



Disrespected Literature and Sign Language ¹

by Rachel Sutton-Spence

ABSTRACT: The study of hitherto “disrespected literature” makes us look at all language in a new way, revealing the potential—and limitations—of language, creativity and humanity. I argue that sign language literature, or , as it is called in one sign language, as an example of disrespected literature, can reveal new ways of thinking about literature, literary analysis and language, as well as highlighting the relationship between language art and the body of the language artist. I discuss the paradox that academic acceptance of—and respect for—the new literary cultural norms may compromise those norms, as canons are created, conveying institutional status and risking the cultural norms of the community that created it. Disrespected literature brings into focus the relationship between language, the body and identity. The essential corporal nature of sign language  can powerfully express Embodied Political Resistance to prevailing disrespect. Thus, when we respect the sign language literature of a deaf culture, we respect the language, the body and the person.

KEY WORDS: sign language; sign language literature; deaf literature; disrespected literature; embodied poetry

¹ The image  here is the written form of the sign used in Brazilian Sign Language when talking about deaf literature. Sign language literature (sometimes also called deaf literature), as I will argue here, differs considerably from written literature. The term  is written in the Sutton SignWriting system, so that the signed form can be represented in a written text without resorting to translating it with the English word “Literature”, which has very different connotations. Using this instead of the English word “literature” is a way to respect the art form, by avoiding the translated term in a language of a society that has often disrespected sign languages.



INTRODUCTION

With poetry we hope to forge a connection ... to elicit a nod of understanding – that reassuring flash of recognition that tells us we are not alone. But what happens if people do not believe their language is a true language, and poetry is an art form that will never be theirs? What if they finally find their language, their “voice” and, thus, discover their poetry? (Lerner and Feigel 0:24-0:54)

Deaf people’s sign languages have long been repressed, and their literary art forms have been neither recognised nor respected by the academy until very recently, to the effect that many deaf people believe even today that “poetry is an art form that will never be theirs” (Lerner 0:43). In this paper, I question the word *literature* to describe this cultural linguistic event is a crucial part of our understanding of this disrespected literature. I argue that the study of sign language can challenge ideas of “respected literature” and of “literature” within the academy and among members of communities using disrespected literatures. After a short review describing some of the features of sign language literature, I will address in some depth the problems of naming it, before turning to discuss the way that sign language literature embodies the political and world experience of deaf people, using examples drawn from British and Brazilian Sign Language literature.

By “disrespected literature”, I refer to literatures that the academy (especially literary critics) and the more educated sections of society have excluded from any canon of “quality” because of attitudes to the language in which the literature is presented. However, if we change our approach to disrespected literature and the languages in which it is produced, we can learn to see texts and the literary field differently, ultimately learning to see language—and even ourselves—differently. For example, even the term *disrespected literature* suggests that we know what literature is (or should be) in other languages and cultures.

Challenges to the canon of respected literature are not new, especially challenges based on attitudes toward the people or cultures producing the literature or its modality (Guillory). Among many examples, all in relation to written literature, are Gilbert and Gubar for challenges by women’s literature, Mazza for challenges by modern women’s writing, and Cirillo for Caribbean literature. Ruth Finnegan’s seminal 1978 work on oral literatures, and the many works that followed, present further challenges. Here, though, I emphasise the relationship between the attitude to the languages in which the literature is created and the respect accorded to it by the academy.

Gloria Anzaldúa, a Spanish speaker, wrote, “So if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself” (205-206). She argues that she is her language, and her language comes with its own literacy practices. For deaf people, sign language and their sign language literary practices provide identity (Spooner). By taking sign language literature as an example of disrespected literature (Frishberg), we can see an unwritten literature produced by people whose language is rarely accorded the status it deserves (frequently not even accorded the status of language) and who are a minority group in every society.



Seeing signing used in a literary context can change deaf people's views of their language. Bernard Bragg, an American deaf actor and poet, said of his deaf teacher, the poet Robert Panara

his signs were a miracle of vividness and eloquence [...] we had never realized that this, our native language, could be such a powerful vehicle for expressing the richest and subtlest feelings and conveying nuances of meaning as sophisticated as those of the most articulate English speakers and writers. (qtd. in Lang, 61-62)

If members of the deaf community can be transformed by understanding this relationship among respect for language, literature and the self, so can non-deaf people.

SIGN LANGUAGE LITERATURE

Sign language literature has its roots in deaf people's unwritten and unrecorded sign language folklore. Storytelling, particularly, has long been a valued language art-form in the deaf communities, where "smooth signers" (Bahan) or "master signers" (Reilly and Nipapon Reilly) with the knack for producing highly entertaining stories filled with visual images, entertained and informed other deaf people at school in childhood or in deaf clubs in adulthood (Rutherford).

With the development of accessible video film technology, sign language stories and poetry were recorded and allowed signers to use more complex language and poetic structures in their poems. This was because the poems can be repeatedly viewed, studied and analysed for their subtler elements (Krentz). This technological advance, coupled with increasing interest in the art form in academic circles (especially in the United States, see: Lerner and Feigle; Klima and Bellugi) led to the growth of what is now known as sign language literature, with high-art genres such as sign language poetry, and the development of deaf literary norms.

In many sign language art forms, how something is communicated is often more important than what is communicated, and the fact that it is communicated at all in sign language is often special and noteworthy (Peters). Mimicry and cinematic visual forms are highly valued (in comparison to "Respected" literatures, where such things are not valued). Sign language literature blends storytelling (which tells with words) and theatre (which tells with action and dialogue), and the skill of many literary signers lies in the way this blend is created. Literary elements in sign languages focus on creating powerful visual images through signs, and include using exaggerated facial expression, carefully controlled eye gaze and eye aperture, the location of referents in space, classifiers and constructed action (that is, the taking on the role of different characters and "impersonating" them). Rhythms created by movement and speed of signs, repetition of the same handshape in different signs, and symmetrical signing also form part of deaf literary aesthetic norms. Few of these elements find ready comparisons in analysis of written or oral literature, yet, if we looked at those texts with these expectations, we might uncover new ways to appreciate it.

Acceptance of sign language literature within the academy has created challenges, both to the academy and members of communities using this type of



disrespected literature, as sign language artists can be faced with the challenges to create a literary art form that is respected in the academy but that remains true to the original cultural norms. Over twenty years ago, Ormsby (1965) suggested the true extent of sign language poetry had been exaggerated but that emphasizing the importance of sign language poetry helped to establish its credibility and "hasten[s] its advance". When respected academics gave their support to sign language poetry, and training was given in the analysis and appreciation of the poems, the art form gained credibility. However, as sign language literature is the subject of increasing academic research and is taught in more Deaf Studies and Sign Language courses in universities, the academy has unwittingly created its own canon, based particularly on work from the mid-late 20th century that was recorded on videotape or DVD. This conveys status to certain forms of literature but possibly accidentally tramples on the cultural norms of the community that created it. I have personally witnessed on three separate occasions (in two different countries) deaf people telling other deaf people that what these people had just performed as sign language poetry was not poetry. They justified their opinion by saying that they had studied sign language literature at college. Part of the danger that the academy may unwittingly change sign language literature comes from arguing for respect for sign language literature by claiming that it bears much more similarity to "respected literature" than might be first thought. However, we cannot assume that literature is the same in all cultures, just because something that appears to be like it exists, and I will address this next.

WHAT SHOULD WE CALL THE LITERATURE THAT IS DISRESPECTED?

Thus, we come to the question of what we should call the disrespected literature when the word *literature*, defined by its written heritage dating from classical Greece, may have little in common with another culture's "literature". As Margaret Noodin (in personal communication) has explained, Anishinaabemowin (spoken by the Ojibway people of North America) has two words to refer to their language practices that might be translated using the English term *literature*: "*dibaajimowinan*—more contemporary truth telling in all formats; *aadizookanag*—refers to the presentation of timeless knowledge. Both are nominalizations of verb forms but notably, the first is considered inanimate while the second is animate." A single word *literature* hides this division because it is one not readily recognised in English or European literature, but which could be and could provide a new perspective.

Attempts have been made to name sign language literature using words in English to reflect the fact that it is signed and not written, including: Oral literature, Orature, Face to face tradition, Sign Language Literature, Literature in Sign Language, Deaf literature, Visual Literature, Sign-ature and Visu-ature. However, as Spooner (51) notes in relation to American sign Language (ASL), using different terminology can marginalize the language and literacy practices of minority groups so that "[B]eing satisfied with new categories [such as signacy] simply casts Deaf people and ASL, yet again, as the 'other.'" Spooner notes that this "systematic fragmentation" leads to oppressed cultures and their features being characterized as "the other" and not part of a comprehensive epistemology.



Perhaps instead of trying to translate the words or concepts into English, we could use the word from the literature's language, deliberately "foreignizing" the word for English-language readers. For example, the language art-forms known as ♯ in Brazilian Sign Language or bsl-l.i.t. in British Sign Language, may be referred to in English translation using the English word *literature*. However, they bear very little relation to written or spoken literature in English or any other non-deaf culture's language.

EMBODIED SUBJECTIVITY

Derek Attridge makes it clear that literature should be seen as an event, in which reader and writer participate. The Brazilian Sign Language artist and researcher Claudio Mourão has noted that Brazilian Sign Language literature (♯) is both an artefact and a process. The sign ♯ can be as much a verb as a noun. Seeing literature as an event rather than as an object changes our understanding of it and our relationship with it. Literature, or at least ♯ , is something people do, and thus becomes intimately related to the body, both that of the poet-performer and that of the audience. As Heidi Rose has noted, it is a way of writing the body into literature. In his British Sign Language (BSL) poem *Two Books*, the BSL poet Paul Scott takes on the role of different books in a book shop which sign their content to their readers. In an interview discussing his poem, he said, "Hearing people who want to read a poem can take a book from the shelf and read it. For deaf people, I am the book" (Sutton-Spence and Quadros 1). This embodied subjectivity of sign language literature is seen in embodied speaking with the subject as the core. Embodied speaking, following Koltai unites action, feeling and thought to create utterances that go beyond language to communicate through a person's whole experience.

EMBODIED POLITICAL RESISTANCE

Sign language literature, always an act of embodied speaking, can also be an act of embodied political resistance. Paul Scott's BSL poem *Doll* is superficially a short, amusing poem about a child playing with a doll. The child brushes the doll's hair and applies make-up to it, although we see the doll resisting it all. Finally, bored and wilfully destructive, the child pulls off the doll's head. Closer attention to the poem reveals it is an angry critique of the treatment of deaf people by hearing society.

In the poem, Paul Scott, the person, the poet and performer takes on the role of the narrator (who repeatedly says "Poor doll"), the doll and the child. He is the narrator; he is the doll; he is the child. He is the oppressor and the oppressed; he is the observer and commentator. Simultaneously, his body tells the information and shows it. In Figure 1 below, we see the poet performer in the role of the child, holding the doll firmly in his left hand and applying the unwelcome make-up with his right hand. In the second picture, the poet performer's body and face have taken the role of the doll objecting to the make-up, but the hands (which to a deaf person are revered as the way of communicating and expressing the self) remain the child's hands and are not



the doll's hands. The right hand is the child's hand that applies the make-up and the left hand still holds the doll firmly.



Fig.1 Application of make-up on the doll in Paul Scott's *Doll*

In the poem, the doll's arms are pinned by the child, so it is unable to voice its objections to its treatment. This refers to the repeated attempts by people in hearing society to prevent deaf people from signing (many older deaf people remember their teachers tying their hands to prevent them from signing). When the child decides to pull off the doll's head (Fig. 2a), the grip is loosened just enough so that when the poet performer shifts to become the doll, it waves frantically in its distress (Fig. 2b), but the child does not see. The child adjusts its grip and once more the arms and hands are pinned. They do not move, as the doll struggles to resist in the grip of the child (Fig. 2c). Prevented from using its hands, the doll is rendered "speechless" while it is destroyed (Fig. 2d).



Fig. 2: The destruction of the doll in Paul Scott's *Doll*.

Fig. 2a. Child pulling the doll apart

Fig. 2b. Doll waving in distress



Fig. 2c. Doll unable to move its arms Fig. 2d. Child with the doll destroyed

By using his deaf body to show the deaf experience, the poem is in Paul Scott, the person, the poet and performer. We cannot take the poem out of the performance or out of the poet and keep its meaning.

EMBODIED DEAF WORLD EXPERIENCE

Sign language literature does not just focus on oppression and political resistance. Much of it is a joyful celebration of what sign language can do in the hands of an expert to reveal the deaf world experience. It is impossible to list all the examples or even offer a summary of the genres of sign language literature around the world that celebrate sign language and the positive aspects of the deaf world experience (Sutton-Spence and Kaneko). One example will serve here, from a new, emerging genre of sign language literature, cinematic signing presented simultaneously with the original film, a form that has developed recently because of technological availability. There are many examples available on internet video sites. In this one, Cezar Pedrosa de Oliveira signs the scene from the film *X-men Apocalypse* in which the super-hero character Quicksilver rescues his companions from an explosion. The skill lies in recreating and re-presenting in sign language the actions and images that are presented in the film. The timing of the signs must match the timing of each shot in exact simultaneous production, so the signer must select the primary image in each shot and decide how to depict it in the time available. In Figure 3a, Oliveira's left hand shows Quicksilver holding the scrap of paper, while the right hand shows the cake he has dropped. Although the shot in the film shows only the back of Quicksilver's head, the signer shows us his facial expression, and adds the relevant eye-gaze and aperture, and facial expression. He does not sign the school in the distance, the road or the trees. In Figure 3b, the hands show the floorboards buckling, and the eye aperture and facial expression show the timing and intensity of the explosion in slowed time. None of the companions to be rescued is represented in the signed version but that is not necessary because the art-form is working with the film, not instead of it. It is sheer entertainment, and we marvel at the performer's linguistic ability. We cannot take out



the film from the performance, or separate the poet, performer or signs from the film and keep the meaning of the piece.



Fig. 3. Cezar Pedrosa de Oliveira's signed reproduction of a scene from the film *X-men the Apocalypse*
Fig. 3a. Left hand shows Quicksilver holding the scrap of paper, while the right hand shows the cake.
Fig. 3b. The hands show the floorboards buckling, and the eye aperture and facial expression show the explosion.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, in this brief essay, I have shown why it is worth studying a disrespected literature such as sign language literature. It reveals the beauty of sign language and sign language literature, making us look at any language and literature in a new way. It shows us the potential and the limits of language, human creativity and humanity, suggesting that these limits are very much further than we might imagine if we had never had the pleasure and privilege of seeing the disrespected language and its art-forms. That teaches us respect and the humility necessary for recognizing unanticipated and unfamiliar art forms that, undoubtedly, lay ahead in our explorations of literature.

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Rachel Sutton-Spence has taught the linguistics and literature of Brazilian sign Language at the Federal University of Santa Catarina, Brazil since 2013. She was previously a Reader in Deaf Studies at the University of Bristol, England. She has co-authored with Michiko Kaneko *Introducing Sign Language Literature: Creativity and Folklore*, Palgrave Press, 2016.

suttonspence@gmail.com