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PUPPETS, MEMES, JESTERS, AND BENEVOLENCE PORN: THE SPECTACLE OF ACCESS

Abstract: Signed language interpreters' proximity to significant political figures and entertainers invites the nondisabled gaze. The spotlight on interpreters in the media is a symptom of celebrity culture intersected with toxic benevolence. This paper considers media attention given interpreters as a site of tension surrounding attitudes toward access for disabled people. Signed language interpretation is provided for deaf people's access. The presence of signed language interpreters in public spaces and their proximity to significant figures subjects signed languages to public consumption, which is then rendered into sources of entertainment for nonsigning people. The reduction of signed language interpreters to entertainment material signifies the value placed upon accessibility, creates hostile workspaces for signed language interpreters, and reinforces notions of signed languages as novelties. Such actions have adverse effects on signing deaf people's linguistic human rights and their ability to participate as informed citizens in their respective communities. The media, its audiences, and some of the ways that interpreters have embraced such attention have actively co-produced signed language interpretation as a venue for ableism, linguistic chauvinism, and displacement.

Keywords: sign language, interpreting, access, disability, media

Signed language interpreters' proximity to significant political figures and entertainers invites the nondisabled gaze.¹ Signed languages attracts the nondisabled gaze as an embodiment of otherness, representing an impairment often equated with biological and linguistic inferiority.² The spotlight on interpreters represents the nondisabled gaze where abled people *stare* at disabled people, or in this case, representations of disability difference in the process of enfreakment through staring. "The non-disabled

¹ J.J. Murray, *Linguistic Human Rights Discourse in Deaf Community Activism*, "Sign Language Studies" 2015, vol. 15, no. 4, pp. 379–410.

² D. Baynton, *Forbidden Signs: American Culture and the Campaign Against Sign Language*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1996; H.-D.L. Bauman, *Audism: Exploring the Metaphysics of Oppression*, "Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education" 2004, vol. 9, no. 2, pp. 239–246.

gaze or ableist poverties is also driven by curiosity, perceived as a ‘right’ to intrude, inquire, appropriate impairment as a public spectacle. To stare is to ‘enfreak’ and to assert power.”³ Disability studies scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson describes staring as a process in which enfreakment occurs through abled entitlement to disabled bodies.⁴ People with extraordinary bodies, often on the margins of the economy, were coded as freaks; forced to work in venues like circuses and carnivals. Their embodied differences were used to provoke people’s prurient curiosity and free them of their coin. Since the nineteenth century carnival venues, freak shows have morphed into reality television shows and inspirational porn about disabled people.⁵ In contemporary media, the depiction of signed language interpreters as extraordinary (benevolent) bodies whose embodied performance of disability amuses, delights, and entertains, often for profit, extends the concept of freakery into the 21st century.

In recent years, video clips, memes, televised news coverage, blogs, and deaf community discourses working with signed language interpreters reveals tensions surrounding the displacement of deaf people in conversations about accessibility and signed languages. Some popular treatments of signed language interpreters imagine them to be the puppet to be manipulated by the speaker into an entertainment product as what happened to the author’s interpreter at the *Tranny Road Show* where the improv actors ‘recruited’ a reluctant interpreter into signing taboo words and gestures repeatedly for the titillation of the audience while rendering the disabled person’s presence in the audience into a spectacle. Examining the phenomenon of the signed language interpreter as entertainer, my lived experience as a deaf person in the United States influences how I critique the relationship between audiences, media, and signed language interpretation. The celebrity-like reactions to media coverage of signed language interpreters Amber Galloway Gallego and Kevin Gallagher displaces deaf people in access discourse and as experts on signed languages. Those are the jesters, interpreters who put on a *performance* for the nondisabled gaze while displacing deaf artists and deaf people’s complaints about accessibility. Others are transformed into memes and video clips. Those are the meme interpreters, hapless interpreters like Lydia Callis, Jonathan Lamberton, Jesse Conrad, and Nigel Howard, interpreting somber occasions without intent to perform, who were transformed into viral memes on social media platforms. The consequences are wide ranging for deaf people from the loss of access to *spaces* like queer, trans, or black spaces; to *care*-having interpreters available and provided; to *entertainment* as cultural belonging; to *security* via vital public health and safety information.

Critical disability media studies offers an analytical framework to consider the ramifications for access, belonging, and inclusion for signing deaf people through

³ R. Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*, Columbia University Press, New York 1997, p. 6.

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ R. Garland-Thomson (ed.), *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, New York University Press, New York 1996.

the objectification of the interpreter in the United States. Signed language interpretation is provided in public spaces to provide access and promote inclusion. Audience responses, and on occasion, how interpreters respond to media attention, frames signed language interpretation as a commodity for nondeaf people's consumption, erasing accessibility as the purpose for the interpreter's presence. The spotlight and the camera, necessary to render the signing accessible to sighted deaf audiences, transforms the signed language interpreter into an entertainer. As curious onlookers, audiences gaze upon this person in the spotlight, enthralled by the novelty of rowdy hand movements, chaotic bodily contortions, and twisted faces, which are intentional functions of signed languages. The nondisabled gaze centers and celebrates interpreters in conversations about signed languages and access while excluding deaf people. Making sense of this relationship, as Elizabeth Ellcessor, Mack Hagood, and Bill Kirkpatrick suggest, offers us insights on understandings of access and disability through language ideologies about non-normative ways of languaging.⁶ Ellcessor, Hagood, and Kirkpatrick urge us to consider "more fully the *role* of media within economic and ideological circuits of production and reception."⁷ As a social institution, the media is a formidable force in constructing popular understandings of disability.⁸ The media and in particular, its relationship with audiences, is a contributor to popular conceptions of interpreters as entertainment source material rather than signifiers of disability participation in the public sphere by situating signed languages as a source of humor.⁹ The reduction of signed language interpreters to entertainment material, even on serious occasions such as public health emergency broadcasts¹⁰ signifies the value placed upon accessibility, negatively impacts the willingness of public figures to "share" the stage with interpreters, creates hostile workspaces for signed language interpreters, and reinforces notions of signed languages as lesser than spoken languages. Nondeaf audience discourses about sign language interpreters erase deaf consumers as the *raison d'être* for the presence of signed languages in the public sphere. The relationship among media, audiences, and signed language interpreters contributes to the ongoing *disablement* of signing deaf people by pro-

⁶ E. Ellcessor, M. Hagood, B. Kirkpatrick, *Toward a Disability Media Studies* [in:] E. Ellcessor, B. Kirkpatrick (eds.), *Disability Media Studies*, New York University Press, New York 2017. For further discussion of ideologies about non-normative languaging, review J. Henner, O. Robinson, *Unsettling Languages, Unruly Bodyminds: Imaging a Crip Linguistics*, 2021 (unpublished manuscript), <https://psyarxiv.com/7bzaw2021>.

⁷ E. Ellcessor, M. Hagood, B. Kirkpatrick, op. cit., p. 4.

⁸ J. Cherney, *Ableist Rhetoric: How We Know, See, and Value Disability*. Penn State University Press, State College, PA 2019.

⁹ Slowhandsmith, *Chelsea Lately Show "Interpreter Finds Fame" skit; Chelsea Handler finds controversy by mocking deaf*, YouTube, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pzKMenXqlwc> (accessed: 17.11.2022); C. Monroe, 'Family Guy' cast screws with sign language interpreter at Comic-Con, Banana 101.5, 29.10.2012, <https://banana1015.com/family-guy-cast-screws-with-sign-language-interpreter-at-comic-con/> (accessed: 17.11.2022).

¹⁰ L. Hou, O. Robinson, *Sign Languages as Disaster Entertainment*, "Anthropology News," 19.06.2020.

moting linguistic chauvinism, minimizing the complexities of access as practice, and celebrating interpreters as benevolent actors.

The visible presence of interpreters was made possible by deaf people's political activism across the globe such as the #WhereIsTheInterpreter campaign in the United Kingdom during the COVID-19 pandemic, deaf Americans' activism in passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act 1990 and its amendment in 2008, and the work of the World Federation of the Deaf in the passage of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities.¹¹ Interpreters are provided because society, as a consequence of deaf activism, has decided that providing interpreters is right and necessary.¹² Legislated access meant deaf people's access and belonging are viewed as legitimate. Greater visibility of signed languages has, at times, had the effect of framing access practices as acts of benevolence for the consumption of nondeaf people.

The nature of signed language interpretation attracts the spotlight. Disability media scholar Elizabeth Ellcessor argued "the very visibility of ASL interpretation poses a challenge to the invisibility of media access and the place of disability and difference in the public sphere, showing alternative arrangements of language, bodies, mediated communication, and public engagement."¹³ Ellcessor adds since the majority of interpreters are white women, the performing white female body is the spectacle. In a culture where white people performing blackness is taboo, the sight of white women like Amber Galloway Gallego performing Black cultural musical performances or using Black language norms in signed language becomes its own spectacle.¹⁴ For example, white women interpreting Black music performance artists adds a layer of taboo where white women perform blackness under the guise of plausible displacement deniability, in which they can claim they were simply conduits in interpreting a black musician's performance. White women's insistence upon interpreting Black musical performances displaces Black deaf people by offering culturally inaccurate and incompetent interpretations.¹⁵

The idea of interpreters as conduit-like puppets lacking autonomy is not uncommon. People unfamiliar with signed language interpretation, reinforced by media representations, often understand interpreting as a neutral conduit of communication access. The conduit model frames the interpreter as "passive conveyors of infor-

¹¹ J.J. Murray, op. cit.; L. Stewart-Taylor, "Where is the Interpreter" 2020, <https://whereistheinterpreter.com/about/> (accessed: 17.11.2022).

¹² H. Haualand, C. Allen, *Sign Language Interpreting: A Human Rights Issue*, "International Journal of Interpreter Education" 2009, vol. 1, iss. 1; J.J. Murray, op. cit.

¹³ E. Ellcessor, *Is There a Sign for That? Media, American Sign Language Interpretation, and the Paradox of Visibility*, "Perspectives" 2015, vol. 23, iss. 4, p. 587.

¹⁴ K. Coe, *11 Times Sign Language Interpreters Reignited Supreme in Hip-Hop*, "XXL," 29.06.2017, <https://www.xxlmag.com/american-sign-language-interpreters-in-hip-hop/> (accessed: 17.11.2022).

¹⁵ J. Wicker, *The Need for Black Sign Language Interpreters in Hip Hop*, "Okayplayer" 2022, <https://www.okayplayer.com/originals/black-sign-language-interpreters-hip-hop.html> (accessed: 17.11.2022).

mation” relaying between two modalities of a language.¹⁶ In media depictions, acknowledgement of the autonomy of the interpreter is absent including their ability to decline to interpret if they are not an appropriate fit for the setting and to decline media attention. The understanding of interpreters as puppetlike conduits for voice renders the interpreter vulnerable to what I call access hijacking. Access hijacking happens when the audience has judged signing deaf people’s access and participation to be secondary to the desire for curiosity and entertainment. Access hijacking is a phenomenon where abled people appropriates the assistive and access devices of disabled people for their own enjoyment. The interpreter, through the behavior of either the audience or the speaker, is compelled to perform while abandoning access as their primary consideration. Signed language interpretation becomes a spectacle through the puppet interpreter through how the speaker treats the interpreter as an extension of their own performance. The puppet attempts to stay within their role in co-mediating auditory and linguistic information with the intent to provide access but instead becomes a source of entertainment.

A clip from *Tacoma FD* offers a fictional example and also a social commentary on nondeaf people’s relationships with signed languages. They released an uncaptioned promotional video clip featuring an example of the puppet interpreter become entertainer for *Tacoma FD*, a comedy television show. Although fictional, the clip reflects what happens with interpreters on stage and in the media. In the making of access a source of humor, the absence of captions suggests deaf people are not imagined as a part of their prospective audience. In addition to treating access as a source of humor, the clip also depicts the use of taboo topics like sex to further the novelty of signed languages and access practices.

The speaker and the interpreter both have a serious affect as the speaker conducts a news briefing about a series of deliberate fires set in sex toy warehouses. Despite the dark topic of arson and property damage, the presence of the signing interpreter has transformed this space into a comedy stage. The firefighters and reporters ask questions in a sequence intended to elicit a variety of sexually charged signs describing a variety of sex toys. The interpreter’s unruly body, manipulated by the nondisabled speakers in the audience, moves and jerks in exaggerated sexualized ways, spawning disorder in an otherwise orderly space. A seemingly innocuous question asks for a list of items lost in the fire. The interpreter signs the corresponding words as the speaker voices out the list of sex toys. Some of the signs are iconic, others graphically exaggerated, as the interpreter attempts to maintain a neutral facial expression. As the sexualized tempo of the questioning rises to a crescendo, the storyline impresses upon audiences that the interpreter lacks the autonomy to manage their objectification in the moment. Rendered puppetlike, the questioners have hijacked the interpreter as a site of access. In doing so, they have transformed the press briefing into a perfor-

¹⁶ S. Wilcox, B. Shaffer, *Towards a Cognitive Model of Interpreting*, “Benjamins Translation Library” 2005, vol. 63, p. 27.

mance intended to elicit laughter. This clip reveals ideologies about signed languages and access. One is the belief that the interpreter signs as if they were voice controlled puppets lacking autonomy to respond in ways that does not fuel prurient interests.

The signs by the interpreter-actor in the *Tacoma FD* clip were exaggerated, communicating the comedic nature of the interpreter's interpretation is deliberate, intended for the nondisabled gaze. The perceived vulgarity of signed languages in this clip also drives the logic behind the memefication of interpreter Nigel Howard's work interpreting COVID-19 pandemic press briefings. His signs describing social distancing and infection were reduced to taboo gestures depicting sexual and gang signs.¹⁷ Likewise, the memefication of Howard's signs into taboo gestures shows how audiences and media contribute to the objectification of signed language interpreters as sexual sources of humor. The interpreter's workplace becomes a site of sexual harassment. This clip and memes about Howard's work signposts a number of tropes in public facing signed language interpreting, where interpreters are reduced to sources of taboo humor, which may be sexual, vulgar, or otherwise offensive.

Using interpreters as a vehicle for offensive speech to elicit laughter is a common trope in comedy shows. Comedians Chelsea Handler, Adam Hills, and Brad Williams mock signed language interpreters on their shows. Handler's late night show knocked interpreter Lydia Callis as she interpreted for Mayor Bloomberg in the aftermath of hurricane Sandy in 2012. Hills, in introducing the presence of the signed language interpreter at one of his 2021 shows said, after watching interpreter Catherine sign his utterance of wanker, that "the show might just degenerate into me saying rude words and having Catherine do them."¹⁸ Williams' comedy sketch on YouTube depicts signed language interpretation. In an exaggeration of made-up signs, perhaps only obvious to fluent signers, he portrayed an interpreter's "signs" for blind and cognitively disabled people in deprecating ways (he used the traditional slur). Insulting not only blind and cognitively disabled people, he also insulted deaf people by using signed language interpretation as a source of ableist humor. A little person, Williams' claimed intent was to show how ableism manifested in signed languages although the signs he uses are unlikely to be used among actual signers. In describing those so-called ableist signs, he uses slurs to describe cognitively disabled people while suggesting that it was acceptable for him to hijack the stage interpreter as co-performer. He reinforces the notions of interpreters as puppets, signed languages as inherently iconic and unsophisticated, and access as a site for entertainment. Treating the interpreter as a puppet is rooted in the perception that signed language interpreters are objects, not people. The fact that the majority of signed language interpreters are women and women's autonomy is often delimited in social discourses also contribute

¹⁷ L. Hou, O. Robinson, op. cit.

¹⁸ Universal Comedy, *Adam Hills Messes with the Sign Language Translator*, Facebook, 25.08.2021, <https://www.facebook.com/comedy/videos/adam-hills-messes-around-with-the-sign-language-translator/557029179080768/> (accessed: 17.11.2022).

to the objectification of interpreters.¹⁹ While *Tacoma FD* happened to have sex toy warehouses as the subject, it is not unusual for people to find ways to turn spoken discourse to taboo subjects in order to render interpreters into a source of entertainment. To persist even when the interpreter or the deaf people in the room are uncomfortable suggests interpreters cannot have expectations for dignity in the workplace. When interpreters involuntarily become a source of sexual or taboo humor, interpretation becomes a site of contested access because the interpreter's autonomy and dignity are not respected.

Objectification continues long after the interpreted interaction is complete. The emergence of social media outlets like YouTube and Facebook and technologies to convert media into memes enabled consumers to turn imagery of interpreters into viral memes and videos. A well (or ill-) timed photo and remixed videos of interpreters at work are combined with text delivering commentary. The subject may be as mundane as public health briefings or as urgent as impeding weather disasters. Interpreter Jonathan Lamberton, while interpreting a briefing about an ebola outbreak in 2014, was captured signing with his arms outstretched in a way that generated zombie jokes. The video went viral.²⁰ During the COVID-19 pandemic, signed language interpreters appeared on camera beside local and state officials. Amidst interpretation of death, hospital shortages, and public health measures, audiences captured signed language interpretations, turning them into a variety of memes. One popular meme showed interpreter Nigel Howard signing social distancing. That snippet became a joke alluding to penis size.²¹ In 2020, during a COVID-19 briefing, interpreter Jesse Conrad interpreted for Maryland Governor Larry Hogan. A Facebook meme came out with an image of Conrad at work. The text reads, "Gov Hogan says not to panic... I feel like the sign language interpreter is delivering a different message!"²² In 2012, New York interpreter Lydia Callis interpreted news broadcasts about Hurricane Sandy. Shortly after, videos of her interpretation remixed and set to music went viral online. Callis was described as "Sexy Lydia."²³ One site called her "hot slut of the day."²⁴ A tumblr was created, proposing Callis' "face for NYC mayor."²⁵ Her work

¹⁹ M. de Wit, *A Comprehensive Guide to Signed Language Interpreting in Europe*, 2020 edition (self-published, printed by Create Space, Baarn, M. de Wit).

²⁰ CBSNews, *Raw Video: Sign Language Interpreter Goes Viral during de Blasio Ebola Press Conference*, YouTube, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=flpBil-Yi9c> (accessed: 17.11.2022).

²¹ L. Hou, O. Robinson, op. cit.

²² Americasbestpics, *Gov Hogan Says Not to Panic. I Feel the Sign Language Interpreter is Sending a Different Message*, 2020, <https://americasbestpics.com/picture/gov-hogan-says-not-to-panic-i-feel-like-the-7DLEdvAX7> (accessed: 17.11.2022).

²³ C. Ferrufino, *Sexy Lydia Calas the Sign Language Interpreter Throwing Down*, YouTube, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=divky_yj-VE (accessed: 17.11.2022).

²⁴ M.K., *Hot Slut of the Day!*, "Dlisted," 30.10.2012, <https://dlisted.com/2012/10/30/hot-slut-day-1370983625-2/> (accessed: 17.11.2022).

²⁵ *Jokes about Bloomberg's Sign Language Interpreters Aren't Funny*, DeafYouVideo, 2012, <https://deafyouvideo.blogspot.com/2012/11/jokes-about-bloombergs-sign-language.html> (accessed: 17.11.2022).

was spoofed on an episode of *Saturday Night Live* and mocked on the Chelsea Handler Show. As a woman working in a public facing setting, she was subjected to sexual objectification, her status as a working professional reduced to a sexually desirable object. Meme treatment of interpreters is a consequence of the networked audience where social media allows a new phase of creation and distribution where consumers are also content producers.²⁶ Pandemics and hurricanes are life-threatening events. Yet, there is the reluctant star, with ill-timed photographs much to the delight of audiences who form fan clubs around signed language interpreters, capture images and video, remix materials, and circulate memes online. The unwitting meme interpreters are those who, in the faithful execution of providing access, becomes fodder material as audiences repurpose their images and video into material for entertainment.

Then there are those who embrace the spotlight through or as a consequence of audience interaction and social relationships with media. For signing deaf people, such behavior has important implications for our access to the public sphere. Interpreters who embrace the spotlight are jesters, appreciated for their absurdity rather than their ability to provide an accessible environment. The jesters refer to interpreters who embrace the abled gaze, deviating from their role as access providers to amuse non-signing audiences, eager to clown for adoration. Deaf people are purportedly present, but access becomes secondary to the notion that the interpreter is part of the entertainment package. Since much of this happens in musical contexts, perhaps part of the entertainment value and absurdity lies in the fact that nondeaf people have difficulty imagining the legitimacy of deaf people occupying, let alone appreciating, such spaces.²⁷ If deaf people are incapable of enjoying music then the interpreter cannot really be there for them, can they? The interpreter's pivot to nondeaf audiences suggests a underlying lack of commitment to access as collaborative practice or interpreting as a form of linguistic care work.²⁸ One example of this is the case of Kevin Gallagher and the Seattle Men's Chorus.

In 2016, Gallagher retired after 35 years with the Seattle Men's Chorus but not free of controversy. Three years before he retired, the Seattle deaf community led a public protest with activist Katie Roberts speaking out about two decades of complaints regarding lack of access at the chorus. The chorus provided signed language interpretation but the problem was that their dedicated interpreter, Kevin Gallagher, was described by multiple deaf people as incomprehensible recurring complaints over the span of two decades. A deaf gay youth described crushing disappointment in the Seattle Men's Chorus. What was to be a special moment for him and his mother, to be in a queer space for the first time, was deflated because he did not have an accessible experience. He could not understand the songs nor appreciate their musicality. Two

²⁶ M. Hills, *Audiences* [in:] M. Kackman, M.C. Kearney (eds.), *The Craft of Criticism*, Routledge, New York 2018.

²⁷ J. Cripps, *Ethnomusicology*, "Journal of American Sign Languages and Literatures" 2018, <https://journalofasl.com/ethnomusicology/> (accessed: 17.11.2022).

²⁸ J. Henner, O. Robinson, *Unsettling Languages...*, op. cit.

decades of recurring complaints were ignored until deaf people started a blog and local news reporters picked up the story. The response from Gallagher and Chorus director Frank Stilwagner decentered access. Instead, they centered Gallagher's feelings, his long relationship with the chorus, and most important, how much non-deaf people appreciated Gallagher's signed artistry.²⁹ Gallagher described himself as a sign language artist, not an interpreter, in a 1988 news article.³⁰ Whether or not deaf people understood him mattered little to either.³¹ After months of tension, Stilwagner compromised. The chorus would provide another interpreter on one side of stage for access and keep Gallagher on the other side for the nondisabled gaze as entertainment.³²

Here, it is clear that Gallagher's role is no longer that of access provider but that of jester, present for nondisabled consumption. Further, Stilwagner's framing of his compromise is illustrative of understanding access provision as a form of benevolence. The spectacularization of signed language interpretation frames signed language interpretation as acts of benevolence and interpreters as heroes.³³ Stilwagner's defense of Gallagher suggests we should distinguish between coverage of disability as inspiration porn and benevolence porn.

Australian disability activist Stella Young introduced the term inspiration porn in a TedTalk.³⁴ Inspiration porn exceptionalizes disabled people living quotidian lives, framed as extraordinary, having overcome great personal difficulties. Disabled people having typical human experiences like having sex, playing sports, or participating in social activities are portrayed as remarkable. Such mundanity inspires abled people while objectifying disabled people. Benevolence porn, too, objectifies disabled people. Benevolence porn centers the abled person's perceived benevolence and frames their actions surrounding accessibility as heroic. Literature scholar Rachel Kolb describes media portrayal of signed language interpreters as the hero complex where signed language interpreters are read by nondeaf people as heroic for doing their jobs.³⁵ Benevolence porn distinguishes from inspiration porn by centering on the abled person's actions toward the disabled person. Those actions are marked as acts of generous benevolence rather than as counterpoints to structural ableism. The

²⁹ J. Spencer, *Silent Night Reflections*, Jeff's Jottings, 25.12.2018, <https://jeffsjottings.wordpress.com/2018/12/25/silent-night-reflections/> (accessed: 17.11.2022).

³⁰ *Open Letters to Seattle Men's Chorus*, 2014, <http://openlettertosmc.blogspot.com/> (accessed: 17.11.2022).

³¹ L. Turnbull, *Critics Say Chorus Interpreter Is Inaccurate, Seek His Removal*, "Seattle Times," 19.12.2013.

³² B. Davidson, *Letter from Seattle Men's and Seattle Women's Chorus*, 19.11.2014, <http://openlettertosmc.blogspot.com/2014/11/update-kevin-gallagher-will-return.html> (accessed: 17.11.2022).

³³ R. Kolb, "This ASL Interpreter is Our New Hero": *Stage Interpretation as 21st-Century Media Spectacle*, Spectacle of Disability Conference, Los Angeles 2017.

³⁴ S. Young, *I'm Not Your Inspiration, Thank You Very Much*, YouTube, 2014, https://www.ted.com/talks/stella_young_i_m_not_your_inspiration_thank_you_very_much?language=en (accessed: 17.11.2022).

³⁵ R. Kolb, op. cit.

eager feel good consumption of signed language interpreters as heroes or abled people for ensuring accessibility and inclusion of disabled people in conversations about disability while evading ableist attitudes and structures in a manner that reinforces ableism as an individual problem is benevolence porn.

Benevolence porn describes media coverage of interpreters as heroic agents of benevolence and any coverage of really, any abled person in the vicinity of disabled persons performing any kind of inclusion. For example, the local high school hockey team being lauded for letting a player with Down's Syndrome play one game, or the generous hearts of the teachers who take on the special burden of special education, or the parents who gamely learned to navigate their child's disability with strength and fortitude (Wiley, 2017).³⁶ Minnesota Governor Walz's declaration of a Nic Zapako day for interpreting COVID-19 press briefings is a manifestation of benevolence porn, in which a public facing interpreter is framed as a hero. Zapako was a paid signed language interpreter contracted by a local interpreting agency who made regular appearances at press briefings. The extent of Zapako's "heroism" was her popularity with audiences and in particular, her animated facial expressions. There was no mention of the off camera interpreters who made the interpretation possible, or that she was a paid professional among many who were equally able and willing to provide interpretation for the briefings, no distinction as to whether she was an effective interpreter for the target audience, or acknowledgement that she was part of the spectacle that enlivened an otherwise dreary context. As Walz himself said, she was the most popular person on the podium. Walz took advantage of a easy opportunity for political points without real consideration of the politics of accessibility in the state nor for the interpreters who continued to show up in courtrooms, classrooms, and hospital rooms throughout the pandemic and all its unknowns. Nic Zapako day did little for problems of access for deaf and hard of hearing people in the state such as addressing efforts by local deaf people to pass state licensure bills for interpreter quality assurance.

Benevolence porn elides structural problems of ableism and audism by suggesting access should not be and is not a given. Benevolence porn fuels an interpreter's desire to be proximate to fame. Such desires delivers dire consequences for deaf people because accessible communication becomes the interpreter's secondary consideration. The glamorization of interpreters as heroes and perpetuation of benevolence porn contributes to power imbalances between deaf people and access providers. Fame encourages the interpreter's ego to supersede the needs of deaf consumers as evidenced by Gallagher's refusal to step down as the Seattle Men's Chorus interpreter because nondeaf people's enjoyment of his performance was prioritized over the access needs of deaf attendees. Fame also got to interpreter Travis Painter's head when he decided

³⁶ D. Wiley, "Score! Hockey Team Celebrates Goal By Senior With Down Syndrome," *NBC Boston*, 16.02.2017, <https://www.nbc.com/news/local/score-reading-memorial-high-school-hockey-team-celebrates-goal-by-senior-with-down-syndrome-bear-chris-mcfarland/36594/> (accessed: 17.11.2022).

to abandon his post interpreting for Gallaudet faculty Khadijat Rashid and her student at the annual National Economists Club's dinner to be interviewed by the "Wall Street Journal" about his job as an interpreter.³⁷ His deaf consumers were left without access while the "WSJ" portrayed Painter's work as heroic and centered him, a non-deaf person, as an expert on signed languages rather than defer to the deaf people who were with him that night.

Media framing of disability has consequences. Increased visibility of signed language interpreters does not always translate into positive outcomes for deaf people. The celebrification of signed language interpreters leads to the view that they are entertainers or even competitors for attention while ignoring deaf people's lived experiences and oppression.³⁸ Some entertainers and politicians refuse to allow signed language interpreters on the stage for access because they fear being upstaged.³⁹ Teachers have refused to allow interpreters in the classroom or to be placed in an accessible sightline for the same reason. Deaf people are denied participation in cultural and educational activities because of misperceptions of interpreters as entertainers and because of the fear that spectators would focus on the novelty of signed languages. In some cases, people fraudulently claiming to be interpreters in order to claim public attention have deprived deaf people the opportunity to participate in communal activities like mourning a beloved political figure or remaining informed of important political news. Known as fake interpreters, they have emerged on media newscasts in South Africa, Colombia, Peru, and the United States. Perhaps most famous is the case of the fake interpreter at Nelson Mandela's funeral in South Africa.⁴⁰ Deaf people have also observed interpreters vying for high profile jobs or centering themselves as performers for the nondeaf gaze, more interested in being visible than providing access.⁴¹

The above intended to show how signed languages and interpreters intersect with celebrity culture, while constructing deaf people as other through the knowledges and discourses of deaf people. The case studies included show how the spectacularization of signed language interpreters dampers access for signing deaf people be it through hijacking access, denying deaf people's belonging in public spaces, or transforming

³⁷ E. Williamson, *Interpreters for Deaf Cuts through D.C.'s Political Jargon: Sign Language Interpreters Gets Creative with Specialty Vocabulary*, "Wall Street Journal," 13.01.2014, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304773104579266792997670058> (accessed: 17.11.2022); D. Stuckless, *RID, Inc. More re: Travis Painter and the Wall Street Journal Article*, Facebook, 15.02.2014, <https://www.facebook.com/RIDinc/posts/more-re-travis-painter-and-the-wall-street-journal-articlefacebook-entry-on-beha/10152203905294133/>.

³⁸ L. Marcus, *Twista's ASL Interpreter's Viral Moment Misses the Point*, CNN, 23.08.2019.

³⁹ E. Terry, *Facebook Post about Tyler Perry Refusing Interpreters at a Stage Show in Rochester*, Facebook, 11.04.2019 (accessed: 8.03.2020).

⁴⁰ A. Smith, *'Fake' Sign Language Interpreter at Nelson Mandela Memorial Provokes Anger*, NBC News, 11.12.2013, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/fake-sign-language-interpreter-nelson-mandela-memorial-provokes-anger-flna2d11723934> (accessed: 17.11.2022).

⁴¹ D. Stuckless, op. cit.

interpreters into benevolence porn. Such spectacularization subjects deaf people to ableism inherent in discourses surrounding robust access to the public sphere. Those discourses reveals power relations between deaf and nondeaf people as signed languages are appropriated as novelties for entertainment while accessibility remains elusive.⁴² Those discourses shapes attitudes, beliefs, and power structures about ownership of signed languages and who has primary consideration in the effectiveness of the access provided. Such celebrations of signed languages are disembodied from deaf people but have tangible consequences as experienced across the globe with the emergence of fake interpreters in across the globe.⁴³

The solution to the spectacularization of signed languages is complex. Greater public education about the role of interpreters as access providers and the challenges surrounding signed languages and linguistic human rights, as well as centering deaf people in conversations about signed languages in the public sphere may alleviate some of the problems generated by the treatment of signed languages as entertainment source material. Sign language interpreters themselves must also divest from the spotlight by understanding they are not performance artists in their own right. Given the dynamics of power, privilege, and linguistic oppression involved, as long as nondeaf interpreters are the center of attention when it comes to signed languages, deaf people's voices are silenced.

Joseph Murray, a linguistic rights scholar, critiques the visibility of signed language interpreters as both empowering and counterproductive. Interpretation is brought to "highly visible platforms [that] bring sign languages to wider public notice and legitimize them by their proximity to powerful political leaders."⁴⁴ Increased visibility is a political goal for deaf communities but in many cases deaf people are not rendered any more visible nor the cause of linguistic human rights advanced. The reaction of nondeaf audiences to the visibility of interpreters in media and media framings of interpretation as a point of access reveal tensions surrounding access, inclusion, and power through the framework of Hills' audience theory.⁴⁵ Those reactions show that the perception of interpreters as performers and signed languages as novelty to be used for artistic effect defeats the purpose of their presence, which is to provide access for deaf signing people. Access framed as entertainment by signed language interpreters while deaf signing artists are ignored is disempowering to deaf

⁴² E. Elcessor, M. Hagood, B. Kirkpatrick, op. cit.

⁴³ Scripps National Desk, *Fake Sign Language Interpreter: Woman Has Record of Arrests for Fraud*, ABC Action News, 15.12.2017, <https://www.wcpo.com/news/national/fake-sign-language-interpreter-behavior> (accessed: 17.11.2022); A. Smith, 'Fake' Sign Language..., op. cit.; World Federation of the Deaf and World Association of Sign Language Interpreters, *WFD-WASLI Joint Statement about the Sign Language Interpretation at Peru Congress*, Vimeo, 2016, <https://vimeo.com/183064461> (accessed: 17.11.2022).

⁴⁴ J.J. Murray, op. cit., p. 398.

⁴⁵ M. Hills, op. cit.

people.⁴⁶ Public attitudes can either narrow or broaden access in the public sphere in ways that are not covered by disability access legislation. Such laws, difficult to enforce, encounter ideologies about language, disability, and the burden of access. Combined, such attitudes and reactions have adverse effects on deaf people's ability to participate as informed citizens in their respective communities. Some might argue that the nondisabled gaze on interpreters is a productive encounter where nondeaf people learn more about deaf people and signed languages, understanding access via signed language interpretation as a legitimate human right. However, the media, interpreters, and nondeaf audiences have actively co-produced signed language interpretation as not a site of access for deaf people but as an avenue for ableism, linguistic chauvinism, and displacement to persist.

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