

The New York Times

Opinion

DISABILITY

I Performed at the Super Bowl. You Might Have Missed Me.

It was an act of both patriotism and protest. And it brought both joy and frustration.

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Feb. 3, 2020



Christine Sun Kim performing the national anthem in American Sign Language at the Super Bowl on Sunday. A J Mast for The New York Times

As a child of immigrants, a grandchild of refugees, a [Deaf](#) woman of color, an artist and a mother, I was proud to perform the national anthem and “America the Beautiful” in American

Sign Language at the opening of the Super Bowl on Sunday. I accepted the invitation to represent the National Association of the Deaf in partnership with the National Football League because I wanted to express my patriotism and honor the country that I am proud to be from — a country that, at its core, believes in equal rights for all citizens, including those with disabilities. So while Yolanda Adams and Demi Lovato sang on the 50-yard line at Hard Rock Stadium in Miami, I signed along on the 40.

Unfortunately, while the performance was broadcast in real time on the jumbo screens in the stadium, those watching on their televisions, computers and phones got a seriously truncated version.

While Fox Sports announced the signed performance of the two songs on Twitter, it did not actually show it. On the television broadcast, I was visible for only a few seconds. On what was supposed to be a “bonus feed” dedicated to my full performance on the Fox Sports website, [the cameras cut away](#) to show close-ups of the players roughly midway through each song.

Why have a sign language performance that is not accessible to anyone who would like to see it? It’s 2020: We’ve had the technology to do so for decades. And people noticed. The deaf actress Marlee Matlin, who has signed the anthem at three Super Bowls (in 1993, 2007 and 2016), tweeted:



To be honest, it was a huge disappointment — a missed opportunity in the struggle for media inclusiveness on a large scale. Though thrilled and excited to be on the field serving the deaf community, I was angry and exasperated.

Still, my pride in being chosen for this performance was genuine. Because of the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990, I have been afforded the rights and access that have allowed me to live a life on par with my fellow citizens. I am able to watch TV with captions, make phone calls through an online video platform, and have interpreters provided for my education, among many other privileges. I have traveled to many countries and witnessed firsthand the lack of equality for deaf people all over the world, making me appreciate being an American even more. I realize that being a citizen of this country is not something to be taken for granted.

It is a little-known fact that the N.F.L. has been providing some access to deaf people for more than three decades. Recently, that has extended to game-day commercials. In 2008, Alexis Kashar, a deaf civil rights attorney, raised the issue of Super Bowl commercials not being fully captioned with the N.F.L. Ms. Kashar, who at that time was the chair of the National Association of the Deaf's civil rights committee, brought in her colleague Howard A. Rosenblum, the organization's chief executive, to petition for more accessibility. The N.F.L. subsequently encouraged advertisers to address the issue, even though they were not required by law to add captions. Within a few years almost all Super Bowl commercials were captioned. The N.A.D. continues to ensure the commercials are captioned to this day.



Demi Lovato, top, and Christine Sun Kim performing at the Super Bowl in Miami Gardens, Fla. Scott McIntyre for The New York Times

Even so, I accepted the invitation with some hesitation. Being deaf in America has always been political, and I needed to process some internal conflict before accepting. I knew that some musical artists had refused opportunities to perform at the game last year in support of Colin Kaepernick. I wondered whether I should do the same.

I thought of the deaf people who had been mistreated or killed by police. I thought about Robert Kim, a deaf man who was beaten and tasered in 2012 by a police officer in a St. Louis suburb; and Daniel Kevin Harris, who was shot and killed in 2016 by a North Carolina state trooper; and two Oklahoma men, Pearl Pearson, who was badly beaten by police officers in 2014, and Magdiel Sanchez, who was shot and killed by police in front of his home in Oklahoma City in 2017.

These incidents are part of a pattern, as Amiel Fields-Meyer noted in [a 2017 article for The Atlantic](#). While the Americans with Disabilities Act requires the government to provide “effective communication” and “reasonable accommodation,” Fields-Meyer wrote, “When it comes to the deaf community, officers’ gaps in cultural competency have led to strain and miscommunication — and, at times, the use of deadly force.”

Of course, deaf people face many other obstacles and injustices: limited access to mental health service, health care and sign language itself, inadequate online accessibility, lack of employment opportunities and more. And as usual, these inequalities and the burden of their effects fall disproportionately on people of color.

But in the end, I accepted the invitation. Our rights can easily disappear if we do not continue to show up in places like the Super Bowl.

I had hoped to provide a public service for deaf viewers, and believed that my appearance might raise awareness of the systemic barriers and the stigmas attached to our deafness — and move some people to action. I hope that despite the failure of Fox to make the performance accessible to all, it did do that.

What kind of action? My parents took action by learning to sign for my [Deaf](#) sister and me. This made us feel seen and respected. Today, I’m teaching my hearing child to sign as well. Respecting all languages and identities can only lead to better laws and a higher quality of life. Signing the anthem was a way to celebrate my language.

The N.A.D. has posted video of my entire performances of “[America the Beautiful](#)” and the [national anthem](#) on YouTube.

I wholeheartedly support the efforts to promote accessibility and equality that have been undertaken by the N.F.L. and the N.A.D. I also stand in recognition and support of those who have used the N.F.L.’s platform toward wider goals of social justice. I see my performance as part of that expression.