Creative Sign Language

Four Arms Language.¹

I can play with language!
Language! Language!
Language! Language! Language! Language! Language!

‘Poetry’ by the Flying Words Project, Peter Cook and Kenny Lerner (1993 – reproduced in Nathan Lerner and Feigel 2009, in American Sign Language (ASL) and English)

Introduction

Hold a tree in the palm of your hand,
or topple it with a crash.
Sail a boat on finger waves,
or sink it with a splash.
From your fingertips see a frog leap,
at a passing butterfly.
The word becomes the picture in this language for the eye.
‘Language for the Eye’ by Dorothy Miles (1976)

This Element describes creative sign language in deaf literature. To showcase the exciting developments in Latin American deaf literature, we focus upon

¹ Painting by Fernanda Machado, after ‘Poetry’ by the Flying Words Project, Peter Cook and Kenny Lerner (1993).
creative Libras (as Brazilian Sign Language is known) produced by the Brazilian deaf community, but we emphasise that the essential characteristics of Libras literature can be seen in similar productions and performances in sign language literatures around the world. In this Element, we include examples of poems and stories from several other sign languages to give readers a practical experience of appreciating works of creative sign language.

The focus of our work here is on deaf literature in sign language. Any definition of literature needs to accommodate exceptions, but our understanding of deaf literature is that it is the body of creative language work of deaf communities. It includes both fiction and non-fiction, in the form of storytelling, poetry, jokes, and other creative pieces. It is founded on four key characteristics: it is primarily created and/or performed by deaf people, it is aimed at deaf audiences, it has content that relates to the experiences of deaf people, and it is performed in sign language as the visual language of deaf people. There are exceptions to each of these four criteria, so we see examples of creative sign language that do not fulfil all four and yet can still be considered part of deaf literature, but the general parameters are useful for understanding this field of study.

We describe creative sign language within its historical and social contexts, tracing its development within the national deaf community and mainstream society, as well as the influence of deaf artists and performers from other countries. The role of linguistic, social, and education policies in promoting creative sign language will be outlined, as they impact on the development of sign language artists, artworks, and audiences. We also trace the effect that changes in technology and the transmission of creative sign language via the internet and social media have had on the artform, considering questions of performance, filming and editing, and the potential for written sign language literature.

Following an in-depth exploration of the ways that aesthetic sign language is used to create highly valued, visually intense, emotionally rich poems and stories, we will consider emerging genres of deaf literature. Questions of original deaf literature for children and the role of translated, retold, or adapted stories from books and films will be addressed. Drawing on anthologies of Libras poems, jokes, and stories, we will use close-reading techniques to show how the literary effects are created, while reminding the reader that creative sign language in any country cannot be separated from the deaf community. The
themes addressed in different genres provide strong insights into the complex identities of deaf people in the twenty-first century, always celebrating the beauty, richness, and sheer delight of this form of deaf cultural heritage.

1 History and Social Context of Sign Language Literature

There are deaf artists in every sign language community, whose ability to create enjoyable, valued language art forms is recognised by other community members. In this section, we will focus principally on the history of creative sign language in the Brazilian deaf community because it is the one that we know best, but we refer to other national deaf communities and we expect readers to find parallels in any nation or deaf community, including their own. For example, for the story of another country’s sign language art movement, we highly recommend Nathan Lerner and Feigel’s (2009) video documentary *The Heart of the Hydrogen Jukebox* about American Sign Language (ASL) poetry in the twentieth century.

In the following paragraphs, we provide a short introduction to the long history of Brazilian deaf artists and deaf literature, to show the wide range of artistic skills of members of the deaf community. Rich materials document the history of Libras literature (Mourão 2016; Rocha 2008), many of which are informal records, some archived and some almost forgotten, dating back to the foundation of Instituto Nacional de Educação de Surdos (INES), the national school for the deaf in Rio de Janeiro, in 1857.

Face-to-Face Encounters with Sign Language Literature

Deaf children from all over the country boarded at INES and shared cultural and language experiences. It is well known that school is a key source of most people’s language lore (Opie & Opie 1959) and we may say that INES created the roots of Brazilian deaf folklore. The INES graduates returned to their hometowns and shared what they had learned, at their local deaf clubs and at regional artistic events. Records from deaf schools and those of their graduates provide material for academic study, and for deaf children in schools and adults in the deaf community to understand their history, including their literary heritage. Rich records of artistic endeavours have already revealed a hitherto undocumented history of Libras (Rocha 2008). It is important that we collect more material from regions across the country, for researchers worldwide to study documents that shed more light on the literary and artistic history of their deaf communities.

Although most deaf people are born into hearing families, the few families where deaf parents have deaf children are crucial for passing deaf folklore down through the generations (Ladd 2002; Lane et al. 1996). Mourão (2016) reports that the Libras artist Rimar Segala grew up in a deaf family and encountered creative
sign language and deaf literature in the form of theatre and storytelling among other deaf families and in the deaf clubs in São Paulo, long before it became a recognised term in academic circles and before it was taught in Libras Studies courses.

Deaf community cultural events have provided important opportunities for sharing and perpetuating sign language creativity. In the past, deaf adults travelled to meet other deaf people face to face at deaf club events and at sports competitions at local, interstate, and international levels. At all these events, people told new stories, poems, and jokes, or performed theatrical sketches which the participants then passed on within their local deaf communities. Bahan (2006) has described how these informal social encounters at sporting events included storytelling and formed part of the face-to-face folkloric tradition of deaf literature in the USA. Charles Krauel’s film footage of deaf Americans’ social events from the 1920s to 1950s includes several examples of people performing language skits, chants, or stories, while their friends look on (Supalla 1994). Similarly, in Brazil, Strobel (2013) reports that deaf arts of all forms developed through these face-to-face contacts across states within the country.

With the imposition of oralist education methods after the congress of Milan in 1880, institutional support for sign languages and their art forms stopped in schools for deaf children around the world. At INES, the roots of Brazilian deaf folklore were severed, as Libras was repressed. Although we know that it continued, both in schools (including INES) and in deaf associations, we have no clear records of it during most of the twentieth century. The growing recognition of the status of sign languages following the linguistic research of William Stokoe and others in the USA and pioneering researchers in Brazil, such as Lucinda Ferreira Brito and Ronice Müller de Quadros, contributed to the legal recognition of Libras in the Libras Law of 2002. This law’s enacting decree in 2005 led to development of Libras teaching, discussion of language, linguistics and culture in Libras, and the establishment of the first Libras Studies Undergraduate Course (‘Letras Libras’) at UFSC, the Federal University of Santa Catarina, in 2006. This course, offered nationwide through eleven regional hubs, trained over 1,500 students (almost all deaf) and, importantly for creative sign language, included modules on sign language literature, taught by Professor Lodenir Karnopp.

As in many countries, despite the relatively recent ‘discovery’ of deaf literature by the academy, members of the Brazilian deaf community have known about deaf theatre, deaf jokes, caricatures, and humorous pieces for many years, having learned about them, as we mentioned earlier, while at INES or when attending deaf clubs or sporting events. The students brought their knowledge of deaf folklore to these first Deaf Literature courses in the Libras Studies degree program. It was an unprecedented opportunity for stimulating interest in Libras literature within the deaf community at a national level. The materials
used in these early courses had a huge impact on general awareness of deaf literature within the deaf community.

Researchers have frequently noted the importance of deaf folklore for sign language art forms in the deaf community (see, for example, Peters 2000; Carmel 1996; Rutherford 1993; Frishberg 1988). Folklore is a way of expressing the traditions and experience of a particular group. This knowledge is often passed to new generations through language and is transmitted face to face rather than in formal education (Dundes 1965). Deaf folklore generally is concerned with deaf world knowledge and the experience of members of the deaf community (Bahan 1994), and this may be expressed especially in the marked forms of aesthetic signing valued by deaf people. Carmel (1996) uses the term Signlore for deaf folklore that focuses on language. There is a common understanding (Taylor 1948) that literature, being a predominantly written art form is more refined and erudite, practised by educated members of the community, while folklore, being predominantly unwritten, has a lower status, often being termed ‘popular’. This attitude stems primarily from a general idea that written creative language is superior to unwritten forms (Hutcheon 2012). However, in many cultures, especially those without a strong written tradition, folklore is indistinguishable from literature and literature contains many elements borrowed from folklore. Within the deaf community, the long tradition of deaf folkloric sign language art forms gives them a highly valued status (Peters 2000; Rutherford 1993).

Sutton-Spence and Quadros (2005) showed that creative sign language has its roots in everyday communicative signing but that it has its own artistic characteristics. In a comparison of two sign language poems, one Brazilian and one British, about the national identity of deaf people (Brazilian Flag in Libras by Nelson Pimenta and Three Queens in British Sign Language (BSL) by Paul Scott), they identified elements that had their roots in deaf community folklore, but which had become incorporated into sign language poetry. It could be said that the creative sign language produced in Libras before the inception of the Libras Studies courses can be termed deaf folklore but academic interest in it, with critical and codifying approaches as it is increasingly taught formally, began a phase of deaf literature. As study of deaflore moved into academia and formal education, its status grew, artists increasingly recorded their work, and developed a more critical understanding and awareness of the work they composed and performed. Mourão (2016) reports that many deaf Libras artists today did not originally see their work as literature but have come to see it as such since its incorporation in the academic curriculum. Heidi Rose (1992) has offered another perspective – that the advent of video led to ASL literature because it allowed for the easy recording, storage, distribution, and analysis of sign language performances. The two developments of video and academic studies of sign language literature may not be unrelated.
Deaf artists have long performed at their local deaf clubs, but few were known more widely. Before the development of easily accessible video technology in the late twentieth century (Krentz 2006; Rose 1992) and the boom in internet video technology in the twenty-first century (Schallenberger 2010), the only opportunities for their work to become better known were at large events such as at the annual conference held at INES in Rio de Janeiro, and other occasional festivals of deaf art and culture, such as those held in the big cities of São Paulo in the south-east and Porto Alegre in the south. However, these festivals were occasional, one-off events. The Deaf Folklore Festival series at UFSC is an attempt to create a regular festival, holding events biennially since 2014. This concept has spread nationally and there are regular festivals in Brasília in the central west and Recife in the north-east of the country. These Brazilian festivals of creative sign language have links with those in other countries such as France, Chile, and South Africa.

All these festivals encourage artists and their audiences to share in new ideas and provide more material to develop their own art forms nationally, with more records of the literary performances (Sutton-Spence et al. 2016). The French connection with the world’s largest and arguably most important deaf artistic performance event, Clin d’Oeil, held biennially in Reims since 2003, has been especially important for creative sign language internationally. At Clin d’Oeil, deaf artists and their audiences meet to see high-quality, often groundbreaking and pioneering sign language performances from around the world, in theatre, film, dance, clowning, storytelling, poetry, and other performance genres. Libras artists have played an increasing part of this international sharing and development since Brazil was showcased as Clin d’Oeil’s invited nation in 2017.

Although technological advances and the social isolation caused by the 2020–1 Covid pandemic have reduced the emphasis on live performances, leading to more recorded pieces distributed through the internet, the importance of continued face-to-face events cannot be overstated.

Generations of Deaf Artists

Sign language artists are made, not born. They may have a particular aptitude for language creativity and performance, but they are the product of their experience and their knowledge of creative language learned from the deaf community. To

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6 See, for example, www.clin-doeil.eu/. 

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understand the history of creative sign language, we need to trace the history of
the artists who produce it and their experiences and influences.

The documentary *The Heart of the Hydrogen Jukebox* (Nathan Lerner & Feigel 2009) traces the timeline of deaf American sign language artists from the 1940s and their influences, documenting the individual lives of deaf artists and the ways in which these contributed to their styles of ASL signing, theatre, and storytelling that formed the collective concept of ASL poetry by the 1990s. This documentary inspired research along similar lines of artistic generations in Brazil (Sutton-Spence et al. 2017). It rapidly became clear that, as in the USA, the development of Libras literature arose from the communal artistic environment of deaf Brazilian artists and their interaction. (A similar pattern can be seen in the influences on deaf sign language artists in the United Kingdom (Sutton-Spence 2020) and France (L’Huillier & Liennel 2019) and we suspect that it holds true in many countries.)

An important influence on a nation’s sign language literature is that of artists in deaf communities in other countries. The exchange of ideas, skills, and training has been as important in Brazil as it has been in other countries. In the USA, despite a long folkloric tradition of creative signing in ASL, the formation of the National Theater of the Deaf (NTD) in 1967 spurred on new experiments in artistic and poetic ASL. The Brazilian Carlos Goes travelled to the USA to study deaf theatre in the 1990s, where he was influenced by the American actor from NTD, Bernard Bragg. On his return to Brazil, Carlos Goes passed on his new knowledge to his home deaf community, including the young Nelson Pimenta Castro, who later also travelled to the USA to study with NTD. When he returned, he published (in 1999) a highly influential DVD *Literatura em LSB* (‘Literature in LSB’8) of fables, stories, and metaphorical pieces adapted from what he had learned in the USA. His poem *Brazilian Flag*9 had a great impact on Brazilian deaf people, for whom the Brazilian national anthem, with its unusual literary style, was hard to understand.10 His description of the meaning behind the national flag made it accessible to the deaf community, appealing to their own sense of national cultural and linguistic identity. The interest in Libras poetry and storytelling inspired by the DVD led Nelson Pimenta to give workshops and training in deaf clubs and schools, travelling

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8 LSB is the acronym from *Língua de Sinais Brasileira*, Brazilian Sign Language, a term that is now used less than the term Libras, which we use here.
9 In Portuguese, *Bandeira Brasileira*, versions of which can be found through a simple internet search.
10 The lyrics of the Brazilian national anthem are markedly erudite, using arcane vocabulary and grammatical forms that are a challenge to many citizens, not only members of the deaf community.
with deaf theatre groups to show the Brazilian deaf community artistic sign language that appealed to their own sense of deaf identity. From his work in theatre and poetry, the third generation of Libras artists emerged, and the process continued as they passed on their skills, knowledge, and styles. Perhaps we are now on the fifth generation and, as Mourão (2016) observed, it will continue as deaf people pass on their own creative knowledge, blending it with traditions and knowledge of other members of the deaf community.

Where deaf artists have moved to work within the higher education system, formal teaching at undergraduate level has helped develop new materials, leading to new research, and has trained new creative sign language artists. We have already referred to the fundamental shift in Libras literature that occurred with the nationwide Letras Libras courses of 2006 and 2008. These courses have developed and spread across the country so that deaf literature is taught in at least one federal university in every state in Brazil.

The ‘Facebook Libras Poetry Course’, first run out of UFSC in 2014, is offered simultaneously to on-site students at the university (in the south of Brazil) and online for deaf people across the country to study by distance learning. There has been great demand for these regular courses, with interest generated partly by the success of the four-day Deaf Folklore Festivals held in 2014 and 2016, at which performances were accompanied by workshops and seminars on different aspects of sign language literature and folklore. Students wanted to extend their knowledge in these year-long courses with weekly meetings. A by-product of these courses is the creation of original materials by the course participants submitted as exercises set during the lessons. These materials have been used in undergraduate teaching, postgraduate research and publication, in creative performances, and in community outreach programmes in the deaf community, including in schools. There are currently few openly and widely available examples of high-quality, original Libras literature to serve as resources for teaching and research, and few texts that teachers can give to students that exemplify the rules and norms of creative sign language, so materials that students created during the ‘Facebook’ online courses have fed back into subsequent course editions, improving learning year on year.

Graduates of this course have gone on to become sign language professionals, especially teachers. One example is the profile of the Libras poet Victoria Pedroni who took the course as a student while an undergraduate, returned the following year as a teaching assistant, then became one of the teachers on the course, and completed her master’s degree on signed poetry duets using materials generated during the course (Pedroni 2021), providing new material for future teaching. Figure 1 shows the three teachers of the course and Figure 2 shows some poetic performances by the students.
The edited book by Karnopp, Klein, and Lunardi-Lazzarin (2011) *Cultura Surda na contemporaneidade* [*Contemporary deaf culture*], concerning the production, circulation, and consumption of deaf literature, shows the importance of its visual nature. While research initially focused on illustrated printed books written in Portuguese and in Libras, presented in SignWriting, as well as adaptations of traditional stories known in general Brazilian society for the deaf community, the contributors also acknowledged the increasing role of DVDs and sites such as YouTube in showing the creative, artistic, and cultural richness of deaf literature in Libras. The lack of high-quality material for research into sign language literature has been widely acknowledged among researchers, and a further by-product of the online courses has been that work created has been selected for anthologies of Libras poetry and other literature genres (Machado 2017; Sutton-Spence & Machado 2019).

**Technology and the Evolution of Artistic Productions**

Since the first known filmed performance of creative sign language in 1913, technology has dramatically changed how deaf artists produce and disseminate their work. The evolution began slowly, with film, videotape, and DVDs

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**Figure 1** Teachers of the Facebook Libras Poetry course (Left to right: Fernanda Machado, Rachel Sutton-Spence, and Victoria Pedroni)

Source: Authors’ personal archive.

[The Death of Minnehaha](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Death_of_Minnehaha_(1913).webm)
(Krentz 2006), but the launch of YouTube in 2005 allowed people with no specialist video or computing knowledge to post videos, and subsequent development in social networking sites means that a signer can upload videos of stories, jokes, sketches, poems, or other presentations quickly and easily. The speed at which these can be shared in these informal spaces attracts increasing audiences of people who have never met the artists. The openness of social networking sites, in conjunction with the increasing accessibility of open seminars, workshops, conferences, and festivals, provides ever more materials

Figure 2 Poetic performances by the students (Sara Amorim, Angela Okumura, and Marcos Marquioto)

Source: Authors’ personal archive.