

# Introduction

Carol L. Robinson

You see? You si? You sea? You C? U.C.? O . . . U . . . C? (O handshape emphasizes the open mouth, U handshape shows the gun going to the mouth, and C handshape indicates the exit wound behind the head) What do you see?

—Willy Conley, *The water falls*.

ONE EVENING, AFTER AN especially long day of work at Gallaudet University, Willy Conley and I went out to grab dinner together at a restaurant in downtown Washington, D.C.—a place noteworthy for its multicultural and politically fired atmosphere. We ate and continued a conversation begun in the English Department’s ad-hoc film committee meeting that afternoon. I was signing in American Sign Language (ASL) to Conley (because of his profound hearing loss, 105 db in one ear and about 98 db in the other ear), and Conley was voicing in English to me (because of my profound deficiency in ASL perception). At one point, Conley voiced to the waitress, asking her for some more butter. The waitress must have noticed my signing to Conley and apparently made an assumption, for when she brought more butter to the table, she waited to get my attention and then very, very carefully and slowly voiced to me, “buuuuutteerrrrrrr.” Her face was toward me, not toward the truly deaf person at the table. Annoyed, I loudly and clearly *sang* back to her (in imitation of a commercial from some time earlier), “Parkaaaaaay!” The waitress immediately blushed and began apologizing profusely. Meanwhile, Conley was signing to me, “What happened? Why is she upset? What did you do *now*, Carol? What the hell is going on?” I signed back to him, explaining the waitress’s misunderstanding. He turned to her and voiced, pointing to the large hearing aids that many deaf people wear hooked over the back of their ears, “You see these? *I’m the deaf one.*” “Yeah!” I voiced and brokenly signed simultaneously, “*I’m the dumb one!*” I’m afraid she

was almost in tears at that point, poor thing, so we left her a large tip with the check.

This story, I hope, illustrates how real-life experiences—such as the common misconceptions hearing people have about deafness, and the ways in which Deaf/deaf<sup>1</sup> communities and hearing communities clash—find their way into Willy Conley's plays. In 1990, Mary Louise Pratt gave a keynote address to the Modern Language Association Literacy Conference in which she said, "Descriptions of interactions between people in conversation, classrooms, medical and bureaucratic settings, readily take it for granted that the situation is governed by a single set of rules or norms shared by all participants" (37). Rules of communication, be they on the stage or in a real-life situation, are invisible, assumed, "broken," or remade, and often clash with other rules of communication, even within the same culture or subculture. That waitress had not understood the rules of our conversation because she was not privy to our point of view. Therefore, she wasn't playing the "game" right.

The game of communication/miscommunication is a common theme in theater, but for Conley's pieces, the stage becomes a post-postmodernist playing field of multidirectional binary oppositions (such as on/off, right/left, liberal/conservative, medical/mystical, fantasy/reality, man/woman, and image/sound) between characters who are Deaf, deaf, hard of hearing, hearing, paying attention, ignoring, communicating, not communicating, miscommunicating, and/or misunderstanding—sometimes all at the same time. Such a game in Conley's works is conducive to producing humor, but neither the game nor the humor is always pleasurable for everyone all the time. In other words, Willy Conley is a linguistically gifted storyteller who plays with the poetic/imagistic line between real-life experiences and expressions and the possibilities for photographic, written, and performed portrayals of those real-life experiences and expressions.

---

1. The "d" in *Deaf* is capitalized to signify an identity based on the use of sign language and the common bonds it forges. People who have a severe to profound hearing loss but do not use sign language as their first language or identify with the Deaf community are referred to as *deaf*.

To illustrate, I'd like to tell another story. When I first met Willy Conley, nearly two decades ago, we had an extremely difficult time communicating. The problem wasn't just the usual clichéd list of differences that came between us (he was a man, I was a woman; he was a Southerner who loved the ocean and big cities, I was a Midwesterner who preferred the wilderness and big lakes; he was an aspiring artist, I was an aspiring scholar), it was also that he was Deaf and I was hearing. He, *apparently*, could neither lip-read very well nor speak at all, while I was a novice at American Sign Language. The struggle for us to communicate was intense. However, thanks to Conley's encouragement and ingenuity, we managed to discuss everything from department politics to favorite movies. Indeed, particularly in the beginning, Conley was a tortuously patient-but-persistent person—starting each conversation with pure ASL, downgrading it to PSE, downgrading that to gestures, downgrading that to pen and paper (or napkins or whatever else was handy), and when all else failed, we would fall back to using the computer and e-mails. There was no giving up, no matter how frustrating things got. In the end, my ASL skills improved rapidly, but what did Conley get out of the experience? One day, I made a discovery. After nearly a year of believing that this Deaf/deaf man could not speak, I overheard him talking—in quite clear English—with a colleague. “What an incredible performance!” I thought. I still think it. Conley performed his Deaf self brilliantly, allowing me to see the dominant part of his identity while suppressing his talents for coping with the hearing world: a game of life in which the rules of communication helped me learn to better communicate in his world. Is that not what audiologists and teachers of the Deaf/deaf do every day? The whole thing actually had been a game, a very serious game.

However, in a recent e-mail, Willy Conley made it clear to me that he did not, and still does not, see that first-year experience as a performative game. While part of his purpose had been to help me “quickly pick up ASL,” there were deeper, more personal and political reasons for his behavior. He wrote,

Actually, it wasn't a game from my end of things. . . . I was trying to protect myself from being exploited, which still happens to this day whenever I open my mouth around some hearing people because what happens is that because I speak fairly clearly, they equate that with the clarity of my hearing and go on talking to me as if I were hearing. Then, when I tell them of my communication needs, they think I'm a fraud or pandering for more attention, money for interpreting, etc. . . . I was told that one neighbor in my homeowner's association was fighting not to have the association pay for an interpreter at our association meetings. He said, "Willy doesn't need an interpreter." I could kick myself for making an effort to speak to my neighbors to be friendly when we first moved in our neighborhood. Do I not speak and scare them away? Do all the communication in writing, if they don't run away? What happens if my [hearing] parents show up one day and I'm talking to my father on the front lawn and a neighbor hears me speak? Heaven forbid—I've been a fraud all along—playing this con game. (October 3, 2008)

For Conley, my communication game experience was a method of training me—a method of fixing the signing-impaired person, a method of bringing me just inside the communication boundaries of Deaf culture.

These stories illustrate the phenomenon described by Pratt as a *contact zone*, a "setting (geographical, theatrical, textual) in which two or more cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today" (34).<sup>2</sup> In this case, the asymmetrical relations of power center around Deaf/deaf communities struggling to be accepted into the hearing world. From my side of the contact zone (as a hearing, female scholar), I see the experience as a constructive way of playing with the linguistic and other communicative challenges posed for those trying to cross such barriers. From Conley's side of the contact zone (as a Deaf, male creative writer and photographer), he seems to see the experience as self-defense in a hearing world that neither typically

---

2. Mary Louise Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," *Profession* 91 (1991): 33–40.

understands nor typically sees a need to understand the Deaf/deaf way. Conley and I were caught—as many other members of the Deaf/deaf and hearing communities—in a contact zone between two very different communities in which the struggle to communicate successfully (or unsuccessfully) is belabored by miscommunications (purposeful or accidental) and misunderstandings (also purposeful or accidental).

Willy Conley's plays represent the contact zone between two cultures and their languages, which makes the plays, printed as they are in this anthology, autoethnographic texts. An autoethnographic text is one that constitutes "a marginalized group's point of entry into the dominant circuits of print culture."<sup>3</sup> The transculturation of his plays is multidirectional, an autoethnographic portrayal of hearing world perceptions of the Deaf world, as well as Deaf world perceptions of that hearing world's perceptions. Furthermore, because there is no official print version of ASL (other than the printing of film), the *graphic* aspect of Conley's texts becomes glaringly invisible. He must describe the *look* of ASL expressions through printed English text, which is less tedious and more effective than drawing stilted images of ASL.

The crux of the struggle is in a perception of deafness and Deaf identity by members of the dominant hearing world. Indeed, Conley is an example of the limitations of Disability Studies, which tends to stress the act to not *disrespect disability* rather than to learn to *respect ability*. Conley has much ability to be respected. He holds a B.S. in Biomedical Photographic Communication from Rochester Institute of Technology, an M.A. in Creative Writing from Boston University, and an M.F.A. in Theater from Towson University. At the time of this publication, he is an Associate Artist with Center Stage (Baltimore, MD), an Affiliate Artist with Quest Productions (A division of Quest: Arts for Everyone), an Associate member of the Dramatists Guild, and Professor and Chair of the Theatre Arts Department at Gallaudet University.

---

3. Pratt, 35.

Willy Conley was the first Deaf person to receive national certification as a Registered Biological Photographer; he studied under Nobel laureate Derek Walcott at Boston University, and he has since won numerous playwriting awards. For Conley, disability is not the focus, merely the side-effect. Willy Conley's works strike back against the disabling portrayal of Deaf/deaf individuals given by members of the hearing world, for they shift the focus from the *corrected* (such as by some "miracle" medical procedure or "clinical" religious ritual) to a focus upon the *enabled* (such as by a community's language and cultural codes). In so doing, Conley demonstrates the abled voice of the Deaf community.

At the very beginning of *I See a Voice: Deafness, Language and the Senses—A Philosophical History*, Jonathan Rée observes that "the idea of being heard, of possessing a voice or having it ignored or suppressed, of demanding, validating, giving or offering a voice—the voice of the people, the voice of God—nearly coincides with that of human and civil rights." To voice is not a measure of vocalness or muteness of sounds; it is a measure of how fluent one is, whether in a spoken language, a written language, or a signed language. For Rée, "the insistent old issues about time as against space, succession in contrast with simultaneity, or hearing as opposed to seeing, have absolutely nothing to do with the question of linguistic organization."<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, paying attention is a skill that can be refined into an art: an understanding, acknowledgment, and/or recognition, regardless of acceptance or respect. Expressing to another individual is not limited by the parameters of speaking, signing or writing. Physiologically, one can scream and shout all one wants (through spoken words and vocal gestures, through signs and visual gestures, through written language and drawn gestures), yet some just won't "hear" that "voice."

Conley's plays hold a "voice" that is highly visual. Visual theater is actually very kinetic, communicating through gesture, mime,

---

4. Jonathan Rée, *I See a Voice: Deafness, Language and the Senses—A Philosophical History* (New York: Metropolitan Books; Henry Holt and Company, 1999), 1, 365–66.

sign language, sign-mime, dance, and other body movement. Masks, expressive costumes and even puppetry may be used to supplement such expressions. The emphasis of communication is through what is seen rather than through what is heard. In the current collection of works, Conley politicizes, polarizes, personalizes, and then synthesizes the visual (gesture, pantomime, and language) over the aural. Perhaps this is because visual gesture and language are politicized, polarized, personalized, and synthesized sometimes with, but mostly above and beyond, sound-based gesture and spoken language in his life. Conley once wrote to me in an e-mail that

It wasn't until I was three that my parents found out that I was deaf. That means I didn't acquire language until after the age of three. My world and all of the information around it were funneled through my eyes. My needs were expressed through gestures and pantomimes. Later, I was diagnosed as . . . "profoundly deaf". . . . My parents told me that once I was fitted with hearing aids, I fell in love with all of the different sounds I was hearing. . . . Just as I enjoyed the world of sounds, I also enjoyed the world of silence. (February 27, 1999)

To date, medical, pedagogical, linguistic, and semiotic studies of language and meaning have held an intensely narrowed view of nonverbal language systems. Indeed, it is only since the arguments made by William Stokoe in his monumental work *Sign Language Structure: An Outline of the Visual Communication Systems of the American Deaf* were published in 1957 (barely over fifty years ago) that a recognition of nonverbal language systems has even begun to become established. As recently as 2003, Scott K. Liddell wrote that "linguists analyzing vocally produced languages have been able to ignore both gesture and gradient aspects" of spoken languages which cannot be done with sign languages, such as ASL.<sup>5</sup> Conley's visual theater challenges this bias toward sound, while also simultaneously embracing sound for its kinetic (vibrational) qualities. It

---

5. Scott K. Liddell, *Grammar, Gesture, and Meaning in American Sign Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), xi.

is a visual theater that both incorporates and transpires beyond the sublingual movements of body gesture to the physical (visual and aural) poetics of language, juxtaposing American Sign Language on equal ground with spoken English, producing a complex portrayal of communication that is full of both meaningful and meaningless games.

The plays written for Deaf culture theater serve three distinct purposes: to entertain members of the Deaf community, to educate hearing audiences about Deaf culture and sign languages, and to tie deaf and hearing cultures and their languages closer together into a (hopefully) decreasingly dysfunctional relationship. Willy Conley's theater—with its visual-audio blendings of playful rhythms and bittersweet tones—belongs to this last category. Visual theater—including Conley's theater—isn't necessarily silent (just as silent film was never completely silent; it usually had music and sometimes someone produced sound effects, such as shotgun fire, behind the screen), but limiting Conley's works to the realm of visual theater ignores the multimodal, multimedia aspects that permeate his plays. Like Tennessee Williams before him, Conley is fascinated with the ways that contemporary technology may be incorporated onto the stage, and he uses music, sound effects, visual effects, film and television to their full effect.

Furthermore, these plays follow the practice of such theater companies as the National Theatre of the Deaf, Cleveland Signstage Theater, Deaf West Theatre, and Sunshine Too, in which voice supplements sign language, much like subtitles supplement a foreign-language film. Indeed, some critics complain that such performances pander to hearing audiences. Incorporating multilingual dialogue, using both signed ASL and spoken English for separate, particular purposes, Conley tends to move beyond not only a recognition of cultural differences posed by and between spoken English and American Sign Language, but also the colonization of one culture over the other. Sometimes the dominating culture is Deaf, but more often it is the Deaf characters who struggle to climb out



of the gutters of the hearing world. Willy Conley's love for English and American Sign Language, as well as the cultures associated with those languages, is at the root of much of his writing voice. For example, he takes pains in several of his works to point out most of the possible meanings of various ASL or English signs or words, forcing the audience to sort out multiple meanings to find the "right" one, only to face the question, "Right for whom?"

If Willy Conley's plays portray one "truth," it is that Deafness/deafness, is only a disability when it is not treasured, respected, or at the very least accepted. In her introduction to *No Walls of Stone: An Anthology of Literature by Deaf and Hard of Hearing Writers*, Jill Jepson writes, "Conley's work zeros in on two issues vital to deaf identity: society's determination to remake deaf people in the image of hearing people, and the right of a deaf person to choose a deaf identity."<sup>6</sup> The focus is human angst and empowerment, whether Deaf angst and empowerment in a hearing world, or hearing angst and empowerment in a Deaf world. The focus is also on technology: technology of the stage vs. technology of the cinema vs. computer technology. The ultimate focus is Deaf/deaf human angst and empowerment in the face of technology over cultures, hearing and Deaf/deaf alike.

The idea of curing a person of deafness is reminiscent of other corrective notions of human perfection; for example, curing a black person of the "wrong" skin color, fixing a woman's "undesirable" breast size, or selling a drug to a man that says he isn't a "real" man unless he can sexually perform "properly." There is nothing wrong with wanting to change, or even "improve" one's self, but there is something very wrong when society pressures people to change or improve who or what they are in order to foster one acceptable, generic identity. The iconic symbol of deafness has been established in a horribly misleading way. A deaf character in a novel, for example, is often exploited by the writer to symbolize the inability to listen, to be aware, to pay attention, to know,

---

6. Jill Jepson, ed., *No Walls of Stone: An Anthology of Literature by Deaf and Hard of Hearing Writers* (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 1992), 8.

and, ultimately, to understand. The argument that physical deafness does not necessarily always equate with other disabilities is a persistent theme running through most of Willy Conley's works. It is a theme often shared in a sharply communicated voice, a voice that surgically slices through clogged channels of communication both within and between Deaf/deaf and hearing worlds. Sometimes, the surgery is painful. The funny thing is that pain is a part of everyday life.

---

Carol Robinson is Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Kent State University Trumbull campus in Warren, Ohio.