



Making Multiple Deaf Worlds Intelligible: A Posthumanist Arts-based Cartography of *Apple Time*

JOANNE WEBER

University of Alberta, Canada

ABSTRACT *In this paper, I provide an arts-based posthumanist cartography of a theatre play, Apple Time performed by deaf youth in Regina, Saskatchewan. This play was co-constructed by deaf youth performers, two deaf adults, a hearing teacher, and a hearing director. Apple Time premiered in Regina, Saskatchewan on June 2, 2018, and was remounted again at the Globe Theatre (Regina) in February 2019 and again at the SoundOff Festival in Edmonton, Alberta. The arts-based cartography examines intelligibility as a methodological problem as posited by Graïf (2018), in which the actions of deaf children and youth often remain invisible due to the ontological position that perception of the world is predicated upon the ability to hear. Intelligibility as a methodological problem poses a challenge to the deficit perspective commonly held by families and service providers working with deaf children and youth (Glickman & Hall, 2019). The performers in this play were able to re-align audience perceptions through the presentation of their inner worlds and preoccupations, thereby making their multiple deaf worlds more intelligible.*

KEYWORDS posthumanism; cartography; deaf education; sign language; deaf theatre; playbuilding; participatory action research

Introduction

In this paper, I provide an arts-based posthumanist cartography of a theatre play, *Apple Time*, performed by deaf youth in Regina, Saskatchewan.¹ This play was co-constructed by deaf youth performers, and premiered at the Artesian Theatre in Regina, Saskatchewan on June 2, 2018. *Apple Time* was also produced at two additional venues: the Globe Theatre in Regina and the

¹ These deaf youth performers recount their personal stories and discuss their own performances in *Apple Time* which is available at *Deaf to Deaf: Research and Stories* (<https://www.torontomu.ca/researchmatters/deaf-to-deaf>). See also Nafisi et al. (2024) in this issue of *Studies in Social Justice*.

Correspondence Address: Joanne Weber, Faculty of Education, University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB T6G 2R3; email: jweber1@ualberta.ca

ISSN: 1911-4788



SoundOff Festival in Edmonton, 2018. Here, I critically reflect on elements of the play that create the conditions of possibility for a posthumanist mapping of the intra-actions between humans, animals, earth, and machine,² including the play's co-creation methods and elements of the performance: the opening scene, the use of the stage, and the use of false identities. This arts-based cartography is built upon an analysis of the assemblage of the play alongside interviews with the youth actors. This cartography examines intelligibility as a methodological problem, as posited by Graif (2018), in which the actions of deaf children and youth often remain invisible due to the ontological position held by their families and service providers whose perception of the world is primarily built upon their ability to hear. The lens afforded by intelligibility as a methodological problem challenges the deficit perspective associated with providing educational and mental health services to deaf children and youth described as language deprived persons (Glickman & Hall, 2019).

Background

The deaf youth performers of *Apple Time* are members of Deaf Crows Collective (DCC), a non-profit theatre group dedicated to producing original works that attest to the lived experiences of deaf people. I am the group's artistic director. The DCC's mission is to provide opportunities for theatre performance by deaf actors of all ages to celebrate deaf culture, encourage self-expression, and foster relationships between hearing and deaf communities (Deaf Crows Collective, 2019b). *Apple Time* created "a magical, liminal 'third' space" that brings people together "to create entire new worlds" (Deaf Crows Collective, 2019a, para. 1). The production blended theatre and puppetry as well as deaf storytelling and poetry to bring audiences "on a mythical journey of immigration and migration on the Deaf high seas" (Deaf Crows Collective, 2019a, para. 1). *Apple Time* is about the desire to create worlds in which we connect and belong across our shared and our different life experiences (Deaf Crows Collective, 2019a).

The *Apple Time* performers are part of an influx of deaf youth from Syria, Bangladesh, Somalia, Ethiopia, Pakistan, and Iraq. The performers included three students of Indigenous Canadian ancestry, one Canadian settler, and one student from Syria, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Somalia respectively. None of the five newcomer Canadian deaf youth had ever encountered or received sustained exposure to American Sign Language (ASL) until their arrival in Canada. ASL afforded the students rapid entry into their school (which they attended together), the broader community and Canadian society. See Figures 1 and 2 for photographs of the deaf youth in their character roles.

² The term "machine" does not always apply to technologies that deaf people use, but to the mechanistic aspects of our lives such as the use of vehicles, small appliances, and tools. In mapping the intra-actions between animal, earth and machine, binaries are avoided.



Figure 1. Actors Kainat and Alex onstage as part of the *Apple Time* performance. On the left, Kainat holds a giant wooden needle with thread. On the right, Alex has hands on their hips and looks into the camera. He wears donkey ears, a ribbon shirt and a Metis sash.



Figure 2. To the right, actor Shayla smiles at the camera and holds a plush wolf puppet above her shoulder. To the left, actor Mustafa Alabssi tips his bowler hat. He wears a traditional Arabic long white garb and a red clown nose.

As artistic director of the DCC, I was directly involved in the production of *Apple Time*, attending all the rehearsals and working closely with the director and production personnel as well as the deaf actors. I am also a deaf researcher, fluent in ASL and English and I have lived and worked in deaf communities for several decades as a community service worker, a teacher of the deaf and now as a university academic.

My experience as a deaf researcher differs from that of non-deaf researchers, who have a limited understanding of the ways in which deaf people navigate hearing and deaf worlds. As a long-standing member of the deaf community, I have witnessed the ways in which deaf youth thrive with the support of deaf community and deaf cultural capital (Ladd, 2003). Through engagement with the deaf community, many deaf people have opportunities to engage in cultural, linguistic, social, and educational events that enrich their lives, enable them to resist oppressive systems, and navigate hearing and deaf worlds (Bahan, 2008; O'Brien, 2017). Traversing these multiple worlds requires a complexity of skills, beliefs, attitudes, and language conventions. Deaf cultural knowledge is a rich resource among deaf people; however, it is not always readily recognized by non-deaf researchers and other observers. This kind of "deficit framing" by non-deaf people fails to acknowledge the abundance of social, cultural, and linguistic competencies held within deaf communities. Graif (2018) posits the unintelligibility of deaf peoples' actions, behaviours, motivations, beliefs, and language usage as a significant methodological problem for non-deaf researchers, one which also extends to non-deaf educators, administrators, health care providers, and even parents who have a limited background with deaf experience and within deaf culture (Glickman & Hall, 2019). Deficit thinking is pervasive among non-deaf people who are in relationship with deaf people and has detrimental impacts on deaf people. I propose that deficit perspectives enacted by non-deaf people create an ontological problem which leads to the unintelligibility of deaf people and invisibilizes the rich set of cultural values, knowledge, beliefs, and linguistic conventions that exist amongst deaf people.

Enacting a Deaf Onto-Epistemology

This paper considers the stories and scenes developed for the play *Apple Time* using a posthumanist arts methodology to investigate intelligibility as an ontological problem. Artists working within the posthumanist tradition are charged with constructing their inner and outer worlds in ways that inform the actual assemblages in which human and non-human actors (including animals, machines, and earth) move (Jagodzinski & Wallin, 2013). The world of *Apple Time* is an assemblage, and this paper presents a mapping of that world. This cartography maps the intra-actions between the human and non-human actors involved in *Apple Time*. A posthumanist cartography helps to map affects, intensities, desires, and energies across the play; it avoids positioning their deaf

experience in opposition to a hearing experience. Posthumanist concepts offer a novel way to approach intelligibility as an ontological problem and help avoid categorizing deaf youth and the play itself into broad categories which may obscure nuanced and unique perspectives belonging to deaf youth. Instead, this perspective centers their wealth of deaf cultural knowledge, culturally specific sign language, and the relationships among the youth, adults, the process, and the play. This cartography seeks to map these intra-actions and do away with categories that may obscure the intelligibility of the deaf youth. The cartography does not comment on the ways hearing people should understand deaf youth, but instead follows closely the deaf youth's construction of their inner and outer worlds within the context of a theatre play.

Posthumanist applied linguistics posits language as distributed throughout an assemblage (Pennycook, 2018). Language functions are not as a domain of individual cognition but are a confluence of material, bodily, human, linguistic, social, cultural, and political entities in intra-action with each other (Barad, 2007; Pennycook, 2018). Thus, language is the domain of the assemblage, and in this case, the assemblage of the theatre play, *Apple Time*, which explores the intra-actions using ASL poetry, puppetry, mime and physical theatre. Individual cognition in linguistic intra-actions is decentered in the assemblage of *Apple Time*, which suggests a different ontology; it suggests an onto-epistemology in which the anthropocentric view of humans is supplanted by a (near) flattening of the relationships among animal, earth and machine. For instance, the deaf youth performers were charged with the construction of their props for each of the scenes. Props included puppets, puppet screens, blankets, masks, necklaces, feathers, and headdresses. Designing and making these props necessitated many discussions among the youth performers. As they assisted each other in the construction of these objects, they negotiated roles, problem solving approaches, and established processes bound up with the nature of manipulating fabric, wood, paper, small electronics, and retrofitting larger pieces of furniture. In doing so, material objects exerted influence on the youth, who in turn exerted their own influence through the shaping of the materials into the desired props. In this context, languaging, as opposed to languages situated within individual cognition, occurred in the assemblage consisting of deaf youth and material objects who were producing and being produced by each other. Moreover, the onto-epistemology of the play directly challenges the phonocentric ontology usually applied to deaf people in which being is equated with the ability to hear (Valente, 2014); non-being is assigned to those who cannot participate in the phonocentric world by virtue of not being able to hear fully or at all. *Apple Time* enacts a deaf epistemology.

Deaf epistemology challenges phonocentric ontology by first asserting that the eyes are equal to the ears in using sign language to access the world, (Valente, 2014) thereby challenging the assumption that the world is only phonocentric in nature. The world just is – it is neither hearing nor deaf (Graif, 2018). Deaf epistemology, a form of posthumanist onto-epistemology, further asserts that language and cognition are distributed throughout the assemblage,

and therefore engages multiple semiotic resources located in the intra-actions among animal, earth, and machine discernible through all senses including seeing and hearing.

Methodological Approach

Graif (2018) suggests that intelligibility is a methodological problem that occurs when deaf persons, their practices, values, and experiences pass unseen through hearing worlds. The inability to recognize deaf people, their negotiations with hearing people, and their cultural knowledge and values suggests that hearing people require conscious alignment with deaf experience before deaf people can become perceptible, and therefore made intelligible. Graif's (2018) observations from his ethnographic study of Nepali deaf people include the ways in which hearing people often frame the deaf as transparent, devoid of a history, an inner life, memories, and feelings, and understand deaf people as having limited wants and desires. Many deaf youth who performed in *Apple Time* struggled to convey their experiences of learning, community, and language acquisition to their parents and the community which rendered them invisible. For instance, in another study, I worked with Jones and Atwal (2023) to report that due to incomplete access to conversations at the dinner table with family members, some deaf youth performers reported heightened feelings of isolation and invisibility with their family members. As a deaf Canadian born and raised in Canada, I could easily relate to the dinner table experience as it is considered a universal experience among deaf people living within hearing family contexts (Meek, 2020). As Kunreuther (2006) suggests, this may be because "there are few things more closely identified with a person's capacity to think, act and accomplish than speech" (as cited in Graif, 2018, p. 13). This kind of invisibilizing renders the deaf youth performers as unable to speak, devoid of having pasts, presents, and futures, and without social facts, histories, and shared perceptions that the deaf youth experience and share (Graif, 2018). To further illustrate, Graif (2018) describes how the Nepali deaf person must

...bear the burden of transparency for everyone around him, anchoring his words and expressions exclusively to a here-and-now of shared perception and memory. He must circumscribe his language to a history no larger than the one occupied by those immediately present. He must deny everything that makes NSL [Nepali Sign Language] particular to a time, place and community of practice. (p. 23)

Some of the deaf youth performers have expressed similar frustrations despite repeated attempts to share with their parents the rich experience of their lives, the value of American Sign Language, the significance of their education, and the importance of belonging to a deaf community in which they discover a history and can participate in shaping their own futures together (Weber, 2007, 2013; Weber et al., 2023). In the case of immigrant

parents with deaf children, such frustrations can arise from the co-existence of cultures pertaining to the family's origin, the expectations of Canadian cultures as defined by mostly white, English-speaking people, and deaf culture (Batamula, 2002).

In Graif's (2018) study of Nepali deaf people, he exemplifies how one subject, Laxmi, occupies two worlds within her home and family life. According to Laxmi's father, there is the Laxmi here and now in the home who talks like a "monkey" (that is, uses sign language) and there is the Laxmi whose exists outside of the home who uses sign language and works in the outside world as a competent laborer. The father's feelings associated with Laxmi in her home are noted as incoherence, shame, incompetence, and at the same time, he recognizes many positive attributes within his deaf daughter within their home. These positive attributes are more apparent within the Laxmi outside her home who uses sign language, works, and socializes out in the deaf community and the world at large. The father is unable to recognize the complexity of Laxmi's experience; using a sign language and having a life that is foreign to her father and other hearing interlocutors, renders her unintelligible. In this way, the most positive and negative aspects of deafness become mapped simultaneously over time and space. This establishes multiple, co-existing, and sometimes incompatible ontologies. Yet, as Graif (2018) argues, there is a space between deaf as incompetent and deaf as a participant in communication and deaf community, which Laxmi clearly occupies. The space of things between hearing and deaf people is what makes multiple worlds intelligible. Moreover, within this space, the deaf are endeavoring to manage hearing people's perceptions, inviting them into a realm of processing the world primarily through vision. In doing so, deaf people hope that hearing people would gain an experiential understanding of life as an ocularcentric person (Skyer, 2021).

In this cartography I examine the play *Apple Time* and ask whether multiple deaf worlds become intelligible to hearing people through its creation and performance. This cartography is a "map" consisting of an examination of selected scenes to enable analysis of the assemblage of the play alongside interviews with the youth actors. Within the assemblage of the play that includes the youth performers, the hearing director, the artistic director of Deaf Crows Collective, the deaf youth who were co-authors of the play, the deaf adults, the rehearsal and theatre sites, props, and other material resources, I explore how distributed language in the light of posthumanist applied linguistics serves to re-align perceptions of hearing people so that the deaf youth's experiences become perceivable and therefore intelligible. What is rendered intelligible and unintelligible is determined through the assemblage (Barad, 2007; Deleuze et al., 1987). In *Apple Time*, the assemblage includes the group of deaf youth performers, the hearing director, the deaf adults, and the physical props and puppets, all of which are distributed throughout rather than according to the actions of individual

human actors (Barad, 2007; Deleuze et al., 1987). By exploring what is made intelligible by the assemblage I examine what this assemblage of people, spaces, and materials says about the inner lives and worlds of deaf people. What are the desires of the assemblage and how can they realign the perceptions hearing people have of deaf experience.

Apple Time endeavors to “create entire new worlds” (Deaf Crows Collective, 2019a, para. 1), worlds in which deaf lives are understood as connected, rich, and whole. In this way, through theatrical performance, *Apple Time* also endeavors to make deaf experience intelligible. In this cartography, I describe how the deaf youth performers perceive how hearing people understand deaf experience, and how through the play the deaf youth attempt to undo and redress those limited understandings. Graif (2018) suggests that intelligibility is a methodological problem only because hearing people are accustomed to perceiving deaf people in socially prescribed, pathological ways. *Apple Time* addresses that intelligibility by creating deaf centered worlds. This calls into question hearing people’s perceptions of deaf experience and proposes other ways of seeing and being.

Methods

In the six months leading up to the performance of *Apple Time*, I, a deaf researcher, along with a hearing co-teacher, the Deaf Crows artist in residence who was also the director of the play, and a deaf ASL consultant, adapted Norris’s playbuilding schema as a participatory action research phase of the playbuilding process (Norris, 2009). Playbuilding begins with a series of activities with a group of actors to encourage them to explore their own life histories, themes, and questions. Each actor develops a vignette with support of their peers that highlight their own preoccupations, life histories and questions. These vignettes are further refined and overarching themes linking the vignettes are identified and further developed as metaphors unifying the play. We began by interviewing the students individually. We asked, “What is important to you? What do you want to share?” Then we asked each student to create a series of four physical movements that encapsulated their sharing in the initial interview. This enabled us to group, organize, and eliminate ideas. During the second round of interviews we elicited further memories, details, and concerns. From the data we were able to arrive at a synthesis and to engage in group discussions about the images, metaphors, themes, concerns, and desires identified in the individual sessions. We began to develop theatrical scenes based on the data from the student interviews.

The play’s title emerged from this creation phase. In an exploratory exercise, one of the performers created a dream box, an art installation related to her dream which she painted in bright greens, yellows, and pinks. We asked her what the name of the installation was to be, and she enthusiastically

responded, “Apple Time.” We as a group felt that “Apple Time” represented for the collective, as it did for her, a creative and mysterious place of community, connection, and joy. During the scripting phase (Norris, 2009) we asked ourselves several times, what is “Apple Time”? Why “Apple Time”? In refining this concept, we were able to discern ways in which individual scenes could be tied together in a kind of measure of time through deaf experience. In this way, *Apple Time* became the collection of what Mienczakowski (1995) identifies as the “adapted verbatim accounts of informants into an authentic, validated, polyphonic narrative that expressed informant agendas of concern in their own words” (p. 361).

Following the playbuilding phase, we co-constructed the play itself. The stories featured in *Apple Time* were co-constructed by the eight student performers, along with the artists in residence, Chrystene Ells and Berny Hi, and me. Allard Thomas, the ASL consultant, also assisted in providing the signs for the narratives and the standard ASL translations, which supported the students’ work. Interpreting was provided while I confirmed the message equivalency and sought to push the conversations further into consideration of the students’ individual worlds. Chrystene asked each of the student performers to design their own puppets, costumes, and sets. A Cirque du Soleil clown, Mooky Cornish, volunteered to assist one student, Mustafa Alabssi, in developing a clown sequence that featured his journey from war-torn Syria to Canada. It should be noted that the students who had been exposed to ASL and the deaf community for an extended period were able to develop their narratives independently. Four students who had just come into the program one or two years prior to the production of *Apple Time* struggled to build narratives that were cohesive because they were beginning to learn ASL. Co-construction of the narratives of the latter students were inhibited by their own reticence, cultural and religious rules, fears about exposing dysfunctional family secrets, and lack of fluency in ASL.

The first performance of *Apple Time* in Regina in June 2018 included a scene that required significant support from the teaching staff, deaf consultant, and artists-in-residence in its development. The student who created this scene struggled to develop a cohesive narrative and requested a complete change in her story for the Edmonton performance at the SoundOff Festival in 2019, seven months after the premiere. With experience and support, she was able to develop the story in more detail and provided ideas for props and puppets. Between the two performance runs, she became empowered to tell the story she really wanted to tell. After the data gathering phase and the co-construction of the narratives, we entered an intensive two-week rehearsal period during which the stories, the signing, use of props and puppets, and the physical theatre sequences were refined. We were making the stories more intelligible for the mixed deaf and hearing audience.

Arts-Based Study *Apple Time*

Here, I offer an arts-based study of *Apple Time* by focusing on the key elements of the performance: the opening scene (The Invitation), the use of the stage, use of false identities and elimination of binaries, using deaf cultural behaviors, co-opting the hearing audience, and remixing cultural references. These performance elements demonstrate how *Apple Time* and the performers' stories and actions can be interpreted as an assemblage in which humans, animals and machine produced and are produced by each other to point out a new perspective to the hearing patrons. Thus, feelings, thoughts, and actions emanating from the deaf world are made intelligible to a hearing audience, thus offering new light on unintelligibility as a methodological problem.

The Invitation

In *Apple Time*'s opening scene, the elderly deaf character introduces the desires of the entire assemblage of *Apple Time* in a mime sequence. The character mimes the writing of a mysterious invitation and blows the invitation (which by now has multiplied into several invitations) into various corners of the theatre and the *Apple Time* worlds the youth performers inhabit. The invitation puts into motion a mapping of the performative desires of the youth performers within the assemblage (including other performers, collaborators, the audience, the theatre itself, the props, puppets, and other material resources). These intra-actions draw upon multiple semiotic resources including analog captioning, signage, ASL poetry, puppetry that depicts animals, boats, machines, and fabric that is used to portray sky and sea, suitcases and trunks that represent destinations and origins, and the physical theatre, which includes mime, dance, and gesture alongside ASL interpretation. The mysterious yet far reaching call of the invitation suggests that language and cognition are distributed throughout the intra-actions among humans, animals, earth, and machine in the multiple worlds in which the youth performers inhabit. The invitation, in its mission to gather deaf people together to share their stories and form a community based on their desire to communicate with ease, challenges hearing people who believe that the only world to which deaf people can belong is the world of hearing people, a phonocentric assumption in which hearing and being are conflated.

Use of the Stage

The stage became analogous with Deleuze et al.'s (1987) conception of the "body without organs" over which the deaf youth performers traverse in their attempts to grapple with hearing people's perceptions of them as belonging solely to the hearing world (Graif, 2018), while at the same time

creating whole new worlds for both themselves and inviting in anyone who would like to join. The body without organs is defined as an inchoate mass of animal, earth, and machine, which is not organized or immediately categorized. It challenges traditional ideas of the body by representing it instead as a dynamic assemblage that interacts with and is shaped by its environment. The deaf youth performers in *Apple Time*, zig zag over the stage and their stories, looking for lines of flight. In other words, they seek ways to confront hearing people's perceptions of them (Braidotti, 2011; Deleuze et al., 1987). For instance, at first Chrystene Ells, the director of *Apple Time*, insisted that the youth perform without shoes. She explained that bare feet on the stage would enable them to be more present in their bodies and more able to remain in character. During rehearsals, the deaf youth performers explained that they developed a different perception, that they were hovering over the stage as if it were a space of potentiality, like the body without organs. At the talkback after the performances the performers also revealed a different perspective. They explained that their bare feet on the stage enabled them to perceive the vibrations and ascertain the performance cues more easily as to exits, entrances, and movements on the stage. The importance of feeling the vibrations and feeling more connected to others and their movements challenged the notion that having bare feet on stage only enabled them to remain in character. Their bare feet, they discovered, also enabled them to better communicate with each other through the tapping, thumping, and humming. Bare feet provided them access to a language of movements among each other on the stage. The meaning of bare feet ascribed to them by the hearing director was experienced by the deaf youth performers in a much more attuned and complex way. Bare feet offered to them another way of sensing and communicating through the play. The director's and the audience's understanding of the deaf performers' experience was made more intelligible in the audience talkbacks.

Use of False Identities and Elimination of Binaries

In both the play and the interviews with the deaf youth, six of the eight performers explored their problematic relationships with their families. Some of the scenes in *Apple Time* openly portrayed difficulties connecting with their families; other scenes were shrouded in metaphor and symbolism. Shayla, a First Nations performer in *Apple Time*, presented a nondualist view of identity. She identified herself as belonging to a different species than her family. She happily presented herself as a "baby eagle" and pointed to a wolf puppet as a representation of herself. In doing so, she challenged the audience to think through this double entendre. How was it possible for her to understand her identity as non-human animal? Furthermore, how was it possible for her to belong to a family of eagles when she was really a wolf?

This jarring clash becomes resolved when she is visited at night by her dead grandmother who is a wolf; her grandmother reaffirms her identity. In the end, being a wolf in a family of eagles is presented as a possibility rather than an impossibility. This intra-action with humans and animals results in Shayla's assuming the energy of a wolf as transmitted by her grandmother.

In another scene in *Apple Time*, a young deaf woman from Bangladesh, Fatima, presented herself as a "tiger dragon" who endeavors to join her family flying high in the sky near the sun. In this classic twist on the Daedalus legend, she portrays herself as unable to join her family for a prolonged period as she becomes overheated and uncomfortable being near the sun. She finds her solace by plunging into water and finding a shell that reveals the secret that she is a water tiger dragon. Here Fatima takes on the affect inherent in the energy of a water tiger dragon by reveling in the secrets of the shell that she has discovered upon her dive into the water, away from the blazing rays of the sun. Like Shayla who affirms her wolf self in a family of eagles through contact with the spirit of her grandmother, Fatima finds her full tiger dragon self in the water. Both stories tell the story of deaf experience as magical and beyond a hearing experience. Both scenes challenge a hearing view of deaf people as either distinct and therefore not easily integrated, or easily integrated because one simply desires that to happen. Through their characters' identities, the deaf youth performers challenge hearing theatre patrons to examine their dichotomous view of deaf people. In doing so, the deaf youth performers engage with what hearing people think of them and then subvert that perception, thereby inviting hearing people to another way of being (Graif, 2018).

Using Deaf Cultural Behaviours to Challenge Hearing Perceptions

Stomping feet, waving, feeling the floor for vibrations, relying on community for comfort and support challenges families, educational environments, and administrators. These are some of the performers' attempts in *Apple Time* to address the needs of deaf youth in school and at home. The collectivism associated with the deaf community (Ladd, 2003) is grounded in sign language and a wealth of deaf culture. This often challenges the treatment of deaf people as atomistic entities embedded within hearing communities. In Kainat's scene, she is pursued by a menacing predator whose visage is a shadow behind a puppet scene. Kainat receives support from other deaf women on the stage. They urge her to confront her predator by sewing up a curtain that covers the window from where he beckons for her. This machinic action provides an energy suggesting enclosure, protection, and safety. Her deaf women friends then take the curtains and drape them around her shoulders as an act of protection. Kainat signs that she is safe because she has friends. This contradicts the supposition that only hearing people (counselors, teachers, advisors), can effectively take care of deaf people and in particular

deaf victims of violence and abuse. The love, care, and support of Kainat's friends easily overshadow any succinct words that a counsellor might convey through an interpreter in a consultation. Deaf people rely more on warmth, kindness, and care than on the clever and deep words of a hearing counselor. The deaf challenge the notion that the individualism inherent in the privacy of a counsellor's office heals. Rather, as we see in Kainat's scene, the collective brings about an unparalleled strength, warmth, and kindness toward the victim and offers collective support in dealing with the violence and with healing. Again, the hearing audience is challenged in this scene by the invitation to consider the power of deaf collective culture to address difficult social and personal situations. In the assemblage that is *Apple Time*, the group actively works together to confront Kainat's intruder using a giant sewing needle which presents affects associated with multiple semiotic functions: sewing, flourishing the needle as if it were a sword, and thrusting the needle upward to indicate victory.

Co-Opting the Audience

There is a "wink-wink" moment in *Apple Time* where a deaf performer co-opts the audience into believing that a fellow deaf performer is incompetent because he does not hear or understand what is going on. By engaging the audience in this way, the audience is invited to confront its own deficit perspective about deaf people. In Mustafa's scene, a messenger delivers an envelope to him that has documents concerning his journey to Canada, a surprise after a long internment in a refugee camp. Mustafa does not hear the doorbell and an exasperated messenger, played by Fatima, stomps her foot to catch his attention. This brief intra-action with machine (the doorbell) betrays the phonocentric assumptions that doorbells are heard by everyone, including deaf people. Furthermore, the short exchange between Mustafa and Fatima consists of his double checking, again and again, as to whether the envelope is for him. The scorn on the messenger's face as she presses the envelope to Mustafa's chest is a replay of what deaf people experience often: the lack of patience and consideration for the need for clarification required by deaf people. The "wink-wink" aspect confronts the audience as to how often this scenario is replayed in the lives of deaf people. This sudden transparency serves to shock and inform the audience of what may have been impervious to them.

Re-mixing Cultural References

Richard's scene in *Apple Time* explores what it means to use one's memory, knowledge, and skill to face a challenging situation. In his real life, Richard is a First Nations youth who has been raised in foster homes and is divorced

from his Saulteaux First Nations heritage. He explores this lived experience in *Apple Time* in a scene where he learns to ride a unicycle. As he learns to ride the unicycle he taps into his cultural knowledge and his memory of participating in spiritual and religious ceremonies to guide him through this challenge. He remixes his understanding of the Saulteaux understanding of the presence of the eagle to find his way on the unicycle. He does this making visual associations between him balancing on the unicycle and the eagle spreading its wings. In doing so, Richard's character becomes machine and animal simultaneously, taking on the energy of an eagle which enables him to successfully ride the unicycle. Richard challenges the audience by drawing from his cultural and spiritual heritage in unexpected and unsanctioned ways. By visioning, he makes a connection between his own struggle to ride the unicycle and the spread of the eagle's wings, which instructs him to spread his arms wide, as a source of balance. The energy in becoming eagle becomes as a source of inspiration, protection, and balance. In doing so, Richard remixes his understanding of cultural and spiritual references, thereby presenting a new and vibrant interpretation. This remixing allows for a new understanding of deaf people as people who can use the knowledge that is given them to find their way.

Discussion

Within the posthumanist framework, questions of individual agency, language, and cognition are abandoned. For instance, it is difficult within the assemblage *Apple Time* (the youth performers, the deaf consultant, the artists-in-residence, and me as artistic director) to attribute ideas, movement, image, ASL poetry, puppet design and fabrication to individual people. The collective becomes the centerpiece to the assemblage. Furthermore, there was considerable push and pull amongst the group about what the play was about and how it was made throughout the process of creating *Apple Time*. For instance, from my experience in the process as a deaf adult fluent in ASL, I felt considerable anguish as to how the lesser skilled signing hearing team (artists in residence and interpreters) communicated with the youth performers. I worried about how much hearing bias they were instilling in the performers, and what was authentically developed by the youth performers themselves. I wondered how the youth's desire to comply, to perform, to create, and to communicate merged with their desire to reshape hearing people's perceptions of themselves.

Artistically, I wanted *Apple Time* to pack a powerful wallop and teach the audience something about the oppression of deaf people and how things needed to change. I worried that *Apple Time* would give the impression that the "kids are alright," and that the joy and celebration of each other's stories in their light and dark complexities would placate hearing audiences and not challenge their perceptions of deaf youth. I struggled as a deaf researcher and

artistic director with the responsibility of shaping these performances to conform to the expectations of quality theatre performances, and at the same time lose the message that had gripped my mind and heart for decades: that is the persistent oppression of deaf youth. In the play making process, my internal conflicts surfaced from time to time in the form of unpleasant clashes with the hearing members of our team, as I did sense their desire to present deaf people as having the same hopes, dreams, and aspirations as hearing people. I often expressed the concern that their motivations to present deaf as the same as hearing would gloss over the deaf youth's real concerns. I worried that the team's motivations would override the need to provoke the audience into understanding the oppressions that the youth performers experienced daily. For these reasons, the deaf consultant Allard Thomas and I attended every rehearsal with a watchful eye on the playbuilding process. I think our presence, even though we did not often intervene, contributed to the shaping of the play. Our opinions were respectfully sought throughout the playbuilding process, and we provided deaf mentorship to the students in the process.

My inner conflicted feelings as an artistic director of this production are mirrored by Graif's (2018) reports that Nepali people view the opposite of being deaf as being Nepali. In several conversations with the hearing artists-in-residence, I came to understand what they wanted to achieve. Namely a parallel universe in which deaf people could language, play, think, and learn on their own terms, rather than being positioned as a subhuman species of humanity. It certainly was a departure from the theatre of the oppressed genre. Rather, it was a movement toward inviting hearing people into an experience of what it means to be ocularcentric, that is to process the world predominantly through vision. This aligns with Graif's (2018) perception that something much more subtle runs beneath the surface as he suggests that the implication is that Nepali people often do not see deafness as an experience that permeates language, culture, and social, emotional, and kinship ties. Rather, being Nepali is the most critical aspect of a hearing person's life which trumps the state of being deaf (Graif, 2018). The deaf child's exclusion from participating in ethnic, religious, and cultural traditions may be a source of anguish for many families of deaf children. Outside of Nepal, many deaf children are bewildered and bored by audiocentric ceremonies, religious services, and ethnic traditions that they take part in to reassure the family that they do, indeed, participate in these cherished traditions. The fear that a child cannot participate in those aspects of family beliefs, culture, and heritage often trumps the deaf child's need for understanding of what these cultural, ethnic, and religious traditions mean. Furthermore, the deaf child's interpretation of these cultural traditions may be entirely different than their established cultural, religious, and ethnic meanings. As an artistic director, and with the help of the artists-in-residence, I felt empowered to embrace intelligibility as a methodological problem; that is, the reality that audiocentricity often obscures what is truly experienced by

ocularcentric people.

Furthermore, the adoption of the posthuman framework allowed me to think about language and cognition as distributed throughout the assemblage of *Apple Time*. The confluence of my discomfort with the process, my understanding of playbuilding as a form of participatory action research, my increased understanding of dramaturgy, and my eventual embrace of the play as it evolved between the performance runs became resolved through my thinking about intelligibility as a methodological problem (Graif, 2018). Instead of continually presenting deaf people as oppressed and marginalized, I began to see how the assemblage allowed (and wanted!) the play to be an experiment in both creating deaf worlds and challenging ways in which hearing people perceive deaf people. The framing of the world according to sound does, in many ways, render the realities of deaf lives unintelligible and therefore exacerbates the abyssal line between hearing and deaf. Deaf people have developed a remarkable astuteness concerning the ways they are perceived by hearing people and continue to challenge hearing people's perceptions of deaf experience. Indeed, the degree to which deaf people appear incompetent to hearing people or bereft of a "normal life" that contains the privileges associated with being hearing, become irrelevant in *Apple Time*.

Implications and Conclusions

Good theatre reaches the hearts of patrons and in the end, promotes dialogue and change. My worries about the making of *Apple Time* were assuaged by the comments of several theatre goers, both hearing and deaf. Many people expressed feeling awed by the intersectionality of deafness with the multiplicity of cultures represented in *Apple Time*: Muslim, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Somali, Syrian, Plains Cree, and Saulteaux. In this way, intersectionality became visible. Furthermore, *Apple Time* challenged the ways in which hearing people view deaf people and how deaf people challenge those perceptions. This positions deaf people as confident and vibrant individuals who are creators of their individual and collective realities. *Apple Time* was so well received that an additional performance run of the play was staged in February 2018 at the Globe Theatre, a professional theatre in Regina. This performance run prompted several media appearances and garnered an invitation for additional performances in Saskatoon at a gathering of federal and provincial government officials who serve children and youth, and at a local high school.

Intelligibility as a methodological problem is a useful ethnographic lens that confronts the labels often assigned to deaf people, such as being deprived of language, speech, and hearing and the concomitant realities associated with such deprivation. The intelligibility problem points to the frame unconsciously adopted by hearing people toward deaf people; the ontology premised on the

ability to hear often renders deaf people as invisible. When intelligibility is viewed as a methodological problem, then posthumanist investigations of deaf people in different locales and ways in which they address how hearing people perceive them disrupts the ontological assumptions of people who predicate life on the ability to hear. Largely, when the arguments advanced by many deaf studies scholars (i.e., deaf people are normal, deaf people can do anything except hear, and that ASL is a language) are accompanied by a fine-grained analysis of what deaf people actually do in response to how hearing people see them (Kusters et al., 2017), then the ontology built on being and hearing becomes profoundly disrupted. Finally, posthuman applied linguistics questions the accuracy of the perception of deaf people as language deprived. Language acquisition theories have situated the acquisition of language within the individual (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). While Vygotsky (1925) emphasized the ongoing nature of language acquisition in multiple and shifting social contexts and in engagement with competent linguistic models, posthumanist applied linguistics considers the affect associated with animals, earth, and machine located within an assemblage as important contributors to language acquisition.

The assemblage continues to move, and deaf people continue to move in a world that is neither hearing nor deaf, speaking nor signing, but one that is comprised of performative intra-actions between animals, earth, and machine. Arts-based research is contingent upon the construction of worlds by artists (Jagodzinski & Wallin, 2013) to avoid reliance on categories that may obscure, obfuscate, and render invisible what is truly going on in the assemblage of intra-actions between animals, earth, humans and machine. An arts-based cartography yields rich insight into the notion of the assemblage as performative, and the ongoing intra-actions between humans, animals, earth, and machine suggest that language deprivation is not static nor defined according to binaries or categories but grounded in inner and outer world experiences of deaf youth performers in *Apple Time*. Thus, the cartography provides a way to address intelligibility as a methodological problem when researching deaf subjects.

***Apple Time* Cast List**

Alex Bristow (Moose Story)
 Sable Fink (Huntress Story)
 Fatima Tun Nafisa (Tiger-Dragon Story)
 Richard Pangman (Eagle Story)
 Shayla-Rae Tanner (Eagle/Wolf Story)
 Mustafa Alabssi (Immigration Story)
 Kainat Wahid (Needle Story)
 Ilhan Abdi (Boat Story)
 Allard Thomas - Performer, Deaf Elder & Prop Design

Acknowledgements

The author thanks Chrystene Ells, Berny Hi, and Michelle Grodecki for their support of the youth performers in *Apple Time*.

References

- Bahan, B. (2008). Upon the formation of the visual variety of the human race. In H. D. Bauman (Ed.), *Open your eyes: Deaf studies talking* (pp. 83-99). University of Minnesota Press.
- Barad, K. M. (2007). *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Duke University Press.
- Batamula, C. (2002). Family engagement among immigrant parents with young deaf children [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Gallaudet University.
- Braidotti, R. (2011). *Nomadic theory: The portable Rosi Braidotti*. Columbia University Press.
- Deaf Crows Collective. (2019a). *Apple time*. <https://www.deafcrowscollective.ca/appletime.html>
- Deaf Crows Collective. (2019b). *Home*. <https://www.deafcrowscollective.ca/>
- Deleuze, G., Guattari, F., & Massumi, B. (1987). *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Glickman, N. S., & Hall, W. C. (Eds.). (2019). *Language deprivation and deaf mental health*. Routledge.
- Graif, P. (2018). *Being and hearing: Making intelligible worlds in deaf Katmandu*. Hau Books.
- Jagodzynski, J., & Wallin, J. (2013). *Arts-based research: A critique and a proposal*. Sense Publishers.
- Kusters, A., De Meulder, M., & O'Brien, D. (Eds.). (2017). *Innovations in deaf studies: The role of deaf scholars*. Oxford University Press.
- Ladd, P. (2003). *Understanding deaf culture: In search of deafhood*. Multilingual Matters.
- Lightbown, P. & Spada, N. M. (2013). *How languages are learned* (4th ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Meek, D. R. (2020). Dinner table syndrome: A phenomenological study of deaf individuals' experiences with inaccessible communication. *The Qualitative Report*, 25(6), 1676-1694. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2020.4203>
- Mienczakowski, J. (1995). The theater of ethnography: The reconstruction of ethnography into theater with emancipatory potential. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 1(3), 360-375. <https://doi.org/10.1177/107780049500100306>
- Nafisa, F., Wahid, K., Tanner, S., Alabssi, M., & Weber, J. (2024). Deaf to deaf (Dispatch). *Studies in Social Justice*, 18(1), 14-15.
- Norris, J. (2009). *Playbuilding as qualitative research: A participatory arts-based approach*. Routledge.
- O'Brien, D. (2017). Deaf-led deaf studies: Using Kaupapa Maori principles to guide the development of deaf research practices. In A. Kusters, M. De Meulder, & D. O'Brien (Eds.), *Innovations in deaf studies: The role of deaf scholars* (pp. 57-76). Oxford University Press.
- Pennycook, A. (2018). *Posthumanist applied linguistics*. Routledge.
- Skyer, M. E. (2021). *Pupil ≠ pedagogue: Grounded theories about biosocial interactions and axiology for deaf educators* (Publication No. 28651387). [Doctoral dissertation, University of Rochester]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.
- Valente, J. (2014). Monster's analysis: Vulnerable anthropology and deaf superhero-becomings. In M. Sasaki (Ed.), *Literacies of the minority: Constructing a truly inclusive society* (pp. 10-36). Kurishio Publishing.
- Vygotsky, L. (1925). Principles of social education for deaf and dumb children in Russia. In *International conference on the education of the deaf* (pp. 227-235). William H. Taylor and Sons.
- Weber, J. (2007). *The pear orchard*. Hagios Press.

Weber, J. (2013). *The deaf house*. Thistle-down Press.

Weber, J., Jones, C. T., Atwal, A. (2023). Please pass the translanguaging: The dinner table experience in the lives of newcomer Canadian deaf youth and their families. *Languages (Basel)*, 8(2), 96. <https://doi.org/10.3390/languages8020096>