CC2
ASL Poetry and Performance in Translation
Student journals, week 7: Dennis Cokely

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Bridging the Gap between Two Cultures

Dennis Cokley’s lectures last week formed a bridge between d/Deaf culture and the non-Deaf world. Mr. Cokley not only elucidated the performance elements of ASL poetry and its features, but also revealed rather interesting facts about d/Deaf culture. He was an exemplary representative of a man who had explored both worlds and has now become an intermediary bridge. Being an interpreter is a significant role that Mr. Cokley plays in the d/Deaf, but it is his role as a scholar of d/Deaf culture and ASL in the hearing world which has opened the window into this silent culture. ASL and d/Deaf culture indeed cannot and will not survive without the help of such scholars as Mr. Cokley.

It was interesting to learn from Mr. Cokley that ASL does not have signs for words like “am, was, and, etc.”, and unlike the English language, ASL depends more on the use of adjectives. The absence of signs for these words explains why ASL is such a demonstrative language because its syntax is substituted by more descriptive images. Mr. Cokley also explained the earlier use of artificial systems for signing, such as SES, and the use of PES in the past as a means of universal communication. PES, which can be considered a contact language, seemed fascinating in the sense that it combined words and syntax from both English and French to form a system that d/Deaf people can use for communication; unlike any written language, this is only possible in a sign system. ASL is a language which not only deconstructs certain linguistic constraints in an innovative way, but also relies on the use of the human body as the source of the language.

ASL can in fact be described as a language of cinema for its use of various cinematographic elements. These film techniques were clearly demonstrated in Mr. Cokley’s translation and explanation of Debbie Rene’s poem “Swan” and Gil Eastman’s “Epic”. Both poems demonstrated the idea that meaning in ASL, unlike in
written English poetry, is often included in the movement of signs themselves. You don’t need punctuation, rhyme, or specific syllables in ASL poetry to make it creative; all you need is simply your body and your creativity. What better language can you possibly want for communication?!

Another noteworthy concept that Mr. Cokley had clarified was the notion of the contemporary diaspora of d/Deaf communities. The only thing that d/Deaf people have control over is their language and culture, and shamefully, external forces are doing their best to make this community more “individualistic”. Federal laws, high rent rates, and new technologies have made it impossible for these people to live in peace together without any external disruptions to their culture and way of life. Why is it that when a certain community decides to remain isolated for the sake of protecting its identity we do all that is in our power to rupture that unity and force the members of that community to assimilate? No one can better represent the d/Deaf culture than the d/Deaf themselves and with the help of scholars like Mr. Cokley, a future for ASL and d/Deaf culture can be ensured.
This week we had the amazing opportunity of having Dennis Cokely be our guest lecturer. One of the first things that struck me about Dennis (which I had noticed when he was interpreting for Patrick as well) was just how knowledgeable he was about not only ASL as a language, but also about Deaf culture. I feel like we could have had an entire class of us just asking him questions. There’s one point in my notes where I just wrote “knows everything!” as my general impression of Dennis on the first day of class. One subject that we talked about on the first day that I was very interested in was the process by which Deaf children learn how to read. Growing up, learning how to read was a very phonetic process for me (and still seems to be for children these days, based on my sisters’ experiences) and I really couldn’t understand how Deaf children could learn to read in a way that wasn’t severely frustrating and limiting for them. When Dennis explained the concept of content and form, it clicked for me how learning to read takes place (both in Deaf children and non-Deaf children). A child must have either the content or the form in order to successfully “get” and understand the other. So for Deaf children, going through the story first in ASL helps them understand the content of the story and then they can more easily acquire the “form”. I thought this linguistic discussion was really interesting.

As interesting as Tuesday with Dennis was, I was utterly enthralled by his discussion and interpretation of the Gil Eastman Epic on Thursday. A few weeks ago I read the book about the Deaf President Now movement that is on reserve and I watched the Epic with the voice-over interpretation. Dennis’ interpretation was honestly so much better. He explained not only what was happening in the story, but also the poetic devices
that Eastman used to really emphasize important events and themes throughout the story. Relating this to the linguistic study above, I think that because I already knew the “content” of the DPN story, I was able to really focus on the form, and the way Eastman used ASL (and also modified and changed his use of normal conversational ASL) to delightfully tell this story. I loved the different cinematic techniques that Dennis explained; how Eastman starts with the world, then slowly navigates into Gallaudet, and back out at the end of the Epic. I thought just the little detail about the “a” and “l” in ASL on the Lincoln statue was super interesting (whether intentional or not). Dennis interpreted the epic so wonderfully and I’m once again amazed at how many incredible people we are being introduced to in this class.
Dennis Cokely’s visit seemed to relate Deaf culture a lot more to our class than other visits because it gave us a non-Deaf perspective and a linguistic perspective on American Sign Language. Dennis I think may have been the first present to also not have ASL as a first language. I think that this gave us a more relatable perspective when viewing the ASL poetry in class. Now we could see the individual techniques used in poems to give meaning, extend gestures to give rhythm, and implicit meanings with uses of the dominant hand and the non-dominant hand in signing. This was especially I think apparent for me and the entire class when viewing the “To a Hearing Mother.” Seeing it from this analytical point of view, the poetry seemed more poetic and beautiful to me as a viewer, especially when we discussed Eastman’s Epic on Thursday. The idea of the “Us” versus the “One” made me think of how inclusive American culture really is. As Dennis said, “in American culture you cannot assume anything about

I was also interested to see that Dennis’s name sign corresponded with the sign for non-Deaf people who “think” Deaf. Just like Larry’s had to do with his occupation, Dennis’s seemed to have two meanings: both for his occupation and for his understanding of the Deaf community so that implicit sense of Deaf community could be extended to him.

On Wednesday, I was amazed at Dennis’s encyclopedic knowledge of the Deaf community. It was amazing to learn the various forms of “languages” like SEE and LUV and how they came to be created and taught to Deaf students. Even more so, I was amazed during Dennis’s performance on Wednesday the extensive history of Galludet and how various teaching techniques to students in Europe differed so drastically. On the whole, after listening to Dennis’s lectures, I felt I could understand the Deaf community in a historical perspective even more. And it also made me see Deaf culture as an ethnicity even more. How their collectivist culture made them resilient through the years and blunt in their honesty.

I also found that Dennis’s teaching method also showed how much Dennis respects ASL as a language. For Dennis, the bottom line is not for communication to be possible for his students but for them to actually learn ASL. So, with this in mind, he tries to reinforce this concept by discouraging teachers trying to communicate with students outside of class not in strict ASL, so as to enforce an ASL learning environment for the students, helping them to learn the language more clearly.

Dennis’s also helped me to consider another topic for my final project. I had never considered the equal playing field that silent films had brought to the Deaf community. Before films had sound, a Deaf actor could get a role in a film and not have to worry about speaking. This meant that Deaf actors were finally seen as equal to non-Deaf actors in competing for film jobs. In this single period of time in a single medium, being Deaf was not an issue. This opened up a whole new set of ideas for me in looking at Deaf people in films for my final project.

I also found Dennis to be incredibly humble in his presentation. Even in his performance, Dennis turned his presentation over to children’s poems. He allowed us to understand a part of Deaf culture, without seeming to be a full part of it himself. I found his humility especially apparent when Larry mentioned during our watching of the Epic that Dennis was actually the interpreter for Ted Koppel in the storyline of the Epic. To
think that Dennis is such an important part of the Deaf community but maintains such a humility and respect for its culture is an amazing thing to see.

I also found Dennis’s explanation of the three acts that changed the way Deaf people were treated under law to be very interesting. The ADA, 5.04, and 94.142 all seemed to be both good and bad for the community. Because Dennis asked us the hard question: “Who does the act really benefit?” We were able to see that while integration with the non-Deaf community seemed to improve because of these acts, the Deaf community seemed to not really benefit at all. The reading level for Deaf students upon graduating high school did not change based on these acts. And furthermore, it dissolved the community events and gatherings for Deaf people with the encouragement to mainstream students. It was the first time I realized how alone a Deaf individual must feel; without close Deaf parents or Deaf role models in a child’s life growing up, there is literally no one the child can relate to; and even more so, if the child had not been exposed to ASL early in his or her life, they are not even able to express their frustration properly to others.

In all, Dennis Cokely personified what he called a bridge between two worlds. Perhaps the most remarkable point made in his visit was that he happened upon the Deaf world by chance, and was not planning to be this involved in the Deaf community when he started. It made me realize how even all the planning in the world for your future may not result in your true calling or passion; sometimes you just seem to happen upon it and find an incredible new outlet for your talents. Dennis Cokely really showed this to me, as his role in the community seems to bridge a divide. And the thing that really was extraordinary was that Dennis did not claim to be an expert on Deaf culture or an ambassador for the community in the non-Deaf world. He simply showed how important this community was to him and how non-Deaf people as well as Deaf people need to make the effort to bridge this gap in the non-Deaf world. Both groups need to take a stand in the hearing community in order for the majority of non-Deaf culture to change to be more inclusive, especially in America, which touts a nonexistent sense of inclusivity. And thanks to Dennis, I know that in my life, regardless of what field I end up pursuing, I will definitely try to make this part of American culture known and appreciated and valued.
Dennis Cokely was our first and only non-deaf guest speaker of the class, and I don't think there is any individual more qualified to speak on the topic than he. Because the class was able to speak and communicate fluently with him, I felt all of us got a little more "raw mileage" out of the lectures than with out previous speakers.

Dennis is amazingly intimate with both Deaf culture and ASL. His translations of "To a Deaf Mother" and Eastman's Epic captured so many nuances that I would have never thought about (although sometimes I thought he was analyzing points that might not have been intended to be analyzed by the poets). That made me think to myself: he is so intimate with Deaf culture that he may as well be one himself. But can an individual that does not belong to an insulated group be as or more knowledgeable and qualified to speak on behalf of or about the group than the members of the group itself? One side of my brain thinks no; what the members of the group experience defines a part of the group, and so an outsider can never give a first-hand perspective as well as an insider could. But the other side of my brain thinks; if there is some objectiveness in defining what is Deaf and what isn't, then an outsider can eventually come to understand what defines the culture, and therefore be as good of a source as an insider. Just a random thought, on thinking about how even someone as knowledgeable as Dennis might not be considered an "insider" by some deaf people.

Before last Wednesday's event, I had been curious as to what Dennis's presentation would be since he was a scholar and not a performer. But afterwards, I was very impressed with, his expository story-telling, his project of working to promote Deaf poetry, and the kids performing the actual poems. On the story-telling side, Dennis was great; his voice somehow drips authenticity and incites interest. His story of Abee de l'Epee and the development of Deaf education in Europe and America was refreshing, and helped fill in some gaps from the readings. As for the actual poems themselves, I was touched by the cultural understanding that some of the kids demonstrated in their poems. A few looked like they were no more than 8 or 9 years old, yet they know they are and will forever be Deaf, and are already embracing their identity. I just hope that more deaf children will grow up with the opportunity to have that kind of self-realization.

The efforts of Dennis and his colleagues to promote Deaf culture through ASL poetry contests and other events are, without a doubt, a big step forward in raising Deaf awareness. But I couldn't help but think that they were merely temporary palliative solutions to a bigger problem at hand: the structure of deaf education. We can continue to promote and encourage creativity in ASL, but what good is that if there are fewer and fewer native Deaf people as a result of mainstreaming? And what about the actual teaching methodology in the deaf schools? One person asked how many schools send in entries for these ASL poetry contests. I think Dennis replied with a number in the low 20's, but a quick Google search shows over 60 deaf residential schools alone in the U.S. Why aren't more schools participating? Do some deaf schools still cast aside ASL in favor of spoken teaching? Maybe not, but with how close the Deaf community is, I would expect participation in such contests to be higher. Whatever the reason, I think the need to address the educational system for deaf students is apparent, and hopefully this class will be a step towards raising the awareness required for such a movement.
Dennis Cokely

Dennis Cokely’s visit elucidated many questions I had about Deaf culture, but at the same time brought about more concerns and questions. Perhaps the most important message he gave the class, and what I took away as most meaningful, was the aspect that Deaf culture and the Deaf world is what people should be studying if we want to know what it’s like to be human. This particularly resonated within me, because it seems to be an underlying theme among all of the guests that we’ve had, and a necessary life lesson that I am confirming more with each passing class.

Cokely greatly emphasized on education and the fact that Deaf people are the most oppressed in the United States. The notion that they start off at a disadvantage compared to other individuals and are “inferior from the get go” is very discouraging to hear, and an unfortunate truth. Deaf people face so many struggles that are in addition to the daily struggles of being a human being. They have to deal with the biases and negative perception of the general population, handle the fact that their necessities in life, such as hiring an interpreter, are extremely expensive, and all the while face disadvantages in education. Cokely posited the metaphor of the Deaf world as a parallel world – one in which it is like the nondeaf world with different ethnic groups and professions, just with the difference of being deaf. This was an apt analogy, as it brought to light another parallel that I believe is extended to the nondeaf world.

As Cokely said, the Deaf are oppressed and undereducated. A parallel to that is also the fact that the nondeaf world is undereducated. As with all minority cultures, biases and misconceptions exist in the world because people are to not expose to the truth, whether that be because of education or life experiences. This is an unfortunate aspect of life and extends to my personal self too. Before I took this class, the most I knew was how to sign the alphabet. I think it’s disappointing how little I knew; however, now that I am more educated I am frustrated with the fact that there is still a long way to go in terms of equality for minority cultures. Cokely gave an important fact: that ASL is the 4th most popular language in the United States, yet few colleges and universities offer ASL as a language class and do a great injustice to Deaf people. Perhaps the most
important aspect of educating people about the Deaf world is starting with the school systems. I agree with Cokely in that it’s necessary to tackle the education system first. Another aspect I took away from Cokely’s visit was the fact that ASL is such a high context language and thus Deaf culture is a high context culture. As a collectivist culture, Deaf people embrace each other and are able to assume “maximum shared knowledge.” This contrasts greatly with the U.S’s individualistic culture that emphasizes on promoting the self. This low context culture, in which we assume nothing, is a discouraging comparison. The discrepancies between cultures show the fact that for people who don’t know much about the Deaf world, there is a whole new culture underneath their very noses. It seems that it’s the burden for people like Dennis Cokely to help spread awareness, but at the same time, it’s unfair. While I acknowledge that there will always be discrepancies in knowledge about all minority cultures, I do hope that with the wise advice and guidance of people like Dennis Cokely, more people can become educated and knowledgeable about the Deaf world and thus more accepting of the fact that life is full of diversity so we can all embrace everybody’s differences.
Having Dennis come in has also helped me generate a fuller perspective of the Deaf world, and how we as non-deaf individuals can relate to the Deaf community. As Dennis mentioned, it is difficult to see at times the unique and valuable aspects of your own culture. Dennis was able to share with us aspects about Deaf culture that some of the other speakers may have overlooked or taken as a natural assumption. I really appreciated Dennis' emphasis on Deaf society as being more of a collectivist culture as opposed to an individualistic society like our own. I think that distinction really framed a lot of the issues -- especially the more contentious points -- that we have talked about.

The importance of residential schooling really stood out for me in Dennis' lectures. In order for Deaf individuals to receive the quality education promised to American citizens they should not be mainstreamed. It is all too true to consider how much harder it would be for a Deaf child to become a leader in a secondary schooling environment geared towards hearing children. This environment would harm a young Deaf individuals' confidence and self-esteem, and give them a false feeling of inadequacy.

Seeing the poetry of young Deaf students during Dennis' Hood lecture made this point even more salient. The students were so confident and happy while performing their pieces that I was saddened to think that had they not been so fortunate to be in a nurturing program, their outlook on life and view of themselves could have been dramatically different. If residential schools are not provided as an option for students, not only do the rich and vibrant aspects of Deaf culture like poetry suffer, but the spirits of these individuals are harmed as well.

On a final note, it was refreshing to meet someone like Dennis. I've notice that in college and in your 20's it is easy to turn your focus inward. Everything is about you, and arguably, that mentality is necessary to get the most out of your time in college and figure out who exactly you are. Now that I'm about to graduate, I realize that I need to shift my priorities once again, and start considering how I will choose to relate to the rest of society. I really enjoyed meeting Dennis because he is a great example of someone who has found a fulfilling path in life through helping others. He is not a member of the Deaf community, but he still is able to champion their causes and serve as a bridge and advocate. He gave me plenty to ponder in that regard.

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Dennis has taught me more about the Deaf community than any other person. Through him I have learned about Deaf residential schools and mainstreaming, social clubs, cities for the Deaf, the idea of a Deaf state, etc. Most interesting is the way that the Deaf seem to "know" about each other. Dennis said that Deaf teachers often teach non-Deaf students to a level of ASL understanding, but do not teach them so as to be mistaken for a Deaf person. That way, every true Deaf person will be able to pick them out as non-Deaf. This, along with other things, makes the Deaf community tight-knit and strong since they have that sense of pride.

ASL is a "meaning-intensive" or whatever the term is, language, in that you can assume that the other person knows a lot of the same things that you do. Because two people that sign come from similar backgrounds and experiences, they do not need to first find certain things out. They can jump right into--for instance, making fun of hearing people. This seems an excellent way to bring the Deaf community together, with shared experiences, shared history, and sometimes a common "enemy".

Again in an ideal world non-Deaf people would learn how to sign. This makes sense, and that is what I will try to do. However, as long as most people are not acquainted with Deaf people in their lives, there really is no incentive, no reason, and no easy way to learn ASL. Only when people are confronted with Deaf people in their lives does the possibility come up and any sort of advantage for learning ASL will become apparent. Since the Deaf community is still so small, I think it will remain in the corner, and out of the spotlight.

Dennis helped me learn the significance of hand positions, movement, quantifiers, simultaneous signing, and more. I talked to him about ABC stories and will now be doing my final project about ABC stories. I am looking forward to it. He also helped me translate a part of a song into ASL, and with his instruction, along with Mary, I was able to get a GLOSS. I am excited to get better and video a song. But just some of his comments made me think of certain aspects of translating in a new light. It is not so much translating sentence for sentence; it is much more important to translate the meaning.

Dennis is a great guy, and I wish I could have told him how much I appreciated his visits. They have taught me more than he realizes. They have opened the door for me into a whole new world, and I hope that I continue to learn more from this world.
As I expected from his visit with Pat Graybill, Dennis was amazing to listen to. Although his insight into the short poems we've been working with was interesting, I really liked his interpretation of Gil Eastman's Epic. Listening to it on the Signing The Body Poetic DVD was, at best, mechanical, but Dennis brought it to life and worked with the signing. I found myself just listening to the DVD and not connecting it to the signs, but Dennis really incorporated Gil's signing with his interpretation well. For instance, Dennis really pointed out the poetic elements of it, like the way Eastman describes buildings from the top down, which was echoed in most descriptions. I really liked how he pointed out subtleties, such as how the people were clapping, then signed "clapping," showing how the culture grew during this week.

One theme that resonated from Eastman's Epic was the Ivory Tower motif. The hearing people who made decisions about Gallaudet exemplified the Ivory Tower motif seen in literature. Spillman comes down an elevator to speak about the decision. The crowd has to go the stairs to the capitol building (which, although unmentioned, is white). I liked how this motif progressed. When it is first used, Spillman comes down to the crowd, and right after they cry to the heavens, but they fall short. The second time, the crowd goes up the stairs to the capitol building, but not in, and immediately after their cries reach the heavens. The third time, they go into the capitol, and right after the narrative talks about the signal going to the stars and actually having an effect, the stars being satellites this time, which broadcast the cries of the Deaf community to the world. To end this motif, Eastman describes the crowd thanking the stars, which later return the message in the form of the plane flying overhead.

One thing that I wish I would have asked Dennis was the significance of 7 in the poem. I didn't catch on to it until late so there may be more instances, but everything happens at 7 o'clock, and when Gil describes the different countries that hear the Deaf cries, he chooses to include Italy, who's sign is a 7. My guess is that it brings out that fact that this was a week, 7 days, where the country heard Gallaudet.

The videos Dennis showed on Wednesday night were amazing. Even as someone who doesn't know ASL, I could see how beautiful the signing was, especially the first little girl. I especially liked the poem about "Us and Them, we are not the same." The rhythm of the phrase "Us and Them, we are not the same," was great. If the signs for "Deaf" and "Hearing" are actually translated as "Us" and "Them" which Dennis did, the poem is easily relatable to the human experience and not just the Deaf community, which I think is important to all poetry.
Dennis Cokely is an amazing ally to the Deaf & HH communities. He recognizes the areas in which he is privileged and uses his privilege to create positive social change for these communities. In social organizing the importance of knowledgeable, informed allies cannot be overlooked. Dennis is an excellent ally because of his willingness to be involved in a community of which he is not a member and his unwillingness to overstep his bounds or to speak on behalf of this community.

He is aware of the power of poetry and performance as a tool for retelling history, passing on cultural information and for creating progress. This understanding has allowed him to create a poetry competition, inviting Deaf & HH children throughout the US and parts of Canada to participate in the creation of new cultural material. I am amazed at Dennis’ foresight into the ripple effect that creating a national competition has had. Schools now have local competitions and public performances as a precursor to creating an entry for the national competition. This brings poetry – specifically political poetry about the experiences of Deafhood – into a more public arena where it is shared, remembered, repeated, adapted, changed. This is a truly amazing project and I hope it will continue to grow.

Aside from his organizing skills I am impressed with Dennis’ insight into the poetic. At the East Wheelock dinner he pulled out a theme in Valli’s “Dandelions” poem that I hadn’t considered: the more you try to weed us out, the more we grow. I believe that growth absolutely happens more in times of difficulty, but it also makes me worry that when marginalized groups achieve goals of “equality” that there will be less of a need for a community. When these groups can find images of themselves in congress, on TV, in academics, in magazines, in places of power, what will happen to the tight-knit communities to which they once belonged? This is a question that scares me. In many ways I think that reaching the goals my community is currently struggling to achieve will lead to the end of this community, as collective organizing will no longer be necessary and assimilation will (regrettably, in my opinion) become even more easily achievable. I wonder if speculations such as these are also feared in the Deaf & HH communities as well and would have liked to have the opportunity to ask Dennis his thoughts on this.
Having Dennis Cokely as a returning guest in our class was a great experience. Although he had been in the class earlier in the term, at the time, I didn’t fully realize and appreciate his knowledge of Deaf culture and Deaf issues. It was nice that he was able to come back and teach the class, not only about poetry, but also about the flaws in Deaf education. Through his lectures I was able to acquire completely new ideas about mainstreaming and deaf residential schools. Hearing about the advantages of going to a deaf residential school for deaf youth I began thinking back to my time in boarding school. I recall having much closer relationships with my teachers and a better feel for the world of academia. Although me going to a boarding school is not really comparable to a deaf student going to a residential school I think I can still identify with the great personal care that can be found at boarding schools. Being a ‘double minority’ in my small environment with caring teachers enabled me to grow and foster whereas in public school I was drowning. I also really enjoyed speaking with Dennis Cokely at office hours. His answer to my question about LGBT youth really got me thinking about the vast amount of information and support that is harder for children in Deaf society to receive.
I really loved our guest this week. I really wish he had came at the very beginning of the term. As good as it is to hear about the different methods of rhyme rhythm and symbolism that can be used in ASL poetry, Dennis actually took us through and analyzed these poems with us, allowing us to see these aspects in action. It’s very hard to understand and appreciate things like flow and parallel hand shapes when the majority of us are hearing people who are only starting to grasp some rudimentary signs.

By taking us through and helping us to analyze the poems down to individual signs, it significantly strengthened my appreciation of the intricacies of ASL poetry. One example of this is when Ella Mae Lentz performed the poem "To a Hearing Mother". Not only did he help us to understand the powerful meaning of this poem, but he demonstrated some interesting nuances in the poem. One thing he pointed out was that though Mrs. Lentz is right handed when she separates US and THEM to sides of her body she starts with THEM on her left side and puts US on her right, the "preferred" position. He also explained to us a cultural component in the poem, where the sign that means HEARING actually has a different implication, one of not us or other. Another interesting concept that he showed us was that of flow in signs, especially in the poem the Swan where there was no need to sign the rippling water, but it allows Rennie to flow seamlessly into seeing the swan. These nuances deepened our understanding of the breadth of ASL's use of a language and our knowledge of Deaf culture. It has been hard for me to grasp these concepts just through reading and our normal classes, but these two classes brought so much into focus. I hope we do more of this sign by sign analysis in the future.

Beyond this I found Dennis' knowledge of Deaf culture to be both entertaining and informative. My favorite example of this was when Dennis explained how Deaf people are really blunt in order to show that they care. He said that when a Deaf person says "You've gained weight" that shows that not only do they care about how you look but that they remember how you used to look. These interesting insights were extremely enlightening and gave us an expert's insight into the culture we have been studying.
Week 7 Journal: Dennis Cokely

This past week, a familiar face served as guest lecturer for the class—none other than the renowned Northeastern University linguist and scholar of ASL, Dennis Cokely. Though Cokely had previously served as a resource to the class during Patrick Graybill’s visit in week two, his prior appearance was chiefly in the role of interpreter, providing only minimal commentary and insights of his own. This time however, Cokely was unburdened by the limitations of interpreter ethics and imparted a wealth of knowledge regarding Deaf culture and ASL poetry to the class.

To begin, a common theme emphasized throughout Cokely’s presentation, and one which I found particularly fascinating and informative, was the inherently collectivist nature of Deaf culture. As several members of the class were apt to point out, this is not uncommon amongst marginalized minority groups within mainstream society, but based upon Cokely’s commentary, the Deaf minority culture seems exceptionally geared towards collectivism.

An example which demonstrates this point is the fact that the Deaf favor excruciatingly flagrant honesty when interacting with one another, as well as with those of the hearing community. This is a trait which I had previously observed in the behavior of the Deaf guest lecturers who have visited our class, as well as our ASL instructor, Mary Essex. However, I had previously not thought much of it, attributing it more to individual personality traits and such. I thought the point Cokely made about how what would be interpreted within individualist mainstream American culture as derogatory would be seen amongst the Deaf in an entirely different light. For instance, were a Deaf person to greet me after a long absence by telling me I’ve gained weight, I would likely
be offended. However, Cokely made the claim that such unfiltered honesty is Deaf
culture-speak for expression of love and affection.

Cokely further implied that due to the collectivist nature of Deaf culture, such
statements can be interpreted as a sort of benevolent guidance for the Deaf as well as a
means to cope with the ubiquitous prejudices of mainstream hearing society. For
instance, going back to the weight analogy, following Cokely’s line of reasoning, a Deaf
person could be trying to impart the message that it is important to maintain one’s health,
as to do otherwise could create and perpetuate another negative stereotype against the
Deaf (namely, that Deaf people are overweight and unattractive). Though I don’t really
understand how or why these statements would be interpreted in this way, I nevertheless
accept the validity of Cokely’s point. The fact that I am unable to see such statements as
anything but insults is mainly a product of the “low context” culture to which I am
accustomed, which is in direct contrast to the “high context” nature of Deaf culture
described by Cokely in which maximum information regarding shared experiences,
opinions, and beliefs is assumed during communication between Deaf people.

Though Cokely addressed a multitude of other issues, including the failures of
mainstreamed education for Deaf people, and his involvement with programs such as
youth poetry contests which are designed to perpetuate involvement in ASL as an art
form, it truly was the theme of the collectivist nature of Deaf culture which particularly
intrigued and resonated with me. I feel that as a result of his invaluable perspective as a
member of mainstream culture who has worked for the majority of his life with the Deaf,
I now have a far greater understanding of and appreciation for the uniqueness of
American Deaf culture. I’m sure that I am only beginning to see the tip of the iceberg, however…
Even though Dennis Cokely is not a Deaf person himself, he has a surprisingly vast amount of insight into the Deaf experience. Before we came to understand his background, I thought that perhaps he entered this field because he was a CODA or a SODA. However, we learned in class that his passion for his work all started with his friendship with Patrick Graybill in the seminary. Their interactions led him down a different kind of path of “enlightenment” to where he is now, as the Director of the ASL Program at Northeastern University and one of the most well regarded interpreters in the nation.

Through Dennis, we have learned perhaps the most about the history of Deaf culture, from the early manual codes for English to the rise and fall of Deaf clubs. I was really intrigued by what he had to say regarding the impact of non-Deaf people in awareness of Deaf-related issues. For instance, he insisted that non-Deaf teachers of American Sign Language have a negative impact, in that they are taking opportunities for employment away from potential Deaf instructors. I feel as though this is a matter of ethics, since it is challenging to weigh the trade-off between teaching ASL to non-Deaf students and offering jobs exclusively to the Deaf (who may be qualified but lacking the official education and degree(s) necessary to teach, according to Dennis).

During the drop-in hours on Wednesday, he also briefly discussed the role of the non-Deaf in issues or realms of Deaf empowerment. He argued that a non-Deaf person in authority should use his or her influence to assist and empower Deaf individuals. Moreover, the non-Deaf person should be willing and prepared to hand over his or her position to a Deaf person, when a Deaf person is available and qualified to take over that job. I wonder if Dennis himself has ever struggled with this internal conflict personally. Granted, it wouldn’t really make sense for a Deaf person to be in charge of the interpreting program at Northeastern, but surely, a Deaf person could head the components of the program related to Deaf culture and the Deaf community in America.

This whole issue raises the question, how can non-Deaf individuals, such as ourselves, can aid in the Deaf cause of self-determination in ways other than learning American Sign Language (from a Deaf teacher, naturally)? Or rather, do the Deaf actually want assistance from the non-Deaf? After all, support is one thing, but
supervision is another. There seems to be a fine line between helping and interfering, as is usually the case in situations between majority and minority groups.
Sitting through various lectures and events with Dennis Cokely over the past week has been extraordinarily informative. Aside from hearing Cokely’s take on the intricacies of Deaf Culture, we have learned about the experience of a non-deaf person who occupies space in the deaf world, a perspective that can be easily overlooked in a class on ASL Poetry.

I found Cokely’s public performance at the Hood Museum especially interesting since he addressed one of the pressing topics of our class--the decline in ASL Poetry among the Deaf Community. As non-deaf Americans have become increasingly interested in learning ASL songs and other artistic expressions such as Poetry, ASL poetry seems to be a declining aspect of Deaf Culture. Cokely acknowledged several possible reasons for this decline, most which parallel the decline of Deaf social spaces. As a result of cultural integration through tools such as closed captioned television and online internet communities (not included in this discussion are the effects of the American with Disabilities Act on public education of deaf individuals) the art form of poetry, which was commonly enjoyed in group spaces as a tool of deaf narrative expression, is on the decline.

For many non-deaf individuals, a little less poetry may not cause alarm. This is especially true since for most American students poetry tends to be an abstract, inaccessible form of expression that we first experience when our English teachers press
upon us the importance of meter, rhyme and memorization. But like most things, the use of poetry needs some context to better understand why its decline is so pressing in the Deaf Community. As mentioned above, poetry tends to be less abstract (although abstract is definitely used) and more narrative. Poetry's rise in the Deaf Community is credited with its ability to allow individuals to express themselves and the Deaf Experience. Without ASL Poetry, many of the Deaf Community’s most important historical events such as Deaf President NOW! and the story of Abbe Charles-Michel de l'Épée might be lost forever. In essence, a decline in poetry within Deaf Culture may have greater implications than such a decline within non-Deaf Cultures.

Dennis Cokely is working to actively combat such declines through his annual poetry protest. Personally, I found the videos we previewed at the Hood to be very inspiring and hopeful for the future of ASL Poetry. By actively engaging deaf youth in the process of creating ASL Poetry through a contest that rewards their achievement the contest works to make ASL poetry a relevant form of popular art in deaf youth. In turn, students will aspire to be poets. More so, the contest is bound by rules that specifically ensure the passage of deaf oral histories and stories featuring important historical figures. More than an art contest, Cokely’s project encourages the rejuvenation of ASL Poetry in youth and guarantees the art form will continue to grow for years to come.

Cokely’s innovative approach to ensuring the continuance of ASL Poetry contrasts with approaches taken by other cultural groups such as the French who famously implemented Language Protection Laws among other measures to prevent what the nation views as detrimental influence from outside cultures. While it is understandable that a people
might seek to protect their culture (one might say its natural), we should never forget that
cultures evolve, mix and change naturally. To prohibit such evolution is to inhibit a
natural progression that has always occurred as people migrated, inter-married and were
introduced in various manners to other cultures. Although cultures can be protected to a
certain degree, I do not think we should seek to prevent all kinds of cultural blending. By
engaging youth in the process of ASL Poetry, Cokely rejects forced cultural protection
that often proves ineffective and chooses a path that focuses on building support for ASL
poetry organically because of its fun, engaging and relevant nature. I think this approach
is brilliant and effective.
Dennis Cokely’s visit to our class this week allowed me to truly place the Deaf experience within a historical context for the first time. Through his breakdown of many important pieces of legislation and various reforms to existing policies, Dennis illustrated for me how the hearing majority has interrupted much of the richness of Deaf culture through mainstreaming and integration into the hearing world. I was struck by his take on the consequences of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Through my past experiences working with children with life-long disabilities and medical conditions, I have heard many parents heralding the opportunities that such legislation makes possible. For example, one family used the terms of the ADA to compel their local school district to make the facilities in the elementary school for gifted students accessible for those who require use of a wheelchair. I was therefore surprised to hear Dennis focus on the negative impact of the ADA on Deaf education. However, having heard Patrick Graybill attest to the value of residential education for the Deaf, as well as Christine Kim’s frustration with her recent experience in the public school system, I could understand how the policy of mainstreaming could certainly cut down on the opportunities for Deaf students to learn and flourish.

I like what Dennis said about the Deaf community making up a “collective culture.” Though I think it is common for marginalized groups to present a united front within larger society, I had never formally considered the distinction between “collective” and “individualistic” society. While many of the works and artists we have studied thus far have focused on the Deaf experience (a clear manifestation of a collective identity) I think that the Eastman epic was particularly demonstrative of this concept of collectivity. Eastman offers a narrative that details a situation in which the Deaf community rallies behind a single, specific cause; rather than discussing the more general, common themes of marginalization, forced assimilation and ambiguous identities, Eastman offers an example of how the Deaf community exercised their power as a united force and resisted falling into passivity. I think that Dennis’ interpretation of the epic allowed me to understand both the meaning and aesthetic value of this story as well as I possibly could without entirely comprehending the sign.

Lastly, I really enjoyed Dennis’ presentation at the Hood museum. It was incredible to see how, as a scholar in the field, he has tried to restore some of the cultural richness that has been lost in educating the upcoming generation of Deaf adults. I will be interested to see how efforts like those of Dennis and his contemporaries at Northeastern translate into changes in the education system- will there be a resurgence in the number of residential schools for the deaf in the U.S. or will the government continue to project “conventional” educational schemes on deaf children?
Dennis Cokely, the premier American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter, visited our class for the second time. He guest lectured for the entire week and presented a show at the Hood Museum. He calls for bridge building, in which non-signers seek introspection and insight to successfully navigate between the hearing and Deaf communities. Cokely offered insight into the plight of the Death, specifically regarding education and language. He is infuriated by the current teaching system. "Forty percent of early [ASL] teachers were deaf", according to the interpreter. Then, prior to 1880, the average literacy rate for Deaf students was at a fourth grade level. The United States later adopted oralism following the Milan Congress in the late 1800s. By 1910, only ten percent of ASL teachers were Deaf. The literacy rate for Deaf students who are not born to Deaf parents continues to remain at or below that of a fourth grader. The dearth of Deaf teachers creates "a system that perpetuates under-education". Consequently, it leads to a "population in which student's language model is interpred with relatively new experience". When children have few role models to aspire to, I believe, it creates an emotional barrier that prohibits success. Surely the fourth grade leaving in 1880 is much different from that in 2011....with that in mind, I wonder how far the literacy rate has regressed?

Dennis Cokely explained the key different between the hearing and Deaf world, which is something I have wondered about. "I an individualistic society", he began, "we present the facts--in a collective culture, we present narratives". Storytelling is essential to Deaf culture; as traditions and facts of life are passed down orally, a Deaf person's message becomes that of an entire culture. "Narratives have more potency than objectivity, and are characteristic in a lot of minority cultures who are not assimilated". As I was growing up, men in my community were taught to be extra cautious around police. Rodney King, a young California native, was brutally beat by police officers. The incident caused public outrage that raised tensions between the Los Angeles Police Department and the Black community. Ten years later, there is an invisible gap between law enforcement and minorities in the United States. Similarly, there is a huge gap between the use of speech and the Deaf in the United States. In school, non-Deaf teachers encourage their students to speak, as it gives hope to more professional opportunities and social acceptance. The teachers, however, are rarely Deaf and have a difficult time understanding that Deaf speech is incomprehensible for the majority of Americans. They have never experienced the downside of failing to communicate with their peers. Following school, Deaf graduates enter the workforce and are faced with the brutal reality that few pedestrians are accustomed to their "English". These graduates tell others about their experience, which leads to the disdain of oralism. It takes only one bad experience to reinforce the minority collective.

I loved Cokely's introduction about Clayton Valli, as well. One of the first poets to go public with ASL poetry, Clayton Valli relocated to Reno, Nevada as a young man. He attempted to trained a monkey in ASL. During the time, scientists believed that ASL could bridge the gap between humans and "animals" by providing interspecies communication. But what does this say about ASL", Cokely questioned. He strongly
believes that, during that period, scientists reduced the dynamic language to a simple mode of gestural communication. I wholeheartedly agreed with Cokely. It reminded me when Ebonics became more mainstream, and words that I considered a part of my culture were used in pop and rap videos, with no reference to their origins. This leads to my next question... what happens when ASL becomes more mainstream? Will it be reduced to mere slang, with little respect for its origin? Moreover, how will Deaf people be treated? Will they lose their minority status and, consequently, the culture they aim to protect?

These are questions that Cokely and other great leaders in the Deaf community will have to ask themselves. Bridging the gap, I believe, has less to do with language and more to do with empathy. Not everyone wants to be Dennis Cokely and literally enter a stadium with hundreds of Deaf people. I admire Cokely's work and his willingness to discover his true path... but I wonder if the United States will collectively recognize the significance of our Deaf community.
Our class had the wonderful opportunity to hear from Dennis Cokely. When we first met Dennis he was interpreting for Patrick Graybill, and I really enjoyed having him back as our guest teacher. I loved hearing about Dennis’ introduction to ASL and Deaf Culture, and it’s amazing to see how much he’s accomplished in this field. Aside from benefitting from his knowledge, I think just hearing his story and seeing his passion for what he does inspired me. By chance he found his way into a career that it would have been impossible to anticipate.

Dennis’ provided insightful information about education of the Deaf and Deaf Culture. I found his breakdown of legislation surrounding people with disabilities and the resulting consequences for Deaf people to be fascinating. Dennis described the result of these laws as a “forced Diaspora,” which sent Deaf children to mainstream schools, resulting only in poor education and isolation. Although we’ve touched on this theme with other guests, I continue to find this subject very thought provoking. Prior to this class, I would not have guessed all of the problems with mainstream education for Deaf children, and I probably would have chosen a mainstream school over residential school if forced to make a hypothetical choice. Perhaps this is because for most of our lives, we’ve been taught that the notion of “separate but equal” is not possible, especially within the context of racial segregation and the African-American Civil Rights Movement. Segregation can only be a bad thing – this is what we are taught. While racially segregated schools had negative effects for the marginalized, many of the readings and speakers for this class have persuaded me to believe separate schools for Deaf children are in many ways beneficial. However, the poor connotation of “segregation” or separation of a minority group from the mainstream led me to assume that mainstreaming Deaf children was a good thing, and perhaps even something to celebrate (much like integrated schools were once celebrated?) Although prior to this class I didn’t spend much time thinking about this, to reiterate I’m saying that if asked to guess I think my gut would have led me to be in favor of mainstream schooling, although with careful consideration I’m sure I could have come up with pro’s and cons. To have equal education doesn’t necessarily mean Deaf children should have the same exact educational experiences as non-Deaf children, which is something I’m guessing few people realize. Although it is a stretch to project my own though process, I wonder if the dark history of separate schooling influenced the push to mainstream Deaf children and has since contributed to this “forced Diaspora” and the negative consequences that Dennis discussed.

Switching gears, I enjoyed Dennis’ deconstruction of ASL poetry and the Eastman epic. I enjoyed considering the “cinematography” of poetry, especially with respect to Debbie Rennie’s “Swan.” Given that I am not fluent in the language, I have experienced some difficulty appreciating ASL poetry as a separate form from conversational ASL. I liked how Dennis pointed out movements in poetry that would not be performed in conversational signing. I was able to better see what distinguishes poetry, and I hope to apply Denis’ teachings to the next poems I watch.
To be honest, at first I was wary about having a non-Deaf guest. I knew that Dennis was very knowledgeable about the things that we are studying, but I wondered about something being lost in discussing and analyzing the Deaf community in such a detailed manner without someone there to confirm the experience for us. This theme of the ideal roles for Deaf and non-Deaf members of a community is something that I’ve struggled with a fair amount over the last couple of weeks as I consider a job working with and advocating for Deaf people. I wonder about the line that delineates what is helpful and what is hurtful, something Dennis helped me sort out during his office hours. I was surprised, though, in finding that, even though Dennis is not Deaf, he added a fresh, interesting perspective and an incredible amount of insight into some of the things about which we have been talking. In fact, I think that the fact that we can relate to the way in which he experiences the world, coupled with the fact that we had already spent a week together, fostered a certain connection. I also would venture to say that sometimes an “outsider’s” perspective is beneficial; from the outside it is much easier to see things for what they are, and to appreciate the nuances of a culture. This is precisely the insightful perspective that Dennis shared with us.

One example of this is Dennis’ thoughts on the “collectivist” nature of the Deaf community, reflected in many aspects of ASL, versus the individualist American culture (“if there is such a thing…”). This seemed to be a reoccurring theme, whether we were discussing various aspects of Deaf culture or the linguistic features of any of the poems, this seemed to be a cornerstone. I found it particularly interesting how Dennis connected this idea of a collectivist culture to narrative instead of fact, as in the smoking example.
He also made the point that the characteristic bluntness of Deaf individuals is an effort to “protect the collective”. Furthermore, he painted the picture of a dynamic culture, which is an important detail to keep in mind. With regard to the collectivist culture, it sounded like technology has had a huge impact on shaping the ever-evolving Deaf culture. His argument about the importance of *place* when speaking about technology driving out Deaf clubs was an interesting one, and it reminded me of the chapter in *Inside Deaf Culture* that adds the emergence of a Deaf middle class to the argument.

Personally, I continue to be fascinated by ideas about Deaf education, which is very much linked to these arguments of a middle class. Dennis was able to add a new political dimension to the topic of Deaf education, and I found myself wanting to know even more about that. Once again, I was blown away by his stories about Deaf literacy and frustrated by the fact that ignorance on the part of our society and our government has led to lack of opportunity for Deaf people, which has created the stigma of limited ability that still persists.

Finally, as I touched on in the first paragraph, I think that I am most grateful for the one-on-one conversations that I was able to have with Dennis. I admire all that Dennis has accomplished, his ingenuity, and the spirit with which he persists. I hope to emulate his work, and having had the opportunity to interact with him has definitely helped me progress on that path.
If I could describe Dennis Cokely's visit with one word, it would have to be, educational. This week I learned so much about D/deaf culture than from reading assignments and other guest lecturers. Dennis presented so much information, from historical facts to the colloquialisms of D/deaf language/culture/life. Dennis made a statement however, about how Deaf people can sometimes be considered their own “ethnic group.” I'm not quite sure about this, or rather I'm not completely sold. In some respects, yes they can be considered their own ethnic group, but not really. I'd like to explore that further which would require a comparison between my definition of ethnic group and the official working definition of “ethnic group.”

While Tuesday's lecture on the poem “swan” was very intellectual, dissecting the poem, explaining it and relating it to how D/deaf people relate things, view life, experiences etc., Thursdays lecture, for me, was more enjoyable and riveting. Dennis stated that Deaf people are extremely blunt, and that is how they show they “care” about you; he then gave the example of your friend wearing a hideous outfit to a date, and “Hearing people” shying away from telling them the truth, whereas a Deaf person would tell them they look horrible. I responded to that example and said I would tell the truth too. Prof. Polansky, made an interesting statement saying that that probably occurs in minority groups in general, because as a minority, you have to look out for one another, they represent the collective group as a whole, if one person looks bad, the whole group looks bad and so that is why someone of a minority group would probably be more inclined to “tell it like it is.” I definitely agree with this, and I never thought of it that way until it was brought up. I thought that was a very interesting take on that type of situation; ideas of “protecting the collective,” “reflection on us,” “group has a certain level of priority more than the individual.”

Another interesting point that Dennis made was the fact that the Essence of Deaf poetry is the fact that in it, you find elements that you do not see in everyday normal speech or conversation; thus making it poetic. Since Deaf people can't really speak a poem and have puns and play on words, it seems as if they've evolved their own way to turn a regular phrase/word/sentence into a significant, meaningful, thought provoking poetic stanza. I found that quite interesting and innovative and just intriguing.

Lastly, my final thought has to do with the “Deaf President Now” movement and Clayton Valli's moving poem. The poem in itself was lovely, the way he moved and signed was captivating and engaging, my point however has to do with the actual events of the movement. Dennis stated that, and I forget her name, I think it was Bassett, she stated that “Deaf people aren’t ready to function in the human world.” Of course Deaf people found that offensive, but just as a human being and as a minority, that statement in general is just horrendous. It implies that Deaf people aren’t human essentially, which is such a slap on the face. It implies that deaf people are subhuman, how could that be? How could someone even think that, let alone say it...I was definitely taken aback by the quote and it reminded me of how cold some people are, it reminds me of all the injustices done to humans in the world, all the inequalities, everything. Its because of statements/thoughts such as this one that horrible words and actions/experiences happen. It's just sad really.