

Introduction

The image on the front cover is a detail of Randy Garber's 2011 *Made in Translation* from her series of the same name. The piece consists of a five-foot-eighteen-inch rectangular copper panel, above which coil bits of copper wire. At times resembling pieces of mesh and at others organic shapes—leaves, branches, buds—the intricate twists of the wires create both depth, which is heightened by the variegated tones of the copper background, and a sense of something coming alive, reaching outward toward the viewer. The translation of the copper into these various textures and dimensions results in the creation of something complex and difficult to decipher but nonetheless vibrant and vital. Like much of the modernist work I discuss, rather than transmitting a “message,” the piece highlights the communicative processes through which we are accustomed to receiving information. One of these is alluded to through the use of the wires, which evoke the copper telecoils found in hearing aids and cochlear implants that boost magnetic signals from telephones and hearing loops, translating sound waves into magnetic signals so that users can access specific sounds more directly. The tangles of copper appear to be messages caught in the middle of this process, information translated into another form but not yet decoded.

In “Conversing and Reversing,” Garber explains, “I suggest this liminal state in my work by creating ambiguous abstract forms, open-ended narratives and unsettling spaces and figures that hover between the volumetric and flat. Thus the imagery expresses not only my particular experience of navigating through auditory distortion, but also reveals

the elusive nature of communication.”¹ As the twisted wires of *Made in Translation* reach out past the frame of the background, refusing to be pinned down or straightened into coherent meaning, they connote both the specific difficulties of an individual attempting to make sense of an oral utterance she cannot process aurally and the universal experience of the way meaning is transformed as it is passed between media, languages, and minds. Garber’s embodied experience of deafness, that is, opens onto broad questions about the processes through which we signify, the relationship between different forms and modalities of language, and what is artistically made (rather than lost or even just found) in recognizing these diverse types of communication by attempting to translate between them.

This sense of the deep intersections between deafness and artistic and linguistic experimentation around sites of indeterminacy, embodiment, translation, and trace drives my exploration of the connections between critical Deafness and modernist studies throughout *Deafening Modernism*. In developing a Deaf theory that engages with but is not restricted to identity-based understandings of deafness, I draw on Lenard Davis’s work on Deaf critical insight. In his influential *Enforcing Normalcy*, Davis explores the potential of “deafness as a critical modality,” as a series of metaphors and assumptions pertaining to both bodies and languages. Rather than operating solely as a biological fact, or even a social construction, he suggests, deafness can also function as a lens through which we gain new appreciation of issues such as silence and voice that are central to literary works.² To deafen is to “deprive of the power of hearing, to stun with noise,” a definition that is itself revealing of some of the valuable critical work such a concept might perform.³ So deeply enmeshed in our language use is the concept of sound that even the ways we describe the absence of audition cannot help but make reference to it. Beginning to unpack some of this auditory bias in our approach to language initiates a process of revealing what this bias has heretofore obscured.

For Davis, the deafened moment par excellence is that of reading. Since the advent of the printing press, the main way most people have experienced literary texts has been through a process of silent reading. Although we tend to emphasize the acoustic elements of language, words on a page are surrounded by silence. By forcing us to encounter language without sound, the act of reading itself becomes deafening. As Davis explains, “By the deafened moment, I am speaking (writing) of a contextual position, a dialectical moment in the reading/critical process, that is

defined by the acknowledgement on the part of the reader/writer/critic that he or she is part of a process that does not involve speaking of hearing.⁴ But as the phrasing itself points out, our language strains against the notion of this silence, infusing the ways we think about writing. To write something is still to “say” it. As the definition highlights, the process of deafening is not a neutral one. Deafening refers to “a silence with heavy significance; spec: a conspicuous failure to respond to or comment on a matter.”⁵ Our “conspicuous failure” to respond to the notion of deafening other than through recourse to lack and negativity (“to deprive” of a “power”) has obscured the ways that approaching deafening as one incarnation of crip epistemic insight can expand our perspective on how languages function in literary contexts.⁶ To deafen is also to bring into dialogue with the culture and history of the Deaf, a minority group still often not recognized as such. In focusing on the auditory elements of language, we miss the insights that Deaf history and language can provide into “issues about representation, communication, [and] ideology.”⁷

Deafening modernism, then, involves both cultural and historical recovery—situating literary modernism in the context of the history of a frequently ignored minority—and the development of a critical lens, which I will variously term Deaf insight or Deaf epistemology.⁸ This process will also help reveal some of the elements of modernist language to which we have been deafened by the incredibly powerful and institutionalized accounts of the period that have tended to exclude the deaf. Having reclaimed this context, *Deafening Modernism* engages studies of American Sign Language (ASL), a language that itself is distinguished by its inherent embodiment and visibility, to explore modernist literary experimentation.⁹ The project’s focus on modernism derives from that period’s surprisingly pervasive interest in these experiments at the intersections of words, bodies, and images and the wealth of pragmatic and theoretical knowledge that Deaf culture can bring to their analysis. The process of deafening modernism, I suggest throughout, forces into silence our received readings of the period, providing us the opportunity to interrogate some of the assumptions about what language can and should look like that, in addition to being critical to literary developments at the time, continue to shape the ways we think about language and, through it, ourselves.

In this study, I have very deliberately chosen to concentrate on modernist works that are neither by nor about individuals who are deaf. While there remains a great deal of work to be done recovering and analyzing such works, my interest here is in examining the ways in which

Deaf studies illuminates texts with no obvious or literal connection to deafness.¹⁰ In order to make the case for the relevance of Deaf insight to central issues within modernist literary studies, I have focused, with a few notable exceptions, on canonical texts. The Deaf-authored texts I do discuss—selections of contemporary ASL poetry—will serve as a basis for developing and illustrating a Deaf poetics, which I argue helpfully illuminates modernist literature. The decision not to address early twentieth-century texts by or about deaf people is both pragmatic and political. ASL was not recognized as a language until 1965, and ASL poetics did not really take off until the 1980s. As a result, deaf literature from the early twentieth century was by and large neither conceptualized nor performed in ASL. Moreover, the novelty and relative scarcity of film cameras at the time means that we have very few preserved examples of signing of any kind from the period. Beyond pragmatics, my selection of primary texts speaks to a gap within disability studies scholarship. While literary disability studies has repeatedly asserted the relevance of disability to all people, whether or not they identify as disabled, in practice the vast majority of disability and Deaf studies works focus on texts in which explicit references to disability or recognizably disabled bodies are present. This is an understandable strategy, but it unfortunately contributes to the mistaken belief that disability insight is only applicable in such contexts.

The problems with this logic become apparent when “Deaf” or “disabled” are substituted for other minority groups, particularly those for which there is a longer history of scholarship.¹¹ As Toni Morrison influentially argued three decades ago, a consideration of minority experience, specifically what she called an Africanist or black presence, is “central to any understanding of our national literature and should not be permitted to hover at the margins of the literary imagination.”¹² This “minority” perspective is key not only because it adds to “majority” discourse but also because it fundamentally restructures it, an insight that has in many ways shaped the direction of literary scholarship over the past fifty years. It would seem rather absurd (one hopes) to argue that critical discussions of race should be limited to texts that prominently feature bodies of color or that queer theory provides valuable perspectives only when the characters or authors being considered belong to a sexual minority. But somehow the otherwise familiar notion that the margin constitutes the center loses its grip when it comes to discussions of disabled bodies. In writing a book about modernism and deafness that is not about deaf bodies in modernist texts, it is not at all my intention to

suggest that deaf bodies be marginalized within the discourse; throughout the book, I argue for renewed analysis of the embodied nature of language. I am, however, interested in expanding the scope of literary disability studies by demonstrating the broad and nonidentitarian ways in which it might interact with other fields of study.

Closeting Disability

The assumption of disability studies' limited relevance within the academy at large and the associated reflex to attempt to ghettoize disability derive from a series of deeply held but often-occluded cultural beliefs about normative embodiment, issues that critical analysis of disability brings to the surface. In addition to the deeply problematic desire to make invisible a group that, at 15 percent of the American population, represents the largest physical minority in the country, this impulse to marginalize both disabled individuals and discussions of disability represents a basic misunderstanding about the nature of disability itself.¹³ While the pragmatics of negotiating daily experiences (often, more specifically, the legal structure established by the Americans with Disabilities Act) may require establishing a line between "disabled" and "nondisabled" bodies, in reality all bodies exist on a spectrum of ability and disability. Moreover, for most people, the status of the majority of these abilities remains in flux throughout their lives, and the meaning of a particular ability or disability can change dramatically based on context.¹⁴ The experience of a visual impairment, for example, signifies something quite different when one is navigating a familiar route with a white cane as opposed to when one is in a new environment without a cane. While the idea that disability has no fixed meaning, or that everyone can in some way be thought of as disabled, problematically eschews the very real experiential differences between bodies that exist at different places on this spectrum, the deconstruction of the disabled/not-disabled binary usefully demonstrates the ways in which everyone has a very real and direct stake in discussions of and attitudes toward disability. While people do not wake up and find themselves a member of a different race or gender (without, at any rate, a great deal of expensive and informed consent on their part), many do wake up and find themselves disabled. Indeed, all bodies, if they live long enough, will become disabled.

Questions about normative embodiment raised by disability studies, therefore, apply to all of us. Not only, as Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell put it, does "the deficient body, by virtue of its insufficiency,

serve[] as the baseline for the articulation of the normal body”; it raises the potentially unsettling notion that there is, in fact, no such normal body at all.¹⁵ Disability reminds us of our mutability and, through it, our mortality. The fluidity of many kinds of disability also calls into question the presumed stasis of other forms of identification. As Lenard Davis argues in *Bending Over Backwards*, “inability spells the end of many identity groups; in fact it can create a dismodernist approach to disability as a nonidentity.”¹⁶ Disability provides a concrete example of the theoretical commonplace that identity is constantly in flux in ways we cannot always control.

This tension between how we like to think about our bodies and the ways our bodies actually experience the world has become a critical issue in the reevaluation of what we mean by the term “disabled.” Somewhat ironically, given the emphasis on nonnormative embodiment apparently at the core of disability theory, the body itself has proven something of a sticking point. As Tobin Siebers explains, embodiment “appears as a bone of contention in disability studies because it seems caught between competing models of disability.”¹⁷ In line with the rise of diagnostic medicine and the surveillance of the body that Michel Foucault and others have chronicled, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the disabled body was perceived primarily as a problem to be fixed.¹⁸ According to this medical model, such corrective intervention was necessary either by modern medicine or (if that was not possible) the modern institution. In response to this demeaning of nonnormative bodies (which is to say all bodies), the disability rights movements of the 1960s and ’70s argued that disability should instead be understood as a social problem; while an individual might be born with particular impairments, these only become disabilities when that person is put in a situation in which the social and/or physical environment is not accommodating. In this view, disability is largely a question of design. An individual with a mobility impairment, for example, only becomes disabled when confronted with a set of stairs. If we lived in a world that was designed to accommodate a wider range of physical and mental abilities rather than one that restricted access, the theory goes, disability would all but vanish.

As Siebers and others have pointed out, while the social model has been incredibly important, both in gaining political rights for the disabled and in reshaping the ways in which disabled individuals think of themselves, it also raises several problems of its own. Following the logic of the social model to its conclusion, one is left with the rather

unsettling notion that there is no physical difference at all. If all bodies are disabled, then none are. While this might present a desirable ideal of human inclusiveness (a point that is itself debatable), it does not realistically represent the world that we currently inhabit, a world that is structured around differences that, while many may be exacerbated or produced by social inequality, do in fact include a range of bodily abilities. If an individual's vision is measured at 20/600, no amount of accommodation is going to make her able to read a book in standard print, and to deny this does violence to the lived reality of her body, suggesting that her experiences are not valid or significant. As Tom Shakespeare puts it, "the social model so strongly disowns individual and medical approaches, that it risks implying that impairment is not a problem."¹⁹ Because "the social model defines disability as oppression," it also seems to foreclose on other, potentially more productive, ways of understanding disability.²⁰ The task ahead for disability studies, it would seem, is to develop understandings of disability that are able to take account of what Siebers refers to as "complex embodiment" while simultaneously recognizing (and seeking to ameliorate) the social factors that contribute to disablement.²¹

Where disability studies challenges our assumptions about bodily norms, Deaf studies puts pressure on those we make about linguistic practices. One of the reasons for the marginalization of Deaf studies (and people) has been ongoing misunderstandings about those practices. In addition to discomfort potentially raised by the fact that anyone can become deaf (and that nearly everyone will sooner or later experience some degree of hearing loss), the central premise of Deaf studies—that the Deaf are a cultural minority that possesses a distinct and complete language—shatters the myth of the universality of spoken language. It forces us to reevaluate our assumptions about what languages can look like and how they can function. As language is believed by many people to represent the dividing line between humans and other kinds of animals, any tinkering with these assumptions is met with icy resistance by those who feel their perceptions of themselves and their ways of defining their very humanity are being threatened.

Anxiety over definitions of language perhaps partly explains the incredible slowness with which the notion of ASL as a complete and natural language has spread beyond the Deaf community.²² ASL was not recognized as a language until the 1965 publication of William Stokoe's *A Dictionary of American Sign Language on Linguistic Principles* and was not acknowledged by the Modern Language Association as a real

language until 1997.²³ As Brenda Jo Brueggemann has noted, prior to that it had been listed as an “invented” language, immediately preceding Klingon.²⁴ It is still a widely held misconception, even among those who are highly educated, that ASL is not fully equivalent to other languages, that it is just a version of English on the hands or a system of gestural iconography. The pervasiveness of these beliefs can be measured in the fact that many doctors continue to counsel new parents against signing with their deaf infants because it will supposedly impede their acquisition of “real” language.²⁵

In addition to the discriminatory logic of this line of thinking, it is self-defeating in that it has prevented generations of linguists and other scholars from recognizing the ways ASL might illuminate their work. By virtue of the fact that signed languages operate in a visual modality, they offer exciting insights into the nature of language and human communication. This modality also makes them uniquely qualified to provide new perspectives on questions of the visual and embodiment within the context of literature. To begin to access these ideas, to deafen our discussions of modernist literature, involves an ironic undoing of the silence or “failure to respond” to issues surrounding Deaf culture and language that have caused us to overlook the ways these discourses can productively inform our understanding of English-language texts. While the political importance of recognizing this minority group and its contributions to wider culture are of great import and should not be overlooked, the matter is not merely one of inclusiveness. When we retrain ourselves to pay attention, to “listen” to things beyond the verbal, we find that Deaf culture and language have a great deal to say about concerns that are central to mainstream culture and, for the purposes of this study in particular, American literary modernism.

Language Politics

My discussion of modernism focuses on four areas that dominated writing during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as well as later critical analysis of it: impersonality, primitivism, difficulty, and the image. Just as signed languages push us to reconsider the possibilities of language, modernist writers’ desire to “make it new” through experimentation in these areas challenged preconceptions about the ways language could produce or destabilize meaning.²⁶ Part of the impetus for many of these experimental practices in the United States arose from contemporary cultural and political attitudes toward

language, in particular, a push for standardization against which many writers situated themselves. The emphasis on linguistic conformity had dramatic consequences for the fledgling American Deaf community, as well as for other American linguistic minorities, and reintegrating Deaf studies into the narrative of American linguistic politics and practices necessitates examining Deaf history in conversation with these broader developments.

American English has always been a porous and shifting language. Even before European colonization of the Americas, the language was already being enriched through borrowings such as “guava,” “hammock,” “iguana,” “canoe,” and “manatee,” all of which were taken from an English-language translation of Pietro Matire d’Anghiera’s *De orbe novo* in 1555.²⁷ Linguistic contact between indigenous Americans and waves of multilingual European settlers, as well as the individuals arriving as slaves from various parts of Africa, resulted in a richly diverse idiom that predated the establishment of the nation. Many communities maintained their native language for both daily activities and publishing purposes. So much non-English-language material was produced during colonial times, in fact, that the British Parliament identified it as a means to generate revenue. The Stamp Act of 1765 included a specific tariff against non-English publications: “For every skin or piece of vellum or parchment, or sheet or piece of paper, on which any instrument, proceeding, or other matter or thing aforesaid, shall be ingrossed, written, or printed, within the said colonies and plantations, in any other than the English language, a stamp duty of double the amount of the respective duties being charged thereon.”²⁸ As these examples demonstrate, later attempts at constructed nostalgia around a supposed “purer” usage of American English were entirely fictional; the universal usage of any form of English, much less a particular version of it, had never constituted an experiential reality in North America.

This linguistic diversity persisted through the founding of the nation. Indeed, as Alexis de Tocqueville posits in *Democracy in America*, its perpetuation can be thought of as a direct result of democratic government. By doing away with an aristocratic system that strictly separated people based on their socioeconomic station, linguistic borrowings and subsequent blurring were able to occur in all directions: “The constant restlessness at the center of a democracy leads . . . to endless developments in the language. . . . Besides, democratic nations like change for its own sake, which is as obvious in language as politics. Even when they do not need to change words, they sometimes feel the desire to do so.”²⁹

For Tocqueville, such linguistic blending marked a productive shift away from aristocratic systems, in which both social station and linguistic behavior were more rigidly fixed. This tendency toward iconoclasm continued to be bolstered by America's status as a nation of immigrants. As Richard Bailey explains, from its founding through the beginning of the nineteenth century, "America was not demanding a rapid assimilations of other languages to English."³⁰ As had been the case in pre-Revolutionary America, immigrant communities within the country often maintained their native languages. Politicians took to recruiting new immigrants by publicizing the country in foreign languages. Citizenship status in early America, that is, was not dependent on the mastery, or even necessarily the usage, of English.

This productive tension of a national identity founded on the absence of a coherent identity came to be seen in a decidedly different light in the years surrounding the American Civil War.³¹ In its aftermath, cultural diversity was perceived as contributing to the diverse political allegiances that threatened the existence of the nation. As part of that cultural diversity, linguistic difference was met with increasing skepticism. Anxieties over what it meant to call oneself "American," and the political stakes of there being no singular answer to the question, continued to trouble politicians and cultural commentators throughout the century following the war.

These tensions were exacerbated in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by an explosion in immigration. Between 1836 and 1914 alone, over 30 million Europeans migrated to the country.³² By 1910, at a time when the country's entire population was just over 92 million, there were 13.5 million immigrants living in the United States. Congress responded by passing a series of laws restricting immigration: first the Page Act in 1875, which was followed in quick succession by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the Naturalization Act of 1906, the Immigration Act of 1921, the Emergency Quota Act of 1921, and the Immigration Act of 1924. Despite attempts to limit who was permitted into the country, the waves of newcomers had a profound impact on the nation, especially in light of the fact that, unlike the firm sense of national culture and identity that many brought with them, America was still in the process of attempting to identify itself as a unified country.

Further complicating matters, in 1898 the U.S. stepped onto the world stage as an imperial power.³³ Following its victory in the Spanish-American War, the United States gained control of Puerto Rico, Guam, the Philippines, and (temporarily) Cuba. That same year, it annexed Alaska, further

extending the noncontiguous borders of the nation. At a time when many European powers were moving away from this variety of imperialism, the U.S. was just getting started. What this meant in terms of national identity was that the country now consisted of even more individuals who did not share a single history, culture, appearance, or language. The linguistic diversity that resulted is attested by a late nineteenth-century New York City guidebook, which described newspapers in “Russian, Swedish and Norwegian, Danish, Portuguese, Greek, Arabic, Chinese, Hebrew, and almost every language in the world.”³⁴ In 1900 in Chicago, a city geographically removed from most other nations, it is estimated that two-thirds of the population spoke languages other than English; a staggering 500,000 spoke German, 125,000 spoke Polish, 100,000 spoke Swedish, 90,000 spoke Czech, and 50,000 spoke Norwegian.³⁵

Unable to do much of anything about diversity in general, many Americans turned to language with an obsessive vigor that makes little sense when removed from this context. Unlike skin color or heritage, language, it was believed, could be modified. And nativists accordingly fixated on this process. As early American history demonstrates, there is no historical basis for the claim of a singular American English producing a unified body politic. Once the idea took hold, however, the construction of such a language rapidly became much more than just a matter of convenience. One of the clearest examples of the link made between communicative efficacy and larger questions of national identity is the Ford Language School, established by Henry Ford at his plant in 1914. In addition to providing language instruction, the school also regulated employees’ hygiene and social interaction by appealing to the need for greater industrial efficiency. At the school, the notion of becoming more American, the stated goal for pupils, was a question of working in a manner that produced maximum financial profit, which would in turn contribute to the prosperity of the nation. Here and elsewhere, linguistic and cultural assimilation were explicitly linked to industrialized productivity.

In order to assimilate people into this hyperefficient language community, it was first necessary to determine precisely what American English was. An American Academy of Language (to be modeled on the French Academy) was proposed in 1894 with the goal of answering that question, and organizations such as the National Speech League, founded in 1916 by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), and the Linguistic Society of America (1924) sprang up with a similar purpose. Part of the stated work of such groups was to separate American English from other varieties, a differentiation signaled by the promulgation of

potential names for this national language: “American,” “Amerenglish,” “Statish,” “Unitedstatish,” “Inglis,” or “Americane.”³⁶

The notion of an “Amerenglish” quickly took on regulatory power. In 1907, Theodore Roosevelt declared, “We have room for but one language in this country, and that is the English language, for we intend to see that the crucible turns our people out as Americans, of American nationality, and not as dwellers in a polyglot boarding house.”³⁷ Roosevelt believed that this linguistic preference should have specifically political consequences, and many people agreed. In the 1920s, individual states began issuing language legislation. The 1923 Illinois law, for example, declared that “the official language of the State of Illinois shall be known as the ‘American’ language,” neatly separating America from both the foreign languages of immigrants and British English.³⁸ The implications on the social and political standing of individuals who did not speak English, or who did not speak it normatively, were far-reaching. As Roosevelt put it in “Americanism,” “No man can be a good citizen if he is not at least in the process of learning to speak the language of his fellow citizens.”³⁹ For many people, “American” came to signify “one who is fluent in American English,” an idea put into law by the Naturalization Act of 1906, the first law to establish English-language literacy as a requirement for citizenship.

The force of this political argument was bolstered by the entry of the United States in the First World War, a conflict that introduced new waves of xenophobia, as well as a renewed desire for a recognizably American identity. In this context, as Joshua L. Miller explains, language “became understood as a surrogate for race and class differences. Those who could not or chose not to speak English or who spoke it in unfamiliar accents came to be viewed as unpatriotic and potentially subversive threats to national unity.”⁴⁰ Where racial and religious discrimination might be frowned on, language remained (and, indeed, remains), by and large, an acceptable social prejudice.⁴¹ Individuals who did not speak “standard” English were no longer “merely” different; that difference had a series of negative values attached. And, as the Ford schools demonstrated, this linguistic regulation often went hand in hand with other forms of enforced bodily conformity. Nowhere was this more clearly demonstrated than in the treatment of America’s two indigenous non-English speaking populations: Native Americans and the deaf, whose socially vulnerable position enabled the government to remove them from their homes and place them in boarding schools where they could be forcibly restricted from using their languages.

Boarding Schools

While there are obvious and very significant differences between the experiences of Native and deaf Americans, the similarities in the use of boarding schools to eradicate native language as a way to assimilate children into a perceived societal norm reveal the extent to which people in power were willing to go in order to perpetuate the illusion of America as a monolingual nation. Boarding schools had long been part of the indigenous experience, from mission schools to the indigenously run schools of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In the late nineteenth century, however, mirroring the broader shift in attitudes toward American identity and language discussed earlier, these schools changed their pedagogical approach. After the Civil War, the government became more interested in establishing unified control over the schools. As Edward P. Smith, then commissioner of Indian Affairs, explained, the elimination of indigenous languages was key to that process. A boarding school, he argued, “takes the youth under constant care, has him always at hand, and surrounds him by an English-speaking community.”⁴² As the 1880 Board of Indian Commissioners annual report put it, “We no longer hear advocated among really civilized men the theory of extermination, a theory that would disgrace the wildest savage. As we must have him among us, self-interest, humanity and Christianity require that we should accept the situation and go resolutely to work to make him a safe and useful factor in our body politic.”⁴³ Parallel to Roosevelt’s speeches, the report links linguistic conformity to the health of the state.⁴⁴

Similarly interested in linguistic assimilation was Captain Richard Henry Pratt, the man credited with developing the modern American Indian boarding school system. Pratt’s experience working with American Indians came from working with prisoners of war in Florida, an important reminder of both the close temporal links between the Indian Wars of the nineteenth century and the establishment of boarding schools, as well as the strict regulatory nature of such institutions. Pratt felt that for a Native American child to achieve “absorption into our national life with all the rights and privileges guaranteed to every other individual,” he would have to “lose[] all his Indian ways, even his language.”⁴⁵ The impact of Pratt’s philosophy was far reaching. By 1889, of the 36,000 American Indian children educated in boarding schools, 10,500 of them were in schools that followed Pratt’s model.⁴⁶

In the early twentieth century, the schools’ pedagogy underwent another substantive shift. Whereas Pratt had believed in a fundamental

equality between humans (that everyone was born a virtual blank slate and that differences were caused by inequalities in education), new policies that I discuss in more detail in chapter 2 came increasingly to be modeled on the logic that there were inherent and hierarchical differences between races. The perception of these differences contributed to the force with which language policies were implemented at the schools. Children were forbidden from using their native languages, and breaking this rule was met with the same punishment as if a child “used obscene language, fought, [or] stole property”: teachers and principals “withheld food,” “forced children to march, mop floors . . . or clean filthy bathrooms.”²⁴⁷ These punishments taught children to perceive speaking their native language as equivalent to committing acts of theft or violence. The penalties for the offenses varied but could include corporal punishment: “Teachers slapped the palms of hands, made students stand in the corner, lie on the floor in front of classmates, wear dunce caps, stand on one foot, and clean mortar between bricks with a toothbrush.”²⁴⁸ Older students were sometimes involved, “whipping the backs, buttocks, and thighs of boys and girls.”²⁴⁹ The use of non-English language, these penalties aimed to teach students, was a source of shame, something to be associated with embarrassment and pain.

The restricted environment of the boarding school—deliberately designed to separate children from their families and “Indian ways”—coupled with the youth of pupils made these schools a striking example of the reach of the government into the lives of its citizens and of the lengths to which it was willing to go to assimilate them into “our national life.” In broader society, the government’s options in terms of restricting language use were confined to passing “new laws, deportation threats, and other forms of social intimidation.”²⁵⁰ In the schools, however, there were few, if any, checks on what instructors could do. It was in this context in the nineteenth century that institutions for the deaf came to increasingly (and, ultimately, almost exclusively) center around linguistic assimilation, often employing similar tactics to indigenous schools to achieve their ends. To unpack these parallels, I begin with a brief history of attitudes toward signed language leading up to the late nineteenth century.

History of Sign

Signed languages have been central to the development of modern Deaf pride and identity. “As long as we have deaf people on this earth,”

declared National Association of the Deaf (NAD) president George Veditz in 1913, “we will have signs.”⁵¹ And, as passing references throughout Western literature demonstrate, as long as there have been communities of deaf people, this has indeed been the case. The earliest of these references comes in Plato’s *Cratylus*, in which Socrates ponders the nature of names. “Answer me this,” Socrates commands Hermogenes: “If we hadn’t a voice or a tongue, and wanted to express things to one another, wouldn’t we try to make signs by moving our hands, head, and the rest of our body, just as dumb people do at present?”⁵² Rather than being an aberration, as signed languages came to be viewed in certain circles in the twentieth century, Plato highlights the commonsense nature of their employment among the deaf. His ability to call to mind this image of signers as an example for his argument and his assumption that the reference will be familiar to Hermogenes suggest that deaf signers were not an infrequent sight in ancient Greece.

Plato was not alone among great Western thinkers in taking this view. Leonardo da Vinci similarly held that it was obvious and natural that the deaf would communicate manually, employing “movements of their hands and eyes and eyebrows and their whole person, in their desire to express that which is in their minds.”⁵³ The association of the deaf with signs, the notion that they might be the “natural” mode of communication for individuals who could not process auditory language, in other words, has significant historical precedent. In both these accounts, signs are presented as effective means to communicate, a successful substitute for spoken language. There is no sense given that these gestures are inadequate to “express what is in their minds.”

The perception of sign language as an effective, natural mode of communication for the deaf continued through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Numerous philosophers were fascinated with what they called languages of gesture, and some became convinced that they were the forerunners of all language. While it was not the common view, René Descartes even held that “signs” employed by those “born deaf and dumb” represented a complete language.⁵⁴ The English doctor John Bulwer dedicated much of his working life to the idea that the language of gesture was the best means to educate the deaf. In *Chirologia, or, the Natural Language of the Hand*, he marveled at “that wonder of necessity which nature worketh in men that are both deafe and dumbe; who can argue and dispute rhetorically by signes, and with a kind of logistique eloquence overcome their amaz’d opponents; wherein some are so ready and excellent, they seeme to want nothing to have their meanings

perfectly understood.”⁵⁵ The idea of a more “natural” language was a source of fascination because it seemed to suggest a link to the language used by man before the Fall, one, it was imagined, that had universal meaning and that was not artificially constructed.

Étienne Bonnot de Condillac was similarly convinced that a form of sign language, which he referred to as “the language of action,” had predated spoken ones. What interested him most about such languages was their instantaneousness. While spoken language required that elements follow one another in a linear sequence, Condillac observed that in the language of action, one could communicate numerous pieces of information simultaneously. Accordingly, and anticipating the work of later scholars of ASL, he came to regard sign as the “language of simultaneous ideas,” a point to which I return in chapter 3.⁵⁶ Although Jean-Jacques Rousseau believed that verbal speech was generally superior to sign, he also argued in *On the Origin of Language* that “visual forms are more varied than sounds, and more expressive, saying more in less time.”⁵⁷ By moving beyond some of the inherent limitations of verbal communication, Condillac and Rousseau suggested, sign was not merely compensatory but might provide additional communicative possibilities that speech did not.

The two also reasoned that, because signs were directly connected with “natural” meaning and feeling, they represented a more honest form of communication. While these connections with nature later became problematic, what such attitudes offered at the time was a primarily nonpejorative (if still potentially condescending) way of thinking about signed languages. And after the once-dominant attitude that the deaf were not fully human, and therefore could not be taught, began to fade away, clergymen’s initial attempts to share with them the word of the Christian god followed from this association. While teaching the deaf to speak (to “pass” to the greatest extent possible) was considered a goal, instruction at schools for the deaf was initially conducted in a combination of signs and speech. In 1755, Charles-Michel Abbé de l’Épée established the first free school for the deaf in Paris, France. This school, and others that followed, allowed deaf children, most of whom had never encountered other deaf people before, the opportunity to share the signs they had developed to communicate with their families and neighbors. Because these signs were thought of as a visible representation of speech, rather than a language with its own grammar (an idea that was nearly two centuries off), the home signs were standardized into an official French Sign Language that attempted to impose French grammar and

word order onto the pupils' sign systems. Across the channel, in 1760, Thomas Braidwood established Braidwood's Academy for the Deaf and Dumb in Edinburgh, and in 1783, he moved it to London. The Braidwoodian method of education involved a combined method of a forerunner to British Sign Language and speech training.

Despite these developments in Europe, educational prospects for deaf American children remained quite limited. They were either placed in hearing schools, where they could not understand the instructor, or kept at home. Into this scene came Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, a young preacher who fell into the world of education after meeting Alice Cogswell, the nine-year-old deaf daughter of his neighbor. In 1815, frustrated with the lack of available information on how to best educate Alice, Mason Cogswell asked Gallaudet to travel to Europe, in the hope that he would find a model in the deaf schools there that could be imported to the States. Arriving first in Great Britain, Gallaudet found himself rebuffed at the oral Braidwood school, which was hesitant to share its methods. Gallaudet did, however, meet Abbé Sicard, the head of the *Institution Nationale des Sourds-Muets à Paris*, and two of his students, Laurent Clerc and Jean Massieu, who invited Gallaudet to Paris to visit their school and to learn French Sign Language. Impressed by both the school and the highly educated Clerc, Gallaudet persuaded him to relocate to America, where the two founded the American School for the Deaf in 1817.

Following the French approach, American schools employed sign (or, more accurately, Simultaneous Communication) to educate students.⁵⁸ Before this time, deaf individuals had been spread out across the country, and the school provided one of the first opportunities for large groups of deaf people from diverse locations to congregate and share language, experiences, and culture. This situation, in which individuals find shared culture away from home rather than with their families, explains the central role that Deaf schools played within Deaf culture. Many of these early students hailed from Martha's Vineyard, an island off Cape Cod in New England that was home to the first Deaf community in the country. Because of a high rate of genetic deafness—in the late 1800s, one in 155 people was born deaf, nearly thirty times the national average—it was, for nearly two centuries, just as common to find islanders communicating with sign as with English. Both hearing and deaf islanders signed, creating an environment that was accessible for all.⁵⁹ Students arriving at Gallaudet's school brought this language with them, where it mixed with the French Sign Language of

Clerc and the home signs of other students to create the language that in the 1960s came to be called American Sign Language.

At the time, however, even educators who supported the use of sign language misunderstood its significance. Sign was believed to be a universal language, despite the empirical evidence demonstrating that sign languages of various nations were mutually unintelligible. While educators of the deaf who supported the use of signs (manualists) argued that sign was, in fact, a language, they described it as a language of pantomime or gesture. Helmer Myklebust summarized this view in *Psychology of Deafness*, arguing, “The Manual sign language used by the deaf is an Ideographic language. . . . It is more pictorial, less symbolic. . . . Ideographic language systems, in comparison with verbal symbol systems, lack precision, subtlety, and flexibility. It is likely that Man cannot achieve his ultimate potential through an Ideographic language. . . . The manual sign language must be viewed as inferior to the verbal as a language.”⁶⁰ Such opinions were based on assumptions and impressions, as no full-scale examination by linguists of any sign language had yet occurred. They were widely accepted, however, even by deaf signers, who had been taught to think of their language as an inferior copy of English.

As subsequent studies have demonstrated, sign languages are not ideographic in the way Myklebust suggests. While ASL possesses some signs that seem to visually relate to their meaning (the sign for “tree,” for example, consists of the dominant arm bent at a ninety-degree angle, with the palm wiggling like a tree in the wind), the vast majority of signs do not have this close correspondence. And those that do are equivalent to onomatopoeic words in English, such as “pop” or “boom,” not an indication that the entire language is a grammarless system of pictures. As the linguist Ursula Bellugi explains, “When a gesture becomes a sign, its properties change, because as a sign it forms part of the linguistic structure of the signed language and thus becomes subject to grammatical rules operating in the signed language.”⁶¹ Even when signs appear similar to gestures, the former are not reducible to the latter. It was over a hundred years, however, before this misperception was corrected. At the end of the nineteenth century, the sign language used in schools was believed to be simply a more elevated degree of basic pantomime. Learning sign language was seen as an art, rather than being akin to learning German or French, and, accordingly, most educators of the deaf were not formally trained in it. Many picked it up from their pupils, a bottom-up approach to language that sharply contrasted with contemporary efforts to standardize and fix language

and that contributed to a great deal of variation in the ways in which individuals signed.

Despite the mistaken views that these early deaf educators had of sign language, the program proved highly successful in teaching a population that had, until that point, remained largely beyond the reach of formal education, and this success led to the founding of additional schools for the deaf. In 1864, Gallaudet's son, Edward Miner, established the first college for the deaf, which in 1986 became Gallaudet University and which remains the world's only liberal arts university for the Deaf. By the end of the nineteenth century, there were eighty-seven schools for the deaf around the country.⁶² Many of the teachers of these new schools were graduates of Gallaudet's, and they took with them the language and Deaf culture they had learned in his school. In this way, the language that eventually became known as American Sign Language was spread to deaf people throughout the country.

* * *

It is at this point that we rejoin our broader story. As I described at the beginning of the chapter, by 1864 tolerance for linguistic diversity was dramatically decreasing. The push was to assimilate children into the majority culture, not to help them develop a language and cultural identity of their own. At the same time, advances in acoustic technology seemed to present new options for more closely aligning deaf education with this homogenizing zeitgeist. As Jonathan Sterne explains in *The Audible Past*, technological developments such as the telephone, the phonograph, and radio changed the ways people thought about sound: "As there was an Enlightenment, so too was there an 'Ensoniment.' A series of conjunctures among new ideas, institutions, and practices rendered the world audible in new ways and valorized new constructs of hearing and listening."⁶³ Part of these processes involved the ability to visually capture and record sound, to make it less ephemeral.

In 1874, Leon Scott invented a device, the phonautogram, that would enable the writing of sound. The machine was modeled like an ear and registered different vibrations that it could record with a stylus. Alexander Graham Bell and Clarence Blake produced a similar device that used an actual human ear.⁶⁴ Bell, building on his father's work developing a system of notation for speech, conceived of these machines as a way to approximate the experience of processing sound for deaf children so that they could learn to be more like the hearing.⁶⁵ He characterized the invention as "a machine to hear for them, a machine that would render visible to the

eyes of the deaf the vibrations of the air that affect our ears as sound.”⁶⁶ As Sterne explains, these efforts to create devices “to hear for them” were a major contributing factor in the development of sound reproduction. In addition to changing the ways that many modern writers conceptualized language, such inventions had a significant impact on deaf education in America. At precisely the time when Americans were becoming obsessed with establishing conformity, this technology represented a kind of miracle solution to the “cultural problem of deafness”: the deaf could be trained “to pass as hearing people through their speech.”⁶⁷

Driven by excitement over this idea, Bell threw his full support behind what came to be known as an oral approach to deaf education. Oralism involved a focus on training pupils in speech and lipreading. More disturbing to some deaf people, it included at the time (and in some places even now) a simultaneous ban on the use of any kind of sign language, which it was (wrongly) believed would retard the student’s progress with speech. Because this method of education fit so well with the broader cultural push for conformity, it very quickly achieved widespread popularity. The first purely oral school in the United States, the New York Institution for the Improved Instruction of Deaf Mutes, opened in 1867. Partially through the efforts of Bell, who believed that the deaf should be forbidden from intermingling (lest they reproduce and their children also be deaf) and using sign to communicate, schools across the nation began changing their method of instruction and adopting this new approach.⁶⁸ “People do not understand the mental condition of a person who cannot speak and who thinks in gestures,” Bell insisted. “He is sometimes looked upon as a sort of monstrosity, to be stared at and avoided.”⁶⁹ Mixing technology with eugenic philosophy, Bell sought to eradicate deafness by fully assimilating the deaf into mainstream society.⁷⁰ His approach won broader support when, in 1880, the Second International Congress on Education of the Deaf in Milan, Italy, issued a resolution outlawing the use of sign language in the education of deaf children.⁷¹

The results of the decision were dramatic. Nearly all deaf teachers were removed from their jobs, eliminating positive deaf role models for children who were isolated from other deaf people, as was almost always the case. As in American Indian education, in oral schools, children were physically punished if caught communicating with their native language. As one man recalled in a documentary on boarding school practices, “Whenever teachers and dorm counselors saw that I was signing, they would whack me on the hand with a ruler. I was 4½! Can you imagine smacking such a tiny hand?” Another man recounts a similar

experience being caught signing at school: “[The principal] came up to me and mouthed the words ‘you signed.’ I had no idea what she was talking about. ‘Give me your hand!’ I put out my hand, and she smacked me several times. She repeated, ‘You signed’ and kept on whacking my hand.”⁷² The majority of students’ time in class was spent repeating and memorizing sounds that would, proponents of the method argued, allow them to interact more easily with a hearing, nonsigning world. As a result, much less was available for studying the subjects their hearing counterparts were, which led to deaf children being characterized as intellectually inferior when they could not perform at the same level on tests. As James William Sowell, a product of the boarding school system, put it in his poem “The Oralist,” “Minds they have as sound as yours but for hours you waste; / Spirits as impervious yearning for the light.”⁷³ Such was the power to normalize that this kind of environment was seen as more desirable than having a minority culture within the United States communicating in a language other than standardized English.

Writing Back

The legacy of Deaf boarding schools is mixed or, as Carol Padden and Tom Humphries put it, “powerful and conflicted.”⁷⁴ While the schools removed children from their families and sought to normalize them through the acquisition of English in ways that were damaging to their self-esteem, they also provided a place for deaf people to come together and form community. Unlike indigenous children, it is entirely possible that students at deaf institutes had never met other deaf people before arriving.⁷⁵ It was at these schools that ASL developed, a fact that has heavily influenced the role that Deaf institutes continue to play in American Deaf culture. Despite these positive outcomes, the ways in which boarding schools played out national debates over language on the bodies of children remains deeply problematic, as do the ways that in the late nineteenth century the schools sought to systematically separate children from their minority cultural identities.

While progressives such as Bell and Pratt saw themselves as “saving” deaf and indigenous children by “restoring them to society,” the damage done by forcibly restricting language use can be extreme. The act of separating an individual from his or her language is, as Toni Morrison reminds us, an act of deep structural violence above and beyond any physical violence experienced by the students in the schools. In her 1995 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Morrison argued, “The systematic

looting of language can be recognized by the tendency of its users to forgo its nuanced, complex, mid-wifery properties, replacing them with menace and subjugation. Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge.⁷⁶ Boarding schools were designed to be locations where the “systematic looting of language” could most effectively be performed. The idea of limiting knowledge is particularly relevant to discussions of versions of oralist philosophy that disallowed the use of manual communication. Part of the oralist rhetoric was that children who learned to sign would never learn to speak. Terrified parents stopped using home signs with children and physically restricted them from doing so. No child, however, whether deaf or hearing, can learn to lipread as an infant. Even for children who would ultimately learn to speak and lipread English, this meant that during the first three years of life, years we know to be critical to brain development, children were denied access to any form of language, potentially interfering with intellectual development in ways that even later language acquisition could not ameliorate. So strong was the impulse to normalize, however, that linguistic “deviance” was perceived as more of a handicap than any potential developmental delays.

The use of boarding schools to force linguistic assimilation for both deaf and indigenous children created complex identity politics. On the one hand, the schools violently restricted students’ development and access to their cultural language. On the other, they did provide access to the language of the majority, and perhaps more importantly, they provided the opportunity for the formation of unique cultural identities. No widespread Deaf identity existed before the boarding schools, and as Amelia V. Kantanski notes, such institutions also saw the development of a pan-Indian identity that could prove strategically useful for pupils.⁷⁷ The ways in which English was forced on students had a lasting effect not only on students but also on the English language itself, something that both Deaf and indigenous writers have capitalized on, challenging the boundaries of the English language that the schools worked so hard to enforce. As Kantanski argues in relation to the Native American schools, despite the systematic attempts of authorities to eliminate indigenous languages and cultures, “many American Indian writers were able to wrest control of both the content and the form of their self-representations and fictional literary productions out of the hands of the schools in acts of rhetorical sovereignty.”⁷⁸

Similar acts of “rhetorical sovereignty” play out in Deaf literature. Willy Conley’s “Salt in the Basement: An American Sign Language

Reverie in English,” for example, highlights the difficulty of the kinds of translation acts expected of students and reveals the limitations both of translation and of written English itself. The title of the poem offers insight into the contentious middle ground occupied by individuals whose national and linguistic identities were put into conflict by the assertion that only those who speak standard American English count as American citizens. It foregrounds the fact that the text to follow will involve a translation from ASL to English, that we should understand it in these terms, rather than as a performance of “imperfect” English. Whereas a hearing author might take for granted the fact that grammatical eccentricities would be understood in aesthetic terms, as formal experimentation, Conley’s need to clarify this for readers highlights the perception of the deaf as a group whose English is flawed.

Further foregrounding questions of translation, the poem is presented in gloss, a transliteration in English of ASL signs that is specifically not a for-meaning translation. The beginning of the poem reads as follows:

me little, almost high wash-wash machine
 down basement, me have blue car
 drive drive round round
 basement

happen summer time
 me inside blue car
 drive round round
 basement

me drive every corner
 drive drive drive
 then BOOM! Me crash

there brown paper round tall
 me get out of car
 look inside brown round tall
 many many small small
 white rock rock
 small white rock rock

for-for?⁷⁹

Rather than attempting to conceal the difficulties of translation that standard English often masks, “Salt” places them front and center. The poem exists between languages, not comfortably inhabiting either,

denaturalizing linguistic convention and forcing readers to consider how much is invisibly lost in the reverse transcription process, when a Deaf child like the one in the poem is forced to fill in the gaps through lipreading or Signed English, a popular communication system that uses select signs from ASL to produce a grammatical, syntactical copy of English on the hands.

The disconcerting sense of being between languages is amplified by the age of the speaker, a small child who reports what he sees, rather than translating or providing clarifying commentary. In distinctively ASL style, the poem begins by setting the scene, establishing the time and place of the events. The importance of the setting is emphasized through the repetition of “basement,” three times within the first two stanzas. The poem’s central object, the salt, is defamiliarized in this environment, suggesting the importance of context clues to determining meaning. This uncertainty about the salt is projected onto the reader through a presentation of the material in which it is not instantly recognizable: “many many small small / white rock rock / small white rock rock.”

Through the process of determining what the substance is, the poem’s speaker leads us through various linguistic ontologies, aligning each with a particular language. In English, the sign “for-for” translates to “why,” suggesting that the child recognizes the substance but is puzzled at the unfamiliar context and asking for clarification. His father, however, responds to the English question—“What is it for?”: “father told me for-for / outside road // me ask again for-for?”⁸⁰ In responding to the English, the father misses the point of the question, reinforced by the child’s continued insistence that this answer is insufficient. Operating in separate linguistic modes, the two are communicating at cross-purposes. It is only when the boy sees the salt melt the ice for himself—“me look down white rock rock / burn burn hole many many / hole in ice / same-same ice in my lemon drink // me jaw-drop”—that he grasps the purpose of the substance he played with in the basement.⁸¹ The child understands why the salt is in there not through a description but through a direct visual experience.

The ability to provide a version of such experiences is a unique feature of signed languages, one that I return to in more detail in chapter 4. In the gaps between the father’s and the child’s understanding, as well as between the child’s and our own, “Salt” explores alternative epistemologies to those that emerge from languages in the aural mode. Moving beyond decades of research that sought to align ASL with spoken language in order to establish its status, the poem opts instead to focus on the differences engendered by their divergent modalities. The

poem becomes about the diverse ways it is possible to perceive the salt, to understand and communicate its purpose. In ASL, for example, the signs for “brown paper round tall” would include more specific information about the bag’s precise shape and size, as well as its location relative to other objects in the basement.⁸² In English, we would get the specific noun “bag,” which would clarify in a different way. Caught between, however, we are left in a state of confusion. By bending the English of the poem to illustrate the problems with translation, as well as the possibilities of alternative linguistic modes, “Salt” establishes a kind of rhetorical sovereignty. The poem suggests that something is lost in translation, that there are alternative ways to comprehend objects, and leaves us curious about what else they might reveal.

Embodied Language

One of the fundamental components of these alternative ways of knowing, and one that I address throughout the book, is the fact of ASL’s embodiment. As I explained earlier, spoken languages are also embodied. But both spoken and written language can be separated from the body, whereas there can be no disembodiment of ASL. This was particularly significant at the beginning of the twentieth century as new technologies made it easier than ever to divorce living from textual corpuses. As Juan A. Suarez explains, “The new media disassociated language from human corporeality. The typewriter, for example, interposed a mechanical contraption between hand and text and did away with the personal distinctiveness of handwriting. Other devices, in turn, detached oral language from the physical presence of the speakers and reattached it to inanimate objects. The voice was then disembodied and, therefore, dis-organ-ized.”⁸³ It is out of this historical moment, which also saw the rise of first audio and then visual recording technology that allowed the separation of humans from their voices and images, that we get formalism, an approach to reading texts that detaches them from the external world.

The concept of explicitly focusing on language’s embodiment was not new to American modernists. Walt Whitman, for example, had suggested such a blurring in “A Song of the Rolling Earth”:

Were you thinking that those were the words, those upright lines?
 those curves, angles, dots?
 No, those are not the words, the substantial words are in the
 ground and sea,

They are in the air, they are in you.

Were you thinking that those were the words, those delicious
sounds out of your friends' mouths?

No, the real words are more delicious than they.

Human bodies are words, myriads of words,
(in the best poems re-appears the body, man's or woman's, well-
shaped, natural, gay,

Every part able, active, receptive, without shame or the need of
shame.)⁸⁴

For Whitman, the idea of language in bodies was a way to ground language in the personal rather than the abstract. What bodies as words offer, which “those delicious sounds out of your friends' mouths” do not, is communication that refuses the Cartesian split that would render the physical shameful (something Whitman challenged throughout his career). By contrast, if “human bodies are words” and the words “are in you,” considerations of language become part of everyone's daily existence. Embodied language also offered a way of negotiating the general and the particular, as the abstract content of the language would be balanced by the literal presence of the human body that was either, according to varying formations, inscribed with words or composed of them.

If the ideas themselves were not novel, they were granted new urgency by the increased attempt to standardize both languages and bodies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Modernist experiments with the interaction of words and bodies on the printed page were also distinguished from earlier efforts by the concurrent rise in discourses surrounding bodily measurement, classification, and normalization. This merging of normative attitudes, as well as the development of the term “norm” itself, led to new crackdowns on individuals who either could not or would not conform.⁸⁵ As with fears over linguistic diversity, this deviance was perceived as not only undesirable but threatening to what was popularly described as a brave new world in which science could improve humanity.

If a large part of the impetus behind calls for the standardization of American English was synced to the standardization of American bodies—an intersection I refer to as *communicative norms* and describe in more detail in chapter 2—it makes sense that writers seeking to challenge both began investigating connections between the two, attempting to create a kind of textual-physical hybrid that in some way made present

the body. Modernist writers responded to these communicative norms in several ways. One of them, outlined by Sarah Wilson, was to re-create the personal experience of hybridity of the modern individual in literary form. As she explains, “Formal experimentation . . . conceives of a text as individual, or logically parallel to the individual; in the context of melting-pot thinking, the text-as-individual produces a distinctive relation between reader and text.”⁸⁶ The increasing diversity (and potential discomfort over that diversity) at the turn of the twentieth century was expressed through “polyglot formal effects akin to those found produced by immigration in the turn-of-the-century United States.”⁸⁷ Texts came to parallel or represent bodies; textual form “broke” around bodies that proved difficult to assimilate into a homogenized norm.

A similar kind of breaking with the standard is traced in Michael North’s *The Dialect of Modernism*, in which he investigates the use of racial dialect in modernist writing. “Dialect mimicry,” he argues, “led to a breakdown of both the privilege that the standard enjoyed and the myth that there could be a ‘natural’ alternative.”⁸⁸ By repeatedly referencing precisely the kind of language movements that standard English tried to repress, the use of dialect by writers such as Gertrude Stein, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Hart Crane also called attention to the bodies that employed such language, bodies most likely to face discrimination in the push toward standardization.

The interest of most modernists in this kind of recognition was not to insert it into already existing forms of literature as a kind of inclusive practice but rather to employ it as a means to shatter form itself, to produce new hybrid forms including the two that I will be talking about in this book: embodied and visual language. In addition to the more obvious methods of including marginalized bodies and languages in texts (directly referencing such bodies), writers also began to experiment with less explicit possibilities. As I discuss in chapter 2, embodied language was most closely associated with earlier traditions of oral literature. This interest in reintroducing the body can also help explain the modernist obsession with “primitivism.”

Not incidentally, within modernist literature, these issues are often raised in works that reference human hands. In Crane’s “Episode of Hands,” for example, a description of hands is used to establish a bond between a factory worker and the son of its owner and to signal a homosexual encounter between the two men. The owner’s son’s emotions are represented by the movement of his hands as he makes a physical and emotional connection with an injured worker: “As his taut, spare fingers

wound the gauze / Around the thick bed of the wound, / His own hands seemed to him / Like wings of butterflies / Flickering in sunlight over summer fields.”⁸⁹ Here, moving hands serve as code for something that cannot be spoken of in conventional verse; they call attention to the possibility of an unsanctioned erotic relationship between the worker and another man.⁹⁰ The hands are threatening because they shatter the myth of standardized communication’s universality by foregrounding the bodies that do not fit comfortably within these paradigms, the bodies that it would be most convenient to marginalize and ignore.

This process becomes nearly impossible when such bodies insist on signifying in ways that cannot be separated from their physicality. As Helen Gilbert notes, what is deemed to be excessive movement is deeply problematic for structures of power invested in keeping bodies strictly under control, because such movement involves “resisting identities imposed by the dominant culture on individuals or groups and/or abrogating the privilege of their signifying systems.”⁹¹ Constraint of the natural movement of subjected bodies is achieved through the construction of strict social norms that can then be imposed from above as well as from within the community. Because of the subversive potential and focus on the individual of alternative means of signifying, they appear with surprising frequency in modernist literature as an ideal. It is such a language, written in the body, that Crane imagines to describe the responsibility of the future to the past in the “Cape Hatteras” section of *The Bridge*: “Thou hast there in thy wrist a Sanskrit charge / To conjugate infinity’s dim marge- / Anew . . . !”⁹² Significantly, this embodied message does not have a clear written equivalent; it must be transmitted through a distant and unfamiliar language rather than being translated into written English. Because it cannot be extracted from the body, it retains a kind of transience that the development of writing removed from the social dynamics of other languages, an ephemeral quality that appeared in numerous attempts to think through this intersection in modernist literature and one that analysis of ASL poetics and Deaf cultural dynamics will help us to flesh out.

Visual Language

In addition to being embodied, signed languages are also, dramatically, visible. Indeed, a large part of what was being policed in these efforts to restrict bodies was precisely their visibility in public. As Michel Foucault and others have chronicled, modernity witnessed the rise of

numerous technologies of vision that allowed bodies to be surveilled in increasingly intimate ways. Additionally, the invention of photography and the cinema during the nineteenth century meant that the world could be seen differently and that images of the world and of bodies within it could be preserved and more thoroughly analyzed. This increased visibility deeply influenced how modernist writers perceived their age. “I cannot repeat this too often,” Gertrude Stein famously declared in “Portraits and Repetition,” “any one is of one’s period and this our period was undoubtedly the period of the cinema and series production. And each of us in our own way is bound to express what the world in which we are living is doing.”⁹³ The cinema provided writers with new ways of thinking about images, as did advancements in modern art. “We are under the dominion of painting,” Virginia Woolf commented in 1935, and as the sheer number of literary movements aligned with developments in painting or other engagements with the visual image—imagism, surrealism, cubism, vorticism, impressionism, dadaism—suggest, the question of how to merge these newly articulated ways of seeing with text remained a dominant concern throughout the period.⁹⁴

If, as Rebecca Beasley has argued, “literary modernism is, paradoxically, a visual culture,” however, it was not so in any straightforward manner.⁹⁵ The modernist period had a complex relationship to visual perception, engaging it in significant but not always consistent ways. On the one hand, new technological developments appeared to cement the realism of the visual image. Burgeoning disciplines such as anthropology similarly centered on the primacy of documentary visual observation and were constructed around a relationship between observer and observed. On the other, as I discuss in more detail in chapter 4, Martin Jay describes the modern period as marking a shift away from the scopic regime of Cartesian perspectivism, which he describes as being characterized by a “vigorous privileging of vision” that associated it with definitive truth.⁹⁶

Part of this shift is attributed to the very elements of modernist culture that would have seemed to support the privileging of vision, a dynamic that P. Adams Sitney terms “*the antinomy of vision*.”⁹⁷ “Modernist literary and cinematic works,” he claims, “stress vision as a privileged mode of perception, even of revelation, while at the same time cultivating opacity and questioning the primacy of the visible world.”⁹⁸ There is a similar tension between clarity and opacity in Crane’s “Episode of Hands,” which imagines direct communication through the body in ways that employ deliberately difficult diction and syntax. This paradox of communication

that is at once more abstract and more concrete attended visual/textual as well as physical/textual hybrids.

As Michael North explains in *Reading 1922*, while the increasing availability of pictures from around the world might have been expected to provide clear and unbiased information, “photography’s promise to end mediation simply made its audience all the more aware of it” and in so doing challenged the very notion of fixed truths.⁹⁹ The self-reflexivity that characterized modernity developed out of new visual technologies and practices—photography, cinema, the increasing ease of travel that allowed more people to see themselves through the eyes of others, and disciplines such as anthropology that involved looking at the cultures and practices of those others—all of which complicated any simple one-to-one translation between the truth and what one saw. Other emerging fields, such as public relations and psychology, also spread epistemological doubt about absolute truths. And the discourse of psychoanalysis similarly destabilized the idea that one could determine truth from what was visible, relying instead on hidden or repressed truths that could only be accessed through language and not images. These contradictory messages regarding images were not lost on writers. Stein believed that “the truth that the things seen with the eyes are the only real things, had lost its significance,” though she continued to focus on the role of vision in her own work, including *Tender Buttons*, in which Stein borrows from Cubist philosophy and provides multiple angles (as well as emotional resonances) of an object simultaneously.¹⁰⁰ While more strictly in keeping with how vision works, this approach is so distinct from typical presentations of visual information in textual form that even today these portraits remain challenging.

Overview

As with questions of embodiment, experiments into visual poetics repeatedly come up against a series of apparent contradictions that ASL, a visual and physical language without textual counterpart, is intriguingly positioned to mediate between.¹⁰¹ Over the course of the next several chapters, I demonstrate how Deaf epistemology provides a vital and largely untapped resource for understanding the history of American language politics and the impact that history has had on modernist aesthetic production and the field of modernist studies by productively reframing questions that have been central to both: the tension between an emerging celebrity culture and theories of impersonality, the apparent

paradox of an aesthetic simultaneously fascinated with primitivism and making it new, the juxtaposition and indeterminacy at the heart of modernist difficulty, and the apparent disjunction between imagism and epic in the careers of many prominent modernist writers. Throughout *Deafening Modernism*, I argue that Deaf and disability language, culture, and literary forms allow us to think these ideas together in ways that reveal relationships that are not simply contradictory. To support this claim, I draw on a range of methodological approaches, including literary analysis and history, linguistics, ethics, and queer, cultural, and film studies. In discussing Deaf studies in these unexpected contexts, it is my aim to highlight the contributions the field can make to broader discussions of the intersections between images, bodies, and text, as well as to contribute to the movement within both modernist and disability studies to enlarge the conventional boundaries of these disciplines. My goal is to tell the story of modernism from the perspective of Deaf and disability insight, to highlight the exciting new ways deafness as a critical modality invites us to think about topics we thought we knew. In so doing, I also hope to expand literary disability studies by demonstrating the importance of the field even and especially in places where no literal deafness or disability is located.

In chapter 1, I analyze the tension between modernist ideas of impersonality and the growing fascination with the celebrity poet. At the same moment that writers such as T. S. Eliot and Gertrude Stein were exploring ideas of impersonality in their writing, the circulation of their bodies within society as celebrities in newspapers, in journals, and at public lectures and readings was determining the ways their work was being read. To address the relationship of the authorial body and its personality or impersonality to literary work, I analyze ASL poetry by Debbie Rennie, Peter Cook, and Kenny Lerner, texts that by structural necessity are involved in an ongoing negotiation of that relationship. Drawing on these poetic texts in conversation with queer theory, I argue that sign literature enacts a model of embodied impersonality—a self-shattering that nevertheless refuses the disavowal of the embodied subject. Such a model of social interaction through literature allows us to reinterpret Sherwood Anderson's two volumes of critically ignored poetry: *A New Testament* and *Mid-American Chants*. Taken together, these texts suggest a model of poetic ethics based on interpenetration that paradoxically foregrounds the embodied subject even as it challenges its boundaries.

Building on the idea of alternative relationalities, chapter 2 examines how the use of embodied language and history in storytelling cultures

enables a productive reading of modernism's interest in cultural memory that moves beyond accusations of primitivism to unpack both the ethics and pragmatics of this unexpected look to the past in the context of making it new. Drawing on the history of early twentieth-century Deaf boarding schools, I trace the development of communicative norms, which combine the growing interest in linguistic standardization with restrictive attitudes toward embodiment. The context of deaf educational practices reveals the force behind this push toward standardization and provides a model that illuminates the modernist discomfort over bodily signification that we witness in a variety of media, from the dance of Josephine Baker to the films of Charles Chaplin. In *Modern Times*, I argue, Chaplin draws on metacommentary related to his own aversion to the enforced speech of talking films to provide a nuanced portrait of the effects of enforcing communicative norms. These pernicious effects also underlie Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, in which the sheer number of townspeople who are either unable or unwilling to communicate through conventional speech demonstrates the extent to which the struggles of such individuals are symptomatic not of the problems of individuals but of a society whose prescribed modes of communication do not accommodate the diverse needs of its population. What these examples help to demonstrate is that the struggle against enforced linguistic and physical conformity at the beginning of the twentieth century was much more far reaching than is usually assumed. In conversation with the deployment of storytelling within Deaf culture as a response to such restrictions, the work of Chaplin and Anderson reveals the power of alternative artistic modes of signifying to shatter communicative norms.

This consideration of communicative norms establishes the impetus for the kinds of formal experimentation I address in chapter 3, in which I tackle the issue of modernist difficulty from the perspective of ASL linguistics. By approaching difficulty from the perspective of Deaf linguistic rights, I provide new ways for both enacting modernist difficulty and thinking through its implications. Focusing on juxtaposition (as demonstrated in collage poetics) and simultaneity (as seen in literary cubism), two of the most prominent ways in which modernist difficulty has been explained, I demonstrate how these dynamics emerge from manual languages as a result of their inherently visual and physical nature. Modernist poets themselves were intrigued by the political and aesthetic possibilities of such language. Hart Crane, for example, developed the idea of an "incarnate word," which represented an attempt to recall the physicality of language as a means to think through problems emerging from

more standard written language that he perceived as dehumanizing in that it abstracted away from particular bodies and lived experiences. The consequence of this attempt to use the body to mediate between the general and the particular was an intense strangeness or difficulty in Crane's work that has led some critics to characterize his writing as failing and even to link this "failure" to his suicide. As studies of ASL reveal, however, dense linguistic figurations are actually effects of working at the intersection of bodies and words. I argue that one of the implications of this understanding of difficulty is that it allows us to rediscover the presence of bodies in modernist texts in which they appear to be absent. In the final section of the chapter, I take on this political project in the poetry of Gertrude Stein and William Carlos Williams and the art of the precisionist painter Charles Demuth.

Chapter 4 continues exploring what ASL might contribute to an ontology of the linguistic image by focusing on the qualities of movement and temporality and argues that the expanded description of the image suggested by such an ontology enables us to reconsider classifications of modernist works, specifically the apparent abandonment of imagism by H.D. and the supposed emphasis on sonority over vision in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. I begin by tracing the history of the visual image's perceived relation to truth, as well as the ways modernist literature responds to these claims. I argue that the cinematic and visual techniques in the ASL poetry of Clayton Valli and Bernard Bragg demonstrate how the ability to manipulate temporality is not opposed to a present image but rather derives from the language's ability to produce material things in the world. These features—the indeterminism I discuss in chapter 3, the movement and engagement with temporality in Valli's "Dew on a Spiderweb" and Bragg's "Flowers and Moonlight"—reconcile the modernist fascination with the image as both inescapably tangible and present as well as multifaceted, shifting, and indeterminate. The negotiation of this impasse enables us to return to modernist classifications with a fresh eye, to challenge the traditional attribution of H.D.'s movement away from imagism and into epic poetry as a result of the limitations of the visual image, and to identify the ways in which the palimpsest functions as a visually structuring element of Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. I conclude the book with an epilogue on the twenty-first-century textual body that considers both Deaf epistemology and modernist studies in the context of the Human Genome Project and genetic art.

Across these chapters, I demonstrate the extent to which ideas central to Deaf epistemology are embedded in debates that have surrounded

modernism and modernist studies for over a century. But the project also has a broader goal. In *Narrative Prosthesis*, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder argue, “While other identities such as race, sexuality, and ethnicity have pointed to the dearth of images produced about them in the dominant literature, disability has experienced a plethora of representations in visual and discursive works. Consequently, disabled people’s marginalization has occurred in the midst of a perpetual circulation of their images.”¹⁰² In *Deafening Modernism*, I want to build on this argument. Through analysis of impersonality, primitivism, difficulty, and the image, I tease out how and why the marginalization of Deaf culture and bodies, as well as of Deaf studies as a field, has occurred parallel to (but too frequently not in conversation with) the ongoing fascination with issues of embodied and visual language within modernist studies. The difference is subtle but, to my mind, significant. I argue that part of the work of placing Deaf and disability studies into active dialogue with other fields involves moving beyond the assumption that such conversations can only occur at sites where disabled characters or authors are being represented or in which disability-related terminology is being used. Broadening the range of nonidentitarian possibilities for how we might think Deaf and disability studies together with other areas of literary and cultural analysis represents for me one of the more exciting directions in which literary disability studies might develop.