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Signs And Voices: Deaf Culture, Identity, Language, And Arts

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Introduction

In recent years, the rapid pace of cultural and technological change has necessitated a continual rethinking of what it means to be deaf, hard of hearing, or culturally Deaf.[1] A growing number of deaf children receive cochlear implants and are educated in mainstream settings, posing new challenges for defining both individual and collective identities. The development of genetic testing, gene manipulation, and other genomic technologies raises difficult questions for bioethicists, medical researchers and practitioners, and d/Deaf people. New research on sign languages, building on William Stokoe's groundbreaking research on American Sign Language (ASL) in the 1960s, has led to a greater understanding of and respect for the language, literature, and ways of life of signing Deaf people. At the same time, however, the widespread use of new communication technologies such as video relay services, text messaging, and electronic pagers has altered how people who are d/Deaf communicate with one another and with the hearing world. New video and digital technologies also play an increasingly important role in the creation and dissemination of ASL poetry and other forms of ASL literature. As these various technologies are reshaping d/Deaf identities and communities, hearing high school and college students are enrolling in ASL courses in record numbers. What does this mean for ASL, for d/Deaf people, and for Deaf culture? The chapters in *Signs and Voices: Deaf Culture, Identity, Language, and Arts* address these and other cultural issues that are changing the landscape of d/Deafness. The book is divided into three sections—Culture and Identity, Language and Literacy, and American Sign Language in the Arts—each of which focuses on a particular set of theoretical and practical concerns.

The editors of this volume first came together to organize the Signs and Voices conference, a four-day event in November 2004 that took place at Swarthmore, Haverford, and Bryn Mawr colleges. Many of the chapters in this volume grew out of work presented at that conference. The Signs and Voices

1. Following a convention first established by James Woodward, we use *deaf* to refer to individuals who are audiologically deaf and *Deaf* to refer to those who use sign as their primary language and identify with Deaf culture. Because these categories are overlapping and not always easy to tease apart, we also adopt the more recent practice of using *d/Deaf* to represent deaf, hard of hearing, and culturally Deaf people. See Brenda Jo Brueggemann's chapter in this volume for a discussion of the usage of *deaf, Deaf,* and *d/Deaf.*

conference was catholic, striving to be as inclusive as possible of different viewpoints, and eclectic, presenting research in many disciplines as well as visual, literary, and performance art and work related to assistive technologies and civil rights. We came away from the conference newly aware of important and exciting work in many fields of endeavor and committed to introducing our readers to some of that work. Other chapters included here were presented in an earlier form as part of the Presidential Forum on American Sign Language at the December 2004 Modern Language Association Convention in Philadelphia. Still others were solicited for this volume, and one, a study of the development of Nicaraguan Sign Language, originally appeared in *Science* and is reprinted here with our thanks. The book is accompanied by a DVD that includes clips of ASL and of ASL poetry and theater discussed by our contributors.

Taken together, these chapters point to new directions in a broad range of fields, including cognitive science, Deaf studies, disability studies, education, linguistics, literary criticism, philosophy, and psychology. Although no single volume can cover every discipline and every new angle of research, this collection aims to showcase some of the innovative and rigorous work being done across the disciplines. We hope that it will prove useful to scholars and teachers in a variety of fields, to their students, and to general readers, both d/Deaf and hearing, who are seeking information about d/Deaf matters.

Culture and Identity

The chapters in Part One explore what it means to be d/Deaf in the twenty-first century. Examining the past and envisioning the future, these chapters reflect on the complex individual and cultural processes through which d/Deaf identities and communities are constructed. They underscore the importance of understanding key moments in history as we move into a future of new choices and dilemmas for people who are deaf, hard of hearing, and culturally Deaf. Many factors, including the development of new technologies and changes in educational practices, mark the early twenty-first century as a moment of rapid cultural change and potentially of cultural crisis for d/Deaf people. These chapters testify to the ability of d/Deaf individuals and communities to adapt, to survive, and to thrive.

In the first chapter, "Scientific Explanation and Other Performance Acts in the Reorganization of DEAF," Tom Humphries traces the development of a new discourse of Deaf language and culture, a discourse that challenges earlier scientific explanations of deafness based on degree of hearing loss, functional ability, and social isolation in a hearing world. In the 1960s, William Stokoe's sign language dictionary, as well as work by many other linguists, sociologists, and psychologists, introduced the revolutionary ideas that ASL is a bona fide language and that people who use it as their primary language belong to a Deaf culture. Humphries emphasizes the crucial role played by cultural processes within the Deaf community in disseminating these ideas. When Deaf people entered into "talk" about their own language and culture, offering explanations to one another and to the hearing public via performance, the revolution had truly begun. In addition to "talking culture," Humphries argues, Deaf people made their culture visible by performing their language in public venues; by

teaching one another, as well as hearing people, about ASL and Deaf culture; by collecting and displaying cultural artifacts; and by differentiating who and what is or isn't Deaf. Their new understanding that "everything DEAF had value" not only transformed perceptions of self and society but also effected long overdue changes in the sociopolitical and economic status of Deaf people.

In "Who Am I? Deaf Identity Issues," Irene W. Leigh asks, "What does it mean to say 'I am deaf'"? She reviews the literature on deaf identity development, exploring the definition of identity as both self-perception and social construct and considering the influence of language and communication, hearing ability, and family and social environment, including ethnic background. Leigh points out that for the 96 percent of deaf children born to hearing parents, a growing number of whom are receiving cochlear implants and being educated in mainstream settings, the paths toward deaf identity are not clear-cut. She reviews several theoretical models of deaf identity development and reports on a study by Deborah Maxwell McCaw showing that both deaf acculturation and biculturalism are associated with a healthy sense of well-being and that "being comfortable with one's deafness is as critical for psychological well-being as is the ability to switch comfortably between Deaf and hearing environments." Leigh concludes that deaf identity is mutable rather than fixed, that it is defined by both individual and cultural experiences, and that today's deaf identities will inevitably be reshaped by historical, cultural and technological forces.

Brenda Jo Brueggemann, in "Think-Between: A Deaf Studies Commonplace Book," introduces a theory of "betweenity" that challenges us to create new conceptual spaces between *deaf* and *Deaf, deafness* and *disability*, and other terms that attempt to name and differentiate deaf identities. She goes on to map several fruitful sites of inquiry for Deaf studies. These include the study of the "ever-shifting deaf cyborg" and the rhetorical relationship between technology and identity; the "euthanasia" of deaf people as part of the T-4 program in Nazi Germany in 1941–42; the evolution of new sign languages in developing countries and places such as reunified Germany; the proliferation of ASL courses for hearing students in high school and college curricula; and the relationship between writing and signing. While urging us to view the "identity kaleidoscope" from varied perspectives, Brueggemann makes clear that the shifting boundaries of Deaf-world do not entail the end of Deaf culture or of ASL but instead compel us to develop more capacious theories of self and community, theories that incorporate spaces of "betweenity."

Next, in her chapter " 'I Thought There Would Be More Helen Keller': *History through Deaf Eyes* and Narratives of Representation," Kristen Harmon describes the evolution of a proposed exhibit about Deaf culture, planned jointly by Gallaudet University and the Smithsonian Institution. This exhibit, later renamed "History through Deaf Eyes" and reframed as "a narrative that places culturally Deaf, hard of hearing, and deafened people within the context of American history," has been exhibited at several sites in the United States, including the Smithsonian's Arts and Industries Building in Washington, D.C. Drawing on the letters of protest and support generated by the exhibit proposal and also on the comments and drawings entered in visitors' logbooks at the Smithsonian posting, Harmon examines how the emotionally charged responses to the exhibit reveal competing discourses of deafness and Deaf culture in American life. The written

responses to the exhibit—from parents of deaf children, audiologists and other medical professionals, and d/Deaf and hearing children and adults—stake out deeply felt positions about language choice, education, and technology. Harmon articulates the poignant question that the varied responses to the exhibit invoke: "Who owns the deaf child?"

In the final chapter in this section, "Bioethics and the Deaf Community," Teresa Blankmeyer Burke takes up this question as she surveys bioethical issues that affect d/Deaf individuals and communities and offers an analytical framework for examining these issues. Burke explores how Beauchamp and Childress's four ethical principles of autonomy, beneficence, nonmaleficence (the duty to do no harm), and justice raise bioethical issues for d/Deaf people. For example, she explains that interpretation of the dictum to do no harm depends on how an individual or community defines the concepts of health and harm, and she asks whether the principle of autonomy grants potential parents the freedom to use genetic technologies to select for genes associated with deafness as well as to screen out these genes. Burke argues for a nuanced, case-based bioethics and points out that most bioethics decisions are driven not by policy but by individuals making choices in specific contexts. "Granted," she writes, "this generates a messier picture of bioethics, but one that more accurately reflects the reality of bioethics in the greater deaf community." In closing, she emphasizes that emerging technologies make it critically important for members of this community—whether hard of hearing, deaf-blind, oral deaf, late-deafened, or culturally Deaf—to engage in dialogue with bioethicists and researchers.

Language and Literacy

The chapters in Part Two highlight new research on sign languages and examine the implications of this research for educating deaf children. The first three chapters present evidence from linguistics and cognitive neuroscience research that enables us to better understand the similarities and differences between sign and speech, the relationship between linguistic and other types of cognitive processing, the development of new sign languages, and the semantic and syntactic behavior of specific signs. The remaining three chapters in this section draw on linguistic and pedagogical research to discuss the theory and practice of teaching deaf children, emphasizing a bilingual approach and the early use of sign language.

In "Cognitive and Neural Representations of Language: Insights from Sign Languages of the Deaf," Heather Knapp and David P. Corina offer an overview of the linguistic, psycholinguistic, and neurolinguistic properties of sign languages. They reaffirm that sign languages are natural languages, pointing out many structural similarities between sign and oral languages, but also noting the important difference that sublexical elements of sign occur simultaneously (both hands articulate as they move through space) without any problem of reception. Knapp and Corina note that psycholinguistic findings thus far have shown that sign languages and oral languages are accessed in the same way with regard to whether the signs/words are real or nonsense and with regard to whether the signs/words are frequent or rare. They argue for another similarity: Signs and words are stored and accessed along both structural and semantic dimensions.

And they note that evidence from research on aphasia, cortical stimulation mapping, and brain imaging shows that the same parts of the left hemisphere of the brain are responsible for linguistic structures in sign and oral languages. However, sign languages may also recruit parts of the right hemisphere, particularly when producing spatial information, such as that in classifier predicates and prepositions. Additionally, the production of ASL by signers who acquired sign during the critical period for language (whether they are hearing or not) involves the right hemisphere in a way that production of ASL by non-native signers does not.

In "Children Creating Core Properties of Language: Evidence from an Emerging Sign Language in Nicaragua," originally published in *Science*, Ann Senghas, Sotaro Kita, and Aslı Özyürek report on their study of children's sign in Nicaragua. In 1977, the first special education school opened in Managua, followed by a vocational school in 1981. The deaf children who attended these schools did not have a language in common prior to coming, instead having a variety of home sign systems. Once at school together, they began communicating with gestures, but soon this expanded to real sign. Preadolescent signers typically make changes in the grammar, teaching them to younger signers, but not to adults. Over the past twenty-five years, one cohort of children has taught the next cohort the sign language that was created at the school. In this study, Senghas, Kita, and Özyürek compare the signing fluency on complex motion events of deaf signers from three separate school cohorts (by the year they entered the school community) with the gestures used by hearing Nicaraguan Spanish speakers while speaking Spanish. They found that the younger the signing cohort, the less their signing is like gesture and the more fluent it is. In sum, the youngest signers are the most fluent, in contrast to most Deaf communities. Their findings give novel support to the claim that the language-learning mechanism in the brain is responsible for those attributes of language that are universal, and they contradict the claim that languages evolve solely through cultural transmission from generation to generation.

Carol Neidle and Robert G. Lee present us with another linguistic study in "WELL, 'WHAT' Is It? Discovery of a New Particle in ASL." They look at the frequently used sign often glossed as WHAT, articulated with a 5 handshape on (one or) both hands in neutral space with the palms upward and a single outward movement of the hand(s). This particle has received little attention in previous linguistic literature, being assumed to be either gestural (and not true sign) or an integral part of the other signs with which it occurs. They offer evidence that this particle is a bona fide sign, independent of other signs. It typically follows a semantically focused element and adds a sense of domain-widening or indeterminacy. That is, it serves to extend the set of referents under consideration to a larger group than one would normally expect. A somewhat comparable effect is found in English when we say "some boy or other" as compared with just "a boy." Neidle and Lee show that this particle is not to be identified as the wh-element WHAT because it behaves differently from WHAT syntactically (in terms of its distribution) and semantically; nor is it to be identified as an indefinite determiner, because it can co-occur with ordinary indefinite noun phrases. Indeed, this particle can also occur in sentence-final position, lending the same kind of expansive interpretation to the entire event of the sentence—giving a sense of "x or something like it happened."

The next three chapters examine the implications of research in linguistics for educating deaf children. In "Success with Deaf Children: How to Prevent Educational Failure," Ronnie Wilbur reviews research from linguistics and other fields that lends support to the use of natural sign languages in the early education of deaf children. She points out that success is multidimensional, involving doing grade-level work, feeling independent and happy, and choosing and working toward one's own career goals. Language is essential to any child's success, and this is true whether the language is a sign language or an oral language. She cites research showing that the use and mastery of sign language in the early years does not interfere with a deaf or hard of hearing child's development of speechreading and vocalization. Indeed, it is positively correlated with reading skills and general achievement. This should be no surprise: One must acquire language first in order to have the cognitive development that underlies successful skills in reading and writing. There is no substitute for the acquisition of a natural language. Signed Exact English (SEE), for example, cannot offer the cognitive benefits that ASL offers; because it is an artificial construct, it does not have those features common to all natural languages. Wilbur advocates the bilingual approach to deaf education, giving many arguments based on linguistic structures.

In "English and ASL: Classroom Activities to Shed Some Light on the Use of Two Languages," Shannon Allen, a teacher at the Pennsylvania School for the Deaf, describes her own practical methods for helping her deaf students express themselves in both ASL and English. She presents three activities that she has used in kindergarten and first grade classes, based on the work of others, but with her own spin. These activities explicitly address differences between the two languages with the goal of improving fluency in both. The first, Doing Words, involves daily one-on-one work with a student. The teacher begins by asking the student what word he'd like to focus on today. Then, together, they figure out what the child would like to say about that word and how to write the word or sentence that the child intends. The second, Morning Message, involves daily work with the whole class. The teacher writes the morning message—four simple lines in English—and the students greet each other and read the message, then sign it. They talk about differences between the way the English is written and the way the ASL is signed, such as the position of the verb. The third activity, ASL/English, is a group activity that calls for two teachers—the regular classroom teacher and a speech or ASL teacher. Each thirty-minute lesson focuses on a particular aspect of either English or ASL that the teachers want the children to master.

Doreen DeLuca and Donna Jo Napoli also apply linguistics to practical activities in educating children in "A Bilingual Approach to Reading." They explain why learning to read English for the child who is deaf or hard of hearing is similar to but even more difficult than learning to read Chinese characters for the child who is hearing and not a speaker of Chinese. English and ASL are quite different structurally. With respect to the lexicon, there are many mismatches. Some English words correspond to several different ASL signs, and some ASL signs correspond to several different English words. Also, the expression of predicates differs between the two: ASL uses classifiers in motion predicates while English does not. Syntax also presents many challenges to the new reader.

Word order alone is an issue, with the verb being medial in English but final in ASL. DeLuca and Napoli propose that initial reading materials for deaf and hard of hearing children offer stories told in one-word utterances, so that the child can focus on the concept of reading and on learning to recognize the individual words without having to face differences of linguistic structures between ASL and English at the outset. Later reading materials should revolve around particular differences between the two languages, explicitly confronting them. They present, as an example, their first story from *Handy Stories,* a reader with five stories in it, which will be published by Gallaudet University Press.

American Sign Language in the Arts

In recent years, ASL storytelling, poetry, and theater traditions have begun to receive the critical attention they have long deserved, and new artistic practices have developed and flourished. These emergent poetic and performative practices have been nourished by many factors, including research in linguistics (discussed in Part Two of this book), recognition among Deaf people that ASL is a rich natural language (discussed in Tom Humphries's chapter in this volume), the tremendous growth of ASL courses in colleges and universities, and new video and digital technologies used both to create and to preserve original ASL literature and translations. Presenting new work on the theory and practice of ASL poetry and the translation of Shakespeare into ASL, these chapters discuss the ways in which ASL draws on and reinterprets literary traditions in English and also how ASL expands these traditions, creating new possibilities for literature and performance. In particular, the visual and spatial dimensions of ASL provide unique poetic and dramatic resources, challenging us to rethink traditional notions of language, literature, and literary theory.[2]

In the opening chapter, "Body/Text: Sign Language Poetics and Spatial Form in Literature," H-Dirksen L. Bauman turns a Deaf eye toward literary theory and practice, revealing their phonocentric heritage and imagining a Deaf literary theory that would foreground the visual and spatial aspects of literature. Drawing on essays by G. E. Lessing, Joseph Frank, and W. J. T. Mitchell, he explores the relationship between the visual and literary arts and examines the notion of spatial form in literature. Bauman suggests that incorporating discussion of sign language and sign literature adds depth and perspective to theories of spatial form. He also shows that the embodiment of the text in a sign poem invites a phenomenological reading. The body performing a poem does not simply move through space, but collaborates with that space—in both oral poetry and sign poetry. But gesture and sign enable the mental grasping of space, which in turn carves out a place for the poem to occupy. A look at Clayton Valli's poem "Hands" offers a useful demonstration, as do examples from Ella Mae Lentz's, Debbie Rennie's, and Peter Cook's work. The Deaf poet's hand creates a form in space that allows the audience to see the poem, experience the image, and thus create with the poet the textual event. Bauman's analysis makes clear that

2. See *Signing the Body Poetic: Essays on American Sign Language Literature,* ed. H-Dirksen L. Bauman, Jennifer L. Nelson, and Heidi M. Rose, for an extended discussion of emerging traditions in ASL literature and critical analyses of this literature.

the growing recognition and appreciation of sign poetry expands our understanding of literary modalities and can lead to richer and more nuanced interpretations of poetry of all kinds.

Michael Davidson's "Tree Tangled in Tree: Re-siting Poetry through ASL," like Bauman's chapter, explores how sign poetry reshapes and expands our understanding of language and literature. After discussing the visual poetics of modernist literature and the role of the optical in the Foucauldian notion of "biopower," he turns to a discussion of the literary strategies of three ASL poets. First, he explains Ezra Pound's modernist experiments with poetic form, based on Pound's reading of Ernst Fenollosa's theory of the Chinese character as a method for poetry, and then he examines how the poet-pair The Flying Words Project radically transforms two of Fenollosa's key examples: "Sun Tangled in Branches of Tree" and "Man Sees Horse." Peter Cook, the Deaf poet of the pair, combines the signs TREE and SUN, just as Chinese characters can be superimposed to create new characters. And in translating into ASL the phrase "Man Sees Horse," Cook wreaks havoc with the grammatical distinction between subject and object. Davidson then turns to Clayton Valli's "Snowflake" and lays out how Valli exploits ASL, SEE, fingerspelling, and nonsense signs to display a range of levels of attempted communication between a deaf child and his hearing father. He examines a related theme in Patrick Graybill's "Paradox," in which the poet explores generational and cultural tensions about language choice through images of race and gender. In each of these poems, ASL poets reinterpret literary conventions through Deaf eyes, both building on the modernist project and challenging us to rethink the metaphor of vision on which it is based.

In "*Nobilior est vulgaris*: Dante's Hypothesis and Sign Language Poetry," David M. Perlmutter traces the recent emergence of ASL poetry and argues that two things set the stage for signers to produce original poetry in ASL. We needed to realize both that ASL is a natural language and that natural languages offer the noblest vehicles for poetry (an insight that the great medieval Italian poet Dante offered when he chose to write his poems in the language of the people, Italian, rather than in the literary language of scholarship at that time, Latin). Perlmutter offers a detailed analysis of a single poem: Clayton Valli's "Deaf World." He shows that three basic structural elements of oral poetry are found in this sign poem: the stanza, the line, and the hemistich (half-line). Then he delves into the relationship between the structure of the poem and its content. He shows that the two stanzas of the poem have distinct syntactic structures and distinct uses of handshapes, which correspond to the contrast Valli sets up between the descriptions of the hearing world in the first stanza and that of the Deaf world in the second stanza. Having demonstrated that this sign poem uses poetic devices found in oral poetry, Perlmutter goes on to show that sign poetry also uses resources not available to oral poetry. Through classifier predicates, body and face orientation, shifts in hand dominance, and eye gaze, the poet is able to exploit linguistic patterns at multiple levels, underscoring Dante's insight about why natural languages are the noblest vehicles for poetry.

Following these three tightly argued analyses of Deaf poetics and of a few sign poems in particular, we turn to a discussion of creating ASL poems in "Flying Words: A Conversation between Peter Cook and Kenny Lerner." The editors of this volume approached Cook, a Deaf poet, and his hearing collaborator,

Lerner, with a long list of questions about their work. They began responding to the first question—"Can you tell us a little about the way you two work?"—and turned it into an extended riff on their collaborative creative process. They never got to the other questions! The conversation flies back and forth between Cook and Lerner, giving the reader insight into the inventive and serendipitous nature of their work as they feel their way through creating a poem, sometimes across 500 miles, sometimes with one waking the other in the middle of the night, and often in a hotel room (as in the DVD clip that accompanies their chapter). What emerges is a sense of how a poem becomes full over time, often turning out very differently from the original conception. Cook and Lerner explain that their poems are always in process, even many years after they first created a poem or an image, and they discuss how video relay technology has given them a new way to create and rehearse poems. One of the striking features of this conversation is the way these poets play off one another's language and ideas; this aspect of their exchange may reveal as much about their creative process as their actual words. Their conversation shows how language games can produce serious contributions to art when those games are played by masters.

Next, in "Visual Shakespeare: *Twelfth Night* and the Value of ASL Translation," Peter Novak brings us to a discussion of theater. He describes the process of translating Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* into ASL—a collaborative effort by two deaf translators, Adrian Blue and Robert De Mayo, and two hearing translators, Catherine Rush and Novak—and shows how the synergy of two languages and cultures creates a new, embodied text. Videotape proved to be a critical tool for establishing continuity in the team's work and for later analysis of the project. There are several film clips on the accompanying *Signs and Voices* DVD, some illustrating key moments in the translation process and others filmed during the play's production in Philadelphia. Novak explains how the ASL translation enhances the gestic element in Shakespeare's language; how it maps social notions of gender, class, and power onto the body; and how the performative nature of ASL enables visual augmentation of the text. He also describes the challenges of translating into ASL a play that opens and closes with music and details how the translators rendered rhymes, puns, double entendres, and other aspects of Shakespeare's text. Full of detailed examples from the original text and the translation, Novak's chapter provides a vivid demonstration of the literary and performative richness of ASL.

We end with "ASL in Performance: A Conversation with Adrian Blue," a companion piece to Novak's chapter. Blue is a director, storyteller, playwright, and actor who worked with Novak on the ASL translation of *Twelfth Night* and acted in the production. The editors' conversation with Blue touches on his childhood and schooling and traces the development of his career, from performing mime shows as a teenager to acting and directing with the National Theater of the Deaf, cowriting and producing the play *A Nice Place to Live* with Catherine Rush, and translating and performing Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* and *Much Ado about Nothing*. Blue discusses how he approaches the use of both signs and voices onstage. He explains, for example, that when he writes a play with both Deaf and hearing characters, or when he directs a play featuring both Deaf and hearing actors, he finds ways of using voicing that enhance the dramatic structure of the play rather than simply making the play accessible to hearing

audience members. In addition, he gives us further insight into the difficulties and pleasures of translating Shakespeare; focusing on specific scenes, he discusses the translation problems posed by these scenes and explains the translators' inventive solutions. The chapters in this final section underscore the vitality and creativity of Deaf culture as it faces both challenges and new possibilities in the twenty-first century.

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Reference

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