

AFTERWORD

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This is a remarkable collection of essays about American Sign Language (ASL) literature, made more so by the fact that the history of this kind of analysis is so recent. As the authors have detailed so well in this volume, there are many reasons to group poetry, storytelling, and other kinds of signed performance together as a body of literature; they share a certain aesthetic of celebration of the signed form, and collectively they touch on many of the same themes.

The transition to what I call self-conscious sign language performance was rapid. When the National Theatre of the Deaf gave its first performance in 1967, showcasing some of the country's best Deaf actors, their program featured not original but translated poetry. Audree Norton translated, with long and lithe arms, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "How Do I Love Thee?" ("Let me count the ways . . ."), as Joe Velez "vogued" his way through Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky." Bernard Bragg, arguably the most recognizable of Deaf actors at the time, performed the feline "Tyger, Tyger, Burning Bright" (by William Blake). The performers were willing and able but perhaps not yet ready to present on a national stage completely original forms of signed poetry and performance.

As Cynthia Peters explains, it was several seasons later (1971-72) before they offered up an original performance, the outstanding *My Third Eye*. It was vaudevillelike: a collection of skits, demonstrations, a short choreographed sequence, and yes, poetry, linked by sharp humor and a theme of resistance—against the oppression of oral training and denial of sign language that was so much a part of many of the actors' experiences, against demanding family members and teachers asking what was humanly unrea-

sonable, and against an American society that had waited too long before being willing to watch Deaf actors perform on their stages.

It would be foolish to claim that ASL poetry and performance began at this moment because, as Ben Bahan and the editors have argued in this volume, elements of modern ASL poetry can be traced to the earlier kinds of performances in the community. Face to face, and before audiences in all types of venues, Deaf people have been performing imaginatively and with feeling. Predecessors of today's poems and stories, from lyrical signing to compelling narratives, can be found in filmed records as well as in performances passed down from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. What, then, began with the current generation of ASL poets and performers? What has this particular type of poetry discovered?

The naming of the language as American Sign Language had a great deal to do with the beginnings of ASL poetry. The language of my deaf father's generation was simply "the sign language," but in mine we gave it a name. Once named, the language took on a different position in the community; it became itself an object to behold. Deaf poets and performers became self-conscious, internal, and deliberative and opened themselves to critical study. Clayton Valli began to design poetry that explored the capacity of the handshape and the movement of signs. Dorothy Miles experimented with poetry that would match signs with written English words, in which the two languages would influence each other. Ella Lentz took an experience almost universal to children, that of watching the visual music of telephone wires dipping and swaying while riding in a car, and added the rigorous cadence of number signs to create "Eye Music." Patrick Graybill captured the conflict of longing and loneliness of the deaf child in his haiku about the long drive back to his deaf school in Kansas. The theme was age-old, but it came together with structure in a new aesthetic of sign literature.

Signed narratives took off in new directions too. Sam Supalla brought late-twentieth-century cinematic technique to signed stories. Ben Bahan wove allegory and contemporary imagery into taut narratives. Gilbert Eastman composed an epic poetic narrative in honor of the Deaf President Now movement, stringing together familiar and evocative images from Deaf life. The National Theatre of the Deaf continued to stage more original pieces, not vaudeville but fully formed plays. Don Bangs, Shanny Mow, and Willy Conley mounted original productions and in each explored themes of everyday Deaf lives, from problems with hearing in-laws to tragic deaf education schemes.

At some risk of overgeneralizing, I will offer what I believe are some important characteristics of this new impulse of ASL poetry and performance. It has strong narrative content. Cynthia Peters describes indigenous Deaf American theater as remaining "close to the everyday lives of its viewers." ASL poetry is the same. The stories the performers tell are of resistance, oppression, and deeply felt occupation by others. Whether the piece is Sam Supalla's "Eyeth" or Eugene Bergman and Bernard Bragg's "Tales from a Clubroom" or Ben Bahan's "Bird of a Different Feather," the Other is present, unrelenting, and uncomprehending. Gilbert Eastman's epic poem "Gallaudet Protest" links images of resistance with emblems of nature: as surely as we know that stars appear in the night, a protest will begin. Such pieces tell stories that are personal and familiar to deaf people.

Michael Davidson (in chapter 11 of this volume) describes the project of ASL poetry as essentially a nationalist project because it insists on the uniqueness of the signing poet as someone unlike an English-speaking poet. Furthermore, he observes that ASL poetry is suspicious of "phonocentric models of literature." ASL poetry celebrates the potential of the sign, how lyrical forms can be made out of handshapes and movements. In this sense, ASL poetry not only shows but proclaims a different order, one in which speech and hearing are contested as the only way to organize lives. These themes have been present for a long time in American deaf life—one of the most eloquent calls to resistance was George Veditz's 1913 speech "The Preservation of the Sign Language." As Chris Krentz explains in chapter 3, what marks modern ASL poetry is how it reiterates these themes and imbues them with self-conscious poetic structure. Theme and structure become married; the structure of the poem or narrative is itself an emblem of a new order.

Because he sees the themes of resistance and oppression in ASL poetry as akin to those of the colonial experience as told elsewhere in the world, Michael Davidson proposes that "[a] postcolonial regime is very much under way, and performance is one of its key venues." He is suggesting that we may find useful many nationalist and postcolonial literature projects from around the world, from the Philippines to India and Madagascar, where novel forms of language and performance have risen out of histories of colonial occupation. I would agree. A colleague of mine, Vicente Rafael, has written about the ascendancy of "Taglish," a blending of Tagalog, a Filipino indigenous language, with English for use in popular literature and performance in the Philippines. The blended language reflects the coming

together of the Philippines' pre- and postcolonial history, enacted in jokes and cartoons reflecting on the modern problems of the Filipinos.¹

The unique combination of theme and structure that defines ASL performance can be seen in the poetry and performance of "experimental" sign poets such as Peter Cook and Kenny Lerner. At the start of the performance of their poem "e = mc²" they warn the audience that the piece they are about to perform actually "HAS NO MEANING!" Smiling at their audacity, they specifically tell the audience, "DO NOT TRY TO UNDERSTAND THIS POEM!" The poem is a cleverly lyrical piece combining handshapes and movements that suggest meaning but soon become nonsensical. At the end, the audience cheers at the performance; even though the poem is not a canonical poem with stanzas and a theme it still qualifies as a sign poem because it is so structurally attentive to movement and handshape. The poem's theme is that ASL structure by itself can be lyrical and pleasing. We should also understand that not only poets but their audiences as well have become analytical. Cook and Lerner are performing to well-informed audiences who fully understand their tongue-in-cheek commentary on their own performance. Yet Cook and Lerner also perform poetry that tells of resistance, the best known of which is their "I Am Ordered Now to Talk," which draws on Cook's memories of his oral education as oppressive. Even when they are playful, Cook and Lerner's poems are content-full.

Another way to understand ASL poetry is to view the work of deaf poets working outside ASL, such as Aaron Williamson, a British performance artist who grew up deaf and learned British Sign Language later in life as an adult. As Michael Davidson explains about Williamson's performances, they are whole-body pieces centered on the omnipresence of sound and speech. In one of his more powerful pieces, he carries a heavy plaster model of an ear on his back and portrays deaf people's near-universal experience of confronting again and again the dominance of sound and speaking in every aspect of life. While Williamson celebrates gesture and the visibility of the hands and the body, he does not locate sign language front and center in his acts of resistance. Without sign poetics, he is free to explore the lived world of deaf people—how hands are used to indicate when they are used together with speech, how meaning can be glimpsed with snatches of lipreading and gestures by others. In this sense, it is perhaps deaf poetry. The burden of comprehending others rests on the deaf person, and Williamson enacts this as he carries the heavy plaster ear around on stage.

In contrast, an American work that rails against the omnipresence of the ear, Sam Supalla's "Eyeth," represents the ear not as a plaster object but as a word and a sign ("Ear-th") built into the structure of the signed narrative. Whereas Williamson uses performance to signify, ASL poets and storytellers use the signs themselves to signify. For this reason, translation is always an issue with ASL literature—the very thing that makes it different also makes it difficult to understand. Whereas Williamson's performance can be understood by watching it, Supalla's cannot without translation. This is why I think postcolonial and nationalist analyses have good potential for understanding ASL literature. ASL literature stands behind the veil of language and is thoroughly steeped in the history of the community.

What comes next, after the self-conscious sign poetry of the late twentieth century? Already there is a new generation of sign performers that blend hip-hop and other urban styles into their signing. Whereas Sam Supalla is careful to articulate his signs as he uses film technique in the "Wildest Whiskey of the West," David Rivera purposely blurs his handshapes and cuts short his movements, as if rejecting the precision of "mainstream" sign poetry. He uses television shot structure in his performances as well. His slow-motion piece of a football game mimics the multiple shot angles of television sports shows; the same arm that throws the football appears from several different points of view. His themes are gritty, reflecting his urban experience. His hands form handshapes for signs, but the handshapes are also the street gestures of urban youth. In young ASL poets, we are seeing a movement from a romantically conceived "pure" poetry to a "hip" street poetry.

We are also seeing the internationalization of sign poetry. Italy's sign poetry has seen tremendous growth in the last twenty years. The poetry of the Deaf Italian brother and sister Rosaria and Giuseppe Giuranna uses the closeness of the sibling relationship as a structure for performing stanzas. They alternate lines and even parts of lines in a duet performance that is almost musical. Their lines flow, then build up to a crescendo as the frame of their poetry together becomes larger than each of them individually. Japanese sign narrators use number signs to tell a story, as do Americans, but the numbers run *backwards*, as in one about a fisherman at the end of the day watching a sunset. The poem begins with the number nine and counts down to zero: the fisherman puts down his fishing pole, and when the last sign is reached a zero stands in for a round sun setting. Imagine how many more ways there are of doing sign poetry once we move to the world stage.

The first world celebration of Deaf communities at Deaf Way 1989 brought together an astonishing array of stage performances, sign poeties, music, dance, and visual art. Clearly inspired by it, Deaf Way 2002 featured performances not only from Europe but also from Asia, South America, and Africa. As Deaf people themselves migrate, from Asia to America, from eastern Europe to the Middle East, from Africa to Europe and America, their communities' sign performances travel with them. Already there has been a great deal of borrowing and cross-fertilization of literatures in different sign languages. Perhaps the next volume of ASL literature will not be just about ASL poetry and performance but will be expanded to include world sign literature and will acknowledge the influence of Deaf artists from around the world.

NOTE

1. Vicente L. Rafael, *White Love and Other Events in Filipino History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).