Silent Deaf theater never needed to give “lessons” to hearing people. The only hearing people who came were those who already knew the language and were related to Deaf people either by family or by some other intimate relation. The aim of Deaf theater was to entertain Deaf people, and to translate the world into their own terms. Their theaters were private and out of sight of the mainstream. Deaf people lived their lives outside the public glare, in borrowed and temporary spaces, figuratively mute as well as invisible. Sign language was mysterious and obfuscating, not to be readily understood. The history of how sign language came to be, how the different groups of deaf people came together, and how they lived their lives, were known only by those in the community.

But once the actors of the National Theatre of the Deaf mounted the stage in the fall of 1967, their language and way of life suddenly became public and enormously visible. Hearing theater critics wrote about their signing, and hearing audiences applauded their signed performances. Even Deaf people noticed the actors’ signs, especially when they complained that the signing was too fast. Once seen by others, the actors turned their lives into material for the stage and began to objectify themselves. The fact of their
signing and their not speaking became a matter of public curiosity and an object of discussion. Where silence was once not noticed, it was now a commodity, and for that matter, made even more emphatic by voice interpretation. Signing was the manner of performing, and it was itself the performance. Astonished, the Deaf actors began to look at their own hands, and literally began to watch themselves sign.

Outside the world of theater, a storm was gathering. While the NTD actors were experimenting with what to show and say about their language and culture on stage, William Stokoe, a hearing scholar, and his Deaf colleagues at Gallaudet College, Carl Croneberg and Dorothy Casterline, had just published a new sign language dictionary. In this dictionary, signs were listed not by their translations in English, as had previous dictionaries of sign languages, but by their internal structure: the combination of handshades, locations or where the signs were produced on or around the body, and the type of movement. This was a first true dictionary of a sign language written, as the authors say, “on linguistic principles,” or on its own terms, rather than by derivation or translation through another language.

Science and art had come together in a brilliant confluence of discovery: that sign languages are human languages, and could be analyzed and understood as any other language in the world. Sign language could be codified in a dictionary and performed on a Broadway stage, both powerfully legitimizing acts. It should have been a moment of sheer exhilaration, but instead the community was stricken by a profound anxiety.

Instead of praise, the dictionary drew bitter criticism and anger. Gilbert Eastman, a drama professor at Gallaudet at the time, remembered some thirty-five years later, at a conference honoring the eightieth birthday of William Stokoe, that when he first heard of the dictionary, he “vehemently despaired” Stokoe for having done such a thing. How dare a hearing person write such a dictio-

nary of Deaf people’s language? How dare he represent his language in this bizarre form—as a collection of nonsensical symbols, squiggles, and invented vocabulary? Stokoe had invented a new word, “chereme,” to describe the smaller parts of a sign, drawing from the Latinate cher to mean “gesture” because he could not find a vocabulary ideal for his purposes. He added “tab” for location, “dez” for handshape, and “sig” for movement. Eastman was incensed at the audacity of what Stokoe had done. He was an outsider, trampling through the language for gain and profit. Stokoe had been hired to teach English literature at the college, but somehow had become sidetracked; supposedly he taught Chaucer by day, but in his spare time, he had managed to convince two Deaf colleagues to join him in a “vanity” project.

In the early 1960s, structural linguistics, which had originated in Europe as part of a movement to compare languages of the world, was gaining a foothold in American colleges and universities as an academic discipline. In this approach to language study, languages were described according to the design of their sound structures, the organization of their morphemes and vocabulary, and their sentence structures. By coding these structures, languages could be more easily compared, and histories of language families could be tracked over time. Stokoe was convinced he could show that the same structures can be found in sign languages.

Because structural linguistics relied heavily on the description of the sound system, Stokoe needed to show that signs could be organized in the same way: as having smaller units that are assembled together in rule-governed combinations. His dictionary was both analysis and product; he demonstrated the linguistic principles by inventing an entirely new system for representing signs. But strangely, instead of being praised for his efforts, he was reviled and ridiculed. A decade later, the dictionary would turn out to be the beginning of a new generation of sign language studies that would change how we understand the human capacity for lan-
guage and thought. Today there are university laboratories throughout the world devoted to the study of sign language, but in 1965, the dictionary received little scientific recognition.

Shortly after the introduction of the dictionary, the initial reaction of incredulity had transformed into a massive anxiety and confusion around sign language, both in the Deaf community and outside. The first struggle was to come to an agreement about a new name for the sign language. For the older generation the language of Deaf people in America was simply called “the sign language.” Until then in everyday talk and throughout all official publications of Gallaudet College and the National Association of the Deaf, there was no other name than “the sign language” when referring to how Deaf people communicate. Stokoe and his colleagues, in the tradition of comparative linguistics, decided to alter “the sign language” to “the American sign language,” as a way to distinguish the American language from other sign languages of the world. Shortly after, the label shortened and became fully capitalized and the language was called “American Sign Language.” But even among those who embraced the idea of American Sign Language as a distinct language, it was not yet clear how to talk about it as a language.

Lou Fant published a new sign language book in 1972, using a name he had invented for the language, a collapsing of words into one: “Ameslan.” In the introduction, he explained that as a hearing child of deaf parents, he had grown up learning the language at the hands of his deaf parents. He believed that unlike English, “Ameslan” was communicated visually, not linearly, and that the “pure” form of the language had no fingerspelling; instead, it relied on images created through signs to build sentences. We know today that fingerspelling is very much a part of ASL, having a history as long as if not longer than American Sign Language. At the time, however, Fant wanted to demonstrate the uniqueness of the sign language, perhaps by distancing it from English—yet at

the cost of an incorrect observation. After a short life, the name “Ameslan” was dropped in favor of “ASL,” perhaps because Ameslan seemed less like a scientific term.

Instead of relieving the anxiety, each new label seemed only to increase it, provoking heated debate and ideological clashes within the community. At the start, the term “American Sign Language” or “ASL” was denied by many. Instead of embracing a legitimization of the language they had used for their entire lives, they were suspicious of it. Instead of seeing American Sign Language as a designation of one of many sign languages around the world, they worried more about the claim that ASL was separate from English.

Here class divisions began to manifest themselves in the debate. In their eagerness to portray ASL as different from English, linguists during the early years may have labored too hard to make it seem more exotic, more unusual than it really was. Among the educated elite of the Deaf community, graduates of Gallaudet College and their faculty, many, like Gilbert Eastman, were openly derisive. Even if they were willing to agree that ASL was different from English, ASL wasn’t the language they used. Their signing was English influenced and educated; ASL was used by the less educated in the Deaf community, the “grassroots,” a class term used to refer to those who attend Deaf clubs, work at lower-paying trades, and never went to college. The educated elite used English in their signing, as evidenced by the greater use of fingerspelling and the fact that their sentences followed English word order more closely.

Did this development in naming the language represent a new kind of stigma, making Deaf people different in yet another respect? They were already different, and now as users of a different language, were they carrying an additional burden of strangeness? What, they asked, was the nature of this language with the new label? What made it deserving of a new designation? These questions were spawned in part by Deaf people struggling to confront others’ ideas about the poverty of their sign language. Having been
told many times by the more powerful science of others that sign languages were nothing more than imperfect systems, they were suddenly required to reconcile two disparate notions: that sign language had linguistic structure and that it was not a language.

James Woodward suggested that the form of signing that many of the Gallaudet elite described themselves as using could be called “Piggin Sign English” (PSE). He had noticed that signers changed word order or added more fingerspelled words when in the presence of English users. Because the communicative setting involved power imbalances between Deaf signers and hearing signers who were native users of English, he borrowed the term “pidgin” from spoken language study to describe the moment of language use when speakers of one language changed their vocabulary and grammar to accommodate speakers of a different language. Stokoe described the language situation at Gallaudet and other places as similar to a “diglossia” continuum where sign language varied from more like ASL to more like English.

Instead of easing tensions, Stokoe and Woodward’s attempts at describing sign language structure and form seemed only to increase them. The comparison of sign language with the spoken language pidgins of the Caribbean and South Pacific exacerbated the sense of strangeness and “otherness” that linguists brought to the community. True, the comparison to similar language situations elsewhere in the world drew ASL more into the class of world languages, but the vocabulary of science, including words like “diglossia” and “pidgin,” was not always reassuring. Hidden seams of prejudice against different styles of signing began to be exposed among both Deaf and hearing people.

Adding fuel to the fire was a growing movement in schools and programs for the deaf that ran counter to the growth of sign language studies in colleges and universities. With the goal of teaching English to deaf students, committees of teachers met to invent vocabularies of signs in which ASL signs were modified and new signs invented. New signs were believed to be needed because ASL was not thought to have equivalents to English words. The ASL sign PANTS, used to refer to any category of pants, from jeans to trousers, was modified as two new signs, one with the P handshape for PANTS, and the handshape J to mean JEANS. A further example was a modification of pronouns in ASL, which are gender-free and involve pointing in space. Because the signs did not mark gender, new signs were invented for “she,” “he,” “her,” and “him.” In addition, ASL does not inflect TO-BE, so the teachers proposed separate signs for “am,” “is,” “was,” “were,” as well as “be” and “been.” This language engineering by committee brought the debate over ASL to a fevered pitch, as Deaf people, wary of educators’ attempts to modify sign language, protested the efforts.

The fact that many Deaf people were involved in these attempts to “improve” ASL—or replace it in schools with a “better” option—shows how deeply conflicted the community found itself. Just as ASL was gaining academic credence, the movement in support of signed English likewise rose in prominence. The community had long invested in written English and competence in speech as paths to advancement within a hearing world, and using signed English seemed like a reasonable extension of the same belief. But the shift to recognizing ASL and Deaf culture caused conflict in the community because it meant that what had traditionally been devalued suddenly became valued.

There had long been threats on sign language from oralists, but their threats were to banish sign language altogether. Now outsiders were threatening not to eliminate, but to name, describe, modify, even to promote sign language, albeit in a different form. One would expect the recognition of ASL to be celebrated; it instead caused conflict and anxiety. The more that linguists argued that ASL was different and independent from English, the more the community agonized over whether it made sense to be “for” ASL, because what would that make them? It might mean becoming
something they didn’t yet understand. Did the new move to language legitimacy threaten a move toward more “difference,” isolation, and stigmatization? Many thought so. Others embraced the new rhetoric, because it offered the possibility of thinking the politics of language between deaf and hearing people.

This conflict and anxiety can be understood as the struggle of moving into a public sphere, where the age-old arguments over identity and language now had new stakes. The NTD represented an opening up of the community to the public, requiring the actors to reveal what had once been private as newly public. As Deaf actors struggled to decide which parts of themselves they wanted to use on the stage, the Deaf community battled over what to name their language, what to call their practices, and how to present themselves in a public language. It could be said that once exposed to the bright lights of science and the public’s interest, Deaf language and culture irreversibly changed. They certainly became more self-conscious, more deliberate, and more animated, in order to take their place on a larger, more public stage.

When the Deaf community went public, it was clear that there was a great deal of work ahead. Much would have to be rethought and redone. There was a new concept not only of “language,” but also of “culture.” Deaf people’s community life was described variously as “our ways of doing things,” “our common beliefs,” or “deaf world,” but not yet as a culture. With the introduction of the concept came the difficulty of matching science to the everyday lives of Deaf people: What is a “culture”? How does one determine the boundaries of such an entity? Are Deaf people a distinct culture? Or are they more appropriately identified as a subculture of hearing culture? Was there one culture or more? If the culture entailed use of ASL, where did orally trained or late learners of ASL fit in? Where should hearing people be placed in the organization of the community?

Issues of “membership” became the focus of the discussion, and anxiety crept into the debate. How could one become a “member of the Deaf community”? Are there recent arrivals, late arrivals, or nonarrivals? How much knowledge is needed for membership? Scientists offered definitions of “culture” less focused on membership, but the literature did not relieve the anxiety.

The idea of a language and culture promised a great deal; it promised equity and opportunity. If a community had its own language, and its own culture, it could claim certain rights equivalent to those claimed by minority groups. It could claim an interest in affairs having to do with deaf children and adults. It could realign the relationship of Deaf people to their schools, since now, as a distinct cultural group, they had an independent interest in the school curriculum. Furthermore, as the notion of culture was gaining a great deal of attention in the public—especially as issues of race and ethnicity moved to the forefront of American life during the 1960s and 1970s—the headiness of the idea of culture brought with it the sobering realization of how to enact it, how to translate it into terms for everyday life. And on this point, Deaf people disagreed. They debated among themselves such questions as: “What is ASL?” “Who is Deaf?” and “Is there a Deaf culture?” all of which were emotional political issues. The convention of using the capitalized Deaf to emphasize the cultural drew even more attention to the description of Deaf cultural practices, but whose practices and which practices counted?

In this moment of transition, the arts, including the NTD, played a role by modeling for the public a new mixing of languages and practices. ASL poets and storytellers of the 1970s and 1980s were among the more influential forces in guiding the community’s transition through this period of public debate. Some were in some way connected to the NTD. Dorothy Miles and Patrick Graybill performed in the first few seasons of the NTD. Ella Lentz attended summer school at NTD, and then worked with Dorothy Miles, performing Dorothy’s poetry in public while she began writing her
own original pieces. Clayton Valli never had contact with the NTD; in fact, he had developed much of his first poetry on his own while working as a teacher of the deaf in Nevada. Debbie Rennie performed in Rochester, New York. There were also inventive and popular ASL storytellers, including Sam Supalla, Ben Bahan, and Ted Supalla. All of these storytellers and poets consciously created performances that emphasized ASL as content and form. In this respect, they departed from the earlier generation of sign language poets like Merv Garretson, Robert Panara, and Willard Madsen, who came from the generation that called their language “the sign language.”

Dorothy Miles, or Dot as she liked to call herself, was one of the first poets of this generation of ASL poetry. Through her poetry, from her earliest to her last contributions, she modeled a transformation in the relationship between ASL and English. Miles was British-born, and as she recounts in “Biographies” in the NTD’s first original production, My Third Eye, she stopped hearing at the age of nine after a long childhood illness. After attending deaf schools in England where she learned her first sign language, British Sign Language, she came to Gallaudet in 1958 and while there, became actively involved in theater. She played mostly supporting roles, until her last year at Gallaudet when she played opposite Phyllis Frelich in Medea, and caught the attention of her acting colleagues as a promising talent. Though dedicated, she was not yet a powerful actor, so when the National Theatre of the Deaf opened, she was not on the original roster. She joined the company first as a wardrobe mistress, then in the following season she was hired for a role in the lead play, Dylan Thomas’s Under Milkwood.12

In this production, Miles was an intense presence, and she brought a great deal of creative energy to the company. In addition to performing, she helped to translate scripts, and found herself moving between English and sign language. She directed one segment of My Third Eye, “Side Show,” and contributed poetry for the company’s offshoot Little Theatre of the Deaf, aimed at a younger audience of children and teenagers. As she explains in a videotape of her work while she was visiting at the Salk Institute in La Jolla, California, she had experimented with writing poetry mostly “about nature and love” ever since she was a child, but her poetry began to take shape and to undergo deep changes while she was at the NTD.13

At first, Miles found her colleagues not “particularly impressed by my ‘new technique’ of combining spoken poetry with sign language.” She had experimented matching signs with words to try and create poetry that would be equally spare. Her classic haiku “The Seasons,” written around 1970, illustrates her early experiments with this technique:14

Spring
Sunshine, borne on breeze
among singing trees, to dance
on rippled water.

In the first line of the first verse, she signs SUN, BREEZE, AMONG SINGING TREES, then for the second line, DANCE ON RIPPLED WATER, SPARKLING-WATER. The lines were both literal and interpretive, using the signed prepositions AMONG and ON as well as using signs to evoke vivid images of the wind whistling through the trees and the sunlight rippling on the water. Hers was a simultaneous “translation” in which the English is preserved as well as in ASL, both matched in timing and line structure. This is in fact typical of the last generation of sign language poetry, in that it attempts to maintain fidelity to the English text, but present signing in lyrical form. In this case, the signing followed the sequence of English words, retaining them as the signs translated the meaning.

Whereas other Deaf poets wrote poetry in English about deaf themes, as in Merv Garretson’s “To a Deaf Child,” Miles’s poetry was beginning to experiment with the evocative power of signs
themselves, how they could make images as well as translate the poem. In her haiku, she signs how the breeze moves among the tree branches, but also separately signs AMONG and SINGING. Garretson used traditional verse structure, and carefully planned the rhyming of English words in the lines of the poem. Miles’s experiment at this point became less traditional, but she still was faithful to translating between English and ASL.

Later, while developing material for a company performance aimed at children and teenagers, Miles tried a different tack and wrote a poem “that is written for the sign language.” As she explains: “When I first wrote that poem, I signed I CAN HOLD A TREE IN PALM OF MY HAND. Those were my words.” She had, as in the earlier poems, translated the words in each line from English into ASL, matching signs to words, but then when “I showed [the poem] to my great friend Remy Charlip . . . he told me, ‘Why not start with the image? Don’t start with the words, I CAN, because that’s not necessary in the poem.’ I read through it and realized he was right so I eliminated all the I CAN’s from it so that I showed I could instead of saying I could.”16 The “showing” was the use of ASL to create imagery.

As she continued to experiment, she began to integrate the two languages more deeply, delving even further into their structural differences, revealing how different the languages were through they were matched in time line for line.

Language for the Eye

Hold a tree in the palm of your hand,
or topple it with a crash.
Sail a boat on finger waves,
or sink it with a splash.
From your finger tips see a frog leap,
at a passing butterfly.
The word becomes the picture in this language for the eye.

Here, Miles signs TREE with her left palm below her right elbow, and then allows the hand and arm to “topple.” She deftly switches from TREE to BOAT-SAILING-ACROSS-FINGER-WAVES (all as one sign), with the left hand mimicking the rolling motion of waves. The BOAT then sinks, and the two hands together form SPLASH. Returning to English, Miles signs FROM FINGER-TIPS SEE FROG LEAP PASS BUTTERFLY. She pauses and then signs the last line of the verse: WORD BECOMES PICTURE IN THIS LANGUAGE FOR EYE. Though literal, she shifts her eye gaze to move between signs, to show the transition from “word” to “picture.”

After five years with the company, Miles left the NTD and began to travel around the country, including stays at the Salk Institute, then a center for the early work on American Sign Language, where she interacted with sign language linguists. There she became more reflective about how she used language in her poetry. No longer content to do conventional verse, she experimented even further with her work, pushing the boundaries she had maintained between the two languages. The result was an explosive poem aptly titled “Defiance.” By way of introduction, she explains: “Last summer when I knew I was leaving the NTD, I went through a really big change in my life and soon I was writing things that I really felt were poetry. And one of them was the expression of my grief and anger at separating from the NTD, and it came out in sign language and English and it’s called, “If I were I . . .”17

Defiance
If I were I
I would not say those pleasant things that I say;
I would not smile and nod my head
When you say
No!
I would not bear, restrain, repress my disagreement.
But argue every point to puncturing—
Then smile,
If I were I.

What is remarkable about the poem is the way that she pushes the structural possibilities of ASL further than she ever had before. She does not simply sign the lines, but manipulates the signs themselves to create new forms of meaning. Conventionally, the line would be signed: IF I TRADE I, or “If I were to replace myself with a different I,” but she inserts a sign that is not translated into English at all: HYPOCRITE. She signs IF followed by the sign HYPOCRITE, and then the next sign, I, is signed directly on the handshape for HYPOCRITE, which would be best translated as: “If I were to replace my hypocrical self with a different I.” Following this type of “portmanteau” of juxtaposing one sign on another—done only with artistic license, not in everyday language—she then signs TRADE followed by I. Abandoning literal translation, Miles has gone beyond the English to create a line in sign poetry that has meaning above and beyond the words. Where her poetry had previously matched the two languages faithfully in translation and structure, here she tips the scale in favor of ASL. The Deaf audience is surprised by the invention, and pleased. In the meantime, listeners of English hear a well-designed poem in English, but it is not exactly the same one that signers see.

Miles’s journey in her own poetry, from what could be called “matched” translations to “parallel” translations, reflects a deepening sense of sign language as a medium for cultural expression and a separation in Deaf people’s own minds between the two languages. A poetry was born that was strongly “sign-centered,” that is, unabashedly independent of English and in the words of Michael Davidson, “not phonocentric.” In her performances, Miles sought to reach out to the Deaf community by emphasizing during her performance elements that were private and special to the group. The sign HYPOCRITE in Miles’s poem is not spoken in English, and is understood only by those who know the language and the special mode of sign invention.

With Miles came a generation of poets and performers who expanded on her example: Patrick Graybill, Ella Lentz, Debbie Rennie, and Clayton Valli created poetry that was signed first, and translated into English at a later time or not at all. In all their public performances, they sought to celebrate the potential of ASL, to use signs and forms that were both familiar and new. Ella Lentz in “Eye Music” borrows the all-familiar experience (to deaf people) of watching telephone lines dance through space while riding in a car, and incorporates it into a poem about the internal music of watching visual patterns. Davidson describes these sign poets as “using ASL as a powerful counter-discourse to phonocentric models for literature. In their work, performing the text means utilizing ASL signing to establish community (the Deaf audience understands a sign’s multiple meanings) and politicize the occasion (the hearing audience cannot rely on acoustic prosodic models).”

Their performances offered for the Deaf community, at a time when it was arrested with anxiety, a vision of how to represent themselves in a discourse of language and culture. The poetry spoke of independence and equity, with presentations that were equated with, but not subservient to, English. Gradually the poetry and the performances of equally inventive and skilled ASL storytellers like Sam Supalla and Ben Bahan became a new standard for public performance, showing that ASL should become the name of the language of the community, because it had such rich potential.

Today, sign poetry, indeed all forms of signed performance, is very popular with audiences. Poetry readings have been scheduled across the country in various venues. Many sign poets have “published” their poetry on videotape, for sale to students of sign language and other members of the community. Chris Krentz sees a large shift to film and video publishing for art forms in the community, and argues that the trend may have mixed consequences.
The immediate, audience-based performances of the Deaf clubs where recordings were rarely made have been supplanted by commercial videos of signed performances that can be purchased for home and classroom viewing. Krentz wonders if the change from large auditoriums to small, intimate domestic and educational spaces will affect sign poetry and make it more formal and stilted, transforming what used to be “oral” and face-to-face into something more like written poetry, to be viewed over and over again for formal purposes.

It may be that one consequence of the trend to video is that it has allowed sign poetry to develop into new, more reflective forms. Peter Cook, a Deaf poet, and Kenneth Lerner, a hearing person who performs with Cook, use video extensively as a medium for developing their poetic text. Their work is perhaps more free from the anxiety that earlier ASL poets felt. No longer required to establish ASL as a separate language in the public mind or to be advocates of ASL because the label is no longer as provocative as it was when Dot Miles was performing, the poets playfully tease the audience about ASL.22

Lerner: Ok, now, I have a confession.
Cook: What did you say? You have a confession?
Lerner: A confession. I’ve been doing some research. I’ve been studying, I’ve been chatting with experts. I’m sorry to tell you that I’ve learned that ASL is not a language. When compared with English, it stinks.
Cook: That’s not true!
Lerner: ASL sucks!
Cook: That’s not right!
Lerner: [Begins to mime apes.]
Cook: [Pretends to take a swing at Lerner.]
Lerner: Anyway...

Cook: Where did you learn this “research”? From them? [points to audience]
Lerner: People here? No! My audiologist told me.

The exchange segues into a particularly vivid performance about a bird who flies into the side of a house, and because the poem is so obviously about the potential of ASL to portray in detail the feathered characteristics of the bird, its flight and its eventual demise, the exchange is only tongue-in-cheek. During the routine between the two poets, the audience knowingly laughs at them, because at this time, the community has come full circle. ASL is not as volatile a label as it was nearly thirty years ago, and at this time, there is ease and familiarity instead of anxiety and hostility among both Deaf audiences and hearing audiences. Shortly following this exchange, Cook and Lerner set up the next poem, and take yet another cultural swipe:

Lerner: Okay now. Now that you understand a different perspective, we’re going to show you a weird poem.
Cook: The poem is called “e=mc2,” or “Relativity.”
Lerner: And please... don’t... try... to understand this poem.

The poem is vaguely about traveling through the universe, alternating between earth and space, the simultaneous voiced translation provided by Lerner as odd as the signed performance by Cook:

\[ E=mc^2 \] (or Relativity)
E and B, man’s sperm equals a monster, M, C, crunch crunch.
Spit ‘em out, squared man
Right side up, upside down, right side up
He goes into a strange kind of a landscape,
Shaped kinda like this, so it goes
Up and over and under and down and
Up and over and under and down.
And off the side, he is falling.
Snow, snow, snow heavy snow, pushing down
Until it’s pushed back up in the sky
Snow rising into clouds, swirling from below the sun
Burns a hole right through above the earth
Rotating, the pilot blasts off, out over the earth
Through clouds, through clouds, through clouds, and then out, up
Upside down, right side up, and while he answers the phone

At the conclusion of the piece, the poets sign backwards and match it in spoken words:

Man squared crunch see a monster sperm man equals egg e,
Poem understand try don’t please and clip etilair
Which is squared c m equal e.

Cook and Lerner have freed themselves from the obligation to make sense, to present a message, or to do ASL poetry in the conventional sense. Though they do poetry that tells messages—indeed, poetry in the sense that Dot Miles meant it, full of knowledge about the language and its political situation—they also experiment and draw attention to the very act of ASL poetry itself. At every turn during their performances, their audiences understand what they are doing. They laugh and cheer at every pretense of the poets. Sign poetry has reached a point where it no longer needs to teach or justify itself; it is widely regarded and appreciated for what it is—an emotional outlet, a political statement about the language and culture, and finally, simply entertainment.

Dot Miles, in her time, would have been a poet laureate of the Deaf community. Her poetic voice came out of a personal and communal anguish—how to resolve the conflicts from within and without. She wrote poetry intended to be lyrical and evocative, to elevate the view of the language as one worthy of literary regard, and as she tells us, she wrote out of a deep need to reach out to others. Her poetry was politically charged, but it was also about unrequited love and wistful memories of her childhood. Miles loved deeply and invested her creative energies heavily in her poetry. Today poetry and poets can afford to be irreverent, cheeky, and politically mischievous, but in 1975, Miles was very serious about her work. In a videotape, we see her refer to the original name, “the sign language” when referring to the language of her poetry, a reminder that at the time she began her experimentation, the idea of ASL as a name for the language was still new.

As Deaf people watched poets and storytellers perform on public stages, their view of the language was transformed. Sam Supalla’s popular “Best Whiskey of the West” is borrowed in part from Ray and Charles Eames’s 1977 film Powers of 10, and from cowboy stories popular in schools for the deaf (see Merv Garretson’s “Cowboy Poem”). In Powers of 10, the camera moves from the smallest molecule out through the body to galaxies in outer space; in Sam’s story a cowboy drinks a shot of whiskey that propels him through the roof, through the sky, past the clouds, and into outer space. The cowboy continues flying past the moon, Mars (with Martians waving), and through the Milky Way until he is caught in the hand of a Supreme Being. The Being takes one look at his watch, announces it is not the cowboy’s time, and throws him back. Down he goes, again through the galaxies, the planets, into earth’s atmosphere, and finally back seated on the bar stool. Supalla’s meticulously planned choice of handshapes, movements together with management of the face, is only one part of the performance. What Deaf people recognize immediately is the mimicking of film and camcorder technique in Supalla’s story: using hands and signs to depict close-ups as though there were a camera panning across a landscape. This is storytelling for a media-savvy generation, a pleasing blending of the two visual grammars into a single story.

Stretching tradition further, David Rivera and Manny Hernandez use television rather than film technique in stories about sports, incorporating slow motion and replay shots into their descriptive
structures. In contrast to Sam Supalla, who insists on crisp signing technique, Rivera blurs his handshapes slightly and makes his movements wide, giving an urban, hip edge to his signing. Evon Black brings the history of Black deaf schools to the public stage in her one-woman show about African-American Deaf culture, riffing on subjects ranging from hair combing in Black Deaf schools and mimicking signing styles of the older African-American deaf. Not only is there new technique and content in storytelling and poetry today, but there is also a revival of old styles, and the audience is pleased by the juxtaposition of the old and new.

The anxiety of culture is a problem of the times: when is a Deaf person “Deaf” or “deaf”? When or where is “culture”? Perhaps it is no longer useful to count how many or who, but instead to focus on the cultural, where meaning is made—for the moment and in the moment. The collective experience of Deaf people is not necessarily one that every Deaf person shares or even knows directly, but the residue of this history permeates the experience of Deaf people. The central role of deaf schools in their history remains today as each new generation of Deaf children and their parents makes decisions about schooling. The lingering and lasting effects of separation and segregation have created overlapping yet distinct cultures within the community. The struggle to use voice and manage voice and to make sign language intelligible underlies nearly every political act of the community. Voice as a technology continues to grow and change as Deaf people manage its use through history. Invention and innovation in performance have characterized sign poetry and storytelling from the first gathering of Deaf people during colonial times to this day. The cultural is neither here nor there, but is borne through history, made anew by the circumstances of the present. Cultures suggest a fixedness of place and time. The cultural offers a fluid idea of how experience and expression come together. The cultural resides in things, in behaviors as well as in performance.

George Veditz delivered his fiery speech in sign language and later wrote it in English. Dot Miles signed and wrote her poetry simultaneously, trying to find the point where the two languages meet. Clayton Valli worked with his hands, practicing the positioning of hand and movement until the line was perfectly crafted, then recorded on videotape and sold to ASL classrooms across the country. The cultural is never universal or without time, but exists in the moment of expression. The long history of the language is delivered to the performance, and in the performing, it is made anew. Veditz, Miles, and Valli used the same language and struggle for expression, but in each there is a fresh and new expression of language and idea, made real for the time they lived in.