

Review:

Tracy Ann Morse. *Signs And Wonders: Religious Rhetoric and the Preservation of Sign Language*. Washington DC: Gallaudet University Press, 2014.

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Since the creation of American Sign Language, deaf community activists in the United States have fought to sustain Deaf culture and language in face of an unreceptive—or even hostile—hearing majority. In *Signs And Wonders: Religious Rhetoric and the Preservation of Sign Language*, Tracy Ann Morse argues that religious rhetoric has been central to those efforts, by providing the American “deaf community with a powerful language to convey its authority in its struggles to preserve sign language” (4). Morse historically traces the centrality of religious rhetoric in the “locations of schools, the sanctuary, and the social activism of deaf people” from the early 19th century until the present (9). Morse positions her project at the nexus of disability, religious, and rhetorical studies—disciplines that, she observes, are rarely in dialogue and have yet to critically examine “many facets of the deaf community’s activism” (87). *Signs and Wonders*

will also appeal more broadly to those interested in education politics, community literacy initiatives, and civic activism.

Chapters one and two focus on the foundational efforts of the Gallaudet family, whose commitment to American Sign Language (ASL) and the education of deaf Americans was rooted in their Protestant belief system. Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, a Protestant minister, cofounded the first permanent American school for the deaf and was instrumental in bringing a standardized form of sign language to the United States from Europe, which developed into ASL. Morse rhetorically analyzes Gallaudet's 1817 inaugural speech at the school, noting that his "use of religious rhetoric lent power to the view that the emerging deaf community was made up of intelligent humans who deserved an opportunity to be educated through sign language in order to know God" (31). Gallaudet's catalytic Protestant rhetoric inspired new deaf community leaders, who "typically were educated for the ministry" and held prominent roles as superintendents, teachers, and ministers in residential schools and churches that served the deaf community (31). Morse argues that this early Protestant influence helped form the American deaf community, "because residential schools brought together deaf individuals who had been living apart" (130).

Following in his father Thomas' footsteps, Edward Gallaudet's Protestant rhetoric played a crucial role in preserving ASL amidst the deaf education debates that raged over the second half of the nineteenth century—debates that linger to this day. Pure oralists, "educators who argued that deaf American students should learn to speak and read speech only," advocated for the end of manualism, "the use of sign language to teach deaf students" (36, 35). The movement towards pure oralism was fueled by scientific and technological advances, as well as political shifts in the United States. As superintendent of the Columbia Institution—a deaf school that eventually became Gallaudet University—Edward Gallaudet advocated for an educational approach that combined oralist and manualist methods. He combated the scientific and nationalist rhetoric of pure oralists with Protestant rhetoric. As results of these efforts, "the chapel was for the most part maintained as a signing place" despite the popularity of oralist methods in deaf schools (68). Morse extends her examination of sacred spaces into chapter three, which addresses

the role of Protestant churches as sanctuaries “for sign language and the deaf community” over the course of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries (66). She argues that Protestant churches such as St. Ann’s in New York City offered a “safe signing space” for deaf individuals who were often isolated from other deaf Americans—and in turn, “stabilized the emerging deaf community” (67). The ministers of these churches played a powerful role in supporting ASL and the deaf community through their commitment to signing sermons. Additionally, “deaf and hearing ministers intertwined their religious callings with the will to serve the deaf community’s political interests” (83). Morse notes that many deaf and hearing Protestant ministers assumed leadership roles in the National Association of the Deaf, and that some churches spearheaded deaf advocacy projects, such as St. Ann’s Church lobbying media networks for the “use of captioned television” in 1974 (82). By serving as a sanctuary for ASL and advocating for the deaf community and its’ language, Morse argues that churches “played a powerful role in changing the social status of the deaf community” (82). Morse’s claims are well supported by meticulous archival research, as she offers a compelling case for the community-building and public advocacy work of faith-based deaf activists.

As Morse traces deaf community activism from the twentieth century through the present, she argues that Protestant ideology has left a “religious imprint on the American deaf identity” that continuously emerges in both “sacred and secular contexts of activism” (134, 7). In chapter four, Morse focuses on several examples of deaf community advocacy work that incorporate “artful expressions and modern technology” along with religious rhetoric (133). As a contemporary example, Morse presents an extensive analysis of Deaf West Theatre’s production *Big River: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, a creative musical “adaptation of an adaptation” of Mark Twain’s classic story (102). For Morse, this production represents a shift “from defensive to offensive” activism, spreading awareness of ASL and Deaf culture rather than fending off attacks (86). A bilingual bicultural production with deaf and hearing actors signing, speaking, and singing in tandem, Deaf West’s “rhetorical strategy demonstrates the complimentary way in which deaf and hearing people can work together” and engages a broad audience that might not otherwise have been exposed to Deaf culture and language (104). By portraying Huck as deaf, “*Big River*

successfully blends Twain's "theme of outsiders" and racial injustice "with the historic struggles of the deaf community to advocate for full inclusion" (105). Morse notes that Protestant themes—present in Twain's original work—play a central role in the production, as the storyline engages Protestant concepts including "salvation through literacy" and the belief that, despite differences, "we are all children of God" (111, 114). For Morse, Deaf West's production proves that even today, "although not all deaf Americans subscribe to a religion," and despite secular shifts in American society, religious rhetoric can be a powerful component of Deaf rhetoric (86). Moreover, the American deaf community is forever connected with Protestantism through their shared history of ASL advocacy. By exposing this lasting connection and identifying its presence in *Big River, Signs and Wonders* reminds contemporary activists of the value of historical reflection. Looking backwards will not only deepen contemporary activists' understanding of their movements' respective histories, but also expose rhetorical tools that can be creatively reconfigured for future advocacy work.

The relationship between deafness and technological advancement is a thread that weaves throughout Morse's book, from the anti-ASL rhetoric of 18th century oralists to the media-based advocacy of contemporary deaf community activists. Morse considers this relationship most explicitly in her conclusion, where she reflects upon technological advancements and the shifting role of religion in the deaf community. Rather than supply answers, Morse leaves her readers with a series of thoughtful questions and calls for future research on intersections between "rhetoric, writing studies, deaf studies, and disability studies" (134). When I finished Morse's book I was not only appreciative of what I had learned, but excited by the possibilities for future interdisciplinary research and exploration. Morse's awareness of her cross-disciplinary audience is reflected in her accessible writing style and clear explanations of discipline-specific concepts from deaf and rhetorical studies. As such, I can imagine *Signs And Wonders* being integrated into upper-level undergraduate curricula—exposing a new generation of scholars to the innovative rhetoric of deaf community activists. *Signs and Wonders* will not only prove valuable to students and scholars across disciplinary divides, but also to scholar-activists seeking change outside the walls of the academy. While the role of religion in U.S public discourse may have

shifted, the coalition building and rhetorical savvy of deaf community activists retains its relevance.

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