

I was tasked with writing a creative non-fiction narrative of my journey and relationship with literacy while incorporating two sources provided by the professor. At the time of writing, I was also enrolled in American Sign Language 1 and Deaf Communities: Facts and Perspectives. As a Deaf person raised in a hearing, English-only family, the first semester at Wesleyan threw me head-first into a whirlwind of self-discovery, identity reckoning, and, for the first time, a home under the umbrella of Deafhood. This essay allowed me to explore recent questions about my ears, brain, words, and world.

Literacy, Deafhood, and Loving a Language That Doesn't Love Me

It's all too much.

Voices and verbalization are too much. Incomprehensible, invisible waves of vibration that everyone else can conceptualize and revel in float past me garbled and muted. The world operates on sound to an extent that hearing people will never be able to actualize. Lecture-based education, caption-less entertainment, ordering in a drive-thru, doctor's appointments, airport security, navigating public transportation, and advocating for myself in conversations are some of the many instances where I realize the all-encompassing dominance of the hearing world and my position on the outskirts of it. Verbalized English is a struggle every single day, and I've learned to identify with and define my literacy through writing, art, and all things visual. A Deaf mentor of mine once explained it on a Post-It note we passed back and forth: *Everyone on this planet is worried about what they're hearing. That's why it's called EARth and not EYEth.*

Trying to communicate with you is too much.

The speech therapy "classroom" was a converted janitorial closet just off the cafeteria. The woman who worked there was too young to be disillusioned by the setup, ushering me inside until our knees touched every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday morning. The inches between us diminished as she put her hands on my throat, jaw, and tongue or pulled my grubby hands towards hers. As she spoke, my fingers rested on her larynx, grasping desperately at the vibrations that sounded out *cat, ball, boy*. She pointed at her lips and then to words printed in thick cardboard books, drawing a line that somehow connected the inked shapes to the waves she produced. She would press my tongue to the roof of my mouth with one manicured nail, gesturing for me to breathe out and somehow form an *nnn*.

James Baldwin, in his piece, *If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?* writes, "Each [person] has paid, and is paying, a different price for this 'common' language, in which, as it turns out, they are not saying, and cannot be saying, the same things: They each have very different realities to articulate, or control" (Baldwin 1). Baldwin expresses that even within speakers of a mutual language, the process of acquiring that language and the underlying connection to that language is varied. My parents, as well as hearing educators and my peers, often assume that since I can carry a conversation in verbalized English, I am paying the same "price" in the exchange: minimal effort to receive auditory and social input, convert the input to understandable ideas and mental images, and form a response. For me, however, every conversation is a measure of statistics. With lipreading¹ alone, I can interpret and understand every third word spoken. Sounds like *v* and *f* look nearly identical as I awkwardly focus on people's mouths, which are either speeding through words, filled with food, covered by beards, or bouncing around and switching directions. With my hearing aid, I get every second word. They sound mechanical and filtered, as if there was static playing faintly underneath. The little device is uncomfortable and itches my inner ear when it isn't dying at the most inopportune moment. At maximum, I am getting sensory input for 50% of a conversation — the rest, I must spend mental energy to infer through situational awareness, context cues, prior knowledge, and dumb luck. That's not the same price. Every interaction leaves me feeling drained, confused, and less than. Spoken English cannot quantify the reality I am trying to articulate, as speaking takes too much effort to truthfully and comfortably express myself. I do not define my literacy through my speaking ability, but speech is a fundamental aspect of our audist² world.

¹A method of understanding speech by interpreting how mouths and lips move in relationship to the sound being produced.

² The prejudiced belief that hearing is superior to hearing loss, d/Deaf people should be discriminated against, and d/Deaf lives are inherently flawed.

It's too much.

I learned quickly, however, that if I focused all my attention on the books the speech therapist held up, she would praise me for “actively paying attention.” To avoid her probing and straining, I buried myself in written language. Richard Scarry and Eric Carle began as shields, pages to poke my nose between to block my line of sight, but quickly developed into refuge. The pictures were textured and engrossing, communicating with me without noise and without needing to understand the letters surrounding them. In her one memorable moment of kindness, the speech therapist gave up on a Wednesday morning lesson and toted me down the hallway to the library. My commitment to reading was an unconscious effort to create my own Eyeth — a world dominated by visual information and literacy. I couldn't articulate the words on the page or even rationalize that the words were the same thing I was trying to grasp verbally; to me, they were two separate concepts. The print, I adored, and the voice, I did everything to avoid. Without a signed language or any other way to express myself, I dedicated all my time and energy to writing.

I understand that English isn't made for me. Simply put, my body and brain weren't built to comprehend it. That doesn't stop me from having a deep, intrinsic love for it. In her essay “On Pandering,” writer Claire Vaye Watkins points out, “... people at the periphery will travel to accept and even to love things not made for or toward them: we have been trained to do so our entire lives” (Watkins). In an environment where the dominant language cannot be said to be truly “mine,” I've learned to grab it by its horns and force it to represent me. Time and time again, I have traveled to the center of the hearing world and loved English in all its messy, ableist, archaic glory. That's my definition of literacy: my ability to cajole the imperfect language tools I have to represent myself in a world that wasn't built for me. I've manufactured my

education, my creativity, and I tirelessly work to imbue meaning into every impossible conversation I have.

I'm currently taking a sociology class called Deaf Communities: Facts and Perspectives. We frequently discuss literacy in terms of d/Deafness,³ and the concept of language nativity came up. "Are mainstreamed⁴ d/Deaf people who learned verbalized English through speech therapy and audiological methodologies considered *native* English speakers?" my professor signed. "Language acquisition is supposed to be easy. Our brains are hardwired to make it easy between birth and age five. Those kids who faced language deprivation and then had language forced on them after the learning period — is English really *their* language?" How often do we consider access and ability when we discuss literacy? Who gets to decide that English is *their* language, and are the rest just fluent in the language of their oppressors? Who decides any of it?

I don't have an answer to any of that. It's too much, but I'm learning. I'm learning the language I was supposed to know, learning to find myself in the ranks of a boisterous and developed Deaf and hard-of-hearing community, and learning to identify as a writer who wrestles with English.

I've been a poet for years, publishing my work globally and performing slam in both English and ASL. I see myself in text messages, notes in the margins, graphic tee-shirts, tattoos, menus, and water bottle stickers. I've discovered a passion for library sciences and making the written word accessible to all. More than once, I have found myself in between library stacks while shelving books and have thought *it's too much*. In those moments, the sentiment is not

³ The lowercase d signifies medical hearing loss while the uppercase D signifies an active member of the Deaf community. For example, an aging family member who recently started using a hearing aid versus a Deaf from birth individual who uses sign, attends a Deaf school, and prefers to interact with Deaf people. d/Deaf is used to represent all individuals with hearing loss, including hard-of-hearing people.

⁴ d/Deaf students in public education, learning alongside hearing peers and without access to a signed or visual language.

from frustration or lack of understanding, not from rage or discomfort, but from the abundance of literature, knowledge, and understanding that surrounds me.

Works Cited

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