Signers of Tales: The Case for Literary Status of an Unwritten Language

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One of the most frequently cited arguments against granting academic credit for courses in American Sign Language (ASL) continues to be the presumed "lack of literature." Chapin's introduction to this volume gives us two recent cases. My own experience in dealing with curriculum committees in several major universities has given me a chance to confront skeptical colleagues face-to-face. I wish I could report that my successes were universal. In fact, they have been limited. I have managed to aid several graduate students in getting ASL accepted for their foreign language reading or competency requirement. I have helped create additional exceptional cases for undergraduates, like the one cited in Chapin (above). In the interest of affecting attitudes of even more skeptics and aiding colleagues engaged in similar efforts, the following remarks collect the arguments refuting ASL's "lack of literature" and will propose several curricular remedies to improve those sign language courses which suffer from inadequate focus on literary traditions of the deaf.

A bit more background may give insight. In the early years of this decade I was invited to participate in a unique curricular partnership. The Theater Department and the Education Department of a local undergraduate program wanted to highlight their strengths together. They asked me to help them make their well-known children's theater productions accessible to deaf audiences by involving the students enrolled in deaf education, theirs being the only B.A. program in deaf education resulting in state certified teachers in the city. For several years (1982–1985), I taught a course for Marymount Manhattan College (New York,
NY) called "Sign Language and the Performing Arts." I asked that this course be required of students auditioning for roles as student interpreters in the spring children's theater productions. It was my belief then, as now, that students with a limited exposure to sign language should gain a bit of perspective on their place in the literary lives of their audience. The deaf students who would see our productions might never have attended a live theatrical performance before, nor have been exposed to interpreters, but these facts did not mean that their lives up until now had been lacking in structured or traditional forms of performance, nor that they would not be exposed to even more language art in their own language. The deaf adults whom we would invite to attend the performances would come with rich experiences of deaf theater, interpreted performances, and a variety of verbal art forms. The following remarks, then, have grown out of this course, as well as prior reflections on what constitutes a traditional and conventional verbal art form in a language without sound or writing.

**Defining a literary æsthetic**

Does a literary tradition depend on a written tradition? This question may be crucial for some who argue against ASL's academic status because of literature. I believe the case can be made by analogy with the greatest traditions in Western and non-Western literature that written forms of language are not required for a community to possess a well-formed æsthetic in poetry, narrative, humor, and rhetoric.

**Greek and Balkan Epics.** Consider, first, the classical Greek Odyssey: it is without question a literary work worthy of study by students of Greek language, and in translation by students of literature. Can we assume that its author wrote the tale down himself, or even that there was a single person called Homer? Albert Lord argues convincingly that Homer "represents all
singers of tales from time immemorial and unrecorded to the present. Each [of whom...] is as much a part of the tradition of oral epic singing as is Homer” (1964:vii). Lord cites the evidence that the epics we know today as classics of ancient Greek literature must have been passed on orally for a long time before being written down, that writing only came to the languages of that part of the world well after the events depicted in the tale would have taken place. Nonetheless, this epic forms the heart of Western literary traditions.

Its poetic structure is apparently shared with other, more recent, Balkan tales. Lord goes on to argue that oral epic song is narrative poetry composed by people who didn’t know how to write. It consists of metrical lines and half lines using formulas which are not frozen forms, but are rather productive words or phrases that fit given metrical conditions (4). In fact, Lord has studied the oral epics generated by skilled “singers of tales” in Yugoslavia from roughly 1945-55. The modern examples of Balkan epic poetic exhibit the strict adherence to meter, rhyme, imagery, and narrative cohesion that we find in studying the ancient written example more familiar to us. The differences are that the modern forms are spoken rather than written, composed in performance at rapid rates of production. Lord argues that it is this speed of composition that forces the use of formulaic and traditional elements.

The distinction here must be drawn between oral literature as pure oral memorization and oral composition. While less skilled singers may learn a few songs or verses through memorization, the singer with a more representative repertoire of 30 or more epic songs will not rely on memorization. Lord’s detailed analysis shows just how elements are rearranged, how metrical structure interacts with grammar and meaning. His study concentrates on not only how the performers compose, but also how they learn and transmit their epics (vii).
Having dismissed rote memorization, let us not swing to the opposite conclusion: the epics are not broad improvisation, but rather are improvised within the restrictions of a particular style. The metrical types and rhyming patterns fit a closely held traditional form. While individual singers have distinct and identifiable styles, the genre of oral epic poetry holds the reins on totally unbounded improvisation.

Thus, we see that the very foundation of Western literary traditions has its roots in an oral narrative tradition, one which is still alive today. The restriction of "literature" to that which is written down denies the shared aesthetic common to both modes of presentation, oral and written. The notions of meter, rhythm, rhyme, image, and other poetic devices are constant irrespective of mode. We should not artificially limit ourselves to those examples of language art which can be studied via the written page.

Yiddish. Isaac Bashevis Singer received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1978 honoring his literary output in Yiddish. In his remarks, he said, "The high honor bestowed upon me by the Swedish Academy is also a recognition of the Yiddish language—a language of exile, without a land, without frontiers, not supported by any government, a language which possesses no words for weapons, ammunition, military exercises, war tactics; a language that was despised by both gentiles and emancipated Jews." (6–7) His writing and the acknowledgement of his prolific and accomplished literary output through this prize focused world attention on a long but largely unknown literary tradition of Yiddish newspapers, plays, romantic novels, and works translated from other great languages of the world.

Although writing in Yiddish has been known for nearly 1000 years, efforts to elevate that writing to full public status were hampered for many years, even centuries, because of several factors. Yiddish is written using Hebrew characters. Structurally the language was originally the German spoken in Jewish com-
communities of the Rhineland; in subsequent generations it has grown as Jewish communities came in contact with various other languages, Polish, Russian, Hungarian, French, Latvian, English among others. The first Yiddish writing was literature in translation, sometimes adapted to remove non-Jewish religious references. So the Nibelungenlied and the stories of King Arthur reached Jewish audiences from the 15th century onward.

Yiddish lacked authority, however, since the community recognized Hebrew alone as the language of law, of official records (both religious and otherwise), and naturally of religious practice. Yiddish might be fine for non-serious purposes, such as writing romances, quasi-religious or ethical teachings aimed at a female audience, namely that audience which was not expected or required to read Hebrew. In the past century, scholarly attention has been drawn to the linguistic description of Yiddish structure and dialect variants, the preservation and criticism of Yiddish literature and the teaching of Yiddish language to adults. YIVO, the Yiddish institute, is dedicated to these several goals, but interestingly it was only founded in 1925. During the discussions of the founding of a Jewish state, Yiddish partisans attempted to make it the official language of world Jewry. In fact, efforts to modernize biblical Hebrew won out, and the Holocaust of World War II destroyed more than half the world’s Yiddish speakers (Gittleman, 1978:11-21).

The comparison with ASL and other deaf sign languages is particularly apt. For deaf signers, only within the past 25 years has their language won the respect of scholarly scrutiny. Cohn’s indictment of earlier efforts of deaf poets cites the borrowed aesthetic of auditory rhyme and spoken language meter (264). The movement away from literature in translation alone to narrative, poetry, theater composed from within the deaf sign language itself is either relatively recent, or the artifacts are more available and appreciated by the wider signing audience than ever before. Furthermore, deaf authors, poets, and playwrights
are composing from impulses within the Deaf cultural tradition. The examples cited below show the importance of the deaf social club, the constant conflict for the right to "speak" for oneself using the language of one's own, the role of the residential school in developing social values and imparting more than schoolbook education.

Non-Western Traditions. Without belaboring the point, the case could equally well be made for literature among the peoples of Polynesia whose oral recitations of genealogical history are well-known, and among the Aborigines of Australia, whose poetic traditions refer extensively to dreamtime, a prehistory, in which the moral and ethical culture was set forth. Neither of these traditions relies on written language; both involve traditional language forms used within a highly stylized cultural context.

Gary Witherspoon (1977) shows us that the traditional healing ceremonies of the Navajo are built on a foundation of culturally understood relationships between thought, speech, language, and knowledge. That is, the Navajo philosophical framework motivates the traditions of ritual, including the parts of ritual involving language.

Writing down language

Alternatively, some critics may claim that since it is not generally possible to write signs down adequately, the lack of a writing system should indict the literary study of this language.\(^1\) Let us not confuse form for substance. There do exist several proposals for orthographic systems for signs, including the notation of William Stokoe's important and useful *Dictionary of ASL on Linguistics Principles* (1965, 1980) and Valerie Sutton's (1982) adaptation of her dance notation. Instructors who feel comfortable with any of these may find it a useful tool to attune

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\(^1\)Scribner and Cole (1981) discuss alternative functions for three writing systems that coexist in one Liberian speech community.
students' analytic eyes to the fine details of signs. Other instructors may accomplish the same goals by alternative means. The conventions for transcribing ASL signs using capitalized English words (to distinguish a gloss from a full translation) with additional diacritical markings have been introduced by several of the more popular textbook authors (cf. Baker & Cokely 1980), and students become accustomed to these conventions after a few class meetings and home study sessions.

Albert Lord, in his already cited "The Singer of Tales," describes the relationship between writing or transcribing the songs and their performance. For many accomplished singers, the process involved in reciting at a pace slow enough for transcription into written form deforms or disturbs the performance. The usual rapid pace of composition might measure 10–20 ten-syllable lines per minute (17). What's more, writing down an oral epic fixes it for the world of literates. It does not change the epic for the author-performer, who continues to take that as one instance of a recitation of that song. But for the world of written language and literature, that instance becomes the song (124–5).

Alternative recording techniques (other than manual transcription of a live performance) are now available through advances in video and audio recording, alternatives which are less intrusive to the performance. In addition, we find greater general availability of devices to play back performances recorded by these means. I submit that access to videotape and film can permit pedagogical approaches to understanding traditional forms in American Sign Language.

In short, the lack of writing tradition should not stand in the way of our discovering literary traditions, in the ways language users store and share their common understandings of the world's wisdom and mysteries.

Deaf people who share a community have shared ways of expressing their understandings of the world, their values and beliefs, the lore of being different in a potentially hostile and
frequently foolish world, and of recognizing language as an object of beauty and play. Some of these understandings have begun to be analyzed by academics. Some of the same ones and others can be found in film and videotape resources, which have proved valuable supplements to texts, classroom discussions, and community involvement.

**ASL Genres**

I have found three indigenous major genres of literature in ASL. (I assume a similar case can be made for most of the sign languages with which I am familiar, especially those of Western Europe, Asia, and the Soviet Union.) The three primary genres are that of oratory, folklore, and performance art. In some respects these are artificial boundaries, useful more for analytic purposes than any other reason. The following descriptions are not intended to exhaustively identify particular settings or subtypes within these three genres, but rather to give the reader sufficient evidence to support the division into three.

**Oratory**

The first recordings of ASL on film document the long tradition of skilled oratory. (Two such examples are annotated below.) Given that early teachers of the deaf most often had training as clergy, the attention to public speaking styles is not surprising. ASL oratory is marked by its rate of delivery (slower than ordinary conversation), the size of individual signs and signing space (expanded from ordinary conversation, no doubt in part because of the relatively greater distance between signer and audience), and the incorporation of formal, and occasionally archaic forms into the rhetorical style of the signer.

Examples of oratorical rhetoric can be found today in religious institutions, formal occasions such as after dinner speeches, conference keynote addresses, and graduation
addresses. For the individual hearing guest at a deaf social event, or the few hearing participants attending an occasion like the National Association of the Deaf's convention, oratory can be seen live.

Sign language students will largely rely on their instructor's ability to secure examples on videotape, or to recreate the circumstances of oratorical performance by involving deaf visitors in the sign language class. The latter circumstance requires the "suspension of disbelief" on the part of the deaf visitor, whose language behaviors are carefully tuned to adjust for the appropriate audience (Fischer 1980). The sign language class is an artificial environment for most forms of oratory. Therefore, the instructor's responsibility will necessarily involve sensitive briefing of a deaf community member who may be invited to be a guest in a sign language class.

Folklore

Folklore here is meant to include all sorts of traditional language arts. Among these we find recitation of narratives which may have traditional themes and motifs, conventions for creating names in sign, visual and verbal jokes and games, and language art which depends on the form of signing for its aesthetic. Lentz (1980) gives a brief taxonomy of folklore genres which include some of the most important story types, motifs, and joke formulæ.

Storytelling — narrative — is perhaps the most obvious and easiest to incorporate into a sign language classroom. While I do not refer here to retelling of children's stories from Western literature (e.g., Little Red Riding Hood, but see below for "literature in translation"), I do recognize that retelling experiences from childhood has value for both the storyteller and the audience. Hearing students can always deepen their appreciation of the special life circumstances of deaf people. The deaf signers we
call on (or view on videotape) often share the experiences of residential school life, separation from home at an early age whether that separation is physical or psychological. Certainly deaf signers share the awakening of the realization that their deafness separates them from some of their human companions and brings them closer to others. Stories abound which encapsulate the deaf community's view of the World as hostile or mysterious, in contrast to signing and the Deaf domain as familiar and knowable. What new stories will come out of the more recent experiences of deaf adults who have been "mainstreamed" and how the received wisdom may change as the conditions of deafness-as-isolation change from isolation of the group (residential school) to isolation of the individual (mainstreamed school) cannot be easily predicted.

ABC stories (also called alphabet stories or A-to-Z stories) are one of the most complex and at the same time compact verbal art forms in ASL. An ABC story gives a quick narrative, but is highly constrained in its structure. It is composed on only 26 signs, each using the handshapes of the one-handed manual alphabet in order. (A subtype of the ABC story might be called the 1-2-3 story, in which handshapes for numbers constitute the formal constraining principle.) Traditional themes include potentially taboo topics such as sex, ghost stories, or tales that mock religion. ABC stories may be frozen, memorized static artifacts of the culture, or in the hands of a few skilled signers may be a productive art form created on the spot, tailored to particular themes, and given fresh life.

A simple demonstration of the variation in skill at manipulating ABC stories comes from asking signers if they know any ABC stories. Some people will not admit knowing what the idea is, until the questioner quote the first 3-4 signs of a traditional ABC story. The signer whose performance skills do not include productive creation of stories within this form may then be moved to either show the memorized form, or reveal that indeed
he or she only knows the first half dozen signs of that story. The rare person who has the ability to create or recreate ABC stories will then display his or her skills. Sign language students, after being exposed to one or more examples of ABC stories (either live or on videotape), can be asked to create their own for homework.

From humor as well as narrative, the stock of traditional characters and practical jokes becomes familiar. Just as English speakers know from the few words "did you hear the one about the traveling salesman?" that a joke follows, so the ASL variant of "little moron" jokes can also be recognized. Other humor depends on visual similarity between two distinct signs (near puns). The last two chapters of Klima and Bellugi's *Signs of Language* (1979) examine in some detail the notions of poetry and wit in ASL. The exposure of sign language students to ASL humor suits Chapin's third purpose of language study, sensitizing them to a new æsthetic expression.

**Performance Art**

By performance art, we can include poetry (especially that composed in ASL) and other rehearsed or scripted works. Jim Cohn (1986) supports the notion of an emerging consciousness around indigenous poetic forms in ASL. He argues that images and iconic elements will make ASL poetry most translatable into spoken language. While I may disagree with his notion that true ASL poetry never existed before Alan Ginsburg's 1984 conversations at NTID (Rochester, NY) with Robert Panara, the program Cohn outlines for nurturing deaf poetry through community recognition, experimentation, and discussion is a valuable model to recreate elsewhere.

Bernard Bragg and Eugene Bergman's English (bare-bones) script of *Tales from a Clubroom* permits us distant from the performances of that play to appreciate its characters and themes. Some of the language choices are lost without a video-
tape of an actual performance, since the English version cannot capture the particulars of the ASL forms. *Sign Me Alice* by Gil Eastman is another script which uses a gloss transcription system to represent the signs used on stage. The story is known to hearing readers as George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, but it has been reworked to tell the conflict between the "war of the methods" in deaf education (signing vs. speech, and if signing, which variety).

**Beyond ASL genres**

At least two additional sources of external literary tradition inform the study of deaf sign language and its culture and community in this country. These sources include literature in translation and images of deaf people in literature, film and television. The former includes material translated from English or other languages, but performed in ASL for deaf (and general) audiences. The latter includes views of deafness and deaf people available to general audiences, both deaf and hearing, which have influenced students' stereotypes or attitudes toward hearing impairment before their entry into college level sign language instruction.

**Literature in Translation**

We certainly must acknowledge the importance of material translated from English or other languages in looking at the performances of National Theatre of the Deaf and other regional or college performing groups. For example, Little Theater of the Deaf, NTD's performing ensemble for school-age audiences, often uses haiku translated from the Japanese as a featured section of its revues. The use of haiku (in English translation) has been adopted by college theater groups as a training technique. The original Japanese form of haiku, with its three line format with precise number of syllables per line (five-seven-five) and the
invocation of seasonal imagery, is often followed in English translations, but is less emphasized in ASL translation, where the notion of “syllable” has no direct equivalent. Rather, the ASL version of haiku highlights building a single image with a high value on economy of signs employed to produce the mood and scene. The introduction of haiku forms has also been used as an instructional technique with grammar school-age children, who are first shown ASL translations, invited to invent their own, and helped to translate the signed versions to an English form.\(^2\)

Haiku, then, takes on a special meaning when used with ASL translations or original forms. Ask sign language students to examine either videotaped examples or live performances, and later to create their own ASL haikus. This exercise can develop the students’ appreciation for the capability of ASL to pack several semantic notions into a single sign, and for the effects of rhythm, repetition of movement, physical placement of signs in the signing space, and signer’s affect in developing an aesthetically pleasing and appropriate translation.

The growing popularity of interpreted performances — that is, theatrical or musical productions with sign language interpreters involved in the performance — likewise points to a measure of acceptance among the Deaf community of participation in mainstream literary traditions. And yet, careful examination of the ways in which these translations are created and the resultant linguistic objects and their performances give us further evidence for independent aesthetic judgments which are made by the translation supervisors, directors, and performers.\(^3\)

\(^2\)Dennis Cokely, personal communication.

\(^3\)See Frishberg 1986 for a fuller treatment of interpreting, especially interpreting performances.
Literature about Deafness & Deaf People

If the schedule permits and the instructor can integrate the material, we can extend the curriculum to include consideration of deafness and deaf people in English language literature (including film). 4 Joanne Greenberg's *In this Sign* (made into a television film “Love is Never Silent”) imparts a great deal of cultural information about deafness in a well-written, if somewhat sentimental, novel. Her short story “And Sarah Laughed” shows some of the same characters from an earlier time. Carson McCullers' *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* has been recognized as a classic of literature from the American South, and portrays two quite different deaf characters in relation to the hearing world. *Children of a Lesser God*, which won awards on Broadway and in Hollywood, is available in script form and as a film, if not a live performance, gives the view of the well-meaning hearing teacher in contact with the maturing deaf woman. It is a love story with a political and educational impact. (The differences between the original play and the adaptation to screen are instructive as well.)

Robert Panara’s article (1972) about deaf characters in English language literature highlights certain stereotypes which students probably bring to their sign language classes, but which are hard to draw to the surface. Panara reveals variety of communication techniques these characters employ, and notes the heavy emphasis on sensational and exaggerated accomplishments in lipreading, speaking and the like. He also exposes the high proportion of charlatan deaf characters, those posing as deaf, but who are later revealed to have used the device for trickery.

Batson and Bergman (1985) have collected writings about and by deaf people in an anthology which may still be in print. In the first section are excerpts from the perspective of the deaf as

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4For comparison, see Basso 1974.
seen by others (e.g. Turgenev, Dickens, Ambrose Bierce, Isak Dinesen), while in the second are pieces showing the deaf as seen by themselves (Albert Ballin, Julius Wiggins, Grace McGreevy).

**Inserting Literature in the ASL class curriculum**

In order to build and expand students' views of what constitutes literary achievement in a language without written literary form, two types of activities may be employed. First, the extensive use of film and videotaped materials can expose students to a variety of forms of literary output. These materials also engage students' attention to details of the production of signing, with the potential for repetition of identical performance by replaying particular segments of a film or tape.

**What materials shall be employed?** Materials used in sign language instruction might be historical films, documentaries about deafness or deaf people which include relevant samples of literary production, pedagogical materials aimed at a deaf or signing audience, or theatrical productions.

With care, an instructor may adapt materials intended for interpreter training to sign language classes at a more elementary level. Naturally, each film or videotape must be examined to determine its appropriate use with the target audience.

**Where can these materials be obtained?** Several organizations have tapes available for purchase or loan. Others rent to educational institutions for low cost. The Gallaudet University (Washington, D.C.) Media Distribution office updates its catalogue periodically and makes its films and videotapes available to nonprofit educational institutions. It may also make the materials available through one of the extension offices in other regions. The National Association of the Deaf (Silver Spring, MD) has in the past sold or rented video materials through its bookshop. TJ Publishers (Silver Spring, MD) has recently sent
out its catalog of videotaped materials available for purchase. Included are children's stories, tapes to accompany instructional textbooks, scholarly lectures from recent conferences, and tapes modeling family communication with deaf and hearing family members. Modern Talking Picture Service (St. Petersburg, FL) offers free loan of educational captioned films and videotapes to classes with at least one deaf or hearing impaired student. Their catalogue requires careful screening, since many of the materials are simply captioned versions of general interest films and videotapes. Only some of the items have sign language or deaf content.

In addition, local public libraries, schools for the deaf, and nearby colleges or universities with larger programs serving deaf and hearing impaired students may have media collections to be shared with the regional community. Most institutions of higher education provide a budget for rental of alternative media for classroom use, and each institution's media office will have catalogues and helpful personnel to assist instructors in securing appropriate materials economically.

Films & Videotapes. Below are listed only a few samples of appropriate film and videotape materials that can be used with sign language classes to augment and support the study of literature in ASL. Instructors need to preview materials before showing them to classes for several reasons. First, the instructor needs to be certain that the chosen film or tape suits the level and purposes of the course. Next, the instructor should be certain that he or she understands each part of the material; in the case of the historical films of ASL, even experienced signers will require repeat viewing to catch all the archaic forms. Further the instructor must prepare activities for the class to focus their attention. Sometimes, more than one viewing of a film or tape is necessary for the students to be able to see the features of the material which the instructor finds pedagogically important to
that level of sign language instruction. For example, some instructors will choose to show the NAD performances first with the sound on to give students the overall sense of the performance, and later without sound to encourage attentive viewing of particular theatrical or poetic ASL forms, without audio distraction.\(^5\)

The choice of whether to discuss the film or video material using speech or sign in class depends on the level of the class and the way in which the course is designed. To compare with spoken language instruction, some foreign language courses require the use of target language for all class activities. Other such courses make a distinction between conversation instruction, and discussion of grammar, literature and culture of the target language, such that the former activities are all conducted in the target language while the latter activities may use students' ordinary classroom language, especially at the lower levels of instruction.

Wherever possible, making the visual materials available to students for repeat viewing in a language lab or media center can prove helpful. This way the instructor may model during class the desired sort of analysis or preferred viewing techniques, but can then make the "reading of literature" part of the homework activity.

**Conclusion**

ASL has been excluded from fulfilling foreign or second language requirements in some institutions because of claims that it has no grammar, cultural context, or tradition of literature. The preceding remarks refute the last of these claims (while other articles in this issue address the first two). We have seen that a literary aesthetic can be defined prior to a written literary tradition, as in the case of Greek and Balkan epic poetry. We

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know that other languages which are socially stigmatized nonetheless adapt literature through translation and develop their own literary institutions. Non-Western cultures without writing traditions convey their traditions of history and philosophy within community-defined forms of expression. And, finally, the presence or absence of writing (systematized orthography) has little relationship to the existence of a traditional verbal art form.

We have discussed three genres of ASL language arts: oratory, folklore, and performance art. For each of these, examples have been offered both in explanation and in video or film for use in college-level classes. It is incumbent on the instructor to find appropriate ways to insert such examples into the curriculum and to train students to see the relevant features of these examples. In addition, literature in translation (whether performed by deaf artists or hearing artists with interpreters) can be useful to demonstrate the incorporation of culturally-valued features into the form of expression.

**APPENDIX: RELEVANT EXAMPLES**


The series of videotapes geared to the three student textbooks includes not only demonstration of the dialogues for each unit, but also “provides several ASL stories, poems, and dramatic prose of varying lengths and difficulty for use in the classroom or language lab.” (Baker & Cokely, 1980:vii)

*My Third Eye* — National Theater of the Deaf (1973)

One of several early documentaries of NAD productions, this one features a variety of popular performance pieces, including personal reminiscences from deaf members of the cast, poetry, playful sign etymologies, and a fantasy about deaf views of the strange practices in the “Land of A-Ba-Ba” (among hearing people).

*Preservation of Sign Language* — George Veditz (1913) — NAD

An early President of the National Association of the Deaf, Veditz here gives an impassioned plea for the preservation of sign language
traditions through documentation on film as well as by sign language use in schools and other institutions. The structure of his argument and his style of delivery are as worthy of attention as his message.

*Memories of Old Hartford* — John Hotchkiss (1913) — NAD

A reminiscence of early days at the American School for the Deaf in Hartford, Connecticut, this film and others of its era make visible the facts that (i) sign language has been recorded and preserved from nearly as early as Edison’s records of spoken language, (ii) historical changes in signs and their pronunciations can be documented through such records. Hotchkiss recalls his own encounters with Laurent Clerc, David Bartlett and other early figures at ASD.


Pat Graybill, one of a number of accomplished alumni from the earlier days of National Theater of the Deaf, still a professional performer and more recently a college level educator, has made a videotape which “reveals the foundations of Deaf culture.” (Sign Language Studies 54: 91-92) His portrayals of the roles that the hearing and deaf adults around children in a residential school for the deaf take on give insight into the school as a powerful binding force in deaf lives. These roles may be both the external labels “teacher” or “houseparent,” as well as the traits the people assume in the functions “loving,” “cruel,” “authoritarian,” or “well-intentioned.” With cameo appearances by other deaf actors, the videotape presents the physical and psychic space familiar to many deaf viewers, and now available to sign language classes.

*See What I Say* — Filmaker’s Library (1981)

Available as a 24-minute film or videotape, this production documents the work of Holly Near, a feminist folksinger, and Susan Freundlich, a professional performance interpreter who toured with her for several years. Their close working relationship was achieved through careful rehearsal and discussion process, which we see parts of and hear the two of them reflect on. The response of the target audience is shared through the stories of four women who have
experienced the change from isolation of deaf people to more open acceptance of sign language, interpreting and performance.

*Shadowing — Stage Hands, Inc. (c.1980)*

This tape describes the process used by the Stage Hands, Inc., group in conjunction with the Alliance Theatre Company/Atlanta Children's Theatre to prepare and produce interpreted productions for deaf and hearing impaired audiences. Among the areas of attention are script analysis and translation, blocking and direction, focus (of interpreter's attention), lighting, pre-teaching activities and reactions of theater staff/actors to audience and interpreters. Role for hearing impaired coach or consultant is touched on. Tape provides a good starting point for comparison with practices of interpreters in other regions of the country and/or where the audience may not be limited to school groups.

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