Amplifying Unseen Voices: Digitizing American Sign Language Poetry
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Deaf Culture Defined

The Deaf community is a beautiful mosaic of multiple cultures, identities, and sign languages.

- Carla García-Fernández

Arnaud Balard, French DeafBlind Artist
“Preservation of Sign Language: George Veditz”
The National Technical Institute is a Deaf college at RIT University. There are over 1,100 Deaf and HH students and a strong Deaf community in Rochester (20,000+).
American Sign Language (ASL) Movement

➔ 1960--ASL recognized as a language
➔ First ASL and Deaf Culture book
➔ Dr. William Stokoe (from Rochester) and 2 Deaf co-researchers, Casterline and Cronberg.
➔ Gallaudet University, a Deaf liberal arts college, established in 1864 and in Washington, DC.
“Sculptures in the Air” CLIR Grant Proposal

1984--Allen Ginsberg and Robert F. Panara, poets, held a “Deaf Beat Summit”. Interpreting student who studied and worked with Ginsberg, Jim Cohn, invited Allen to present with Panara (a Deaf poet) to discuss the visual nature of poetry and translating them to different languages.

2016--reviewed the ASL Poetry and Literature collections, which is a rich form of sign language artistry and expression for the Deaf community. We identified 61 videos the team could digitize, caption, and voice.

2017-2020-submitted proposal to CLIR and awarded for this unique collection with talented ASL sign artists, including our faculty and alumni. It is the largest online portal of ASL poetry and literature in the U.S. thanks to CLIR funding, our library and archives team, and the community.
Deaf Poets’ Styles Featured in Portal

Deaf poets have different expressive sign language artistry styles

Clayton Valli, Patrick Graybill, Debbie Rennie (alumni)-Original poetry style created in ASL that uses body language, rhythm and movement

Dr. Robert F. Panara, Bernard Bragg -Transliteration of English poems performed in sign language with ASL features.

Flying Words duo -Peter Cook (Deaf) and Kenny Lerner (hearing) (both alumni) - an avant -garde style ASL and spoken English (“captions”) hybrid work
“Hydrogen Jukebox”
Translation
Patrick Graybill

Voice Interpretation: Kip Webster, 1984

“Explosion of ASL Poetry” and start of movement

“Hydrogen Jukebox” Translation
Patrick Graybill

Voice Interpretation:
Kip Webster, 1984

Start 9:05   End: 9:12
(LUNA)

Patrick signs “music,”
"box,"
"coin from pocket,"
"vertical record
becoming horizontal,"
"needle going around,"
"thunder shaking," and
"bomb exploding."
After the 1984 symposium, students hosted the Birds’ Brain Society sign poetry performances

ASL Poetry Movement
First National ASL Poetry Conference, 1987

Featured ASL Poets: Peter Cook, Patrick Graybill, Ella Mae Lentz, Debbie Rennie, Clayton Valli
“Black Hole: The Colors of ASL” by Debbie Rennie

Voice Interpretation: Donna Kachites, 1987
“Black Hole: The Colors of ASL” by Debbie Rennie

Voice Interpretation: Donna Kachites, 1987

Start 1:13
LUNA
A ladder...reaching to the sky.
At the top, paint cans--red, yellow, blue, green, black.
Brilliant blue sky canvas--
red. yellow. blue. green. black.
Hands are the brushes for the colors of ASL.
The ladder is shaking. Down below it's a language tyrant.
"Get down. Get down from there or I'll force you down." "No, No. Stop it Stop it."
The red is the first to go down. Yellow, green, blue...tumbling tumbling.
black, black, black splash.
The black hole language tyrant disappears into the black hole.
The ladder is consumed rung by rung.
"No. No. I won't be sucked down. I will fly back up, up, up.
Back to the colors, to the colors, to the colors, back to the colors. ahh. The colors of ASL."
Note the visual rhyme of his body/head/hands/eye gaze/eyebrows shifts

Back and forth, and, in and out movements
Open 5 fingered and clenched fists handshapes
Note groups of 3 signs

Primary handshape in the poem is open 5 fingered handshape
Clayton Valli: Dandelions

Note the visual rhyme of his body/head/hands/eye gaze/eyebrows shifts

Back and forth, and, in and out movements
Open 5 fingered and clenched fists
handshapes
Note groups of 3 signs

Primary handshape in the poem is open 5 fingered handshape

Start 4:56. End 5:53 (LUNA)
A Dandelion

Their yellows dotted the field,
their petals waving with the breezes.
An irritated man staring at them, snarling,
“Dandelions!” His hands pulled
some apart, and mowed the rest down
until the field was smoothed out
in green. The rain soon came
and went away; the sun sneaked in,
warming a seed in the soil.
The seed rose, enjoying all nature.
It waved, watching a bee
coming by with a greeting and
going away. Nights it closed
Its petals, opening up again

In the morning. One day it turned
Into white puffs, their whiskers
A halo, but it moved with the breeze.
Its seedlings flew off in every direction.
Spotting its whiteness, the man,
Enraged, spit out, “there!”
The brave white puff still waved,
Still sending off its seedlings.
The man grabbed its stem and pulled out.
The white puff exploded, its seedlings
Scattering everywhere on its own.
Dr. Robert Panara
“NTID”

Robert Panara: Distinguished Americans Stamp, 2017
Dr. Robert Panara
“NTID”

Start 1:49   End: 4:36
LUNA
Rethinking technical standards in digitized ASL poetry and literature collections
Physical object -> digital asset

- .avi
- .mp4 (video)
- .mp4 (audio)
- .srt
- .txt
- .pdf
Existing models of access

- Filename
- Identifier
- Title
- Type (genre)
- Rights
What are the access points?

1. Digitized materials in several searchable locations
Content of materials

2. All videos are voiced and captioned

Multimodal access

3. All videos have a complete text transcript

Transcript:

WOMAN: I WOULD LIKE TO GIVE A WARM WELCOME TO MICHELLE BANKS.

SHE IS THE DIRECTOR OF ONYX AT ...

IN THAT PART OF NEW YORK CITY.

DURING THE TALK, SHE WILL BE TALKING ABOUT IS AFRICAN-AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE IN VISUAL THEATER.

NOW, I DON'T WANT TO GO ON ANY LONGER.

I'D LIKE TO GIVE HER A CHANCE TO START, BUT...

[INDISTINCT]
Kinds of discoverability

4. All videos have catalog records in the library OPAC
5. All videos have detailed archival metadata in our Digital Collections portal.
Archival access

6. All videos are described in finding aids
Community access

7. All videos are available on YouTube
A new model of access

- Determine specs and required fields with partners
- Expertise comes from both the repository and the community!

From Project to Program
“Captioning audio and video presented on the web would be a major step toward equitable access to our collections for people with hearing loss, but would also significantly impact preservation reformatting programs and resources at a time when the need for preservation reformatting is already at a crisis point.”

OCLC’s “Research and Learning Agenda for Archives, Special, and Distinctive Collections” (2017)
What is “Good Enough”? 

*Extensible Processing for Archives & Special Collections: Reducing Processing Backlogs*

Daniel A. Santamaria, 2015
“The lack of a one-to-one relationship between deafness and ASL use means that knowing how many people are deaf does not allow us to estimate how many people use ASL in the United States.”

Taking Stock, Making Hay: Archival Collections Assessment

Martha O’Hara Conway and Merrilee Proffitt, OCLC, 2011
Thank you!

Questions?