

Warm Hearts, Warm Hands at the ARTiculating Deaf Experiences Conference



By Joseph C. Hill



On November 6 to 9, 2019, at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) in Rochester, New York, the wintry weather came early with icy rain that turned to snow and with a significant drop in temperature. Nevertheless, to paraphrase the well-worn line from Elsa in *Frozen*, the cold never bothered nearly 200 people, set on traveling locally, nationally, and internationally to attend the *ARTiculating Deaf Experiences* conference on the NTID campus. The people came at the perfect time for a weekend full of concurrent and independent events related to art: the exhibition of *Color to the Cube* at the Dyer Arts Center featuring stunning, engaging, and thought-provoking artworks by more than 40 artists of color; the NTID ASL Lecture's guest presenter, Mia Sanchez, expressing her thoughts regarding *What Color is Your Soul*; the opening reception at the *De'VIA: The Manifesto Comes of Age* exhibit held at the Memorial Art Gallery; the opening night of *People of the Third Eye*, a play production written and performed by Deaf playwrights and actors; and the 8th Annual DeafMute Banquet celebrating the 307th birthday anniversary of Abbé de l' Épée and memorializing Deaf ancestors of great artistic talent.



The conference invited presenters to the Panara Theatre's stage to give their critical and multi-layered thoughts about Deaf experiences, drawing on their academic and artistic disciplines, which included art, literature, film, theatre, Deaf studies, cultural studies, linguistics, history, and deaf education. Every morning, the conference organizers, Tabitha Jacques (Dyer Arts Center director) and Patti Durr (RIT/NTID Associate Professor), opened with the announcements before ceding the stage to the keynote presenters, speaking for 75 minutes on the critical contributions and developments in their respective fields. Olivier Schetrit, a French postdoctoral researcher with a PhD in anthropology, engaged the audience through International Sign with a historical narrative of the Deaf art developments that incorporate elements of signed language, visual cultural practices, and Deaf pride. Kristi Merriweather, an American educator and Deaf learning specialist from Atlanta, Georgia, took on the tagline, "doing it for the culture," to highlight the need for visible Black Deaf cultural and linguistic features in art, literature and media to promote multicultural and intersectional representation of Deaf experiences, in this particular case, Black Deaf experiences. Lastly, Fernanda de Araugo Machado, a Brazilian professor at the Federal University of Santa Catarina talked about a published collection of Brazilian Sign Language (Libras) poems.

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Following the keynote addresses, the audience was treated to 2 half-hour presentations before lunch each day with the topics including De'VIA manifesto, De'VIA themes and motifs, Deaf creative writing, intersectional Deafnicity in literature, musical aesthetics in signed language performance arts, and political activism. Activism, as explained by the dynamic presenter Amy Cohen Efron, is a formula for artists to create art in multiple forms with a political intention to spark conversations and raise awareness. Efron gave a couple of simple yet powerful examples of how one could make an impact as an artist: applying the blue painter tapes on the raised letter words “deaf,” “and,” and “hard of” on the outdoor signage so it read “Alexander Graham Bell Association for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing” signifying the underlying intent of the association; and setting a temporary memorial in front of a medical research building mourning the death of 12 Deaf children as a result of cochlear implant surgery in the 1980s. Both examples resulted in a call to security and legal enforcement and heated debates across social media platforms about the appropriateness of such activities. This captured the spirit of Deaf art repeatedly emphasized at the conference: Deaf people have always existed, and their humanity cannot be denied.

The rest of the day went to the panels and the presenters sharing their respective works:

- a) The lived experiences and historical narratives of Deaf New Yorkers, Deaf Lesbians, and a 19th century Deaf artist;
- b) Comics, photography, literature, and filmmaking through Deaf eyes;
- c) The Nordic Deaf Theatre Companies Collaboration panel;
- d) Intersectional Deaf experiences and identities in poetry and performing arts;
- e) Historical fiction based on the vanished Martha’s Vineyard signing community;
- f) Poetry as a pedagogical device in re-animating the historical account of Deaf experiences.

The conference finished on the high note with the screening of *Signing Black in America* documentary led by the writer of this article, who is known for the research on Black ASL and language attitudes in the American Deaf communities. The 30-plus minute documentary is a chronicle of racial, educational, religious, and cultural impacts on the life of Black ASL, as told from the perspectives of students, teachers, scholars, entertainers, deaf families, and interpreters. After the screening, the audience was aching for more information on Black Deaf experiences and language, which emphasizes the point Kristi Merriweather made in her keynote presentation: we need to promote and produce diverse representations of Deaf experiences in all mediums.



The overall goal of the *ARTiculating Deaf Experiences* conference was to offer a comprehensive view of Deaf experiences encompassing art as a movement, historical and current perspectives, literature in signed and written mediums, and theoretical application of intersectionality in all mediums. Thanks to the hard work of the conference committee and the participation of presenters of diverse backgrounds, consider the goal achieved.