

PAH!: A Quiet Suggestion for the Next Inaugural

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On January 21st, like many other Americans, I was moved by Richard Blanco's inaugural poem. Blanco, the child of Spanish-speaking Cuban exiles, occasionally writes large parts of his poems in Spanish. He is not the first inaugural poet to spotlight America's multicultural makeup, but perhaps the first to acknowledge our multilingual demography. Listening to his poem, I imagined that there might someday be an inaugural poem in a language other than English.

This had occurred to me before. I watched the first Obama inauguration with my friend Dennis Cokely, director of the American Sign Language program at Northeastern University in Boston. Cokely is one of the foremost interpreters and teachers of interpreting in the United States, and an interpreter for several former presidents. We watched a version of the telecast with the ASL interpreter in one corner of the screen. Cokely had something of a professional interest in President Obama's speech.

Listening to Blanco, I wondered if we might someday *see* an inaugural poem in ASL, perhaps with someone like Cokely interpreting it for the non-Deaf community.

This is an odd dream for someone like me. I am not Deaf. I am a composer and musician. At the recent inaugural I was as fascinated by James Taylor's beautiful guitar harmonies and the extraordinary precision of the snare drummer in the Marine Corps Band as I was by Blanco's poem. I became interested in ASL some years ago, and have been studying it for some time, while also learning about its culture. I've spent a lifetime in music, working with sound that has arguably very little "meaning." ASL fascinated me: it was full of meaning, with very little (if any) sound. As I learned about ASL's rich theater, storytelling, and poetry traditions, the cultural and linguistic isolation of the Deaf community also became strikingly apparent to me.

With about 3 million “native” signers in the United States, ASL is probably second only to Spanish as the language with the largest number of native users besides English. American Sign Language and “Deafness” are trendy now, with television shows like “Switched at Birth,” Mayor Bloomberg’s interpreter, and trends like “baby sign.” Many high school and college students learn beginning ASL, even though this often amounts to little more than finger-spelling, which, ironically, is the part of ASL which is not sign but English. But just as American culture cannot be separated from our poets, musicians, filmmakers, and other artists, neither can Deaf culture be understood without its literary forms, forms that are difficult to understand without knowing sign.

Who are ASL poets? Some of the most established and influential include Patrick Graybill from Rochester, NY, Peter Cook from Chicago, and Ella Mae Lentz from Berkeley. Graybill, Cook and Lentz are three great American poets whose poems are unwritten, but created and performed in sign, generally without translation for the English speaking world. Their work often describes the Deaf experience. The most common themes describe growing up without being able to sign, and the ensuing joy of linguistic, cognitive, and artistic liberation experienced when they finally learn. Only then do they have their own language, can they communicate freely, poetry blooming from their hands. Other, younger poets often explore less specifically Deaf themes. Two of my favorites (there are many) are Rosa Lee Gallimore, who works in performance art and even music, and Monique Holt, who is currently translating the complete Shakespeare sonnets into ASL.

Maybe for that future inaugural, an eloquent signer could perform one of the beautiful, canonical poems of the late Clayton Valli, like his “Dandelions,” a poem whose technical virtuosity and magnificently simple imagery capture the Deaf experience in a few short minutes. Valli is often thought of as the ASL Robert Frost, our first inaugural poet, so perhaps his work is an appropriate way to introduce hearing America to this unique, endogenous literary tradition. But there’s plenty of work to choose from. Modern ASL poetry, on video, and now all over the Internet, has more than a forty-year (recorded) history and repertoire. That repertoire is still growing.

Although poems in ASL are frequently interpreted (like Cokely's interpretations of his close friend Graybill's work), there are few written English translations. Translation of poetry from one language to another is difficult enough. Going from a signed language to a written one is even more so. Poetry in sign must be seen on video or performed live. Communication between Deaf poets and their hearing colleagues can be a daunting and isolating problem.

There are, however, some famous exceptions. In a catalytic encounter in Rochester, NY in 1984 (captured on film in Miriam Lerner and Don Fiegel's invaluable documentary "In the Heart of the Hydrogen Jukebox"), Allen Ginsburg lamented to a roomful of Deaf poets and students that he was dissatisfied with written language's imagistic powers. He offered the phrase "hydrogen jukebox" from his poem "Howl" as an example. The young Patrick Graybill, already an accomplished ASL poet and performer, stood up and "translated" it to ASL, astounding Ginsburg, who shouts, "That's it!" Sign poetry can do things that English poetry cannot (and of course, vice versa). You can't have phonetic rhymes in ASL, but you can't *be* a jukebox in English.

In March 1988, the Deaf community had its own Stonewall; it's own Selma; its own Seneca Falls. Students at Gallaudet University riveted the world when they closed down the campus in the Deaf President Now movement, or DPN. They demanded that Gallaudet, the only university in the world where sign is an official language, have a president from its own culture for the first time in its 125-year history (Lincoln signed its charter). In ASL, the DPN movement is symbolized by a universally known but difficult to translate sign — PAH! — in which the index fingers of both hands circle out from the face, accompanied by an unvoiced explosive vocal sound. It means something like "Finally!"

At some inauguration in the near future, I hope to see an ASL poet on the steps of the Capitol. Maybe she's now a student in a Deaf elementary school like the Lexington School for the Deaf in New York City, or at my New England neighbor the Austine

School in Brattleboro, Vermont. She will deliver the inaugural poem in one of our country's most extraordinary, beautiful and unknown tongues. What a sound we would all hear as Americans join the Deaf community in saying, finally, "PAH!"

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