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Brenda Jo Brueggemann, *Deaf Subjects. Between Identities and Places* (London and New York: New York University Press, 2009), 203 pp.

Reviewed by **Elena Intorcía**

The field of Deaf Studies has recently been receiving growing attention in the academic realm, as is witnessed by the number of debates and conventions and the proliferation of events and projects funded both by universities and local deaf organizations.

*Deaf Subjects. Between Identities and Places* by Brenda Jo Brueggemann, Professor of English and Disability Studies at the Ohio State University, offers its readers a compelling insight into Deaf Studies and skillfully faces deafness-related issues aimed at fostering greater and deeper awareness (in hearing and deaf audiences alike) of what it means to be deaf. In it the author, hard-of-hearing herself, knowingly explores not only the world of deafness, but the very nature of identity, tying it to fields as diverse as gender studies and rhetoric.

In keeping with her fascination for what she terms a theory of “betweenity” (9), the author applies it to “the modern deaf subject” (3), and persuasively creates and displays connections among Deaf culture, identity and language throughout the seven chapters that make up her text. Deafness itself occupies a position of “betweenity” in relation to disability identity. This issue is examined through a comprehensive exploration of four main points related to deaf people’s identities: the efforts of Deaf activists and communities to separate “deaf” and “disabled” and to distinguish between “deaf” (lower case), for those who see their deafness as an impairment, and “Deaf” (upper case) for those who see themselves as a cultural and linguistic minority, efforts and definitions that Brueggemann suggests might now be left behind; the figure of the “new deaf cyborg” – an expression borrowed from Donna Haraway’s image of the cyborg as a “hybrid of machine and organism” – resulting from the spread of cochlear implants among deaf people, which creates a further “between” space (between past and present as well as between present and future) and plays a crucial role in refiguring the “Deaf gaze”, as implants can altogether change deaf people’s status as “people of the eyes” (18); the (changing) nature of ASL (American Sign Language), heading towards processes of standardization; the relationship between writing and deafness. The place and potentialities of ASL in the academy are also explored at length, as well as the possible problems inherent in the production and reception of deaf ‘literature’.

A key issue in *Deaf Subjects* is the point Brueggemann makes about the ‘performativity’ of sign language and its relationship to writing meant as

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‘performance’. An interesting field of investigation is therefore the exploration of what writing – as performance – and sign language – which is performative – have in common. At this point the author wonders “How can language change your hearing?” (22) and goes on by asking to what extent the study of Deaf culture can enhance a better understanding of how language shapes, controls, and alters the perception of the world.

American Sign Language (or any Sign Language) possesses a “unique nature” because of “its performance and passage as a non-print, non-written, visual and embodied language” (34). However, its history has been quite troublesome, as its official recognition as a language of its own has required much conflict and debate. Until 1997 it was listed in the *MLA International Bibliography* under “invented languages” and even today, despite considerable linguistic research, scholars of ASL literature, literacy and linguistics still have to struggle to find a proper location for ASL within academic organizations.

A whole chapter in *Deaf Subjects* is devoted to ASL literature and to the need felt by the author to face it both rhetorically and digitally. A “rhetorical and digital approach” can indeed impact on literature, film, rhetorical and language studies, thus leading to a new awareness of key concepts such as “vision”, “embodied language”, “voice”, “the gaze”, “presence”, “utterance”, “identity”, “space”, “frame”, “visual literacy” (40). Here Brueggemann draws on her previous work *Lend Me Your Ear: Rhetorical Constructions of Deafness* (Washington DC: Gallaudet University Press, 1999) to support her stance. A rhetorical approach to the study of ASL at large is deemed fundamental for many reasons, first of all to supplant the purely linguistic study of ASL; although this has undoubtedly done much for the advancement of both national and global Deaf culture, it “often overtakes other ways to study and obscures other frames and lenses for looking at the richness of language, community, tradition, history and *literature* related to sign language” (39). The rhetorical approach is also important because of the possibility it offers – associated with performance, poetic and philosophy – to help place ASL literature within the long-standing philosophical and poetic Western tradition. Furthermore, it provides an opportunity to focus on the persuasive potential of this literature and on the role of the audience in its production.

One more problematic aspect to consider when studying ASL literature is indeed that of its interpretation and fruition by the audience. A challenging question arises here: which audience are we referring to? Who does the Deaf author write for? In fact, contemporary ASL literature appeals to a double audience: to both hearing and deaf audiences, a fact that brings about the problem of fixing and controlling it. Some deaf author-performers have tried to find ways to animate on stage the gap and interface between sign and speech. A well-known example is the duo of performers, *Flying*

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*Words Project* (made up of Peter Cook, signing, and Kenny Lerner, hearing), who try to integrate sign and voice, ASL and spoken English, in their performances.

A further challenge ASL literature is called to face is the role – and, possibly, the interference – of ‘translation’ (from ASL, a visual language, into a written and oral language such as English). The body and act of translation and interpretation thus becomes “a body that matters” (58), an expression echoing feminist writer Judith Butler’s work *Bodies that matter*. The new media technologies can help archive, fix, preserve and analyze ASL literature, but this also brings about a certain loss of authorial control over literary production for the ASL author.

First of all, ASL literature challenges the very etymology of the word ‘literature’, deriving from the Latin “in letter”, taking us back to the earliest forms of literature, which were oral and linked to the body. ASL literature (and, in fact, any Sign Language literature) can be seen as not only a visual and spatial but also an ‘embodied literature’; perhaps, Brueggemann provocatively suggests, literature itself might be reinvented as *sign-ature*. Seen from this angle, the deaf space becomes a visual, performative space.

As it is true of any language, a problem connected with ASL is that of the inherent attempt of any language to standardise, categorise and resist what it comes in contact with. Brueggemann’s reflection about the use of the English language by Deaf authors is particularly interesting. For them, this represents a language which is not their ‘own’, since they consider their first language to be Sign Language. This bears resemblance to the experience of post-colonial writers from non-European countries who use English as a means of communication which, although not fully capable of expressing their own world, still enables them to reach a larger audience.

Deaf autobiographies, in particular, and narrating Deaf lives in general, are seen as a way of exploring identity politics and the relation between the self and the other, the writer and the audience. Through the help of new technologies like digital media, video and film documentary, it is now possible to diversely and innovatively express deaf narratives, whose ultimate task is simply to get people – both deaf and hearing – “to see deaf lives” (40). Focusing on some examples of “modern deaf identity” (5), Brueggemann intersects deafness and gender through the portrayal of the Allen Sisters and their photography – which she beautifully and forcefully paints by intersecting historical data and pieces of her own creative writing - and through reference to other famous deaf women at the turn of the twentieth century, such as Mabel Hubbard Bell, Alexander Graham Bell’s wife. When dealing with deaf biographies, the author highlights the need to portray people’s deafness “in relation to their own lives and their location in time, gender, and geographical space” (6), bearing in mind the importance of representing deaf lives “in all the between

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contexts, relationships, and frames possible” (97), also to bring them out of the loneliness and isolation by which such narratives are very often confined and trapped.

An additional intersection the author creates is that of Deaf Studies and feminist theory; a compelling question she asks is: “Do feminist theories about ‘writing the body’ – Cixous, for example – apply to and invigorate, or further erase, deaf people and their way of performing literacy?” (22). The answer, of course, is not given, and this adds to the involving dialogic and investigative nature of the book itself.

The final chapter of *Deaf Subjects* deals with the Nazi T-4 program, illustrating how the Nazis came to the resolution to kill some 240,000 people with disabilities, through the “potent sociopolitical, medical, and rhetorical forces of economics, euthanasia, and eugenics” (141). Here the borders between disability and deafness collapse under the powerful Nazi economics of the *Erbkrank*e (genetically unhealthy), which made all people with disabilities alike an economic burden too heavy for the state to bear, envisaging the erasure of lives ‘not worth living’ as the only possible solution.

The great contribution of Brueggemann’s text to Deaf Studies lies not only in what is clearly and overtly expressed and portrayed in it, but also and foremost in what is left unsaid – still not ‘unheard’ – among the ‘between’ cracks and borders scattered everywhere on the pages, which allows the reader considerable space for reflection.