

Rochester Institute of Technology

RIT Digital Institutional Repository

Presentations and other scholarship

Faculty & Staff Scholarship

2006

Roots and wings: ASL poems of "Coming Home"

Karen Christie

Rochester Institute of Technology

Dorothy Wilkins

Keuka College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.rit.edu/other>

Recommended Citation

Christie, Karen and Wilkins, Dorothy, "Roots and wings: ASL poems of "Coming Home"" (2006). Accessed from

<https://repository.rit.edu/other/598>

This Conference Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the RIT Libraries. For more information, please contact repository@rit.edu.

Roots and Wings: ASL Poems of “Coming Home”

KAREN CHRISTIE, PH.D., & DOROTHY M. WILKINS

Karen Christie is an associate professor in Department of Cultural and Creative Studies at the National Technical Institute of the Deaf (NTID) where she teaches primarily literature courses. Dorothy Wilkins is a professor and co-coordinator for ASL and ASL/English Interpretation at Keuka College in Keuka Park, New York.

For many Deaf people born into hearing families, coming “home” into the Deaf community for the first time is a common experience and leads to a change in language use and identity. In this paper, we relate how Deaf literary artists, and specifically ASL poets, represent this experience of “coming home.” The quest for a home is also a common theme which has emerged among the literatures of postcolonial peoples in exile (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, 2005) and we will suggest it parallels the Deaf experience. In addition, we look at the symbols used by ASL poets for representing the journey to Deafhood (cf. Ladd, 1993). The ASL poems, “Cocoon Child” by Clayton Valli (1995) and “Black Hole: Colors ASL” by Debbie Rennie (1990), in particular, employ images which suggest that finding home for the first time inspires a liberating transformation of not only language and identity, but also of spirit. It is this experience which Deaf people desire to bequeath to future generations of Deaf children: that which provides them with both roots and wings.

INTRODUCTION: POSTCOLONIAL LITERARY HOMES

“There are only two lasting bequests we can hope to give our children. One of these is roots; the other, wings.” —Hodding Carter

IN THEIR BOOK *THE EMPIRE WRITES BACK*, ASHCROFT, GRIFFITHS AND Tiffin (2005) identify a number of themes that run throughout the literatures of postcolonial peoples in exile. One of these is the quest for home. Postcolonial writers may be described as minority writers, diasporic writers, writers of exile or immigrant writers. Despite the reasons for and time of “displacement,” these writers are often viewed as foreigners/different in their places of residence, and often feel that way as well. The concept of “home,” hooks (1991) has noted, also is very different for those who have been colonized or oppressed. Thus, in the literatures of these peoples the struggle of finding

their place, their home, often is addressed and provides a type of re-writing of the dominant culture's account of the history of a group.

While the homeland of these writers may be a real place, Rushdie (1992), calls them "imaginary homelands" as the literary attempt to truly describe one's homeland will not be an objective reality and is likely to be idealized. In this way, home becomes a sense of place "created by a community of language, culture, and customs" (Said, 2001) and a place of belonging. Along with the idea of home is the concept of sharing a "fictive kinship," which implies a collective identity by which disenfranchised peoples share "a particular mind set and world view" (Fordham as cited in Leistyna, 1999:80). As Rushdie (1992), Ashcoft (2001) and Said (2001) show, postcolonial writers use the trope of "home" with special meaning. This unique meaning of home and kinship is particularly relevant in discussing the literary works of Deaf people.

DEAF PEOPLE AND THE QUEST FOR HOME

In a number of writings concerning Deaf people and the Deaf community, there has emerged a refrain about the importance of finding or feeling "at home." For those of us born into hearing families, we grow up with a feeling of being foreigners and different from those in our family's extended community. Because of a shared physical characteristic and because we are unable to be acculturated into our family's cultural heritage, Lane, Hoffmeister, and Bahan (1996) contend Deaf children from hearing families are born with a "Deaf heritage" of which they "take possession" when they finally come home to the DEAF-WORLD.

Home as a geographical community. For Deaf people, the quest for a homeland at one time did become the yearnings for the establishment of a literal geographic place, with our own governing structure. In the last century, Lane (1995) notes that there have been several movements by Deaf people in various countries to establish land for a Deaf community. Between 1856 and 1859, there was a flurry of letters in the *American Annals of the Deaf* arguing for the claim of some land in the west for a "Deaf colony." While such a colony never materialized, the dream has manifested itself into the form of a town. Laurent is a signing-friendly community in South Dakota which is being built today (see <http://www.laurentsd.com>). However, this sense of home as a particular geographic place is less common when creating literary works about the Deaf experience and the longing for home.

Home as the Deaf school. Many Deaf people have told about experiencing the feeling of coming home when discovering others like themselves at

Deaf schools. In the beginning of his aptly titled *At Home Among Strangers*, Schein (1989) shares the stories of two Deaf men, Edmund Booth and Frank Bowe, as first-time arrivals at different Deaf schools. Both of these men arrived with a hearing sibling, yet at once felt they had "come home" to a family of Deaf people. That these two stories happened over 100 years apart speaks to the perseverance of the Deaf school as an enduring place of cultural initiation. Additionally, the Deaf school as home transcends even traditional geographical boundaries. Ladd (2003) shares the memories of Raymond upon "first contact" with other Deaf people at a Deaf school in England:

I saw all these hands waving around...I remember that—I was four and a half, five, and a kid came up and signed to me, and I shrank back....Yet I identified myself with him like that (snaps fingers). Yep, that moment opened me to the world, really. (301)

Beyond the Deaf school, the Deaf community maintains the homeland for Deaf people. It further organizes the establishment of clubs, athletic associations, advocacy groups and religious organizations (see Lane, Hoffmeister and Bahan, 1996; and Ladd, 1993). These readings give us some information on the idea of a Deaf homeland from historical and sociological perspectives. What about the Deaf homeland as a personal and literary experience?

Home in Deaf/ASL Literature. Peters (2000) addresses the Deaf homeland as a literary experience in *Deaf American Literature: From the Carnival to the Cannon*. In particular, she mentions Bang and DeLap's play "Institutional Blues" (1993) which gives audience members a glimpse into the Deaf school as a homeland. Echoing the experiences of Booth and Lowe, one of the students at the Deaf school in this play explains, "...here (deaf-school) feel like family. True love mother father, but here school feel like me having 100 brothers and sisters..." (p. 18). The Deaf girl, Darlene, goes on to contrast her dinner table experiences with her family of origin with those of her Deaf school family.

In the film *AsaramaKu* (2000), RIT student filmmaker Leon Lim tells the story of a Deaf Malaysian boy's coming home to a Deaf school. Lim shows that after arrival at the school, the boy must go through an initiation process in order to be accepted. Yet, once accepted into the "family," he clearly remains in close contact—evidenced by the shared memories and food at his 50 year class reunion which frames the film's story. Thus, the film tells a common "coming home" story experienced among Deaf people from vastly different geographical backgrounds, and further suggest Deaf people may be viewed as diasporic people of a Deaf Nation (see Ladd, 1993). In addition, Lane (1995) mentions Douglas Bullard's *Islay* (1986) as "a Deaf utopian novel."

In this book, the narrator sets out to establish a deaf state, a Deaf homeland. Peters (2000) analyzes this "Deaf American Novel" in great detail focusing particularly on Bullard's use of satire in creating both his Deaf and hearing characters. However, the protagonist, Lyson, frequently articulates Deaf truths: "Hearing think us deaf have no family, no loved one, no roots, no legitimacy" (Bullard, 1986:61). At one point, Lyson visits with Anthony, a Deaf geneologist and his Deaf wife, Jayne. While Lyson has come to talk about Anthony investing in his deaf state of Deaf brothers and sisters, Anthony assumes Lyson has come to trace his family lineage. Confusion ensues, which Jayne clarifies "...You, Anthony talking about blood. You, Lyson talking about spirit." Jayne clearly is interested in Lyson's idea as she complains to her husband, "...you stubborn on ground, while he, Lyson, trying fly!" (Bullard, 1986:166). As these brief passages illustrate, Bullard clothes his truths about the spiritual longing for a homeland in survival humor. Writings which mix "the bizarre and the plausible" have been identified as features of postcolonial literatures in which these writers "...demand the prerogative of redreaming their own lands" (Boehmer, 2005:236).

In looking at literary works created in ASL, Peters (2000) mentions Stephen Ryan's "Planet Way Over Yonder" (1991). Like the folktale "Eyeth" and NTD's "My Third Eye: Circus Sideshow," this is an inverted world story. In these works, a planet is inhabited by Deaf people who are the majority and where hearing people are considered freaks, aliens, and "people of the ear."

Bonnie Kramer's ASL narrative "The Deaf Duckling" (1996) tells the story of a deaf duckling who leaves home after being ridiculed for wearing a body hearing aid. This duckling runs away, coming upon another pond, where he meets signing Deaf Swans. One of the Deaf Swans assures the Deaf duckling of their shared heritage. She frees the duckling of the body aid that has been weighing him down. The Deaf duckling becomes a swan and joins the group in flight to a new home where there are 'many, many like us.'

In Ben Bahan's "Bird of a Different Feather" (1993), a young bird feels a conflict in establishing a home among the valley birds or among the eagles of the mountains of his parents (which are allegories for the Deaf community and hearing world, respectively). It ends with the bird flying off toward the horizon of a setting sun. While the conclusion of the story implies a depressing between-state, Ashcroft (2001) has described the postcolonial motif of horizons as suggesting places of merging potential which challenge "the nature of inherited boundaries of cultural limitations" (204). This may be true for a postmodern interpretation of "Bird of a Different Feather."

Thus, we see the prevalence of longing for a homeland in a number of genres of literary works by Deaf people. However, what of ASL poetry?

DEAF HOMELAND IN ASL POETRY

In our study of ASL poetry in terms of themes of resistance, affirmation and liberation (Christie and Wilkins, 2007), we looked at the poetry of ASL which specifically addressed the "Deaf experience." We found that these poems could be described in terms of those that communicated political resistance to the majority culture and those that communicated an affirmation or celebration of Deaf culture (see Durr, 1991 and this volume, for description of these terms related to Deaf Art). With ASL poems of affirmation, we found a particular subgroup of poems which delineate the *process* of liberation. That is, a poetic description of a Deaf person's experiences of resistance to the majority culture and their ultimate affirmation of life as a Deaf person. Table 1 represents the thematic areas of resistance which are transformed into parallel areas of affirmation in ASL liberation poetry. ASL poems which describe the transition from being forced to use only speech to discovery of ASL as one's own language is an example of a liberation poem in the sub category of linguistic liberation (see Christie and Wilkins, for further explanation).

	Resistance to Majority Cultural Values	Affirmation of Deaf Cultural Values
Linguistic	English/Speech Sound Communication focus on form	ASL/Hands + Eyes Visual Experience Communication focus on content
Personal Identity	Medicalization of Identity Monocultural	Deaf Cultural Identity Bi/Multicultural
Education	Mainstreaming Institutionalized Audism	Deaf School contexts Cultural Transmission
Social	Individualism Assimilation Isolation Ignorance of own culture	Historical Collectivism Cultural Survival Social Interaction Awareness of Own

Table 1: Processes of Liberation

Here, we focus on liberation poems that describe the transforming experience of being ignorant of and isolated from Deaf people and the community to becoming aware and acculturated. Clayton Valli's "Cocoon Child" and Debbie Rennie's "Black Hole: Colors ASL" are two ASL poems of liberation which address the experience of "coming home" into the Deaf community.

COCOON CHILD: VALLI'S ASL POEM OF COMING HOME

The ASL poem, "Cocoon Child" appears in *ASL Poetry: Selected Works of Clayton Valli* and is signed by Rosalee Gallimore. The poem will be analyzed

here in three parts. The first part opens with a child wandering aimlessly with a somewhat innocent and unknowing expression. The narrator in the poem states directly that this child didn't know who she was or what the meaning of life was.

In the second part, the child persona goes into a limbo stage. She clenches her fists, crosses her arms over her chest, lowers her head, and closes her eyes. Clenched fists and closed eyes clearly symbolize Deaf people being cut off from the world, and turning inward. This limbo stage is further symbolized by a cocoon-like covering which protects the child's body against interference from the outside world.

During this cocoon stage, others come near the cocoon and are described as willing assistants or guides. While one encourages the other to be patient, they ultimately serve as midwives in the rebirthing by pulling at a thread from the top of the cocoon. This is the unraveling of the chrysalis in which the metamorphosis to a butterfly is completed. The child emerges from the cocoon uncrossing her arms, spreading open her hands, lifting up her head and opening her eyes. This unfolding and opening out happens in the direction of the mentors. She moves toward the space where the mentors have come, opening her arms in what could be an unfurling of her wings. Flying upwards as a butterfly, she states that she now knows her true self.

This poem is one in which we see the transition of a person from an isolated Deaf person in the majority culture to membership in the Deaf home community. The poet shows that this process is parallel to the metamorphosis from a land animal to a colorful, flying animal. It is clearly a poem of liberation and evolution. It suggests not only a personal liberation by finding a home and oneself, but also a spiritual one, as the persona at the end of the poem is now signs from an elevated space, representing a higher spiritual plane.

"BLACK HOLE: COLORS ASL:" RENNIE'S POEM OF COMING HOME

Debbie Rennie's poem, "Black Hole: Colors ASL," has also been identified as an ASL poem of "coming home." In this liberation poem, the persona experiences a life transition into the Deaf community via ASL.

At the beginning of the poem, the persona comes upon a ladder which she decides to climb. The persona's nervous glancing about and facial expressions communicates a feeling of uncertainty about this upwards climb. In addition, she communicates a feeling of uncertainty about what she has left below. The creator of the poem has indicated to us that she is moving in the "right" direction as she is climbing upwards which has a positive connotation (cf. Wilcox, 2000). As the persona climbs up to a scaffold-like area, she discovers several cans of paints. She begins to create by dipping her hands

in the paints and splattering the colors across the blue sky. Here, she is discovering the rich colors of ASL and is delighted by her own ability to be a full creative language user.

Her discovery process is interrupted by someone shaking the bottom of her ladder. This someone urges her to come down—back to her old life, and is causing her to lose her balance at the top of the ladder. A can of black paint spills down and creates a sinkhole. The person who was shaking the ladder disappears into the abyss. The ladder, then, begins to move, sinking downward. At the top of the ladder, the persona flails her arms, trying to keep her balance. In this part of the poem, the persona is moving from ignorance to awareness. She has realized that immersion or attempts at assimilation have failed, and the majority culture has become a black, sightless place for her. Her struggle is a personal struggle of rebirth into a new language and culture.

In the final part of the poem, the persona's arms, struggling to help maintain her balance, become wing-like. Her body lifts off the ladder, flying upwards. Her facial expression communicates she is incredulous at this power she has found within herself. She flies upwards into the painted sky with colors sensually streaming down her face.

COMING HOME: ASL POETRY

These two ASL liberation poems tell the story of 'coming home' for the first time. They are both poems about a journey. Said (2001) has mentioned that "motifs of journeys underpin the plot or provide a symbolic framework for a great number of postcolonial texts" (190). In addition, "the culminating event in the journey narrative is that of homecoming..." (192).

It is interesting that the poems begin differently. The persona in Valli's "Cocoon Child" seems to begin the journey to Deafhood as a result of feeling lost and feeling the lack of a sense of self. Her wandering and isolation is reminiscent of that of the exile. This is what drives her from her place of ignorance, and she turns inward. In contrast, the persona in Rennie's "Black Hole: Colors ASL" is presented with a way into the Deaf community, a symbolic ladder. Her journey appears to be one stimulated by curiosity. It may be that the journey in "Cocoon Child" is a journey that begins at a Deaf school, with Deaf peers who play a significant role; in contrast, "Black Hole: Colors ASL" may begin in a mainstreamed educational setting where the pressure to assimilate into the majority culture is symbolized by the person shaking the ladder. Rennie's poem clearly focuses on the homeland's language, ASL, as the way into the Deaf community and development of a Deaf self. The metaphor of ASL as colors and a creative self contrasts with the implied metaphor of hearing culture and English as a black hole. It is language use that

stimulates the transformation. In Valli's poem, the focus of the transformation is in the match between the need for self-knowledge and external guidance. Still in this poem, the persona's hands move from being closed to being open and free to sign.

Most significantly, we see the personas of both poems undergoing radical physical transformations which result in winged, flying selves, images which are repeated in other literary works such as *Islay* and *The Deaf Duckling*. They have unlocked a power of which they were unaware. This may be akin to the liberating discovery of their Deaf heritage which they have possessed all along. They rise above, freed from limitations and restrictions, which have kept their souls earthbound. These changes imply a transcendence: they have become authentic, self-actualized spirits. And, "where else could one's place be but the location of the spirit" (Ashcroft, 2001:199).

These ASL poems of coming home necessarily include the concepts of language and identity transformation. In order to find a homeland, Deaf people must learn the language of that homeland, ASL. Writer Dennis Lee (as cited in Ashcroft 2001) has explained this need because "the language (of the colonizer) was drenched with our non-belonging." This communicates that as long as a deaf person is not at home in the language, she/he can never really be at home in the community. In addition, one needs to shake off the medicalized identity bestowed by doctors, teachers, and hearing family members. In Wong's novel, *Homebase* (1990), the Chinese-American states "Identity is a word full of home." Coming home, as the poems imply, means becoming Deaf—the discovery of one's true identity, an authentic self.

CONCLUSION

Like the concept of home expressed by postcolonial writers, a Deaf homeland is a created space of comfort, refuge, and belonging. Home is where we experience life with a family of others like ourselves, who use our language, and know who we really are. It is a safe place from which we can travel into a world dominated by others.

The coming home poems of "Cocoon Child" and "Black Hole: Colors ASL" emphasize the importance of ASL and Deaf identity. They both show that if a Deaf person has a home—roots, ASL, and a strong identity—we will have wings. Wings are symbols used by both poets to describe the feelings of freedom, self-actualization and spiritual fulfillment. With the quest for home satisfied, the Deaf person is liberated. In this way, Deaf poets "sign back" to the hearing empires which have historically presented us as languageless peoples whose quest should be to learn to talk, be fixed and accept a life as isolated handicapped individuals in a hearing world. In this way,

Deaf poets give "voice" to the importance of our homecoming and in turn, transform the future for Deaf children.

REFERENCES

- Ashcroft, B. (2001). *Post-Colonial Transformation*. London: Routledge.
- Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G. & H. Tiffin (2005). *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. NY: Routledge.
- Bahan, B., & Supalla, S. (1992). *ASL Literature Series: Bird of a Different Feather and For a Decent Living*. San Diego, CA: DawnSign Press (videotape).
- Bangs, D. & DeLap, J. (1993). *Institutional Blues*. Cheverly, MD: Cultural Arts Pbulick Playhouse.
- Boehmer, E. (2005). 2nd Ed. *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*. NY: Oxford.
- Bullard, D. (1986). *Islay*. Silver Spring, MD: TJ Publishers.
- Carter, H. (2006, April 8). <http://www.wisdomquotes.com/000274.html>.
- Christie, K. & Wilkins, D. M. (2007). Themes and Symbols in ASL Poetry: Resistance Affirmation and Liberation. *Deaf Worlds*, 22:1-49.
- Durr, P. (1999). Deconstructing the forced assimilation of Deaf people via De'VIA resistance and affirmation art. *Visual Anthropology Review*. 15 (2), 47-68.
- hooks, b. (1991). *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. London: Turnaround.
- Kramer, B. (1991). "Deaf Ducking." First National ASL Literature Conference. Rochester, NY: National Technical Institute for the Deaf. (videotape)
- Ladd, P. (2003) *Understanding Deaf Culture: In Search of Deafhood*. Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.
- Lane, H. (1995). "Reproductive Control of Deaf People and the Deaf Search for a Homeland." In *A Deaf American Monograph*, pp. 73-77. Silver Spring MD: National Association of the Deaf.
- Lane, H., Hoffmeister, R., & B. Bahan. (1996). *A Journey into the DEAF-WORLD*. San Diego, CA: DawnSign Press.
- Leistyna, P. (1999). *Presence of Mind: Education and the Politics of Deception*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Lim, L. (2000). *AsramaKu*. Rochester, NY: Deaf Rochester Film Festival. (film)
- Peters, C. (2000). *Deaf American Literature: From Carnival to the Canon*. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press.
- Rennie, D. (1990). "Black Hole: Colors ASL." In *Poetry in Motion: Original Works in ASL*. Burtonsville, MD: Sign Media, Inc. (videotape).
- Rushdie, S. (1992). *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticisms 1981-1991*. London: Granta Books.
- Ryan, S. (1991). "Planet Way Over Yonder." In *ASL Storytime: Volume 5*. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University's Department of Sign Communication. (videotape).
- Said, E. (2001). *Reflections on Exile: And Other Literary and Cultural Essays*. London: Granta Books.
- Schein, J. (1989). *At Home Among Strangers*. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press.
- Van Cleve, J., & Crouch, B. (1989). *A Place of Their Own: Creating the Deaf Community in America*. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press.
- Valli, C. (1995). "Cocoon Child." In *ASL Poetry: Selected Works of Clayton Valli*. San Diego, CA: DawnSign Press (videotape).
- Wilcox, P.P. (2000). *Metaphor in American Sign Language*. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press.
- Wong, S. (1990). *Homebase*. NY: Plume/NAL.