Bridging connections between avant-garde shape and pattern poetics, from Dadaism to the contemporary L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E page poets, ASL poetry resists and stretches hearing-based modalities of creative exchange and communication. Spoken word traditions, performed through call-and-response community exchanges, are crafted through rhythmic vocal intonations, word play, and musicality. Although political and subversive, slam poetry functions within a phonocentric built environment that privileges oralist and audist modalities. By contrast, ASL poetics and performances incite new understandings of kinetic, corporeal, and visual artistry, illuminating a Deaf diaspora within the United States that strives to connect Deaf artists and communities. ASL poets Peter Cook and Gilbert Eastman retell ASL poetic origins by mapping out new Deaf-centered cartographies and homelands. Moreover, documentary films such as Sound and Fury (2000) and Deaf Jam (2011) present the lived Deaf diasporas and expand on how and where Deaf communities cultivate networks in order to formulate new architectures of personhood and being. This paper traces the lineage of Deaf poetry, its innovations and limitations, and its expansion of diasporic communities by incorporating Deaf spatiality. I argue that although poetry appears to symbolize its own built environment within the constraints of form and genre, ASL poetry—as a social practice and political tool—generates new possibilities that foster Deaf corporeal subjectivities and environments in our phonocentric world.

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ASL artists such as Peter Cook and Gilbert Eastman retell ASL poetic origins by mapping out new Deaf-centered cartographies and homelands. Moreover, documentary films such as *Sound and Fury* (2000) and *Deaf Jam* (2011) present the lived Deaf diasporas and expand on how and where Deaf communities cultivate networks to formulate new architectures of personhood and being. This paper traces the expansive genealogies of Deaf poetry. Deaf poetics are innovative and enhance Diaspora studies by incorporating a Deaf-centered spatiality into our built environments. Ultimately, I argue that, although poetry appears to symbolize its own built environment within the constraints of form and genre, ASL poetry—as a social practice and political tool—generates new possibilities that foster Deaf communities in our phonocentric worlds.

### Concrete Environments and Creative Spatialities

Phonocentric spaces include schools, restaurants, transportation systems, and other social concrete environments that are built on “oralist and audist” systems that privilege oral and audial means of communication respectively (Edwards, 2006). Phonocentric environments assume oralist and audist communications as default, and are built with the “unquestioned orientation that speech and hearing are the only fully human modalities of language” (Dirksen et al, 2006). An education-based “built environment” is one where architecture firms, affiliated corporations, university systems, etc. construct classrooms that privilege students who primarily learn by speaking and listening (Dirksen et al, 2006). Thus, those who are not integrated nor able to communicate in that phonocentric environment and space are ultimately excluded.

For example, at Georgetown University, the English Department conference room contains a large oval table, windows that face only East (instead of allowing light from all sides to filter into the room), and one large TV tethered to a DVD and computer source. The room is technologically advanced and intimate in contrast to a traditional classroom setting or lecture hall that features a large white board or chalkboard and individual desks in rows facing the lecturer. During seminar discussions, learners rely on sound for instruction. Students’ facial expressions or movements are not visible to one another. Moreover, discussion is based on listening to the instructor’s lesson plans and responding to other students who are engaging in the discussion. For an ASL learner, reading facial expressions and interpreting hand and body shapes, orientation, and signed letters are crucial.
Lighting, visual class materials, space on the table, and proximity to students are all factors that affect ASL communication. In consequence, implementing these visual and spatial aspects of ASL learning is essential to understanding the sensuous complexities within our own built environments, particularly within classrooms and creative spaces.

Slam poetry contests, open mics, and author readings are other examples of phonocentric spaces. Slam poetry is a subversive form of poetry that originated in Chicago at the Get Me High Lounge in 1984. In 1988, the first slam poetry competition was organized by Bob Holman at the Nuyorican Poets Café in New York City. Since slam’s inception, a boom of slam teams around the world have arisen. Most renowned is New York City’s Urban Word Slam Team where hundreds of students compete for five spots on the national team each year. In Washington DC, Busboy & Poets (named after Harlem Renaissance prodigy Langston Hughes), Split This Rock, and Bloombar are creative poetry spaces that have open mic poetry nights daily. Political and resistant in the art form, slam poetry relies on intonation, musicality of the verse, word play and personal narrative. The flow and music of slam poetry, and the ability to captivate audiences by way of manipulating the English language through sound, are salient to the success of slam.

**ASL Origins and Histories**

The East Coast is home to not only slam poets, but also to prominent ASL institutions, schools, scholars and poets in the United States. Formal sign education was initiated in France by Charles Michel De L’Eppe who created the first free public Deaf school in 1760 and the first French sign language dictionary in 1788. In 1817, the first American School for the Deaf was founded by Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet in Hartford, Connecticut. Afterwards, Deaf schools were built in New York (New York Institution for the Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb in 1818), Pennsylvania, Kentucky, Missouri and Virginia between 1817-1839 (“ASL Timeline: Gallaudent University Archives”, 2016). In 1864, Abraham Lincoln signed the charter for Gallaudet University and the school became the first university to offer degrees to Deaf students.

Gallaudet University’s students and faculty have fought hard to secure ASL and disability rights legislation for their Deaf students. In 1988, students and faculty organized an eight-day fueled protest for a Deaf President. This initiated after the Gallaudet Board of Trustees selected a hearing faculty member, Elisabeth A. Zinser, as the university’s next president. Angry students and faculty protested and shut down the campus for eight days after the decision was announced. The protesters demanded the following: “a Deaf President who could fully represent Deaf culture, the resignation of Jane Bassett Spilman, who was chair of the Board of Trustees, the representation of at least 51% Deaf members on the Board of Trustees, and non-punitive repercussions for the protesters” (“ASL Timeline: Gallaudent University Archives”, 2016). As a result, Dr. I. King Jordan replaced Zinser as the first Deaf President at Gallaudet.

This rise of identity politics and the Deaf Pride movement sparked after the civil rights and feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Following their lead, disability and Deaf rights activists have fought to secure their cultures and representation. For example, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, first signed by Richard Nixon, “includes a section requiring federally funded organization to
provide teletypewriter (TTY) phones and interpreters for the Deaf” (“ASL Timeline: Gallaudent University Archives”, 2016). Following Nixon, George W.H. Bush signed the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 that banned discrimination against persons with disabilities in the labor and work force. In 2006, a second Deaf President Now protest arose to instate Jane J. Fernandes as the new president. With the rise in the popularity of cochlear implant surgery, ASL communities are now struggling to find sustainable ways to retain their culture and heritage, that oppose the medicalization and pathologizing treatment of Deafness, in order to resist the able-bodied ideal.

**Deaf Centers and Diasporas**

This Deaf genealogy demonstrates how Deaf culture is moving away from the margins and periphery and towards a Deaf Center, wherein ASL cultures and poetry incite new “cognitive, cultural and creative diversity” (Dirksen et al., 2013). This transition of a new local power transforms our contemporary spaces towards a notion of Deaf gain, which provides alternative modes of examining art production, expression and reception. Deaf gain is defined as “unique sensory orientations as forms of visual-spatial [and kinetic] language…provid[ing] opportunities to explore human character” (Dirksen et al., 2013). Deafness has both extrinsic and intrinsic values. Examples of extrinsic Deaf gains are: new fields for interpreting symbols (semiotics), enhanced spatial thought processes, and new visual grammars. Intrinsic gains include: new medias and platforms, ongoing evolution of the individual and self-advocacy (Dirksen et al., 2013). Thus, in utilizing more visual and sensorial pedagogies and interactions, mapping a “different center” for Deaf communities creates new localities and possibilities for phonocentric environments to learn and rebuild from (Paden and Humphries, 2013). The emergence of “Deaf renaissance”, which includes films, literatures and other ASL-based art practices, provides new poetic vocabularies such as “metaphoric iconicity” and “cinematic grammar,” which are essential for understanding how ASL poetry is communicated, constructed, and practiced, especially for those who reside on the spectrum of hearing loss: “A-Little Hard-of-Hearing to Very Hard-of-Hearing” (Edwards, 2006) (Bauman and Murray, 2013) (Paden and Humphries, 2013). In understanding the implications of Deaf gain and the nuances of non-hearing communities, our phonocentric normalcies can better learn from Deaf cultures.

When developing concrete spaces for Deaf communities, wherein hearing worlds can learn to adapt to, where do ASL communicators turn to? Bauman H-Dirksen and J. Murray note that Deaf communities are “never occupying a homeland” There are no built worlds that automatically accommodate Deaf culture and, as a result, this notion of a Deaf diaspora surfaces (Bauman and Murray). In the documentary film *Sound and Fury* (2000), director Josh Aronson traces the Artinian family, specifically though the eyes of two brothers Peter (who is deaf) and Chris (who is not deaf). Within Peter’s family, his wife, young daughter Heather (a future Georgetown alumnus) and two sons are all deaf. Heather’s parents are adamant about not giving her cochlear implants. On the other hand, Chris and his hearing wife recently gave birth to a son who is deaf and they eventually decide to have a cochlear hearing implant surgical procedure performed on him. This film traces the divide between hearing and Deaf worlds within a divisive family, and the politics of exclusion and community within Deaf communities.
Heather’s family eventually moves from Long Island, New York to Maryland to find a more accepting ASL community and school for their daughter. Although Peter’s hearing parents and brother (Chris) can sign, they are against his decision to not provide Heather with cochlear implants and call his refusal to provide treatment as “abuse” (Aronson, 2000). Chris, also judges his decision as “criminal” (Aronson, 2000). Once Chris and his wife decide to give their newly born Deaf son the cochlear implant procedure, they see how the surgery has given their son a hearing able-body. After his son’s surgery, Chris is elated and says, “Deaf culture as they know it is done” (Aronson, 2000). Since cochlear implant surgery is now a viable option for his family, Chris believes that Deafness can be treated and cured. In turn, it can provide an option for hearing families to treat their children who are born deaf. Similarly, Peter suggests that “Deaf people may become extinct” with the rise of this cochlear implants, but in resistance, he aims to cultivate a Deaf culture with his family and children (Aronson, 2000).

Through Peter’s diaspora, finding community amidst difficult kinship ties resonate. Much like the queer diaspora, wherein queer folks are disowned by their families and are forced to relocate, Peter and his family migrate away from home to find more solitary within ASL-dominant spaces. Chris’ impulse to secure a “normal functioning” and able-body for his son mirrors Robert McRuer and Adrienne Richs’ imbricated concepts of compulsory heteronormativity and compulsory able-ness: “compulsory able-bodiedness that produces disability is thoroughly interwoven with the system of compulsory heterosexuality that produces queerness, that—in fact—compulsory heterosexuality is contingent on compulsory able-bodiedness and vice versa” (McRuer, 2013). Through this loss of kinship and home, much like the queer diaspora, a Deaf diaspora in the United States emerges.

**Deaf Poet Creation Stories and Palimpsests**

In mapping a Deaf homeland within this diaspora, ASL poets have produced their origin stories and myths. The poem “Let There Be Light” demonstrates a cosmic origin tale for ASL performers and signers. First, the poem starts with a box symbolizing “Limit” (Dirksen et all, 2006). The performer starts with a constraint, something that is heavy and difficult to hold. He situates it back into focus and looks through a telescope with in and out of close-up and establishing camera shots. Through the performer’s “cinematic grammar” the pictures focus on the stars through the viewer’s telescope lens (Dirksen et all, 2013). The twinkling stars turn into a brilliant Cosmo, which shifts into a ball that crashes down and creates Earth. Through evolution, plants begin to grow, water is present, and life begins.

This ASL “Promethean gesture,” or Creation narrative through geological time, produces legends and myths that can be passed down through generations of ASL signers (Dirksen et all, 2013). In contrast to Chris’s beliefs that Deaf society is “done” and heading towards extinction, ASL poetry shows us the possibilities that an ASL version of “oral histories” and “oral literature” has provided to phonocentric culture. For example, Uganda scholar Pio Zirimu notes that orature “is a way of revitalizing and valuing community stories which may include ‘ritual texts, curative chants, epic poems, musical genres and folklores’ (‘Definitions and understandings of oral literature’, 2016). Thus, this new signed version of a mythopoetics, a hybrid literary form that encompasses poetry and mythology, serves as a resistant and
political tool for displaced and marginalized communities to collect and record their origin stories by communal sharing and performance. By resisting erasure and the extinction of ASL communities and cultures, these collective stories will pass on and continue to be signed and re-envisioned for future generations.

Similarly, Gilbert Eastman’s “EPIC: GALLAUDET Protest” (capitalized letters refer to the signed images translated on page) signs the beginning of his poem with “UNIVERSE EARTH U.S.A. WASHINGTON, D.C.,” moving from a macrosocial sphere to the microsphere, District of Columbia, locality (“Outside & Subterranean Poetry (66): Gilbert Eastman, from ‘Epic: Gallaudet Protest’ (in American Sign Language),”, 2016). In this poem, Eastman traces the origin of the body and history of our current political climate. He maps out the concrete spaces and American origin symbols, The Founding Fathers: “FACE–PROFILE COLUMNS LOOKED AT REFLECTION POOL / WASHINGTON MONUMENT STREET CARS / CAPITOL DOME U.S. FLAG” (“Outside & Subterranean Poetry (66): Gilbert Eastman, from ‘Epic: Gallaudet Protest’ (in American Sign Language),”, 2016). Reading verses on the page is completely different than watching the performance live. Rather than working with written grammar structures, the capitalized words of poem of the page are written through images, rather than subject pronouns, verbs and objects. Thus, a “cinematic grammar” appears with the body, the page or template of the poem, when Eastman appears on stage. Eastman’s corporeal spatiality represents the grammar and punctuation of the poem (Dirksen et al., 2013). In analyzing live ASL poetry, instead of citing poetic terms such as enjambment, caesura, anaphora, wordplay, it is essential to observe the five components of the sign: “palm orientation, location, hand shapes, movement, and facial expressions” (Lieff, 2012). Eastman occupies a large space at the podium as he creates his origin tale of how ASL rights have transformed over history.

Furthermore, Eastman’s poem demonstrates how ASL poetry, through a Deaf diaspora, can map out new visual cartographies in built environments, classrooms, neighborhoods or performance spaces, that predominantly cater to creative expression and pedagogy through hearing. Eastman’s use of imagist techniques with ASL poetry enriches our ideas of expressive literary images and palimpsests. Palimpsests are literary strategies that demonstrate how earlier texts from history bare visible traces in contemporary literature and thought—our present in conversation with our past. In thinking about the body as a palimpsestic tableau or line of a poem, we realize how visual and kinetic our relationship to poetry can be, and ASL words and sign codes are re-formulated and transformed over time. These words are even overlapping within multiple historical precedence. Modernist, Beat and L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets sought to transform the ways that we commonly envisioned what poetry is. For example, Classical, Romantic and Pastoral traditions of lyrics, sonnets and other forms privileged aesthetics of sound within their poetry. In contrast, as Michael Davidson asserts, ASL poetry concerns the merging of the mind (or spiritual), the body and cinematic mind, that modernist figures, Walt Whitman, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Louis Zukofsky and Gertrude Stein, experimented with to form new ontological reinterpretations of the visual body, the poetic self, and the “relationships between sign and object” (Davidson, 2012). By studying ASL, as a marker of how our visual and object-sign languages can change over
time, we can expand how we can express our artistic selves through mediums that do not privilege audial or oral modes of communication.

_Sins Invalid: An Unashamed Claim to Beauty_, a disabilities-centered performance show in San Francisco, is an example of a queer and radical arts space that defies normalized views of disability and able-bodiedness. Deaf dancer Antoine Hunter’s piece proves that the reconciliation of the internal self, with the outer self, is the affirmation that transcends definitions of Deafness and phonocentric space. Through a mixed contemporary dance and poetry performance, Hunter conveys that rhythmic alignment does not solely rely on the syncing of hearing. Before his performance begins, the introducer recites:

> “Some assume people with disabilities have ‘extra senses’ – a sixth sense to negotiate the world. No. All beings have multiple and phenomenal senses. All beings struggle. Deaf or hard of hearing dancers do not have an extra sense to feel vibration out of the air. Movers or dancers who are deaf or hard of hearing take a risk in moving or dancing, often without knowing the sounds around them” (Berne and Moore, 2006).

As the piece progresses, Hunter pirouettes to a spoken word piece about the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment, a forty-year long clinical study (1932-1972), wherein doctors and researchers treated Blacks with syphilis to experiment and draw conclusions on the effects of untreated syphilis. Although the doctors and researchers knew about, and had access to the cure for syphilis (penicillin), many of the research subjects were not treated, rendering those bodies as permanently disabled. Hunter’s sway and vibrations artfully display that union of body with the physical space. Thus, the movements and expression result from the interior self—or “internal meter”—that moves with the music in a synced relationship that is not commanding or dependent on one another (Berne and Moore, 2006). In coordination with the overtly racist Tuskegee experiment echoing in the background, this subversive piece signifies and artfully destroys the medical, industrial and racist experiments on Black disabled bodies.

**Deaf Slam Poets in Contemporary New York City**

Judy Lieff’s _Deaf Jam_ (2011) explores more recent ASL poetry diasporic communities in New York City as she documents the first ASL high school slam poet team who competes at the Urban World and Nuyorican Café slam poetry competitions. This documentary captures a bildungsroman story of Aneta Brodski, a Deaf teenage who grows up in Queens, New York City. Aneta was born in Israel and migrated to Russia then to New York where she attends the Lexington School for the Deaf. The Lexington School for the Deaf was built in 1867 and is one of the first K-12 schools for Deaf students in the United States. According to the film, “52% of Deaf children learn speech, 36% learn sign with speech and 11% learn sign only” (Lieff, 2011) Thus, even at one of the U.S.’s oldest and most famous Deaf school, oral modalities of learning and communicating are demanded of Deaf students to this day. Aneta first learns about ASL poetry in an afterschool program, and through various poetry workshops with poet Peter Cook and scholar H-Dirksen Bauman, she strives to find a unique ASL poetic voice. The ASL slam poetry club will be the first group to compete for a spot as a member of the Urban World NYC slam team. This film articulates Aneta’s journey towards finding a
creative ASL voice within the spoken word and poetic built environments that do not fully comprehend Deaf poetry.

One of Aneta’s first poems is about her own birth and her own coming of age narratives. She signs a narrative about the biological processes of reproduction and how she came to be. This origin tale is another vehicle through which to explore the mode of connection and relation within the ASL communities. Aneta first performs this piece with her teammates at an ASL Poetry Performance where 350 Deaf students from all over NYC attend. The ASL team’s instructors encourage the students to not spell out their poetry by hand, but rather to think only in pictures—cinematic images. Peter Cook signs, “No words, just images!” to Aneta through a Skype call as she constructs her poem. Eventually, Aneta performs at the Nuyorican Poets Café, which was founded in 1973 by Miguel Algarin. The Nuyorican Poets Café is a “multicultural and multi-arts institution” that “gives voice to a diverse group of rising poets, actors, filmmakers and musicians... Allen Ginsberg called the Café ‘the most integrated place on the planet’” (“History and Awards: Nuyorican Poets Café”, 2016). Thus, in signing the first ASL poem at Nuyorican, Aneta conveys a new visual communication and art to the Nuyorican space. When Aneta performs, her translator announces that there will be no audible translation. Instead, she asks the audience to focus on the pictures of her images that are not oral, but instead in the same imagist language that she experiences daily. The reception from her audience is minimal, and although Aneta brings something new to the diverse space, the boundaries of misunderstanding between the hearing and Deaf worlds remain.

In melding those boundaries together, Aneta meets Tahani, a hearing Palestinian American spoken word poet, who attends Columbia University and works with Urban Word. The two poets team up to write a spoken word/ASL poetry collaboration piece that merges both spoken word and ASL languages. In articulating both their own diasporas, Israel and Palestine, and their personal experienced differences between the hearing world vs. Deaf world, both poets contest phonocentric spaces and the broader nation-state conflicts and war between Israel and Palestine. Aneta, subsequently, does not have American citizenship and she performs “My family has been waiting for the immigration papers to come through for over ten years” (Lieff, 2011). The two collide both diasporas together to resist the violence that has arisen among multiple worlds: Deaf vs. hearing, Israel vs. Palestine, and the migration from a distant homeland to the United States. The pair performs Columbia University, Baltimore, Maryland and other venues across the United States before performing at Bob Holman’s Bowery Poetry Club, a famous performance space for poets located in Manhattan. Deaf Jam illustrates that ASL poetry is becoming a new force within slam poetry spaces, and there is much needed intercultural education and pivotal growth that can enrich our creative, communicative and educational worlds.

**ASL Poetry’s Limitations and Risks**

Although promoting ASL poetry in public spaces is ideal for visibility, culture and community in the microsocial and global world, marketing ASL as an aesthetic can be problematic in many artistic circles. For example, in Washington, DC, Busboy & Poets on 5th and K, features ASL poetry open mics every third Friday of each month. However, many of these performances are ASL translations of songs such as Whitney Houston’s “The Greatest Love of All,” Michael Jackson’s “The Way You
Make Me Feel,” and Macklemore’s “Same Love.” Though the artists (predominantly hearing) intend to promote the visibility of sign language and culture, there is a line of caricature and mimicry that diminishes the quality of Deaf-centered poetry. This staunches the creative possibilities of ASL poetry, as a subversive social practice, to materialize.

If ASL open mics are essentially translations of popular songs, then the image of ASL is that of translation of/for the hearing world, and not of its own generative, community-based and political capacities—the new kinetic, corporeal and imagist palimpsests and origins stories that Peter Cook, Gilbert Eastman, Aneta Brodski and other ASL poets strive to achieve. Moreover, celebrities such as Johnny Depp and Natalie Portman’s sign language translations of Paul McCartney’s “My Valentine” music video (over ten million views) and Ed Sheeran’s “You Need Me, I Don’t Need You” music video (over forty million views) market and capitalize on the aesthetics of ASL for its “trendy and cool” and “new and exotic” appeal for mainstream audiences, rather than for ASL poetry’s subversive content and community-driven purposes. Thus, for an ASL poetics to manifest, support for lived Deaf poetic and embodied experience is crucial for the longevity of an authentic ASL voice.

**Conclusion**

Today, artists are creating new journals and mapping out their own intersections of what constitutes as Deaf and disabilities cultures. For example, radical journals such as *The Deaf Poets Society: An Online Journal of Deaf and Disabled Literature* seek to “create a literature of a society with a different center...to incubate and amplify the literature of the movement that fights back against bigoted policies of sterilization and the racist, classist pseudoscience of eugenics” (“The Deaf Poets Society Manifesto”, 2016). Although not all the included writers are Deaf in this journal, *The Deaf Poets Society* hopes to incite and display a cultural consciousness that is against the obliteration of Deaf and disabled cultures and communities. Thus, the journal’s “aim is to always be accessible to every reader...who understands the difficulty of managing physical pain...the literature of the recovery rooms, the psych ward, the hospice” (“The Deaf Poets Society Manifesto”, 2016). By mapping out spaces for Deaf and disabled communities to connect to online and elsewhere, new imagined worlds for ASL poetry and shared community is possible.

By examining ASL poetry through its concrete and corporeal spatialities and cultural histories, more analyses of ASL and built spaces are required to understand more about Deaf culture and its creative worlds, not only in the United States but globally. The destruction and un-mappings of Deaf culture destroy the possibility of understanding new kinds of diaspora and migration in the United States: a country built by the hands of immigrants. Thus, by locating and examining how communities are moving away from oralist and audist modes of communication institutions, and architectures, educators and artists can imagine and implement new worlds that are more interconnected and consciously constructed through visual and kinetic modalities, and through languages that are more intercultural, imagist and corporeal. Simultaneously, by viewing the body as its own cinematic and corporeal grammar, new worlds of poetry and its social practices can emerge.
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