Poetics of Iconicity: Reading American Sign Language Poetry

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The idea of creating original signed art in American Sign Language (ASL) surprises many hearing people. Why not just write? What makes it different? To answer the first question: people want to create literature in their native language, and as ASL does not have a standardized written form, this art is not written. The second question is more difficult and is the subject of this thesis.

My project focuses on analyzing a handful of rhetorical methods and devices utilized in the creation and performance of American Sign Language Poetry. My hope is that by focusing on some key elements, the reader will gain a sense of what it means to perceive language and literature in the visual-performative mode. My goal with this project is to introduce a taste of what it means to shift our restrictions on literature to embrace a new form. This thesis provides an introduction to ASL Poetry as an art form and leaves open several questions for further study. The field of ASL poetics is no more restricted than the field of English poetics, and more original art appears every day that might challenge some of the conventions relied upon for my conclusions.

I hope this thesis can provide a starting point for those who do not know ASL to immerse themselves in an unfamiliar art form and explore a new way of conceptualizing linguistic expression. For those who do know the language, I hope that this thesis highlights components of the art that might not have occurred to you previously and builds connections between ASL Literature and the broader literary canon.