

NOTES ON THE CULTURE

# American Sign Language Finds Its Spotlight

Across all performative mediums, today’s Deaf creatives are celebrating, protecting and sharing their distinct mode of communication.

By Jake Nevins

March 25, 2021

LAST AUGUST, several months into lockdown, Raven Sutton posted a short clip on TikTok. In it, Sutton, a 25-year-old Black Deaf dancer living in Washington D.C., covers Cardi B’s song “WAP” in American Sign Language, or A.S.L., which she’s used, alongside English, her entire life. Wearing a tan crop top and hoop earrings, Sutton signs Megan Thee Stallion’s verse, maintaining coy eye contact with her camera as she reimagines lines like “Gobble me, swallow me, drip down the side of me” for a Deaf audience. Sutton, of course, can’t “hear” the music in a conventional sense. But having danced since childhood, she’s found ways to channel her intuitive feel for rhythm through the vast, lexically complex language of sign, paying close attention to the vibrations of the bass pounding through her speakers or holding an eight-count so she knows when the words begin. Sutton posted the 35-second video and then closed the app for a few hours to get on with her day. She returned to thousands of likes, comments and, eventually, a retweet from Cardi B herself.

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For hearing audiences, long dismissive or at least ignorant of A.S.L. and its bountiful possibilities for creative expression, the video piqued curiosity. Some asked if Sutton was *really* Deaf, so exacting was her choreographed interpretation. Others, Sutton told me in a video call moderated by a sign language interpreter (as all interviews for this article were conducted), wondered why she signed the song’s titular refrain several different ways, once connecting both hands to make a V shape, another time gyrating her hips back and forth. Such questions were expected, given how widely misunderstood American Sign Language remains, more than 200 years after it was enshrined as the language of the Deaf. It is not merely English in gestural, transliterated form, as hearing folks often assume, but a visual language no less grammatically and syntactically evolved than any other, whose descriptions and sentence constructions utilize space and time multidimensionally. Sign tends to set the scene, placing the relevant characters in a given sentence in spatial relation to one another, much like stage directions. Further distinguishing it from English is A.S.L.’s topic-comment structure, in which the object of a sentence is often introduced before it’s described: If someone wishes to say they “liked a book” in sign, they’d mention the book before they do their feelings about it. For Sutton, the song’s irreverent hook could take numerous shapes in A.S.L., depending on the context. “There’s a part where Megan is, you know, talking about different types of ... ” she says with a laugh, hesitant to invoke the song’s title. “But she’s talking about different scenarios, right? She’s talking about him paying off her college, she’s talking about taking pictures on his phone.”

Since going viral, Sutton has continued to use TikTok both to showcase her dance and to educate her large contingent of hearing followers, placing her among a wave of Deaf creatives who, consigned to their homes during the pandemic, are leveraging their popularity to advocate for Deaf awareness and, by extension, a greater understanding of sign language in the culture at large. “Digital communication methodologies have been something that Deaf people adopted very quickly,” says Carrie Lou Garberoglio, 41, director of the National Deaf Center in Austin, Texas, where the first-ever A.S.L.-accessible video game, a choose-your-own-adventure called Deafverse, was developed in 2019. Early on, Deaf people embraced teletypewriter (TTY) technology and emojis, and they’ve long relied on the internet to foster intracommunity rapport. As social media has proliferated, it’s functioned as a conduit for these efforts, allowing Deaf folks to bypass the gates of institutional power that have traditionally held them back.

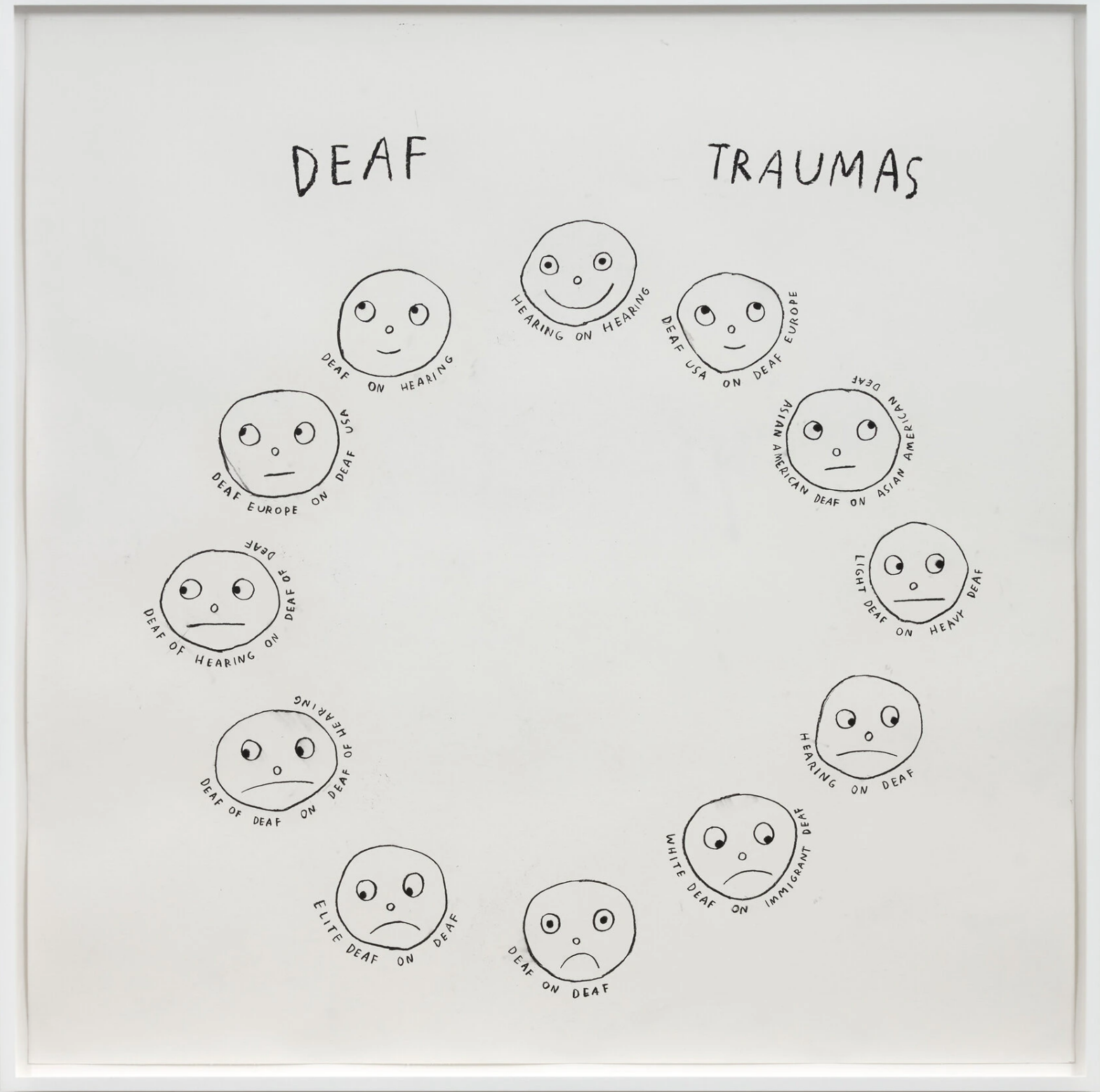


“Translating Interpreting” (2021), the second work made by Kim to accompany this essay. Photo by Stefan Korte

But one does not have to be online to witness this upsurge in Deaf content and sign language representation, itself both a part of and distinct from the groundswell of stories about differently abled people that have arisen over the last decade. After years on the margins, the Deaf community is experiencing a series of firsts: a Deaf contestant on the latest season of “The Bachelor”; Marvel’s debut Deaf superhero, Makkari, played by the Tony-nominated actress Lauren Ridloff in “The Eternals,” out later this year; and the record-breaking \$25 million sale of the film “CODA,” short for Child of Deaf Adults, to Apple Studios after its rapturous reception at this year’s Sundance Film Festival. Even state-by-state coronavirus briefings, which have made minor celebrities of the sign language interpreters relaying life-or-death information to viewers, have shone a light on A.S.L. and the myriad ways Deafness is sidelined. Last fall, in the first case of its kind, the National Association of the Deaf successfully sued the Trump administration for failing to provide an interpreter at its Covid-19 briefings. Meanwhile, less than a week after the inauguration, President Biden’s press secretary announced that an interpreter would be present at all of the administration’s daily press conferences, a first in presidential history. For several years now, these breakthroughs have seemed imminent, a matter not of merit but of opportunity and resources. But it’s no coincidence that they’re all coalescing now, following a time of pandemic, protest and social upheaval that’s provoked frank conversations about access and equity, and also a mass migration to our screens, wherein the visual has supplanted the auditory, imbuing our attempts at understanding each other with a renewed sense of urgency and empathy. All of us, living under circumstances so inhospitable to genuine human connection, have adopted new modes of engagement; from that, there’s emerged a recognition that language need not be the exclusive provenance of sound or even text but of signs, too.

In conversations with many of the Deaf community’s foremost creatives and de facto activists, there’s a sense of both enthusiasm and wariness, a desire to bridge the gap between the Deaf and hearing worlds and an equally strong sense of exhaustion, accumulated over time, at the patience such a merger would require. “Sometimes,” says the 40-year-old Berlin-based visual and sound artist Christine Sun Kim, “hearing people don’t know what to do when they encounter a Deaf person, and we end up having to communicate their way.” The animating spirit of much of Kim’s work, particularly her series “Trauma, LOL,” recently on view at the François Ghebaly gallery in Los Angeles, is a sense of enervation at this cycle, of “having to explain and explain and explain to people who are not Deaf, and who are kind of creating *more* work for us.” Though art institutions have been more hospitable since Kim was named a TED Fellow in 2013, and included in the Whitney Biennial six years later, she’s often found herself justifying the need for an interpreter or feeling infantilized by curators who imply she’s just lucky to be included. “We have to protest more just to get basic needs met,” she says. “If it were completely up to me, I wouldn’t want to be an activist.”

Over generations of gradual but often arrested progress, the Deaf community has remained self-sufficient, justifiably suspicious of the intercessions of hearing people. As a result, there is a sense of proprietorship about A.S.L., fortified when they see it mocked or commodified. It was only eight years ago that Deaf people watching Nelson Mandela’s memorial service saw their language bastardized by a sign language interpreter whose gestures were convoluted and unintelligible. Now, according to a 2018 report by the Modern Language Association, A.S.L. is the third-most commonly studied non-English language in American higher educational institutions, after Spanish and French, and across the internet one can find scores of instructional videos taught by hearing people, a reliable if bothersome metric by which to gauge the language’s mainstreaming. “Oftentimes, it’s not even accurate — facial expressions, body movements, location, hand shapes, all of that is important when you’re teaching,” says Sutton, who attended Washington, D.C.’s Gallaudet University, the country’s first and only liberal arts college for the Deaf. “What they end up doing is using our culture and our language for clout.”



Kim's "Deaf Traumas" (2020). Photo by Paul Salveson. Courtesy of the artist and François Ghebaly, Los Angeles

TO UNDERSTAND THESE misgivings, one must know the history of sign language, which is characterized by sharp vicissitudes of embrace and oppression. Sign language arrived in America by way of France, where, in the mid-18th century, under the auspices of the religious educator Abbé Charles-Michel de l'Épée, it became the primary mode of instruction for the French Deaf. Until then, sign language had existed as a kind of informal mixture of the community's Indigenous signs with French grammar. De l'Épée, upon encountering two Deaf girls and watching them communicate, found that the Deaf, then seen as ineducable, were in fact adroit students, so he began applying a more sophisticated structure to their native hand signals and gestures. His methods were formalized in 1760, with the founding of the first free school for the Deaf, later to be known as the National Institution for Deaf-Mutes in Paris. "The abbé de l'Épée was not the inventor or creator of this language," wrote Pierre Desloges, whose 1779 account of that period reflects the spirited beginnings of Deaf enfranchisement. "Quite the contrary, he learned it from the Deaf; he merely repaired what he found defective in it."

After de l'Épée's death in 1789, this effort was carried on by the grammarian Roch-Ambroise Cucurron Sicard, known as Abbé Sicard, a mentee of his who would usher in what Oliver Sacks, in his seminal book "Seeing Voices" (1989), called "a sort of golden period in Deaf history," whereby sign language was recognized as the "natural" language of the Deaf, not a mere childlike form of pantomime. Sicard would eventually meet Thomas Gallaudet, an American educator who helped establish, in 1817, what would become the American School for the Deaf in Hartford, Conn. What followed was a cross-pollination — between French sign language and the systems of home sign that already existed in American towns with large Deaf populations, like Chilmark, Mass., on the western edge of Martha's Vineyard; Henniker, N.H.; and Sandy River Valley, Maine. Ultimately, these disparate strains of sign would merge to create American Sign Language.

But soon after Congress, in 1864, authorized the creation of the first federally chartered Deaf institution for higher learning, which would become Gallaudet, prominent oralists like Alexander Graham Bell, following in the tradition of the educational reformer Horace Mann, advocated for deaf assimilation through speech and lip reading. Bell himself had a fraught relationship with Deafness that preceded his telephonic innovations: Both his mother and wife were Deaf, and he saw their impairments as something to be eradicated, going so far as to speak out against Deaf intermarriage in an 1883 speech at the National Academy of Sciences.

For Bell's part in thwarting sign language education and undermining Deaf culture, Kim considers him to be the community's greatest historical scourge, a conviction that inspired the site-specific mural at Washington University in St. Louis that she unveiled this past February. A 25-foot-tall work that imagines three variations of Deaf-specific afflictions, titled "Stacking Traumas," features musical notes placed atop one another, referencing a

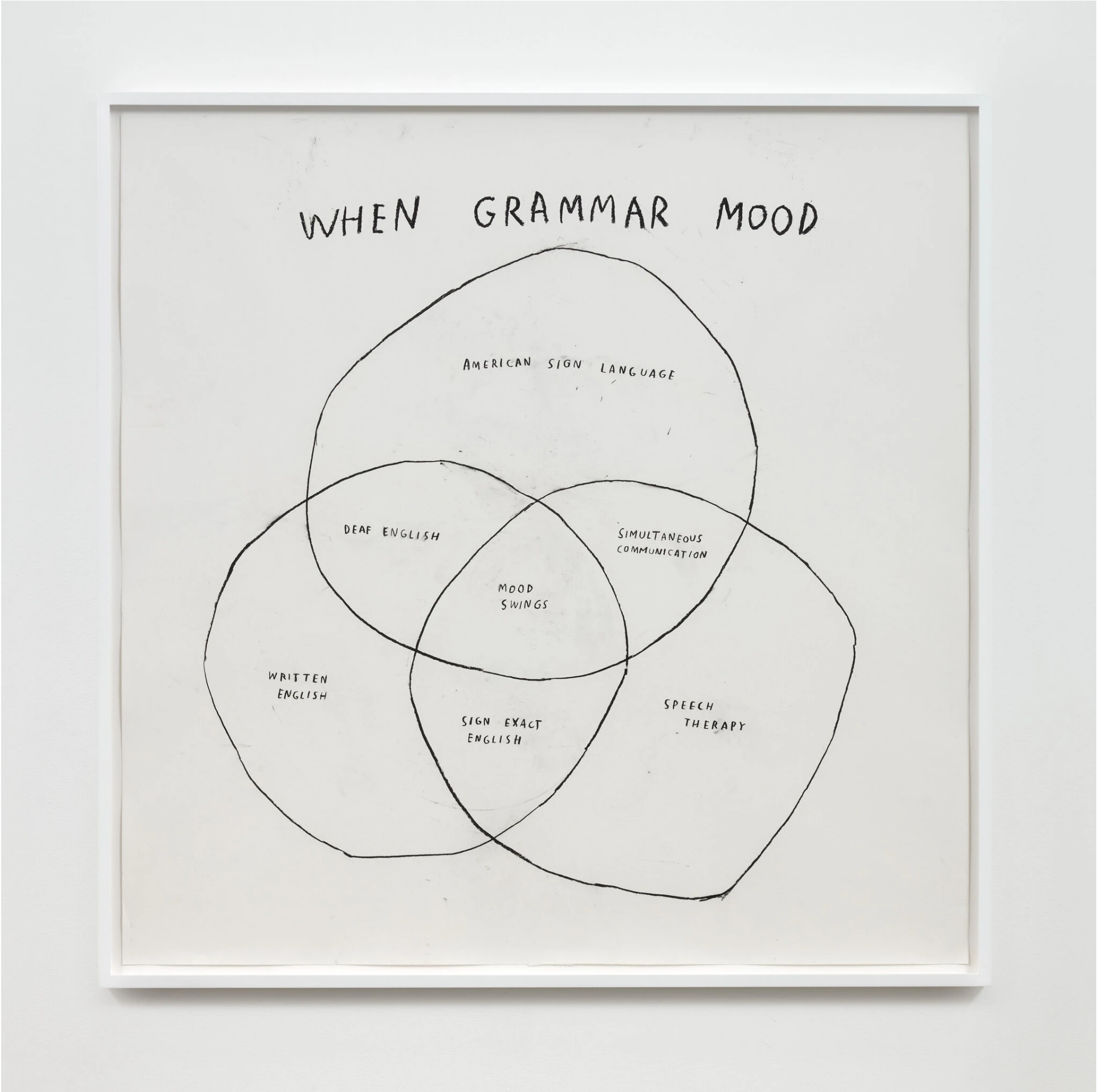


collective indignity. The first is “Dinner Table Syndrome,” or the difficulty of holding court in hearing settings. The second reads “Hearing People Anxiety,” an agita born from navigating the chasms between Deaf and hearing people. At the topmost rung is “Alexander Graham Bell,” his name looming over the others, a hurdle to be cleared.

THIS PAST FALL, Netflix released the first season of the docu-series “Deaf U,” a soapy look at the lives of several undergraduates at Gallaudet, executive produced by the 31-year-old Deaf actor Nyle DiMarco, who graduated from the university in 2013. If the series appears at first like your garden-variety campus reality show — complete with love triangles, unwanted pregnancies and daddy issues — it’s those qualities that make the show’s existence remarkable, radical in its familiarity: Alongside the spectacle of young-adult melodrama is a sense of gravitas, a thread from past to present, for Gallaudet is to the modern Deaf movement what Stonewall was to gay rights. There, in the spring of 1988, the student body successfully protested to demand the resignation of its hearing president and the installation of the school’s first Deaf leader.

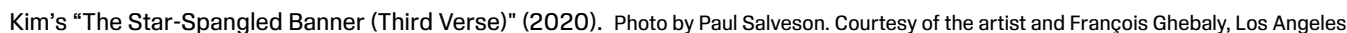
By depicting the familiar theater of college life through sign, “Deaf U” doubles as a rigorous look at A.S.L. in practice, and the social stratification that’s entrenched within it. The generationally or prelingually Deaf, with their mastery of sign language, sit at the highest rungs, while some students are seen as not Deaf *enough*, particularly those who wear hearing aids or cochlear implants. There’s Alexa, the white daughter of Deaf parents and Gallaudet graduates, whose pedigree puts her among the school’s Deaf “elite,” and two of the young men she dates, Rodney and Daequan, both of whom are Black and partially hearing, prompting frank conversations about the fence-straddling this requires of them within a cloistered ecosystem. While filming, the mostly Deaf production team would often call a pause, moving from one unremarkable conversation to a juicier one being held elsewhere. “A lot of our language is based on the face,” DiMarco says. “It’s a subtle movement or twitch of the eyebrow ... so it was [crucial] that Deaf people behind the camera could pick up on those nuances.” During one scene, we see Alexa, seated on a bench in the campus courtyard, crane her neck around to make sure no one is in eyeshot before asking Daequan if he got her pregnant on purpose, signing the words down by her lap, as if to whisper.

One byproduct of “Deaf U” is a better understanding of these idiosyncrasies, embedded in every language but often overlooked in A.S.L., which must contend with the assumption of its inscrutability. Language, its prescriptive parameters drawn by the hearing, has long been considered the domain of sound but, as Kim explains in her 2015 TED Talk, sound “can be felt tactually, or experienced as a visual or even as an idea.” It was not until 1960, with the publication of the linguist William Stokoe’s monograph “Sign Language Structure,” that A.S.L. would recover from the deleterious effects of the oralist movement and be treated academically as a bona fide language. In the six decades since, as Deaf people were once again encouraged to communicate in their native language, there has emerged an understanding of Deafness not as a handicap but as a veritable culture, which, in turn, has nurtured an embrace of its primary exponent: sign language. But it’s no accident that this is happening at a time when all American language, signed or not, is expanding and evolving — look, for instance, to the ways in which Black, Latino and queer vernaculars have filtered into common parlance.



That's why there is something revolutionary about all the A.S.L. content on TikTok, where videos are often supplemented with captions and viewers are just as likely to encounter a brief tutorial in sign language as they are a video of a Deaf person using it at a drive-through. The app functions as a kind of permanent archive of a visual language that is by nature fundamentally untranscribable, and thereby always at risk of erasure. At the beginning of her videos, the 22-year-old Texas-based Nakia Smith dabs lotion on her hands, a habit one might liken to throat clearing. Smith, part of the fourth generation of Deafness in her family, instructs her followers in the intricacies of Black American Sign Language, a dialect she describes as "A.S.L. with seasoning," or broadcasts the failures of accessibility — videos without captions; classrooms without interpreters — that still blunt Deaf integration.

Smith and others use their growing platforms not only as a loudspeaker but as a form of preservation. But how does one safeguard a visual language whose complexity is distorted by the written word? These issues are especially salient in theater, since videos of A.S.L. productions protect only the footage itself, not the words being signed. For this reason, the 41-year-old New York-based Deaf playwright Garrett Zuercher writes in both English and A.S.L., a laborious if not atypical process to which he's become accustomed. "My whole experience has been bilingual, which is very common in the Deaf community," he says.



<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/25/t-magazine/american-sign-language-asl-deaf-culture.html>

Zuercher and several others in the Deaf theater community convened remotely to watch Stephen Sondheim’s “Sweeney Todd” (1979). All Sondheim aficionados, they noted how often the closed captions failed to account for the overlapping density of his dialogue and libretto. “It felt like a watered-down version of Sondheim,” Zuercher told me.

Soon after, he and his friends, including Ridloff, decided to put on their own reading of “Sweeney Todd,” this time in sign, an endeavor that functioned like a restoration: The calculated cadences that had been lost in the subtitles were made clear visually. The group put on another two shows — “Company” (1970) and “Into the Woods” (1986) — and with that, a theater collective, now known as Deaf Broadway, was born, a kind of East Coast counterpart to the 30-year-old Deaf West Theatre in Los Angeles. While closed captions are an invaluable asset to hard-of-hearing viewers, the effects of enjoying a production in one’s native tongue were invigorating. One mother got in touch with Deaf Broadway to let them know that though her hearing children were fans of the 2014 film adaptation of “Into the Woods,” it was not until seeing the signed iteration that her Deaf child connected with it, too. To Zuercher, “that is proof that captions don’t do it — access *in sign language* is what really provides understanding.”

SO, TOO, DOES seeing oneself onscreen, though for the 17-year-old Pennsylvania-based actor Millicent Simmonds, those moments of recognition have always been scarce. When Deaf characters *have* been depicted onscreen, they’re often played by hearing actors; even in “Children of a Lesser God,” for which the Deaf actor Marlee Matlin received an Academy Award in 1987, dialogue in American Sign Language is frequently obscured by the film’s editing. It’s this history that’s motivated Simmonds to see her own work — which includes roles in “Wonderstruck” (2017), “A Quiet Place” (2018) and its sequel, to be released later this year — as a corrective. Without sign language, she says, “I wouldn’t have a relationship with my own family, I wouldn’t have communication.”

This process of coming to recognize Deafness as a way of life, rather than a lesser one, likewise unfolds in the recent film “Sound of Metal,” directed by Darius Marder and starring Riz Ahmed, who learned sign language for the role. About halfway through the film, Ahmed’s character, Ruben, who has lost his hearing after years spent touring as a heavy metal drummer, decides to get a cochlear implant, a neuroprosthetic device that stimulates the auditory nerves to create the sensation of hearing. But among his cohabitants at the Deaf commune where he spends much of the film, this procedure is seen as an affront. “Everybody here shares in the belief that being Deaf is not ... something to fix,” his mentor tells him.

Therein lies an enduring ideological divide that “Sound of Metal” broaches but doesn’t adjudicate. Instead, the film makes an argument for a life lived richly, with sign language but *without* sound. Deafness is not sanitized of hardship; having spent countless hours in audiology consultations myself on account of my own hearing deficit, I can say Marder deftly captures the essential alarm and shame of that ordeal, particularly as Ruben first experiences sound as it’s communicated through his implant, somewhat garbled and motorized, not like he remembers. But neither is Deafness pathologized, as it so often is onscreen, or equated with a kind of sensory or spiritual impoverishment.

To help faithfully represent the Deaf experience, Marder enlisted Jeremy Lee Stone, 32, who has a minor role in the film and taught Ahmed sign language at the actor’s Brooklyn home. Their initial conversations had to do with Deaf identity, “capital D, relating to the culture and history, versus lowercase d, meaning deaf in the medical sense,” as Stone distinguishes it. Gradually, he submitted the actor to a rigorous process of A.S.L. instruction, wherein Ahmed had to, as Stone says, “remove his identity and become a different character.” At a cafe, when Stone and Ahmed were practicing sign language and a waiter came by to take their orders, Stone would not let Ahmed speak on their behalf, making him order his drink just as his character would. “I wanted him to experience ... that frustration of not being able to communicate clearly, the misunderstanding that happens,” Stone says.

As we spoke via Zoom, I asked what he thought was the most common misperception about A.S.L. If a picture is worth a thousand words, then “one sign is worth a million,” he eventually answered, though Stone realized immediately that the adage did not truly demonstrate the vitality of what he refers to as a multidimensional language, through which meaning, concepts and behaviors that might require several sentences to describe verbally can be expressed with the flick of a wrist, a furrow of the brow, the body acting as a proscenium before which one can stage an infinite number of scenes. “It’s hard to describe,” he added. Then he thought better of it and showed me instead.

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