

Amplifying Unseen Voices: Digitizing American Sign Language Poetry





Presenters

**Elizabeth Call,
University Archivist**

Email: Elizabeth.Call@rit.edu

**Joan Naturale,
NTID Librarian**

Email: jxnwml@rit.edu

**Ella von Holtum,
Archivist**

Email: evhtwc@rit.edu



Deaf Culture Defined

The Deaf community is a beautiful mosaic of multiple cultures, identities, and sign languages .

Arnaud Balard,
French DeafBlind Artist
“Preservation of Sign
Language: George Veditz”

- Carla García-Fernández



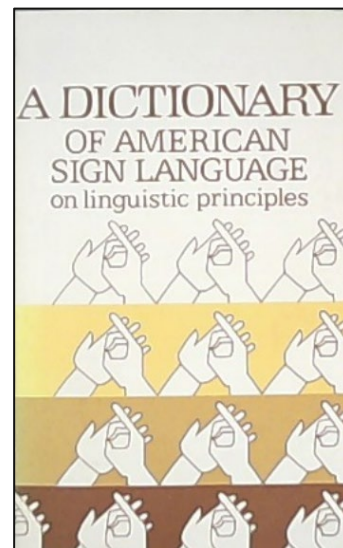
NTID at Rochester Institute of Technology

The National Technical Institute is a Deaf college at RIT University. There are Over 1,100 Deaf and HH students and a strong Deaf community in Rochester (20,000+)



American Sign Language (ASL) Movement

- **1960--ASL recognized as a language**
- **First ASL and Deaf Culture book**
- **Dr. William Stokoe (from Rochester) and 2 Deaf co-researchers, Casterline and Cronberg.**
- **Gallaudet University, a Deaf liberal arts college, established in 1864 and in Washington, DC.**





“Sculptures in the Air” CLIR Grant Proposal

1984--Allen Ginsberg and Robert F. Panara, poets, held a “Deaf Beat Summit”. Interpreting student who studied and worked with Ginsberg, Jim Cohn, invited Allen to present with Panara (a Deaf poet) to discuss the visual nature of poetry and translating them to different languages.

2016--reviewed the ASL Poetry and Literature collections, which is a rich form of sign language artistry and expression for the Deaf community. We identified 61 videos the team could digitize, caption, and voice.

2017-2020-submitted proposal to CLIR and awarded for this unique collection with talented ASL sign artists, including our faculty and alumni. It is the largest online portal of ASL poetry and literature in the U.S. thanks to CLIR funding, our library and archives team, and the community.



Deaf Poets' Styles Featured in Portal

Deaf poets have different expressive sign language artistry styles

Clayton Valli, Patrick Graybill, Debbie Rennie (alumni)-Original poetry style created in ASL that uses body language, rhythm and movement

Dr. Robert F. Panara, Bernard Bragg -Transliteration of English poems performed in sign language with ASL features.

Flying Words duo -Peter Cook (Deaf) and Kenny Lerner (hearing) (both alumni) - an avant -garde style ASL and spoken English (“captions”) hybrid work



“Hydrogen Jukebox” Translation Patrick Graybill

Voice Interpretation:
Kip Webster, 1984

“Explosion of ASL
Poetry” and start of
movement

Patrick signs “music,” “box,”
“coin from pocket,”
“vertical record becoming
horizontal,”
“needle going around,”
“thunder shaking,” and
“bomb exploding.”





“Hydrogen Jukebox” Translation Patrick Graybill

Voice Interpretation:
Kip Webster, 1984

Start 9:05 End: 9:12
(LUNA)

Patrick signs “music,”
“box,”
“coin from pocket,”
“vertical record
becoming horizontal,”
“needle going around,”
“thunder shaking,” and
“bomb exploding.”



Birds' Brain Society Flyer

After the 1984
symposium, students
hosted the Birds'
Brain Society sign
poetry performances

ASL Poetry Movement



* Birdbrainers afraid he's going to blow up the place - so he wrote this poem
to be immortal ALLEN SIMS BENS

INFORMATION: 475-6466 voice/TTY
National Technical Institute for the Deaf
Rochester Institute of Technology - Henrietta Campus

NATIONAL DEAF POETRY CONFERENCE

An Explosion of ASL Visual Poetry

Performance, Workshops, and Presentations by

PETER COOK
PATRICK GRAYBILL
ELLA MAY LENTZ
DEBBIE A. RENNIE
CLAYTON VALLI

SEPTEMBER 24-26 1987

Voice transcriptions will be provided by poetry performance artists


Marie Bernard
Susan Chaplin
Dorina Kachtes
Kenny Lerner
Miriam Nathan

for the Deaf

First National ASL Poetry Conference, 1987

Featured ASL Poets:
Peter Cook,
Patrick Graybill,
Ella Mae Lentz,
Debbie Rennie,
Clayton Valli

NATIONAL DEAF POETRY CONFERENCE



“Black Hole: The Colors of ASL” by Debbie Rennie

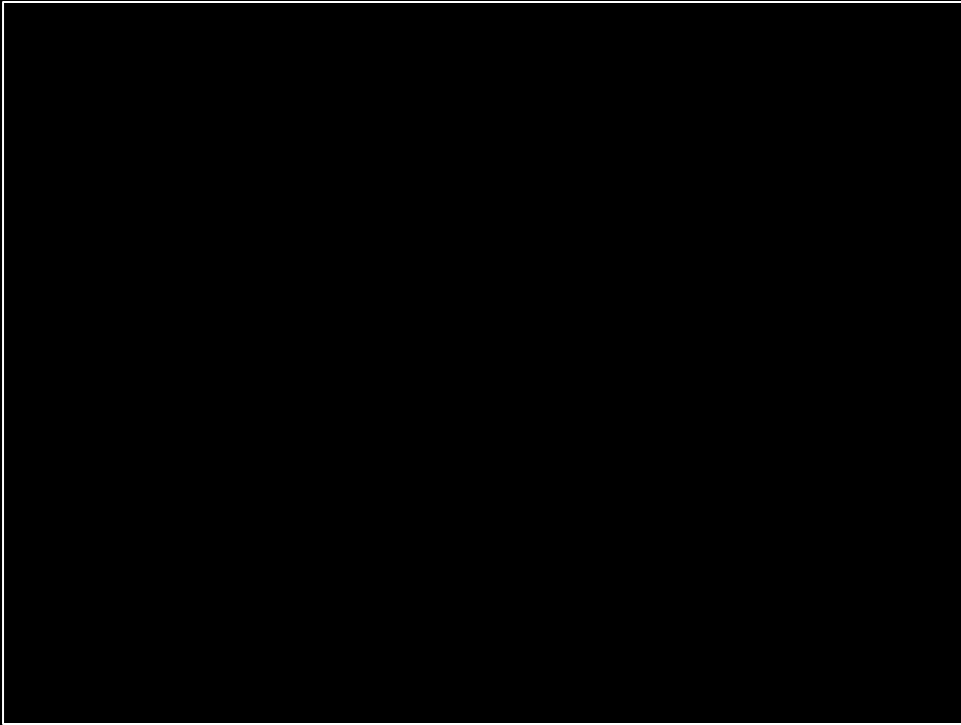
Voice Interpretation:
Donna Kachites, 1987





“Black Hole: The Colors of ASL” by Debbie Rennie

Voice Interpretation:
Donna Kachites, 1987



Start 1:13
LUNA



Translation of Black Hole: The Colors of ASL Poem

A ladder...reaching to the sky.

At the top, paint cans--red, yellow, blue, green, black.

Brilliant blue sky canvas--

red. yellow. blue. green. black.

Hands are the brushes for the colors of ASL.

The ladder is shaking. Down below it's a language tyrant.

"Get down. Get down from there or I'll force you down." "No, No. Stop it Stop it."

The red is the first to go down. Yellow, green, blue...tumbling tumbling.

black, black, black splash.

The black hole language tyrant disappears into the black hole.

The ladder is consumed rung by rung.

"No. No. I won't be sucked down. I will fly back up, up, up.

Back to the colors, to the colors, to the colors, back to the colors. ahh. The colors of ASL."



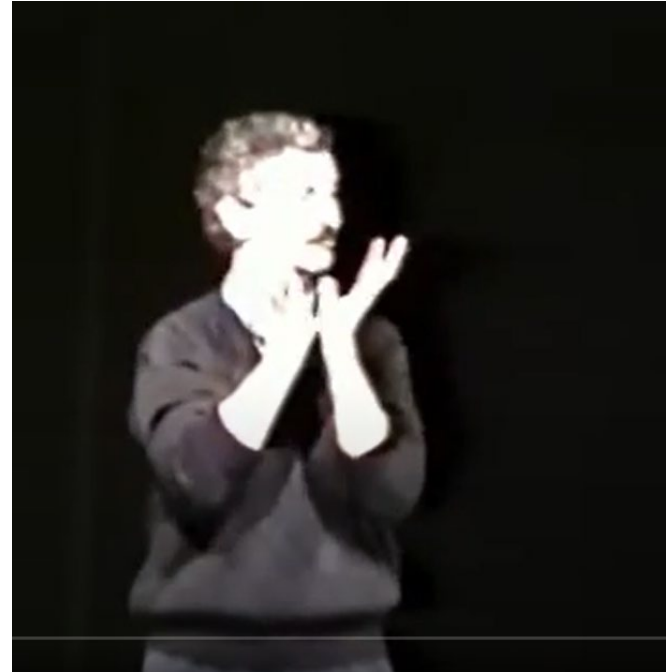
Clayton Valli: Dandelions

**Note the visual rhyme of his
body/head/hands/eye gaze/eyebrows shifts**

**Back and forth, and, in and out movements
Open 5 fingered and clenched fists
handshapes**

Note groups of 3 signs

**Primary handshape in the poem is open 5
fingered handshape**





Clayton Valli: Dandelions

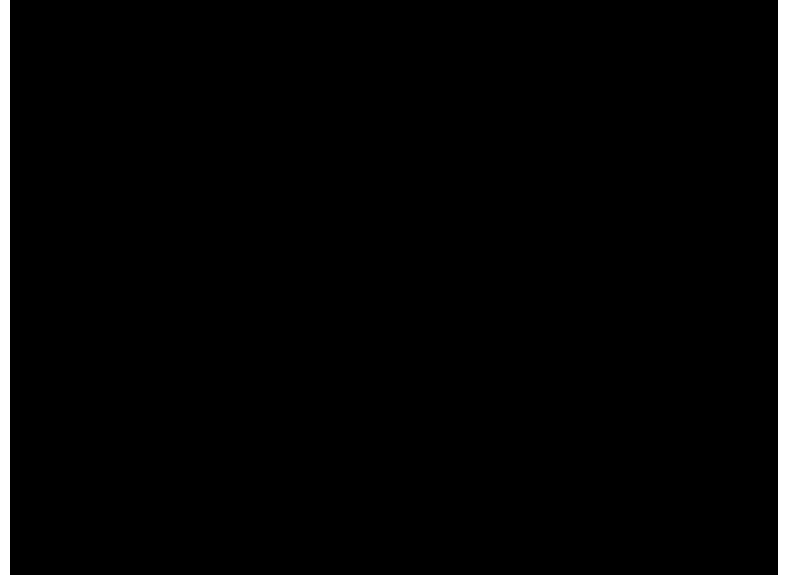
**Note the visual rhyme of his
body/head/hands/eye gaze/eyebrows shifts**

**Back and forth, and, in and out movements
Open 5 fingered and clenched fists
handshapes**

Note groups of 3 signs

**Primary handshape in the poem is open 5
fingered handshape**

Start 4:56. End 5:53 (LUNA)





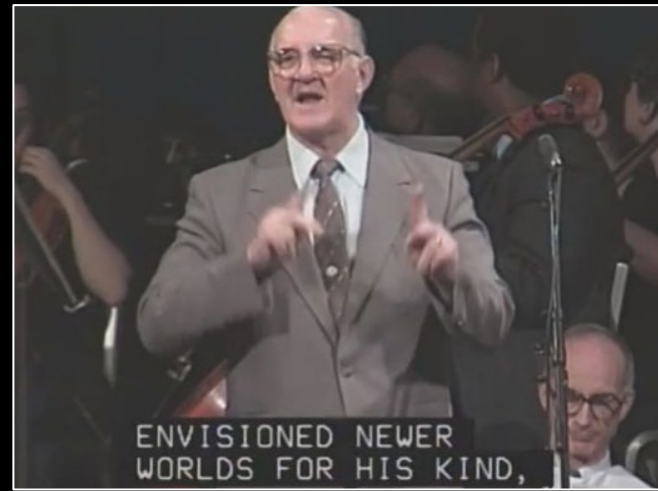
Dandelion Translation by Raymond Luczak

A Dandelion

Their yellows dotted the field,
their petals waving with the breezes.
An irritated man staring at them, snarling,
“Dandelions!” His hands pulled
some apart, and mowed the rest down
until the field was smoothed out
in green. The rain soon came
and went away; the sun sneaked in,
warming a seed in the soil.
The seed rose, enjoying all nature.
It waved, watching a bee
coming by with a greeting and
going away. Nights it closed
its petals, opening up again

In the morning. One day it turned
Into white puffs, their whiskers
A halo, but it moved with the breeze.
Its seedlings flew off in every direction.
Spotting its whiteness, the man,
Enraged, spit out, “there!”
The brave white puff still waved,
Still sending off its seedlings.
The man grabbed its stem and pulled out.
The white puff exploded, its seedlings
Scattering everywhere on its own.

Dr. Robert Panara “NTID”



Robert Panara:
Distinguished Americans Stamp,
2017





Dr. Robert Panara
“NTID”

Start 1:49 End: 4:36
LUNA



***Rethinking technical standards in digitized
ASL poetry and literature collections***





Physical object -> digital asset

- .avi
- .mp4 (video)
- .mp4 (audio)
- .srt
- .txt
- .pdf



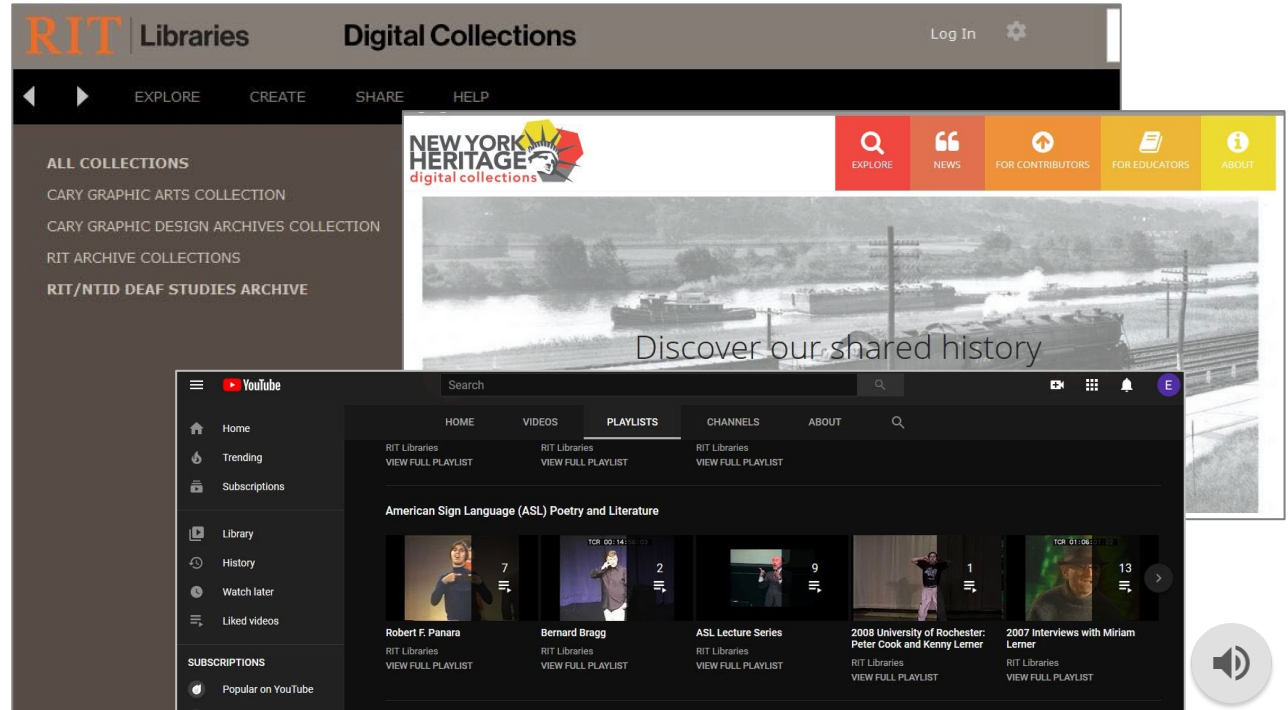
Existing models of access

- Filename
- Identifier
- Title
- Type (genre)
- Rights

The screenshot shows the RIT Libraries Digital Collections interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with 'RIT Libraries' and 'Digital Collections' logos, a 'Log In' button, and a search box. Below the navigation bar, there are tabs for 'EXPLORE', 'CREATE', 'SHARE', and 'HELP'. The main content area is titled 'RIT Libraries Collections' and 'Browse Deaf Studies, Culture, and History Archives'. On the left, there is a sidebar with 'View Collection Categories List' and a list of collections: 'ALL COLLECTIONS', 'DEAF STUDIES, CULTURE, AND HISTORY ARCHIVES', 'RIT ARCHIVE COLLECTIONS', 'RIT CARY GRAPHIC ARTS COLLECTION', and 'RIT CARY GRAPHIC DESIGN ARCHIVES COLLECTION'. The main content area features a grid of four items: a poster for 'An Evening of Poetry and Sign', a photo of a man in a hat, a poster for 'P.I.T. INTRAMURAL CHAMPIONS', and a photo of a woman in a long dress. Below the grid, there are two buttons: 'BROWSE ALL' and 'BROWSE 4W FACETS'. The page includes a welcome message, instructions for exploration, and contact information for the RIT Archives. The footer indicates the page is powered by Luna Imaging, version 7.5.3.1, revision 15817, and was created on 6/28/2019.

What are the access points?

1. Digitized materials in several searchable locations



Content of materials

2. All videos are voiced and captioned



"African American Sign Language in Visual Theater," Michelle A. Banks, 1991. <https://digitalcollections.rit.edu/luna/servlet/s/73or82>.



Multimodal access

3. All videos have a
complete text transcript

Transcript:

WOMAN: I WOULD LIKE
TO GIVE A WARM WELCOME
TO MICHELLE BANKS.

SHE IS THE DIRECTOR
OF ONYX AT ...

IN THAT PART OF NEW YORK CITY.

DURING THE TALK, SHE
WILL BE TALKING ABOUT

IS AFRICAN-AMERICAN
SIGN LANGUAGE

IN VISUAL THEATER.

NOW, I DON'T WANT
TO GO ON ANY LONGER.

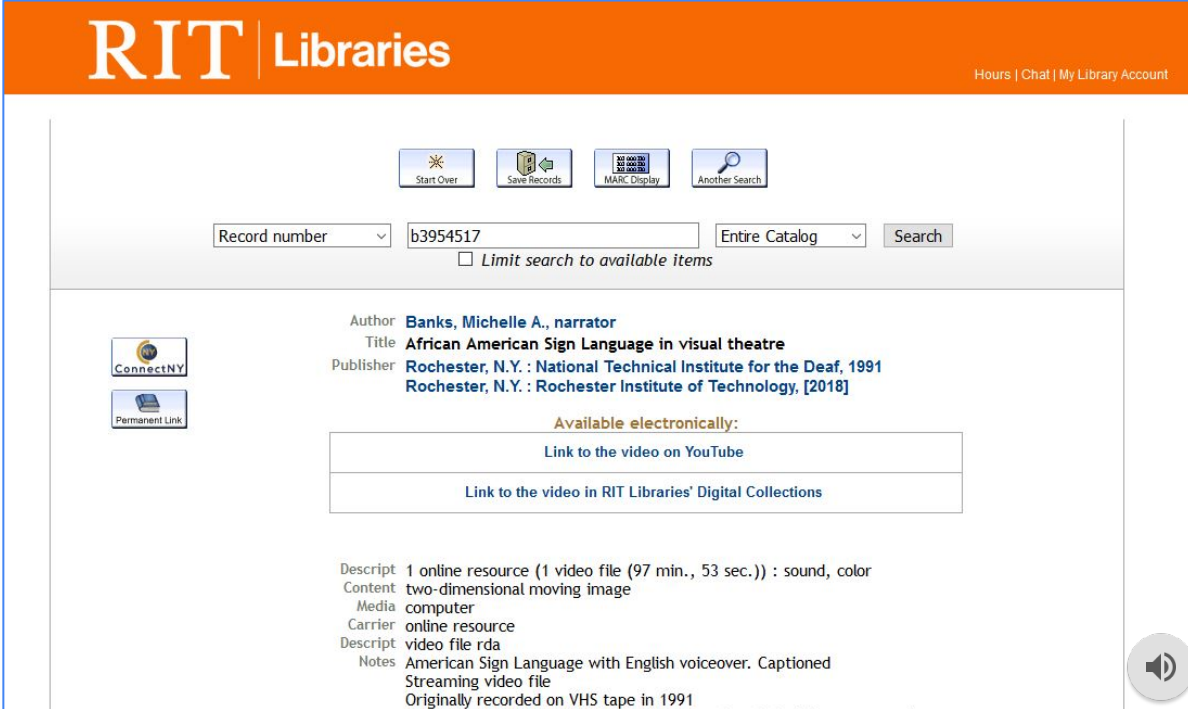
I'D LIKE TO GIVE HER
A CHANCE TO START, BUT...

[INDISTINCT]



Kinds of discoverability

4. All videos have catalog records in the library OPAC



The screenshot displays the RIT Libraries OPAC interface. At the top, the header reads "RIT Libraries" with "Hours | Chat | My Library Account" on the right. Below the header, there are navigation buttons: "Start Over", "Save Records", "MARC Display", and "Another Search". A search bar contains the record number "b3954517" and the search scope "Entire Catalog". A checkbox labeled "Limit search to available items" is present. The record details include:

- Author: Banks, Michelle A., narrator
- Title: African American Sign Language in visual theatre
- Publisher: Rochester, N.Y. : National Technical Institute for the Deaf, 1991
Rochester, N.Y. : Rochester Institute of Technology, [2018]

On the left side, there are icons for "ConnectNY" and "Permanent Link". Below the publisher information, there are two links under the heading "Available electronically":

- Link to the video on YouTube
- Link to the video in RIT Libraries' Digital Collections

At the bottom, technical details are listed:

- Descript: 1 online resource (1 video file (97 min., 53 sec.)) : sound, color
- Content: two-dimensional moving image
- Media: computer
- Carrier: online resource
- Descript: video file rda
- Notes: American Sign Language with English voiceover. Captioned
Streaming video file
Originally recorded on VHS tape in 1991

A speaker icon is visible in the bottom right corner of the interface.

Technical access

5. All videos have detailed archival metadata in our Digital Collections portal

The screenshot displays a metadata viewer interface with a dark header and a light background. The header reads 'MEDIA INFORMATION' with a close button (X) and a right arrow (>). The main content is organized into several sections:

- COLLECTION NAME:** RIT/NTID Deaf Studies Archive
- Record** (with a dropdown arrow)
- Filename:** ds_0101_mbanks_cap_01.mp4
- Identifier:** ds_0101_mbanks_cap_01.mp4
- Title:** African American Sign Language in visual theatre
- Creator:** Banks, Michelle A.
- Subject:** American Sign Language
- Subject:** African Americans
- Subject:** Deaf United States
- Subject:** Deaf, Theater for the
- Date of Original:** 1991
- Date of Digitization:** 2018
- Broad Type:** moving image
- Digital File Format:** mp4
- Physical Format:** VHS
- Dimensions of Original:** 97 minutes
- Language:** American Sign Language
- Language:** English
- Original Item Location:** RITDSA.0101
- Library Collection:** Sculptures in the Air: An Accessible Online Video Repository of the American Sign Language (ASL) Poetry and Literature Collections
- Library Collection:** Karen Christie ASL Literature Collection
- Digital Project:** 2018-2019 CLIR Grant-ASL Poetry and Literature
- Catalog Record:** <https://albert.rit...>
- Catalog Record:** <https://twcarchives...>
- Place:** New York - Rochester
- RIT Spaces and Places:** Henrietta Campus

A speaker icon is visible in the bottom right corner of the viewer interface.

Archival access

6. All videos are described in finding aids

National ASL Literature Conference collection

Collection Identifier: RITDSA-0101

RIT Archive Collections | National ASL Literature Conference collection

Collection Overview Collection Organization Container Inventory

Scope and Contents

The National ASL Literature Conference (ASL) Literature Conference held at National ASL Literature Conference Jukebox Parts 1 and 2, and a copy of the digitized for viewing:

In "African American Sign Language in Visual Theatre" the video, she leads a group discussion for African American Sign Language or African American Sign Language.

In the film "What is ASL Literature, Anyway?" offered-for example, Bonnie suggests a few subcategories within each. Gil Eastman discusses performer composition and audience. Claudia not poetry *of*/for the Deaf. Lynn Jacobowitz experience. She will be videotaping kinds of ASL literature are two separate bodies of work to Sign Language literature and is missing American Studies and whether these concepts adapted. Bernard Bragg then suggests using too limiting—doesn't take into account Deaf

African American Sign Language in visual theatre

Digital Work Identifier: ds_0101_mbanks_cap_01.mp4

RIT Archive Collections | African American Sign Language in visual theatre


Dates
1991


Creator
• Banks, Michelle (Person)

Summary
Michelle Banks shows a videotape of a performance in African American Sign Language. Following the video, she leads a group discussion focusing on how to use African American Sign Language in theatre and the importance of preserving Black Sign Language or African American Sign Language and Black Deaf culture.

Extent
668.66 Megabytes (mp4)

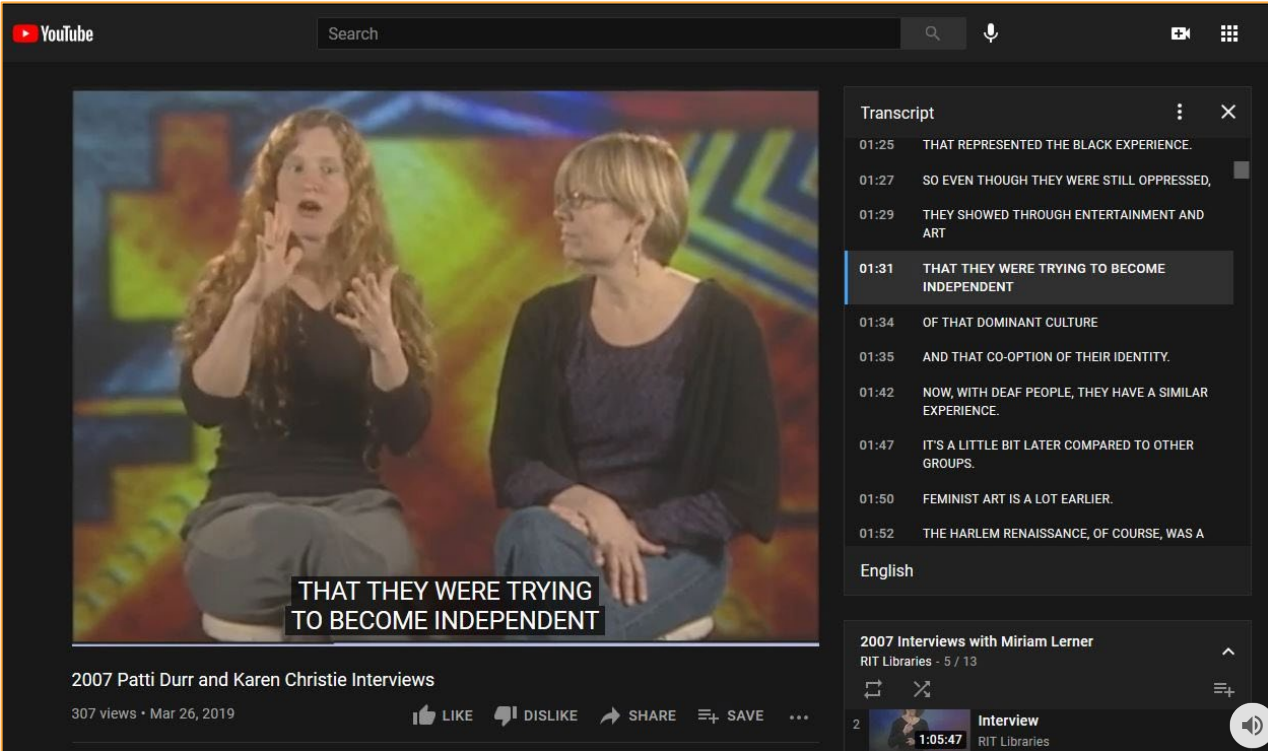
Language
Sign Languages
English


Digital Object (moving_image)



Community access

7. All videos are available on YouTube



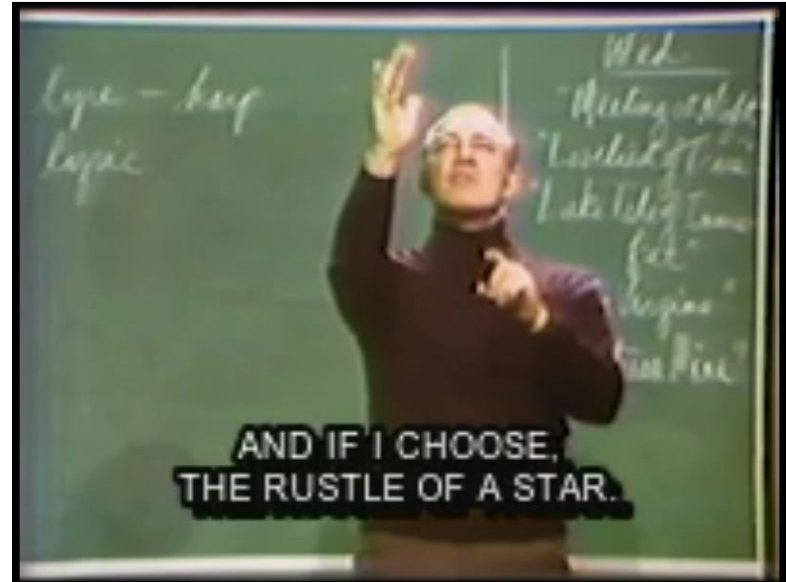
The screenshot shows a YouTube video player interface. The video title is "2007 Patti Durr and Karen Christie Interviews". The video has 307 views and was uploaded on Mar 26, 2019. The video content shows two women sitting on a stage, with the woman on the left speaking and gesturing. A subtitle overlay at the bottom of the video reads "THAT THEY WERE TRYING TO BECOME INDEPENDENT". On the right side of the player, a transcript is displayed, listing timestamps and corresponding text. The transcript includes the following entries:

- 01:25 THAT REPRESENTED THE BLACK EXPERIENCE.
- 01:27 SO EVEN THOUGH THEY WERE STILL OPPRESSED,
- 01:29 THEY SHOWED THROUGH ENTERTAINMENT AND ART
- 01:31 THAT THEY WERE TRYING TO BECOME INDEPENDENT
- 01:34 OF THAT DOMINANT CULTURE
- 01:35 AND THAT CO-OPTION OF THEIR IDENTITY.
- 01:42 NOW, WITH DEAF PEOPLE, THEY HAVE A SIMILAR EXPERIENCE.
- 01:47 IT'S A LITTLE BIT LATER COMPARED TO OTHER GROUPS.
- 01:50 FEMINIST ART IS A LOT EARLIER.
- 01:52 THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE, OF COURSE, WAS A

The transcript is currently set to English. Below the transcript, the video player shows a playlist of 5 videos, with the first video titled "Interview" by RIT Libraries, which is currently playing at 1:05:47.

A new model of access

- Determine specs and required fields with partners
- Expertise comes from both the repository and the community!



"Poetry Class part one: analysis of poetry," Robert Panara, 1974. <https://digitalcollections.rit.edu/luna/servlet/s/7ew519>



From Project to Program

“Captioning audio and video presented on the web would be a major step toward equitable access to our collections for people with hearing loss, but would also significantly impact preservation reformatting programs and resources at a time when the need for preservation reformatting is already at a crisis point.”

OCLC’s “Research and Learning Agenda for Archives, Special, and Distinctive Collections” (2017)

What is “Good Enough”?

Extensible Processing for Archives & Special Collections: Reducing Processing Backlogs

Daniel A. Santamaria, 2015

“The lack of a one-to-one relationship between deafness and ASL use means that knowing how many people are deaf does not allow us to estimate how many people use ASL in the United States.”

Ross E. Mitchell et al, “How Many People Use ASL in the United States? Why estimates need updating,” (*Sign Language Studies*, Volume 6, Number 3, 2006)

Taking Stock, Making Hay: Archival Collections Assessment

Martha O'Hara Conway and Merrilee Proffitt, OCLC, 2011

Thank you!

Questions?