

FINDING DEAF GAIN: CHANGING LANGUAGES,
CHANGING LENSES, CHANGING SOCIETY

by

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Abstract

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Most literature is analyzed through various lenses, or more accurately, schools of thought informed by life experience and cultural knowledge. Literature created in American Sign is no different than any other literature in spite of it being a visual-spatial language rather than a sound-based language. It requires scholars able to access the Deaf Lens, cognizant of the linguistic and historical context that informed Deaf artists in the creation of their work. This context is embedded in their ASL literature, and often requires scholars to approach their work as the product of a colonized group.

Though the Deaf Community does not have land or resources available for the colonizer to take, the colonial narrative can be seen as the closest analogue with which we can identify key ideas that resonate in ASL literature. The most critical aspect is that of resistance to the colonizing impulse that the Deaf Community has experienced for centuries. The questions of identity, language, and Otherness come to the forefront when viewing ASL literature through the Deaf Lens.

Analyzing Clayton Valli's ASL poetry "Dandelions" and "Something Not Right" demonstrates how the Deaf Lens yields deeper insight in how ASL is deployed to create literature uniquely specific to the Deaf Experience. This then allows scholars to recognize problems and means of resistance found in other colonial literature, and by extension, the issues facing today's society.

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Chapter 1

Introduction to the Other

I am a subaltern. I am a member of a minority group, the Deaf. To be more accurate, I would best be identified as a subaltern elite by virtue of my upbringing, education, and chosen field of work. I bring different perspectives regarding languages and cultures, and I have unique access to an untapped field of literature—American Sign Language literature. The same thing can be said of Deaf artists who create poetry and other types of literature in American Sign. They instill their work with experiences filtered through their lives as Deaf persons, living as a minority in a larger world that is often at odds with their Deaf way of life. This life idealizes and promotes the values of shared language (American Sign) and identity¹, community support, and collective resistance to those who would deny the Deaf their way of life. This leads to common themes that can be seen in their work.

Using Patrick Graybill’s “The Artist & His Work,” I can demonstrate the layers of meaning embedded by Deaf authors. Graybill’s work is a clever ASL poem done in the genre of a Handshape Story. Specifically, it is an ABC story with an additional Number story (1-15) at the end. For scholars and laypeople unfamiliar with this, the premise is simple- each sign used has to correlate with the handshape used to represent the English alphabet (and at times, numbers). The next sign has to correlate with the next letter. A rough comparison can be made to acrostic poetry.

¹ Hence the capitalization of Deaf to identify them as a group, although as noted later in this thesis, an intersectional approach will be necessary to parse through various dimensions of Deaf people.

My analysis of Graybill’s poem will illuminate key ideas that recur frequently in ASL literature. In the interests of saving time and space, I have placed the full English translation in the appendix. For now, I will present an excerpt of my own translation² of the last part of the poem as shown in the videotext *ABC Stories*. I have italicized the translation to remind readers that it originally was in ASL.

“You think it’s weird?”

Oh I see...

No, no, no.

Really, really look at the painting.

You think it’s lousy?

You’re delusional—

Quit it,

You peabrain.”

This is the dialogue that the artist has with the viewer, after he has found a portrait of himself. What might other literary scholars, not versed in the myriad aspects of the Deaf Experience, be able to make of this (translated) piece of literature? The scholar may skew towards a more literal approach to the literary text—a “what you see is what you get” take on the story. The story is of a person who paints a self-portrait then sells it. The analysis may focus on how Graybill adheres to the rules of an ABC story, and how facial expressions provide the poem with more linguistic meaning (so a single sign does not equate a single word), allowing us to translate the poem into phrases and even complete

² To be clear, this is ONE translation of the poem, not THE translation. The question of translation is a massive question, which I address in some aspects later in my thesis.

sentences. The scholar may point out a rhyme occurring between “delusional” and “quit it”—signs with similar handshapes and occurring in adjacent sign spaces. All of the preceding ideas are valid but focus only on the surface aspects of the poem. Culture is left out of the equation, unseen by the mainstream scholar. However, a scholar who employs the Deaf Lens—that is, uses the linguistic, historical and social perspectives adopted by the Deaf Community, will be able to unpack more in a reading of the poem.

I began my excerpt with the W line of the poem, “you think it’s weird?” because “weird” is a significant word for Deaf people. Living as a minority in a predominantly Hearing³ world, Deaf people constantly have the tag *weird* hung upon them. Their facial expressions are weird. Their flying hands are weird. Their voices are weird. Their hearing aids and cochlear implants are weird. Their customs are weird. Being a Deaf person is weird... to Hearing people. Therefore the self-portrait of the Deaf artist may be thought of as weird.

Yet, the artist tells the viewer to stop thinking in those terms—labeling it a consequence of having a small mind. The artist is proclaiming that his self-portrait and, by extension, he is not weird, regardless of what others may think. If a person does think he is weird, that person is operating with a very limited scope of what it means to be Normal.

Furthermore, what is the self-portrait made of? Not oil or watercolors, but handshapes and movements. The self-portrait is made of ASL, and the appellation of

³ As shown in this thesis, people whose hearing fall within a certain range, and depend on aural information and spoken language have their own culture built up around these auditory strategies, and are thus denoted as Hearing. Conversely, deaf people (people whose hearing range fall below certain thresholds) and depend on visual languages have their own culture built up around these strategies and are thus denoted as Deaf.

weird has been and continues to be applied to the language of the American Deaf. In this poem, ASL and being a Deaf person are interconnected, and similarly looked down upon as *weird*. A Hearing scholar might make note of this, but to a Deaf person, the issue of language and identity are at the forefront of everyday life. Being Deaf is constantly informed by the fact that one is not Hearing due to the minority nature of the Deaf Community. The concept of the Other has been an important literary question for scholars of the new millennium, and Hearing scholars can engage with this concept. However, the cultural awakening of the Deaf Community that began in the 1960s with the linguistic legitimization of ASL has led to the recognition and re-centering of the Deaf Experience. Deaf scholars are addressing the question of the Other, but in new ways. You see, it's not me who's the Other. It's you, the Hearing scholar, who's the Other.

So, in "The Artist & His Work," Graybill raises all of the issues that my thesis addresses. I examine the relationship between ASL and the Deaf Identity through how Deaf authors deploy American Sign Language and cultural signifiers to address both Deaf and Hearing audiences. I examine how Graybill and other ASL authors engage in resistance to the imposition of Hearing cultural values and mores. I show how this can be compared to a form of colonization—the control of the linguistic and cultural capital of the American Deaf, and by extension, the control of their bodies and identities. With this approach, we can connect the ASL literary narrative to the larger colonial narrative. All of this is informed by my position as a subaltern researcher, with the recognition of the

intersectionality of the Deaf Experience, and a different view of Deaf people. This view of the Deaf situates them as another Normal, just the same as Hearing, not a weird Other.

One idea that wends its way through scholarship on minority perspectives is the fact that there is a specific lens through which one can reexamine artistic works and glean new insights. African-American Studies necessitates a deeper understanding of life as a minority marked by skin pigmentation. Queer theory comes out of the common experience of the LGBT spectrum. In Deaf studies, scholars can apply the Deaf Lens. This means scholars bring to bear the historical perspective, social rules, and linguistic tools that members of the Deaf World use to negotiate meaning in the world around them. Although as in with any other minority group, there is no singular template on which all members of the community adhere. Scholars may wish to employ an intersectional approach due to the differences that a Deaf person experiences due to race, gender, socioeconomic status, and many other factors. One person's perspective will be different from another's so each Deaf person's lens is tinted to her or his own unique shade. It is with this recognition and admission of my own particular tinted shade that I proceed with my demonstrations of how the Deaf Lens can be effectively deployed.

Lennard Davis shows how the Deaf Lens works in his text, *Enforcing Normalcy*. He uses the Deaf Lens to reexamine the notion of reading. It is a simple hypothesis, sketched out but not fully fleshed. Davis addresses the use of "speak" in lieu of write: "The act of writing is falsely given the qualities of sonic duration [...] our assumptions about writing, about language, about communication are based on the premises that language is in fact sonic, audible, vocalized" (100). He does this to demonstrate the idea

that the majority of the world belong to a group, Hearing people, and have a Hearing perspective. Most people will go through their entire lives without realizing that they are a member of this group, because they have no contact with an Other which would illuminate their 'hearingness' while Deaf people constantly interact with an Other.

Deaf people go about their business constantly noting what Hearing people think and do because it contrasts with their own way of life, of vision and hands. This allows the fallacy of using the word 'speak' as opposed to 'write' to become evident to one who can objectively view the instances of sound in situations where there is no sound.

However the vast majority of scholars dealing with literature is Hearing and knows little to nothing of American Sign Language (ASL), and the Deaf Perspective. A small group of scholars may have gained knowledge about this; but this information is usually obtained through the reading of others' works (in English or another auditory language). The Hearing critic approaches the Deaf person as an Other, the one that is different and lacking. What seems common sense actually originates in of the Hearing point of view, informed by the institutions created by Hearing people and research conducted by Hearing people.

Deaf people have struggled to reveal this fundamental truth—that being Hearing is a cultural construct and simply one of many different ways to live as a human. According to most Hearing people, any person that is not Hearing is automatically an inferior version, abnormal. The language and culture of the Deaf Community instantly disrupts that invisible hegemony. After all, the Deaf Community is the one that identified Hearing people for what they are, as opposed to just not deaf. The disturbance that Deaf

Community creates in Hearing society leads to a tension where the mainstream culture is confronted with evidence that their culture is not superior, but simply a chosen way of life; and other ways of living are equal, not inferior as previously thought. This tension is revealed in the literature of American Deaf people, expressed through their language, American Sign. Often the tension leads to resistance when the mainstream culture, Hearing culture, attempts to reassert the superiority it previously enjoyed.

My examination of ASL literary resistance is achieved through situating the Deaf as a colonized people. The disability that deaf people are thought to have is based on socially constructed ideas rather than in medical fact. Proceeding from the premise that Deaf people are disabled by the majority surrounding them—Hearing people—it becomes easier to recognize the actions taken by Hearing authorities⁴ and the subsequent reactions of Deaf people as a form of colonization that focuses on the minds and bodies of the Deaf object. Clearly, Deaf people have a purpose in their resistance. Recognizing that the Deaf have legitimate grievances, we can see how different works of ASL literature are indeed resistance literature, and we can even see how ASL itself is employed as a tool of resistance.

Once a paradigm shift is achieved, new insights can be gained in how minorities (specifically the Deaf, and globally, all other colonized peoples) express themselves through literature, particularly in terms of resistance. Both the Deaf and Hearing will

⁴ Systems and institutions that include doctors, audiologists, educators, and other specialists who work in the field of deafness (as disability), as opposed to laypeople who have no social, political or economic or stake in the field of deafness.

benefit from new insights yielded by the deployment of the Deaf Lens. The ultimate goal is that change for the better, will occur—otherwise both groups lose out.

I want to demonstrate Lennard Davis’s notion of examining deafness in literature: “The consideration of disability in relation to social process and cultural production can actually be a somewhat more fruitful endeavor by beginning to lay bare the cultural assumptions” found in literature, more than just cataloging the deaf characters in the aforementioned literature. Applying the Deaf Lens “goes to the very heart of issues about representation, communication, language, ideology, and so on” (124). Although Davis dealt with extant literature primarily written in English, French, and other spoken languages, his suggestion can be applied to ASL literature.

The issue of looking at the content of ASL literature—what it says, what it means—was raised at the ASL Literature-Digital Media Project forum in 2005 at Ohio State University. Brenda Jo Brueggemann covers the discussion in *Deaf Subjects* (2009). ASL performers and critics of ASL literature were brought together and the role of analysis and translation (invariably from ASL to English) was one of the topics at hand. ““To analyze it and write it is a translation” [Kristin Harmon] argued” (57). Brueggemann suggests that “[p]erhaps the rhetorical effect of living in a culture and using a language that is, and always has been, in direct contest with English and subject to the anxieties of translation for even the smallest of daily communicative interactions is just too significant to get us truly past translation and into analysis. Perhaps the time—the kairos—for that kind of critical move in relation to ASL literature has not yet (quite) arrived” (60). Paddy Ladd, in *Understanding Deaf Culture: In Search of Deafhood*,

suggests “the time is right to offer a Deaf historical reading, a *counter-narrative* which disrupts what many Deaf people would call the ‘Hearing’ hegemony” (80). Perhaps the time has come now to move beyond recognition of ASL literature to analysis of its meaning.

The question of translation (and meaning) is critical in the fact that translation means changing ASL into English, which, to the Deaf, is the language of the oppressor. Albert Memmi, in *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, spent equal time examining the positions and viewpoints of both figures in the colonial dyad. It was necessary to view colonialism from both perspectives, rather than just the colonized. In this way, Memmi was able to examine the effects on both parties, not just on the oppressed classes. The Hearing scholar can access the Hearing point of view in studying ASL literature, but needs the Deaf Lens to recognize what constitutes the Hearing Lens. Without seeing the colonized, one cannot recognize one’s self as the colonizer.

Prior Scholarship and Theoretical Frameworks

It has only been 55 years since the critical establishment first began to accept the legitimacy of ASL as a language in its own right, (an issue touched on later in this thesis). Cynthia L. Peters, in *Deaf American Literature*, covers this history of ASL literature before its recognition as such to more contemporary works developed with the understanding that what was made is indeed “ASL literature;” although her critical gaze encompasses all American Deaf literature, not just the signed kind. The other definitive volume that deals with ASL literature is *Signing the Body Poetic: Essays on American*

Sign Language Literature, which examines various aspects of ASL literature. Bauman examines the new models of poetry made possible through ASL. Jennifer Nelson and Heidi Rose each examine how the physical aspects of ASL relate to the physicality of the author. The relationship between movies, theater, and politics in ASL literature are all highlighted and studied.

The major critical journal outlets—*American Annals of the Deaf*, *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education*, and *Sign Language Studies*—have published many articles on ASL literature, but they range wildly in purpose. Some focus on the linguistics of ASL literature, (e.g. “Symmetry in Sign Language Poetry” by Rachael Sutton-Spence and Michiko Kaneko, *Sign Language Studies* Spring 2007), and others on the pedagogy of using ASL (and to a lesser extent, ASL literature) in the classroom (e.g. “Developing Preschool Deaf Children’s Language and Literacy Learning from an Educational Media Series” by Debbie B. Golos and Annie M. Moses, *American Annals of the Deaf* Fall 2013). Others deal with new historical insights on the Deaf, such as Sophia Rosenfeld’s “The Political uses of Sign Language: The Case of the French Revolution” (*Sign Language Studies* Fall 2005). Out of the gamut of published article is a smaller subset that addresses ASL literature as literature; using the same approach as scholars would study Shakespeare’s plays, Baudelaire’s poetry, and Kafka’s prose. These typically appear in *Sign Language Studies* and other journals whose bailiwick is not sign language but rather literature. One such article is Susan Burch’s “Deaf Poets Society: Subverting the Hearing Paradigm” published in *Literature and Medicine* (16.1 1997).

On the formation of a Deaf variety of the human race, I depend on prior scholarship in different fields such as race theory. Ian F. Haney Lopez points out how society creates categories falsely based on physical attributes: “human interaction rather than natural differentiation must be seen as the source and continued basis for racial categorization” (968-69). Race “makes sense only in relationship to other racial categories, having no meaning or independent existence” (971). In this way we can see that being Deaf only makes sense in relationship with being Hearing, and vice versa. Understanding how societies can create labels leads to the understanding of how the Deaf can reject and actively resist the label of *disabled*.

The term “disabled” comes loaded with negative connotations in the English language. It focuses on the difference of the person affixed with the label; it immediately highlights what the individual cannot (but should be able to) do. This is the definition that Hearing people have for the word “disabled” and, interestingly enough, this is also the definition that Deaf people hold. “In the past, such a focus has meant defining deafness in terms of defect and deficiency. It has meant talking about what Deaf people have in common with other disabled people, which has seemed a dangerous path to start down, given that most people think of disability in terms of inability, absence and loss” (Baynton 295). This is the resistance that springs forth from ASL literature, when Deaf authors attempt to reframe the issue towards a cultural model, likening themselves to ethnic groups such as Mexican Americans and others, minorities with their own language and culture in the midst of mainstream America. Instead of being labeled as disabled, Deaf people offering their own alternative label, “Deaf.”

Upon accepting the premise that the Deaf prefer to be identified as an ethnic group with its own language and culture, one can easily understand that as with many other minority ethnic groups, the Deaf have experienced (and continue to experience) colonialist pressures from the majority society with whom they live. Harlan Lane, in *The Mask of Benevolence*, draws parallels between the actual colonized inhabitants of Africa and the Deaf. He outlines the similar labels given to the Africans and the Deaf, the governmental caretaker positions established in the colony and in America, and the economic benefits (a trait of classical colonialism) reaped by creating the colony itself.⁵ Paddy Ladd, in *Understanding Deaf Culture*, takes this train of thought and makes a thorough case arguing that the Deaf are much like a colonized people, and need to decolonize themselves.

Although most people conceive colonialism as formed around economic power visited upon cultures less able to defend themselves, there is undeniably a case to be made for the concept of *linguistic colonialism* and it is this which provides a bridge across which discourses between signing and other colonized communities can begin [emphasis in original] (Ladd 17).

This is the form of colonization I refer to throughout my thesis—colonialism that plays out in languages and control of bodies. Ladd also indicates that welfare colonialism, the dependence of the so-called disabled classes on the financial resources of the public, meant Deaf people’s self-identification as separate but equal to Hearing “had to be

⁵ See p. 36, 91, and 206.

suppressed and replaced by discourses stressing Deaf helplessness in order to benefit from the largesse they hoped to accrue from the discourses of charity” (119). This “Deaf helplessness” created an environment that gave rise to industries focused on correcting the deficiencies of Deaf people. Here, Deaf people themselves become resources to be exploited; “practiced on with little fear of discovery” as Ladd invokes Foucaultian theory of the body. Now it becomes accepted and permissible to perform risky surgeries on infants as young as 6 months old whose only crime is to fail a state-mandated hearing test, and to withhold natural language input to Deaf children putting them at a disadvantage with other children, leading to the necessity of more (paid) specialists working with that child.

The biggest issue with the colonization of the Deaf “is what colonialism sets out to achieve—*the destruction and replacement of indigenous cultures by Western cultures*” [emphasis in original] (17). Once replaced, the colonized people are more compliant and willingly engage in the economic systems created to benefit off the colonized people’s resources—in the Deaf people’s case, their bodies. This colonization of Deaf people’s minds links to Freire’s comment that “[f]or cultural invasion to succeed, it is essential that those invaded become convinced of their intrinsic inferiority” (153). So many Deaf people have accepted this, yet others resist. This is why resistance is so important to the Deaf and why it appears in their literature; this false inferiority has to be exposed. The arts are an important tool of discourse and Ladd gives the example of how in the music business, “Black music and their communities’ concomitant issues [came] to prominence in the USA and elsewhere” (190). In America, the Deaf Community has made inroads

through television shows and educational programs, but the primary avenue for resistance seems best articulated in ASL literature. Recall one of the goals of colonialism is to replace an indigenous culture, but in this case the culture indigenous to Deaf people is not tied to land, but rather to their bodies. Living as deaf people has led to the growth of visual-spatial languages such as American Sign and cultural values that center around living life through the eye, cumulating into the creation of Deaf people. However this sets them at odds with the surrounding majority culture that lives through the ear. This leads to why ASL literature is most often the strongest site of resistance. While Hearing people have found a way to remove the voice and transplant it onto paper to perform for anonymous readers at a remove from the original author, the Deaf author is a critical component in ASL literature, directly projecting her or his ideas through ASL. These ideas are not filtered through text, scripts, voice-over narration, and directorial authority. ASL literature is raw and unmediated between the artist and the audience, and deeper issues can be explored at length when engaging with a piece of ASL literature.

Perspectives on the Deaf and of the Deaf

Ladd points that “virtually all discourses about Deaf people have been conceived, controlled, and written by people who were themselves not Deaf. [Products] constructed from these discourses have maintained an ethnocentric bias” (82-83). What is this bias? Currently there are two models of viewing deaf people, and these models are in binary opposition to the other. One is the ‘medical’ or ‘pathological’ model, which views the deaf individual as being disabled by virtue of the lack of something—hearing. The other

is the ‘cultural’ or ‘linguistic minority’ model. Harlan Lane illustrates how the first model is perpetuated through institutional practices, “[deafness as disability] is legitimized early on by the medical profession and later by the special education and welfare bureaucracy” (82). This model also appears to be common sense. “[H]earing people [...] reflect[ing] on deafness generally begin by imagining themselves without hearing—which is, of course, to have a disability but not to be Deaf” (89). Using this assumption one could further assume that deaf people need to be treated and/or trained to be more like hearing people. In fact, a term has been coined to reflect this manner of thinking, *audism*. First proposed by Tom Humphries in his 1975 doctoral dissertation, audism was defined as “the notion that one is superior based on one’s ability to hear and speak, or behave in the manner of one who hears and speaks” (Bauman *Introduction* 13). This definition has since been expanded to include systemic audism and the privilege that goes with it. Bauman, in “Towards a Poetics of Vision, Body and Space,” refers back to Lane’s work saying, “audism is homologous with colonialism, including ‘the physical subjugation of a disempowered people, the imposition of alien language and mores, and the regulation of education on behalf of the colonizer’s goals’ (32)” (359). This is all in pursuit of making deaf people become hearing, primarily because that is what a hearing person would want if she or he lost their hearing. Therefore that must be what deaf people want for themselves.

Being Deaf is simply not the absence of hearing, say followers of the second model, the Linguistic Minority model. It requires the understanding and acceptance of Deaf culture, of which ASL is an essential component. Valli and Lucas state that

language users constitute 'communities' and ASL is no exception (8). Padden and Humphries link ASL to their work on Deaf culture: "[t]hinking about the linguistic richness uncovered in our work has made us realize that language has developed through the generations as part of an equally rich cultural heritage" (*Deaf* 2). They "used a definition of culture that focused on beliefs and practices, particularly the central role of sign language in the everyday lives of the community" (*Inside* 1). The main thesis of Padden and Humphries's work is that being Deaf means occupying "a different center. Deaf people work around different assumptions about deafness and hearing from those of hearing people" (*Deaf* 54). The notion that Deaf people had a culture was bolstered by the fact that they had a language that was not just an imitation of English but a genuine language in its own right. This language contained rules, vocabulary, and idioms unique to it and by extension Deaf culture. In this way, Deaf people are best seen as a linguistic minority living among the majority (spoken English users), analogous to Spanish-speakers in the United States. Jankowski, in her book, *Deaf Empowerment*, states that recognizing ASL as an official language is essential to Deaf culture and establishes "its bilingual and multicultural status" (158-59).

Carol Padden and Tom Humphries establish the location from which Deaf people view the world through differing perspectives in their book *Deaf in America*. They illustrate how the Deaf cause a disruption in the Hearing paradigms with the innocuous term, *hard-of-hearing*. Most readers would take this word to mean *someone who does not hear well*. However, for most Deaf people, Padden and Humphries point out, the term has a dual meaning depending on where you are approaching it. If you approach it from

the Hearing center, it means someone who does not hear well. If someone is *very hard-of-hearing*, it means someone is nearly deaf, incapable of hearing. However if a Deaf person calls someone *very hard-of-hearing*, it means that person is closer to being hearing than being deaf. Why? Being Deaf is who the people are, and if one is not deaf, one exists on a continuum from Deaf (us) and Hearing (them). Hard-of-Hearing people fall onto different spaces in that continuum, just *a little hard-of-hearing* means one is closer to the Deaf. Switch over to another center, the Hearing center, and *a little hard-of-hearing* means someone closer to Hearing people. So a simple term that has one clear meaning is now fluid when viewed from another lens rather than the default Hearing Lens, but “towards a different center” (41-42). This is a simple idea but taps into the primal issue of power, as Foucault points out in his theories, “all authorities exercising individual control function according to a double mode; that of binary division and branding [...] and that of coercive assignment, of differential distribution” (553). When the Deaf have a different definition of *hard-of-hearing*, or more importantly, for the word *deaf* and *hearing*, they unsettle the hegemony of Hearing thought.

Now then proceeding from the premise that Deaf culture exists counter to Hearing paradigms, other issues arise. Clearly, Deaf people as a linguistic minority face different sets of circumstances than other linguistic minorities. “Fewer than 10 percent [of deaf children] are born to parents who are also deaf,” Padden and Humphries write in *Deaf in America*. “Consequently, in contrast to the situation in most cultures, the great majority of individuals within the community of Deaf people do not join it at birth” (5). American Sign Language then is the carrier of culture. Being born deaf does not mean being born

Deaf. Hearing parents usually do not know ASL and are therefore unable to teach their deaf child ASL, and the related values of what it means to be Deaf. Padden and Humphries illustrate “the central role the school plays in the community,” where Deaf peers transmit culture via ASL to other deaf children. Also, teachers who are Deaf serve as adult role models. These Deaf people become the family for deaf children. However, as Harlan Lane points out, most people in power (i.e. school administrators and other governmental figures) fail to recognize the cultural model and create obstacles for deaf children’s learning of ASL (87). Another unique circumstance is that Deaf people are more geographically spread out as opposed to having enclaves—*barrios* or Chinatowns, if you will. This is another reason why schools serve a primary function—they bring deaf children together in one place where they can meet and socialize, and most importantly, learn and use ASL. Without ASL, there is no Deaf Culture. Without Deaf Culture, there is no literature from the Deaf Community. Sign serves as both the product of a culture and the spread of that culture. ASL is the language used to create the literature of the Deaf Community. So without ASL there is no Deaf Community.

Chapter 2

The Nexus of Disability and Colony

Vic Finkelstein began a parable on disability when a disabled girl arrived late. This late arrival set off a chain of events that led to a revolution. The parable, retold in *The New Internationalist*, seeks to help general audiences understand what “disability” means. In the quest to help this girl, and other disabled people, in their village, the hypothetical villagers built a separate village designed for the use of wheelchair users. Everything in this village was designed for the target inhabitants—houses, stores and pathways. Able-bodied workers commuted from the village to the wheelchair village to operate the shops and other components of the infrastructure, insinuating themselves as necessary caregivers. Realizing that these workers were not needed because there were no longer any architectural or attitudinal barriers present, the wheelchair villagers ejected all of the able-bodied aides and took control of their lives and their own village for themselves, no longer accepting the notion of their own perceived helplessness. After a flooding disaster, able-bodied refugees from the originating village, now destroyed, came to the wheelchair village and found themselves unable to navigate the grooved wheel tracks, the low doorframes, the lack of furniture and more. The refugees had become disabled in this environment. The villagers decided the best course of action was to build a new village designed for the refugees. However, the girl, whose tardiness instigated the events, realized this was repeating history and called for inclusion of all villagers, able-bodied and wheelchair users alike.

Vic Finkelstein was a leading scholar in Disability Studies, and came with personal experience, growing up as a wheelchair user in South Africa. He wrote this parable to articulate the core concept of the Social Model of Disability⁶, which would otherwise be difficult to grasp by the majority. The difficulty lies in the need for a paradigm shift in thinking: disability itself is not necessarily disabling. In a society that privileges being able to walk, members in wheelchairs will find themselves disabled—literally unable to go up the steps to the front entrance of a store, unable to reach the light switches to turn on the kitchen lights, unable to drive themselves to work. Unable to, therefore disabled. But build ramps, lower the switches 6 inches, and install the proper gears in a car, and these wheelchair users are no longer unable to, therefore no longer disabled. In a village built for wheelchair users, the inhabitants are no longer disabled.

Now transpose the village full wheelchair users to a village full of people who talk with every part of their body except their vocal cords—a village full of ASL users. In such a village, would you be able to immediately identify who was deaf and who was not? In such a village, who would employers prefer to hire, a deaf person or hearing person? In such a village, would a school for the deaf be needed? In such a village, would speech therapists, audiologists, or cochlear implant surgeons be needed?

This rhetoric is articulated by members of the Deaf Community, and often deployed as evidence of the linguistic and cultural model of Deaf people. While deafness

⁶ I was told this is not typically capitalized, but I had done so, not realizing I was applying a rule of academic ASL, a result of my Deaf perspective.

is typically considered a disability—deaf people have the inability to hear⁷—this framework posits that the true disability is not the *lack of hearing*. Rather, *the society* around deaf people disables them. The Deaf Lens incorporates this recognition of deafness as inability rather than disability, and of Deaf people as a minority group, complete with its own culture, language, beliefs and values. When approaching subject matter about Deaf people (whether created by Deaf people or not), the scholar who applies the Deaf Lens reorients the Deaf Experience as a normal, not an Othered experience. The struggles and frustrations that Deaf people face in mainstream society is not a result of their own ears, but caused by external circumstances. Furthermore, when a work is created by an author who subscribes to the image of Deaf as helpless, disabled, and/or Other, the biases are easily seen through the Deaf Lens.

Most Hearing people take the pathological interpretation—deaf people can't hear—and have expanded on it using a different model called the deficit model. In this model, the idea that deaf people can't hear suggests the obvious binary logical conclusion—deaf people should be able to hear—basic premises built into the Hearing Lens. While mainstream society points to the deaf person's inability as validation of the deficit model, sociologists have proposed that disability is socially constructed, as Finkelstein's parable illustrates.

In fact, let us return to the other village I proposed, of ASL users. What is the one element in this village that completely changes the dynamics between the deaf and

⁷ This too can be a fallacious premise. The majority of deaf people can hear, but only in a limited range of volume and/or frequencies. Only a small percentage of deaf people are “stone deaf,” unable to hear anything at all.

hearing person? The use of ASL. This exemplifies how the deaf are disabled in society—not because they cannot hear but because that they cannot use the *lingua mater*, the mother tongue, used in the society. This is not to mean that the deaf cannot use English. They can speak it. They can read it. They can write it. They just can't hear it. It has been noted by many in Deaf studies that the root word for language is *lingua*—tongue. This speaks⁸ to the fact that language is very much considered oral, not written or visual.

“Western civilization has privileged the oral form of discourse as the essence of language [...] But deafness seems to place a barrier between the subject and oral language—that is, language as it is privileged” by society (Davis, 102). Helen Keller expressed thoughts that engage this notion by comparing deafness with blindness. “The problems of deafness are deeper and more complex, if not more important, than those of blindness. Deafness is a much worse misfortune. For it means the loss of the most vital stimulus — the sound of the voice that brings language, sets thoughts astir and keeps us in the intellectual company of man” (cited in Harrington). This quote appears to have mutated into an oft-repeated paraphrase, “Blindness cuts us off from things, but deafness cuts us off from people” (ibid). So the inability to receive oral (spoken) language is the disabling aspect of deafness, not the inability to hear.

In this village of ASL users, spoken language is not used; instead, the visual-spatial language of American Sign is used. There are no barriers for hearing or deaf villagers against using this language. Even being blind is not a barrier—the deaf and blind use tactile sign based upon ASL. (The blind can sense handshapes and motion

⁸ Recall Lennard Davis's critique on the idea of writing as speaking, thus demonstrating the intrinsic cultural bias favoring spoken language.

through the sense of touch: so blind people, both deaf and hearing alike, are capable of engaging in non-spoken language as well.) The difference between this village of ASL users and a village of hearing people is not the use of sound but the use of language. Understanding this premise allows us to examine instances where language disables people. Consider an immigrant from Pakistan who only speaks Urdu and a few other regional languages unique to her homeland. This immigrant needs a job, but does not speak or comprehend English, therefore the Pakistani can only find menial jobs. The immigrant will not be able to participate in many of the vital functions of daily life or communicate with the majority of American, except without the aid of an interpreter. This immigrant is virtually deaf⁹ and copes with his/her deafness the same way Deaf people do. The inability to receive spoken language is still in effect even if the immigrant has hearing; only the spoken language is English not Urdu.

Deaf experience supports this socially constructed model of disability. I. King Jordan, the first Deaf president of Gallaudet University, confirmed this framework with his famous proclamation, “Deaf people can do anything hearing people can do, except hear” (*Deaf Mosaic* March 1988). This goes to the root of the literal disability while rejecting the disabling perception of deaf people. Jordan also said, “When hearing people imagine being deaf, they think of all the things they can’t do” (*Through Deaf Eyes*). This illuminates the source of the disabling perception and the apparent naturalness of adopting the deficit model.

⁹ Another example of being able to hear yet being “deaf” is the idiomatic meaning of *deaf*: willfully ignoring auditory input: “Deaf to the pleas of the crowd” and so on. And so the ability to hear does not necessarily preclude being deaf.

In a society where sound is used as the medium for many different activities—talking on the telephone, making announcements, listening to music, and speaking the English language—of course deaf people will find themselves disabled. When telephones became a major business communication tool, deaf people found themselves with a new “disability” that hurt their job prospects. Susan Burch writes that this “reduced individuals to a medical condition and ignored their abilities to successfully complete tasks that did not require” hearing and so “Deaf people were grouped with others considered incapable—both physically and mentally—of producing and of contributing to society, such as the blind, paraplegics, and those labeled feebleminded” (103). This, among other examples, shows how disability can be socially constructed as opposed to a biological fact.

Even though today’s technologies have removed many older barriers, allowing deaf people to do virtually everything that hearing people can do, the disabling attitude remains. At the heart of the typical Hearing person’s mindset is the conclusion that the deaf should be able to do things the Hearing way (i.e. with hearing) in order to be viewed as an equal to Hearing people. Deaf people should be able to answer the phone as long as it’s the regular telephone, not some futuristic video-phone that involves a third party that interprets between the hearing caller and deaf caller. So many devices and behaviors in American society require the ability to hear. The drive-thru of a fast food restaurant has swapped the face-to-face interaction of clerk to consumer with a disembodied voice. Information is shared in public spaces via voice through PA systems. This

phonocentrism¹⁰ has led to what truly disables the Deaf—the valorization of listening and speaking ability over all other valid forms of communication. This refers back to what Harlan Lane had discussed—the institutional practices that perpetuate the disability/deficit model of Deaf people.

These same institutional practices exert disabling force onto other people. Recall the “deafened” Pakistani immigrant—her disability was the inability to speak and comprehend English. This tells us that language itself can disable, not just the mode of language (e.g. signing as opposed to speaking). Now recall the village from Finkelstein’s disability parable. Where is that village located? In some proximity to the first village. Where did the inhabitants of the village come from? The first village. The parable ended with refugees from the first village coming to the second village, but finding themselves disabled in the differently-designed location. Here Finkelstein’s parable ends with the proposal to share the village—redesign it so that both wheelchair users and ambulatory villagers could exist and thrive in this location. Thus the story serves its purpose, concluding in the fantastical realm of parables.

In reality, one can predict what would truly happen to that village. The refugees of the first village would attempt to transform the second village into a replacement of the first village. The architectural changes would be taken down, and the new buildings would reflect the customary architecture of the first village. The refugees would (re)institute the systems of power, the binary of disabled and non-disabled. The refugees

¹⁰ Oddly enough, recent research has shown that vision is the prime sense that most people (Deaf or Hearing) use to process knowledge—see Medina, John. *Brain Rules: 12 Principles for Surviving and Thriving at Work, Home and School*. NY: Pearson, 2008.

cannot stand being the disabled, having been perceived as “normal” all along in the home village. We can be confident of this for two reasons: the first is the historical movement of colonization; the second is the historical enforcement of the category of disability. Both reasons complement each other. Echoing Sartre, Albert Memmi says of this aspect of colonization, “Such is the history of the pyramid of petty tyrants: each one, being socially oppressed by one more powerful than he, always finds a less powerful one on whom to lean, and becomes a tyrant in his turn” (17). Lennard Davis highlights and examines this power struggle in the context of disability. After providing compelling evidence for the invention of “normalcy” in the Nineteenth century as “part of a notion of progress, of industrialization, and of ideological consolidation of the power of the bourgeoisie” (49), Davis states the resulting hegemony requires that “normalcy must constantly be enforced in public venues (like the novel), must always be creating and bolstering its image by processing, comparing, constructing, deconstructing images of normalcy and the abnormal” (44).

So now we can tie together disability and colony. We also now recognize the discrimination and oppression that occurs, labeling it *ableism*— the notion that one who is able to do something is superior to one who is incapable of the same thing. When presenting the charge of colonization, Deaf people are asked, “What is being taken from you? How are you oppressed by the colonial systems that perpetuate the colonial state?” Finkelstein’s parable provides insight to the answers for those questions. Deaf people’s bodies, language, and agency are taken from them. A word is given to the act of oppression: ableism. The term “disabled” is used pejoratively, leading to a stigma that

arises out of ableism. Specifically with the Deaf Community, this strain of ableism is recognized and identified as audism (which also intersects with phonocentrism and ethnocentrism—the valorization of one’s own language and culture at the expense of others). Deaf people now have the vocabulary necessary to articulate what they have known all along and experienced all their lives. They can state why they were passed over for promotion at work, not taught ASL in elementary school, or struggle to find their gate at the airport. They have the terms ready in their toolbox to use to specifically identify biased behavior, and now so do scholars who use the Deaf Lens.

All of the preceding can be seen in individual encounters with Hearing people but what of systemic instances of audism and phonocentrism? Many of the other Deaf Studies scholars have pointed to the notion of colonialism as the answer to why audism and phonocentrism is so pervasive as to completely disable the Deaf. In Finkelstein’s parable, the able-bodied person and the disabled person can be identified as the colonizer and the colonized, respectively. Both are tied into symbiotic bonds of power that continually labels and classifies human beings into distinct groups and social strata. In Deaf people, we find the truest sense of ableism and colonialism occurring: the Hearing English language user disables and colonizes the Deaf American Sign Language user.

It is with these perspectives in mind that I will examine the works of Deaf poets and writers to reveal the continual tension between being deaf and being viewed as disabled. Many of the works reveal rejections of this way of thought, both subtle and violent. When Hearing people approach literature by Deaf people, whether written or signed, odds are they will approach it with the most natural perspective, the deficit (i.e.

disabled) perspective. They try to glean what it is like to be deaf and disabled, missing the point in many of the works. The works are not portrayals of what it is like to be disabled. They are portrayals of what it is like to be disabled by others. Considering the American Deaf as a minority group leads to the easy but strikingly complex idea of considering them as colonized group. The colonization of the Deaf Community is a central thesis to Paddy Ladd's *Understanding Deaf Culture: In Search of Deafhood*.

Accepting Deaf People as a minority living within the majority (Hearing Americans), one can find the pull towards normalcy; while natural when approaching Deaf people from the deficit perspective, it becomes a colonizing action from the cultural perspective. Much like other instances of colonialism, the colonizers, through various means, legitimize the act of colonizing. Colonization starts at birth—most states mandate a hearing test for infants, and follow up appointments for those who show “abnormal” results. Doctors and audiologists consult with parents, informing them of corrective options: cochlear implant surgery, if the infant is a viable candidate, can be performed, subsidized by insurance companies; hearing aids, speech therapy, and schools dedicated to the goal of ensuring the deaf child grows up completely assimilated into Hearing society. All of this proceeds from audist premise that it is just better to be Hearing than to be Deaf. This bias has so integrated itself into mainstream society that it is accepted as fait accompli and unquestioned by those who are Hearing. Subjectively, it is true—being Hearing comes with many privileges that it is more advantageous to have the ability to hear. So much information flows through spoken language that Deaf people

automatically are at a disadvantage, therefore why would a parent deny their child the best chance at succeeding in today's society?

Here, the disabling effects of society legitimizes the deficit perspective and therefore makes the medical assistance of the deaf necessary (in the colonizers' eyes). The vicious cycle of disabling and correcting the disability is played out unseen by most of the majority. Deaf people, however, are not blind to this. The complexity of this approach reveals itself in the common consequence of colonialism: resistance. How do the American Deaf resist through their literature? A brief survey of prior scholarship on ASL literature shows that the content sometimes is overlooked because of the form. Here, I will be giving close readings of works performed in ASL and revealing what they indicate about the socially accepted notion of deaf as disabled. I also will show that sometimes the form (being the language) is actually connected to the content—the form is a means of resistance to the colonizing impulse of mainstream Hearing society.

Brief History of Deaf Education aka Colonizing the Deaf

A major system in the colonizing machinery is Education which serves both as a means to disable the Deaf, and the solution for this group of disabled people. The history of Deaf Education in America is much more encompassing than allows for a full discussion in this thesis, but a basic understanding is essential in terms of the colonizing effect on the Deaf Community and the major cultural touchstones in Deaf History that recur in ASL literature. Deaf Education began in Connecticut due to the efforts of Mason Cogswell, a surgeon and father of a deaf daughter. As there was no system of education

for the deaf in America, he rallied others in his community to raise funds and political capital to establish a school for deaf students. Recruited in the cause was Thomas H. Gallaudet, an itinerant minister, who went to Europe on a fact-finding mission, observing the Paris School for the Deaf.

While there, Gallaudet learned about the French system of educating the deaf which, most importantly, embraced the use of sign language. He persuaded a Deaf man, Laurent Clerc, to travel back with Gallaudet to help establish a school. Clerc agreed, transplanting French Sign Language into Hartford, Connecticut, when they opened the American School for the Deaf in 1817.

LSF, the signs that Clerc had brought from Paris, was quickly adopted and adapted by the deaf students in the school. Students brought in their home signs, and other signed languages learned in other regions of the United States. Eventually the adaptations gave birth to American Sign Language. Other schools in American followed suit, using signing as a pedagogical strategy; a strategy that came to be known as manualism. A few other schools subscribed to the philosophy that deaf students needed to be taught how to read and write through speech and listening skills. However, in most schools for the deaf, American Sign Language held reign in Deaf Education (Van Cleave and Crouch, Edwards), a success story in the face of phonocentrism.

However, audist and phonocentric biases would come into dominance in the mid-18th century. Lennard Davis conflates the rise of science and technology in this era to the rise of “disability.” Edwards demonstrates how Education was affected in this era. Horace Mann and Samuel Gridley Howe, educational reformers, “outsiders” as Edwards

puts it (143), attacked the established pedagogy of using ASL in classrooms. Mann appeared to be focused on creating a common culture for all Americans where “republican citizens could work together to rid the nation of poverty, crime, disease and ignorance” (147), goals that seemed within reach with the scientific advancements of the time. Therefore

By educating deaf people in separate schools with a separate language, other hearing educators were, by Mann’s lights, failing to include deaf people in the wider common culture. It was not enough that deaf people were taught to read and write English. They had to learn to speak it as well. They had to share in the same oral culture as hearing people (147).

Howe, a contemporary and educational partner of Mann’s, had similar views informed by his work with blind students. “Howe posited that the blind could never fully master the nuances of spoken English precisely because of their sightlessness [...] he announced, ‘THE BLIND, AS A CLASS, ARE INFERIOR TO OTHER PERSONS IN MENTAL POWER AND ABILITY’” [capitalization in the original] (151). Edwards points out, “Howe drew this conclusion about the capabilities of the disabled body from his work with the blind, but the connections to his later work with the deaf are readily apparent.”

Both educational reformers laid the foundation for the Oralist movement in America and their attitudes are clearly informed by biases which we can identify here as phonocentric, ethnocentric, and ableist. The case can be made to trace educational reform of Deaf people (from Signing to Oral) can be traced to the larger trend of nationalism

sweeping America. Edwards notes “it was not until the rise of anti-immigrant and nativist feeling at the end of the century that oralist arguments would gain currency” (145). The rest of the world was headed towards similar paths as well.

September 11 is a momentous day in Deaf History, not just for the American Deaf but all other Deaf people. In 1880, the International Congress on the Education of the Deaf met in Milan, Italy, for their second annual conference from September 6 to September 11. The main issue at hand—how best to teach deaf students? The philosophical battle between oralism and manualism came to a head when the delegates at the convention adopted resolutions that mandated speech, not sign language, was the best method to teach the deaf. Out of a group of over 160 delegates, only 6 dissenters voted against this oral movement, and out of those 6 was the sole Deaf man in attendance—at a conference meant for the education of the deaf. (Van Cleve and Crouch 109-11).

The 1880 conference resolutions sent shockwaves throughout Europe and America. Schools began dropping the use of ASL in favor of speech-only programs. Signing was banned in the classrooms. Students could only sign in secret. The burden of learning ASL shifted from Deaf adults to Deaf students. Peers had to teach each other what they had learned. To the general public, signing took on a more severe stigma. It became even more of a marker of difference—of inferiority. If the experts in Deaf Education had deemed sign language unworthy of the classroom, it must be so.

The decisions made in 1880 also had effects elsewhere. Deaf teachers of the deaf were commonplace in most schools, but when oralism became the order of the day, these

teachers were forced out of their jobs and replaced by Hearing teachers who were capable of carrying out the new educational agenda. Many of these teachers were hearing women, as Susan Burch shows in her research (17). Deaf children had even less role models for how to be Deaf. They instead had to look up to Hearing people—these female teachers represented “the social expectations of the broader hearing community.” Deaf people fought back by returning to their former schools to bring ASL back to the students. Burch points out the high percentage of Deaf graduates of Gallaudet College who took jobs teaching deaf children (21).

The years after 1880 had other impacts on the Deaf Community—specifically technology. The telephone, and later the wireless radio, changed how Hearing society functioned for the next century or so. Information was transmitted via sound, and business was conducted via sound as well. This prompted cultural changes in America that favored the ability to hear and speak. Employment and other interactions with the majority Hearing society now depended more on aural information, creating further barriers for the Deaf. Altogether, the changes in education and technology at the turn of the century made Deaf people unable to function in Hearing society and gave rise to the invisible bias of audism.

These changes are embedded in the Deaf memory. The effects continued to impact the lives of Deaf people well into the 21st century. However, two positive changes occurred in the latter part of the 20th century, contributing to a resurgence of Deaf Culture and the resistance of Hearing normalcy.

The first was the research begun by Dr. William Stokoe in the 1950s and 1960s, later picked up by other linguists. These efforts slowly restored credibility to American Sign Language that had been taken in 1880. No longer was ASL a broken, inferior version of English but a completely different thing—a language in its own right. New research also led later on to the disassociation of Deaf people from the label of Disabled—out of all the various groups that gathered under the aegis of “Disabled Community,” only the Deaf had their own language and every other cultural element that a language entailed: art, literature, folklore, etc. This sentiment existed long before Dr. Stokoe’s research, because the Deaf had published dictionaries of signs to promote cooperation between the Deaf and Hearing. This itself was an earlier form of resistance because “[e]xplaining how the linguistic system worked and presenting it as a legitimate language challenged oralist depictions of signs” (Burch 56). Though Stokoe’s work had more widespread recognition, others had presented ASL as a language worthy of study through dictionaries and journal articles.

The second was the Deaf President Now movement in 1988. Gallaudet University, the world’s first Liberal Arts college for the Deaf, was established after the American School for the Deaf began graduating more and more Deaf students. Originally called Columbia College when President Abraham Lincoln signed the charter in 1864, it was renamed Gallaudet in honor of the first Hearing American teacher of the deaf. In 1988, the university president was retiring, and the Board of Trustees needed to choose a successor. The Deaf student body and many of the faculty urged the board to choose a Deaf person. The school had been open for 124 years, and for all these years, every

president had been Hearing. Two Deaf men had made it to the final group, but the board chose Dr. Elisabeth Zinsler, a Hearing person as the next president. This led to a week of protests that had been pre-planned by the Deaf student body with the support of many faculty members.

The protestors ultimately succeeded with the assistance of many outside (Hearing) supporters. A major reason for their success was because the Deaf Community presented their case as a matter of fundamental civil rights. Jesse Jackson and other minority-rights leaders saw the clear parallels invoked by the Deaf protestors. Since then, every president has been Deaf. (Van Cleve and Crouch 171-74). Moreover, America began seeing the Deaf as its own group distinct from Hearing people. They were a minority and deserving of the same civil rights that African-Americans, women, Latino/a and others had gained since the 1960s.

Most Deaf people who are cognizant of their identity as a minority in mainstream Hearing America have these historical events in their cultural memory. 1880 is remembered as a holocaust in Deaf Education. Dr. Stokoe is revered as the man who legitimized ASL. DPN gave Hearing people evidence that Deaf people were as fully capable of determining their own destinies through the massive and well-organized civil rights protest carried out in just one week in 1988. These cultural touchstones recur as allegories, call-backs, or outright references in ASL literature as seen in some of the works I examine throughout this thesis.

Understanding what has happened to the Deaf in the past helps readers of ASL literature recognize the resistance (and the reasons thereof) encoded and embedded in

ASL. Applying the Deaf Lens recontextualizes the history of Deaf Education into the history of the colonization of the Deaf. Ladd succinctly connects Deaf Education with colonialism:

By conveying this belief [that there was no such a thing as a Deaf people] throughout the education of successive generations of Deaf children, by destroying Deaf art and literature (Mirzoeff, 1995), and by reinforcing it with the ideology of Oralism, that is, the banning of sign languages and Deaf teachers from Deaf education, they began to convince Deaf people themselves that they did not have any history of their own (89).

The repeat visits to the well of Education and Language are purposeful—the ASL poets are trying to get the message out to Deaf audiences that they have been colonized; they have been deprived of agency. Freire wrote, “The oppressed [are] destroyed precisely because their situation has reduced them to things” (68), less than human. The Deaf “cannot enter the struggles as objects in order *later* to become human beings” [emphasis in original] (Freire 68). For Hearing audiences, Deaf authors are showing the effects of colonization through Deaf eyes, through the Deaf Lens. bell hooks has a trenchant observation that applies here: when students and professors read Freire’s work, they often position themselves as outsiders, examining Freire’s position as a subject (a being with agency) and the oppressed groups as objects (beings without agency). This can be paralleled to how Hearing people who come in contact with ASL literature often come as outsiders, observing the language of the literature and not comprehending the content. They often do not see the roles of the colonizer and colonized unless it is

explicitly illustrated in a poem—the performer herself transforms into the colonized. Freire notes “[o]nly through comradeship with the oppressed can the [outsider] understand their characteristic ways of living and behaving, in which diverse moments reflect the structure of domination” (61). An observer may be hard-pressed to discount the deleterious consequences of colonization when the emotional toll is on display in the performative literature. Forcing the audiences to examine the colonized insider’s point of view is accomplished through the use of ASL, not the oppressor’s language, English.

Pedagogy of Resistance

Invoking Paulo Freire is appropriate here for his work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, explicates another reason for examining resistance in ASL literature. Freire examined education, particularly with how to break the cycle of oppression that can be institutionalized in education. In other words, Freire is talking about resistance—how students can resist, how teachers can resist, and how teachers can help students resist. What Freire wrote can apply to the struggles Deaf people face. Freire notes a result of oppression is dehumanization leading to the “yearning of the oppressed for freedom and justice, and by their struggle to recover their lost humanity” (44). Being affixed by the negative aspects of the term “disability” renders the Deaf as less human than being Hearing. As seen earlier in the history of Deaf Education, having a disability often leads to the fallacious assumption that a disabled person’s intellectual capacities are also disabled. Freire’s work is focused on education that “makes oppression and its causes

objects of reflection by the oppressed,” however “[a]s long as they live in the duality in which *to be* is *to be like*, and *to be like* is *to be like the oppressor*, this contribution is impossible” [emphasis in original] (48). Some of his ideas are very applicable in the area of ASL literature theory, and Freire’s work has appeared in others’ work relating to Deaf Culture.

Sherman Wilcox studied the language use of high-school Deaf students in a Deaf Education program for one year and connected his observations to Freire’s theories. As already mentioned, deaf students are automatically viewed as deficient in the mainstream worldview—they lack hearing and therefore they are automatically incapable of learning as well as their hearing peers. Education of the deaf is changed so it does not resemble the education of hearing people... unless the student itself is changed so she or he resembles a hearing person.

Wilcox compares Freire’s concepts to Deaf Education, “the teacher-student relationship developed in the deficit model of education as basically a relationship of oppression. He terms the oppressors Subjects, those who know and act. They have a paternalistic attitude towards their students and feel they must make them into images of themselves.” The students are Objects, “at best empty containers, at worst broken copies of normal people, and they need to be fixed and filled. Since in this view there is nothing worthwhile in the students’ heads, there is no need to consult them” (156-157). Freire’s theory is termed as the *banking system of education*: information is deposited into the empty vessels of students.

What the students need to be filled with is language. What Wilcox says reflects the point of view found in different schools regarding Deaf Education.

In the eyes of staff members at Northfield [High School], language is the area in which their students are most deficient. One frequently hears teachers discussing a student's language in these terms: 'Oh, he has very poor language;' or 'Yes; James has almost no language.' Of course what is meant here is that students rarely have proficiency in English, either spoken, written, or signed. [...] The 150-page document [outlining the Deaf Education language curriculum] consistently equates language skills with English skills. ASL is never mentioned (158-159).

In this banking system, the only thing that is deposited is English, which implies that the only thing worth depositing is the language of English. Therefore, by not bothering to deposit ASL, educators are telling students that ASL is not a valuable commodity. The colonizers have taken away the value of ASL from Deaf people.

However, ASL is not completely absent from the students' classrooms. Wilcox says "what exposure the students do get to their own language and culture comes 'subversively' in such classes as World Concepts and Language Arts" (160). So Language itself is a critical component for educating the Deaf—but which language—English or ASL? The typical response is English, while ASL continues to be neglected or directly suppressed as it has been since the 19th century.

Language is an essential tool for the pedagogy of the oppressed, a concept that bell hooks examines in her work inspired by Paulo Freire, *Teaching to Transgress*. She

writes that she was “forever dissatisfied with the education I received in predominantly white settings. And it was educators like Freire that affirmed the difficulties I had with the banking system of education, with an education that in no way addressed my social realities” (51). Part of her social reality was language usage and she devotes an entire chapter to the idea of language.

Language, most often, is the tool of the oppressor to teach the oppressed. hooks writes that English “is the language of conquest and domination.” However, it is not the language itself that performs acts of violence that Freire writes about. hooks writes, “what the oppressors do with [English], how they shape it to become a territory that limits and defines, how they make it a weapon that can shame, humiliate, colonize” (168). hooks’s mediations on language was inspired by a line in Adrienne Rich’s poem, “The Burning of Paper instead of Children.” The line is as thus: “This is the oppressor’s language yet I need it to talk to you.”

While this is true following her thesis of how a polyglot African diaspora couldn’t communicate with one another until they adopted the lingua franca of English, or for other forcibly immigrated peoples... it’s not true for the Deaf Community—English is not necessary. It is held up to be necessary, and it is built into the institutions of Hearing American society, so being unable to speak English puts you at a disadvantage. “The banking concept of education,” Freire wrote, “which serves the interests of oppression, [...] attempts to control thinking and action, leads women and men to [conform] to the world, and inhibits their creative power” (77). However, not being able to speak English does not prevent Deaf people from talking with one another. Can one not imagine a more

frightening prospect to the colonizers than a colonized people who do not need the oppressor's language to talk with one another? It is little wonder then that Deaf Education ignores ASL and in some cases outright suppresses it in the name of “~~colonization~~” “normalization.” So why then is resistance shown in ASL literature? Because the literature is resistance itself.

That all of this is couched in pedagogical theory should not be forgotten. This is one of the goals of this paper: to educate others about what can be found in ASL literature. Both the Deaf and the Hearing need to become aware of the problems that are articulated by Deaf signers in their literary works. Freire wrote that oppression can only be resisted by “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (51), such as reflection via literary representations of the world. No change can be effected without garnering understanding and alliances on either side of the colonial dyad. English may be part of the pedagogy of the oppressor, but it also can be used for the pedagogy of the oppressed, by taking what originally appears in ASL to reveal layers of meaning and subaltern history into English. For the Deaf scholar, it is a means to grow and share what the Deaf think, feel, and see with others, and ultimately decolonize themselves. For the Hearing scholar, it is a means to see one's unintentional complicity in a pattern of colonization, and assist in the reconstruction process.

A Primer on American Sign Language

Before proceeding, a basic understanding of American Sign Language is necessary. ASL has been in use for nearly two hundred years, since the founding of the first schools for the Deaf in 1817. However, critical scholarship on ASL has only recently started; William Stokoe's seminal linguistic studies in the 1960's led the way. Stokoe, a linguist, proceeded from the premise that ASL contained common features of all languages, such as a complex grammar and vocabulary, where other scholars assumed that ASL was simply a translation of English to gestures. Padden and Humphries provide the apt analogy that ASL was "not made up merely of gestures any more than English is made up merely of noises. Individual signs are themselves structured grammatical units, which are placed in slots within sentences according to grammatical rules" (*Deaf in America* 7). Stokoe's linguistic studies, and the 1965 sign language dictionary he coauthored with Dorothy Casterline and Carl Cronenberg, were quickly followed by others' research, leading to a sweeping change within the Deaf Community and scholarship (*Inside* 124). Before the research, "[Deaf people] had called [their] language 'the sign language,' [...] but with the advent of scientific studies on sign languages, [their] language acquired a new name, 'American Sign Language' or 'ASL'" (2).

Stokoe proposed that signs in ASL had three parts that were, on their own, "meaningless elements that combine to form all signs, in the same way that phonemes combine to form words in spoken languages" (Valli and Lucas 26). The three parts were location, handshape and movement. Location refers to where the sign is performed. Stokoe categorized 12 locations although more were recognized later. As for handshapes,

Stokoe categorized 19 handshapes, although to date over 150 have been found. Finally, Stokoe found 23 distinct movements in his research, which had to do with the direction the hands move to create signs.

New foundations for ASL linguistics come from the work of Liddell and Johnson. They added two more parts to signs in ASL, “orientation [...] and nonmanual signals” (37). Orientation refers to where the handshapes are when the sign begins and ends, and differs from location. For example, a handshape **B** may begin with the palm facing up, then end with the palm facing down, all taking place in one location, that of the space in front of the signer’s chest. In the correct context, this sign would mean the flipping of a playing card from face up to face down. Nonmanual signals are probably the most overlooked element of signs because to the uninformed (or perhaps uninitiated) viewer, the hand itself holds the most attention. Nonmanual signals refer to facial expressions, positions of the eyebrows, head, shoulders, and sometimes even the whole body. A raised eyebrow changes HE GO WILL (*He will go.*) from a statement to a question (*Will he go?*). These aspects of ASL are commonly known as the ‘parameters of ASL.’

Classifiers, signs that indicate certain semantic or grammatical categories, exist in ASL¹¹. There are specific handshapes that indicate vehicles, and the signer can use these classifiers to show orientation, motion, distance, interactions with the vehicle, and other information. One can accurately describe having a vehicular collision that includes direction, speed, point of impact, and aftermath without ever dropping the handshape

¹¹ In English, classifiers appear as certain words that indicate a group of animals: a flock of birds, or a head of buffalo. Classifiers make up a tiny small fraction of the English language but are more abundant in East Asian languages, and interestingly enough, in Native American languages...

classifier for CAR, which is the handshape for THREE turned onto its side. Research has shown how densely packed information can be encoded into signs. Other classifiers listed by Valli and Lucas are those for surface, instruments (holding/using objects), depth and width (indicating size), extent (showing amount), perimeter-shape (showing shapes of objects), and on-surface (indicating large groups of objects) (82).

Valli and Lucas address the two basic ways one can look at signs in ASL: iconic and arbitrary (5). Iconicity refers to signs that visually resemble the concept or object. Naturally, this is the most visible concept of ASL. However, not all signs mime or look like the referent object or concept. These signs are arbitrary; the sign is allocated an agreed-upon and accepted usage meaning. Valli and Lucas point out that all languages, spoken and signed, contain both iconic and arbitrary symbols. For example, the letter O in the English language can be considered an iconic sign because it resembles the mouth shape produced when saying /o/. Valli and Lucas also point out the relationship of iconicity to onomatopoeia (e.g. a word is a sound—clunk) and phonestheia (e.g. groups of words that look alike and their form seem to indicate their meaning. Valli and Lucas cite Bolinger’s observation of English words ending in ‘-ump’ such as ‘dump, lump, hump, rump’ all tend to relate to bluntness and heaviness) (5-6).

Valli and Lucas go on to defend (or perhaps dilute) the iconicity in ASL. They state that iconicity of a sign often focuses only on one part of the whole, and doesn’t necessarily become a “literal” representation of the object (7). They present this example regarding SIT. The sign for SIT could be construed as to be an iconic representation of a person’s legs sitting on a surface. However, they point out that the sign for SIT is also

used in reference to a cat sitting. Cats obviously have four legs, while the sign only indicates two legs. Yet, the meaning remains the same, the cat is sitting, regardless of the inaccuracy of the iconicity. This then makes the iconic sign for SIT akin to an arbitrary sign. Valli and Lucas also point out that in sign languages developing in different countries, the same object can end up with different yet iconic signs. They offer the example of the sign for STUDENT in ASL, Italian Sign Language and Thai Sign Language. All are iconic, yet all do not look like the other (6). This indicates arbitrariness at work in iconicity.

Iconicity is a significant issue for one main reason—its seemingly unsophisticated nature. It probably is the primary reason why uninformed people have assumed that ASL was only an imitative language that had the English language as its base. Valli and Lucas state, “linguists had a definite sense that admitting the existence of iconicity in sign languages was admitting that sign languages were not ‘real’ languages, certainly not as real as spoken languages whose forms were supposedly arbitrary. It was as though the arbitrary nature of ASL signs had to be emphasized to prove that ASL is a real language and not just a collection of ‘pictures in the air’” (5). However, as they and other linguists have pointed out, spoken languages contain iconicity, so iconicity does not detract from the legitimacy of ASL. The desire for linguists to have ASL recognized as a genuine language is not unlike the struggle Deaf people have in validating their self-perceptions, the validity of Deaf Culture.

Chapter 3

Seeing ASL Literature

A major component of any culture is the literature produced by the people within that culture. The Deaf are no different; Deaf literature expresses their cultural values and worldview. It just so happens that part of the corpus of Deaf literature is in a language that does not have a written form—ASL literature.

Valli and Lucas connect literature to culture:

Artistic forms such as storytelling (which includes A-to-Z stories, numerical stories, and classifier stories), percussion signing, drama, comedy, and poetry have long existed in the Deaf Community. The artistic forms of ASL have played an important role in the transmission of culture and history from generation to generation of Deaf people (190).

Scholars have traced a history of ASL literature shows a beginning dependence on the English language and its literature. Bauman, Rose and Nelson point out that many early ASL poetry performances were signed versions of English poems, “from M. Williamson Erd’s recital of ‘The Death of Minnehaha.’ [...] to Joe Velez’s version of ‘Jabberwocky’” (9)¹². After Stokoe’s research, Deaf artists started to “unmoor” themselves from the English language. Performers such as Sam Supalla, Ben Bahan and Ted Supalla “consciously created performances that emphasized ASL as content and

¹² The translation of “Jabberwocky” can be argued to mark an early experimentation at pure ASL poetry, given the fact that English itself is distorted so much that the written words proved little assistance to deciding what the signs should be. Eric Malzkuhn’s translation is considered one of the pioneering ASL experiments (*Deaf in America* 84-86).

form. In this respect, they departed from the earlier generation of sign language poets like Merv Garretson, Robert Panara, and Willard Madsen” (*Inside* 132). Poets began experimenting with the boundaries of ASL and what it could do. The next generation of poets came to the fore: Dorothy Miles, Ella Mae Lentz, Debbie Rennie, Patrick Graybill and Clayton Valli. In Bauman’s essay, “Getting Out of Line,” Clayton Valli showed the possibility of “multiple rhymes simultaneously, something impossible in spoken languages” in his poem “Snowflake” (96). One might wonder what rhyme means here in ASL?

It means the same as rhyming in spoken English does, only one needs to use a different verb. In English, if two words sound the same in a certain way, they rhyme. In ASL, if two signs look alike in a certain way, they rhyme. At its core, rhyming is about repetition. As mentioned earlier, ASL has distinct parts to the language, termed parameters. To make a rhyme, one just needs to create a visually pleasing repetition of a parameter. So Bauman, when he points out the possibility of “multiple rhymes,” refers to rhyming in more than one parameter of ASL. Clearly, one can see now that ASL poetry can do things English cannot. On the other hand, English is limited only to one channel—the sounds¹³ of words, and performers are limited to only one output—one mouth, tongue and voice.

According to Bauman “three basic cinematic properties [...] play a role in ASL poetics—camera, shot, and editing” (110). Sam Supalla says as much in an interview regarding his ASL story *For a Decent Living*. “I think one obvious thing [seen in my

¹³ Yes, this is overlooking the *look* of words written or typed onto the page, at this time I wish to maintain my focus on orality.

story] is cinematic effects—meaning close-ups, zoom-outs, panning” and different perspectives on a scene. “All of these are what the camera sees, not a narrator or others” (*Bird of a Different Feather & For a Decent Living*). Interestingly enough, Bauman asks, “who knows what future poetic and cinematic forms could emerge as Deaf poets try to re-create the special effects of a movie like *The Matrix*” when one of the most popular ASL videos on YouTube is *Deaf Ninja*, created by Austin Andrews¹⁴, which borrows heavily from the visual vocabulary of Anime and the CGI-driven fight scenes of *The Matrix* movies. Movies, which portray the body in motion was literature, hearken back to oral literature.

Jennifer L. Nelson, in *Textual Bodies, Bodily Texts*, demonstrates one of the current avenues of thought regarding ASL Poetry. Signed literature breaks free from sound in a way that writing cannot. Written English is an arbitrary system that connects letters to sounds. A “reliance on speech as paramount is a matter of arbitrary convenience and not a true given” and it is “limiting in that only one form of discourse is truly legitimate” (120). This limiting is identified as “phonocentrism.” Using Derrida’s theories, Nelson shows that Sign Language is in fact writing in the Derridean sense because “if there is any mediation or spacing present—that is, if there is a signifier and a signified,” then writing has taken place (120). Bauman also echoes this view in his essays on ASL poetics. Jim Cohn connects the pure image driven aesthetics of ASL poetry to what Beatnik and contemporary poets wanted. “What deaf people DO with language is what hearing poets try to MAKE their language do” (263).

¹⁴ Andrews is hearing but grew up with ASL due to his deaf family—another avenue of ASL literature scholarship...

The recognition of ASL literature represents how the perception of ASL has changed from the past, from a means to communicate when one cannot speak to a language in its own right with poetics unique to the language that cannot be reproduced in spoken languages or written languages. It became more important for storytellers and poets to focus on creating in ASL, not first writing in English then translating into ASL.

Moreover, ASL literature is regarded as an oral literature. With the label of ‘oral literature’ comes the importance of transmitting culture. Important themes, historical events, and communal memories cannot be written down in tomes for future deaf people to pick up and learn from. These ideas must be told face-to-face to neophyte audiences so that they can learn what it means to think and live as a Deaf person. The personal and oral transmission of cultural values and mores gains immediacy—even urgency—to the teller and listener. This urgency is reflected in one of the most famous examples of ASL literature, the film of George Veditz’s 1913 lecture, “Preservation of Sign Language.” Padden and Humphries placed Veditz’s lecture in a form of ‘instruction’ literature, a form of literature that “go[es] beyond simply recalling the past and teach[es] about how one’s life should be conducted and what must be valued” (*Deaf* 33). Veditz opens his lecture with a history of how ASL came from France and ends with the exhortation that all Deaf people “will love and guard [their] beautiful sign language as the noblest gift God has given to Deaf people” (36).

This immediacy has not lost its urgency from 1913 to today: the Deaf Community continues to be under assault by assumptions by the majority. Hearing people look at deaf people in an inferior binary relationship—they are the ones who can hear, thereby the

normal ones, while the deaf are the ones who cannot hear—the disabled ones. ASL literature combats this notion.

Form and Function becomes Resistance

ASL literature conveys its message of resistance in two ways simultaneously: the linguistic faculties of sign language and the substance of its content. A specific category of ASL literature—ABC stories—illustrates these concepts through its rigidity.

The genre of ABC stories within ASL literature represents a mix of form and function. The form is dependent on the twenty-six letters of the English alphabet. Each sign or gesture must incorporate the English letter's handshape, regardless of the proper sign's handshape. The 'trick' is to be able to incorporate the handshape as seamlessly as one can. The storyteller's goal is to seamlessly insert each letter, so that the audience is not immediately aware they are watching an ABC story until much later when they see the ending Z. As Bechter writes, "A *good* ABC story is one in which the audience doesn't realize that it's an ABC story" (Bechter 77). Variations on the form include repeating the A-Z pattern again, or three times. Another technique is to backtrack through the alphabet—from A to Z then back to A.

ABC stories contain subliminal tension on a variety of levels. First, there is the tension between the performer and the audience. As mentioned earlier, the goal is to tell a good, entertaining story (function) without the alphabet intruding on the viewer's consciousness (form). Yet, the work invested in creating an ABC story invariably creates a need in the poet-performer for recognition of the work (recognition of the form). In

“Ain’t Got No ABC,” (*A to Z DVD*) this tension is exemplified in a story where the performer is called upon to tell an ABC story, but he doesn’t know one, or have one ready. He can’t copy others’ work either. Grudgingly, he gets up in front of the audience, preparing to sign an ABC story. After much preparation and hemming and hawing, he signs one distinct sentence, and says he’s finished—“that’s one score for me.” The entire story itself is an ABC story, and by the time he “starts,” the storyteller is already down to the last few letters of the alphabet. “Ain’t Got No ABC” shows the challenge of creating and performing an ABC story and the expectations laid on the performer to be original and follow the strictures of the form.

At the end, the poet-performer says “understand?” (often a cue word for indicating the entirety of the previous work was an ABC and Number Story). He wants the audience to know that everything that had gone before was an ABC story. This is one of the tensions within an ABC story—the need to hide the form and the desire to be recognized for hiding the form well. Cynthia L. Peters, in *Deaf American Literature*, says performers show “relatively little concern for meaning: that is, *how* something is communicated has more importance than *what* is communicated” (53). The content of the ABC story has no rules or restrictions, but the composition/performance has one rule—handshapes from the manual alphabet must be used in every sign. Setting aside issues of resistance, subversion, et cetera, ABC stories are a form of art combined with language play. Padden and Humphries studied historical film of ASL literature and “could not find in any of the old films [they] watched” the “focused, analytical sense of the language as object,” as seen in more contemporary ASL performances (*Deaf in America* 77). It

appears that earlier ASL literature was just Deaf people playing with language for the sake of playing with language—both ASL and English. Peters suggests the recent drive to add meaning to ASL art is a “response to the concept of the ‘artistic’ in the Western literary sense” (53). Considering that the linguistic and cultural awakening of the American Deaf did not occur until after the 1960s, it is not surprising that resistance in ASL literature (or recognizing it) is a more recent phenomenon.

So the old form of ABC stories, as a genre, is not necessarily inherently politicized. Stories told in this genre can be politicized according to the desires of the author. The form’s dependence on English should not be taken as a detriment to the issues of resistance against the colonizer and their language. In the way that not all songs are protest songs, not all paintings propaganda, not all ABC stories (or ASL literature for that matter) are purposeful acts of resistance. Combining ASL and English does not imply a superior/inferior relationship (unless context and content make it so).

However, a lengthier examination could be made regarding the fact that the letters of the English alphabet are stripped of their meanings and repurposed by the Deaf in ASL, so that instead of “A for Apple,” we get “A for Knock, B for Door Opening, C for Look...”¹⁵ Near the end, one might end up getting “X for Apple” since the handshape for X is used to make the sign for APPLE. This lends the ABC story form a more powerful means of resistance, the use of English in an way unintended and incorrect by the standards of English users, but sublimely enjoyable by ASL users.

¹⁵ This is a frequently used opening line in ABC stories

Some poets take advantage of the duality of language in the ABC story form to perform a certain function, to relay a message of resistance. Often this echoes the poetic form of acrostic poetry, relaying another message through the poem. Clayton Valli, a formalist steeped in the field of English poetics, used the ABC story to serve a common function within ASL literature: indicting mainstream Hearing Culture's treatment of the Deaf Community. The poem Valli created is called "Something Not Right." At first blush, the story is of a Deaf boy experimented upon by doctors, discriminated by the school system, and abandoned by his family.

Doctors experiment aggressively, fixing ears.

Elementary school discriminates using concepts, abstract theories, ideas, and opinions. No, don't do that.

Is the family aggressive? No. The boy is isolated, looking at society!

(translated from ASL by me)

The hidden meaning is that each sign corresponds with an alphabet handshape but not in alphabetical order, which makes the poem much like a signed acrostic poem, where certain letters spell out something else. A second viewing shows that the encoded message is "D-E-A-F-E-D-U-C-A-T-I-O-N-F-A-I-L-S," Deaf Education fails. Valli does not ask if the audience understands, however there is one possible signal in the poem—the sequence of initialized signs that I have translated to "*concepts, abstract theories, ideas, and opinions.*" Alphabet handshapes are obvious in this segment, "C-A-T-I-O." A savvy audience might then go back and watch the poem, or replay it in their minds to determine what the acrostic message may be.

It is telling that the video does not spell out the acrostic message in subtitles or an superimposed graphic. The DVD host, Marlon Kunzte, only tells the audience, “*You should go ahead and watch it several times. Remember at the end of this presentation, there will be a segment that explains the poem more.*” He says that once the audience understands the deeper message, they will have a deeper appreciation. In the explanatory segment, only the first four letters are highlighted, “D-E-A-F,” leaving the audience to decipher the rest. No further explanation is made. Even in the bonus material provided on the DVD where Valli explains his techniques further, he only addresses the sign language technique of “initialization” (i.e. signs that use alphabet handshapes) but does not touch on the meaning of the poem itself.

It is understandable that neither the host nor the poet attempts to explain the poem due to the weighty issues regarding the colonization of Deaf Americans. A Deaf audience would understand most of the issues surrounding Valli’s indictment against Deaf Education. Valli himself does refer to this obliquely in his unpublished autobiography, portions of which were placed on the DVD version of *ASL Poetry*. Valli wrote that his teacher gave “a forced smile” upon reading Valli’s first English language poem. “My excitement evaporated and my confidence was crushed. I decided not to write poems again” (*ASL Poetry*, Valli’s Story, screen 4). Many Deaf people have experienced similar encounters with their teachers when educated in public school systems or schools devoted to developing listening and speaking skills (oral schools).

That Valli chose to indict of Deaf Education through this form is significant. Fully aware of the poetics of ABC stories, Valli took the English language, impressed into

manual form, and both adhered to and diverged from the original purpose of the English Alphabet. He capitalized on the fact that he could deliver two messages at once through the form and the function.

The English word “deaf” is portrayed in sign language through the pathological perspective, the typical perspective mainstream Hearing society views the Deaf Community. “Doctors experiment aggressively, fixing ears.” That’s what “deaf” means to them. There is a higher correspondence between alphabet handshape to initial letters for words in this poem than in other ABC stories, most likely a sly observation on the fluidity of ASL and the awkwardness of Signed English, which relies heavily on initialization.

In a few instances, Valli does use ASL to bring forth his meaning—if one notices in the first line of my translation there is an extra letter/word unaccounted for in the acrostic message. “fixing ears.” Seeing this in its original form, ASL, one will see that the performer used the sign *fix* at the location of his ears, an ASL grammatical element of providing location to a verb. Fixing what? Ears. So in the poem, there is an invisible word, “ears,” that cannot be represented in Signed English through its word-for-word translation or a corresponding initialization. So ASL is essential to the poem, in spite of the framework of Signed English.

Also, Valli depends on ASL to get the meaning across in the “C-A-T-I-O” segment. *Concepts, theories, ideas, opinions* all have standardized signs, used here in the poem. “Abstract” does not have a standardized sign, at least not in the way it was signed here, but the performer signs it in the same way as the surrounding words—using the

initial A and the same location and movement (originating at the temple and moving forward). The location and movement relate to words under the umbrella of “ideas.” So someone versed in ASL would be able to guessimate that Valli was attempting to say “abstract” or some variation thereof.

So Valli used the English alphabet and Signed English to critique deaf education in America, and when Signed English proved inadequate, Valli used ASL to complete his poem, satisfying both the form of ABC stories, and the function (delivering his hidden content). So we see how language choice can affect authorial intention here.

Lost in Transplantation

The new technology of text (i.e. videorecording) now allows us to view ASL poetry in the form it was originated and intended to be seen—physically. True, one element is lacking: that of the audience feedback. That point aside, ASL poetry has no correlation in print as spoken languages do. Reading the text of French poetry or English poetry evokes the sound patterns in a reader’s mind whereas translating ASL into English print provides a poor analogue to seeing the motion and shapes created by signing. The poetry is created through the repetition of the parameters of ASL: handshape, motion, location, non-manual signals, and palm orientation. Oftentimes, the signs contribute deeper meaning to the poetry, which sometimes can be glimpsed in an English translation; but never fully seen.

Few compilations of ASL poetry include voicing—which by its nature requires a translation from ASL into English. Michael Davidson, a literary scholar who is not fluent

in ASL, remarks, “[t]he decision by Ella Mae Lentz and others not to have their ASL works voice-interpreted is an understandable refusal of hearing culture, but it has limited the venues in which they may participate and the audiences they might reach” (218). This invokes the question seen elsewhere in this thesis—why resist in such a way that nobody but the oppressed can see? This is more than a simple refusal of hearing culture but a deliberate strategy of resistance.

Deaf authors are keenly aware of what can be shown in ASL to a Deaf audience, knowing that they will be able to grasp the multiplicity of meanings in one sign that an interpreter, equipped with only one voice, can’t adequately portray. One of the most subtle and strongest resistance poem, “Dandelions,” by Clayton Valli, depends on ASL to put forth its meaning. Translating it into English would transform it into something other than resistance poetry.

Clayton Valli was aware of this dilemma. As John Lee Clark states in his editorial preface to the text version of Valli’s “Dandelions,” “Valli thought for many years that his work could not be translated into English. How could something so beautiful and so powerful in its native airspace be harnessed on paper, in mere words?” (178). In 1987, Valli provided an English translation at the first National ASL Poetry conference but did so through unvoiced text (*Heart of Hydrogen Jukebox*). Clark admits that “something, as is always the case, is lost in translation, but it is good enough and does literature a great service.” While the translated poem does literature a great service, it no longer is resistance poetry.

“Dandelions,” as signed by Valli, is a powerful allegory on the Deaf experience in relation to the resilience of sign language. On its surface, the poem is a gorgeous pastoral poem about dandelions growing and fluttering in the breeze. The dandelion’s life cycle is illustrated from beginning to end, from its initial bright yellow petal to final white seed sphere. An unnamed man battles the stubborn dandelions, ripping them up and mowing the lawn. The poem ends with the futility of the man’s actions as he grabs a white, seed-laden dandelion. The seeds burst free and scatter across the field.

The allegory is not immediately recognizable until the viewer pays attention to Valli’s choice of signs. The key clue is in the repeated ‘rhyme’ of the **5** handshape. It represents the dandelion’s petals, the cluster of dandelions waving in the breeze, and most tellingly, the seeds that spread forth from the dandelion.

The seed is signed as a **5** handshape with a **1** handshape below it. It is an iconic representation of the seed floating in the air, and more to the point, echoes the sign for **SHOW**. The allegory relies on the cultural knowledge of the Deaf Experience. The dandelions are undesired and Others seek to eliminate them. It is telling that the only two instances of English (i.e. English words fingerspelled) that appear in the poem are the outbursts of the unnamed man, who first identifies the flowers, “Dandelions!” and then again “There!” This subtly identifies the affiliation of the man with the side of English and by extension, Hearing people. His attempts to control the dandelions parallel the attempts of Hearing society to control the Deaf.

Signers from all cross-sections of the Deaf Community know of the beleaguered history of ASL, both in the collective past and in their personal pasts. They can apply this

knowledge to their reading of “Dandelions,” noticing how Valli’s whole hands are the primary vehicle of the dandelion and its seeds. The man that seeks to eliminate the dandelions, but in actuality spurs the spread, can be representative of many organizations and movements in the history of the Deaf. The seeds (hands) spread from dandelions to other places, “showing” sign language. The more sign language was suppressed, the more stubbornly Deaf people held onto ASL and continued to pass it on in secret, paralleling the futility of the man’s final gesture in the poem, in which the seeds scatter...or rather, SPREAD.

The rich allegory layered beneath Valli’s poem that depicts nature growing and surviving, is more difficult to see in Luczak’s English translation “A Dandelion” (or in Valli’s 1987 text for that matter). Also a Deaf author himself, Luczak does a noteworthy job in his translation. The English poem captures the surface of the ASL poem in a marvelous way, showing the dandelion and its resistance to the man. Valli himself approved this translation, possibly because it is an excellent poem in its own right and stands on its own apart from ASL. However, once the poem is transformed into English text on page, the reader loses the literal sight of the Deaf man, Valli, signing and his purposeful sign choices and expressions. Valli’s poem needs ASL to maintain the full integrity of the allegory Valli embedded through language.

The hands, Valli’s vehicle of expression and the vehicle of ASL, are all but absent in the English translation. Luczak does invoke the hands with the key verb choice “waving” as the dandelion “waved, watching a bee/ coming by with a greeting and/ going away” (180). This verb has a close relationship with the hand, so it is not difficult for the

reader to imagine the hands in relation to the dandelion. Yet, the crucial sign for the seed as presented by Valli has no analogue in this English translation. The seeds are just “seedlings” that end up “scattering everywhere on its own.” Without the hook of the hands on which the allegory can be hung, the poem loses much of its original cleverness and meaning.

However, Clark’s goal is to try to mitigate this loss by providing Hearing people with a way to experience Valli’s poetry. Valli has been known to be a fan of Robert Frost, another formalist poet known for his portrayals of nature. The translation, *A Dandelion*, can easily be placed alongside any of Frost’s poems due to its poetic celebration of mundane nature. The poem could find a wider audience since the number of English readers far outweigh the number of readers skilled in reading ASL—in the same way that Michael Davidson remarks on the limited venue of ASL performances. And the body of literary enthusiasts, predominantly Hearing, would miss out on the fact that the Deaf Community had its own Robert Frost observing the same natural world and reproducing the phenomena and subsequent feelings through American Sign Language.

Luczak’s other English translation, of Valli’s “Pawns,” is a far more successful one. The difference in the two is that the poetic technique is linked to the meaning of “Dandelions” but the meaning of “Pawns” can be transplanted into English without loss of meaning. To be sure, the poetic techniques used to tell “Pawns” are lost because these techniques depend on the language, not the content. However, the content does not depend on the language. “Pawns” is a poem that uses chessboard and pieces as a metaphor for the debate over AIDS and the victims, and of the AIDS quilt. This

experience is not limited to the Deaf Community but to all communities in the world, and the goal is not to resist the audist establishment on behalf of the Deaf World. Luczak illustrates the content skillfully in English text in the same way Valli illustrated it in ASL. The reader of either version is still able to come away with the same content, and consequently, meaning.

Valli did not intend for most of his poems to be translated into English. They were created in ASL for ASL-using audiences, primarily Deaf people. Such an audience could bring the cultural knowledge necessary to unpack the allegory in “Dandelions” with the clues Valli seeded throughout the poem via his techniques. The allegory highlights the Deaf Community’s resistance. Transplanting “Dandelions” into English led to the removal of ASL suppression from the poem. This highlights the problematic nature of translating ASL poetry, with the ultimate goal of articulating integral components of ASL poetry—language and meaning, and the necessity of knowledgeable readers who can yield insight on both components.

Davidson remarked on the limiting effect of ASL-only performances, but was insightful enough to articulate the reasons.

ASL poets like Clayton Valli, Ella Mae Lentz, Debbie Rennie, and others have made ‘think-hearing’ a subject of aesthetic critique while using ASL as a powerful counterdiscourse to phonocentric models of literature. In their work, ‘performing the text’ means utilizing ASL signing to establish community (the Deaf audience understands a sign’s multiple meanings) and politicize the occasion (the hearing audience cannot rely on acoustic

prosodic models). Thus a key meaning in every Deaf performance is a set of shared cultural values implicit in the use of ASL. One might say that in addition to the four categories foregrounded in Deaf performance—space, body, time, language—a fifth must be added: that of Deaf culture itself (217).

Deaf Culture is essential to understanding ASL. As outlined earlier, the relationship between ASL and culture intertwined: two sides of the same coin. “In every Deaf performance, a set of shared cultural values is implicit in the use of ASL, with themes revolving around resistance to oppression by hearing people, as well as affirmation of deaf culture” (Holcomb 135). To make poetry available in English means giving up what has helped create and sustain the Deaf World, its language. Davidson is also correct; the decision to limit the poetry to ASL is a form of political discourse—resistance to colonization.

ASL as Political Discourse

It is necessary to fully unpack the implications of creating and showing literature in ASL without spoken or written English translation. What happens when translation is not allowed for ASL? What are the rhetorical effects of using ASL, as opposed to English, as a vehicle of resistance? How does separating ASL from English constitute a political statement? An examination on the effects of discourse that distances itself from English reveals a number of important elements related to resistance.

The first and the most obvious event is that Hearing people (and other non-signers) are disabled, in the same sense that Deaf people are disabled. They immediately find themselves turned into the Other when all along they had been comfortably and squarely set in the mainstream. The non-signing audience has to struggle with the lack of access that the Deaf Community has been experiencing in modern times. All students new to ASL experience this Othering, and are able to use their personal experience as a tool to start utilizing the Deaf Lens, seeing things from the Deaf perspective. The prior experience with being disabled through linguistic difference enables the student to understand how hearing abilities by themselves do not create a disability. The discomfort and frustration that the audience feels can be used to identify with the discomfort and frustration of the Deaf storyteller, especially when the topic relates to oppression and resistance. This would be lost if the ASL literary work was translated into English. In short, literature in ASL makes the audience Deaf—creating a seemingly oppressive environment in which a community can band together through a shared experience and shared discourse.

Second, the deliberate choice of creating ASL literature requires a conscious effort on the part of every author. As already mentioned, the Deaf Community is a bilingual community, living with and using English (not necessarily spoken but at the very least, written) alongside ASL. When one decides to use ASL as the sole language for her or his literary work, that person has chosen NOT to use English. This choice may have several intentions. One possibility is that the author is choosing not to perpetuate the myth that ASL is just “English on the hands.” Having voice or text connected to the

signing can give the false impression that there is nearly a one-to-one correspondence with signs and the grammars of both ASL and English are the same. This also leads to another issue in which the audience may ask about, “if you could voice or write it out in English in the first place, why didn’t you?” The use of ASL without English drives the focus onto the primacy of the language of the Deaf, something sorely lacking in the last one hundred years.

One of the major themes that Deaf authors have been highlighting in their work is the oppression of ASL. bell hooks provides another suitable quote, from Gloria Anzaldua who writes “if you really want to hurt me, talk badly about my language” (1027). She goes on to write, “as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate.” Using English as the vehicle for resistance could be construed as a tacit admission that English is better than ASL. Providing translations can seem as a way to make up for the deficiency of using ASL rather than English. One has to understand that translation is still a political act in that it mediates the oppressed’s language into the language of the oppressor. This political act is not found in a translation of Baudelaire’s French poetry for both languages coexist as equals. Students who begin studying English translations of Baudelaire do not come to his French poetry with already ingrained concepts like “French is exactly the same as English” or “English is a better language than French” whereas these same students often uncritically accept that speaking is better than signing. Part of this comes from the socially constructed label of the Deaf as disabled. If they are disabled, they make-do with signing because they cannot use English. Lay people are not the only ones

affected by this seemingly common-sense notion. Professionals in the field of audiology and medicine discourage parents from using sign with their children for the fear that signing would become a crutch¹⁶ and prevent their deaf child from depending on their hearing skills—they “talk badly” of ASL. The deficit model of viewing the Deaf leads to viewing ASL as an inferior mode of communication. However, this is resisted through making a clear distinction between ASL and English, and the conflating of English and ASL would blur that distinction.

That is another strong reason why Deaf people use ASL as a medium for their literary resistance. It serves as an answer to the refrain of how sign language is less capable, less sophisticated than spoken language, or even writing. The response is resistance, and the resistance is the response. It makes perfect sense to prove the fallibility of audist attitudes about language, intelligence, and sophistication by using the language and modality under fire. One of the oldest objections about ASL is that it is simply gestural representation of English; furthermore it is obviously iconic and incapable of expressing abstract concepts that spoken languages, developed over thousands of years, can express. A basic multi-pronged assault on this reasoning is effected by the deployment of ASL resistance poetry. Not only does the poem mean one thing, it also means another—something a simple visual iconic language couldn't do. ASL's dependence on English is shown to be a false image—ASL can exist without English (as shown in ABC poetry). Moreover, by not using English as a vehicle for

¹⁶ Interestingly, an appropriate translation for crutch would be the sign DEPEND, and it would show up twice: ...DEAF CHILD NEED DEPEND EAR SKILL. Here, the meaning of “crutch” reveals that hearing people use hearing as a crutch—they depend on their hearing. Consider the current population of functionally illiterate Hearing people in America. Applying the same “self-reliance” paradigm, these hearing people should have not used their hearing as a crutch...

resistance avoids the tacit admission that English is the better language in which important discourse should be carried out.

The third effect of using ASL only is the creation of a space where English, and by extension, Hearing assumptions and ideologies, can be critiqued. On a larger scale, we can examine English in a clearer manner, identifying what it truly does. Davis, Nelson and Rose all separately invoke Jacques Derrida's theories about grammatology and writing because ASL does not depend on phonology in the same way that writing does. In this respect, ASL allows for the possibility of an uncontaminated space in which one can examine the function of a phonocentric language.

For the Deaf, a space in which only ASL is chosen is political resistance. As Adrienne Rich points out, one needs "the oppressor's language to talk" to the audience. By instituting the need for the use of the colonizer's language, a colonial power ensures that the oppressed cannot find alternate means to communicate and organize resistance. When one uses English, one loses sight of alternate means of communication and what communication itself really means. Lennard Davis demonstrated this in his observations about how English text emulates speaking but objectively, it is not speaking at all—it is just marks on a page. ASL affords a place to recognize institutionalized phonocentrism. Take the English word, "call." The word has multiple meanings and consequently, multiple signs to address each meaning. Specifically, to call someone means to contact them by telephone. The sign for this is somewhat iconic in the fact that one would use the classifier for telephone (akin to how Hearing people act out telephone calls) and the sign would move from the direction of the caller. In the case of the Deaf, that sign would be

inappropriate and does not reflect the technology the Deaf actually use to make telephone calls. Therefore there are two other signs, one to indicate a call made via TTY, and another to signify a call conducted through videophone. So an English phrase in which “I’ll call you” does not foreground the lived-in reality of the Deaf person, while the ASL phrase “I’ll call you” explicitly represents this reality. A Hearing audience seeing this would realize how things they take for granted are accessed differently by the Deaf.

A more complex example can be found in Valli’s “Dandelions.” As already mentioned, the poem has two clear instances of English, “Dandelions!” and “There!” As already pointed out, the use of English marks the man as an English-language user, and most likely a Hearing person. The first word he utters is a pivotal one—a name (i.e. a label). This brings to mind Foucault’s theories of power and the role of branding. One of the important issues concerning the Deaf Community is that of labels—Deaf? Hearing-Impaired? Disabled? However, all of these terms come from English and the Hearing point of view. These people who can’t hear—they are deaf, a binary division. These flowers in the field that I find unappealing—they are branded dandelions. In the poem, the ASL identification of the dandelions translates to “yellow flower.” Just that—a flower. Branding it as a dandelion assigns the flower a connotation, that it is an undesirable weed-like plant. This identification requires the use of the English word “dandelion” and adds to the layered meaning of the poem.

On a meta level, the poetry of “Dandelions” depends on the continued rhyme of the 5 handshape. This is interrupted by the fingerspelling of the English word D-A-N-D-E-L-I-O-N-S, none of which rhyme with the 5 handshape. This has the effect of

discordant notes in a symphony of hands, which itself is a remark on the intrusion of English in ASL. If ASL is simply English on the hands, then the incorporation of an English word shouldn't be jarring, yet it is. This disruption is repeated with the word "There!" which continues to interfere with the ASL poetry scheme. Valli could have as easily represented this through pointing but just the same as he made the conscious choice to use ASL, he also made the conscious choice to use English here, T-H-E-R-E. Conversely, what kind of insights would we have if Valli had disseminated the poem in English? We may have been able to identify how the label "Dandelions" is significant, but it easily could have been subsumed within the other English words in an English text. Moreover, we would have not been able to discuss the effect of English on ASL without the void of English created by the use of ASL.

A fourth effect of using only ASL allows the literature to be placed in a different arena of discourse: education. With the growing trend of Hearing students taking ASL in high school and colleges, it's becoming more likely that most of the people with some familiarity with ASL will be Hearing, rather than Deaf. ASL and education is not just for the Deaf, it's also for the Hearing student trying to learn a new language. The inclusion of Paulo Freire and bell hooks in this work is not simply for their thoughts on the oppressed classes, but also for their contributions in the conversation on education, on the deployment of subversive pedagogy; one that could be implemented in teaching Hearing students ASL.

Mike Kemp, in "Why is Learning American Sign Language a Challenge?" cites the proposed placement of American Sign Language as a Category IV language, which

indicates that it is more difficult for an English speaker to learn than Category I languages such as Spanish and French (256). This would be akin to saying ASL is as difficult to learn as Chinese or Arabic, themselves Level IV languages. Part of this categorization is that it requires a different attitude towards language and modality that does not come naturally to most students. Kemp outlines several cultural elements that may hinder learning of ASL, “social dominance patterns and attitude” and “congruence” (257). Kemp explains that if an ASL student approaches the language with the feeling of superiority (or conversely, inferiority), language learning is minimal. Most often a Hearing person learning ASL will begin with the tacit agreement that being Hearing is better than being Deaf, and all the other logical ideas that proceed from that perspective. If the student maintains this, then the student will become unwilling to immerse into the language and learn more than only what’s necessary. The converse is true—if a Hearing person feels intimidated by the Deaf World and inadequate, learning is hindered. Similarly, given that Deaf Culture is so different and requires such a paradigm shift from what the Hearing student had grown up thinking, the Hearing student will be less inclined to enter the world that causes this paradigm shift. As pointed out earlier, in a Deaf and ASL only environment, the Hearing student becomes the Other, the minority, the disabled (that is, unable to communicate). Therefore staying out of the Deaf World would be preferred in spite of the detriment to language learning. These Hearing students arrive with the old conventional wisdom is that sign language, being gestural, is less sophisticated and evolved than spoken language, and therefore easier to learn. Many different linguists and other experts have contested this. Davis, in *Enforcing Normalcy*,

cites a number of critics to counter the seemingly commonsense notion, and ties this into the greater framework of normalcy versus deviation.

Furthermore, successful language learning requires exposure to a variety of language models, and oftentimes the ASL teacher will not be able to bring in a Deaf person every day or even once a week. What happens then is that the teacher leverages technology to show video of Deaf people in various forms of communication—interpersonal, presentational, and artistic. This allows for the culturally sensitive teacher to display ASL literature that demonstrates the grievances the Deaf Community has against the larger Hearing community. Too few members of the Deaf Community are in positions of power to activate changes in the colonial dyad of the Hearing and Deaf. Instead, every Hearing student in the ASL classroom has the potential to be an agent for change for the Deaf Community. A Deaf artist, who decides to create poetry or literature in ASL, knows that Hearing audiences will see the work; and most typically, these audiences are composed of students. These students may be capable of a paradigm shift to see the world from the Deaf point of view; recognizing injustice and becoming potential allies for change from colony to post-colony.

Finally, “writing” in ASL is a necessary step in the decolonization process. Anzaldúa observes of her language (and all languages), “Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself” (1027). An examination in the backgrounds of various ASL poets reveal similar origins: they all began writing in English until they realized ASL was capable of literary art. Both Valli and Lentz talk of their beginnings as poets on their

video anthologies *ASL Poetry* and *The Treasure* respectively. As mentioned earlier, Valli wrote of how he tried writing English-language poetry and showed it to his teacher to disappointing results. He wrote how he abandoned writing poetry until 1971, when his family's summer cottage burned down. (*ASL Poetry, Valli's Story*). His English text came up lacking in comparison to the ideas in his mind, so he began signing the poem, and found ASL better conveyed his intent. However, Valli wrote that "many Deaf people were unaware of the richness and complexity of ASL. Many were ashamed of their language, having been told it was broken English, unintelligent, and used by uneducated members of Deaf society" (not unlike what Anzaldua experienced) and he also believed this, and kept his ASL poetry a secret. Soon thereafter, ASL was in the midst of a resurgence, post-Stokoe. In 1980, Valli met with Ella Mae Lentz, who identified herself as an ASL poet. Valli "never thought anyone could be an ASL poet" but revealed to her that he too created some ASL poetry. This led to him participating in an ASL poetry evening in Boston in October, 1980, and cementing his new identity as an ASL poet. Lentz, in her author's commentary on *The Treasure* says much the same, that she began writing in English before recognizing the "richness and complexity" that Valli had eventually discovered. Dorothy Miles, another pioneering ASL poet, worked in English as well. Padden and Humphries trace the origins of her poetry through Miles's writing in her book *Gestures*. One of her poems "developed from a discussion about the similarity between the signs for SHY, SHAME, and WHORE. When I finished writing it, I found most of the signs I would use had the same handshape" (qtd in *Deaf*, Padden and

Humphries 81). Miles also spent time with sign language researchers and her experiences prompted her to continue developing poetry using ASL.

As Anzaldua points out, taking pride in one's language equates taking pride in one's self. On the political scale, the use of ASL situates the identity of a Deaf person at the forefront—there is no mistaking that the author is Deaf, whereby the use of English can confuse the issue. It elevates ASL from a “broken” language to a complete language capable of literary power. “The choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment,” Ngugi wa Thiong'o writes in *Decolonising the Mind* (1126). While he was focused on his African identity and heritage languages, what he wrote applies to Deaf people and ASL. “Thus one of the most humiliating experiences was to be caught speaking Gikuyu in the vicinity of the school” which led to corporal punishment or public shaming (1131). So “any achievement in spoken or written English was highly rewarded; [...] the ticket to higher realms” which relates to the broad field to the Deaf poet that uses English rather than ASL and “English was the official vehicle and magic formula to colonial elitedom” (1132).

Thiong'o examines language in depth, and his insights apply to the role of ASL in political discourse. He says “communication between human beings is also the basis and process of evolving culture” therefore ASL users contribute to the evolution of Deaf Culture (1133). “Language carries culture, and culture carries [...] the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. How people perceive themselves affects how they look at their culture, at their politics and at the

social production of wealth” (1134). Therefore in colonization, it is essential to control this worldview through language, “their tools of self-definition in relationship to others.” Colonization achieves this control in two ways, “the destruction or the deliberate undervaluing of a people’s cultures, their art, dances, religions, history, geography, education, orature and literature and the conscious elevation of the language of the coloniser.” The role of language and culture is clearer in the process, “culture is a product of the history of a people which it in turns reflects, the [colonized] child was now being exposed exclusively to a culture that was a product of a world external to himself. He was being made to stand outside himself to look at himself” (1135). So now how the child sees the world is seen from the cultural center of the colonizer, not of the colonized. Using the colonized’s language was linked to “low status, humiliation, corporal punishment, slow-footed intelligence and ability or downright stupidity, non-intelligibility and barbarism,” all terms used with the Deaf (1136). Clearly, the use of the colonizer’s language meant accepting a priori the cultural lens of that language/culture.

So when one does not use the colonizer’s language, one is able to use their native cultural lens and be able to “study the culture and environment of their society first, then set it in relation to the culture and environment of other societies” (1145). The language of literature is no different, “a powerful instrument in evolving the cultural ethos of a people” (1146), in favor of the colonizer, or in favor of the colonized. So the choice to use ASL is the rejection of the colonialist attempts to destroy (at the worst) or unsettle (at the mildest) the sense of a Deaf self and Deaf worldview. All of the various rhetorical effects of using ASL without English come together here in the attempt to “decolonise”

one's own mind and also the minds of the others. So the choice of ASL is inherently political and subsequently politicizes the literature itself.

Identifying Unheard Resistance

Another answer to why resistance is presented in ASL as opposed to English can be found by looking at other aspects of Deaf Culture, at the larger arena of Deaf Art. In 1989, a group of artists collaborated on a manifesto to articulate the characteristics of Deaf Art, given the term De'VIA (roughly translated to DEAF VIEW IMAGE ART) (Durr, 2006). Dr. Paul Johnston, one of the collaborators and now a professor of art at Gallaudet University, said of De'VIA, "all the slights and suppressed feelings bubble up within [the Deaf artist] until he takes all that out from within and puts it on the canvas for all to see" (*Audism Unveiled*). This relates to the resistance category of Deaf Art, which is quite easy to see for Hearing people, unskilled or untutored in sign language. Deaf people, very often referred to as *people of the eye*, naturally gravitate towards the visual. However, Patti Durr, in her analysis of De'VIA, posits a categorization of this genre into two broad areas. One area is in terms of *Affirmation*, where artists celebrate the Deaf Perspective and the way of life, including American Sign Language. The other area is *Resistance*, in which artists reveal forms and manners of oppression and also show resistance to this oppression.

I believe this categorization can easily be applied to literature created in American Sign Language. A survey of ASL poetry and other literary forms reveals how one can sort works into one thematic group or the other. The benefit of classifying ASL literature

is the same as for Durr when she categorizes De'VIA: recognition that the artwork has a purpose. The artwork has something to tell the audience. The artwork exists for reasons other than just to be viewed and admired. What does this painting or sculpture have to say about the human condition? About members of the Deaf Community? About outsiders looking into the Deaf World? So goes it for ASL literature.

The relationship between De'VIA and ASL literature is very close; what can be said for one can be said for the other; with one significant difference. An outsider with little or no knowledge of Deaf Culture can still glean some insight from viewing De'VIA. Take Betty Miller's provocative work, "Ameslan Prohibited," in which a pair of hands is shackled together and all of the fingers and thumbs have been violently chopped off, lying scattered about. A viewer with no knowledge of ASL, or the history of its repression in education and society, would still understand the power and fury in the image. Chuck Baird's "Crocodile Dundee," also would be plainly understood. The reflection of a crocodile's head in a stream actually turns out to be the sign for CROCODILE. While an untutored viewer would not remark on the iconicity of the classifier, they would still come away with the affirming message, "So that's what you can do with ASL!" Not to say that all works within the De'VIA genre can be so easily understood and interpreted, the point remains that most general audiences can appreciate De'VIA and come away with a sense of the messages encoded within.

This is the difference between ASL literature and De'VIA. One has to possess a working knowledge and basic cultural understanding of American Sign Language and the Deaf people that use it. ASL literature, especially the more poetical forms, can be viewed

and appreciated by outsiders but only to a certain extent. The works that fall within the Affirmation camp succeed in their goals—to create a positive, uplifting image of ASL. Someone who doesn't know a flick of ASL can still admit “it looks so beautiful.” However, a full unpacking of the message requires more fluency in ASL. In the case of Resistance literature, more than just ASL fluency is required to fully understand this type of literature—one must have a good awareness of the history of Deaf people in America and the various political, social and educational contexts that surround this contentious history.

This raises one of the fundamental ironies in the Deaf Experience—the literary resistance to oppression is usually incomprehensible by the oppressors. As already laid out in this thesis, the reasons are many. The Deaf Community wishes to preserve ASL and prioritize the language, avoiding any action that may imply ASL is less than the colonizer's language, English. Using ASL is akin to thumbing the Deaf people's collective nose to the now clearly Othered Hearing people. Using ASL propagates ASL and Deaf Culture, showing both as a valid and capable in their own right. Using ASL teaches other Deaf what they can do with their own native language. And it's not the Deaf people's fault that ASL is incomprehensible to Hearing people. There's nothing stopping them from learning ASL, except possibly their own colonial attitudes. Still, this incomprehensibility actually undercuts the goal of resistance—how would the oppressors know the colonized are resisting?

So by categorizing the basic themes that inform ASL literature, one is also made aware of the goal infused into the literature. Something is there for the audience to see

beyond the surface, but how can the audience see it? And how can the audience who *needs* to see it, be able to see it? Paulo Freire and Paddy Ladd both suggest how this can happen through the actions of scholars from the group in question. Freire wrote that the path towards taking action occurs when “Subjects of thematic investigation are not only the professional investigators but also the men and women of the people whose thematic universe is being sought” (181). Ladd proposes the need for subaltern-researchers: members from within the community who can identify and articulate elements of Deaf Culture. Such a “Deaf subaltern-researcher therefore brings to this area of study an experiential knowledge of the Deaf Community, and it is this experience which can then be entered officially in the academic records” (281). Once entered in the records, the message is now understood by those who do not have the necessary prior knowledge. Once in the records, the resistance message can be disseminated and a dialogue can be opened up with members of the oppressing majority.

Again, one may ask—why tell about the complaints and resentments and indictments of the oppression in such a way that only the oppressed can see and understand? Anyone can easily look at a large canvas and see the stark horror and anger embedded in the brushstrokes; but a much smaller audience can view the handstrokes of ASL poetry and see the rage and bitterness embedded within. Why are the Deaf preaching to the converted? A variety of reasons present themselves.

One reason may be that it’s the most natural way to express their resentment. Pierre Desloges, in his defense of his native sign language, wrote, “no other language is more appropriate for conveying great and strong emotions” (*Deaf Experience* 37). Davis

discusses this aspect, “the metonymic nature of sign anchors the deaf to the signified than to the signifier. As such, sign can better express emotions and sentiments” (69). What topic is bound to provoke greater emotion than that of the continual suppression and oppression of sign language and the Deaf Community? The anger, resentment, and bitterness that is evoked by audist attitudes and establishments quickly and more easily fly to the tips of the fingers than to the tip of a pen. What English words can convey the mix of emotions that erupt as resistance to colonial attitudes?

One may look at other places where resistance in the 20th century occurs—not in text but in performative literature. Protest songs, chants, poetry, even visual arts—all meant to be performed and seen and heard by an audience. A neatly typed manifesto can be easily submitted to the oppressing authority and just as easily laid aside unread by the authority. Performance demands to be received. It reaches a larger audience. “As opposed to reading a fine piece of literature in isolation, Deaf lit often requires a gathering place for the artistic work to be presented, shared, and enjoyed by others [... there,] people reaffirm and celebrate their culture and language” (Holcomb 135).

Another reason may be that the choir to whom the resistance is preaching is not entirely made of converts. In the same way it can be difficult for a Hearing person to consider the Deaf as a cultural group, it may be difficult for deaf or even Deaf people to realize this fact. So many of the Deaf Community have grown up within the greater Hearing culture, going through the acculturation (read: colonizing) apparatus in place by the mainstream society: schools, the workforce, the media, and even their own families. All of these institutions contribute to the valorization of the Hearing way of life, of

spoken speech above signed languages, of American individualism and perseverance against personal obstacles. What many Deaf people have come to realize is that being forced to change is a form of discrimination, audism. Genie Gertz, working on a framework provided by Joyce King, proposes the term for those unconverted deaf: “dysconscious audism” (219). Deaf people experiencing this may be fluent in both American Sign Language and Deaf Cultural norms, yet accept the idea that Hearing culture and norms are the preferred values and as such, view themselves as inferior. In other words, Deaf people have grown up in and around Hearing cultural apparatus and have seen this has been the way things were for so long, that even members of the Deaf Community can and do subscribe to the perspective that deaf people are broken and need to be fixed in order to fit into Hearing society. By living in isolation, whether by circumstance (living far from Deaf populations) or design (being placed in Hearing schools), many Deaf people emulate Hearing people, demonstrating what Freire notes about the oppressed. He wrote that due to “their alienation, the oppressed want at any cost to resemble the oppressors, to imitate them, to follow them” (62). Many deaf¹⁷ people have internalized the audism prevalent in society, submitting to the colonizer’s mindset that they are the ones disabled—less than Hearing.

Deaf people submit to the authorities all the time—to the teachers, to the speech pathologists, to the audiologists. Deaf people cannot deny the inherent truth, “it’s better to be hearing than to be deaf.” What most don’t realize is that this is true only because the game of life is played according to Hearing rules—the result of being colonized by the

¹⁷ Hence the lowercase d, denoting persons with deafness, as opposed to persons who live as Deaf

dominant society. They don't realize that it is not intrinsically better to be hearing than deaf. They don't realize that if the rules were different, geared towards the Deaf way of life, then most of the difficulties and frustrations of going through life would melt away. As Gertz says, many Deaf people think uncritically about the world and the way it functions. One way to trace this is to the primacy of the English language and Hearing culture. Forcing Deaf people to use the Hearing Lens causes them to overlook the disabling aspects of colonization, as Thiong'o points out.

Reading *The Mask of Benevolence* is a rude wake-up call but a difficult one to negotiate, being a long-form English text that takes patience and determination to work through for many deaf people or even already acculturated Deaf people. Similarly, Paddy Ladd's doctoral work, *Understanding Deaf Culture* is a lengthy chunk of English text, the results of years of research and writing done in graduate school. Yet it is not reaching its intended audience. In 2009, members of the Deaf Community in northern California created the Deafhood Foundation as a means to engender discussion and activism within the Deaf Communities across America. One of their activities is the translation of Ladd's book into ASL so it reaches the audience it most benefits.¹⁸ So ASL continues to be the preferred method of reaching Deaf people in the wider world who are unaware of their role as an oppressed people.

For the d/Deaf struggling with the effects of colonization, identifying resistance literature produced in ASL can help directly illuminate the otherwise hidden reality of society. Deaf people learn that it is okay to complain about the various indignities; indeed

¹⁸ www.deafhoodfoundation.org and www.deafhood.us, respectively

it is right and proper to complain about them. They learn how to view their experiences through a different lens, a Deaf Lens, rather than the default Hearing Lens. They learn that through a simple paradigm shift, what once seemed commonsense now becomes foolhardy and even downright obstructive. Deaf people don't live in a Deaf-Only bubble, free of Hearing friends, acquaintances and colleagues. Once they learn of the real social problems facing the Deaf Community, they can in turn educate others and recruit allies.

Chapter 4

Deaf Gain

In the Deaf Community, reframing the discourse is the order of the day. For centuries, the conversation has been based on the hearing (and Hearing) experience and perspective: the “normal.” Now the Deaf Community has been able to show that their perspective has value. One way they show this is by reframing the phrase “hearing loss.” Obviously, this term demands that one’s center is at the Hearing point of view. The Deaf have lost hearing (whether or not they were even born with it at all). Their entire lives are a struggle to replace and/or overcome this lost hearing. A new term making its way through the Deaf Community is “Deaf Gain” (often signed DEAF BENEFIT). This asks one to consider, “what do Deaf people (and by extension, Hearing people) get from being deaf?” A number of answers readily present themselves: a different language, a culture, a tradition, and a family. However, as my thesis shows, the Deaf have gained something else as well—the ability to NOT use the colonizer’s tongue.¹⁹

There once was a time when sign language was a perfectly satisfactory and admirable language to use. At the height of this era (the 19th century), annual gatherings known as the Paris Banquets brought together Deaf people and various Hearing guests (like Victor Hugo). Deaf men would give signed speeches on various important topics of the day—politics, education, and economics. These banquets were covered by Hearing newspapers and exhibited several core values that have disappeared through colonization.

¹⁹ Or in the case of ABC stories, a way to use the colonizer’s tongue against them

One such tenet was that sign languages “were offered as a gift to hearing people, that if they joined with Deaf people and learned them, the quality of their lives would be improved.” Hearing people who did not know sign were deficient (Ladd 111). That time disappeared in the wake of the decision of 1880, but is making a comeback with the linguistic validation of sign languages.

This linguistic validation has also reframed the narrative of the Deaf people in America as a minority group colonized by the majority; with their language, culture, and way of life denigrated, suppressed and supplanted with the English language and its concomitant Hearing American ideologies. What is the Deaf Gain in this new structure? Deaf people can now look to other similarly colonized groups such as the Native Americans, Africans, or Latino/a people. They can observe the strategies these groups used in their struggles find ways to adapt these strategies for themselves. It’s not just the Deaf that gain, it’s also the Hearing. The other groups can look to the Deaf to see how they have collectively resisted for the last one hundred years—how they were able to prevent their language of American Sign from disappearing when so many other languages have gone extinct throughout the world.

All of the benefits that the Deaf worldview can offer could not have been accomplished without ASL. This language, as Thiong’o points out, is inextricably linked to the culture, to the worldview, of the user of that language. For there to be Deaf Literature, and there is indeed Deaf Lit, there must be ASL literature. And the Deaf Gains that the Deaf share through ASL literature cannot be commingled with English without

some dilution. This dilution makes it so much easier for English and its default Hearing perspective to invade and invalidate the gains made.

Ultimately, the Deaf are not resisting Hearing people—they are asking that people, deaf and hearing, resist the idea that Deaf people are defective and in need of correction. This is not an idea only for Deaf people, or only for Hearing people; this is something both groups need.

In cultural synthesis—and only in cultural synthesis—it is possible to resolve the contradiction between the worldview of the leaders and that of the people, to the enrichment of both. Cultural synthesis does not deny the differences between the two views; indeed, it is based on these differences. It *does* deny the *invasion* of one *by* the other, but affirms the undeniable *support* each gives *to* the other. [Emphasis in original] (Freire 181).

By recognizing the value of Deaf people as humans in their own right, and possessing a perspective that contributes to humanity as a whole, all people can gain. As Patrick Graybill points out it's not weird to be Deaf.

Furthermore, in Graybill's ASL poem, "Liberation," he begins with the colonizer's language. "English. English." The sign transforms into the violent paternalism of the colony—the harsh patting of the subject's head. The subject breaks free of the colonizer's chains and signs. The two languages of ASL and English struggle until finally mutual respect and understanding occur, and both languages go together hand in hand, now equals. This is the ultimate goal of the Deaf Community—not to flee

to an isolated world free of Hearing people and English. The hopes and wishes of the Deaf is to be truly recognized as what they are—members of the human race—no better or no worse than anyone else, but equals.

APPENDIX A

Translation of Patrick Graybill's "The Artist & His Work"

Note: Translated from ASL, with line breaks in keeping with the ABC/Number framework

*The artist picks up a rag
And dusts off an item,
But wait, there's a picture
On the other side!
"Eee, it's me!"
The artist looks around,
Wondering what he should do.
"The hell with it," he thinks
As he adds his mustache
And beard to the painting.
He takes a drag of his cigar
And hangs up his work.
Purring with satisfaction,
He sits back,
Smoking his stogie.
"Perfect."
Stubbing out his smoke,
He hopes,
eagerly anticipating
The big day, Tuesday.
"Oh it's so cute," he thinks,
displaying his work for you to see.
"You think it's weird,
Hmm?" he asks you.
"Oh I see...
No, no, no.
Really, really
Look at the self-portrait.
You think it's lousy?
You're delusional—
Quit it,
You peabrain.
Seven dollars?
Eight dollars?
Nine dollars!
Nuts!
Understand?
Double understand?
Oh, 13 dollars?
It was a 14 year old.
15 dollars. Sold.
So there."*

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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Edward Henry Bart IV grew up in self-contained Deaf Education classrooms and mainstream Hearing classrooms. He attended Rochester Institute of Technology in New York, and graduated with an AAS degree in Imaging Technology in 2000. He earned a BA in English from the University of Texas at Arlington in 2004, and then a MA in English in 2015.

Edward is certified in the state of Texas to teach English to grades 8-12, Deaf Education to all grades, and American Sign Language to all grades. Since 2006, Edward has taught English and ASL to diverse student populations, ranging from middle school to college. He has served on the board of the Dallas-Fort Worth chapter of the American Sign Language Teachers Association, and as the department chair of Languages other than English at his high school campus.

Edward is interested in ASL literature, Native American literature, media representation of the Deaf, and language learning issues, among other topics. He is interested in developing an ASL literature course that serves as a dual-credit course for both English and ASL. He has presented on his topics of interest at various conferences at the local and national level, for groups such as the College English Association and the Community College Humanities Association.