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The Kitchen Light of NTID

Miriam Lerner

It is often noted that great events are a concurrence of great people, great ideas, and the right time and place for the perfect fusion of energy to explode into a supernova of enlightenment. It can be difficult to find specific times and locations when great changes and shifts in attitude occur, as they usually follow a more geologic model of slow and almost imperceptible change over time. However, when considering ASL poetry and literature, the importance of NTID and specifically the Panara Theatre housed in LBJ Hall cannot be overstated. The right people, and—of paramount importance—the right environment, were ready to come together for the unleashing of new forms of ASL performance art. This chapter documents that story from a mix of firsthand experience and information gained in the process of making the film, *The Heart of the Hydrogen Jukebox*.¹

In 1982, a hearing poet named Jim Cohn was traveling around the United States, honing his craft and ruminating on different modalities of poetry and literature. He became interested in the idea of American Sign Language, and what poetry—a word-based representation of images—would look like in a language that essentially consists of images. He found his way to NTID, was accepted into the Interpreter Training Program, and set about learning what ASL poetry might look like.

While at NTID, Cohn sought out the Deaf poet Robert Panara, perhaps the greatest 20th century Deaf scholar of Deaf literature. With Panara acting as Cohn's cultural informant, they discussed similarities and differences between Deaf and hearing poetry. Cohn

studied all of Panara's writing on Deaf poetry and its history. Taking this ethnographic approach, Cohn became convinced that, not only was Deaf poetry a literary genre that survived outside the American literary canon, but also that American Sign Language poetry was a living, breathing American poetic form—its own literary space.

Cohn confronted a perplexing challenge during his quest: the Deaf people he encountered who were creative signers eschewed the notion that what they were producing could or should be called “poetry.” In their minds, poetry belonged to written and spoken languages, and they had no templates for the existence of ASL poetry. Their experiences of poetry were, for the most part, that of being compelled to memorize sound-based poems in English classes, thus instilling in them the notion that only spoken language with rhyme and meter could lay claim to producing poetry. The notion that ASL was a true language was getting traction in the late '70s and early '80s, so the time was ripe for a paradigm shift in terms of ASL literature genres.

If this chapter were a river, we would now have side channels to wander, as there are two concurrent stories that meet again further downstream.

One story also takes place in the early 1980s, when a small group of extremely creative Deaf students at NTID began having parties in their rooms and playing translation games. They would read a story or a comic book, look at illustrated magazine or album covers (this was before CDs, iPods, or personal computers), and

attempt to “translate” and perform the images in ASL. They played with the language and stretched their imaginations in ways they had not attempted before, but the aggregate synergy of their inner visions pushed them in surprising ways. Other students heard about the fun, and the rooms were soon so crowded that another venue had to be found to accommodate their fans and to carry on their experimentation.

At the time, there was a bar called The Cellar located in the tunnels underneath the dorms at NTID. The sign-play parties migrated there, and soon students were taking turns performing on a makeshift stage for any and all who showed up. One of those students was Peter Cook, who would later go on to become an accomplished ASL poet and storyteller, as well as a respected interpreter trainer, ASL and Deaf Studies professor, and chair of the ASL department at Columbia College Chicago.

It was Cook who came up with the idea of naming these weekly performances at the Cellar “The Birdsbrain Society,” after seeing a poem by Allen Ginsberg of the same name. Cook was also the person responsible for organizing these first poetry “readings” in ASL by Deaf students. It was during this time that Cohn first interviewed Cook about ASL poetry and began publishing his poetry in *ACTION*, a magazine of poetry and poets based in the Rochester community.

Meanwhile, in our second story, Cohn was hot on the trail of what ASL poetry might look like. Along with becoming involved in the Rochester hearing poetry community, especially at the literary center Writers & Books, he attended the The Cellar gatherings with great interest and was intrigued by what he was witnessing. Cohn had studied under and served as a teaching assistant to the famous American Beat poet, Allen Ginsberg, in Boulder, Colorado. Cohn invited Ginsberg to come to NTID and provide a workshop/discussion group to students, NTID professors, and invited guests, on February 1, 1984. Dr. Robert Panara was the co-presenter, and together with Ginsberg explored the various ways poetry functions in language and culture, attempting a cross-linguistic, bi-cultural understanding of meaning, translation, and aesthetic.

At one point Ginsberg read from his famous poem, “Howl”. He stopped at one of his favorite images

in the beginning of the poem, “...listening to the crack of doom on the hydrogen jukebox.” He asked if there was a way to render that phrase adequately in ASL, or if it would be impossible to translate. Patrick Graybill, a founding member of the National Theater of the Deaf, had years of experience translating English texts into ASL for performances. Much to his chagrin, Graybill was “volunteered” by other members of the audience to attempt an ad-hoc rendition in front of the group. It is, indeed, fortunate that we have video footage of the event, because Graybill’s spontaneous and brilliant offering astonished and delighted all present, including Ginsberg, who exclaimed, “That looks like it!” That moment changed Graybill’s understanding of his own work, and also proved to be an epiphany for a young deaf student who was in attendance that day, Peter Cook.

And now these two river channels come together, producing a current as swift and resolute as the Yukon River. Cohn had seen Cook’s work in The Cellar and was impressed with his pieces, as well as those performed by Debbie Rennie and Patrick Graybill. He set about convincing these talented authors that what they were doing *was* poetry, and to open up their work to the hearing community of writers in Rochester. To accomplish this, the Deaf poets would need someone to use their voices to translate the work and perform it with them. Cohn had a friend, Kenny Lerner, a hearing teacher who signed ASL and worked in the English Learning Center (ELC) at NTID at the time. Cohn intuited that Lerner and Cook would be a good fit, and even though Lerner wasn’t an interpreter, Cohn introduced them to each other. They did, indeed, connect in an artistic way, became good friends and performance partners, and eventually formed the partnership, The Flying Words Project. Lerner also worked in the creation and translation of pieces by Rennie, who later worked with hearing interpreter Donna Kachites. Graybill wrote his own English translations for his poems, and would rehearse with any interpreter assigned to work with him in performances.

A small group of Rochester interpreters were interested in exploring this new enterprise of interpreting poetry from English to ASL and from ASL to English, and began serving as translators and voice interpreters for much of the work that was being performed

at this time. Writers & Books provided a stage, as did Jazzberry's, a small vegetarian restaurant in downtown Rochester. Cohn initiated a poetry series whereby cross-fertilization of poetry began to occur among Deaf and hearing poets.

In September 1987, Cohn organized and executed the First National ASL Poetry Conference, sponsored and hosted by NTID. For three days, lectures, panels, and performances were held in the Panara Theatre. Showcased during this event were five major Deaf poets of whom Cohn was aware at the time: Cook, Graybill, Rennie, Ella Mae Lentz, and Clayton Valli. Voice interpreters were assigned to all events. A complete video record of the conference is housed in the Deaf Archives section of the RIT Library. The documentary film, *The Heart of the Hydrogen Jukebox*, also in the RIT Library on DVD, as well as posted in its entirety on YouTube, includes interviews and footage from the conference. It was the first time a full conference had been convened specifically for the purpose of exploring and elevating ASL poetry as a distinct art form.

Although there was no follow-up symposium that focused solely on ASL poetry, in 1991, The Flying Words Project (Cook and Lerner) used money awarded by a New York State Council on the Arts grant, in collaboration with NTID, to sponsor an ASL Literature Conference. It was held primarily in Panara Theatre, as well as various classrooms in NTID's Lyndon Baines Johnson Hall. This conference investigated not only ASL poetry, but also storytelling and theater. A second literature conference was held in 1993 at NTID, as well, with Panara Theatre serving as the focal point and meeting place for all of the major performances, lectures, and panels.

As awareness, acknowledgement, and respect for ASL literature in all of its various manifestations has grown, NTID has served as a cultural and linguistic petri dish, growing generations of talented performers and scholars. In a sense, Panara Theatre has become the epitome of the Deaf kitchen: a place for people to congregate, connect, discuss, learn, and grow together beneath the bright light of community. Its stage has hosted numerous performances of plays, poetry, lectures, and discussions, as well as serving as a laboratory for Deaf performance artists to hone their craft and follow their creative muses in an exciting, nurturing

environment. The history that has transpired in that auditorium is full and rich, spanning generations of Deaf students who have been fortunate enough to call NTID their temporary home.

To borrow a hearing phrase and change it up a bit: "Oh, if those walls could only sign!"

Miriam Lerner is a current RIT/NTID interpreter.

Notes

1. *The Heart of the Hydrogen Jukebox*, directed by Miriam Nathan Lerner and Don Feigel (Rochester, N.Y.: Rochester Institute of Technology, 2009), DVD.