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Jody Cripps
jcripps@clemson.edu

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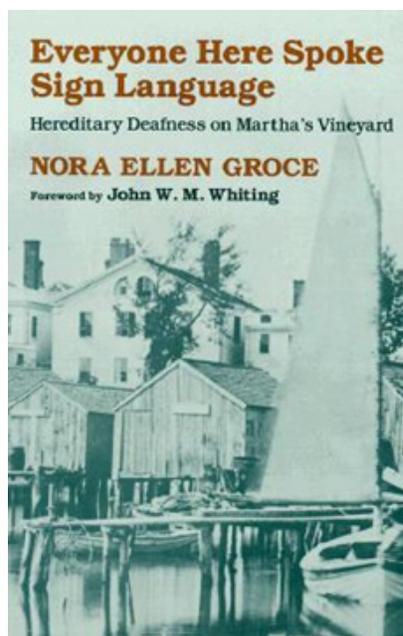
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Martha's Vineyard as an Inspiration

Jody H. Cripps
Editor-in-Chief
 Clemson University

The *Society for American Sign Language Journal (SASLJ)* is pleased to present a special issue: *Revisiting Martha's Vineyard and the Concept of Shared Signing for American Society*. I would like to start by stating that there has been a steady production of research and scholarship over the years on the shared-signing phenomenon in communities and societies throughout the world. I welcome the recent publication by Albert Bickford and Melanie McKay-Cody (2018). One good example of a shared-signing community that used to prevail in the United States is Martha's Vineyard, an island off the Massachusetts coast. Deaf and hearing populations on the island were known to be signers. To be clear, the hearing islanders continued to speak English as their primary language, but they also signed and were able to communicate with deaf islanders. If you have not, I encourage you to read Nora Groce's groundbreaking 1985 book on the shared-signing phenomenon of Martha's Vineyard, shown below.



It is important for us to remember that Martha's Vineyard is not the only place that fostered a positive sociolinguistic lifestyle for deaf Americans. Some version of a shared-signing community phenomenon prevails in Rochester, New York. The long-time presence of the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (with its large enrollment of deaf students) on the Rochester Institute of Technology campus has significantly influenced the city over the years. I recall a *CBS Sunday Morning* segment called "Sign City" that covers this topic. I have

personally observed an increasing number of deaf people marrying hearing people in the last few decades, with the hearing spouse or partner frequently knowing and using American Sign Language (ASL) on a daily basis. Their household becomes a shared-signing space. We all know that deaf parents frequently have hearing offspring who may become fluent in ASL. These children help maintain a shared-signing household with their deaf parents. In our deaf history, while Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet may be a hearing person, he is also a signer who had a profound impact on the education of deaf children in this country—and he married a deaf woman. The fact that the couple's hearing offspring continued to work with the deaf community is remarkable.

At the same time, I am fully aware that American society is largely made up of only spoken-language users. I may be a researcher and scholar by occupation, but I also experience life as a culturally deaf person. Living in South Carolina, I socialize frequently with deaf people. We use ASL for communicative purposes on a daily basis. Any time that I leave my house, I encounter nonsigning hearing people (in my workplace, restaurants, car repair shops, medical offices, and so on). I cannot help but wonder why hearing people in our society cannot be signers in addition to being speakers. I also wonder about the impact of ASL classes offered in high schools and colleges/universities on our society. Deaf people have begun to experience ordering in ASL at fast food outlets, for example. Some workers at these establishments have studied ASL as a language, and I wonder whether our society is moving closer to resembling Martha's Vineyard.

I hope that you can see why I have put together this special issue for SASLJ. I believe that we need to take Martha's Vineyard more seriously, especially considering how society can change for the better concerning all citizens. For this issue, I have selected four articles published between 1980 and 2012 that I think are groundbreaking and socially impactful. I was fortunate to receive permission to reprint the following articles:

Groce, N. (1980). Everyone here spoke sign language. *Natural History*, 89(6), 10-16.

Lane, H., Pillard, R. C., & French, M. (2000). Origins of the American deaf-world: Assimilating and differentiating societies and their relation to genetic patterning. *Sign Language Studies*, 1(1), 17-44.

Brueggemann, B. J. (2009). American Sign Language and the academy. In B. J. Brueggemann (ed.), *Deaf subjects* (pp. 25-37). New York University Press.

Supalla, S. J., Small, A. R., & Cripps, J. S. (2012). *American Sign Language for everyone: Considerations for universal design and deaf youth identity*. Canadian Cultural Society of the Deaf.

In addition, I have recruited scholars from around the country to write fresh commentaries on the selected articles. Alphabetically, these scholars are Bryan Eldredge of Utah Valley University, Robert J. Hoffmeister of Boston University, Judy Kegl of the University of Southern Maine, and Russell S. Rosen of CUNY-Staten Island. The general organizational guidelines for each commentary include (a) an introduction to the article, (b) the significance(s) of the article to the field of deaf/ASL studies, and (c) how the article contributes to the understanding of the prospects for shared signing in the contemporary United States.

Also, Albert Bickford of Summer Institute of Linguistics International accepted my invitation to write an afterword for this special issue. I must thank him and all the contributors who participated in this special issue for their time and reflection on the social relevance of a shared-signing phenomenon concerning the deaf and hearing populations.

I would like to close my Editor's Note by mentioning videos and recent developments taking place on Martha's Vineyard. Some islanders are pursuing a social movement to revive Martha's Vineyard Sign Language by teaching islanders the signed language (see, for example, these columns from *MVTimes*, Bowker, 2020 and the *Vineyard Gazette*, Mead, 2016).

The first video that I encourage everyone to view includes Joan Poole-Nash, who has a long family history with Martha's Vineyard and is a shared-signing community researcher and scholar. This video demonstrates vocabulary comparisons between Martha's Vineyard Sign Language and ASL. In the second video, Benjamin Lewis, who taught ASL at the University of California-Los Angeles, provides an equally insightful perspective on his trip to Martha's Vineyard. Perhaps this issue will lead to a new sense of purpose and inspiration associated with the function and value of ASL, not only for the deaf community but for society at large.



Comparing MVSL and ASL

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EzZsZrtdIIA>



A Visit to Martha's Vineyard

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Ioi7COpA7A

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