CC2
American Sign Language Poetry and Performance in Translation
Dartmouth College
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Journals in reaction to Peter Cook’s visit, May 17-19
Before Peter Cook came to class, I knew that there was going to be more campus interest in his work because of his previous performance on campus as part of the Flying Words Project. I also expected the performances to be very dynamic, as I remember reading a quote from LA Weekly that compared his ability to express himself as comparable to that of comic Robin Williams. But I never expected the week to be this much fun.

Peter Cook walked in to class on Tuesday and immediately asked us all to get up and start signing. We all stood around in a circle and signed our favorite ASL signs. Immediately the room was energized because we were actually signing and being active participants, not passive listeners. Already, students were having a more interactive learning experience. Then, Peter Cook took us through one of the most important exercises I have been through in this course. The hour of no talking. For an hour, Peter Cook asked us to turn off our voices and become in tune with our gestural and facial communication. And for that hour, I learned so much. Peter’s facial expression was definitely a prominent part of his language and ASL poetry. And to become more in tune with that part of communication skills in the exercises we did was a great thing to watch and experience. To not use hand or even a real language to communicate was amazing. It really taught me a lot about how to convey ideas and feelings to other people, and also how much nonverbal communication can be telling of a person’s feelings and personality, even in the non-Deaf community.

Peter Cook introduced me to another aspect of my final project topic when he talked about the first Deaf reaction to film in his lecture on Tuesday. He showed how film techniques were used to describe films and how film techniques were used in ASL poetry. But not only did he show us. He allowed us to take part in the lecture and practice our ASL skills, even to create a poem for the following class. Peter Cook also gave me a focus for my final project paper, when he talked about Charlie Chaplin’s work in the Silent Film Era.

But the most interesting visual connection I have ever seen between two performers was Wednesday night when Peter was accompanied by Kenny Lerner. The chemistry between the two artists was amazing. You could see how they played off each other, how their personalities melded together on stage, which made each poetic performance a very moving thing to watch. The poems seemed so diverse and vivid with Peter’s actions and facial expressions. Even Kenny Lerner heightened the emotion in the room by moving the pitch and tone of his voice with each poem, to make the scene of each poem more surreal.

I also enjoyed taking part in the group poem. It reminded me of how the collective is important in Deaf culture, and how using an audience to demonstrate that feeling is a great way to convey that idea. The group poem allowed the entire audience to form one picture, one scene, together. It was even more exciting because students from other classes and the two students from Harvard Wellesley were able to join in the fun.

Thursday’s class with Kenny Lerner only built on that feeling from Wednesday’s performance. In class, we again had that interactive feel by forming our own poems, after learning about form and structure. The explanation and breakdown of poems by hand
shape and ASL “rhyming” was very interesting. It was also different to analyze poems that did not discuss the Deaf experience. But later that evening at the East Wheelock dinner, when Peter and Kenny performed again, we got to see a new side to Peter’s performance, as a storyteller. We saw the dark side to his poetry and the light side of his storytelling. It was very apparent the stark contrast in material and styles, and how just the presentation of information can change the very meaning of a story.

The most interesting discussion I have heard so far in the class was probably at the dinner, when the various Deaf artists/students/teachers in the room discussed their favorite music. It was interesting to see how each had some song or memory related to the subject. I enjoyed also having two Deaf students from Harvard and Wellesley in class. It was interesting to hear their perspective and interact with them in class. It seemed to give the class a new dynamic, now that not only non-Deaf students were in attendance. It made the environment seem more integrated.

This week was also a huge lesson in interpreting, watching as 4-5 interpreters switch speakers and perspectives during the conversation. With the number of speakers in the room, I finally felt a sense of what Rene Pellerin described as inclusion, where it seems almost everyone in the room knew how to sign, and there seemed to be no communication barrier. In conclusion, Peter Cook’s visit was probably the most interactive visit we have had so far with ASL poetry. It forced us to look at ourselves and what we express even as non-Deaf speakers with facial expression and gestures, and how those are used to create images and use film techniques to tell stories. And it exposed us to some of the most beautiful, contemporary ASL poetry. And while almost all of the poems were not about the Deaf experience they conveyed big emotions and beautifully demonstrated how an observation can be extended into a full picture, a scene, and movie in front of our eyes.

On an aside note, it made me happy to know that Peter Cook resides in the Chicago area, where I’m from. Perhaps I will have the opportunity to see him perform again some time.
Peter Cook’s presentations this week were both amusing and simply innovative. The first class with him started with an acting activity, and rather than us being the audience, we became active d/Deaf individuals. From the very beginning of the week Mr. Cook made us feel comfortable but at the same time he made us challenge ourselves, our beliefs, and our perceptions of d/Deaf culture. By assuming the role of a d/deaf person, we were all as students able to not just experiment with ASL by also explore its features. The first acting activity that Mr. Cook engaged all students in was a game to demonstrate how d/Deaf people demonstrate degrees of signs. The other activity he proposed was a form of “charade” in which students acted out through gestures and facial expression various emotions. The fact that these students were able and obliged at the same time to convey the written emotions through facial expression explains how and why facial expression is an intrinsic aspect of ASL. It was interesting to remark that Mr. Cook emphasized the idea that d/Deaf individuals do not need to learn facial expressions, they simply develop this skill while learning the language itself. These activities showed me exactly why ASL can be characterized as a language that employs cinematographic techniques. Mr. Cook’s performances of his poems were utterly astounding and original. His poems were focused primarily on political issues, and out of all d/Deaf performers so far, he seemed to have been the most politically engaged guest. These poems clearly showed the cinematographic elements of transformation, close-ups, and zoom-outs. It was fascinating
to see how Mr. Cook transformed from speaking of an object in his poem and then eventually becoming that object. In his poem “Charlie” it was easy to see that unlike written English poetry, rhythm in ASL poetry is maintained by hand shapes, their repetition, and by the graceful movements of the signs. Everything in ASL is encompassed in the language itself, and rather than having to learn the rules such as those of grammar and syntax, in ASL facial expression and body language are naturally acquired.

The presentation at the Hood Museum on Wednesday night was extremely engaging and thrilling. Mr. Cook made us do, for the very first time ever, a group poem in which each and every member of the audience participated. It was remarkable at first to notice the sense of accord and interdependence between Mr. Cook and Kenny, but for the presenters to include us all into one performance was indeed a feat. It was stunning to see that simple signs in ASL when organized into a group poem can have such rhythm and graceful movement. Everything about the presentation from beginning to end brought life to the audience and turned us all into active participants.

Mr. Cook’s presentations last week demonstrated to me as a student of ASL a different aspect of this language: its ability to transfer human emotion in a way that written language itself fails to do. In ASL there is no barrier between the writer and the text, because simply you do become the subject and the text. The ability for d/Deaf people to demonstrate their emotions bluntly and without a barrier is not just fascinating, but admirable. How many of us hide behind paper in an attempt to write how we feel without letting others sense that? How many of us say one thing and fake smiles without
actually meaning what we say or the gestures we show? I have to come to not only like ASL more and more, but have also become inspired to learn it comprehensively.
I find Peter Cook and Kenny Lerner interactive approach to getting people to appreciate deaf poetry to be very effective and educating. Most of the lectures we have had in class have very informative as well as interesting but for the first time, Cook’s lecture allowed us, or at least me, to “experience” the power of conveying language and emotions through interpretative gestures and motion. As I came to realize, sometimes we do understand something when it is acted out than said to us. Cook’s lecture in regards to how powerful gestures and facial expressions are to expressing meaning reminded me of times when I know my mother is upset me. She does not have to raise her voice or give me a long lecture; all she does is give me the “eye”. That facial expression is all I need to know that I have stepped out of boundary or done something she disapproves it. It is amazing that the deaf community through ASL utilizes the same method along with signs as a means of communication.

Storytelling through ASL as Cook illustrated through his lectures and performances is more about the subjective mode of expressive rather than the objective which concentrates more on the language used. Cook showed that ASL poetry takes everything into account including the environment and this I believe helps the audience to better understand the mood of the story or poetry being performed. I believe the strength of ASL lies in its very “cinematic artistic approach. Cook’s performances in and out of class were very captivating because he told the poetry as a film would do in the big screen. ASL utilizes the techniques of different angles that movies/films are shot in and this is very effective in telling the “bigger picture”. We are able to decipher the environment and mood along with the subjects involved in the poetry from the way Cooks zooms in and out of the protagonist or main subjects. I began to employ the same method of storytelling when Cook asked us to work in groups to tell a story. The first thing I thought about was if I were a movie, how would I capture the story through the camera? Taking such approach I believe helped my group to focus in on important aspects such as objects/environment that sets the mood with less information as possible. We wanted to tell a story based in the Wild West and we began to use elements that many of us associate with the period without the usage of language. It was very exciting to see how students quickly could tell what story we were trying to tell simply by our facial expressions and movement of our body.

I am not trying to say that ASL poetry is only successful based on the fact that it uses the same methods as filmmakers in capturing a movie. Of course there is more to it than that. Past lecturers have shown that the person performing adds a lot of dimensions and plays a crucial role to helping the audience convey the meaning. For instance, Peter Graybill and Peter Cook are two well-respected performers in the deaf community but they both perform very differently. Peter is able to communicate meaning across through his own special way of distinct facial expressions as well as signing while Cook is more energetic and gets his message across by getting the audience to participate. Audience participation allows us to question and derive the meaning while same effect could be accomplished from intently looking at Graybill while he performs.

In all, I truly enjoyed Peter Cook and Kenny Lerner presence in our class and they truly made both sessions memorable with the wacky and dynamic stage relationship.
After watching The Flying Words Project I really am starting to understand why ASL poetry is unlike any other medium for expressing ideas. During Thursday's class, someone mentioned (possibly Peter Cook) how some earlier poets would have died to have been able to sign and essentially put life and movement behind their words. The story of the hydrogen jukebox that we have heard so many times is a prime example of this. Ginsberg was astonished at how easily the image he was trying to convey in words was conveyed by Patrick Graybill in a quick series of signs and gestures.

ASL poetry is able to capture movement and the progression of a story better than a static art form like written poetry or a panting. I would liken its ability to convey a concept to a short film. When watching a number of the ASL poetry performances, I begin to craft the visual in my head and see the dog Charlie marching through the tropical terrain of Vietnam. I think that ASL poetry is more personal than a film because it gives the viewer the opportunity to fill in the blanks and craft some components of the visual in their head, like a book or oral story. The point that really separates ASL poetry between other mediums of expression is how clearly emotion is expressed. I have been trying to think of another medium that is able to convey such sharp emotions. Being able to read facial expressions while a story or concept is being relayed has a really captivating effect. A film, written, or spoken poem of Charlie would not have been able to strike such a chord of empathy among the audience, as I think the Peter and Kenny's ASL version was able to do.

This got me thinking about the youth slam poetry movement. I think that the emphasis that many of these younger poets are trying to employ by speaking their poetry to a rhythm or with body movement is really similar to what Peter Cook and other ASL poets are able to achieve through ASL. I think that it would be really exciting to see those two art forms interact. ASL could be a perfect medium for these young poets to explore and express themselves through.

I am really glad that Peter Cook and Kenny Lerner agreed to work with our class and share some of their poetry. It was a thought-provoking, eye-opening and enjoyable week. I wish them the best of luck, and hope that they continue to experiment and explore with language.
Every week I am pleasantly surprised with the new and exciting life lessons I take away from each guest. This past week was no different, as Peter Cook and Kenny Lerner helped make the class enjoyable and unforgettable.

In the first class, Peter started off by instructing us to push our chairs back and stand in a circle around the room. We then proceeded to present our favorite signs and I chose to use the sign for “star.” With our individual signs, Peter showed us how to exaggerate the sign to become either incredibly large or small. Additional class activities included working with partners and freezing as “statues” with designated emotional expressions, mimicking the traveling of a vehicle, practicing the art of reacting to a falling coffee cup, and an overall group performance.

This particular week was another meaningful experience, because it was different in that the class was allowed to be a part of the poetry making process. In the previous classes, we were all able to enjoy watching poetry, stories, and learning from the guests; however, we never actually took part in learning what it was like to create poetry. The activity in which we chose our favorite signs and exaggerated them seemed incredibly simple at first; however, the significance of it showed how difficult it can be to express certain meanings in ASL poetry. At the same time, exaggerating signs also shows how important it is to imbue emotion into signs in order to effectively communicate an idea or thought. I appreciate the time Peter and Kenny took to explain how a certain variation in a sign can completely change the meaning of a poem.

Peter and Kenny’s “Flying Words Project” was also especially interesting to watch, as they took ASL poetry beyond normal two handed signing. When they performed, it was a novel idea for Kenny to stand behind Peter and act as a secondary set of hands to convey the idea of “language.” The idea of using more than one person to perform poetry is certainly never one I had thought of before, and I feel that Peter and Kenny are creating a gateway for evolved forms of ASL poetry. During the Hood Museum presentation, I thought it was ingenious to have an interactive presentation and incorporate the audience into an overall performance. Additionally, the group project the class performed at the end was very enjoyable and it showed me how incorporating more than one set of hands adds increased significance and meaning to a poetic piece.
Peter and Kenny were an inspirational duo this past week and provided some food for thought for me in terms of my paper and the idea of using both hands as a means of expressing simultaneous ideas, and in terms of expanding ASL poetry beyond the normal restrictions of one person and one set of hands. I believe they will revolutionize ASL poetry into an even more evocative expression of thought and I look forward to viewing their performances in the future on YouTube.
Peter Cook's classes were very interesting and fun. He has to be one of the most animated people I have met. I noticed that his poetry seems to be more acting than anything else. Of course he is signing ASL, but he does a lot with facial expressions and creative use of classifiers, more so than others like Graybill. He would be the best sherades player in the world. What Peter Cook and Kenny Lerner try to reach in each of their poems is clarity: no matter what signs, what expressions, what classifiers, or anything, they try to create a concept and a picture. And THAT picture can be created in any language with no restrictions. But it is that picture that they go for, and they are very good at creating that picture. They focus on emotion and details in their poems, and Peter Cook uses sound more than any Deaf poet I've heard of (sound escapes his lips almost continuously). Peter Cook can show his emotion at any time with his facial expressions, body language, tempo, and style. His signing is mostly for details. If there is a fence in front of him, Peter will never sign "fence" only. He will sign a huge wall, with barbed wire swirling at the top and spiked outward, or something to that effect. He is a great poet, and each of his poems use the exact same style.

When I was chosen to "eat dinner" I was nervous, but it turned out to be terrific. I will remember forever having to gesture a whole scenario of being at dinner and asking for a glass of red wine, a raw chicken breast, and a vanilla milk shake, only to see other volunteers come up and gesture making wine, killing a chicken, and milking and creaming. Peter Cook's lesson on gesturing was invaluable. It showed me that language, while useful, is not needed. You can get by without it. Not only that, but since I have grown up using English, I suck at it. Trying to do anything without using language is absurdly difficult because I am unfamiliar with it. I had to think hard of how to represent a chicken breast, even though it is extremely easy. I also had trouble forming my "sculpture" into an emotion, because I suck at it! I suck at it even though I know the emotion and have experienced it all the time, I have grown up not focusing on the body language aspect of that emotion, so do not know what it looks like.

It was strange. And eye-opening. It seems that as my English has gotten better over the years, my other forms of expression have waned. How do I get that back?

Anyways, Peter Cook has a teaching style I admire, respect, and hope it can rub off on other teachers. He is engaging and I learned a lot, and I learned stuff I do not usually do. Most of the time I learn about the history of the Deaf community or something along those lines. This week I learned a lot about myself. I had a great time and am absolutely certain that my signing in the future will be influenced by his visit. Thanks Peter.
Having Peter Cook come and guest teach our class this week may have been my favorite week of class this term. He is such an amazing artist, and an inspiring and absolutely charismatic person. There were so many different things I loved about class (and the performance) last week, that I’m just going to mention a few of them.

Coming into class on Tuesday I had no clue what we would be doing. When Peter told us to put our books away and move the chairs out of the center of the room, I knew it would certainly be a different classroom experience. That first exercise we did really opened my eyes up to the different sense of scales that you can accomplish in ASL (from absolutely miniscule to giant) and the different ways you could play with and change signs. I absolutely loved this entire class because after weeks of learning about ASL and ASL poetry we were finally able to try it ourselves, and play with the different aspects of ASL. I realized that at least for me, figuring out the different ranges of facial expressions and consistently remembering to have a certain facial expression was hard. I remember someone asking if this was something that signers had to practice (in a mirror for example) and Peter answered that no, it pretty much came naturally with learning the language. This really shows how much facial expression is part of the language. I also loved the body language exercise we did where we had to be the “sculptures” and “sculptors” of the sculpture garden. It was harder than I expected to come up with what the body language of “frustrated” would look like. Yes, I could describe to you in depth what it feels like to be frustrated about something, but physically sculpting someone into “frustration” was a surprisingly difficult task.
The performance on Wednesday night was extremely entertaining and fascinating. One of my favorite parts was just watching Peter and Kenny interact with each other. It was clear that they are very good friends and it seemed like they almost spoke in their own little language to each other. The group poem we created was such an interesting experience. I never would have been able to guess what an ASL group poem would look like (especially considering the vast majority of the audience were not ASL speakers) but the end result really did turn out to be wonderful. The entire week was hysterical and enlightening and I am so happy I had the opportunity to see not only Peter Cook, but also The Flying Words Project perform.
I knew from the very beginning that this was not going to be a typical COCO2 week. I had seen some YouTube videos of Peter and Kenny, and was very excited to see their poems. But even I had not expected to actually become expressive signers ourselves. In just 3 sessions, I learned by practice and example what makes good sign language poetry and how to make it.

The first thing Peter had us do was stand up and push our chairs to the back and stand in a circle around the room. Then, we made our favorite ASL signs, and then tried to make them "big" and "small." To be very honest, I didn't understand the importance of this until after the lecture. But how "big" or "small" our signs are, or how expressive we are in general when signing, has a big impact on the message delivered. I guess an appropriate analogy would be a person speaking in a monotone voice for the entire time. Who wants to hear that? Can you imagine a mother reading a bedtime story to her child in monotone? As a hearing person I don't think I understood that, to deaf people, expressivity with signs is the same as what expressivity with voice is to us.

What's one thing that really stands out about Peter Cook? He breathes and lives for ASL poetry, and he let us know about it. For example, unlike many of our deaf speakers, Peter was not hesitant to use his voice with us. If I recall correctly, Patrick Graybill, Christine Kim, and Rene Pellerin all seemed to use their vocal cords only when they really needed or when they were laughing (Janet Marcous doesn't count). On the other hand, voice and sounds were a part of Peter's performances and poems. They weren't always comprehensible, but they clearly showed that he puts every ounce of his soul into producing his poems, and that he is more than comfortable with his body and his work.

Of the speakers we've had in class so far, I wouldn't hesitate to call Peter Cook and Kenny Lerner the most "progressive" of them all. Not to take anything away from any of our other speakers, but these two are innovating forms of work that are native to sign language. Consider the general idea behind the Flying Words Project: the combination of speech (Kenny) with signing (Peter) forms almost a mini theater. Or how about the group poem during Wednesday's presentation: in what other medium can an entire crowd be made to participate in on a group poem like that? These forms are works that either won't be possible or won't have the same effect if performed with voice or with actors. I think this is particularly important because it is clear evidence that shows that ASL poetry is not simply a "dummy" medium to which works originally made for other media are translated; instead, it has its own distinct form, and can specialize in ways that other media cannot.

The group scene presentation at the end of Thursday's class is sort of what I would label as the "culminating experience" of the week. We used everything we had learned during the week, including expressive facial gestures, slow-motion, and group coordination techniques to create our own mini-scene, not much different from some of Peter's own works. I had so much fun doing this. If Peter and Kenny could inspire a hearing person like me with their excitement and innovation, I can only imagine how a Deaf person
would be affected.
The classes that Peter Cook taught were amazing. In some ways I wish he, and his poetic partner, would have come earlier in the quarter. His style of teaching made students step outside of their comfort zones and create impromptu skits, practice dramatic signing, devise recognizable gestures and ultimately create visual poetry. I think this experience helped the class as a whole to become more comfortable using their bodies as mediums of communication. Creating group poems also helped to make us appreciate how much time and effort goes in to creating and perfecting an ASL poem. I was absolutely awed by my classmates’ abilities to create stunning and understandable visual poetry in such a short time. Peter allowed the class a safe space to try a new form of art, teaching us new methods of thinking about poetry while simultaneous showing us that it is okay to fail, to laugh and to explore new methods of communication.

Group poetry adds an incredible element to an already impressive art. Although the poetry of other artists is interesting and has visual elements that are easily understood by non-ASL users, the group poetry of the Flying Words Project is even more recognizable. The extensive use of camera angles also adds texture and visual aid to the poetry contrasting, for example, Patrick Graybill’s “Reflections” with FWP’s “Charlie.” Both are stunning poems that tell an incredible story, but “Charlie” is more easily understood by non-ASL users. Many of the poems we saw did not need translation.
I really enjoyed Peter Cook coming to our class. I think he was my favorite guest. He was very
dynamic, and everything was hands on. Both of the classes we had with him were excellent. The
first one was cool because it combined theory with hands-on activities like sculpting each other
and ordering food without saying a word. The activities really helped me to understand
everything that goes into communication without words. This was true especially with the
sculpting exercise. That really helped me to understand how small movements can completely
change the emotion being portrayed. I also thought his lecture on cinematic elements was very
interesting. It really demonstrated the various techniques that Peter uses to enhance his poems,
such as slow motion, close and far shots, and multiple camera work.
A whole different dynamic appeared when Kenny Lerner came. I swear they acted like an old
married couple. It was very interesting to see them together. I thought that the way they broke
down the different techniques and its use in their poem "Charlie" was very cool. I thought it was
really interesting that ASL had the capacity for homonyms, though that's not quite the right world,
when Charlie went up to bite arms and it was the exact same motion when going up to bite the
helicopter pontoon. Though at this point I don't think I should be surprised when an assumption
of mine is broken. It was really cool to see them go through the poem and really analyze it with
them. Though we did this with Dennis I think it was even more interesting to go through the
poem with the artists themselves. Another poem I really liked is the frog poem. I loved how Peter
created the frog and person swimming with his hands so you could really see them. And their two
person part of it was really cool. It was really clever that they are saying that they can play with
language, while also playing with the word language itself.
Peter Cook was by far the most interactive guest lecturer we have had this quarter. His focus on creating group poetry reminds me of the communal nature of creating Deaf Plays examined in the essay, *Deaf American Theater*. Overall his approach was engaging and informative. I found his discussion of classifiers and cinematic technique to be especially helpful. His use of slow motion and other film techniques clearly demonstrates the effects film has on the transference of ASL Poetry. Cook’s film techniques are born out of his desire to replicate motion on film but will be passed on to other poets and students that perform his poems. Through this transference, film techniques become ASL Poetry techniques (very interesting stuff). Additionally, Cook’s Thursday lecture was helpful because of its emphasis on gesture. His emphasis on facial expressions allowed us to explore a topic we have not talked much about. It seems that mastery of facial expressions in sign is hard and I can only imagine that its takes much longer to learn facial gestures than other aspects of ASL. Despite this difficulty, Cook found a way to make it accessible to us. For this reason—Cook’s ability to make the complex accessible—I am glad he joined us at Dartmouth.
When I first walked into the classroom on Tuesday afternoon, I saw Peter Cook and noted his interactions with the others in the room. Within a few minutes, I could already detect his dynamism and energy. I remember thinking to myself, “This is going to be great.” Of course, this notion proved to be spot-on, even more than I had anticipated.

Our classes with Peter Cook were unlike any of the previous lectures with our other incredible guest speakers. Rather than learning more about Deaf culture, we ended up exploring American Sign Language as both a mode of communication and a channel for artistic performance. One of my favorite aspects of the experience was that Peter did not explicitly tell us about his love of ASL poetry or convince us about the power of a poem told through performance. He simply showed us, instead.

The first exercise he led us through on Tuesday was to have us stand in a circle and show each other our favorite ASL signs. Then, he had us make the signs much smaller, and later, much bigger. I found it surprisingly difficult to compress a sign to make it minuscule, as well as to enlarge the sign enough to portray something truly enormous. Even so, it was fun (and kind of funny) just playing with the signs and manipulating them to express different concepts of size and scale.

Similarly, on Thursday afternoon, our final exercise was to break up into small groups and create a performance with at least three different images, using classifiers and evocative gestures. I admit that I felt the tiniest bit ridiculous and/or ill equipped at times, but I definitely enjoyed working with my group on this challenge. We found it somewhat tricky to think up a logical series of images and develop a smooth and fluid transformation between each idea, but the process of creating everything was entertaining nonetheless. I think we really benefited from tackling this challenge hands-on (pun unintended) and experimenting with ASL performance for the first time by ourselves. It forced us to be inventive and think both quickly and originally.

My other favorite aspect of our time with Peter Cook was seeing the “cinematic elements” of ASL poetry, especially as he demonstrated with the Flying Words Project. On Thursday, he and Kenny Lerner showed us one of their poems, “Charlie,” about a dog used by the United States Army to run in the underground tunnels during the Vietnam War. I would consider “Charlie” an epic poem, given its lengthy narrative nature. I found
it helpful that they pointed out certain patterns and techniques to watch for, such as the repetition of certain handshapes to create rhythm and the demonstration of motion to invoke drama or establish a sense of time. I thought that the back-and-forth technique that Peter frequently used to represent a change in “camera perspective” was especially unique, because we hadn’t really seen that previously in ASL poems. In general, I really enjoyed Peter’s animated performance style and the vivid imagery he provides in the poems.

Lastly, his dynamic with Kenny Lerner is as hilarious as their partnership is intriguing, in my opinion. They informed us that they collaborate to create their poems, with each contributing his personal skills or strengths to their work. However, it seemed like Peter was the clear “star” of the Flying Words Project for the entire presentation on Wednesday night. I suppose this is natural though, given that the medium of their work is American Sign Language, which is obviously Peter’s domain of expertise. A Deaf audience would never need to rely on or be able to appreciate Kenny’s dramatic voiced narration, as a non-Deaf audience would. Still, I was impressed and amused by the cooperation and camaraderie of these two men, who certainly seem like “kindred spirits” with one other. I am really appreciative that Kenny Lerner came up to work with us on Wednesday and Thursday, because the Flying Words Project is a remarkable poetic collaboration that has again demonstrated to us that ASL poetry can be very powerful in conveying drama, purpose, and emotion.
Having Peter Cook serve as our guest lecturer last week was certainly an interesting experience. Though I rarely am able to anticipate what each week’s worth of guests and information will bring, suffice it to say that the performances of Mr. Cook and his hearing counterpart, Mr. Kenny Lerner were truly pleasant surprises.

Knowing little about Cook save for his esteemed reputation around the ASL poetry circuit, I was immediately struck by the noticeable differences between his performance style and that of more “classic” ASL poets, such as Patrick Graybill. Though they are both conveying messages through inversion and artistic license of their language, Mr. Cook’s poetry appeared more modern to me, due to his incorporation of slang signs and mimed gestures into his performance, as well as due to the subject matter of his works.

Whereas classic ASL poetry à la the works of Patrick Graybill typically deals with the common theme of oppression and marginalization of the Deaf community, and are typically rooted to some extent in the Deaf experience, I can’t remember a single one of Cook’s works that focused on such ideas. Though I’m sure Cook’s creative energies are at least to some extent influenced by his experience as a Deaf individual, the artist’s poems centered around topics varying in content and seriousness from the political (the poem about “Charlie”, a canine casualty of the Vietnam War) to the societal (the poem depicting the ravaging effect of war on a Latvian village) to the whimsical (Cook’s short caricatured performance of the various members of a professional baseball team).

In a sense, Cook reminded me of the poetry of Debbie Rennie, both in terms of the diversity of poetic topics as well as in his incorporation of non-traditional gestures and cinematographic techniques (addressed later) into his works. I also would liken
Cook’s work to the iconoclastic nature of the Beat poets of 1960s counterculture. I drew this analogy due to both Cook and the Beat poets exhibiting a marked difference in both content and form from their predecessors in respective literary traditions, namely “classic” ASL poets and the traditional American poetry.

Though I have spoken at length regarding the unique content of Cook’s poetry, I have thus far neglected sufficient discussion of the characteristic form he employs in his works. As Cook’s performances, class lectures, and interactive learning exercises should demonstrate, the poet places a great emphasis on not only what he communicates, but the means through which he does so. Cook repeatedly mentioned the importance of film techniques on not only his poetry, but ASL performed literature in general. It is through the use of these techniques that he is able to convey a sense of depth, space, and time to his poetry in the absence of physically moving his body across the venue of his performance.

As a simple example, he compared the presentation of a distant tree, represented by a billowing hand and the close up of the same tree, this time with his entire body assuming the role of the tree. Supplementary class exercises, such as the slow-motion enactment of the spilling of a coffee cup and the group transition scene project demonstrated to me exactly how intricate his usage of cinematic techniques is and gave me renewed appreciation for both Cook’s art and the ease with which he appears to present it.

To conclude, Peter Cook’s visit served, as has been the case with every guest lecturer who has come to visit our class, as an invaluable resource for a specific aspect of Deaf culture—this time modern Deaf poetry.
Peter Cook brought a breath of fresh air into our class last week, providing enough energy to invigorate us all during the Week 8 stretch! I loved his dynamic approach to engaging us in the class, and I can see, now, that he is a perfect leader for something such as the Flying Words Project. It was hugely encouraging to see somebody approach ASL poetry and performance in a such a light and playful way- many of the other artists we have been exposed to this term have focused on the oppression of the Deaf community, and the ways in which Deaf individuals have been marginalized within larger society. Though individuals like Gil Eastman and Rene Pellerin have successfully incorporated humor into their ASL performances, Cook’s work was wonderfully accessible. The way in which we encouraged each of the students to experiment with sign, an expressive art-form of which most of us are only beginning to gain a superficial understanding, made it seem like we were truly part of his artistic experience.

Though I was unable to attend the Hood Performance, I was able to watch my peers present the group poem on YouTube. Seeing how Peter Cook was able to so successfully engage a large group of 20-something, hearing college students, I can only imagine how important he is as a role model for Deaf youth. Having heard the difficult experiences of Patrick Graybill and Christine Kim during their schooling years, it is wonderful to see Deaf adults like Peter Cook encouraging the community to explore sign as a rich form of expression. Peter Cook will undoubtedly be highly regarded among Deaf and hearing communities for years to come.

Peter Cook was, expectedly, the best guest in this class. He was so interactive and fun to work with.

Watching his poetry was fun, but the most interesting aspect of having him in the class was hearing him talk about the process.

His use of rhythm is amazing. I really like how he emphasized the different ways to use rhythm in ASL poetry. The assignment he gave us was good practice using a back and forth technique and a slow motion technique. He showed us some rhythm with hand shape in a civil war poem, although I didn't see as much rhythm from the hand shapes as the rhythmic motions he made.

I really liked the bullfrog poem, especially how the bug was reflected in Kenny's hands.
and then his hands become the ripples after Peter eats the bug. That flow of sign change was beautiful.

Charlie was by far my favorite poem. The metaphors about a loss of innocence were amazing. The "double entendre," as someone in Cleopatra's class called them, were really cool, like the use of Peter's arm as an arm and later as the helicopter pontoon. I really liked hearing people from her class talk, to remind we of what my understanding was just a couple weeks ago. I think that one step for ASL poetry would be to introduce guests like Peter into regular poetry classes, even just for a day. As some students in her class mentioned, it adds a whole other dimension to poetry, and introducing it to English poetry classes might inspire a hearing person to incorporate it.

One question we ran out of time for me to ask was about how the poems evolve, and how aspects are reuse or how a performance differs every time. For instance, the baseball poem was much different than the one I saw on the Hydrogen Jukebox film. Kenny and Peter also seem to use that one in front of the other LANGUAGE LANGUAGE LANGUAGE thing in many poems. Or I just have seen many versions of the same poem that uses that feature.

I'm really glad I had the courage to perform my "homework" on Thursday. His individual feedback made me understand the process to much better. The group assignment was also really fun. I am a strong believer in hands on learning, and Peter was great with it.

This week’s experience with Peter Cook was fantastic! From the start, Peter made it clear that Tuesday’s class would be more of an interactive experience for everyone rather than a lecture style class. He began the class by asking us all to choose a sign, and subsequently manipulate the sign to make it big or small. Although I was a bit nervous to be in front of the class, I was also eager to experiment with sign! His exercises in aspects of ASL including facial expression, body language, and gesture were not only entertaining and hilarious, but were also thought provoking. I think Peter’s visit was perfectly timed, because just as we are beginning to feel comfortable with the topic of our course, Peter came and pushed us to a new level of appreciation. I won’t speak for the rest of the group, but I certainly left Tuesday’s class feeling energized and inspired.

Peter and his non-Deaf partner Kenny Lerner gave both Wednesday’s performance and Thursday’s class. Their dynamic is really interesting. I’ve become familiar on a basic level with interpreting ASL, and it was so interesting to see Kenny’s interpreting for Peter. It was clear that their interactions were not governed by the traditional interpreter codes, and I was intrigued by just how well they communicate in their own unique way. Their performance was
fun and entertaining, and certainly seemed different from some of the previous performances.

This question has been asked many times, but there were moments where I asked myself, “what differentiates this poem from a narrative piece of ASL literature?” I found my answer by thinking back to the exercises we had performed in class on Tuesday, where I was able to reevaluate the crucial role of non-manual signs in ASL poetry and literature. Patrick Graybill had said that his poetry evolved from his desire to “play” with ASL, and in many ways Peter’s class was just that. He taught us how much is possible when you play with and manipulate ASL. Written poets have their methods for this as well, but I think playfulness in ASL is fundamentally different because the modality of the language is different. Thus, I’ve accepted that ASL poetry is not simply a visual or gestural form of a written poem, and there are so many elements that emerge from ASL and not written poetry.

Like I’ve said in previous journals, this week has given me new ways to think about ASL and ASL poetry
This week’s guest lecturer Peter Cook was definitely very interactive to say the least. He incorporated us into everything he did, helping us understand or rather “feel” what it means to not necessarily be “deaf,” but how to perform. He showed us how to use our bodies, faces, etc to portray different feelings, meanings, actions; it was an interactive educational experience that forces you to think out of the box, while at the same time forcing you to become comfortable with yourself, others and expressing yourself. I really enjoyed the poems/lecture on Thursdays class where he talked about his techniques used including hand shape alliteration, rhythm, slow motion and the back and forth technique. MY favorite is the hand shape alliteration because for me it just makes the meaning clearer and it makes it easier for me to follow the storyline. Peter Cook as an individual just seems like a very down to earth, genuine guy, I really enjoyed his presence, he wasn’t afraid to interact with us to “play” with us, to give us feedback during activities, to just delve in and become part of the whole, it was very refreshing and it made it seem less like a class or experiment and more of just a good time. I definitely appreciate his personability, amiability and energy.

What intrigued me a bit were the interactions between Peter and his partner Kenny. When they perform pieces together, Kenny is always to the side and “interprets” a little but after a while he is silent. Also when Kenny is involved in the poem physically, he is always BEHIND Peter. I don’t know if it is because Peter is the “star” or if this juxtaposition is purposeful and symbolic. Peter is Deaf and Kenny is Hearing, so although they work “together” the emphasis or the “main show” is Peter (Deaf world). He is up front and center and Kenny (hearing world) is behind, helping at times but not really “main character” status. If it is in fact symbolic of how Deaf people view hearing world vs. Deaf world than I must say that that is quite creative. IT serves as a physical message saying that while the hearing world is apparent, it takes the backseat to the Deaf world, what they stand for and what they have to say. Also They usually start together and then Kenny goes off to the side and Peter is solo and finishes up the poem by himself, this can be symbolic of the notion that at one point, the hearing world or hearing people are needed to some extent but after a while, Deaf people/World can handle and strive by themselves.