

## *Chapter*

# 3

## *Deaf Carnivals as Centers of Culture*

CARNIVALS, FESTIVALS, fairs, and conventions are a cornerstone of present-day Deaf culture. These gatherings are essential, for sign language—and thus its art forms—requires face-to-face interaction. Unless people congregate in a fairly substantial group, little ASL literature can materialize. Because Deaf people are scattered all over the country, carnival makes possible the dissemination of vernacular storytelling, recorded works on videotape, and texts in English. At these festive gatherings the culture manifests itself in force, a condition necessary to generate literature and the potential for later literature. Carnival is therefore a prerequisite of a healthy Deaf literature, whether that entails texts in English, sign language adaptations, vernacular art forms, or new ASL creations.

At carnival Deaf Americans feel free to be themselves and to produce and distribute their literature. For this minority culture, usually dispersed throughout the majority culture, carnival is the site of communal celebration and liberation. Similarly, Mikhail Bakhtin notes, fairs in the Middle Ages “were the second life of the

people, who for a time entered the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance.”<sup>1</sup> At other times, the people were answerable to feudal lords and masters; only during fairs, harvest festivals, and other festivities was some degree of latitude possible, both in their behavior and in their production of popular art forms. The medieval populace eagerly awaited and participated in these frequent festivals and the literature that they generated; Deaf Americans, who at other times work and live within mainstream society, look forward just as eagerly to festival time when they can engage in their vernacular discourse and literature.

Indeed, “the festival is at the heart of the culture and communication of deaf communities everywhere.”<sup>2</sup> This observation in *On the Green*, the faculty/staff publication at Gallaudet University, was inspired by the wildly popular and successful Deaf Way: An International Festival and Conference on the Language, Culture, and History of Deaf People, which was held July 9–14, 1989, in Washington, D.C. The granddaddy of all festivals, the Deaf Way was both a convention and festival (a “confest”). This chapter focuses in large part on this particular confest because it displays so many different aspects of Deaf American carnival.

Gallaudet University, which sponsored Deaf Way, scheduled over 500 presentations and workshops at the Omni Shoreham Hotel and numerous artistic events and performances on campus. For a week, activities stretched from early morning to late evening; there were films, poster talks, exhibits, dramatic productions, workshops, booths, art displays, fashion, roving mimes and clowns, and more. Dancers, storytellers, mimes, and poets entertained in the evening while fairgoers relaxed, socialized, and lined up for Italian, Mexican, and Chinese food, as well as hot dogs and burgers. The 5,000 registrants included students, scholars, psychologists, researchers, linguists, scientists, sociologists, educators, and parents of deaf children from the United States and seventy-five other countries, with interpreters on hand to facilitate communication.<sup>3</sup> A couple of thousand additional, unofficial participants hung around the lobby of the Omni Shoreham and the Gallaudet campus throughout the festival—chatting, reminiscing, and engaging in extensive storytelling.

After and during the festival, countless informal social gatherings took place as Deaf Americans and international visitors congregated and participated in many rhetorical pleasures such as storytelling.

### **Festivals: Mobile Centers of Community**

Gatherings like the Deaf Way are not simply social events or work-related conferences but have cultural and psychological significance. Deaf gatherings provide a focal point and a cultural center for a widely dispersed people, whose orientation (visual) and mode of communication (sign language) differ from those of mainstream society. Here Deaf Americans find community, ease of communication, and their own rhetorical traditions. Just as the viability of medieval culture was linked to the medieval fair, so too is today's festival crucial to the survival of Deaf culture.<sup>4</sup>

In the Middle Ages, fairs provided occasions for community activities of both town and church, for commerce and trade, and for education. At a time when schooling was not widespread and travel of any distance was rare, the fair was itself an educational experience for the lower classes. It also offered popular art forms, public or official rhetoric, and entertainment. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White describe it as "a kind of educative spectacle: a relay for the diffusion of cosmopolitan values of the centre throughout the provinces."<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Deaf festivals provide cultural (art) forms, political debate and action, educational workshops, new technology, interpreted tours, public services, and so forth. For instance, the biennial National Association of the Deaf (NAD) convention serves an official function for the association. Yet the convention also includes the Miss Deaf America pageant, workshops, lectures, exhibits, and tours. In addition, such festivals play as important a role in commerce as did their medieval predecessors. Many Deaf people who own businesses that are not located in large metropolitan centers rely on these gatherings for exhibiting and advertising their products and services.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, Deaf Americans come together from all over the country for periodic conventions, festivals (regional, national, and interna-

tional), timberfests, school reunions, and the like. Like the Deaf Way, the flourishing Deaf Expo in California and the popular metropolitan festivals in Washington, D.C., are all eagerly awaited. The many academic conferences are also much anticipated and well-attended.<sup>7</sup> Alumni reunions of schools for the deaf attract former students from near and far. The regional and national bowling tournaments dotting the country draw great numbers of enthusiastic participants, and it is not unusual for Deaf people to plan overseas excursions around meetings of the World Federation of the Deaf and the World Games for the Deaf, which convene in a different country every four years.

At these gatherings, the community reaffirms and celebrates its culture and vernacular. Like the medieval fair, all these conventions, tournaments, and festivals serve to draw a widely dispersed community together. Deaf people, like the peoples of the Middle Ages, greatly value the immediacy of personal experience and the more intensive social interaction that is characteristic of traditional oral cultures.<sup>8</sup> Deaf Americans prefer to get together at clubs, at school reunions, in bowling leagues, and at the kitchen table rather than chatting over the phone or e-mailing. In fact, they often spend as much time socializing at such gatherings as they spend attending the official functions.

Indeed, Deaf Americans from all walks of life, ethnic backgrounds, and races travel considerable distances to attend conventions and festivals, much as the medieval populace traveled from outlying farms and manors to converge on the marketplace and fairs. Before telephones and television became accessible, Deaf Americans *had* to move to communicate, socialize, and seek entertainment. Even today, they go to great lengths to see other Deaf Americans and converse in their native language. When they travel and sightsee, they stop frequently along the way, having contacted in advance old friends and school chums and planned their itinerary accordingly.

The coming together of this widely dispersed community provides an arena for public discourse and literature. Once Deaf Americans get together with friends—on whatever occasion—they gather around the kitchen table, along the bar counter, or in

the motel room and talk long into the night. A good deal of time is spent storytelling: relating adventures and misadventures of the trip so far and reporting goings-on in other regions of the country. They may also update one another on cultural developments and pass on—transmit—popular stories and other traditional ASL forms. A people who rely on a visual vernacular must meet face-to-face to preserve and disseminate their culture and literature. Even today's video technology cannot approximate the immediacy of oral storytelling, a point discussed at greater length in chapter 9.

The culture of Deaf Americans has no geographical center, but at the festivities where they gather they find a place of their own. Though it is temporary and transient, it is still worth traveling a long distance to get to and luxuriate in for a short time—to be among “family” and catch up on news and gossip. At the Deaf Way, Sam Sonnenstrahl, one of the attendees, exulted in being part of a “big, international family,” a family exemplified by a table of fairgoers at the International Tent one evening. As one of the young men seated at the table stated, “East and West come together. I am from the Middle East, my friend here is from the West, and this young woman here is from the East.”<sup>9</sup> This place becomes “home”—where one finds oneself and others like oneself; where one's identity is found or is reinforced and strengthened; where one is comfortable with people who communicate the same way and in the process engage in much informal and formal storytelling. Therefore, traveling to festivals and other large gatherings is part of a quest for “home” and identity.

### **A Place of One's Own**

Because most Deaf Americans are born into mainstream (hearing) society but have little or no hearing, many do not fully identify with members of their family or feel fully at home in mainstream society, with its spoken and written English discourse. Lacking an ascribed identity—the identity stamped on one as a result of being a member of a particular family and community—many deaf people feel the need to “achieve” an identity. They must go out into the world

and join together with other deaf people to learn what it means to be a Deaf American. A central state residential school draws young deaf children from what may be a very large area; once enrolled, a large percentage of the children (though less now than in the past) remain there for a good portion of the year, because the trip home is too long to make every day or on weekends. At the school, however, the children find people with whom they can communicate and share stories in ASL; they experience the feeling of being at home and part of one big family.<sup>10</sup>

Don Bangs's *Institution Blues* (1993) reveals how thoroughly the school for the deaf becomes a "home" and how all the children and the houseparents become one big family.<sup>11</sup> More often than not, the children arrive unable to communicate at all and thus not knowing why they have been left at the school. The other children, who probably have had the same experience, must help the new arrivals learn sign language and develop as a "civilized" human being. In Bangs's play, as the children are left to their own devices one evening, they play games together and create group narratives; in one, they portray all the animate and inanimate elements of the Frankenstein tale. As the scene closes, the children one after another join in a chorus, declaring "I have one hundred brothers and sisters! I have one hundred brothers and sisters!" They have come to the school from far and near, and there they have acquired a family and an identity.

Indeed, American literature in general has much to say about achieving identity. The cultural historian Werner Sollars argues that American society places greater emphasis on achieved identity than ascribed identity, for the United States has traditionally valued individualism as embodied in the independent, self-made man or woman going out and making his or her own way.<sup>12</sup> Many members of minority groups, in particular, find that they must achieve an identity: they must discover what it is to be a product of both minority and mainstream society, often discovering in the process that the price of success and acceptance is abandoning their own culture. Such a search for identity—or, more accurately, the evolving of a double identity—is the focus of much minority discourse and literature in the United States.

The *Sign Me Alice* plays of Gil Eastman, staged in 1973 and 1983 respectively, both focus on cultural identity.<sup>13</sup> Drawing on the Pygmalion theme, *Sign Me Alice* and *Sign Me Alice II* were the first full-length theatrical productions at Gallaudet University to deal with deafness. Specifically, they examine Deaf identity in relation to the majority culture. The focus is on Alice who, while working as a maid at a large hotel, meets a learned doctor attending a convention who offers to help her better herself. When she agrees, he instructs her in a kind of manual English and has her learn mainstream p's and q's. Being ambitious, Alice at first is eager to move up the ladder. However, she eventually comes to see that she has an identity in her own right—as a Deaf American—and that ASL, far from being a mongrel discourse, is a legitimate means of communication. Realizing this, she backs away from acculturation and instead chooses a path between the two cultures. She is aware of the mores and values of mainstream society but also takes pride in a Deaf identity and a unique visual vernacular.

Alice is a member of a widely dispersed minority group, many of whose members in effect leave their hearing families to find “home” and identity. This urge to travel and socialize in a quest for home is reflected in Deaf American history and literature (as is this quest in American literature as a whole). A particularly widely known story is that of Abbé de l'Épée's almost legendary efforts in the eighteenth century to seek out deaf children in the towns and country villages of France and bring them to Paris to educate them together. As Carol Padden and Tom Humphries report in *Deaf in America: Voices from a Culture*, “l'Épée's wanderings along a dark road represent each deaf child's wanderings before he or she, like l'Épée, finds home.”<sup>14</sup>

In seeking home or identity, many Deaf Americans dream of and desire an empowered and autonomous Deaf culture, a social reality of their own; they desire a place where they belong, can identify with others, and can in turn be identified.<sup>15</sup> Not surprisingly, many Deaf American narratives deal with a homeland or a desire for a homeland. For example, Stephen Ryan's *Planet Way Over Yonder* is an ASL narrative about a young Deaf boy who rockets off the earth and lands on a planet where the majority of inhab-

itants are deaf while a small minority is hearing—a comical reversal of the familiar two-world condition.<sup>16</sup> Communication media are predominantly visual, as televisions and video screens dot the landscape and sign language is used in all the schools, hospitals, government buildings, theaters, and sports arenas.

Another case in point is Douglas Bullard's *Islay* (examined in chapter 7), a novel that takes place largely on the road and that provides, along with a panorama of Deaf society, a blueprint for a modern-day political and economic takeover.<sup>17</sup> Its audacious protagonist is an ordinary American with an extraordinary fantasy: to establish a homeland for Deaf Americans. By the novel's end, his dream has become a reality.

When Deaf Americans come together for carnival, for a temporary home, they make quite a diverse group (albeit one with a common purpose and a common characteristic). At this gathering, numerous ideas are discussed, diverse perspectives are shared, abundant information is made available, extensive commerce is conducted, and a carnivalesque literature is able to flourish. By its nature, the festival—in both its medieval and modern forms—not only establishes and enhances local identity but also to some degree unsettles this identity by admitting commerce and traffic from elsewhere.<sup>18</sup> Like the medieval fair, the Deaf carnival is both bounded—the center of the community—and the point at which commerce (in the most general sense of the word) and social intercourse converge.

## **A Literature of Carnival**

Although carnival or festival is the mobile center of the culture, where Deaf identity is formed and reinforced, that culture is hardly unitary; and its aggregation is mirrored by a richly diversified literature. Here we find not only the performative or oral forms of the culture, including its traditional art forms, but also hybrid forms and a conventional English print literature. Vernacular storytelling and other ASL performance art take place informally in houses and hotel rooms, while elaborate group and solo performances are staged in ASL or manually coded English. Videotapes (often

captioned in English) of modern ASL narratives and poetry are offered for sale. And we must not forget the profusion of mime, farcical skits, magic acts, and general clowning. In this setting, decorous, disembodied print collides with very much embodied, visual ASL performances that hark back to the physicality and spectacle of the medieval fair. Again, as in festivals of the Middle Ages, popular forms of expressions and rituals abound and official forms and rituals are adapted, parodied, or burlesqued.

Deaf Americans come from far and near not simply to watch but to participate in all this literary and not-so-literary outpouring. As Bakhtin points out, in medieval carnivals, too, no one was only a spectator:

Because of their obvious sensuous character and their strong element of play, carnival images closely resemble certain artistic forms, namely the spectacle. . . . But the basic carnival nucleus of this culture is by no means a purely artistic form nor a spectacle and does not, generally speaking, belong to the sphere of art. It belongs to the borderline between art and life. . . . In fact, carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. . . . Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people.<sup>19</sup>

Every Deaf American participates in carnival, in vernacular storytelling at the bar, in ASL art at the fraternity or sorority function, in viewing and critiquing modern ASL literature on videotape during a workshop session, in laughing at and with the strolling mimes and clowns during the Deaf Way banquet. For their part, ASL performers of various kinds often make a distinct effort to include their viewers in decidedly interactive productions.

### ***The Literary Versus the Nonliterary***

Deaf American literature, having as it does an “oral” component and being produced by a primarily oral people, contains both elements typically viewed as “literary” and elements typically viewed

as “nonliterary.” An oral literature does not have the same artistic concerns as written literature. As Bakhtin argues in *Rabelais and His World*, carnival specifically welcomes the literary and nonliterary, the printed and performative alike. Indeed it has fun with such distinctions and encourages their erasure.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, at the Deaf American carnival, various forms and modes exist alongside one another, often intermixing quite subversively.

Deaf American literature, particularly in its performative modes, is generally heterogeneous and inclusive. For instance, during the Deaf Way a personable young man from Taiwan took the stage one night at the International Tent on the Gallaudet campus and presented a medley of languages, rhetorical forms, and performative modes: dialogue with the viewers, storytelling, sign art, and interpretation.<sup>21</sup> He began by joking in serviceable ASL with his spectators about the Americans who were adopting Chinese children right and left. The young man then announced that he would perform some sign art in his native sign language and then interpret it in ASL. Such performances were welcome and enjoyed; one Danish fairgoer interviewed at the International Tent expressed first enjoyment at being exposed to many different sign languages and then hope that the Deaf Way would become a regular event.<sup>22</sup> His hope took the physical form of a (signed) caterpillar undulating up his forearm and developing into a graceful butterfly, wings folding and unfolding as it took off into the early evening sky.

Which was literature and which was not? Should we exclude the dialogue with the viewers, even though it was a kind of storytelling? Should we single out only the Chinese poem or the metamorphosing caterpillar as “literature” because it is artistic? Should the commentary or interpretation be excluded because it is not artistic? In both cases, multifaceted discourse arises out of and is part of a larger context; one cannot simply declare where the “literary” begins and where it ends. Such an interrelationship of teller, context, text, and viewers characterizes all oral literature, including the carnivalesque.

Carnival gatherings are particularly important in promoting oral or vernacular (ASL) art forms and their transmission. Unlike the literary forms of mainstream society, which can readily be

reproduced and distributed via print and audiovisual media, these indigenous ASL productions rely primarily on the viewers at Deaf gatherings for their distribution. After these viewers take in storytelling, skits, poetry, and theatrical productions, many go home and try out their favorites in front of friends and other members of the Deaf community. In this way, ASL productions are disseminated. In the process they often change, resulting in many variants of a particular work. The endless reproduction of variants makes the literature constantly mobile and fluid.

Performative art forms predominate in Deaf culture and literature. As the world-renowned Polish deaf mime Miko Machalski commented in an interview during the Deaf Way, “Deaf people are particularly suited for theatrics because of sign language and movement.”<sup>23</sup> Literal theatrics were visible at the opening night program of the Deaf Way, “The Night of 100 Stars,” presented at George Washington University’s Lisner Auditorium. The show was transmitted via satellite TV to conventioners on the campus of Gallaudet University and to many countries around the world, as national theaters of the deaf assembled in one place for the first time ever. They included companies from the United States, France, Japan, Spain, Italy, China, Finland, Greece, the Soviet Union, Israel, Norway, India, Belgium, Sweden, Czechoslovakia, and the Philippines.<sup>24</sup>

The full spectrum of deaf theatrical productions was in evidence at the Deaf Way, ranging from the more nativist to the conventionally mainstream. Gallaudet’s *Telling Stories* was an abstract, segmented presentation that used myths and symbols to explore the long conflict between the deaf and hearing worlds; another American production, the popular *Tales from a Clubroom*, was set in a typical deaf clubroom. More hybrid productions included such adaptations of mainstream plays as the (U.S.) National Theatre of the Deaf’s *King of Hearts*, *Oedipus* (Moscow Theatre of Mime and Geste); *Hamlet* (senza Parole—an Italian theater company); and *Phantom of the Opera* (Philippine Theatrical Group). And because Deaf confests are more like medieval carnivals than like mainstream conventions, which are geared only to adults, children’s theater productions were staged throughout the week.

Other relatively elaborate productions and performances at the International Tent on the Gallaudet campus during the Deaf Way were presented by performers who go from one festival to another, one college campus to another, and one metropolitan playhouse to another. Their works often display a carnivalesque quality as they zero in on the two-world condition of Deaf Americans, playing ASL off English and the vernacular tradition off the mainstream rhetorical tradition.<sup>25</sup>

The mixed works very characteristic of carnivalesque literature as a whole are equally common at Deaf festivals. Extensive interanimation of mainstream and Deaf American cultures and their respective rhetorical traditions could be seen in the presentations of SignWave, a singing and signing ensemble that headlined one evening at the International Tent. A half-dozen young men and women simultaneously sang and signed the lyrics word for word, in their English order. The signing as well as general body movements approximated the tune and pitch of a particular song. They thus dynamically blended the visual and the aural, the English words and the ASL signs.<sup>26</sup>

Appropriately for carnival, the more physical forms of Deaf discourse appeared side by side with sophisticated drama, ASL poetry, and eloquent storytelling. The jesters and jongleurs during the Middle Ages similarly entered the mix of entertainments.<sup>27</sup> The farcical and physical quality of many Deaf American skits was exemplified at the Deaf Way by a young mime. The mime portrayed his struggle to ingest some melted cheese. Despite his diligent efforts, the melted mess stretched and stretched and would not break off. At last, rather than disengaging, it parted the performer abruptly but effectively from his own teeth.<sup>28</sup> Other modern-day jongleurs included the performers in "Stars of Mime," "It's Cabaret" (Model Secondary School for the Deaf students), "Magic Night and Roving Magician," and "Curious Circus," the last presented by a theater from Singapore that uses fluorescent props that glow in ultraviolet light. (This company relies on the universal format of the circus to show off the talents of its young cast, who use masks, mime, and magic.)<sup>29</sup>

Such festivals are also the best place to find another component of this carnivalesque literature: texts and videotapes (often

captioned, or at least with English lettering on the packaging) with English and ASL vying with one another are available at countless booths and exhibits. Outside of college campuses with many Deaf students and various organization headquarters, there are few stores catering primarily to Deaf Americans. Thus registrants at the various conventions and festivals crowd eagerly around the vendors and their wares. Here as well, the literary or artistic performances collide with the vernacular storytelling, art, and mime (not considered literature) in which everyone participates. Regardless of which seems to have the upper hand, the carnival offers a superlative opportunity to handle and purchase these writings and videotaped ASL art forms. For instance, during the homecoming festivities at Gallaudet University in 1998, students, faculty, staff, and visitors alike could browse among the Gallaudet University Press exhibits in the student union building adjacent to the football field. Many Deaf American authors were on hand to chat with browsers and autograph their works. At the 1995 Deaf Studies IV convention in Boston, business at the publishing booths was thriving. Indeed, convention and conference planners purposefully include sessions on cultural art forms both to promote them and to deepen the knowledge of attendees. ASL artists themselves are often on hand to conduct workshops.

### ***Laughter, Satire, and Parody***

As the earlier discussion of medieval festivals made clear, mainstream or dominant forms of discourse are often adapted and burlesqued during carnival. The similarly subversive, farcical nature of a great deal of our carnivalesque Deaf literature was much in evidence at the NAD convention in Knoxville, Tennessee, in 1994. *Deafology 101: A Crash Course in Deaf Culture*, a comedy presentation by Ken Glickman, a.k.a. Prof. Glick, was one of the very first events on the convention schedule.<sup>30</sup> This extremely entertaining mock lecture on Deaf culture as seen through the eyes of a Deaf humorist poked fun not only at mainstream society and its expectations of Deaf Americans, from birth onward, but also at Deaf culture itself. Indeed, the videotape version (which was available at the NAD convention) begins by displaying the title and playing upbeat

classical music—itself a thrust at the “classical.” In brief, the production is a classic of what happens to the classical in carnival.

The action in *Deafology 101* begins when Prof. Glick, sporting baggy shorts, black reading glasses, ruffled lab coat, a big bow tie, and disheveled hair, comes striding onstage smoking a pipe, his appearance obviously satirizing absent-minded professors and the educational system that nurtures them. As the professor introduces the course, he stipulates that there is no required reading but has a recommendation: two colorful paperback texts and the human body itself. He explains that the body is necessary for body language, that is, for “bawdy language” or dirty language (which, he points out, is the “same thing”). Instead of the bourgeois downplaying of the physical, we have here a gleeful affirmation of American Sign Language and its expansive use of the body. In introducing himself, Glick asks rhetorically, “What am I? I am a deafologist. Like a scientist? No. I’m a signtist and we will use the signtific method to study the culture.” The performer is understated and underhanded in this apparent salute to science and other mainstream systems of knowledge. “Over many years,” he continues, “We’ve experienced many kinds of situations in our deaf world. Every time I spot a unique situation in the deaf world I ask myself what that is called. I run to that big, thick book. It’s called an English dictionary. Nothing there.” Its very emptiness is why Glick sees a need to analyze particular situations and “describe those situations more accurately and appropriately.” Describing accurately is precisely what he does not do, and in this satirical analysis he is not doing it “appropriately.”

Prof. Glick also carnivalesquely describes Deaf culture and the mainstream culture that it is and is not a part of. He asks, “What is Deaf Culture? It is deafined as a wonderful way of life that is unheard of. That will be on your test.” Continually pacing back and forth between blackboard and podium, Glick goes on to state that deaf people interact with “those people who can’t help but hear,” noting that “The world is full of hearing people. Let’s shorten that to hearies.” He then shortens “deaf people” to “deafies.” In between are the “heafies”—deafies who look and act like hearies—and the hearies who act like deafies, or “dearies.” “Oh, I love them,” he proclaims. “Want an example? Here are two

dearies.” (He gestures at two interpreters sitting in the first row.) Glick continues, “After this lecture I’ll get a piece of paper called an *invoice*. It’s for their hearings.”

The carnivalesque spirit infuses Ken Glickman’s production; his show saw the light of day because of the temporary communal celebration and liberation provided by the NAD convention. As Prof. Glick, he feels free to parody “dumb hearies” and to poke fun at himself and other Deaf Americans as “dumb deafies.” Glickman also has free rein to make fun of the majority language and its manifestations: discourse in English, publications in English, and the educational system that relies on English. Glickman mixes writing in English (notes on the blackboard) and ASL discourse (his own signing). His performance is highly skilled yet “low” and entertainingly mocking, as if to get back at the high literature and discourse of mainstream society. Moreover, he draws his viewers into this carnivalesque production: he interacts with them by way of good use of eye contact, rhetorical questions, and asides. He incorporates the viewers’ responses into the performance, thereby making them participants in this “oral” discourse. In his fluent use of ASL and masterful grasp of rhetorical practices in the culture—playfully set in contrast to conventional mainstream rhetorical practices—Glickman inspires cultural pride in his viewers.

Such carnivalesque discourse is comic, mocking, and culturally informative, and its proficiency strengthens the cultural ego. It inspires in Deaf Americans the *élan* and courage to keep working for the things they need and the autonomy they desire. It gets them to laugh at themselves and at mainstream society, and that laughter provides a sense of equality. As its insights give them a better understanding of themselves and of mainstream society, they gain more self-esteem and more motivation—more “political” momentum and more hope.

Carnival, by drawing together Deaf Americans from all over the country, showcasing their culture, and inspiring them to greater accomplishments, is a phenomenon of the body politic. As Deaf Americans gather, they determine how best to present their needs to mainstream society and how best to nourish and disseminate their culture. Just as the latitude of the common people during medieval

festivals supported popular rituals and forms of expression, so Deaf Americans at their festivals take advantage of their freedom to engage in their own rhetorical forms and poke fun at mainstream rhetorical traditions. Such discourse is an expression of the body politic.

Against Bakhtin's view that carnival represents opposition to hierarchy, Stallybrass and White argue that "One could even mount the precise contrary argument . . . : that the fair, far from being the privileged site of popular symbolic opposition to hierarchies was in fact a kind of educative spectacle, a relay for the diffusion of the cosmopolitan values of the 'center' (particularly the capital and the new urban centres of production) throughout the provinces and the lower orders."<sup>31</sup> However, the Deaf carnival simultaneously grounds symbolic opposition and provides the center for the diffusion of Deaf culture. The Deaf Way, for instance, attracted men and women of all ages with a common purpose: to preserve their culture (and deaf cultures in other countries) and to improve the situation of deaf people around the world. That goal was reflected by Deaf American literature—symbolic opposition—created and disseminated during the festival.

Mircea Eliade, Mary Douglas, Victor Turner, and other anthropologists see the archetypal festival as beneficially transforming for both the minority and majority groups involved.<sup>32</sup> Since Deaf Americans are a minority, they constantly struggle for recognition from the majority of their status as a unique group with their own needs. Most festivals are somewhat tame occasions that nevertheless lead to promising changes. At other times, the festival can become very charged. At its most political—for example, the 1988 Deaf President Now (DPN) movement—the festival can be a revolt that leads to major upheaval (whose aftereffects included, in the case of DPN, the Deaf Way). Festival or carnival has historically been an agent of transformation, to whatever degree, and Stallybrass and White would undoubtedly see late-twentieth-century Deaf culture as similar to other contemporary cultures that "still have a strong repertoire of carnivalesque practices such as Latin America or literatures in colonial/neo-colonial context where the political difference between the dominant and subordinate cultures is very charged."<sup>33</sup>

Carnival leads to social, economic, cultural, and political opportunities and advances, whether small or large. One Deaf Way attendee saw the effect of the Deaf Way confest as having “the potential to change the lives of deaf people around the globe.”<sup>34</sup> Indeed, Deaf Americans generally see themselves as having experienced an improvement (despite some setbacks) in their quality of life and a growing freedom to be themselves, to celebrate their culture, and to use their vernacular. Their gatherings and literature reflect both this progress and the need for more improvement and empowerment.

### Coming into the Light

The optimism of carnival corresponds to a theme pervasive in Deaf culture and discourse, that of “coming into the light.” Historically, it is linked to the coming together of deaf people and the development of a means of communication—sign language—in France in the late eighteenth century, when the Abbé de l’Epée came upon two young deaf sisters, became interested in sign language and deaf education, and subsequently established a deaf school in Paris. It attracted deaf adults as well as children, and soon a small deaf community blossomed around it.<sup>35</sup> When a deaf person finally finds the community so lacking in mainstream society, and with it an ease of communication and fellowship, she or he comes into the light. Particularly when coming together for carnival, deaf people find light: fellowship, communication, laughter, and hope. As Bakhtin tells us, “Light [not darkness] characterizes folk grotesque [i.e., the carnival]. It is a festival of spring, of sunrise, of morning.”<sup>36</sup>

This theme has manifestations from the commercial to the artistic: witness the frequent images of rays of lights in various kinds of advertising circulars and businesses aimed at Deaf Americans. For instance, the logo for Deaf Way II incorporates the image of the sun’s rays. The logo of Nationwide Flashing Signal Systems, a company specializing in environmental assistive technologies, is an abstracted light bulb, and Starlite CyberBusiness Services provides Internet assistance to deaf clients. Optimism prevails as more and more Deaf businesses—with or without a “light” theme—spring up across the country. DawnSignPress is an important Deaf

press and videotape distributor; SignRise Cultural Arts was once a leading community theater in the Washington, D.C., area (producing *Institution Blues* and *A Deaf Family Diary*).

In literature, the theme of light takes many forms. In Clayton Valli's "Windy Bright Morning," sunshine seems to refer to the possibilities of a new day:

*Through the open window  
with its shade swinging, sunshine, playful  
taps my sleepy eyes.*<sup>37</sup>

In Ben Bahan's well-known, humorous videotaped ASL narrative "Bird of a Different Feather" (discussed at greater length in chapter 9), the absence of light plays an important role.<sup>38</sup> A young eaglet who lacks the physical capability to hunt and survive as an eagle, having instead more in common with songbirds, is convinced by his family to undergo an operation. Unfortunately, it makes him only slightly more eagle-like, and it takes away what he had in common with the song birds. Thus, not fully belonging to either species, the much-maligned creature flies off alone into the sunset—going out of the light, bereft of community and communication.

One of the most widely reproduced images of the National Theatre of the Deaf is the photograph of a dynamic ASL tableau from the company's production of *My Third Eye*.<sup>39</sup> This group narrative tells of a helicopter rescue during a violent storm at sea. As the victim is rescued, the storm abates and the sun rises over the horizon. In the closing image, all the performers come together and their outspread hands manifest the rays of the rising sun. Where there is community and communication, there is light and ongoing hope. Such light and hope is provided by carnival—and by the culture that it celebrates and nourishes.

## Notes

1. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1968), 9.
2. "Festival Reflects Heart of Deaf Community," *On the Green*, July 24, 1989, p. 4.

3. See Merv Garretson, foreword to *The Deaf Way: Perspectives from the International Conference on Deaf Cultures*, ed. Carol J. Erting, Robert C. Johnson, Dorothy L. Smith, and Bruce D. Snyder (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1994), xvii–xix. See also Erting’s introduction, xxiii–xxxi.
4. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986), 38.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*, 61.
7. To date, there have been five national Deaf Studies conferences and two ASL Literature conferences; many smaller meetings (e.g., of state affiliates of the NAD) are also held.
8. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 1989), 81.
9. *The Deaf Way*, prod. Department of Television, Film, and Photography, Gallaudet University, videocassettes, July 10–14, 1989.
10. Carol Padden and Tom Humphries, *Deaf in America: Voices from a Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 30.
11. *Institution Blues*, scripted by Don Bangs and Jan DeLap, dir. Don Bangs, SignRise Cultural Arts Production, Publick Playhouse, Chevy Chase, Md., June 6, 1993.
12. Werner Sollars, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 5.
13. Gilbert C. Eastman, *Sign Me Alice*, intro. George Detmold, pref. Gilbert Eastman (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University, 1974); *Sign Me Alice II*, written and dir. Gilbert C. Eastman, Washington, D.C., Gallaudet College TV Studio, three videocassettes, 60 min. each, 1983.
14. Padden and Humphries, *Deaf in America*, 31.
15. Wolfgang Karrer and Hartmut Lutz, “Minority Literatures in North America: From Cultural Nationalism to Liminality,” in *Minority Literatures in North America: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Karrer and Lutz (New York: Lang, 1990), 11–64.
16. Stephen M. Ryan, *Planet Way Over Yonder*, vol. 5 of *ASL Storytime*, prod. Department of Communication, Gallaudet University, videocassette, 30 min., 1991.
17. Douglas Bullard, *Islay: A Novel* (Silver Spring, Md.: TJ Publishers, 1986).
18. Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 20.

19. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 7.
20. Ibid., 6.
21. *The Deaf Way*, July 14, 1989, videocassette, 30 min.
22. Ibid.
23. Machalski is quoted in "The Deaf Way: Creating a World Community," *On the Green*, July 24, 1989, p. 4.
24. *The Deaf Way Conference and Festival Program* (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University, 1989).
25. See, for example, CHALB (Charlie McKinney and Alan Barwiolek), *Live at SMI!*, Burtonsville, Md.: Sign Media, videocassette, 60 min., 1993; Bob Daniels, "Am I Paranoid?" unpublished manuscript, 1992.
26. *The Deaf Way*, July 10, 1989, videocassette, 30 min..
27. Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 35.
28. *The Deaf Way*, July 14, 1989, videocassette, 30 min.
29. *The Deaf Way Conference and Festival Program*, 46.
30. Ken Glickman, *Deafology 101: Deaf Culture as Seen through the Eyes of a Deaf Humorist*, Silver Spring, Md., DEAFinitely Yours Studio, videocassette, 60 min., 1993.
31. Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 38.
32. Mircea Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation: The Mysteries of Birth and Rebirth*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965); Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966); and Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982).
33. Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 11.
34. Quoted in "The Deaf Way," 1.
35. Padden and Humphries, *Deaf in America*, 29–31.
36. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 41.
37. Clayton Valli, "Windy Bright Morning," trans. Karen Willis and Clayton Valli, in *Deaf in America*, ed. Padden and Humphries, 83. See *Poetry in Motion: Original Works in ASL*, Burtonsville, Md., Sign Media, videocassette, 60 min., 1990.
38. Ben Bahan and Sam Supalla, *Bird of a Different Feather and For a Decent Living*, ASL Literature Series, prod. Joe Dannis, San Diego, Calif., Dawn Pictures/DawnSignPress, videocassette, 60 min., 1992.
39. For example, see the cover of Stephen C. Baldwin's *Pictures in the Air: The Story of the National Theatre of the Deaf* (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1993).