"MAYBE JESUS KNOWS SIGN": RESISTANCE THROUGH IDENTITY FORMATION

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ABSTRACT. This anthropological research paper explores how Deaf Christians negotiate their identity as members of two distinct identity groups: Deaf and Christian. The historical perception of Deaf and other disabled peoples in the church has not been positive, and a number of Christians today also view disability as one consequence of a fallen world that God will eventually restore. Since—beginning in the 1960s and continuing until the present time—many Deaf people believe that Deafness is a cultural, even ethnic, identity centered around American Sign Language rather than a disability (Lane, 2005), Deaf Christians in America today occupy a unique position of belonging to two identity groups, whose beliefs may conflict with one another and who may not have the same perspective on what constitutes disability. Using ethnographic evidence among Deaf Christians in Washington, DC, I argue that Deaf Christian identity formation can be seen as a nexus of resistance against deaf-deficient narratives in Christianity, which have historical roots and still hold much currency today. My interlocutors do not necessarily see a conflict between their Deaf and Christian identities, seeing both instead as a single identity of "Deaf Christian," which they index (Ochs, 2009) through conversion narratives, a discourse of "God's purpose," and a desire for better inclusion. In using these language forms, Deaf Christians not only point to its existence but also serve to reinforce its existence.

RÉSUMÉ. Cet article reprend une recherche anthropologique et explore comment les Chrétiens Sourds négocient leur identité en tant que membres de deux groupes identitaires distincts : les Sourds et les Chrétiens. La perception historique des sourds et des autres personnes handicapées dans l'Église n'a pas été positive, et un certain nombre de Chrétiens considèrent encore aujourd'hui le handicap comme une conséquence d'un monde déchu que Dieu restaurera. Depuis le début des années 1960, de nombreux sourds croient que la surdité est une identité culturelle, voire ethnique, centrée autour de la langue des signes américaine, plutôt qu'un handicap (Lane, 2005). Les personnes sourdes et chrétiennes aux États-Unis bénéficient donc d'une double appartenance à ces groupes identitaires, dont les croyances peuvent éventuellement entrer en conflits et qui ne partagent pas la même définition du handicap. En utilisant des preuves ethnographiques parmi les Chrétiens Sourds à Washington, je soutiens que la formation de l'identité chrétienne des sourds peut être considérée comme un lien de résistance contre les récits sourds-déficients dans le christianisme, qui ont des racines historiques et qui demeurent encore vivaces. Mes interlocuteurs ne perçoivent pas nécessairement un conflit entre leurs identités de Sourds et de Chrétiens, considérant les deux comme une seule identité de « Sourd-Chrétien », qu'ils indiquent (Ochs, 2009) à travers des récits de conversion, un discours sur « le dessein de Dieu » et le désir d'une meilleure intégration. En utilisant ces formes de langage, les Chrétiens sourds montrent leur existence, mais s'en servent aussi afin de la renforcer.

Keywords: *d/Deafness, disability, religion, Christianity, identity, indexicality, linguistic anthropology.*

INTRODUCTION

During our interview, Lucas[i] recounted a story to me told to him by his brothers-in-law, who had both attended Gallaudet University, the only liberal arts college for deaf and hard-of-hearing students in the world, in the early 2000s. On the first day of their class on Deaf[ii] history in America, the professor asked the class, "Who here is Christian?" A few students raised their hands. Pointing at each of them in turn, the professor said, "You. . .you. . .you. . . are stupid and feeble-minded."

Laughing at the absurdity of the situation, Lucas went on to explain that this professor also coauthored a book about the making of the Deaf community in America, in which he had written:

> The New Testament contains neither commandments to treat deaf people decently nor promises that one day all shall be free of disabilities. . . they are depicted as sick beings to be cured by the miraculous powers of Jesus. The deaf individual is lost as a human being. Mark shows no concern or empathy for the deaf man; he merely exploits his condition to demonstrate supernatural power. The possibility that deaf persons may be part of God's plan, that He created them for a larger purpose, is absent. (Van Cleve & Crouch, 1989, p. 3)

When Lucas had finished signing out the paragraph, he said, "I read it and it's clear that [the author] isn't interpreting the Scripture in the proper way. You have to read it in context. He is taking a sentence out of the context and it means something different—but that's my view." Lucas believed that the professor was writing from an atheist's perspective, and therefore drew such dire conclusions; for himself, however, as a Christian of more than 40 years, the notion that God has such a low view of deaf people, and that he did not have a purpose for them, was simply inconceivable.

The anecdote I share above illustrates the central problematic I discuss in this paper: the relationship between Deafness and Christianity; in particular, the unique identity configuration of individuals with both Deaf and Christian identities. In this context, Deafness refers to a cultural identity centered around American Sign Language rather than to physiological hearing loss, distinguished by the use of the capital "d". As Harlan Lane (2005) has written, "It has become widely known that there is a Deaf-World in the United States, as in other nations, citizens whose primary language is American Sign Language (ASL) and who identify as members of that minority culture" (p. 291).

Deaf Christians in the United States are in the unique position of belonging to both Deaf and Christian identity groups. Beginning in the 1960s and continuing until the present time, the former group have believed that Deafness is a cultural, even ethnic, identity. Many, given the choice, would rather stay Deaf than become part of the hearing community; for example, Lane (2005) recounted an incident when Gallaudet's first Deaf president, I. King Jordan, was asked on Sixty Minutes if he would like to be hearing, to which his response was, "That's almost like asking a black

person if he would rather be white. . .I don't think of myself as missing something or as incomplete" (p. 298).

The latter group, on the other hand, views disability (of which deafness is often considered a part) theologically, as one consequence of a fallen world that God will eventually restore. Historically, in traditional Christian doctrine, deaf people were often portrayed as victims of circumstance in need of healing, as the healing of disabilities was taken as a sign of Jesus' ministry on earth (Matthew 11:4-5). In extreme cases, they were seen as being beyond salvation, based for instance in the Bible verse: "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17), a view which Deaf historians Van Cleve and Crouch (1989) argued is falsely attributed to Saint Augustine, whose view towards deaf people was far more charitable. Whatever the case, "people who interpreted the Bible literally believed that it indicated that those who are deaf are denied the possibility of faith. Without faith, they cannot be Christians and cannot be saved" (p. 4). These two sets of beliefs seem to be in tension: is a deaf person disabled or not? Does a deaf person need to be healed?

In this research project, I use anthropological methods to explore the question: does an identity conflict exist for Deaf Christians? If so, how do they reconcile and resolve the conflict? I ultimately argue that a unified Deaf Christian identity exists among my informants that is indexed through three linguistic characteristics: conversion narratives, a discourse of God's purpose, and a desire for better inclusion. Deaf Christian identity formation, I argue, can be seen as a nexus of resistance against deaf-deficient narratives in Christianity, which have historical roots and continue to hold much currency today.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Anthropologist Joel Robbins (2003) has argued that although there exist a few ethnographies of particular Christian communities, an anthropology of Christianity for itself—as a "self-conscious, comparative project" (p. 191)—has yet to truly develop, especially compared to an anthropology of Islam. Anthropological studies on the relationship between disability and Christianity are even fewer, with only one scholar, Leila Monaghan (1991), writing about the interplay of Christian and Deaf identities. She discussed these identities in the context of the founding of two Deaf churches, however, without examining if these identities come into conflict. However, the question of identity conflicts for disabled Christians did prompt Kathy Black (1996), ex-chaplain at Gallaudet University, to write *A Healing Homiletic: Preaching and Disability* about healing narratives in the Bible, focusing on theological views as opposed to lived experiences of Deaf Christians. The latter aspect is the focus of this project.

Language is a useful index as an analytical tool for helping us understand how identities are formed and performed by individuals. From an anthropological framework, I follow anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod (1991) in focusing on "discourse and practice" (p. 147) as a way to avoid essentialising my informants and presenting their culture as static and unchanging. According to Elinor Ochs' (2009) Indexicality Principle, people use particular language forms (such as interrogative forms,

diminutive affairs, raised pitch, and so on) to point to particular situational meanings (such as temporal, spatial, social identities, social acts and activities, affective and epistemic stances, and so on). A linguistic index, Ochs defined, is "a structure. . .that is used variably from one situation to another and becomes conventionally associated with particular situational dimensions such that when that structure is used, the form invokes those situational dimensions" (p. 406). In particular, Ochs claimed that people use language to index *social identity*, for example, in hierarchical West Samoan society, "the verbs *sau* ["come"] and *alu* ["go"] index that the speaker is of a higher rank than the addressee" (p. 407). Thus, it is appropriate for older siblings to direct imperatives using these verbs at their younger siblings to index their seniority, but not for younger siblings to use them on their older siblings.

Bailey (2000) further elaborated upon how people intentionally and unintentionally use language to index identity by stating that "analysis of language and naturally occurring discourse is a means to understanding how individuals, as social actors, highlight social boundaries and activate facets of identity" (p. 192). He goes on to explain how second-generation Dominican Americans use language practices to highlight their unique identity position and differentiate themselves from other identity groups. For example, they spoke Spanish to differentiate themselves from African Americans, used certain features of African American Vernacular English to differentiate themselves from white Americans, and spoke English to differentiate themselves from Dominicans from the Dominican Republic. Coupland and Jaworski (2009a) also wrote:

> Rather than reflecting society and an individual's place within it, language use is *constitutive of* social differences and identities. Speakers are able to make active and reasoned linguistic choices, while also responding to the combination of social constraints regulating and restricting their verbal repertoires. (p. 31)

However, Bailey seemed to take for granted the existence of a Dominican American identity without taking into account the process of its formation and the potential conflicts that come with the meshing of two disparate identities. To understand possible responses to identity conflict, Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000) interviewed gay and lesbian Christians, who are analogous to Deaf Christians in that they also belong to two distinct identity groups whose beliefs may conflict with each other. In a similar way to disabled people, there are LGBTQ-negative narratives in Christianity, particularly American evangelicalism, which may cause an identity conflict among gay and lesbian Christians; however, these Christians may not see their sexual orientation as a choice, whereas Deaf identity, as I will elaborate upon further, is often consciously adopted. Rodriguez and Ouellette wrote that there were four strategies in response to gay Christian identity conflict: rejecting the gay identity, rejecting the Christian identity, compartmentalising, and integrating the two identities. They argued that most of the gay Christians they interviewed have successfully integrated these identities and no longer see a conflict between the two. I argue that the Deaf Christians that I interviewed have similarly integrated their identities and no longer see conflict between them.

The participants used a number of stories to index their identities as Deaf Christians, and these narratives are an important discursive tool that allows people to not only *present* who they are but also better *understand* who they are. Schriffin (1996) analysed two stories told by Jewish-American women to demonstrate how they construct their identities, using language to display their epistemic and agentive selves, their role in the family, and their identities as mothers. She emphasised the importance of narrative, the centerpiece of her argument:

> Narrative is a means by which to arrive at an understanding of the self as emergent from actions and experiences, both in relation to general themes or plots and as located in a cultural matrix of meanings, beliefs, and practices. The form, content, and performance of narrative thus all provide sensitive indices of our personal selves and our social and cultural identities. (p. 194)

In my research, therefore, I attempt to elicit and analyse narratives that point to aspects of the participants' identities.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on data collected from five qualitative interviews I conducted with Deaf Christians over Skype as part of ethnographic fieldwork conducted at a large, multi-sited evangelical church with a Deaf ministry in Washington, D.C. over the period of a year and a half. Interestingly, the theme of disability rarely came up during this period (which could in fact point to a resolved conflict between Deaf and Christian identities), and so my findings are derived primarily from the interviews I conducted rather than from my fieldwork, during which I asked questions specifically regarding this topic.

I conducted one interview with each participant. Interviews lasted between 40 minutes and an hour and 10 minutes. I video-recorded these interviews on my laptop and then annotated them with ELAN for significant themes and important instances of linguistic use. Any quotes that I later use in this article have been translated from ASL into English by me,[iii,iv] and I have strived to preserve the voice of the participant as far as possible by using a more literal, word-for-word approach. In line with more qualitative sociolinguistic work that has been done in recent years (see, for example, Bucholtz, 1999; Juspal & Coyle, 2010; Schriffin, 1996), rather than extrapolating my data to generalise about the experiences of *all* Deaf Christians, I am more interested in exploring the range of possible responses that individuals in such a position may use to respond to an identity conflict. The qualitative data I collected are useful for "helping us understand the intricacies and local complexities of more particular instances, seen 'from the inside'" (Coupland & Jaworski, 2009b, p. 19), that is, from the perspective of Deaf Christians themselves.

Of the five participants I interviewed, four were regular attendees of the evangelical church in Washington, DC that I mentioned earlier in this section (where I was also an attendee) and had been for at least two years prior to gathering the data. The church is a large multi-site church affiliated with the Assemblies of God denomination with a number of locations in the DC

metropolitan area; while the vast majority of attendees are hearing, they have a small Deaf ministry at their main campus, where one of the services is interpreted into ASL. The fifth participant had attended the church at least once but now regularly attends another hearing-majority church that also has a Deaf ministry.

While all five had some degree of hearing loss and were fluent in ASL, only one of them was a native user. Jonathan had grown up in a hearing family and attended a Deaf school from two to five before transferring to a mainstream school where he did not sign as he was educated alongside non-signing hearing students. He began learning ASL again while in his first year of college and then transferred to Gallaudet where he obtained a bachelor's degree in Deaf Studies. Vikram had grown up in a deaf family in India, using a variety of homesigns and attending mainstream schools, and only learnt ASL after moving to the United States and attending Gallaudet University. Also mainstreamed alongside non-hearing peers, Lucas did not sign growing up and graduated from a hearing college in Louisiana. After graduation, he moved to Washington DC where he immersed himself in ASL and now uses it as his primary form of communication. Chelsea, the only native ASL user, has a history of hearing loss in her family and her mother and six of her seven siblings are deaf (two were born deaf). She was born hearing and began signing with her Deaf mother and older brother at a young age. She began experiencing hearing loss at the age of 15 and started wearing hearing aids, but did not identify as culturally Deaf until the last two years of high school when she attended a Deaf school. The last, Rachel, was born to and grew up in a hearing family in Singapore. As she was mainstreamed for most of her life, she did not identify as culturally Deaf until she went to Australia where she obtained her undergraduate degree in deaf education and worked as a teacher for deaf children. She spent 11 years there before coming to Gallaudet for her graduate degree and has been learning ASL intensively since then.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The analysis of the data first points to the fact that most of the participants recognise that there could be a conflict between Deaf and Christian identities, though they might not have personally experienced it themselves. Jonathan told me, for instance, that he had struggled with this very conflict between his Deaf and Christian identities in the past (as will be related in a story later). Lucas, who related the anecdote that begins this article, responded that many Deaf people had been "hurt by the church," given the historical Christian perception of deafness as disability and even a disqualifier for salvation. On the contrary, Chelsea was very adamant in saying that she had never felt a conflict between her identity as a Deaf person and as a Christian. For Vikram, he had personally never felt a conflict between these two identities; when I asked him whether there was one, he was genuinely perplexed and asked me what I meant by that question. However, for both Chelsea and Vikram, they acknowledged that others might perceive the conflict I referred to.

For all the participants, however, they did not see or no longer saw a conflict between Deaf and Christian identities for themselves, instead assuming a new identity of being a "Deaf Christian," one that they index through language.[v] Aside from the question of whether a conflict existed, the data revealed three common themes in the participants' responses that index the Deaf Christian

identity: conversion narratives, a discourse of purpose, and a desire for better inclusion. As I discuss later in my analysis, this Deaf Christian identity and its concomitant themes should be read as a form of resistance against disability-negative narratives present in non-Deaf Christian circles.

Conversion Narratives

The first theme is data was conversion narratives. Conversion narratives are common within evangelical Christianity and wider Christian culture and are often called "testimonies." These narratives point to the moment at which a person decides to become a Christian and often involves some element of realisation that they did not like how they were living up to that point. For example, Jonathan told the story of how he converted at a co-educational camp: "I remember hearing the story about Jesus knocking on the door of your heart. Jesus says he wants to come in, but you—the person—need to open your heart to let him in." Chelsea also recounted that she had grown up going to Catholic church and school but never really knew what she believed. She felt the message that she heard growing up was always the same, and never had an impact on her. However, "when I got to my old church, HCC (Heritage Community Church), that's when I understood [the message of the gospel]."

At the same time, the participants had a similar Deaf "conversion narrative," also a trope of Deaf literature, if not necessarily labelled as such due to the religious connotations of the word "conversion." These stories often involve a person who grows up without knowing about Deaf culture and understands deafness only as hearing loss; however, when they encounter the Deaf community for the first time, they find their "true home" there and adopt a Deaf identity (see, for example, *Deaf Like Me* and *Deaf Again*). The participants had grown up in primarily hearing environments—Lucas even stated that he had thought of himself as hearing because of his environment—and used speech growing up, but had found the Deaf community at a later stage and now primarily used sign. Jonathan recounted, "Later, when I was 17—or about 16, thereabouts—I started signing again.[vi] That was when I started to develop my identity from hearing—well, not really hearing, but more hard-of-hearing, more disconnected from the Deaf community. . . I started to make my way to become Deaf."

These conversion narratives indicate how Deaf identity emerges out of a context of community and is then consciously or subconsciously adopted by its adherents and demonstrated through the learning and deliberate use of sign language.

Discourse of Purpose

The second theme is what I call the discourse of "God's purpose." All of the participants, at some point, mentioned their belief that God made them Deaf for some reason. While for Chelsea, the purpose was more personal, for Jonathan, Lucas, and Rachel, it was so that they could reach out to other members of the Deaf community who were not Christians.

For Chelsea, the purpose God had for her was more personal, in that she felt that the most important thing for her was having a relationship with God. As she said, "I can feel, I can have a connection with God. I have feelings, emotions. . . That's why God made me this way: unique."

Jonathan believed differently though. After he was not healed of hearing loss at a church service when he was 16 or 17, he had a change of heart. As he recounted:

> The more I thought about it, God was really showing me, teaching me, that he made me this way for a purpose. He was not opening my ears, but opening my heart, opening my eyes, to see that his plan and purpose for me. I believe he made me Deaf so I could participate in the Deaf community, in Deaf culture, to sign. . . so I can support Deaf and hearing integration [in the church body].

He also believed that part of God's purpose for him was also to educate other hearing Christians about Deaf identity, that many Deaf people were happy to be Deaf and did not want to be healed. Lucas had an even more dramatic shift. He had attended a Deaf school when he was younger, but did not have a good experience there and was often made fun of by other Deaf students because he was not as fluent in sign. He had therefore eschewed anything relating to Deafness in his older years and attended a hearing college. However, he felt that in college he received a call from God to enter full-time ministry serving the Deaf community and, after speaking to his pastor, decided to move to DC to pursue that and became a full-time worker in campus ministry.

Desire for Better Inclusion

The third theme that emerged through the interviews was a desire for better inclusion in the wider Christian body as a particular group, albeit in different forms. For Lucas and Jonathan, they preferred that Deaf Christians have their own church and, in particular, their own Deaf pastor. As Lucas expressed, accessibility in a hearing church was "no substitute for a pastor preaching in sign language compared to a hearing pastor who is preaching with an interpreter." For him, it was important for Deaf Christians to access the message and the gospel "in their own language," that is, ASL. Even with interpreters, he felt that some parts of the message were always lost. Jonathan insisted that no matter what a hearing church did to integrate its Deaf members, Deaf people "would always complain"—they needed a church they could consider their own, not one in which they felt they were in the margins.

Vikram, on the other hand, felt that Deaf Christians could be better integrated and that their needs had to be better met. For example, interpreters should stay after the service to help facilitate conversations; currently, he said, interpreters finish interpreting for the service and leave immediately after: "It's rude!" he said. He insisted on the need for more social events, such as picnics, in which Deaf and hearing members of the church could interact and get to know each other better. Rachel, too, expressed her appreciation of her church's efforts to provide, for example, sign language classes for hearing people so that they could converse with the Deaf members in the church.

DISCUSSION

The three themes that emerge from the data—the use of conversion narratives, the discourse of God's purpose, and the desire for better inclusion—serve linguistically to index the integrated Deaf Christian identity that the participants have adopted. I argue that, in some ways, these three language forms are what Bucholtz (1999) has called "positive identity practices," which are "those [practices] in which individuals engage in order actively to construct a chosen identity" (p. 211). These positive identity practices, which Bucholtz distinguished from negative identity practices—defined as "those that individuals employ to distance themselves from a rejected identity" (p. 211)—take place at different linguistic levels, including discourse. In the same way that nerd girls in Bucholtz's study displayed a particular orientation to language form that includes punning, parody, and word coinage, to legitimise their belonging to the nerd girl community, the participants in this study use the three stated discourse-level linguistic strategies to index their belonging to the Deaf Christian community.

The Christian conversion narrative, in particular, is important in indexing belonging in the Christian community, given its prominence in the evangelical Christian tradition (which the Assemblies of God is part of). Everyone is expected to have a "testimony" and having one points to a pivotal point in the Christian's journey, whether it be a "shift to Christianity from no religion" or the "[strengthening of] a prior commitment to Christianity" (Jindra et al., 2012, p. 2). In fact, at the church, not infrequently, there would be a short, five-minute testimony given by a member of the church just prior to the sermon that could be about God's deliverance from a particular suffering, a renewed commitment to the faith, a recent conversion to the faith, and topics of that nature. Some of the participants were likely socialised into that experience as regular attendees of the church. Possession of a conversion narrative legitimised their membership in the Christian community, while the language the narrative was given in, ASL, plus a conversion narrative of entry into Deaf culture, indicated their unique position as members also of the Deaf community.

The formation of a Deaf Christian identity was in many ways a rejection of and a form of resistance against the label of "disabled"—and often, "in need of healing"—that hearing Christians impose on them. This is seen in that the discourse of "God's purpose" that was utilised by many participants was often linked to specific instances of misunderstanding or ignorance by hearing people. For example, Vikram recounted an incident when he visited an interpreted service at a church in Chicago. During the service, he saw two people close by whispering among themselves, and knew immediately that they were going to pray for his healing. Sure enough, they laid their hands upon his ears and started praying. Nothing happened, but after they finished praying, one of them handed him a piece of paper, on it asking him if he wanted to give a testimony. He agreed, walked on stage, and said through the interpreter: "Thank you to the two of you for praying for me. For me to hear—you all want it for me, I understand, because you have pity on deaf people. BUT God—He sees me and He doesn't [have pity on me]. He gave me everything. This body is what He gave to me and I'm happy with it" (emphasis his). This discourse allowed the participants to

define identity *for themselves* and to see themselves as active protagonists rather than victims of circumstance in their own life stories.

It is also important to note that the three themes that emerged in the interviews with the participants do not merely index the Deaf Christian identity, but in fact also serve to create it. This is what Elinor Ochs (2009) has called "indexical property of constitutiveness." As she explained, "when interlocutors use indexical forms, they may constitute some social structure in the immediate situation at hand" (p. 411). For example, as mentioned earlier, West Samoan society is very hierarchical and the verbs *sau* and *alu* index asymmetric relationships between higher-ranking and lower-ranking members of the society. When older siblings use these verbs on their younger siblings and when younger siblings obey, they in effect *recreate* the unequal power dynamic. When the participants in the study use these language forms to index the Deaf Christian identity, and also when this identity is recognised by others inside and outside that community (for example, the church agreeing to the Deaf ministry's request for sign language classes or more interpreters), they essentially reify its unique existence.

LIMITATIONS

There are a number of drawbacks to the methodology I used. The first is my relationship with some of the participants: we are not only fellow church members, but also friends and that could have influenced both their willingness to speak to me as well as the answers they gave me. Our friendship could also mean that they were more honest with me than they would have been with a complete stranger; however, there is no way to discern this. Second, the data I collected was elicited rather than naturally occurring. As Lucas et al. (2013) have written, there is an inherent conflict in data collection of this sort because although sociolinguists are interested in "the language signers' and speakers' use when they are not being observed," researchers often have "to record their production in situations that often lead to self-consciousness" (p. 545). The third is that I am neither deaf nor a native user of ASL. Hill wrote that "ASL users are. . . sensitive to a signer's audiological status (e.g., Deaf or Hearing)" and recount an incident when a Black Deaf interviewee shifted from signing to speaking when she discovered that one of the researchers was White and Hearing, even though until that point she had been signing fully without voicing (p. 111-112; capitals in the original). While some of these issues, such as my audiological status, cannot be changed, I hope in future projects to mitigate them, through collaboration with a Deaf researcher or recruitment of participants that I do not know.

CONCLUSION

As shown in the data and argued in this paper, for some Christians, at least, there is a real identity conflict between the Deaf and the Christian identity. However, the participants in this study have managed to resolve the identity conflict by integrating the two, pointing to a unique identity configuration that is both Deaf and Christian, not belonging exclusively to one or the other. They index this new identity by three key linguistic elements: the use of the conversion narratives, the discourse of God's purpose, and the desire for better inclusion. The title of this piece comes from

the interview I conducted with Vikram; when I asked him whether there would be Deaf people in heaven, he responded emphatically, "Why not? Maybe Jesus knows sign." This response, in which Vikram posits a signing, even Deaf, Jesus, captures the attempt of Deaf Christians to reappropriate a faith that accommodates their membership in the church, in response to disability-negative narratives that have historically served to exclude them from it.

I ultimately hope that this project will serve as a starting point for further research that will inform churches seeking to set up ministries to the Deaf or existing churches with Deaf ministries on how to better serve this particular demographic. More generally, I hope that it provides insight into the issues that arise and the transformations that may take place in the interplay between religion and religious identity and social and cultural developments.

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i All the participants have been given pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

ii Deaf refers to the cultural/ethnic identity, centered around the use of sign language, whereas deaf refers to an audiological status (whether one can hear or not). The latter (deaf) is a broader category than Deaf.

iii An important limitation, but necessary due to IRB restrictions. Any translation errors are mine alone.

iv I am a hearing researcher who has been involved in the d/Deaf community for many years, beginning in Singapore where I first learned (Singaporean) sign language. I began learning ASL (related to a certain extent to Singaporean Sign Language) in my first year in college and had become proficient enough to take graduate level classes in ASL at Gallaudet University in my last year.

v As a caveat, Vikram said that he was not a Christian, but rather, a "follower of Jesus," a phrase he preferred given disagreements between different Christian denominations.
vi As mentioned in the methodology, Jonathan went to a Deaf school from ages two to five and was educated in a mainstream school without sign thereafter.