translators or captioning, especially in the classroom (Christiansen & Leigh 366). If the CI is not completely effective and the parent chooses to forgo alternative methods of language instruction, such as sign language,

When Orin claims he wants to revolutionize the system, then, he wants to overthrow “the ‘audist establishment’” that has stripped deaf people of their Deafness (“Constructions” 166). Audism, a term popularized by Lane but coined by Tom Humphries, encompasses all the ways in which the hearing mainstream, especially those in power, maintain the supremacy of spoken language and devalue Deafness, both as a biological state and a cultural category. Audism “is the corporate institution for dealing with deaf people, dealing with them by making statements about them, authorizing views of them, describing them, teaching about them, [and] governing where they go to school” (*Mask* 43). Oral-only education and burgeoning technology, such as the cochlear implant, are merely tools of a system that has long denigrated d/Deafness and d/Deaf people. Audism, therefore, denies deaf individuals their right to a culturally Deaf community, to a world in which their biological condition is not tragic but celebratory and their language and culture not inferior but legitimate and vital.

One of the ways audism maintains its power is through the manipulation of the educational system. Orin, for example, is banned from his goal of being a teacher because of audism. His deafness purportedly keeps him from being an effective instructor to the deaf. Lane writes,

In many communities it just happens that to be a teacher of deaf children you must first qualify as a teacher of hearing children, and deaf people are excluded as

the “delay...can retard the whole process of language acquisition and mental development” (Monaghan 19). Complete and unchecked reliance on oral-only education can stunt implanted children. Often CIs are viewed as the final cure, when in reality careful language development and close examination are still necessary. Implanted children do not become hearing and still require immense speech training (Christiansen & Leigh 367). Hearing parents who only wish a happy and successful life for the deaf child may inadvertently rely on a piece of technology that awkwardly positions deaf children somewhere between the Deaf and hearing worlds yet fully in neither.

teachers of hearing children. In other communities, it just happens that to become a teacher of deaf children the candidate who is most capable of communicating with them is disbarred because he or she must pass an examination couched in high register English without an interpreter. (“Constructions” 158)

As Lane indicates, the pedagogical system in place for educating the deaf nearly definitively forbids deaf instructors from teaching deaf students. In a system that considers spoken language the best language, deaf instructors are set up to fail. Audism mandates that the deaf be educated, but only to the extent that they fall in line with the hearing world’s ideologies and assume the mantle of wrong, deviant, and disabled.

Paternalism, however, is both a descendant and co-conspirator of audism. During the nineteenth century, many literary representations figured the deaf as saintly others. Because they could not hear, they need not fall victim to the evils of society. They were, in a sense, swaddled in protective silence. Of course, this silence could also construe the deaf as naïve and innocent—victims. At the very least, they necessitated the protection of the mature, if not evil themselves, hearing world (Batson & Bergman 3-4). As Douglas Baynton succinctly concludes, “Deafness, then, confers both the benefit of innocence and the burden of ignorance: two sides of the same coin” (134). In an address to students at Gallaudet, Harlan Lane insists that “when the powerful set out to assist the powerless, when benefactors create institutions to aid beneficiaries, a disease sets in so no good can come of it; the name of that disease in human relationships is paternalism” (“Paternalism” 4). He continues, arguing that “Hearing paternalism... sees its task as civilizing its charges, restoring the deaf to society,” a world which, for the most part, they have no interest in (“Paternalism” 5). Paternalism, like audism, posits that the deaf need

to be saved, to be taught English in order to function in the hearing world, and that the hearing world and its contingent officers, hearing educators and the medical establishment, must do the saving. While Lane characterizes audism as a ruthless ideology, hearing paternalism is cloaked in kindness but perhaps more poisonous for its facade. As in colonial contexts, hearing paternalists assume the charge of their deaf children as a kind of privileged burden that must be borne for the progress of all society. Orin, while certainly a victim of audism, is also exploited by a paternalist system that educates and trains him to be a fully-functional member of society so long as he continues to defer to audism, to those mandates that determine that he is unfit to teach.

In many ways, James, the hearing speech instructor and Sarah's love interest, represents both the hearing world and this legacy of paternalism. Most of Orin's indignation, therefore, is directed at James. Orin rails at him, saying "You think learning to sign means you can communicate with us, that because you want to change us we want to be changed," indicting the educational system "that sticks us with teachers who pretend to help but really want to glorify themselves!" (22). Orin's renunciation of James seems accurate. When Sarah asks James why he became a speech instructor, he replies saying "In the sixties it seemed important to do things that weren't simply self-serving" (20). Sarah poignantly counters, "Isn't this self-serving?" (20). James is undoubtedly well-intentioned, but his repeated attempts to make Sarah speak and his insistence that ASL "is just as good as" English "among the *deaf*" reveals his own latent paternalism (16). Towards the end of the play, James laments the fact that Sarah cannot hear and enjoy the music that is so vital to him (64-65). When Sarah tells him not to be sad and that she "could never know what music sounds like," he responds, crying "But it makes

me sad for you, damn it!” (65). As Lane suggests, James, as a hearing man, can only understand deafness “by imagining [himself] without hearing” (166). For James to be without hearing would be a disability, to miss the things he loves, like music. He may understand Sarah’s deafness but he utterly fails knowing her Deafness. Despite teaching deaf students and marrying a Deaf woman, James still fails to move beyond paternalism. His sadness indicates pity rather than understanding and punctuates their marriage and interactions like the refrain he wishes Sarah could hear.

Not only the hearing are paternalistic. Even though he is Deaf, Orin also reinforces the paternalism and stereotypes that have beleaguered the deaf for centuries. Early in the play, Sarah slyly mentions that Orin “thinks he’s the guardian of all us deaf children because he’s an apprentice teacher and speaks” (25). His mission is to overthrow the audist system, but he also engages in the paternalism it perpetuates by positioning Sarah as the archetypal “Pure Deaf” person (75). In his meeting with Klein, the lawyer, he attempts to use Sarah as an authentic manifestation of Deafness, a person who neither speaks nor lip reads, to promulgate the Deaf cause to the world. Klein, in her legal efficiency, decides that Sarah’s plight, while it may have made her “unhappy...all [her] life” will be “very useful” in the forthcoming civil rights trial (74). When Sarah decries Klein’s portrait of her, Orin rushes to explain what Sarah means. Orin refuses to let Sarah speak and instead speaks for her. He needs Sarah to silently stand in for Deafness, to embody the spirit of his campaign, but her marriage to James and her entrance into the hearing world soils the purity of her Deafness. While the hearing world may homogenize D/deaf people and culture, Orin reduces Deafness to a single and frankly untenable definition—complete isolation from the hearing world. His crusade against the audist

regime, while well intentioned, and his manipulation of Sarah perpetuate the myth that the deaf need to be safeguarded or protected by those more capable. Orin's goals for his culture are critical, but his methods are far too reminiscent of the legacy of paternalism that seems a redundant theme of Deaf history.⁸

While Orin strives for greater representation and rights for d/Deaf people, recently academia, and, in particular, linguists and ethnographers have welcomed Deaf people and their culture into the fold. Numerous studies have analyzed families with deaf children or parents, deaf people in various nations and subcultures, and the ways in which language is used amongst deaf people. These prescriptive authorities have validated Deafness as a way of life rather than a simple, pathological aberrance (Senghas & Monaghan).

Moreover, despite a history of audism and antagonism, many contemporary schools for the deaf embrace ASL, Deaf culture, and Deaf history. While the wider public may still consider ASL a visible manifestation of English and deafness a pathological anomaly, linguists and anthropologists have made immense strides in the fields, studying different aspects of D/deaf life, including signed languages, technologies, and transcription services (Senghas & Monaghan). To the trained professional, if not to every average citizen, Deafness has largely been welcomed and validated as a culture. This culture, of course, is where Orin and Lydia reside, if somewhat uncomfortably. Through these characters, their averageness, their paternalism, their speaking/signing, and hearing aids, Medoff demonstrates the immense variation in Deaf culture that has not only fascinated researchers but evidently audiences as well. He resists a homogenized, simplistic

⁸ Orin's control of Sarah is not merely paternalist but also sexist. As a Deaf man, he still lives through a more privileged position than Sarah as a Deaf woman, a point I will discuss at length in the second chapter.

rendering of Deaf people, instead offering a glimpse into the tragic history and optimistic future of Deaf culture.

Sarah, Deaf Leader

From the beginning of the play and presumably even before, Sarah stands as a fiercely independent Deaf woman. When she meets James, the hearing speech instructor, however, she is forced to reevaluate herself, her identity and her beliefs. Throughout the play, Sarah is buffeted between the hearing and deaf worlds as represented by James and Orin. James persistently tries to make her speak, from the beginning of their relationship through their marriage. Orin, however, wants to use her as the poster child for his burgeoning deaf rights movement. After a particularly gruesome meeting between Sarah, James, Orin, and Edna Klein, the lawyer, James says to Sarah, “I don’t know which role you’re playing here. Is this Sarah the Pure Deaf Person, or Sarah Norman, the old isolationist maid, or is this Sarah Leeds, teammate of James?” (75). Sarah later responds, “I don’t know which role I’m supposed to play. Orin treats me like an idiot. You treat me like an idiot. Now the lady lawyer treats me like an idiot” (76). Each character attempts to use her for different reasons, to reduce her identity to one uncomplicated definition as James suggests. They refuse to understand the performance innate to Deaf identity, to any identity really, as I will explore in both the second and third chapters. Regardless of their reasoning, they hope to use Sarah as a pawn. Sarah, torn between all, is left unable to ground herself or her identity.

While Orin and Lydia exemplify potentially liminal positions in terms of strict Deaf cultures, Sarah appears to embody cultural Deafness. Unlike Lydia or Orin, Sarah

was born deaf (28). She does not wear hearing aids, read lips, or speak. She only signs. Because language is the primary method of inclusion and exclusion for the Deaf community (*Recovering* 223), ASL serves as a pivotal aspect of Sarah's identity. Moreover, it serves as the bedrock of Deaf culture's claim to a cultural identity. ASL is not a visual, bastardized version of English, but a language with its own vocabulary and grammatical structure (Newman 89-90).⁹ To the majority of the hearing mainstream, however, ASL is visualized English. As Sarah asserts in defense of herself and ASL, "I have more than enough communication skills" (30) and proudly proclaims "I have a language that's just as good as yours!" (16).

Sarah, therefore, is further from that derogatory term "*think-hearing*" than any other character in the play. She is resolutely Deaf, hence Orin's desire to use her as a "Pure Deaf" symbol for his movement (75). When Orin decides to "file a complaint" about unfair "hiring practices," he tells Sarah "I want you with me...Because you're deaf. And pure deaf" (68). Sarah quickly perceives his true intentions, signing "With you? Or to follow you?" (68). As I have suggested, Orin wishes to use Sarah as an example of Deafness, but his paternalism prevents him from perceiving Sarah as a partner rather than an icon. Sarah's Deafness, however, is tainted by her relationship with James. Because affiliations and interactions are pivotal to a Deaf identity, dating and marrying a hearing man sullies her status as "Pure Deaf." In fact, when Sarah marries James, Orin calls her "a phony hearing person" for marrying outside of d/Deafness (71). The marriage viscerally disrupts her self-perception, as I will discuss in the second chapter, forcing her

⁹ Many people still believe that American Sign Language (ASL) is a broken form of English, despite numerous linguistic studies (Newman 89-90). This belief might contribute to the complicated relationship between deafness and disability. If the language is considered broken or incomplete, then D/deaf culture's claim to a minority status rather than a disabled one is undermined.

to reconsider her Deaf identity. In many ways, signing may be her only connection to the Deaf world, her identity, and her heritage.

Despite or perhaps because of Sarah's passionate relationship with signing, James desperately wants to change this aspect of her person. One of the primary impetuses of the play and even of their romance is James' desire to have Sarah speak. When Sarah and James first meet, Franklin, the principal, introduces the pair, claiming that "Sarah has a certain aversion to learning speech" (4). Sarah and James' first interaction, therefore, is an overblown attempt to force Sarah to speak. When James inevitably fails, he takes her out on a date. At an Italian restaurant, James orders for her and asks "Wouldn't you like to be able to function in the hearing world?" (17). Sarah simply answers "No." Despite her trenchant refusal to speak or lip read, James continues to push her, throughout their courtship and into their doomed marriage. James' repeated attempts to coerce Sarah's voice threaten the very core of her identity as a deaf woman and ultimately ruin their relationship.¹⁰ Tentatively positioned on the fringes of Deaf culture because of her marriage, speaking might completely obliterate any sense of Deafness she maintains. Moreover, these attempts suggest James' own privileging of the spoken word as a more authentic expression of the self.¹¹ Despite being an educator of the deaf and marrying a

¹⁰ In the second chapter, I will closely examine how gender affects Sarah's Deaf identity. In particular, I argue that James' coercions represent a bodily violation akin to rape.

¹¹ In *Course in General Linguistics* Ferdinand de Saussure divides written language and speech, privileging the spoken word over the written one. While Jacques Derrida through the term "différance," notably departs from his predecessor, the implicit dialogue between the two opens up intriguing ideas in terms of deafness. By privileging speech as the complete fruition of a subject, Saussure simultaneously denigrates all forms of communication beyond the spoken. Does speech also mean manual communication, American Sign Language, for example? If deaf people do not "speak," are they not subjects? Conversely, is ASL a form of writing, per Derrida? While Derrida does not explicitly examine silence or manual communication, *différance* posits understanding beyond speech or in conjunction with other modes of communication. It insists upon multiple means of understanding, congruent with theoretical frameworks such as post-

Deaf woman, he still privileges English and denigrates ASL. Sarah's stance, however, illuminates the importance of ASL to Deaf identity.¹² Her repeated insistence on using ASL, then, is an assertion of her normalcy in Deaf culture and a resistance to that derogatory term "*think-hearing*." James' coercions are not merely annoying or pretentious, but a direct assault on her identity. As one Deaf person claims, "If you want to change ASL or take ASL away from the person, you are trying to take his or her identity away" (qtd. in Humphries 14).

While others attempt to use her, to manipulate her deafness to construe her as pure or tragic, Sarah knows how to define herself and her particular brand of deafness. When talking with James, Sarah signs "I live in a place you can't enter. It's out of reach...Deafness isn't the opposite of hearing, as you think. It's a silence full of sound" (32). Sarah's characterization of deafness is both poetic, or "romantic" as James describes it, and antagonistic (32). When Sarah claims that James cannot enter into her "place," her space, she means that James as the archetypal audist figure holds no power over her mind or body. Furthermore, she rejects the negative connotation of deafness as lacking or missing rather than simply different. When she attempts to explain what she means by "a silence full of sound," James cannot understand her complicated ASL. And, if he cannot understand, neither can the audience. Without his translation, Sarah's understanding of deafness becomes as inaccessible to us as hearing is to her. Instead, the audience is left with the ephemeral beauty of her signs and the wisdom that comes from recognizing our

colonial and feminist studies. Derrida perhaps critiques the authoritative speaking subject to make room for those voices or signs that have not been "heard."

¹² Language serves as the basis of the cultural identity; however, many different kinds of languages proliferate within the Deaf community. Among American deaf people, a variety of languages exist, including ASL, Pidgin ASL, and Signed English (Newman 116). Each of these languages represents a different position within the Deaf community.

inability to understand. We are, quite literally, left in “a silence full of sound” (32).

Sarah’s Deafness is, like Orin and Lydia’s, merely one, ephemeral point on that spectrum of Deaf identity, equally as viable and beneficially unique. While Lydia and Orin suggest the variation within Deaf culture, Sarah stresses the inestimable importance of ASL to Deafness. Like any other language, ASL informs, crafts, and evolves Deaf culture and Deaf identity. Without it, undoubtedly, Deafness would not exist.

Independence, Dependence, or Something in Between: Reinscribing American Values through Disability

Part of Sarah’s Deaf identity then is her fierce resistance to the hearing world, her independence from it and rejection of speaking and lip-reading. Sarah’s most important speech in the play, therefore, is an assertion of self-worth and self-ownership. She begins by saying, “For all my life I have been the creation of other people,” who told her that she was deaf and therefore wrong, that she was “dumb” and therefore wrong, and then decided that she was not actually dumb “but to be smart [she] had to become an imitation” of the hearing world (89). In other words, Sarah matured in an audist system that explicitly labeled her deviant and wrong. Her defiant rejection of English, then, is a complete disavowal of this reading. She explains,

for all my life people have spoken for me: *She* says; *she* means; *she* wants. As if there were no I. As if there were no one in here who *could* understand. Until you let me be an individual, an *I*, just as you are, you will never truly be able to come inside my silence and know me. (90)

In this speech, Sarah asserts her own self-worth and identity. She clearly explains that she has tried to be what others wanted, tried to approximate hearing, but it is impossible and

insulting to her. Because she is Deaf, a product of audism and paternalism, people have always “spoken for” her, whether it be James, the hearing man, or Orin, the Deaf man (90). In this system, her inability to speak somehow warrants and allows others to speak for her. What she wants, therefore, and what she pleads for is that “I,” that independent voice and identity that has long been kept from her as both a deaf person and a woman by a history of audism, paternalism, and ableism.

Sarah’s desire for independence is indicative of a wider call for self-determination by people with disabilities. As Susan Wendell outlines in “Towards a Feminist Theory of Disability,” “Many disabled people who can see the possibility of living as independently as any able-bodied person, or who have achieved this goal after long struggle, value their independence above everything” (273). While Sarah is not physically dependent and thereby able to achieve many cultural notions of independence, her assertion of personhood and identity is important given the historical and cultural correlation between disability and non-identity. Frequently, disabled people occur as stereotypes rather than fully fleshed characters in the media and in literature. As Garland Thomson asserts,

Disabled literary character usually remain on the margins of fiction as uncomplicated figures or exotic aliens whose bodily configurations operate as spectacles, eliciting responses from other characters or producing rhetorical effect that depend on disability’s cultural resonance. (*Extraordinary* 9)

Moreover, characters with disabilities are rarely written or criticized through the lens of disability studies, but “often interpret[ed]...metaphorically or aesthetically...without political awareness as conventional elements of the sentimental, romantic, Gothic, or grotesque traditions” (Garland Thomson 9-10). Because literature and media almost

always assign meaning rather than humanity to disabled characters, lived interactions between disabled and non-disabled people are always fraught with awkwardness, shame, and averted glances. Robert K. Murphy asserts that disability “robs the encounter of firm cultural guidelines, traumatizing it and leaving the people involved wholly uncertain about what to expect from each other” (87). Moreover, “[e]ven the best-intentioned able-bodied people have difficulty anticipating the reactions of the disabled, for interpretations are warped by the impairment” (Murphy 87). In a culture that simply does not know what to do with disabled people, Sarah’s assertion of an “I” is particularly exiguous.¹³

Independence, however, especially for those with disabilities, is always complicated. The word independence can be defined in innumerable ways, from self government, to financial means, to taking care of one’s person without intervention by others (“Independence”). In the American political arena and in many other political definitions, independence and its contingent meanings derive from John Locke. In her discussion of the relationship between disability and American identity, Emily Russell traces the history of individualism (30). As Russell argues, “enduring models of liberal citizenship,” those tenets that govern American ideals “imagine political independence through John Locke’s concept of an inalienable ‘property in one’s person’” (2), “one’s

¹³ In a discussion of people with disabilities and lesbians and the concept of passing, Barbara Hillyer writes that “women who dress and behave in heterosexually approved ways can be heard with less automatic resistance when they criticize American standards of beauty or heterosexism in general. The political stance, here, is that one can undermine the patriarchy from within only if one can pass” (145). Sarah’s critique of American culture is, therefore, problematic. Often portrayed by a beautiful actress, such as Marlee Matlin, the play seems to support Hillyer’s assertion that only the beautiful can critique dominant culture. While this problem necessitates a more thorough discussion, I think Sarah’s attractiveness, evidenced by the actress portraying her, may actually undermine certain stereotypes of disability while reinforcing others. Sarah’s beauty contradicts the belief that disability must correlate with ugliness or asexuality, as I will discuss in chapter two, but it may also buttress Hillyer’s argument. For now, I can only say that the discussion of beauty is complicated terrain, in terms of disability, in terms of women, and in terms of performance.

ownership of one's body—and one's capacity, or ability, to labor" (4). To be independent, therefore, a person must be in full possession and control of her body. Subsequently, to be American is to be completely physically and mentally healthy. As Garland Thomson asserts, "the principle of self-government demands a regulated body," and disabled bodies are nothing in American culture except defiant (*Extraordinary* 43). From the Declaration of Independence to Puritan attitudes towards the relationship between the body and the mind, i.e. "mind over matter," American culture requires not only a functioning body but also an independent one.

Independence is, of course, intertwined with individualism in the American psyche, inextricable from each other, American history, and what it means to be American. The United States, as Russell argues, paradoxically calls for equality amongst its citizenship but also champions extraordinary individualism and the "self-made man." Russell writes, "For Tocqueville, America's essential difference from other nations was located in its egalitarianism," but it also had a "dangerous tendency toward individualism" (30). Russell reveals the contingent paradoxes embedded in this system, because while "democratic individualism is founded on the premise of equality and sameness of condition" it also valorizes the exceptional and the extraordinary (30). Despite this contradiction, writers, politicians, and average citizens "domesticated the quality as an essential national virtue" (Russell 30). From the beginning of American history then, America has developed a strange relationship to sameness and difference, to community and to individualism. America's cultural heroes embody this paradox, manifesting extraordinary individualism and self-determination while at the same time representing a condensation of "America." Russell cites a small list of American stock

characters that exemplify rugged individualism, including “intrepid pioneers, loner cowboys, captains of industry, or hard-boiled detectives,” each of which is not only desperately individual and independent but also representative of American ideology and community (30). In other words, these symbols of individualism are also symbols of community.

This emphasis on independence, individualism, and self-determination has not left the American national psyche. While modern trends towards group therapy and even pedagogical group “circles” may suggest that we are shying away from the individual, attitudes towards disability indicate that this could not be farther from the truth. Being independent is not a matter of choice in America, but a prerequisite. As Peggy Phelan asserts about American ideology, “you are welcome here as long as you are productive” (11). To be American, then, is to be independent, to have a fully functional body, to be extraordinary but certainly not disabled, to be representative of the nation but not dependent on others, and, most importantly, to acquiesce to this creed.

Disabilities and those with them dramatically disrupt this definition of Americanness. They “are subverters of an American ideal,” that archetype of individualism and independence (Murphy 116). Wendell writes, “to the extent that everyone considers independence necessary to respect and self-esteem, those [disabled] people will be condemned to be de-valued” (273). In other words, the paradigmatic relationship between “independence” and “respect and self-esteem” is not self-evident, but constructed through and by our culture. The disabled are weak where Americans should be strong, impotent where virility reigns supreme, aged in a culture obsessed with

youth, and dependent in a society that not only suggests independence but requires it.

Murphy writes,

The disabled serve as constant, visible reminders to the able-bodied that the society they live in is shot through with inequity and suffering, that they live in a counterfeit paradise, that they too are vulnerable. We represent a fearsome possibility. (117)

In other words, the disabled throw into stark relief the inadequacy and hypocrisy of the American value system. The disabled not only “represent a fearsome possibility” (Murphy 117), but may “help reveal that those [physical and mental] ideals are not ‘natural’ or ‘normal’ but artificial social creations that oppress everyone” (Wendell 268). No body can live up to able-bodied society’s norms and the disabled highlight this inevitability.

American ideology and social customs implicitly mandate independence, but many laws, especially those regarding disability, overtly authorize either strict independence or qualified dependence. Of the 37 million people living in poverty in 2004 (“Income”), 38% had some kind of disability, whether physical or cognitive (Lustig & Strauser 194). Not only are disabled people three times as likely to live in poverty compared to any other group (“About WID”), but there are nearly twice as many unemployed disabled people as abled people (“Facts for Features”). Because disabled people are less likely to have good educations and jobs, many are circumscribed to poverty (“Facts for Features”). One of the government’s means of fighting poverty among the disabled is work disincentives, tools which give money to the disabled on a graduated scale. The purpose of work disincentives is to alleviate poverty amongst the

disabled public. If a disabled person makes more than a certain amount of money, the earnings disregard, however, federally funded aids, such as nurses or assistants, are stripped away. Up to and at the earnings disregard, a disabled person still receives funding from the state. Past the disregard, however, all aid is terminated. The predominant problem in this system is that most disabled people will never be able to make the kind of money necessary for their exorbitant health costs. As Robert K. Murphy asserts, “the disabled are constantly being forced out of the labor market by rules that allow no middle ground between total dependency and full independence” (160). The laws that stand make it impossible for people with disabilities to not rely on the government. In other words, independence for people with disabilities is not merely an ideological problem but a legal, visceral, and lived one.

Most importantly, therefore, America ideals of independence fail to correspond with the realities of the disabled populations of America. On the practical level, independence is not feasible for many disabled individuals. People with impaired motor capacities or with limited speech cannot achieve physical, day-to-day independence. To an extent, even someone like Sarah can never truly be independent in the hearing world. She always, even to the play’s audience, necessitates translation.

More important than the practical limitations of independence are the damaging effects of devaluing dependence and community on disabled bodies and the social body. In a culture that upholds and polices independence, its converse is devoutly denigrated. Dependence suggests a failure of mind, spirit, and body to overcome. Wendell writes, “to the extent that everyone considers independence necessary to respect and self-esteem, those people [disabled or dependent] will be condemned to be de-valued” (273). Those

who cannot access complete independence are looked upon with pity, aversion, and even fear because they reflect the inevitability of disability.¹⁴ In his memoir, *The Body Silent*, Murphy chronicles his life post-quadruplegia. Murphy becomes plagued by isolation, thoughts of suicide, guilt, shame, and worthlessness as he attempts to come to terms with his new identity. He writes, “I had changed in my own mind, in my self-image, and in the basic conditions of my existence” all because of the denigration of disability and dependence (85). As Murphy concludes, “[I]ack of autonomy and unreciprocated dependence...[o]verdependency and nonreciprocity are considered childish traits” that quite literally eradicate humanity from humans (201). In his memoir, Murphy demonstrates the immense trauma related to social perceptions of disability. While Murphy works as an anthropologist, a critical researcher and theorist on disabled communities, he still suffers from the debasement of disability and dependence. Even steeped in the disability rights movement, Murphy cannot escape its prejudices.

Independence, then, is particularly important to disabled people. In a system that denigrates dependence and subsequently shames the disabled, being independent, living independently, and counteracting stigmas form the foundation of the disability rights movement. Murphy writes that the “escape from dependency has been a central goal of the disability political movement” (201) and that “[t]he major goal of the handicapped movement is not to foster dependency, but to move the disabled into the mainstream of society as autonomous individuals” (158). Davis similarly concludes that “people with disabilities cherish independence” and primarily “gather for political action” (162).

¹⁴ Samuels cites Lennard J. Davis: “the disabled body is a direct *imago* of the repressed fragmented body. The disabled body causes a kind of hallucination of the mirror phase gone wrong” (70). In other words, people with disabilities force the non-disabled to reckon with their own fragmentation and to recognize their inevitable literal fragmentation.

Independent living groups, for example, are an important part of the disability community (Murphy 159). These groups allow the disabled to live relatively independently while still offering the care and attention they necessitate.

Yet, as Murphy suggests, many disabled people live and work together, forming symbiotic relationships pivotal to their own survival. Despite an inordinate emphasis on independence and masculinity, Murphy unwittingly demonstrates the efficacy of an interdependent model. In the first example, Murphy, a paraplegic, drives a car with his friend, Mort, who has “recurrent vision problems” (196). With Murphy unable to work the pedals, Mort drives. With Mort unable to see, Murphy “warn[s]” Mort “of various obstacles, such as stop lights and trucks” (196). While I certainly would not wish to encounter this kind of symbiotic driving on the road, Murphy’s anecdote is a tidy example of “individual yet as one.” Operating according to their own strengths, the pair forms a mobile union, if only on the drive to work. In another example, Murphy offers the living arrangement and relationship between two disabled women. One is a quadriplegic “with good upper body strength,” while the “other has cerebral palsy...and very limited arm and hand use” (201). Much like Murphy and Mort’s driving, these two women work out a system of living and thriving together. Murphy offers these relationships as examples “that [the] escape from dependency,” essentially, independence, “has been a central goal of the disability political movement” (201). Yet, each of these relationships is certainly more interdependent than independent. Individual independence, whether mobility or the right to live uninstitutionalized, is wrought through interdependence. So, while independence may be an overt goal of the disability rights movement, it is an ideal achieved primarily through the “individual yet as one”

model. Independence and interdependence need not be polarized, therefore, but can work together to produce new interactions and arrangements for the benefit of all people.

The Deaf Community and Independence

While the question of independence may make for dangerous ground in terms of disability, the Deaf community definitively thrives through interdependence and networks of relations. As Lane writes, “culturally Deaf people cherish interdependence” (162). Since at least the eighteenth century in America, and even earlier in other parts of the world, the deaf have banded together, forming languages, cultures, and identities. In particular, schools for the deaf played an important part in cementing a cultural identity. In the United States, schools for the deaf date back to the early nineteenth century, the first being the American Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb chartered in 1817 as a boarding school. Practically, these schools were often the only way for most deaf people to meet other deaf individuals. Children from rural areas “met other deaf people for the first time and learned, also for the first time, how to communicate beyond the level of pantomime and gesture” (Baynton 129). While families with deaf members typically created their own kind of signed language, schools opened up the possibility of a national language. Culling deaf children from across wide swathes of land and disparate and frequently isolated backgrounds, these deaf students “encounter[ed] the surprising knowledge that they had a history and an identity shared by many others” (Baynton 129). “With the creation of this residential school,” a special space for the deaf to assemble, Baynton argues, “the deaf in the United States may be said to have become the Deaf” (129). In

other words, these schools provided the space for the deaf to form a community and thereby a culture.¹⁵

From their inception, residential schools for the deaf have served as the critical seat of Deaf culture. At the beginning of their history, these schools instructed their deaf pupils through manual means. In other words, they taught them to sign. By the late nineteenth century, however, as I discussed earlier, signing fell out of favor and the oralist or oral-only pedagogy gained traction. In part, the Deaf community gave rise to oralism. Deaf people, of course, did not advocate this route, but their emphasis on community, rate of intermarriages, and their language appeared to threaten mainstream, American identity. The “image of an insular, inbred, and proliferating deaf community, with its own ‘foreign’ language and culture, became a potent weapon for the oralist cause” (Baynton 140). Baynton argues that the hearing mainstream “insisted that their intent was to rescue deaf people from their confinement,” but actually actively worked to return deaf people to the American, linguistic mainstream (140). ASL was not only designated as substandard, therefore, but alien to American identity. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, deafness, deaf people, and deaf culture imperiled the consolidation of an American identity and people. For much of American history, then, Deaf culture and specifically the Deaf community has threatened American modes of identifying. Not until the 1970s did schools for the deaf allow signing again (Baynton 144).

¹⁵ Of course, as schools for hearing children were segregated by race so too were schools for the deaf. While the Deaf community is obviously far more integrated now, this early segregation created distinct delineations and language and practices amongst white and black deaf people. See Glenn B. Anderson and Katrina R. Miller’s “Appreciating Diversity Through Stories About The Lives Of Deaf People Of Color” for first person stories about educational obstacles and white Deaf privilege.

Despite this embattled history, schools continued to carry on deaf culture. Parents would teach their children ASL or “those children who were deaf and attended schools where sign language was banned surreptitiously taught others” (Baynton 144). Even under repressive conditions, ASL and Deaf culture flourished through these schools. Modern schools for the deaf, therefore, not only resist desegregation movements that would force the d/Deaf into public schools but also oppose integration into schools of varying disabilities. In 2007, the Ohio State Schools for the Deaf and Blind were supposed to merge, but protests from deaf students and alumni argued that the merger would ““destroy the deaf school’s culture”” (qtd. in Brueggeman 12). Schools for the deaf do not merely symbolize deaf culture or deaf history, a waning reminder of what Deafness used to be, but continue to revitalize and rework what it means to be Deaf. Their continued importance cannot be minimized given the threat of cochlear implants and mainstreaming.

Moreover, many d/Deaf individuals continue to congregate in social groups well into adulthood. In particular, social clubs played an important role in formulating and disseminating Deaf culture. For those who matriculated in schools that forbid ASL or others who were mainstreamed in public schools, these groups act as a point of access to learn ASL and Deaf culture (Baynton 144). And for those who perhaps matured with Deaf culture, these clubs continue to serve as “Deaf places and points of transmission of Deaf culture” (Senghas & Monaghan 79). As Senghas and Monaghan assert, “finding or establishing places have been explicit goals for many deaf individuals” (79). Unlike other ethnicities or races, the Deaf have no place. They can neither cite a home space nor return to it. Scattered across towns, counties, and states, the American Deaf use clubs to

congregate, to socialize, and, most importantly, to carve a tangible space for themselves and their bodies. Like schools, Deaf clubs create and share Deaf community.

Perhaps more important than the strong sense of community is in the communal way that many deaf individuals identify. As Couser writes, “the ‘deaf way’ of communicating is not entirely, or necessarily, a matter of using sign language; rather it involves relational identification... informality and interactivity” (*Recovering* 228). In particular, this “relational identification” or “presenting oneself by reference to one’s parents and often one’s school” is important to formulating self-identity (*Recovering* 228). Naming, for example, is a communal process. While deaf people are almost always given an English name, which they will fingerspell to interested parties, most have name signs, a sign particular to the individual derived from his or her personality, interests, or characteristics, typically received at school (*Through Deaf Eyes*). The very act of naming, therefore, is communal, generated and activated by other Deaf people. In this way, “interactivity” forms the basis of all communications amongst the Deaf (*Recovering* 228). In one sense, “interactivity” refers to the collaboration of “the hands and body” in any ASL utterance (Senghas & Monaghan 74). ASL is not merely the fluttering of hands, but the conjunction of signing and facial expression across a spatial plane. Furthermore, the ASL speaker must also collude with her audience to make meaning, forming another facet of “interactivity.” Working together, such as in the case of naming, signs and meanings evolve. From “relational identification” to “interactivity,” Deafness, Deaf culture, and Deaf people are utterly steeped in community, understanding themselves and the world through networks of relations.

In many ways, then, D/deaf people threaten that American ideal of independence. Their emphasis on community and relational identification undermine the perceived superiority of individualism and independence. Moreover, the cultural construction of Deafness at least partially insists on isolation or separation from the hearing, American mainstream (Senghas & Monaghan 80). Those tenets that undergird American ideology are not only unimportant, but, for the most part, antithetical to Deaf culture. To be a Deaf American then might be a paradox.

Conclusion

To be Deaf then is to embody Sarah's monologue that I began this chapter with. Sarah signs,

For example, the sign "to connect," a simple sign—but it means so much more when it is moved between us like this. Now it means to be joined in a shared relationship, to be individual yet as one. A whole concept just like that. (89)

Here, Sarah literally champions the efficacy of ASL. In the previous lines, she argues that she perhaps is better at communicating than hearing people because of ASL. ASL, unlike English, as she explains, condenses layers of meaning into one sign; "a whole concept just like that" (89). In exploring the efficacy and eloquence of ASL, Sarah deconstructs the disability construction of deafness and validates and uplifts the cultural model. She suggests that deafness is not merely a biological mishap that necessitates pathologizing, but is "one range within the larger spectrum of human variations" (Senghas & Monaghan 78).

Her speech is not only a validation of herself and her language, therefore, but also an argument for the Deaf mode of identification. Sarah continues, signing,

Well, I want to be joined to other people, but for all my life people have spoken for me: *She* says; *she* means; *she* wants. As if there were no I. As if there were no one in here who *could* understand. Until you let me be an individual, an *I*, just as you are, you will never truly be able to come inside my silence and know me. And until you can do that, I will never let myself know you. Until that time, we cannot be joined. We cannot share a relationship. (89)

Once again, Sarah counteracts the disability construction of deafness, particularly in its assertion that she, as a disabled person, is without humanity, personality, quite literally, an “I.” Moreover, Sarah cries for both independence and inter-dependence in her “individual yet as one” speech. She wants her voice to be heard, an understandable and important claim considering the historical silencing of the deaf. But, she also wants to imagine and introduce a different way of conceiving personal identity. The sign “to connect,” as Sarah argues, not only condenses multiple meanings into one symbol, but also introduces a different mode of conceiving self-identification, one much more aligned with Deaf culture. While Sarah asserts her “I,” an independence that I have argued is important to disabled people and the able-bodied American public alike, she predominantly does so to assert a kind of communal identification. She claims she needs to be an “I” and others need to recognize her humanity before they will “be able to come inside [her] silence” (89). Before she can truly engage in a dynamic relationship with someone, anyone, they must recognize her as a person and as an equal. Her assertion of

independence, therefore, is uniquely tied to other people. She wants to be independent precisely so she can form relationships.

Her definition “to be individual yet as one,” then, suggests a new mode of identifying, one based in Deaf culture. Because community, interdependence, and relational identification are much more important than the individual in Deaf culture, Sarah argues that relationships, and specifically her relationship with James, could stand to learn from this model. “[T]o be individual yet as one” is to be a unique, equal, and human person, but to also be joined to others in a interdependent network and to recognize this rhizomatic web.

Sarah, therefore, explicitly contests and expands American modes of identifying. In a nation that demands independence and exalts the individual, many more of its citizens, including the deaf and disabled, are excluded than included in the national community. Even those citizens who, for a time, pass as able-bodied are facing entropy. Their youth will fade, their joints will stiffen, and they will come to realize that the United States is not constructed for everyone but for a minority population of the able-bodied: the young, the fit, the healthy, and the independent. Wendell writes “to the extent that everyone considers independence necessary to respect and self-esteem, those people [with disabilities] will be condemned to be de-valued” (273). Yet, we all will have some kind of disability if even simple advanced age. Under this ideology, all Americans are destined to loathe themselves and their bodies.

Sarah’s reinscription of what it means to be American, then, could not be more appropriate. Such American archetypes as “the self-made man” or “the rugged individual” quickly collapse under the scrutiny of Deaf tenets and Sarah’s model of

personhood. Signing to a hearing, American audience, Sarah expands what it means to be American, suggesting that all people are embedded in networks of relations and that no one is truly independent or individual. She makes room for Americans to identify as dependent, interdependent, and community-oriented, writing herself and countless others into the national narrative. Sarah suggests that if Americans were to recognize the constellations of people, places, and even things that comprise their lives, independence would not be prized so highly and dependence and interdependence not denigrated. Accepting a communal model of identifying would not only alleviate the pressure to be independent that plagues disabled and Deaf people, but would allow many more Americans to begin to love themselves and their own bodies.

Sarah embodies pride where the American value system says she should have none, courage where she should be weak, and, frankly, ebullient where she should be disconsolate. Sarah, in many ways, is a hero to those living in and through anomalous bodies. She stands in and for all those who have been rejected, stereotyped, stigmatized, and oppressed by an ideology that deems them weak, wrong, insufficient, and, sometimes, evil. Most importantly, Sarah suggests that there is no one way to be American, to be Deaf, to be disabled, or as we will see in the next chapter, to be a woman.

“created in my image”: Disability, Gender, & Subversion

While the previous chapter was devoted to Sarah’s Deaf identity and the ways in which this undermines American identity, much of the play is invested in the progression

and complexity of Sarah's identity and her inability to be simplified into one particular role or characteristic. When Orin realizes that Sarah is going to marry James, he lashes out at her, claiming "You go with him and you'll still be a maid. His maid!" (41). In yet another scene, James, now Sarah's husband, tells her, "I don't know which role you're playing here. Is this Sarah the Pure Deaf Person, or Sarah Norman, the old isolationist maid, or is this Sarah Leeds, teammate of James?" (75). As I have argued, Orin and James represent the polarized Deaf and Hearing worlds, Sarah's past and potential future. It seems important, moreover, that each of these characters is a man. While Orin insists that Sarah will remain a maid if she marries James, James similarly attempts to reduce her identity to a single title: "the Pure Deaf Person," "the old isolationist maid," or the "teammate of James" (75). Each of these men wants to make her over in his own image, whether as a hearing person or as a Deaf one, usurping her singular right to define herself.

Rather than focus solely on Deafness, therefore, I would also like to examine the ways in which Sarah's gender shapes and informs her relationships and identity. In particular, I will explore the intersections of gender and disability and how these overlapping identities shape Sarah's personhood in ways different from either able-bodied women or disabled men. Disabled women are not only doubly alienated from the prototypical American body, but they also face different obstacles in regards to sexuality and beauty than their male disabled counterparts. Throughout the play, Sarah grapples with what it means to be a disabled woman. As a teenager, she reverts to her sexuality to establish herself as an attractive woman in a culture that demands beauty of its women while simultaneously defining this ideal as narrowly as possible. As a woman, Sarah

resists the domination and independence inherent in the audist and patriarchal world. Instead, she rebels by refusing to speak and by offering her communal model of identification. Her relationship and marriage to James, however, complicates her integrity as Deaf, as a woman, and as independent. While she uses the marriage much like she uses her early sexuality, to reclaim her female identity, this charade fails. By the end of the play, she disavows the patriarchal, ableist, and nationalist systems of power that work to denigrate her and her experiences. Instead, she asserts her model for human interaction, “individual yet as one.” While Orin and James attempt to reduce and define her, Sarah realizes that she herself must resist dominating others, a process of subordination inherent in audism and patriarchy. She cannot make James, the hearing man, and Orin, the Deaf activist, over in her own image either. Instead, she suggests an alternative meeting place between silence and sound, man and woman. While binaries inherently breed a system of privilege, Sarah’s complex subject position—a disabled woman—attests to the proliferation of identities, thereby refining her model for identification and interaction.

Disabled Women: Bodies, Beauty, and Sexuality

As Sarah discovers throughout the play, being disabled and being a woman place her in a “doubly oppressed” position (Asch and Fine 241). Susan Wendell argues that “[d]isabled women struggle with both the oppressions of being women in male-dominated societies and the oppressions of being disabled in societies dominated by the able-bodied” (261). Much of my previous chapter can be reviewed again in terms of Sarah’s status as a woman. James’ attempts to make Sarah speak are not merely a product of audism and paternalism but blatant and dangerous sexism, as I will discuss later in this

chapter. Moreover, Orin's paternalism seems more dangerous given the fact that he is a man and Sarah is a woman. I will resist the temptation to merely "review" the previous chapter, but here and elsewhere I would like to suggest that Sarah's Deafness and her gender are delicately intertwined.

Although there are many correlations between disability and feminist studies, the most obvious one is "the body." Both women and people with disabilities deviate from an imagined, bodily norm. Wendell writes,

Our real human bodies are exceedingly diverse... Yet we do not absorb or reflect this simple fact in our culture. Instead, we idealize the human body. Our physical ideals change from time to time, but we always have ideals. These ideals are not just about appearance; they are also ideals of strength and energy and proper control of the body. (268)

Despite the fact that bodies vary, whether in sex or ability, hair texture or skin color, all cultures and particularly American culture maintain ideals of what its citizens should look like. Moreover, these ideals are inextricable from virtues. Beautiful people are good people. They are disciplined, healthy, and in control of their bodies and their futures. People who deviate or differ, therefore, are not only considered unattractive but intractable, malevolent, and even un-American.

While all people with disabilities are maligned under this system, the idealized body doubly afflicts disabled women. Their bodies represent deviations from multiple imagined norms because they are neither male nor able-bodied. Simply put, the difference between men and women is primarily physical. Their bodily differentiation, however, has served to exalt men and denigrate women. Garland Thomson traces this

history to Aristotle's assertion that the female body is that of a "deformed" or "a mutilated male" (qtd. in "Feminist Theory" 280). Essentially, women were disabled men.¹⁶ While this bodily correlation may no longer hold widespread validity, modern women's identities are arguably more tied to their bodies than their male counterparts (Wendell 268). Before becoming disabled, Wendell writes that she "was one of those people who felt 'close enough' to cultural ideals to be reasonably accepting of [her] body" (267). While she "was aware of some alienation" from her body, being a feminist, she "knew in [her] heart that too much of [her] liking still depended on being 'close enough'" (267). Wendell implies that her love for her body is directly linked to her ability to pass, to being "close enough" to that cultural ideal to still be considered attractive (267). Even a woman well informed on issues of sex and gender cannot divorce bodily integrity from cultural ideals. As Wendell suggests, almost every woman, disabled or otherwise, grapples with physical integrity in a culture oversaturated with narrow images of what it means to be beautiful. Becoming disabled, however, doubly estranges Wendell from her body, forcing her to finally see and understand the strenuous pressures of physical ideals. Disabled women, therefore, face far greater pressure than either able-bodied women or disabled men. In a culture that exalts beauty, health, and physical fitness, and judges women's bodies far more harshly than men's, disabled women can never escape their bodies. "Facing" their own bodies and loving them becomes nearly impossible (*Signifying* 8).

¹⁶ This assertion, however, is vexed. Many feminist scholars haphazardly rely on disabilities to metaphorically indict patriarchy. They claim the damages of patriarchal institutions mentally and physically disfigure women. This rhetorical move may further obscure disability and its particulars. See Ellen Samuels' "Critical Divides: Judith Butler's Body Theory and the Question of Disability" for a more extensive analysis of disability and feminist studies.

Despite being circumscribed by their bodies, many disabled women discover that their disabilities rob them of the sexuality and attractiveness typically inextricable from able-bodied women. Asch and Fine argue that “[t]he woman with a disability, whether apparent or invisible, may display less than the norm or the fantasied ideal of bodily integrity, grace, and ease” (244). Because American women ““must look a certain way to be loved and admired, to be worth anything,”” disabled women are all but barred from accessing beauty, love, sexuality, and relationships (qtd. in Asch & Fine 244). For example, when a woman with spina bifida asked her gynecologist if she could engage in “satisfying” sexual intercourse, the doctor replied ““Don’t worry, honey, your vagina will be tight enough to satisfy any man”” (qtd. in Asch & Fine 248). As Asch and Fine sarcastically claim, “Her satisfaction probably didn’t cross his mind” (248). In a culture that defines female physical beauty so narrowly yet so specifically, disabled women can never fulfill its requirements. They can never be beautiful and subsequently can never be sexual. Instead, they are left to languish in a culture that deems them ugly, sexually bereft, and, frankly, impotence-inducing.¹⁷

Sarah, however, resists this reductive depiction of herself. In a conversation with James, Mrs. Norman reveals how popular a young Sarah was with her hearing sister’s friends, particularly the boys. She claims, “These boys really liked Sarah, treated her the same way they treated Ruth, with respect and...and if you didn’t know there was a problem, you’d have thought she was perfectly normal” (29). When James presses Sarah on the issue, however, Sarah divulges, “At first I let them have me because they would.

¹⁷ While physical disabilities are typically connected with asexuality, mental or cognitive disorders are usually correlated with hypersexuality. Either way, people with disabilities fall under deviant sexualities. See Robert McRuer’s “Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence” and Alison Kafer’s “Compulsory Bodies: Reflections on Heterosexuality and Able-bodiedness” for more.

Sex was something I could do as well as hearing girls. Better! It got to be that when I went home, the boys would be lined up on a waiting list my sister kept for me” (31). While her mother believed and perhaps continues to believe that these dates were normalizing her, helping her pass in the hearing world, Sarah suggests that she honed her sexuality as a weapon to combat “hearing girls” and the pervasive assumption that she was less than them, less beautiful, less sexually appealing, and less a person (31). For better or worse, her sexuality became the foundation by which she defined herself as attractive and sexual. Sarah’s sexual revels, therefore, represent a reclamation of the very same sexuality that American culture claims as antithetical to disabled women.

Ability, National Identity, and Gender as Sites of Oppression and Transgression

In many ways, Sarah’s early sexuality also represents an assertion of her independence as a Deaf woman. While women and people with disabilities have faced comparable bodily-based oppression, Wendell also suggests that feminists and disability activists face similar issues in their political agendas. In particular, Wendell argues that one of the problems facing both groups, which should align them more closely to work together, is

whether to place great value on independence from the help of other people, as the dominant culture does, or to question a value-system which distrusts and devalues dependence on other people and vulnerability in general. (261)

The question of independence/dependence pervades disability and feminist literature and theories, but, as Wendell implies, there is no unilateral support behind either course of action.

While I have discussed the meaning of independence in terms of hearing American culture and the tenets of interrelatedness that govern Deaf communities, I would like to reiterate and then shift the frame of reference on the independence/dependence binary to disabled women. To revisit briefly, independence is pivotal to American identity, both a pervasive part of our mythological landscape and a requisite for legal and political citizenship. Independence, however, is not merely an American tenet, but central to patriarchy and ableism as well. Independence is the defining characteristic of American, masculinity, and able-bodiedness. The prototypical American is not only male but masculine in qualities: independent and self-sufficient. To be self-sufficient, to be a true American, moreover, one must be able-bodied, able to labor mentally and physically. National identity, masculinity, and able-bodiedness are intricately interwoven around that ideal of independence.

In America, therefore, dependence is devoutly denigrated. As Wendell succinctly writes, “Dependence on the help of others is humiliating in a society which prizes independence” (273). In the last chapter, I suggested that independence is untenable for most disabled people. Independence is certainly important, especially in terms of the waning self-esteem of the newly disabled, for example, yet not every person is able to physically or mentally access “independence.” Many disabled people do and must rely on others for help and care. As I argued last chapter, dependence need not be stigmatized, therefore. Rather, a communal model of human interaction can and should be implemented for the well-being of all people. In this chapter, I would like to suggest that American culture not only conflates disability with stigmatized dependence, but that women are also incorporated in this unholy triad. When patriarchy, ableism, and

nationalism exalt independence, mental acuity, and physical strength, the disabled and women, purported opposites of these ideals, represent dangerous transgressions.

The question of independence/dependence for disabled men and disabled women, therefore, differs. In his memoir *The Body Silent*, Robert K. Murphy argues that the onset of his quadriplegia represents the complete cessation of his independence and thereby his masculinity (95-98). While still able to work as a professor and researcher, he can no longer fulfill his role as patriarch. His disability robs him of his ability to perform such masculine, independent tasks as changing a light bulb or engaging in sexual intercourse with his wife. He writes, “For the male, the weakening and atrophy of the body threaten all the cultural values of masculinity: strength, activeness, virility, stamina, and fortitude” (94-95). In Murphy’s mind and in American culture, Murphy’s disablement obliterates his independence and thereby his masculinity.

While Murphy suggests that disablement “compromise[s]” a man’s “standing...far more than” a woman’s, he fails to recognize that if women are less “compromised” it is only because society already considers them disabled by virtue of being not male (96). Men risk losing their masculinity in becoming disabled, but Asch and Fine suggest that “our culture views being female and disabled as “redundant”” (249). Good women should be passive, obedient, and genial, all traits which are similarly ascribed to those with disabilities. As Asch and Fine argue, “disability is thought to reinforce...customary female characteristics” (243). While disabled men may lose the independence necessary for American masculinity, disabled women are “[e]xempted from the ‘male’ productive role,” by nature of their biological sex and stripped of “the ‘female’ nurturing one” (Asch & Fine 241). These women, Asch and Fine conclude, are

“doubly oppressed,” twice removed from their bodies because of their sex and ability (241). They are circumscribed by both patriarchy and ableism, twice removed from the cultural norm and therefore twice as likely to be scorned and stigmatized.

I will therefore argue that patriarchy, ableism, and nationalism are interlocking systems of oppression, both within the play and in lived experiences. Each exalts independence at the expense of those who deviate. Disabled women, in their multiple deviations, bear the brunt of this oppression. In particular, Hillyer argues that,

disabled women...have more than average contact with patriarchal institutions and less than average choice about the ones with which they interact. These typically include medicine in many of its subinstitutions: government, including law, welfare, and other social service departments; education; and religion. (14).

Disabled women, therefore, are circumscribed by “patriarchal institutions” (14). As Hillyer suggests, “Often these institutions overlap, as in treatment facilities operated by churches that also offer public school special education classes under their auspices” (14). These are not merely “patriarchal institutions,” then, but nationally or state-funded programs dedicated to maintaining its able-bodied agenda. Moreover, “Women seeking access to treatment,” that would otherwise be unavailable, “must accept the whole ‘package’ in such situations” (Hillyer 14). Disabled women have “less than average choice” and are forced to submit to these institutions so far removed from their own experiences (Hillyer 14).

What Asch and Fine reveal, however, is that while disability studies has exhaustively examined the ways in which disability and its stigmatization strip independence and self-sufficiency from the disabled, much of this analysis is not only

reserved for males and male characters in terms of literary analysis but continues to exalt masculine, patriarchal, and heteronormative modes of living in the world. Yet, as Asch and Fine suggest, disabled women occupy an interesting and even “freer” space (241). Liberated from both masculine and feminine conventions, they may have more opportunities to critique mainstream culture. Garland Thomson asserts that “disabled women operate as embodied alternatives to the status quo” (113). Their beings and their bodies denounce “social rules and categories,” opening up new spaces, definitions, and identities (113). Disabled women, therefore, contest the rigidity and necessity of independence. While independence implies singularity and self-sufficiency, all characteristics which mainstream America exalts, those on the margins of this national narrative, such as women, people with disabilities, and those who identify as anything other than “heterosexual,” contest this narrative. Rather, they and their bodies insist on plurality instead of singularity, subversion instead of dominance, proliferation rather than reduction, and boundaries and borders instead of centers. While ableism and patriarchy posit one, traditional, and authoritative way of living in and through the world, women, and particularly, disabled women attest to the proliferating multiplicity of deviant and different lives.

Sarah as Transgressor

Sarah, in particular, resists hegemony, both in her body and her actions, acting as an “embodied alternative to the status quo” (*Extraordinary* 113). Just as early feminists rejected symbols of patriarchy, so too does Sarah. Early in her childhood, Sarah defiantly rebuffs religion, specifically Christianity. When James coerces Sarah into listening to his

records, she refuses because she abhors that “kind of music”—organs (66). James seems surprised that she can identify the instrument, but Sarah explains her antipathy, signing,

When we were kids in school here, on Sunday they made us go to church. They played an organ fiercely. Orin cried because he could hear just enough for it to hurt his ears. The kids with hearing aids were forbidden to turn them off. We were told it was the voice of God and should hurt. They said we should love God for being so fierce and demanding. When Orin was nine and I was eleven, we started hiding in trees behind the duck pond on Sunday. We pretended we were soldiers and threw dirt clods at the church and made sounds like hand grenades. (66)

Sarah’s story reveals some of the particulars of deaf history and of deaf education in the United States. The rise of schools for the deaf during the nineteenth century undoubtedly coincides with American religious revivals. Teaching the deaf a language, any language, was imperative for the salvation of their souls. As Baynton suggests, the deaf were not necessarily pitied because they could not hear or learn as others could, but because they were estranged, quite literally severed from Christianity (134). As nineteenth-century Christians set out to foreign lands to evangelize perceived heathens, the deaf became a national symbol of savagery that necessitated civilizing. They needed to be Christianized at any cost, as Orin and Sarah discover, even at the painful price of a screeching hearing aid and splitting headache.¹⁸

¹⁸ The recent documentary *Mea Maxima Culpa: Silence in the House of God* chronicles the sex abuse scandals of the Catholic Church. The bulk of the movie investigates the history of sex abuse in the Catholic church, tracing cover-ups across the world and time, ultimately indicting the most recent Pope as an abettor to pederasty. In the movie, various ex-clergymen suggest that sex abuse is not only prevalent but endemic in the Catholic church because of the cult of the priesthood and power psychoses. While certainly incendiary in that regard, the documentary is framed by the story of a Catholic school for the deaf in Milwaukee. For years, the charismatic Catholic priest who ran the school routinely molested students. He even implemented a hierarchy

Christianity has posed similar problems to other disabilities as well. For one, as Couser posits, the symbolic paradigm of disability, that which reads disability as a “stable, legible, and reliable sign of a moral condition or divine disfavor,” is tied to the “Judeo-Christian scriptures” (*Signifying* 21). Throughout the bible, illness, disease, and disability are almost always linked to evil, sin, demonic forces, and the Devil. Hence, Jesus Christ’s redemptive power is literally constructed through the healed bodies of the diseased and disabled (*Signifying* 21-22). The symbolic paradigm, supported and promulgated by Christianity, posits disability or illness as an unqualified mark of inner malevolence or godly retribution. In this signifying system, people with disabilities are confined by the limits of social perception.

Many people with disabilities, therefore, reconcile themselves to their situations through Christianity, religion, and spirituality. In his taxonomy of disability life writing, Couser argues that one of the modes of disability autobiography is “the rhetoric of spiritual compensation” (36). In this rhetoric, the disabled person only comes to terms with her life and body through recourse to God. Couser writes, “she can only be certain of her personhood—which for her is somehow compromised by her disability—when it

of older students to choose and “break in” new victims. While much of the movie is devoted to the conspiracy of the Catholic church to silence victims and pedophiles, the movie’s keen focus on the school for the deaf, the framing of the tale, and the final image/line of the movie suggest that the movie is equally as invested in forwarding Deaf culture and disability studies. Other schools for the deaf around the world experienced similar problems. Students, however, were rarely believed. Not only were Catholic priests not to be crossed, but many of these deaf students signed while their parents could not. In many cases, these priests acted as translators between deaf children and parents. Moreover, the Milwaukee tale of abuse coincides with widespread misunderstandings of Deafness. People thought these Deaf students were also cognitively impaired. When they confessed to the priest’s actions, the people who heard these complaints thought they were lying, acting out, causing trouble, ungrateful, or any number of hostile stereotypes. The final image/line of the movie is one of these victims, simply signing and speaking “Deaf power.” Combatting the Catholic church, which has proved nearly impossible, represents both a victory for victims of pedophilia but also an important step in acknowledging Deaf people and Deaf culture. Both have been silenced for far too long.

has been conferred and confirmed by divine authority” (37). The only way to overcome the symbolic correlation between disability and malignance is through God. While this rhetoric may serve personal fulfillment and validation, it posits disability as a personal “problem—a challenge given...by God for his own inscrutable reasons—not a social or political matter” (Couser 38). The rhetoric of spiritual compensation, therefore, makes political action or change unnecessary. If disability is a personal, spiritual problem, systemic change is pointless.

In a sense, then, Christianity has been used to placate those with disabilities, quelling any sense of indignation or rebellion. While religion may offer a means to understand the vicissitudes of fate and time, its danger is its unchecked power. As Hillyer argues, those institutions that serve the disabled are frequently tied to religion (14). Christianity is complicit in nationalism, sexism, and ableism. Those people that need care are forced to endure indoctrination and aversion for the sake of their health or education as the case may be. In some instances, then, Christianity and religion itself, can prevent people with disabilities from challenging the various establishments in place, whether they be patriarchal, heteronormative, or ableist.

Orin and Sarah, however, rebel against these systems. They transform their horrific, Christian experiences into staged revolutions. After a time, they “started hiding in trees behind the duck pond on Sunday,” circumventing the mandatory services (66). They not only escaped Church, but enacted their own rebellions, pretending to be soldiers hurling “dirt clod” grenades at the incendiary building (66). Despite their young age, Sarah and Orin understand the systems at work to oppress them and actively take up imaginative and metaphorical arms to overthrow them. Sarah, therefore, is not a victim of

ableism, patriarchy, or national identity, but the fruition of Garland Thomson's reading of the disabled woman's body, an embodiment of "alternatives to the status quo" (113).

While chucking dirt may have been a slightly underwhelming rebellion, Sarah's most important insurrection is her trenchant refusal to speak. While I have discussed this at length in the previous chapter, I would like to use Sarah's identity as a woman to further unpack the violence of James' repeated attempts.¹⁹ From the onset, their relationship is embedded in power dynamics: Sarah is deaf and James is hearing, she is a woman and he is man, she is a janitor while he is a teacher. Undoubtedly, James is positioned in a culturally superior role, invested with power and authority. When the pair meet, Franklin, the school's president/principal, asks, or rather commands, James to take Sarah on in his "spare time" (4). As the speech teacher, James' mission therefore is to coerce the recalcitrant Sarah to speak. While James is certainly not an evil man, he does not understand how dangerous and violent his repeated attempts to make Sarah speak truly are. One Deaf person argues, "If you want to change ASL or take ASL away from the person, you are trying to take his or her identity away. I believe 'my language is me.' To reject a language is to reject the deaf person" (qtd. in Humphries 14). James' attempts, therefore, represent a violation of her identity as a Deaf woman. More urgently, James' physical coercions appear analogous to other bodily violations, including rape. Bearing in mind the power dynamics at play in their relationship, James' attempts to make Sarah speak are intrusive and threatening. In making Sarah speak, James takes away her choice, strips her of power, and usurps her right to bodily integrity and control.

¹⁹ It is nearly impossible to divorce Sarah's identity from her Deaf one, and I certainly wouldn't propose such an undertaking. Both ableism and sexism work on her person, in similar yet different and overlapping ways. In this chapter, I see myself peeling apart rather than divorcing Sarah's gendered identity from her Deaf one.

Unlike James, Sarah seems to understand the kinds of power at work within their incredibly disparate subject positions. When Sarah continues to refuse to speak, even after their first date, James psychoanalyzes her. First, he concludes that her “hatred of hearing people” is actually self-loathing (30). When Sarah pointedly claims that his hackneyed diagnosis “sounds like it came straight out of a textbook,” James then suggests that her refusal to speak has something to do with the boys from her childhood (30). Like most of the hearing world, James simply cannot understand why she would not want to talk, to be able to function in the hearing world. Her refusal to speak is not psychological, but a choice. When James cries “Let me help you, damn it!,” like the paternalist he is, Sarah quickly retorts, “How—by showing me the joys of sex with a hearing man?” (31). Rather than recognizing the acerbic validity of Sarah’s deduction, James merely quips “I don’t see you making yourself available for that kind of therapy. I think that’s one language you don’t speak” (31). Not only does James reiterate the dominant narrative of disabled women as unattractive and un- or a-sexual, he also seems to validate sex as a “kind of therapy” (31). While he undoubtedly jokes, the danger of the witticism is compounded by the reality of their date. His coercions coincide with a romantic event, once again conflating speaking with bodily violation. Unlike James, Sarah perceives the threat that their date and his joke pose. Her exclusion from “the cultural center” allows her to more clearly identify its power and influence and to ground herself in opposition to this normativity—that is, until she marries James (*Extraordinary* 115).

Sarah and Marriage: Disrupting and Informing Transgression

Despite Sarah's keen perception, these powerful systems and people continue to attempt to control her. While all disabled people tend to be read by their disability than by any of their various other identifiers, disabled women face this problem more directly. In many ways, disabled women cease to be women. Despite the fact that Sarah embodies a unique subject position, a Deaf woman, almost every character in the play wants to reduce her identity to a set of uncomplicated parts. Orin pulls her towards the Deaf world and James the Hearing. James' lure might be stronger as the pair falls in love and is married. Their marriage, however, is fraught, particularly for James. Even after their wedding, James continues his attempts to quantify Sarah. He questions, "I don't know which role you're playing here. Is this Sarah the Pure Deaf Person, or Sarah Norman, the old isolationist maid, or is this Sarah Leeds, teammate of James?" (75). James not only suggests that Sarah can only play one role in her life, but implies that each of these titles are mutually exclusive.²⁰ The culturally Deaf Sarah could in no way be his wife Sarah. In other words, he sees her disability at odds with her womanhood. Or, perhaps more accurately, he considers her "old" personality unfit for her new status as his wife. In many ways, James attempts to reduce Sarah's identity: She can be Deaf or his wife, but she cannot be both. In his mind, their marriage should initiate a new, better identity.

While James believes their marriage should improve Sarah, Sarah does discover that it challenges and even changes how she defines herself and her beliefs. In part, this dilemma arises from her status as a disabled woman. Marriage symbolizes the status quo and thereby threatens Sarah's rebellion, identity, and body. While Asch and Fine suggest that disabilities might liberate women from traditional female roles, such as wife and

²⁰ I will revisit this scene again in chapter three to discuss the performative nature of Sarah's identity and, in particular, Deafness, and the ways in which performative identities and the genre build fluid roles and community.

mother, the primary impetus of their research is to discover why so few disabled women marry or reproduce (241). They suggest that disabled women

have not been 'trapped' by many of the social expectations feminists have challenged. They have not been forced to get married or to subordinate paid work to childrearing or housekeeping. Instead, they have been warned by parents that men only 'take advantage'; they have been sterilized by force or 'choice,' rejected by disabled and non-disabled heterosexual and lesbian partners, abandoned by spouses after onset of disability, and thwarted when they seek to mother. (254)

Because disability may seem to undermine women's sexuality, attractiveness, and other traditionally feminine traits, such as emotional and physical caretaking, disabled women are far less likely to marry and reproduce, far more likely to divorce, and more frequently barred from adopting than either able-bodied women or disabled men (Asch & Fine 242). Disabilities not only rob women of their attractiveness and sexuality but of that traditional femininity that others perhaps take for granted.

Sarah's self-perception is undoubtedly threatened by the marriage. After all, her Deafness is corrupted by her relationship to the hearing James. Given the cultural problems that Asch and Fine outline, however, marriage may serve as another means for Sarah to ground herself as attractive, sexual, and nurturing. When Orin discovers that Sarah will be leaving the school to marry James, he rails at her, crying "You go with him you'll still be a maid. His maid!" (41). Orin's anger undoubtedly derives from the complications that Sarah's marriage to a hearing man will prove for his burgeoning deaf rights movement. When Sarah marries James, a hearing man, she will move farther outside of strict Deaf culture and closer to the hearing mainstream. Her performance of

her Deaf identity is called into question, and, in Orin's mind, tainted by this unholy pairing. While Orin's antipathy towards the situation is fraught with audism, paternalism, and even sexism, he highlights a very important aspect of many marriages of disabled women. When Orin suggests that Sarah will only be James' maid, he reveals a trend amongst disabled women to assume traditional models of femininity. Because disability strips women of those feminine qualities that may make many feel needed, attractive, or purposeful, they reject all of that which may make them masculine or even more Other than they already are (Asch & Fine 249-51). In particular, Wendell discusses the "shame and loss of self-esteem" rampant in women who become disabled in their adult lives, abruptly forcing them to move from positions of caregiving to care-receiving (273). For women who have constructed their identities around patriarchal notions of femininity and motherhood, this loss of a foundational aspect of identity can completely obliterate any sense of self-worth or value. For Sarah, traditional femininity may help her access the womanhood that's been stripped from her as disabled woman. While Orin certainly wishes to hurt Sarah, his impetuous yet poignant line suggests exactly what's at stake in Sarah's marriage.

At the beginning of their marriage, therefore, Sarah assumes a traditionally feminine identity. More importantly, this feminine identity is indivisible from a conventionally American one. When James suggests that Sarah leaves the school and her job as a janitor and live with him "in the city somewhere," the pair begins to discuss what she wants out of life (39). While they begin broadly conferring on her desire to be a teacher and to be with him, their conversation eventually devolves into the materials her future may hold. She wants a "House," a "car," to "plant a garden," a "microwave oven,"

“a blender,” and a “food processor” (39). These things, most of which are kitchen appliances, are tied not only to being a traditional woman who cooks and nurtures, but also to the prototypical American wife and mother who rules her domestic dominion through cutting-edge consumer products. In many ways, then, Sarah’s desire for “things” coincide with a desire for the American dream, for a husband, home, and children. On the one hand, her longing for this lifestyle is much like her desire to be an individual, an “I.” As both a person with a disability and a woman, Sarah has been doubly erased from the national narrative. She is quite literally without definition and meaning in a culture that requires independence and individualism. Her desire for things, for the American Dream, then, reveals her wish to lead a “normal” life, or, at the very least, a life that is not constantly under scrutiny or deemed deviant and wrong. Becoming the traditional, American housewife will allow her to fulfill a predetermined role, complete with a built-in script.

So, she attempts this identity. The second act of the play commences with Sarah and James already married. They are set to play bridge with Mr. Franklin, the school’s principal, and Mrs. Norman, Sarah’s mother. In this scene, the group gathers at the newlywed’s house, poised around a table, bantering as they play cards. Sarah bakes a quiche and wins the card game, outperforming everyone’s and even her own expectations. As Orin declares in the following scene, “You drive a car...you shop by yourself in food stores, you have a checking account. You’re a regular American housewife” (55).

Despite the success of the night and despite Orin’s somewhat vituperative claim, Sarah seems neither happy nor comfortable in her newfound role. Beneath her bravado,

Sarah worries that the “quiche was runny on the bottom” and that she has failed in her roles as wife and hostess (54). Moreover, Sarah feels as though she were watched like “a laboratory specimen” (54). She assumes, probably correctly, that Franklin and her mother are examining her performance of normalcy as closely as a science experiment. Her panic about the solidity of her quiche and her anxiety about being watched derive from those issues that Asch and Fine suggest plague disabled women. As a Deaf woman, Sarah begins the scene worried that she will not stand up to hearing women’s femininity or to that inexorable role of the American housewife. Before her guests arrive, Sarah silently signs “Watch—I’ll ruin it and they won’t be able to rave that the deafie cooked a quiche” (50). According to the disabling view of deafness, Sarah should be helpless, weak, dependent, and quite incapable of constructing something so complicated as a quiche. While the evening appears a success, she continues to worry about the solidity of the quiche. In many ways, Sarah appears to transfer her anxiety about her own “rolelessness” to this quiche, a food that is symbolically tied to feminine, American, and able-bodied identities. In other words, if her quiche fails then so does she. When James tells her how surprised he is at how well she played, Sarah sarcastically replies “She cooks a quiche, she bids her hand correctly,” as if these feats were impressive for anyone but a Deaf woman (53). While she takes on the American housewife role, she is not only anxious but also vexed by the intractable stereotyping she faces.

In this scene, Sarah reverts to a traditionally feminine identity. While she may not stay there long or comfortably, the inclusion of this kind of waffling suggests the immense problems that disabled women face. They are stripped of their femininity by force and divorced from sexuality and nurturance. Reverting to the trappings of

femininity to establish an identity may be the only way to have one. While many women who are disabled later in life understandably cling to or assume a conventionally feminine identity, Sarah was born deaf. Her marriage, therefore, enacts the violent disturbance on her identity rather than the disability. In fact, her marriage threatens the core of her existence, her Deaf identity. While she performs the role of the wife and hostess, she remains anxious about what it might do to her own sense of Deaf identity. James jokingly reinforces her anxiety when he asks, “Are you afraid if you let everybody know you’re enjoying life in the hearing world they’ll revoke your angry deaf person’s license?” (55). Her marriage does compromise her Deaf identity, a facet of her personality that James cannot fathom. Having grounded herself as a viciously independent, Deaf woman, her relationship with James threatens her understanding of herself.

While the play leaves the future of their marriage open-ended, the havoc that the marriage wreaks on Sarah’s self-identification seems to be the final impetus towards her interdependent/communal model of human interaction. Her very real person resists conventional, American, feminine, and able-bodied modes of identifying. She is neither independent nor does she want to be. Through their marriage, James discovers that he not only becomes a husband but a full time translator. When Orin calls Sarah, James must listen to an intermediary translate Orin’s signs into English, re-translate the English in ASL for Sarah, and speak her responses back into the phone. Tired and sore, James complains “My hands are killing me and my brain feels like a slab of...Look at that—I can’t even spell ‘slab’...I’m going to put my hands into a s-a-u-n-a b-a-t-h” (63). The marriage takes its toll on James as well, who finds Sarah dependent rather than

interdependent. Her body and her identity defy conventional relationships. While James finds the constant translation understandably taxing, their translative relationship embodies Sarah's "individual yet as one model," a direct blow to conventional, American identity.

While I have been championing an interdependent model, I do not want to romanticize dependent or "parasitic" relationships that are lopsided.²¹ Interdependence, however, implies a mutual recognition of strengths and weaknesses, beyond the false dichotomy of independence and dependence. The "individual yet as one" model that Sarah forwards precludes questions of man/woman, hearing/Deaf, independence/dependence, and, most importantly, I/we. In her book *Feminism and Disability*, Hillyer investigates the relationship between disabled women and their female caretakers. In particular, Hillyer suggests that this pairing manages to "work out a model of reciprocity" that recognizes the strengths and limits of both parties (18). Moreover, Hillyer suggests that this is a model the male, able-bodied public can learn from. As she argues,

Reciprocity involves the difficulty of recognizing each other's needs, relying on the other, asking and receiving help, delegating responsibility, giving and receiving empathy, and respecting boundaries. It also involves, as Eleanor Roosevelt pointed out, the ability to accept what we are unable to give and what others are unable to give. (Hillyer 18)

What Hillyer outlines, then, is a model of human interaction based on personal and bodily integrity that understands and thereby respects mental, emotional, and physical limits.

²¹ For an in depth discussion of dependence and relationships, see the chapter "Love and Dependency" in Murphy's *The Body Silent*.

Impairments need not necessitate parasitic relationships. Under a “model of reciprocity,” both the dependent and the caregiver give and take concurrently. What constitutes dependence, therefore, is reconsidered and reinscripted. No longer deviant or wrong, dependence can come to be considered a human trait rather than a stigmatic one. Disabled women need not construct their identities on the invalid independence/dependence dichotomy. Instead, they can question the reductive binary and offer a mode of living that is, in fact, beneficial to all people. Both Hillyer’s “model of reciprocity” and Sarah’s “individual yet as one” prototype reject binaries and craft a space for fluid and mutual interactions.

While Sarah initially desires the American Dream, a feminine identity, and a conventional lifestyle for understandable reasons, she can never live it. Michael Warner writes,

Nearly everyone wants to be normal. And who can blame them, if the alternative is being abnormal, or deviant, or not being one of the rest of us? Put in those terms, there doesn’t seem to be a choice at all. Especially in American where [being] normal probably outranks all other social aspirations. (qtd. in McRuer 490)

Her wish is understandable. Even if the American Dream weren’t a complete fiction, Sarah, a Deaf woman, is not a part of America, American identity, or the American Dream. She is “abnormal,” “deviant,” and “not..one of the rest of us,” whoever that may be (qtd. in McRuer 490). Rather than submit, however, Sarah once again writes herself into the national narrative. Instead of capitulating to false dichotomies, Sarah creates her

own model of humanity: “individual yet as one.” Her marriage does not force her into a submissive role, but highlights how subversive she truly is.

Expanding and Refining “individual yet as one”

By the end of the play, Sarah and James have separated. Her “individual yet as one” speech, so poignant and important to this work, disrupts the tentative relationship they had begun to craft. After they have given the speech, James can only mutter “Well, you...That’s all very...That’s moving—it is, but...” (90). For once, James finds himself without words. He quickly returns to himself, however, and tells Sarah that her “individual yet as one” model is too stubborn, that the hearing world will never “bend” to her (90). The pair fight, Sarah claiming James hasn’t listened to a word she’s signed and James insisting that Sarah’s “real bitch” is that she wishes she could hear (91). The scene builds and James unleashes his fury, signing and screaming,

You want to be independent of me, you want to be a person in your own right, you want people not to pity you, but you want them to understand you in the very poetic way you describe in your speech...you learn to read my lips and you learn to use that little mouth of yours for something better than hearing girls in bed!...You can cook, but you can’t speak. You can drive and shop and play bridge but you can’t speak. You can even make a speech but you still can’t do it alone. You always have to be dependent on someone, and you always will for the rest of your life until your learn to speak. Now come on! I want you to speak to me. Let me hear it. Speak! Speak! Speak! (92)

The latent sexism and paternalism that have bubbled beneath James' surface explode into unyielding vitriol in this his longest speech. To James, Sarah's independence is directly dependent on her ability to speak. To him, all of her actions in their marriage have been mere performance, stepping stones toward the truly independent act of speaking. Unwilling or perhaps unable to actually listen to Sarah's fervent signing, James completely misinterprets her speech. While Sarah challenges independence and its valorization in American, patriarchal, and ableist systems, James continues to exalt these modes of identifying.

James' disquieting oration, while invariably disturbing, offers Sarah yet another facet to her model of human interaction: non-domination/subordination. After his incessant goading, both in the scene and over the course of the entire play, Sarah finally speaks. Without signing, she screams "Speech! Speech! Is that it? No! You want me to be your child! You want me to be like you! How do you like my voice? Am I beautiful? Am I what you want me to be?" (92). While the note suggests that "[o]nly a few words are even barely understandable," Sarah's urgent cry of "You want me to be like you!" resounds throughout the play.²²

On Sarah and James' first date, James becomes conflated with God, religion, and Christianity. He reveals that his mother made, "her confessor, complete with semi-immaculate birth and healing powers" (19). He was her God. Later, Sarah brings this information up again, signing "So your mother told you you were God" (21). When James translates and confirms Sarah's deduction, she pointedly counters "And that's why

²² This scene will be revisited in the third chapter, where I examine the moments when Sarah becomes accessible to James and the audience. I argue that these moments are as important as her "individual yet as one" speech in that they highlight the important, cultural gap between the Deaf and Hearing worlds without closing off communication totally.

you want to make me over in your image” (21). Sarah conflates Christian scripture and audist policy. The need to make deaf people “hearing,” to speak and lip read, mimics the notion of God making humans in his image, as a reflection of himself. Sarah pointedly highlights the narcissism inherent in James’ logic and in the audist system. Speaking only correlates with independence in a world defines it as such.

While Sarah resists the domination of others, she repeatedly attempts to make others over in her image as well. In one scene, she explains to James how her mother hung a picture of the Virgin Mary in her bedroom the day Sarah was sent to the school for the deaf. Sarah, however, “drew a hearing aid in her ear” (45). Sarah’s reinscription of Mary may revise the Christian narrative of disabilities and help craft a space within Christian theology for herself and others with anomalous bodies. This scene appears similar to when Sarah tells James that she wants “Children...Deaf children” (40). Understandably, Sarah wants to be surrounded by people like her, people who can understand her, and people who have never even encountered the correlation between deafness and negativity.

By the end of the play, however, Sarah realizes something. While she tells James that she wants deaf children before they get married, she completely reverses her original statement, claiming “I don’t want deaf children” (96). James assumes her decision has something to do with him, but she pointedly states, “No. I just don’t have the right to demand that anyone be created in my image” (96). Sarah’s proclamation resounds. By this point in the play, she has been married to James and separated because of his violent insistence on making her speak. While the end of the play suggests that the two are now together again, this line is important. She reasserts herself and her declaration that she

will not be hearing, will not speak, will not read lips, and will be nothing but true to herself and her Deaf identity. Moreover, this line suggests that Sarah herself has grown in the intervening time. While her militant pride in her Deafness has been evident since the beginning of the play, she has resisted James as fiercely as he has pushed her. This assertion, then, suggests that she will not attempt to make him over in her image either. Embodying the Deaf and Hearing worlds, Sarah says “We would have to meet in another place; not in silence or in sound but somewhere else” (95-96). Beyond binaries, man/woman, deaf/hearing, I/we, silence/sound, independent/dependent, domination/subordination, the pair can finally be together.

When James and Sarah marry, he takes on a new role: her translator. James finds the job difficult, constantly translating to and from ASL, hands cramping from overuse, and the marriage fails. While this new role has the potential to move towards the model of community and interdependence that Sarah forwards, James cannot truly embody what Hillyer calls the “model of reciprocity.” Hillyer’s model necessitates giving and taking according to individual strengths and weaknesses. Each person in the relationship must possess personal integrity, a recognition of one’s own abilities, and the ability to cooperate with the others. As Sarah discovers over the course of the play, part of this “individual yet as one” mode or the “model of reciprocity” as Hillyer puts it, includes not dominating, subduing, or defining another’s person’s needs or abilities. One of the reasons James and Sarah’s marriage fail is because he insists on defining Sarah’s person. When he explodes, throwing caustic abuse at her, he claims that she doesn’t “think being deaf is so goddamn wonderful” (91) and that she has “probably been reading lips perfectly for years” (92). Despite Sarah’s own confirmation of her strengths and

weaknesses, James refuses to believe her. Instead, he constructs his own image of her. When Sarah erupts in her incoherent speech, she questions, “Am I what you want me to be?” (92). James refuses to be a part of Sarah’s “model of reciprocity,” to work in and through a marriage because he refuses to accept Sarah on her own, highly self-aware terms. What Sarah forwards, therefore, is the opposite of God’s “making one over in his image.” Instead, as she suggests, we make our own images.

Conclusion

Sarah’s refined model for human identification and interaction asks people to become more self-aware, to recognize personal strengths and weaknesses, and to accept others’ similarly enlightened deductions of themselves. In many ways, Medoff’s notes on the play reveal an analogous premise. In his “Not so Random Notes from the Playwright,” Medoff self-deprecatingly outlines the painful process of writing, producing, casting, and living the play for three full years of his life. Most interestingly, Medoff’s notes reveal his own insecurities about the play. In one of the play’s first incarnations, Medoff discovers that play has become “more about James” (iv). He realizes that not only is he “not secure enough as a ‘deaf person’” but that he is “like many male writers throughout history...accustomed to focusing on the male protagonist and surrounding him with functional females” (v). Because he is hearing and a man, he has trouble accessing and portraying Sarah accurately, cannot “write the play [he] want[s] to write, the one in which James and Sarah share the stage equally” (v). Up until that point, James had dominated. No matter how hard Medoff tried, he could only see the world and the play from James’ perspective.

As the play traveled from Medoff's University's stage to Los Angeles, however, Sarah began to evolve through the very nature of theater: collaboration. Medoff claims, "Now when I rewrite I find myself (finally) automatically seeing the play from her point of view" (ix). This change is reflected in the cast lists from early to late 1979. In the former, James and the actor who plays him are listed first in the playbill, while the later production lists Sarah first. This freshness, this vivacity derives from what Medoff calls "the best collaborative tradition in the theatre" (ix). Throughout his notes, Medoff repeatedly refers to the interdependent and familial nature of writing and producing a play. The play changes and evolves through new actors, new directors, new locations, and new audiences. Medoff credits Sarah's evolution, and implicitly his own, to collaboration, to "reciprocity," that essence of the stage and theater and the focus of my next chapter.

"individual yet as one": Genre, Audience, and Community

When Sarah delivers her pivotal monologue, her "individual yet as one" speech, she claims that she has always "been the creation of other people" (89). Both the doctors who misdiagnosed her as mentally handicapped and the audist system that perpetually designates her body and language as inadequate have attempted to define Sarah and mold her into self-referential likenesses. Orin tries to regain her allegiance to the Deaf cause as its Pure Deaf spokesperson, and James wants her to approximate Hearing by speaking and forswearing her Deaf identity. Her speech, therefore, is an assertion of individuality and self-determination. She claims that "people have always spoken for" her, "*She* says; *she* means; *she* wants. As if there were no I" (90). Her monologue is, in a sense, a

performative speech act that creates and establishes her “I.” Her “[u]tterance is an enactment,” a rejection of those systems that deny her personhood and a reclamation of her humanity and identity (Solomon 11). In asserting her personhood, she becomes a person.

What I have been calling both a speech and a monologue, however, may not be classified as such. This momentous assertion of individual identity in the face of homogenizing oppression is actually spoken to the audience by James. Sarah signs and he translates. In fact, the stage directions suggest that the pair speak/sign in tandem, simply written “Sarah and James” (89). Staging Sarah’s assertion of identity in this dual mode is not merely ironical or practical, but a performative representation of the “individual yet as one” model. Sarah signs to the audience and James speaks as her, embodying the communal model that both Sarah and the play forward. While in other scenes, which I will discuss, James speaks for rather than as Sarah, this scene and this speech demonstrate how powerful an interdependent model of communication and relationships can be. Moreover, it suggests how important the genre is to this message.

While I have argued that Deaf and female identities call for community and interdependence in ways seemingly antithetical to mainstream, American life, performance, in all its understandings, engenders, solicits, and creates the community and interdependence that Sarah expounds. The genre solidifies this message of community. For one, Sarah yearns for the fluidity that performance allows. When she asserts, “I don’t know which role I’m supposed to play” (76), the nature of the genre suggests that all of our identities are merely roles, capable of being taken up and placed aside as the situation arises. She need not always be “Deaf,” and can shift in and out of the performative

Deafness and womanhood as she sees fit. Moreover, Deafness itself is extremely performative, both in how members identify and in the interactivity of the language. Like a play, ASL relies on interaction, bodily and facial expressions to communicate.

Theoretically the pair align, but practically there is no other genre that can express the captivating eloquence and performative nature of ASL; ASL simply cannot be written and must be performed. Most importantly, the nature of playwriting, the theater, and performance establishes a model of community that no other genre could express. Unlike novels, plays are a communally written process that necessitate an audience. When Sarah and James together affirm her “individual yet as one” model, they create the community she strives for, between each other, the actors, director, writer, off-stage help, and the audience itself. While the audience does not ever have unmediated or total access to Sarah’s motivations, she and the play engender a “performance community” (Barr 16), offering the audience a glimpse into the Deaf world and into the life of a disabled woman. Where James fails to understand Sarah and her model for human interaction, the audience lives it, creating through the performance space an interdependent network of fluid and reciprocal relationships. The play, including all of its participants, does not merely model or pontificate, but actively generates a new mode of American identification based on Deaf culture and the theater.

D/deafness: Performing History and Performing Identity

I spent the first chapter deeply devoted to d/Deaf identity, history, and particulars. Here, however, I would like to append the first chapter’s assertions by emphasizing the integral role performance played and continues to play in Deaf culture and history.

Before the 60s and 70s, deafness and deaf people were dominated by a scientific or medical discourse that discussed deafness in terms of residual hearing and capacity for spoken language (Humphries 3-4). ASL was considered practical but ultimately inferior to abstract, spoken language. Deaf people themselves were considered unintelligent because they were unable to speak and denigrated with reductive and paradoxical epithets such as “aggressive” and “submissive” and “egocentric” and “unconfident” (*Mask* 39). While deaf people surely resisted these stereotypes, many accepted the widespread belief that ASL was simple and uncomplicated. Unable to effectively communicate with the hearing mainstream and recipients of a longstanding history of oppression and stereotyping, deaf people were considered as childish as their language.

In 1965, however, William Stokoe changed the history of the deaf with the publication of his *Dictionary of American Sign Language*. In this book, Stokoe challenged all previous scientific findings, validating ASL as a complex and linguistically viable language. With this substantiation, deaf people began to reimagine and redefine themselves. “As soon as there was a crack in the door—Stokoe’s recognition that ASL was, indeed, a language,” Humphries asserts, “Deaf people began to talk about it, argue about it, and, interestingly, to do so in public” (6). Many deaf people did not wholeheartedly accept linguistic validation, conditioned as they were by oralist and audist policies. Even though some deaf people opposed Stokoe’s findings, Humphries suggests that this dissention generated a debate where none had existed before. Where the definition of deafness had once been controlled by the audist authority, the medical and scientific discourse, Stokoe’s publication created multiple conversations on what “D”eaf

did or could mean, finally imbuing deaf people with the power to write their own definitions.

While Stokoe's endorsement proved instrumental, evolving perceptions of deafness directly relied on deaf peoples' performances of the language. Humphries writes, "More than just talking about the language, Deaf people began to perform the language in public" (7). After centuries of opaque stereotypes and blatant prejudices, deaf people ventured into public life. Where before they were relegated to private households, schools, or industrial workrooms, linguistic validation brought them into the spotlight in new and exciting ways. As Humphries asserts, deaf people began to use and perform ASL in public, both amongst themselves and for hearing people. Soon, performances became the best way to explain deafness and ASL to the hearing mainstream because performances "had the power, through aesthetic and entertainment qualities, to compel and audience" and "bridge[d] the gap between folk explanation and scientific explanation" (7). In other words, performance allowed Deaf people to translate new scientific findings into captivating visual displays that effectively communicated the complexity of ASL and the intelligence of deaf people. These performances, therefore, became a powerful weapon against stereotyping and audist policies.

Moreover, performance created, consolidated, and promulgated Deaf culture. In performing examples of ASL, deaf people can be said to have become Deaf. Through "ritualized explanations," wherein deaf people coached other deaf people on how to explicate ASL and deafness to hearing people, Deaf culture generated itself (Humphries 13). Performances not only allowed Deaf people to articulate who they were, but helped them discover who they were, both in relation to the mainstream and in relation to other

disabled people Performance created culture out of the audist void, directly contradicting the simplistic rendering of deafness innate to audist policy through representations of language and contesting stereotyping and negativity through pride and power.

If Deaf culture concretized through performance, then Deaf identity is almost certainly performative. As I discussed in the first chapter, Deafness does not necessarily correlate with audiological deafness. A person could be hearing and Deaf. To return briefly, Deafness is characterized by many facets, including degree and age of hearing loss (pre- or post-lingually), language, education, and lineage. Children of Deaf adults (CODAs) who grow up using ASL could be considered more Deaf than a biologically deaf person who is mainstreamed, sent to public school, and only knows English. Deafness is contingent on a cultural language and identity rather than only a physical trait (Grushkin 122).

Yet, detractors argue that disabled identities are not culture but physical ailments. Like Lane suggests, most “hearing people led to reflect on deafness generally begin by imagining themselves without hearing” (“Constructions” 166). To the mainstream, deafness is pathological, a tragic aberration that necessitates some kind of technological amelioration through hearing aids or cochlear implants, as audism mandates. Undoubtedly, this belief is a legacy of the medical paradigm that posits illnesses, diseases, and disability as deviations from a natural norm. What is natural or normal, however, is anyone’s guess. Despite its ambiguity, “normal” and “natural” are considered trenchant, scientific categories. In his article “Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence,” Robert McRuer argues that the “able-bodied identity is at this juncture even more naturalized than heterosexual identity” (490). That able-bodiedness is

the unstated norm is evident in that one never identifies as able-bodied. Its privilege is so “naturalized” that we don’t recognize it until we ourselves age or become disabled. Nora Vincent writes,

The human body is a machine...one that has evolved functional parts: lungs for breathing, legs for walking, eyes for seeing, ears for hearing, a tongue for speaking and most crucially for all the academics concerned, a brain for thinking.

This is science, not culture. (qtd. in McRuer 490-91)

In some sense, Vincent asserts a reasonable point. Disability is always located in the particular, the physical. A person who performs a disabled identity without a biological impetus would be labeled a charlatan and an opportunist. What Vincent misunderstands, and what McRuer argues, is that able-bodiedness is a temporal fiction like gender or sexuality, “always deferred and thus never really guaranteed” (492). Able-bodied identities only exist as a diametric opposite to disability. If able-bodiedness is only ever defined as “not disabled,” then any worthwhile definition is always illusory. In Deaf culture, deafness is not defined as a lack of hearing. It can only be defined as such if being hearing is the privileged state. Rather, deafness is the center or normal of Deaf culture, making hearing the abnormal, even disabled condition. This complete reversal illuminates the absolute relativity of such terms as “normal,” “natural” and “able-bodied.” What Vincent takes as science, therefore, is more a matter of semantics.

When McRuer demonstrates the porousness of such purportedly rigid terms as “ablebodied,” he highlights how important a move this is. Most people, and most Americans, even the most enlightened of us, are apt to think like Vincent, to think that disability is ““science, not culture”” (qtd. in 491). This articulation not only suggests that

science should be impervious from scrutiny, that for some reason something that is “science” is hallowed, untouchable ground, but also that that which is biological cannot simultaneously be cultural. Wendell’s assertion that “disability is socially constructed from a biological reality” encapsulates McRuer’s argument and even Vincent’s (263). Certainly disability is sown through physicality, but this physicality is always interpreted and understood through social and cultural means. Like gender or sexuality, therefore, disability, and, particularly, deafness is performative.

Many disability theorists have already made the leap from Judith Butler’s theories of sex, gender, and performance to disability. McRuer primarily focuses on the naturalization of able-bodiedness and therefore substitutes “terms having to do literally with embodiment for Butler’s terms of gender and sexuality” (492). Other theorists such as Janet Price and Margaret Shildrick rephrases Butler’s assertions on gender/sex to disability, writing “disability itself ‘is performative in the sense that it constitutes as an effect the very subject that it appears to express’” (qtd. in Samuels 64). Ellen Samuels challenges this simplistic exchange of terms, asking what’s lost or disturbed in the unchecked substitution. Moreover, Samuels contests Butler’s emphasis on the role that language plays in materializing bodies and thereby Butler’s relative disinterest in the physical, living, breathing, working, or perhaps not, body.

Samuels’ critique is important. In analyzing performativity, the body should and must be remembered. Deafness, while not contingent on physical deafness, is based in a particular, physical existence. Deafness would not exist without deafness. What Samuels fails to acknowledge, however, is the variation of disabled identities and communities. While some might easily question how a person in a wheelchair performs paraplegia,

something I would argue most undeniably do, Deafness is undoubtedly performative, in much the sense that gender or sexuality is. Based in language and heritage, one truly must perform Deafness to be or become Deaf.

That is not to say that there is one way to be Deaf. In fact, with the advent of technology like the cochlear implant, the definition of Deaf is constantly evolving. Now, many Deaf people have CIs and sign, or speak English and attend a school for the deaf. Perhaps because this technology threatens the physical underpinnings of Deafness, what it means to be Deaf has needed to broaden or face extinction. Modern Deaf people are the inheritors of the Biligual-Bicultural movement (Bi-Bi) that teaches English and ASL, Hearing culture and Deaf culture (Newman). Capable of moving between the Deaf and Hearing worlds, performance is undeniably important to these Deaf individuals. With a foot in both worlds, these liminal Deaf people represent the impressive potential of performance for both the Deaf and Hearing worlds. What may be considered normative in Deaf culture, then, is this fluidity, this performance. While the hearing world and many Deaf people have attempted to categorize, quantify, and delineate d/Deafness through strict definitions and classifications, Deafness defies reduction, insisting on those performances that created and continue to create new ways of understanding and living Deafness.

Disability and Theater

If Deaf culture and Deafness are primarily performative, then theater appears to be the most revolutionary space for communicating radical ideas about disability. With its emphasis on performance, insistence on liminality and in-betweeness, and communal process, among other generic particulars, the theater offers a realm within which to test

the boundaries of the status quo. The stage, therefore, has been the refuge of the deviant and different. From feminists to queer activists, those outside of the American mainstream have used the theater, and its contingent rebellious characteristics, to challenge stagnant and reductive normativity, crafting a space for themselves in the American psyche. When early feminists used the theater to solidify a group identity in the face of misogynistic oppression, unintentionally marginalizing women of color and ignoring economic and sexual disparities, these forgotten women also took to the stage to contest dominating and overarching narratives of what it means to be a woman (Aston & Harris 7). Alisa Solomon asserts that theater is “the art most potentially offensive to the social order” (9). She argues “Not only was the theater hospitable to those bound up in impersonation; it also acknowledged and made space for gender ambiguities that mainstream society labored vigorously to suppress” (13). On the stage, identities become unfixed, gender is shown to be undeniably performative, sexuality shifts fluidly, and, as I will argue, ability is defiantly deconstructed.

In a culture that denies the indivisible correlation between mind and body, the stage insists on the overwhelming presence of the body “in all its sweating, spitting specificity” (Solomon 9). Western culture has tended “to devalue and thus *efface* the body” through such pervasive ideologies as Christianity and Cartesian dualism (*Signifying* 9). These systems prefer to elevate the mind at the expense of the body. Yet, the body is “that which most fundamentally endows us with existence—that which most obviously individuates us” (*Signifying* 10). Modern trends in the Western world, however, seek “to perfect, control, or even transcend the body” (*Signifying* 10). Couser argues that anti-aging surgeries have skyrocketed in recent years and that “plastic surgery

today tends to deny our common destiny,” that is aging and, inevitably, death (*Signifying* 10). Disability, however, forces both the individual with the disability and the people who interact with her to viscerally face their “destiny.” While bodies are undeniably important to gender and sexuality, people with disabilities can never escape their embodiment. Their wheelchairs or their speech cannot be hidden, thus they are inseparable from their bodies, in their own minds and in others’. While much of Western culture divorces the mind from the body, the disabled can never escape the entangled relationship with corporeality.

In some insinuations, therefore, the stage can exploit disabilities, particularly visible ones. Staged representations of physical disability problematically arrange the person with the disability as a spectacle while the viewer is invested with the power of the gaze and potentially positioned as a voyeur. As Stacy Wolf argues,

Whether stared at with curiosity, gazed upon with titillation, perused with prurience, or studied with admiration, visibly disabled bodies seldom occupy a drama’s center stage. Rather they function to allow nondisabled characters to demonstrate their generosity and nondisabled spectators to experience their normalcy. (302)

While Wolf’s assertion may easily translate to any work of art, the visual rather than written representation of a disabled person elides humanity and heightens that “sweating, spitting specificity” of the body (Solomon 9). Undoubtedly, some dramas exploit their disabled characters, but this seems to be a trend in Western art rather than a coincidence of theater. The stage always insists on the human body, but it can and often does, by its very nature, “disrupt conventional patterns of seeing, of knowing, and, especially, of

seeing and knowing bodies” (Solomon 9). For the disabled who can never escape their bodies and for the able-bodied public that polices and enforces this embodiment, the stage can offer a revolutionary arena to visualize and “disrupt conventional patterns...of seeing and knowing [disabled] bodies” (Solomon 9). Where Western culture rejects and denies the body, the stage insists on it, a relationship that can be both problematic and revolutionary for analyzing and deconstructing disability.

Children of a Lesser God is one such revolutionary play. Practically, plays are almost the only arena for discussing deafness. ASL is, of course, a visual language that can never be accurately written. While efforts have been made to transcribe ASL into English, almost every transcription method only flattens its dynamic visual displays. Plays and films are perhaps the only mediums capable of capturing the alluring eloquence of ASL.²³ The language is not merely visual, however, but requires performativity and interaction. Even simple, quotidian conversations utilize facial expression, body movement, and an audience. For these reasons, ASL and Deaf culture easily translate to the stage. Michael Davidson suggests that ASL storytelling is “paradoxical[ly]” close to “ancient oral traditions since both stress face-to-face contact between poet and audience” (109). Moreover, “Both rely on audience participation in knitting community together, and both stress qualities of variation, facial expression, and face-to-face exposure” (Davidson 109). ASL poetry, storytelling, and even conversations are always performance. Davidson claims, “In ASL poetry, meaning is established through a body

²³ While I have noted that there is no one, unifying transcription method for translating ASL into writing, numerous transcription systems “developed out of dance notation” (Senghas & Monaghan 88). That is, ASL is analogous with dance in some sense, another kind of performance. I do not have the time to follow this intriguing and most likely fruitful thread, but an investigation of this sort would continue to illuminate the various elements of performance that pervade ASL and, in turn, Deaf lives.

that is also a text” (109). I would like to amend Davidson’s assertion and suggest that the body, in ASL, is not merely “a text” but a stage and the individual is not only a poet but an actor. The term “text” continues to privilege the written word when writing and textuality are relatively unimportant in Deaf culture. The body as stage, however, incorporates the performative aspects of both ASL and Deaf identity, more accurately reflecting the complexities of Deafness.

The stage, however, is not merely practical for Deaf people. Rather, it is an ideal space for constructing, articulating, and deconstructing Deaf identity. For one, performance, and drama in particular, is the best venue for demonstrating the performative nature of all identities. On stage, actors contest the Enlightenment belief in an essential personhood or self. Between scenes, between roles, and between identities, performances assert the fluidity and multiplicity of identity. As Solomon argues, “Theater...challenge[s] ideas of fixed identities” by “unmooring” such “seemingly impermeable” categories of gender, sexuality, and ability “from the idea that they derive absolutely and inevitably from an original objective source” (14). Where identities seem to be natural, performance illuminates the intersections between reality and representation, highlighting the instability of identity and reveling in the confusion. The very notion of acting reveals that identities can be performed, that people can be other than they appear, and that “real” and “natural” are only fictions. While much of America maintains disability as a physical or biological imperative, disabled identities and Deafness are not only culturally informed but also performative. Being Deaf is, primarily, a matter of choice—of language, relationships, and self-identification. While Solomon’s argument suggests the powerful impact of performance on gender and sexuality, theater

can be equally as potent for demonstrating the performative nature of disabled and Deaf identities. As the stage heightens the relationship between the body and the individual, it can also begin to deconstruct the naturalized discourses on ability, able-bodiedness, and disability.

Many of these naturalized discourses derive from the breadth of narratives that problematically rely on disability and deviance to drive their plots. As Lennard J. Davis argues, disability and difference constitute the very basis of narrative forms. In “Constructing Normalcy: The Bell Curve, the Novel, and the Invention of the Disabled Body in the Nineteenth Century,” Davis traces the history of the normal body, correlating it with the rise of statistics and the novel form. Davis writes, “the very structures on which the novel rests tend to be normative, ideologically emphasizing the universal quality of the central character whose normativity encourages us to identify with him or her” (21). Davis asserts that the novel, through its insistence on normalcy and “middleness,” creates the category of the Other, the different, ultimately, the disabled. Implicitly, Davis argues that the novel form, by its very nature, is always dangerous to difference.

While Davis’ history of the novel is compelling, David T. Mitchell offers another way to conceptualize the relationship between disability and stories. Mitchell uses the term “narrative prosthesis” to characterize “the notion that all narratives operate out of a desire to compensate for a limitation or to reign in excessiveness” (20). As he argues, all stories necessitate aberrancy, whether physical or not, in order to propel the narrative arc toward a resolution. Mitchell claims “[t]he anonymity of normalcy is no story at all” (21). Rather, difference serves as the foundation for all tales (21).

As both Davis and Mitchell argue, narratives and particularly novels rely on aberrancy. While most plays are undoubtedly narratives, neither Davis nor Mitchell explicitly discusses theater in terms of their respective analyses. I would like to argue that the theater, while potentially problematic in terms of visibility and voyeurism, represents a revolutionary form for staging, analyzing, and communicating radical ideas about aberrancy, deviance, and disability. Plays are a fluid space wherein bodies are constantly in flux, between scenes, roles, and identities as they are not and cannot be in any other genre. As I have already established, the stage highlights the fluidity of identity and the performative nature of all human categories, making it a progressive space for deconstructing gender, sexuality, and disability. Here, I would also like to suggest that part of the theater's revolutionary potential derives from its insistence on community.

Unlike novels, stories, or poems, the stage requires, solicits, and elicits community. In the first two chapters, I argued that independence is a pivotal aspect of patriarchal, audist/ableist, and American identities. Davis and Mitchell suggest that novels and narratives reinforce the status quo and, in particular, this conventional emphasis on independence. Traditional novels rely on the trajectory of a single protagonist, perhaps the ultimate fruition of independence. On the stage, however, “[e]ven the most carefully composed tableau does not focus the spectatorial gaze” (Savran 162). Rather, “the spectator’s necessarily errant eye” can choose to focus on any aspect of the performance, from the actor speaking to the set and even to the audience around them (Savran 163). Even plays that emphasize independence, individualism, and the narrative arc of a single protagonist cannot manipulate the audience’s gaze, thereby

inviting them to interrogate and create meaning, to become a part of the theatrical process.

Richard L. Barr simply asserts that “theater itself...is *always* about community because performance always involves communal dynamics” (3). When theater is conceived as a whole in which stage and auditorium form equally representative and complementary parts, then *interplay* between the occupants of these two realms is as quintessentially theatrical as playing itself and in fact becomes the very thing that playing aims to promote. (Barr 9)

Theater, therefore, is not merely the actors or the script, but the “*interplay*” between the “stage and auditorium,” between what precedes and occurs as spectacle and what becomes the audience (Barr 9). While many privilege the stage, for obvious reasons, Barr asserts that the “stage and auditorium form equally representative and complementary parts,” essentially “individual yet as one” (9). The audience, or what develops into the audience, is as crucial to the production as the playwright or actor. Theater is community, making the stage an ideal space for discussing disability and Deaf culture. Both contest reigning narratives of national identity, particularly that tenet of independence. Unlike other narrative forms that problematically utilize disability and difference as narrative devices, the theater actually venerates aspects of disability and Deaf cultures, especially community. In this way, theater and Deaf culture can align to form a potent critique of able-bodiedness, patriarchy, and national identity.

One of the most important ways plays undermine independence is in their genesis. The writing process is always communal. While novels and narratives are typically written by a single person, although not always, plays are invariably created through

collaboration. Barr suggests “the author, director, and designer all creatively contribute to any production” (10). Moreover, “[actors] are dependent on the playwright, and are in voluntary collaboration with him; [the designer] is dependent on the author and the actors, and he should *voluntarily ally* himself with both” (qtd. in Barr 10). Plays, therefore, necessitate an equalizing collaboration. While a playwright may craft the script, a production cannot succeed without design, directing, and acting, each of which informs the audience’s understandings of the play itself. Without hierarchy, this collaboration mimics Sarah’s “individual yet as one” exemplum and Hillyer’s “model of reciprocity.” The nature of theater, its collectivity, almost exactly replicates those interdependent relations important to disability studies and pivotal in *Children of a Lesser God*.

As I argued at the end of the second chapter, the collaborative writing process actually augmented Sarah’s character. At the beginning, Medoff struggled with finding an authentic voice for Sarah. The Sarah contemporary audiences discover, however, evolved through that innate essence of the theater: community. Medoff writes,

As much as I relish one-on-one athletic competition, I have nevertheless relished equally the interdependence, the sharing, the collaboration, the *familial* nature of team sports. Work in the theatre on a play by a group of people has about it those qualities. (“Not So”)

Through months of workshopping and input from actors, directors, and producers alike Sarah becomes a full character, the protagonist in her own right. Much of Medoff’s “Not so Random Notes from the Playwright” is spent discussing the collaborative genesis of the play, crediting deaf actress Phyllis Frelich for germinating the idea for the play, the

director, Gordon Davidson, for critiquing him, and a massive laundry list of co-conspirators in the creative process. Despite setbacks and false starts, the play finally comes together “in the best collaborative tradition of the theatre” (“Not So”). While the play’s script and that initial run on Broadway exemplify the collaborative genesis of a play, *Children of a Lesser God* continues to evolve through new productions, new producers, new actors, and new audiences. The play, as an amorphous and ever-changing entity, persistently transforms through each and every new community it engenders.

Unlike other narratives, plays insist on interdependence and community. Not only is the stage the best form for communicating in ASL, but it is also the most radical space for communicating theoretical ideas about Deafness and Deaf culture. Interdependence, community, and collaboration are paramount to both Deaf culture and the theater and the importance of each is heightened through their intersection in *Children of a Lesser God*. Sarah explicitly states these intertwining concepts in her “individual yet as one” speech, illuminating the predominant message of the play. Moreover, this insistence on community undermines American notions of individualism, as I have discussed at length in the previous chapters. Like Deaf culture, the stage resists monolithic definitions of identity, whether it be gendered, national, or anywhere in between. This resistance is, as many theorists have argued, particular to the theater and as I have argued particular to Deaf culture. The relationship between Deafness and the stage, therefore, is of productive symbiosis, each informing the other, a relationship that Medoff and his crew exploits.

ASL on Stage: Community Formation

One of the most complicated and potentially interesting aspects of any staging of Deafness is how to incorporate and use ASL. In an interview, Deaf actor and director Adrian Blue claims “It’s easy to make sign understandable for a hearing audience” (“ASL” 234). In *A Nice Place to Live*, his play on a nineteenth-century community on Martha’s Vineyard with an extraordinarily high rate of deafness, Blue uses two hearing women gossiping about the action of the play to “translate” the deaf character’s signing (“ASL” 234-35). While Blue’s translation is highly creative and incorporated into the plot, many other plays and performances use simpler means to communicate ASL to hearing audience members, including projecting translations above the stage and, as *Children of a Lesser God* does, using other characters to translate.

While the translative method in *Children of a Lesser God* may seem uncomplicated, its variations are paramount to understanding the play. Throughout the entire production, James and sometimes Orin translate Sarah’s signs out loud, perhaps for themselves but predominantly for the hearing audience. While the audience can visually view Sarah’s signs, the majority of the audience needs James to interpret for them. Every time we “hear” Sarah, then, we hear James. These translations vary from second person iterations to a first person dual articulation. In some instances, however, Sarah’s signing isn’t and can’t be translated. The audience’s relationship with Sarah, therefore, vacillates. Sometimes we understand her through James’ mediating voice, sometimes we hear and see a more authentic voice, and sometimes we can only guess at what she means. Through this oscillation, Medoff engenders “heterogeneous integration,” wherein the audience is “invit[ed]...to shed comforting blinders and (re)view their social worlds” and to unite through “similarity in difference” (Barr 67). We are pushed to relate to Sarah, but

are incapable of fully understanding her and thus incapable of completely fulfilling the traditional audience-protagonist identification. Instead, Medoff creates a community of analytical participants, capable of critical analysis and capable of becoming one, not in spite of, but through difference.

Over the course of the play, James' translations vary from second person iterations to a first person dual articulation. Frequently, however, James translates to his own perspective. When they first meet, Sarah says to him "You give up easier than most" (6). When James translates this line, however, he changes the subject: "I give up easier than most?" (6). In another, particularly ironic scene, James informs Sarah that he would like to be the translator for the speech she'll be delivering for Deaf rights. Sarah signs, "I can't say what I feel about being deaf through a hearing person," which James speaks to the audience as "You can't say what you feel about being deaf through...through a hearing person" (88-89). When translating, James shifts personal pronouns, moving from Sarah's first person point of view to second person. The majority of Sarah's lines are relayed in this fashion and may, as Spirko suggests, refashion James as the protagonist (22), a point I will return to below.

These lines are, of course, ironic given the fact that not only has James been speaking "for" Sarah over the course of the play but because her lines are also literally written by a hearing man. This exchange, therefore, meditates on translations, power, and authenticity. As I have argued, Sarah is positioned in a doubly oppressed role as a Deaf woman. While James appears to translate faithfully, her powerlessness is heightened by this translative relationship. In many ways, James' role as translator further cements his culturally superior status, but, here, I would like to suggest that James' translation is just

one of many in the play and thus indicative of a larger theme. James always translates for Sarah, but the playwright always writes these lines for both of them. Moreover, as the character list mentions, Sarah's lines are written in grammatically correct English as opposed to written ASL. The actress who portrays Sarah, then, must engage in her own round of translations, transforming the grammatically correct English into ASL. What the audience finally receives, then, is multiply translated, from the script to the stage and from the stage to their ears.

While James' persistent translations certainly raise the question of who has the authority, power, and privilege to translate, the innumerable translations of the genre heighten one of the play's chief themes: inaccessibility. So much of disability studies, including this essay, is focused on making disability accessible to the able-bodied, and so many organizations and institutions are devoted to making public spaces accessible to the disabled. Accessibility is championed as the religion of the disability rights movement and the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act is its messiah, making accessibility a right rather than an option. I obviously do not mean to suggest that the ADA is anything but momentous and imperative. The impact and importance of such laws cannot be minimized. I would, however, like to reexamine the word accessibility and its positive connotations. While it is important to accept difference, deviance, and disability, understanding should not be a prerequisite. In *Children of a Lesser God*, Sarah is deliberately constructed as somewhere between accessible and inaccessible, making it more difficult to identify with her. Both her moments of accessibility and inaccessibility suggest that community formation must take place through difference, even and especially those differences that we may not understand.

While James' voice anchors the play, Sarah steers and propels *Children of a Lesser God*. In some moments, however, James speaks as rather than for Sarah. In the most important speech of the play, her "I" speech, Sarah signs and James speaks as her to the audience. Sarah explains the expansiveness of ASL and in doing so offers an alternative paradigm for considering personhood, "the sign 'to connect,' a simple sign—but it means so much more when it is moved between us like this. Now it means to be joined in a shared relationship, to be individual yet as one" (89). Even in her major speech of independence she explains that she wants to be connected to the world, "to be individual yet as one" (89). The way this speech is performed, therefore, is paramount to its call-to-action. Sarah's "I" speech, her great monologue of independence, is spoken by James.²⁴ Even while she is asserting her independence, someone else speaks for her. While in other moments James translates to the second person, here, he uses first person. In this way, Medoff appears to obviate questions of authenticity or ownership. I would like to designate this speech not a monologue, then, but a "dialogue," two people speaking in tandem, "individual yet as one." Through this "dialogue," speaking and signing as one, Sarah and James offer and embody the "individual yet as one" exemplum and that "model of reciprocity" that Wendell forwards (273).

The "individual yet as one" model, however, is not achieved through a mere transfiguration into one signing/speaking being, but primarily realized through unity through difference. In this speech, we encounter as unmediated a glimpse into Sarah's mind as we can. Here, James comes the closest to understanding Sarah, to accessing and

²⁴ Even the construction of this sentence belies the difficulties of translations. The only way to keep Sarah in the subject position is to write the sentence in passive voice. Despite the fact that James translates, a subordinate role, those writing rules want him to be the primary actor. Even the act of translation forces Sarah into an inferior position.

coming “inside” her “silence” (90). In turn, it is the closest we, the audience, come as well. However, many moments are inaccessible to James and to the audience and it is through these moments that the “individual yet as one” model is actualized. Immediately after what I have deliberately been championing as this pivotal moment of the play, the “individual yet as one” speech, Sarah and James’ relationship completely devolves.

While I examined this scene closely in the second chapter, I would like to return to it here again in terms of performance. After her speech, James can only mutter a couple of half-iterated, hackneyed phrases about the speech being “moving” (90). When Sarah suggests that he’s “pitying” her, however, his platitudes transform into an eruption of vituperations (90). He rejects her “individual yet as one” model, claiming

You want to be independent of me, you want to be a person in your own right, you want people not to pity you..., then you learn to read my lips and you learn to use that little mouth of yours for something besides eating and showing me that you’re better than hearing girls in bed! (92)

When Sarah attempts to sign, he physically restrains her, violently shutting down the only means available for her to express herself. He finally, desperately yells, “Now come on! I want you to speak to me. Let me hear it. Speak! Speak! Speak!” (92). Not only does James clearly misunderstand her “individual yet as one” model, but he aggressively assaults her, both verbally and physically.

The scene, however, truly culminates when Sarah speaks for the first time in the play and perhaps the first time in her life. She “*erupts like a volcano in speech,*” crying “Speech! Speech! Is that it? No! You want me to be your child! You want me to be like you. How do you like my voice? Am I beautiful? Am I what you want me to be? *What*

about me? What I want? What I want!” (92). As the stage directions read, however, “*She can’t be sure how this sounds except by his reaction to it. It is clearly sentences, the sense of it intelligible, but it is not a positive demonstration of speech—only of passion*” (92). Unless the audience has a script, therefore, it is impossible to know exactly what Sarah says. Instead, we only hear “*passion*” (92). This powerful moment makes the audience nearly as vulnerable as it does Sarah. Dependent on spoken language and translations ourselves, the audience is ungrounded and shaken by our inability to understand. If briefly, we live like Sarah. This moment not only draws the audience closer to Sarah in some sense, but distances us from her. She brutally reminds the audience that she can’t speak, that she is different, and does necessitate translation. The audience must reckon with the discomfiting notion that the Deaf and Hearing worlds are different and every interaction we have had with Sarah has been mediated.

In another, very different yet strangely similar scene, Sarah is also inaccessible to James and in turn to the audience. While the scene where she speaks is a violent reminder of the differences between the Deaf and Hearing and the dangerous, catastrophic consequences of audism and paternalism, inaccessibility is not necessarily an awful thing. In the previous scene, it serves as a reminder of the necessity of cultural dialogue, but it can also highlight the importance of a culture and its language as well. At the beginning of their relationship, Sarah and James engage in a frank conversation about D/deafness. Sarah tells James, “I live in a place you can’t enter. It’s out of reach...Deafness isn’t the opposite of hearing, as you think. It’s a silence full of sound” (32). When James asks “Really?”, Sarah responds in an ASL approximation of the line “The sound of spring breaking up through the death of winter” (32). The stage notes read, “*He doesn’t*

understand the juxtaposition of: “winter” ... “earth” ... “broken” ... “growth” which is how she begins the line; yet, he is moved by it” (32). Sarah’s complicated, eloquent, and undeniably poetic description of Deafness is inaccessible to James, yet he still manages to be “*moved by it*” (32). While he may not understand the words she’s using, he can understand that he can’t understand. When he asks her “What does that mean?,” Sarah responds with “My secret. No hearing person has ever gotten in here to find out...No person, period” (32). While we understand pieces of Sarah, especially in her “individual yet as one” speech, here, she reminds us that we can never fully understand another human being, especially one so far from our own centers. Instead, we are united through our differences, as Barr suggests.

While many narratives, even plays, rely on audience/reader-protagonist identification, *Children of a Lesser God* resists such a simple relationship. In part, this pseudo-identification indicates the gap between the Deaf and Hearing worlds. While the play offers a glimpse into the Deaf world, it is only ever a translation of a translation and thus unable to fully represent Sarah. This aspect of the play is not a failure, however, but a purposeful recognition of difference. Moreover, in keeping Sarah inaccessible, Medoff, the production team, and the actors begin to initiate the “individual yet as one” model, further refining it. To be “individual yet as one” takes integrity, but it does not necessitate complete understanding. A network of interdependence cannot be contingent on complete knowledge not only because knowing is never comprehensive but because true, if provisional, unity can only be achieved through difference. In the space of the theater, through staging, and through the audience, unity through difference and the “individual yet as one” model work towards fruition.

The Audience: Community Formation Beyond the Stage

I have argued that James and Sarah's "dialogue" literally enacts the "individual yet as one" model. When they speak and sign together, both utilizing first person, they embody those physical and theoretical concepts of the speech. Of course, this brief harmony fails. James cannot accept Sarah's Deafness and all that it entails, severing their short-lived bond. Sarah may not manage to engender total unison with James, but she does form a community. She becomes, if only in the physical space of the theater, one with the audience.

The audience is always a pivotal aspect of the theatrical experience, but tantamount to *Children of a Lesser God* and its communal goal. Blau writes

The audience...is not so much a mere congregation of people...It does not exist before the play but is *initiated* or *precipitated* by it; it is not an entity to begin with but a consciousness constructed. The audience is what *happens* when, performing the signs and passwords of a play, something postulates itself and unfolds in response. (qtd. in Barr 16)

As Blau suggests, the audience becomes itself during a production, forming a critical part of that collaborative process of theater. In terms of *Children of a Lesser God*, the audience is "*initiated*" into the play and thereby into the Deaf world, a place that most will know nothing about. They are not merely introduced to these worlds, but "at once creative in and created by performance relations" (Barr 16).

While all plays require and create an audience, the audience of any production of *Children of a Lesser God* is critical to Sarah's fruition as a disabled woman and to the

“individual yet as one” model she forwards. Over the course of the play, Sarah evolves from a militantly independent and negative person to a model of interdependence. She transforms not through James or Orin, or any other character, but through the audience itself. She describes her earnest desire “to be joined to other people” (90). She achieves a brief unity through the dual articulation of the line with James, but she most powerfully unites with the audience. In expressing herself, she does become “joined to other people” through the experience of the theater. In turn, this unity affords her the clarity to evolve and to discover her model for human interaction. While she may fail to truly connect with James, she creates her connection and community with the audience, allowing them to “come inside” her “silence” and become the network of relationships she desires and the genre solicits (90).

This network of relations, however, is not the homogenous, unthinking mass of “little Oedipuses,” or Sarahs, as Bertold Brecht foretells (qtd. in Barr 71). In the height of his dramatic theory, Brecht, as Barr glosses,

propose[s] alienation as the ideal relation between audience and actor...offering emotional distance as a necessary corrective to the kind of empathetic identification...that inhibits the radical communal potential of contemporary bourgeois theater. (Barr 71)

To Brecht, “empathetic identification” keeps audience members from fully analyzing the theatrical experience. Instead, Brecht argues that the audience merely “lose[s] themselves” in the character and in the experience, thereby decimating any chance for critical analysis (Barr 71).

While this may pose a problem in traditional theater, especially those productions that allow unmediated access to their protagonist, Sarah is never completely available to the audience and thus never able to be identified with completely. Spirko suggests that “[i]t is an open question whether the audience is able to meet [Sarah] on that ground... on her own terms [and] in her own language” (22). To Spirko, James’ mediating voice dominates the play. He writes, “Despite Medoff’s assertion that Sarah is the true protagonist of the play, James remains the filtering consciousness through which the play is told” (22). While Spirko defers to differing staging, he concludes that “a hearing audience will be more likely to find in a hearing character their identification point with the play” (22).

I’m honestly unsure of where to begin to untangle this knot of gross assumptions and misreadings. First, I think I’d like to begin with Spirko’s misrepresentation of Sarah. In some sense, Spirko asserts a truth about the play. While we can “relate” or empathize with Sarah, we cannot truly know her. Everything is mediated. What Spirko misrepresents, however, are those moments the audience gains some kind of access to Sarah, through “points of contact” (Barr 69)—those flashes of clarity and accessibility, such as the “individual yet as one speech”—that allow us to “come inside” her “silence” (90). Secondly, I’d like to question Spirko’s privileging of identification as the preferable relationship between audience and protagonist. Brecht’s warning, that the theater, through unmitigated identification, may turn its audience into passive recipients seems apropos here. Only an audience conditioned to identify with a protagonist would “be more likely to find in a hearing character their identification point with the play” (Spirko 22). Thirdly, therefore, I would like to suggest that audience can, in fact, unite with Sarah

and does. These “points of contact” that allow us to empathize are few, forcing the audience, actors, director, playwright, and every member of the performance to engage in a “perspectival partnership that must respect, and indeed depends on, similarity in difference” (Barr 67). Part of this goal includes being able “to relate characters without denying their individuality” (Barr 69). While Brecht’s theatrical method may create “critical awareness” through “alienation...by preventing viewers from losing themselves in the play,” *Children of a Lesser God* in its oscillation between accessibility and inaccessibility “enable[s] potential critics to first find themselves *through* the play” (Barr 71). As Sarah discovers herself over the course of the play, the audience similarly creates itself, refining its own understandings of Deafness, humans, and the world. The audience, therefore, is an actor in the production, a critical apparatus, they themselves united through difference in the space of the theater and through the course of the play.

Conclusion

After a difficult conversation with James, Orin, and Klein, the lawyer, in which every other character attempts to define and control her, Sarah cries “I don’t know which role I’m supposed to play” (76). While James and Orin certainly care for Sarah, even love her, they refuse to accept her as is and instead try to make her over in their own images. As a Deaf woman, however, Sarah defies reductive definitions of what both of these identifiers mean or could mean. She can flit between identities, between roles, like an actor in a play.

The theater, unlike many other genres, has long acted as a site of rebellion and revolution. Through its insistence on the body in a culture that denies bodily specificity

yet polices them all the more powerfully to the actor's ability to dissolve the lines between reality and play by the very operation of acting, plays and performances can stage radical coups against the trenchant status quo. In terms of *Children of a Lesser God*, Sarah contests multiple norms, including D/deaf stereotypes, both amongst the hearing and militant Deafies alike, gender conventions, and American identity.

Americans may have never been as enthralled with the stage as their trans-Atlantic counterparts, but this play argues that the stage can be a haven for all those forcibly written out of or simply forgotten in the national narrative. Where novels and traditional narrative forms rely on difference and deviance to propel their plots, the stage can offer a revolutionary space for disability, a communal, interdependent network that can actively work to deconstruct stigma and reaffirm lived experiences. While the audience does not gain full access to Sarah, and, as I have argued, shouldn't, she, simply as the focus of the play, refines American identity, crafting a place for herself. Perhaps more importantly, through that theatrical process, she crafts a place in the audience as well for deviance, difference, and disability. Community is "the very thing that playing aims to promote" (Barr 9) and, thus, in this simple correlation works to fracture the trenchant glorification of individuality and singularity so important to American identity, making room for Deafness and all those designated as "children of a lesser God."

Conclusion

On Sunday March 6th, 1988, Gallaudet University's Board of Trustees announced the appointment of Dr. Elisabeth Zinser, a hearing woman with no knowledge of Deaf culture or ASL, to the presidency of the only liberal arts institution for the deaf in the world. That night students marched to the hotel housing the board, the White House, and the Capitol building to express their indignation and protest Zinser's installation. By the next morning, Gallaudet students had drawn up a list of demands, presented them to the Board, and had them roundly rejected. As Gallaudet's official timeline declares, "The day ended with both sides firmly entrenched in their opposing positions and with no quick resolution in sight" ("The Week"). By March 8th, students were demonstrating so profusely and effectively that national news sources saturated Gallaudet's campus, interviewing students and faculty, broadcasting their struggle for self-determination across the country ("The Week").

In August, I visited Gallaudet's extensive archives on the revolution. In my mind, the protests seemed vaguely connected to *Children of a Lesser God*. In 1980, Medoff received a Tony for his role as playwright in *Children of a Lesser God* ("Introduction"). In 1986, a film of the same title, although notably different, premiered (Felleman 110). In 1986, again, the actress who portrayed Sarah, Marlee Matlin, became the first deaf woman to win an Oscar for Best Actress. In 1987, Matlin both astounded and enraged hearing and deaf Americans by speaking rather than signing an award introduction at the Oscars (*Through Deaf Eyes*). And, in 1988, students at Gallaudet University, the only liberal arts college for the deaf, successfully protested the institution of yet another hearing president ("The Impact"). In terms of time, Gallaudet's protests seem to fall

neatly into a linear pattern of Deaf rights, *Children of a Lesser God* ushering in a burgeoning sense of Deaf pride. Thematically, of course, both the play and the protests deconstruct stereotypes and champion Deafness. While intriguing, my nebulous musings seemed ultimately inconsequential.

At Gallaudet's archives, however, I found two distinct pieces of evidence that not only suggest fuzzy thematic similarities but draw a visible parallel between the play and the protests. On March 9th, 1988, *Nightline* held a roundtable discussion on Gallaudet's revolution with Jane Spilman the head of the Board, Elisabeth Zinser, the unwanted president, Harlan Lane, esteemed Deaf theorist and professor at Gallaudet, Gary W. Olsen, Executive Director of the National Association of the Deaf, Greg Hlibok, Gallaudet's Student Body President, and, curiously, Marlee Matlin, deaf actress made famous by her portrayal of Sarah. Reading this transcript, I found myself wondering why might an actress, albeit a deaf one, be involved in this debate on self-determination. Directly related to the protests, however, I didn't question the transcript's place in the file.

In this transcript, Ted Koppel introduces Matlin as "a symbol of pride for many deaf people around the country" (2). In many ways, Koppel's assertions seem a credible reflection of the importance of *Children of a Lesser God* and Matlin's role in it. Lane calls *Children* "the best-known example of a contemporary work of art concerning deaf people" whose "award-winning performances by deaf actresses...apprised Americans (and Europeans of the struggle between deaf people and hearing professionals" (*Mask* 41). Asch and Fine similarly refer to Sarah, who "demand[s] that the world accept [her] on [her] terms" (251). In fact, references to *Children of a Lesser God* and particularly to

Sarah recur repeatedly throughout the disability canon. *Children of a Lesser God*, Sarah, and those actresses who have portrayed her, especially Matlin, have become “symbol[s]” of the disability rights movement and Deaf pride. No other cultural production of disability can claim the widespread integration into the mainstream as *Children*, just as no other representation of disability has so fully been welcomed by the disabled cultures as well. While referring to Matlin as a “symbol” of deafness undoubtedly minimizes her capabilities for criticism and further homogenizes the diverse group collectively included under the identifier “D/deaf,” Koppel’s articulation and Matlin’s inclusion suggest just how powerful the play, movie, and representations can be in communicating and transforming public opinion.

While I think Matlin’s presence speaks to the enormous importance of media in American culture, I also maintain that her inclusion links *Children of a Lesser God* to Gallaudet’s protests for self-determination and self-worth. On the same day that Matlin appeared on ABC Nightline News, the *State-Times* in Baton Rouge, Louisiana published a brief article on an Illinois production of *Children*. Local D/deaf individuals were boycotting the production for casting hearing actors as its deaf characters. Despite being tucked in a file on the Gallaudet protests, this article includes no explicit reference to Gallaudet or the revolution. Its only connection is the date, Deaf pride, and, most importantly, *Children of a Lesser God*.

While Medoff claims that he had no intention of rallying deaf pride and that his true purpose was to tell a love story (“Not So”), his play became a force of its own, echoing and resounding through both American hearing and deaf cultures. For the first time, deaf people had a play and a movie that gave genuine thought and depth to deaf

characters. For the first time, hearing people as a mainstream culture considered and engaged with deafness and deaf people. These two strange pieces of evidence correlate much of what I have been arguing. Not only did the play have tangible and visceral repercussions on daily, lived deaf experience, but it also urged a community of interdependence and reliance among the deaf and among hearing people. Firstly, the play called hearing people's attention to deafness. This attention could not have been more exiguous. Even the article on the boycott hesitantly refers to deafness as "a hearing problem." It seems like the hearing world was the one with the hearing problem. The protests appear dependent, therefore, on this opening up of communication about deafness that the play and the movie garnered. I argue that the play, its widespread audience and its popularity, directly correlate with the success of the DPN protests.

Secondly, the protests and the boycott were at once, as many civil rights protests were and are, a movement for communal acceptance and self-determination. They are "individual yet as one" (89). The play suggests, as do the protests, that disabilities are not a private, individual problem, but a communal and social one. Disabilities are not something removed from the public sphere and relegated to a private, domestic, and quarantined space. Rather, disabilities are called into being as part of a national identity. The play, through its call for community and interdependence, does not necessarily threaten American, individualistic identity but asks Americans to expand and refine their own definitions of selfhood. Through the genre, it makes its message reality, creating through the audience and interdependent, egalitarian network of critical thinkers, "individual yet as one."

WORKS CITED

- “Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, As Amended.” Title 42. *U.S. Code*, Sec. 12102. Web.
- Anderson, Glenn B., and Katrina R. Miller. "Appreciating Diversity Through Stories About The Lives Of Deaf People Of Color." *American Annals Of The Deaf* 149.5 (2004): 375-383. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 21 Mar. 2013.
- Asch, Adrienne, and Michelle Fine. “Nurturance, Sexuality and Women With Disabilities: The Example of Women and Literature.” *The Disability Studies Reader*. Ed. Lennard J. Davis. New York: Routledge, 1997. 241-69. Print.
- “ASL in Performance: A Conversation with Adrian Blue.” *Signs and Voices: Deaf Culture, Identity, Language, and Arts*. Ed. Kristin A. Lindgren, Doreen DeLuca, & Donna Jo Napoli. Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet UP, 2008. 232-8. Print.
- Aston, Elaine, and Geraldine Harris. “Feminist Futures and the Possibilities of ‘We’?” *Feminist Futures? Theatre, Performance, Theory*. Ed. Elaine Aston & Geraldine Harris. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. 1-16. Print.
- Barr, Richard L. *Rooms with a View: The Stages of Community in the Modern Theater*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1998. Print.
- Batson, Trenton W., and Eugene Bergman. *Angels and Outcasts: an Anthology of Deaf Characters in Literature*. 3rd ed. Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet UP, 1997.
- Baynton, Douglas. “‘A Silent Exile on This Earth’: The Metaphorical Construction of Deafness in the Nineteenth Century.” *The Disability Studies Reader*. Ed. Lennard J. Davis. New York: Routledge, 1997. 128-50. Print.
- Brueggeman, Brenda Jo. *Deaf Subjects: Between Identities and Places*. New York: New

- York UP, 2009. Print.
- Christiansen, John B., and Irene W. Leigh. "The Dilemma of Pediatric Cochlear Implants." *The Deaf Way II Reader: Perspectives from the Second International Conference on Deaf Culture*. Ed. Harvey Goodstein. Washington, DC: Gallaudet UP, 2006. 363-69.
- Couser, G. Thomas. *Recovering Bodies: Illness, Disability, and Life Writing*. Madison, WI: Wisconsin, UP, 1997. Print.
- . *Signifying Bodies: Disability in Contemporary Life Writing*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2009. Print.
- Davidson, Michael. "Tree Tangled in Tree: Resisting Poetry through ASL." *Concerto for the Left Hand: Disability and the Defamiliar Body*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2008. 100-15. Print.
- Derrida, Jacques. "Différance." *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan. 2nd ed. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004. 278-99. Print.
- "Elisabeth Zinser." *Deaf President Now*. Gallaudet University, n.d. Web. 12 Mar. 2013.
- "Facts for Features: Americans with Disabilities Act." *Census Bureau Home Page*. 27 May 2008. Web. 20 Oct. 2010.
- Felleman, Susan. "Fluid Fantasies: *Splash* and *Children of a Lesser God*." *Camera Obscura* 19.1 (1989): 108-33. *Duke UP Journals Online*. Web. 10 May 2011.
- Fox, Ann M., and Joan Lipkin. "Res(Crip)ting Feminist Theater through Disability Theater: Selections from the DisAbility Project." *NWSA Journal: National Women's Studies Association Journal* 14.3 (2002): 77-98. *MLA International Bibliography*. EBSCO. Web. 6 Oct. 2011.

- Garland Thomson, Rosemarie. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. New York: Columbia UP, 1997. Print.
- . "Feminist Theory, the Body, and the Disabled Figure." *The Disability Studies Reader*. Ed. Lennard J. Davis. New York: Routledge, 1997. 279-89. Print.
- Garnett, Christopher B., Trans. *The Exchange of Letters between Samuel Heinicke and Abbé Charles Michel de L'Epée*. New York: Vantage, 1968.
- Green, Lynn. "SOU President Elisabeth Zinser Announces Her Retirement." *OUS News and Information*. Oregon University System, 29 Nov. 2005. Web. 12 Mar. 2013.
- Grushkin, Donald A. "The Dilemma of the Hard of Hearing in the U.S. Deaf Community." *Many Ways to Be Deaf: International Variation in Deaf Communities*. Ed. Leila Monaghan, Constanze Schmaling, Karen Nakamura, & Graham H. Turner. Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet UP, 2003. 114-37. Print.
- Hillyer, Barbara. *Feminism and Disability*. U of Ohio P: Norman and London, 1993. Print.
- Humphries, Tom. "Scientific Explanation and Other Performance Acts in the Reorganization of Deaf." *Signs and Voices: Deaf Culture, Identity, Language, and Arts*. Ed. Kristin A. Lindgren, Doreen DeLuca, & Donna Jo Napoli. Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet UP, 2008. 3-19. Print.
- "Independence, n." *OED Online*. September 2012. Oxford University Press. 9 October 2012.
- Kafer, Alison. "Compulsory Bodies: Reflections on Heterosexuality and Able-bodiedness." *Journal of Women's History* 15.3 (2003): 77-89. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 10 Feb. 2013.

- Lane, Harlan. "Construction of Deafness." *The Disability Studies Reader*. Ed. Lennard J. Davis. New York: Routledge, 1997. 153-71. Print.
- . *The Mask of Benevolence*. New York: Knopf, 1992.
- . "Paternalism and the Deaf: An Open Letter to Mme. Umuvyeyi." Gallaudet Archives.
- Lou, Mimi WheiPing. "The History of the Language Use in the Education of the Deaf in the United States." *Language Learning and Deafness*. Ed. Michael Strong. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996. 75-98. Cambridge Applied Linguistics.
- McRuer, Robert. "Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence." Print. 488-97.
- Medoff, Mark. *Children of a Lesser God: A Play in Two Acts*. Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1987. Print.
- . "Introduction to the 1987 Edition." *Children of a Lesser God: A Play in Two Acts*. Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1987. N.p. Print.
- . "Not So Random Notes From The Playwright." *Children of a Lesser God: A Play in Two Acts*. Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1987. N.p. Print.
- Monaghan, Leila. "A World's Eye View: Deaf Cultures in Global Perspective." *Many Ways to Be Deaf: International Variation in Deaf Communities*. Eds. Leila Monaghan, Constanze Schmaling, Karen Nakamura, & Graham H. Turner. Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet UP, 2003.
- Murphy, Robert F. *The Body Silent: The Different World of the Disabled*. New York: Norton & Co, 2001. Print.
- Newman, Lawrence R. *I Fill This Small Space: the Writings of a Deaf Activist*. Ed. David J. Kurs. Washington, DC: Gallaudet UP, 2009. Print.

- Piccoli, Sean. "Gallaudet rally calls for deaf president." *The Washington Times*. 2 Mar. 1988. Gallaudet Archives.
- Phelan, Peggy. *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. New York: Routledge, 1993.
- Russell, Emily. *Reading Embodied Citizenship: Disability, Narrative, and the Body Politic*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2011.
- Savran, David. "Queer Theater and the Disarticulation of Identity." *The Queerest Art: Essay on Lesbian and Gay Theater*. Ed. Alisa Solomon & Framji Minwalla. New York: New York UP, 2002. 152-67. Print.
- Senghas, Richard J. and Leila Monaghan. "Signs of Their Times: Deaf Communities and the Culture of Language." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31 (2002): 69-97. *JSTOR*. Web. 7 Oct. 2012.
- "Show #1773." *ABC News Nightline*. ABC. 9 March 1998. Print. Transcript. Deaf President Now Archives, Gallaudet University, Washington D.C. MSS 148 Box 2.
- Solomon, Alisa. "Great Sparkles of Lust: Homophobia and the Antitheatrical Tradition." *The Queerest Art: Essay on Lesbian and Gay Theater*. Ed. Alisa Solomon & Framji Minwalla. New York: New York UP, 2002. 9-20. Print.
- Spirko, Robert C. "'Better Me Than You': *Children of a Lesser God*, Deaf Education, and Paternalism." *Peering Behind the Curtain: Disability, Illness, and the Extraordinary Body in Contemporary Theater*. New York: Routledge, 2002. 16-23. Print.
- The Associated Press. "Boycott is urged because play lacks hearing-impaired actors." *Baton Rouge State Times*. 9 March 1988: 2-A. Print. Deaf President Now

- Archives, Gallaudet University, Washington, D.C. MSS 148 Box 3.
- Through Deaf Eyes*. Dir. Diane Garey and Lawrence R. Hott. Perf. Marlee Matlin and I. King Jordan. PBS, 2007. Netflix.
- Wendell, Susan. "Toward a Feminist Theory of Disability." *The Disability Studies Reader*. Ed. Lennard J. Davis. New York: Routledge, 1997. 260-78. Print.
- Wolf, Stacy. "Disability's Invisibility in Joan Schenkar's *Signs of Life* and Heather McDonald's *An Almost Holy Picture*." *Bodies in Commotion: Disability and Performance*. Ed. Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2005. 302-18. Print.