

Sound without meaning, meaning without sound:

8 Deaf Poets, 25 Dartmouth students, 1 music professor

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One year ago at Dartmouth College, on the first day of class, the American poet, scholar and translator Patrick Graybill entered a classroom of 25 Dartmouth students. An open-minded group, they had enrolled in the class because it sounded unusual and interesting, but had no idea what to expect. As the “teacher” of this class, neither did I.

Graybill, from Rochester, New York, was the guest instructor for the first week. In his own community he is famous, a universally beloved and respected paragon of literature and culture. Not many people reading this are likely to have heard of him. Graybill is Deaf. His work is in American Sign Language.

He is a spry, twinkly-eyed man in his 70s, who, for some fifty years, has been venerated in American Deaf Culture. His intelligence and compassion are captivating, his charisma radiant. He signs slowly and in broad gestures. His large hands are surprisingly expressive, even if you don’t understand sign. You wish he was your grandfather.

He signs eloquently, but he doesn’t speak — at least I’ve never heard him do so. This class, according to him, was the first time he had talked about his poetry to a non-Deaf audience. Before class, Graybill and I were both pretty nervous. To their credit, the students were ready for anything.

Graybill inaugurated a ten-week class built around guest artists, all native ASL signers and (with one important exception), all Deaf. (Note: By convention, I use “upper-case Deaf” to mean something like “members of Deaf culture,” usually indicating the use of ASL. “Lower case deaf” refers primarily to some difficulty in hearing, but not necessarily

to any cultural identification.) The nine guest instructors worked intensively with the Dartmouth students, none of whom knew more than a little ASL.

I am a composer, and have taught music at Dartmouth for over twenty years. This class was called "American Sign Language Poetry and Performance in Translation." A big, risky experiment for me, it culminated several years of learning American Sign Language and about Deaf culture. It took over a year to develop and plan the class. The logistics were daunting. I had never done anything like it, nor did I know of a similar class taught elsewhere. During the year I taught the class, I became an ASL department of one (under the generous umbrella of Dartmouth's Leslie Center for the Humanities). It was among the most interesting and rewarding classes I've offered in my 30+ years of teaching.

It was not an "ASL class," though it was mostly in ASL (the exceptions were the few classes in which I actually lectured, in English with ASL examples). We made heavy use of interpreters, so that everything was translated. In this one busy term we explored, with the aid of our extraordinary visitors, the breadth and scope of poetry and performance in American Sign Language. We watched and analyzed historic videos of ASL performance,, and read widely about the language and the history and practice of its literary traditions. We experienced sign poetry, storytelling, and performance traditions directly from some of its most accomplished practitioners. One component of the class was a weekly ASL lab, where the students learned beginning ASL. My Deaf friend and colleague Mary Essex, who collaborated with me on every aspect of the class, taught the lab.

The class was ostensibly about ASL literature, all of it unwritten, all of it performed in sign. Privately, my goal for the students and the Dartmouth community was something larger. Deaf people exist in linguistic isolation, almost invisible to the hearing world. I am interested in the bridge between the *Deaf* community and what the ASL scholar, interpreter and educator Dennis Cokely (and one of the guest faculty) calls people like me: "non-Deaf." A culture expresses itself by its literature, and by learning about Deaf

poetry and performance first-hand, I hoped that we might build a much needed bridge between communities.

As the class progressed and the students learned more and more about ASL and its culture, we sought to understand not only *what* was being said but *how*, and *why*. ASL was taken to be the root of a linguistic plant whose flowering was poetry. By the end of the spring, the students understood things about the language, and by extension, Deaf culture, that even many who are fluent in it might never have considered.

The title of the class intentionally used the word "translation." Many university humanities classes, of course, rely heavily on translation, often without much introspection about the word itself. The translation issue is harder to avoid when teaching poetry, which, it's often said, is that which can't be translated. ASL poetry illuminates the idea of something being "lost in translation." It's hard enough to translate spoken or written poetry. Rhythms, sounds, nuances, history, puns, multiple meanings, references, allusions, tropes, contexts and connotations—all these are specific to a language and its culture. How much harder when the translation is between two different modes of communication: gesture and speech?

Signed languages are full languages, equally rich as spoken ones. Yet signed and spoken languages differ in important ways. Sign doesn't have, among other things: written texts, phonemic rhyme, spoken meters, pitch and tonality, loudness, or homo- (or anything) phones. But sign has expressive channels unavailable to written and spoken languages. These include mimesis (one interpreting dictum is "show it don't say it"), physical rhythm and emphasis, spatial pronouns, handshape and motion tropes, and facial indicators, the last of which are essential to the language's meaning. Sign also depends heavily on repertoires of what are called *classifiers*—something like kinetic pronouns. Classifiers offer a flexible, economical and expressive linguistic tool that is rare and highly limited in spoken languages. Their creative use in sign literature presents just one of many uniquely difficult problems for translators.

Because sign is visual and physical, it can do things that a spoken language can't. For instance, ASL performers can make "handshape rhymes," or tell a complex story by moving one finger around in space. Additionally, signed languages (and this is a politically-charged, and complex point) may benefit from being a kind of creole. Unlike conventional creoles, sign vocabulary is *not* drawn primarily from the "dominant" language (that of the country in which the signers live). But signed languages borrow heavily from and freely transform the surrounding spoken language for their own use. Thus American Sign Language makes creative use of American English in artful ways as does, I presume, Quebecois Sign Language (LSQ) of Quebecois French. Sign language poetry and storytelling takes advantage of its complex bi-linguality (an ironic term). In ASL poetry, English, particularly "finger-spelling," is often employed to explore and express differences between its culture and the non-Deaf world. For all these reasons, and others, the translation of sign language poetry is still a nascent and somewhat daunting idea.

How did this ASL poetry class come about? What was a composer and guitar player doing teaching a course on, of all things, ASL? I have no clear answer for that. I had spent some years learning ASL, simply out of curiosity. As a musician, I sensed for some time that understanding sign would be important to me. After a life spent making sound that had no "meaning," I was curious about the opposite, a world with *lots* of meaning and no sound. The more I learned, the more fascinated I became. After a few years, I felt I needed to "do something" with my knowledge, make some kind of contribution to the Deaf community that had been so welcoming to me.

As an artist and performer myself, I was naturally curious about Deaf artists and performers, who but for the linguistic and cultural divide, were my colleagues. As I dug deeper into the history and literature of Deaf arts, aided by a generous New Directions Fellowship from the Mellon Foundation (which funded, in large part, this expensive class and similar activities at Dartmouth and elsewhere), I saw that just as I collaborated with and advocated for fellow musicians and composers, I might do the same for Deaf artists, in new and interesting ways. As an academic and artist who knew ASL, I hoped to serve

as a kind of "bridge" between communities, which, it seemed to me, had little or no way to interact. Art is art, and artists have a common bond that transcends culture and language. I thought I might simply "help out" a bit, starting in my own backyard. Teaching a class at Dartmouth seemed the obvious first step.

Four of the guests — Patrick Graybill, Monique Holt (with her interpreter/collaborator Tim Chamberlain), Dennis Cokely, and Peter Cook (with his collaborator Kenny Lerner) stayed for a week each, and taught two full two-hour classes. Each gave a public performance at Dartmouth's Hood Museum of Art, thanks to my colleague Juliette Bianco, and the staff of the museum. Juliette even ended up giving four private ASL-interpreted tours of a special exhibition of Fluxus work she was curating at the time. The three other guests — Janet Marcous, Rene Pellerin (both Deaf/Blind, the former an activist and educator, the latter a storyteller and performer) and Christine Sun Kim (a Deaf sound artist) came for several days and taught one class each. All the guests were kept busy, meeting with members of the college community, participating in social events and informal performances, and sometimes guest teaching other classes.

It is worth saying a few words about each guest, who are little known outside the Deaf community. *Patrick Graybill* is an important pioneer in ASL performance through his early work with the National Theater of the Deaf. He is also prolific translator, of English to ASL, and a teacher of other poets, having taught for many years at the National Technological Institute in of the Deaf in Rochester, New York (one of the two American universities, Gallaudet the other, where sign is the official language). Graybill's importance to the generations of ASL poets that followed, such as Debbie Rennie, Peter Brook and others, is enormous, and I was honored to have him set the tone for the rest of the class. Graybill enchanted the students and the Dartmouth community with his wisdom and eloquence. His rare performance at the Hood Museum will, I believe, become an important "text" in the history of ASL literature (all of the performances were captured by a professional videographer).

Peter Cook is probably the leading artist in the generation after Graybill. Cook is a virtuosic performer — alarmingly funny, wildly creative, and profoundly interesting. He is the ASL poet best known outside of the Deaf community, partially because of his longtime bi-lingual collaboration called Flying Words Project, with poet Kenny Lerner (who is non-Deaf but a fluent signer). Peter and Kenny had given a remarkable performance at Dartmouth the previous fall, to a large crowd made up equally of the college and northern New England Deaf communities. Kenny joined Peter for the week as interpreter and collaborator, during which they made a memorable visit to a class taught by the poet Gary Lenhart (who, coincidentally, had worked with Allen Ginsburg, an important influence on Peter and the Rochester ASL poetry renaissance of the early 1980s).

Dennis Cokely is widely known as one of the finest interpreters and teachers of interpreting in the United States. He chairs the ASL and ASL Interpreting programs at Northeastern University, and for a lifetime has written and lectured widely on all aspects of the language, its culture, and its pedagogy. His activism on the part of the Deaf community is legendary, and critical to the training of generations of interpreters who have been shaped by his passion and deep, questioning intellect. Cokely is hearing, and his week with the class and the Dartmouth community was crucial: as a hearing insider in Deaf culture, he offered special insights to other non-Deaf people. He is a model for the “bridge” I referred to earlier. At the Hood Museum, Cokely showed videos of poems written by young Deaf students from all over the country, documentation from an annual ASL Festival that he directs in Boston. His visit was transformative for the students, as was his generosity in coming the first week of the class as Graybill’s interpreter (the two are old friends). For me, this was like inviting Miles Davis to guest-teach a class, and having Bill Evans call and offer to accompany him.

Monique Holt is an extraordinarily multi-talented performer. Poet, dancer, translator, dramaturge and performance artist, her approach to ASL performance resists classification. She works closely with Tim Chamberlain, a non-Deaf writer, director and performer who also served as her interpreter for the week. Deaf literature is often about

being Deaf, not surprisingly, considering how marginalized the culture is in our society. The problems and joys of what is now called Deafhood are central to much of early ASL poetry (Graybill's work, and the poetry of Ella Mae Lentz and the late Clayton Valli are important examples). But the younger generation of artists (like Peter Cook and Debbie Rennie, for example) has often focused on different, less explicitly Deaf cultural themes. Monique's work is extraordinary in this regard: she is an ASL artist whose work transcends cultural distinctions. At her Hood Museum performance, she and Tim presented ASL translations of Shakespeare sonnets (both are deeply involved in signed Shakespearian performance). These translations, jaw-droppingly beautiful and painstakingly made, are, I think, a unique and major contribution to world literature. I jokingly suggested after her performance that she should translate all 154 of them. A short time later she told me that she thought that was a good idea, and had started that project which would, no doubt take the rest of her life.

The youngest and perhaps the most unusual guest was *Christine Sun Kim*, who recently received an M.F.A from Bard College in "Sound Art." Christine is Deaf and communicates in ASL, and had worked in visual art for a long time before she became interested in working with sound, from a very personal perspective. Her work is beautiful and highly experimental, and she has shown tremendous courage and creativity in crossing some very odd boundaries (like being a Deaf student in what was essentially a music graduate program). In what may be a first for higher education, in the course of two days at Dartmouth, Christine taught two classes: the ASL poetry class, and my graduate seminar in computer music.

Rene Pellerin is a Deaf/Blind storyteller from northern Vermont. He is a funny, folksy and highly experienced performer, who is a great favorite for Deaf events. His work consists of long, poignant and humorous stories about his experiences as a Deaf/Blind man. What inspired my class about Rene's performance, I believe, was the complete absence of "disabled-ness" in Rene's work (extraordinary, given how difficult many simple acts are for the Deaf/Blind). His stories have something of an absurdist quality, and gently invite the audience to share his distinctive sensory experience.

I have saved a description of *Janet Marcous* for last. Marcous is not a performer — she is a teacher of and activist for Deaf/Blind issues. In about an hour and a half with the students, she had powerful impact upon the students. Using two highly skilled Deaf/Blind interpreters, in a carefully adjusted lighting and seating arrangement, Janet helped the class to understand what a very different world she lives in, teaching them powerful lessons. She immediately bridged the communication gulf between herself and the students with her compassion and intellect. By giving the class a few subtle exercises, she helped them explore their own deepest fears and needs, two words that have special meanings to Deaf/Blind people. I had taken a class from Janet, at Northeastern University, and knew her well. Even so I was not prepared for my class' reaction (all the students wrote journal entries about each guest, the readings, and the performances, all of which are which are archived anonymously on the class website). Janet was unforgettable. Many of the students said it was one of the most, if not *the* most extraordinary and life-changing single classes they had experienced.

Postscript

I had hoped that this class would be a beginning of something, not just for me. And not just for the students either, whose lives and worldviews were nonetheless changed by it. The Deaf community exists among us in invisible linguistic isolation. They are our neighbors and friends. Deaf poets and performers are our colleagues, fellow American artists. Contrary to what most (non-Deaf) Americans seem to think, Deaf people do not really learn spoken English to the same degree that the non-Deaf can, even though they might appear to from a hearing person's perspective. Many become expert at "passing," at giving the impression that they are understanding and communicating fully. Yet they are always working at a linguistic disadvantage, sometimes severely so. ASL is important, an irreplaceable linguistic and cognitive component to a Deaf person's life. It might be said that learning ASL, for someone like me, is a simple act of courtesy.

Education should not only concern itself with understanding what is already well understood, but with finding ways to understand things that are *not* so well understood.

Polansky: "Sound without meaning, meaning without sound..."

That's why I began studying ASL poetry, and that's why, I think, these intrepid students took this class and put so much energy into it. The following year, one of the students, Gabriela Meade, formed a popular ASL club, which, without help from me or other faculty, brought the Deaf poet/performer Ayisha Knight-Shaw to Dartmouth for a fascinating public performance.

By participating in the class, the students did something out of the ordinary. As a result, I hope, they will do more of that in their lives. In this Dartmouth class they helped build an interesting bridge. They may now be better equipped to recognize the islands between which they may build their own bridges.

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Note:

Photographs, videos, student journals, and other class materials are archived at

http://eamusic.dartmouth.edu/~larry/cc2_2011/