Cultural Resistance: ASL Poetry

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AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE (ASL), THE legitimate and natural language used by culturally Deaf people in North America for more than 175 years, has its own distinct linguistic structure, which is comprised of precise handshapes and movements. It is as precise, versatile, and subtle as any spoken language. It differs from spoken language in that it is visual rather than auditory. It must be mastered in the same way as the grammar of any other language in the world.

Unfortunately, ASL has been facing every form of prejudice and oppression from the majority culture since the infamous Milan Congress in 1880. The Congress was successful in passing a resolution declaring the “incontestable superiority of speech over signs for restoring the deaf-mute to society” (Lane, 1992, 119). In spite of an avalanche of evidence that ASL is a natural language with its own grammatical rules and syntax, the majority culture nevertheless views ASL as inferior and incomplete. They strongly feel that ASL is a crutch and hinders the development of the language of English. Many well-meaning but misguided educators believe that the only way for Deaf students to fit into the majority culture is through speech and lip reading. Therefore, they discourage and/or forbid its use in the classroom of Deaf students (Lane, 1992).

Deaf people have their own literary tradition and highly value it. ASL literature is a body of stories, poetry, humor, and other genres, which are passed on by the use of ASL from one generation to another by culturally Deaf people (Byrne, 1996). Because of the historical oppression of ASL, there exists only a small body of literary work (Kuntze, 1993).
the same time, ASL literature has been facing unwanted assimilation caused by influences of the majority culture. While some ASL poems and stories remain intact, others are so influenced by the majority world that they do not entirely belong to Deaf people. However, there are several genres of ASL literature where Deaf people have created examples of cultural resistance.

This paper will focus on one genre of ASL literature: poetry. I will present theories of cultural resistance and four examples of poems to indicate their resistance to the majority influences.

**Literature Review**

Duncombe (2002) explains that cultural resistance is “...culture that is used, consciously or unconsciously, effectively or not, to resist and/or change the dominant political, economic and/or social structure” (5). He also adds,

...cultural resistance can provide a sort of 'free space' for developing ideas and practices. Freed from the limits and constraints of the dominant culture, you can experiment with new ways of seeing and being and develop tools and resources for resistance. And as culture is usually something shared, it becomes a focal point around which to build a community (5-6).

Giroux (1983, 2001) states about a theory of resistance: “...in the behavior of subordinate groups there are moments of cultural and creative expression that are informed by a different logic, whether it be existential, religious, or otherwise. It is in these modes of behavior as well as in creative acts of resistance that the fleeting images of freedom are to be found. Finally, inherent in a radical notion of resistance is an expressed hope, an element of transcendence...” (p. 108). He also explains that “elements of resistance...become the focal point for the construction of different sets of lived experiences, experiences in which students can find a voice and maintain and extend the positive dimensions of their own cultures and histories” (111). Mitchell and Feagin (1995) stress that “...members of oppressed subordinate groups are not powerless pawns that merely react to circumstances beyond their control, but rather are reflective, creative agents that construct a separate reality in which to survive” (69).

The Applied History Research Group at the University of Calgary (2000) explains that “the act of resistance [represents] an attempt to establish and define cultural boundaries and to limit incursion by foreign cultural traditions” (3).

Collins (1991) points out that “...cultures of resistance or oppositional cultures arise to resist the matrix of domination by drawing on cultural resources” (cited in Martinez, 1999, 34). She expands by stating that one of the cultural resources is storytelling, including poetry.

According to Lane, Hoffmeister, and Bahan (1996), the English-speaking majority has surrounded ASL users in school, at home, and in the workplace, for many years. As a result, their ASL has a degree of “contamination” by English: “Deaf people with Deaf parents and early learners of ASL tend to use a grammar different from that used by hearing people, Deaf people with hearing parents, and other late learners whose grammar is more closely related to English grammar” (p. 64).

There are several forms showing the influence of English on ASL. When giving a presentation to a hearing audience with a limited knowledge of ASL, a Deaf presenter may utter several English words while he uses ASL. He may also change the word order of his ASL sentences to be more English-like. Another form is that a Deaf speaker utters ASL signs and mouths their English glosses. Lastly, in a classroom with ASL-using Deaf children, several teachers may use one of the artificial sign systems and sign for each English word in an English sentence. Soon afterwards, the children may pick up and use some English-influenced signs. With no or limited knowledge in the areas of the hearing world’s oppression on Deaf people, the history of Deaf people in the United States and Canada, bilingual philosophy of ASL and printed English, and ASL linguistics, a Deaf individual’s ASL is more likely to be “contaminated” by English-influenced pieces compared to a Deaf individual with extensive knowledge in all of the areas.

**Data Source**

Using poetry in ASL as data, the four poems are as follows:

“Black Hole: Color ASL” by Debbie Rennie
“Cave” by Clayton Valli
“Deaf World” by Jed Galimore (rendition of Clayton Valli’s poem)
“Liberation” by Patrick Graybill

**Research Methodology**

Content analysis has been utilized in analyzing each poem for evidence of resistance. According to the Cambridge Institute for Research, Educa-
tion, and Management, content analysis is “a method of analysis used in qualitative research in which text (notes) are systematically examined by identifying and grouping themes and coding, classifying and developing categories” (http://www.crem.co.uk/definitions.html). One advantage of content analysis is that it “provides insight into complex models of human thought and language use” (http://writing.colostate.edu/references/research/ content/com2d2.cfm). It is important to be aware that ASL poetry loses a great deal of dynamic quality when transcribed and that it is naturally best to view it in its original form.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Poem</th>
<th>Quality of ASL</th>
<th>Individual Dexterity in Execution or Performance in ASL</th>
<th>Evidence of Cultural Resistance?</th>
<th>Individual Consciousness or Unconsciousness of Resistance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Black Hole: Color ASL&quot;</td>
<td>Superior</td>
<td>Superior</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Consciousness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Cave&quot;</td>
<td>Superior</td>
<td>Superior</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Consciousness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Def World&quot;</td>
<td>Superior</td>
<td>Superior</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Consciousness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Liberation&quot;</td>
<td>Superior</td>
<td>Superior</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Consciousness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to the table of the data analysis above, Martinez (1999) states, “The poet, the singer, is infusing her/his words with lived expression, with words that come from everyday lived experience. These words can tell of nature and work and joy. They can also tell of suffering and abuse. The truth of the song or the poetry is the truth of the writer’s life” (48). Also, stories are a language of resistance that serves to document the experience of oppression and voice a conscious opposition to that oppression. [They] are a conscious form of oppositional culture in prose and poetry” (50). There is prominent evidence that the Deaf poets attempt to use their poems to share their lived experience of being oppressed and to “voice a conscious opposition to that oppression.”

**FINDINGS**

Based upon the content analysis of the poems, the finding is that even though the content of each is different from one another, all of the poems have one powerful similarity: resistance. Since ASL and its literature is the single commonality within the Deaf community and is the lasting proof fully representing who Deaf people truly are, the preservation of ASL and its literature is crucial. In this light, cultural preservation of ASL literature in its most proper form is resistance. ASL used in all of the poems appears to be in its most proper form as there is no evidence of English-influenced pieces within them.

Each of the poems will be discussed to indicate their resistance to the majority culture. The first poem is “Black Hole: Color ASL” by Rennie.

Ladder, rungs, ladder upright
I walk, come to ladder, climb up
See pots of red paint, yellow, blue, green
Blue skies, dip into paint, splatter paint
Ladder shakes, people shake, I totter
Paint spills, the ladder shaken to dislodge, paint spills
Black hole looms, and I am endangered, paint spills
I flail and stagger, black paint spreads, I flail
Ladder is pulled down, I stagger and flail, struggle
Black looms, black looms, black looms
I fly and soar, colors all over, I fly
Colors all over, I fly, I soar

(Peters, 2000, 167)

In this poem, we see a basic narrative framework: a person makes the climb out of the hearing world and discovers ASL. Ecstatic, she (or he; the poem is translated using first person for convenience) is in her element; but the ladder is soon shaken, for people in the hearing world desire her return. Struggling to remain on the ladder, she feels at risk not just of falling but of being pulled into an immense, looming black hole. The deaf person perseveres, and even as the ladder is pulled down she takes off into the ASL world of “color,” experiencing the freedom to express herself” (Peters, 2000, p. 167). Deaf people who have had the experience of being controlled by the hearing world and successfully breaking the chain with it would connect to Rennie’s poem.

The next poem is “Cave” by Valli:

Two people are walking [each hand in the 1 handshape, moving forward side by side] and then split up. One goes off alone, while the other continues on his or her way and comes upon a cave. The poet enacts this person, possibly a young man, who steps into the cave, descends rough notehewed steps, and sets foot upon the uneven floor. Inside the cave are stalactites dripping from the ceiling and stalagmites rising from the floor; one has an especially large treelike and bulbous column. The young man makes his way through the tunnels and eventually reaches the back of the cave. The poet then enacts one or more workers who cut the steps into geometric rectangles, smooth out the rock formations from the ceiling,
and add lights to illuminate the room. Other formations from the floor are completely removed so that the surface can be made even and level. Fans are installed to halt the condensation dripping from the ceiling. Guardrails are added at the entrance and a big chandelier emitting yellow, orange, and green flashes of light is hung within. A blue carpet is laid, and red and white seats are placed in rows. When all is ready, people line up and enter for a lecture; and the lecturer goes on and on about the great work that has been done (the “improvements” inside the cave). The poem culminates when Valli signs CAVE BLACK on his forehead and then turns in profile and positions his hands (in the shape for cave) over his right ear. (Peters, 2000, 163–164)

Valli’s poem is strongly symbolic and has a hidden message. The journey into the cave is representative of a Deaf individual who selects to have a cochlear implant and of the lecturer who is a supporter of cochlear implants trying to impress hearing parents of Deaf children. In other words, Deaf identity is not valued. The majority culture views a Deaf individual who cannot hear as incomplete and lost. Thus, they feel the duty and necessity to restore the Deaf individual to the hearing world by fixing his broken ears with a cochlear implant. For the Deaf individual, if something is not broken, do not fix it. For the hearing person, it is quite the opposite.

“Deaf World” is the name of the third poem, which is expressed by Galimore:

I was born in the world of sounds
Put on hearing aids
Hearing sounds (looking confused)
Seeing people enjoying hearing music
Hearing music (looking confused)
Seeing people in a movie talking to each other
Hearing sounds (looking confused)
Hearing sounds and sounds (looking more confused)
Seeing Deaf rocks
Seeing Deaf water
Seeing Deaf trees
Seeing Deaf mountains
Seeing Deaf clouds
Deaf world
Deaf world and I are the same
Hearing world and I are not the same
Hearing world is not mine
Deaf world is mine!
(Translated by Andrew Byrne, 2004)

This poem focuses on a story about a Deaf person who feels no connection with the hearing world and discovers his place in the Deaf world.

Wearing a hearing aid and hearing unfamiliar sounds make no sense to the Deaf person. Seeing everything that is visual in the Deaf world makes a strong connection with him.

One of Graybill’s widely known poems is entitled “Liberation” which is very simple but artful and powerful.

English
English
Prodding, prodding
Hand pushing down head
Signing, signing
Later chained, chained
Anger, anger
Comes to a head
Free at last!
Signing, signing
Confrontation, you and me
Resolved, let us bow
Clasp hands
Peace at last
Wonderful
Mine and yours
Let us bow
Equal in all.
(Peters, 2000, 160)

“Liberation” is the representation of the poet’s feeling of liberation from the bondage of the majority culture and of his joy to be able to use ASL in his everyday life. This poem reflects the experience of many Deaf people who were forbidden to use ASL when they were in a school, staffed with mostly non-deaf educators and administrators, who believed in restoring them to the hearing society.

**Implications**

ASL and its literature are the single commonality within the Deaf community and are the lasting proof fully representing who Deaf people truly are. The preservation of ASL and its literature is crucial. In this light, cultural preservation of ASL literature in its most proper form is resistance. With no or limited knowledge in the areas of the hearing world’s oppression on Deaf people, the history of Deaf people in the United States and Canada, bilingual philosophy of ASL and printed English, and ASL linguistics, a Deaf individual’s ASL is more likely to be “contaminated” by English-influenced pieces. With extensive and updated knowledge in all areas, the individual would make an effort to resist the influences
from the majority culture and thus keep his ASL "uncontaminated" as much as possible.

These poems are a perfect but powerful example of resistance to the majority influences because there is no evidence of any kind of English-influenced pieces within them. According to the Applied History Research Group at the University of Calgary, "the act of resistance [attempts] to establish and define cultural boundaries and to limit incursion by foreign cultural traditions" (p. 3). I strongly believe that the four poems have been successful in establishing strong Deaf cultural boundaries and blocking (not limiting) influences by the English-speaking majority.

Studying ASL storytelling as a form of cultural resistance should be the priority in order to examine the body of ASL literature for the English-influenced pieces and find what is distinctively ASL and distinctly Deaf. In addition, other cultures re-inhabit sacred land or preserve sacred time. For the preservation of Deaf culture, the concept of creating and restoring sacred space in ASL literature should be central. Creating sacred space in the air through the expression of ASL literature passed from one Deaf person to another is a powerful concept. The recovery of ASL fluency preserved in the literature is imperative. This has enormous implications for the education of Deaf children and appreciation of hearing children in a multicultural education system.

REFERENCES


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born Deaf to Deaf parents in Perth, Ontario, Andrew Byrne graduated from the Ontario School for the Deaf in 1985, and Gallaudet University in 1989. Currently, he is working at York University as a second member of the Faculty of Education teaching to undergraduate and teacher preparation program students. In addition, he received a M.S. degree from McDaniel College (formerly Western Maryland College) and is an adjunct professor to graduate students of Deaf Education. He is also a Ph.D candidate in Education at York University specializing in ASL literature. Andrew is also an accomplished storyteller, poet, and actor.