

# Book reviews

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**Morse, T.A. (2014). *Signs and wonders: Religious rhetoric and the preservation of sign language*. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press.**

Through digital communication tools such as signed video blogs on YouTube, deaf and hard of hearing individuals are able to access information and connect with deaf and mainstream audiences on a broader scale than ever before. The National Association of the Deaf (NAD) prominently engages in online activism and political lobbying to ensure access to captioning, videophones, and cultural practices. These rhetorical actions promote the value of deaf identity and the community's system of communication—sign language. Contemporary online activism by deaf organizations and individuals continues a rich tradition of rhetorical moves by deaf individuals who have advocated for the significance of sign language in the community. In *Signs and Wonders: Religious Rhetoric and the Preservation of Sign Language*, Tracy Ann Morse traces how individuals and advocates for the deaf throughout American history have used religious rhetoric—or spiritual arguments and motifs—to argue for the preservation and appreciation of their cultural language.

Morse defines rhetoric “as the use of language—oral or signed—to influence the thoughts and behaviors of individuals or groups” (4). Her examination of religious rhetoric in the deaf community situates her scholarship at the intersections of deafness, religion, and rhetoric. While this book is singular in its focus, various aspects and implications would be beneficial to audiences from different fields of interest. Naturally, those involved in deaf studies and communication—as well as scholars concerned with the history of religious rhetoric—would appreciate this text's discussion of how deaf culture has used religion to instill faith in its

own value. On a broader scale, Morse's text provides rhetoric and communication teachers and scholars with a unique study of how individuals in a community design rhetorical moves (both religious and non-religious) to recognize their members' shared identity and promote a sense of community.

Morse opens *Signs and Wonders* with a beneficial explanation of deaf culture. She begins this explanation with the premise "that religion has provided the deaf community with a powerful language to convey its authority in its struggles to preserve sign language" (4). She then goes on to explain the presence of religious rhetoric in deaf culture for readers who may be unfamiliar with deaf studies, religion, and/or rhetoric. Even deaf readers might be pleased to discover new facets of their own cultural history not covered in other texts.

The first chapter recounts the religious faith of those who founded and led the first schools for the deaf in America in the early nineteenth century. Morse contends that Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, a renowned figure in deaf culture, used religious rhetoric that "lent power to the view that the emerging deaf community...deserved an opportunity to be educated through sign language in order to know God" (31). She identifies religious rhetoric—including biblical references and metaphors—in speeches in which Gallaudet appealed to audiences of faith to support deaf schools. The first chapter as a whole serves as an accessible primer on religious influences on a community and on rhetorical moves communities might employ.

In the second chapter, Morse emphasizes the prevalent influence of Protestant ideology in deaf educators' pedagogies and arguments for the use of sign language. She underscores their belief that "sign language use and advocacy are intertwined with the Protestant perspective that sign language is a gift from God" (55). She situates the conflict between the oral method and the manual (or sign language) method of deaf education within the context of late nineteenth-century American scientific advancement. Readers may be intrigued by the cultural opposition between the Protestant theology motivating the arguments for sign language and the evolutionary theories driving the arguments for the oral method.

The third chapter explores the role of deaf school chapels and churches in preserving sign language and establishing a growing deaf community throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Morse succeeds in demonstrating that deaf “ministers’ religious rhetoric was effective only when delivered in sign language” (67-68). In sign language, facial expression, body language, and body positions are essential in delivering the message and conveying meaning and emotions. Morse’s extended rhetorical analysis clarifies the value placed by early deaf educators on sign language as a means of connecting deaf individuals to their spirituality. As she claims, deaf leaders empowered by their “sense of morality and loyalty to their cultural values, particularly the use of sign language” (84) would be the driving force behind deaf activism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Morse’s examination reaches its most striking moment when discussing advocacy in the contemporary deaf community in the fourth chapter. She highlights two examples of deaf activism that incorporated religious rhetoric to appeal to both deaf and hearing audiences. She first discusses the moving picture campaign that the NAD created in the 1910s with the aim of preserving sign language on film and promoting a moral deaf identity to mainstream audiences. Through descriptions of distinctive moments in the films, she shows how these signed films used religious motifs and arguments to assert the value of sign language. Morse then discusses Deaf West Theatre’s 2004-2005 musical featuring deaf and hearing actors and characters, *Big River: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. She carefully traces the narrative and indicates the rhetorical strategies used through the musical—such as its prominent use of sign language and religious themes—to inspire mainstream audiences. The connection between the two productions is powerful: deaf activists celebrate the value of their community and language through spiritual messages in mainstream media that appeal to various audiences.

As Morse points out, hearing individuals are often moved by watching sign language performances that celebrate the movement and positions of the body in conveying meaning. Her rhetorical analysis may inspire rhetoric scholars to consider how identity influences the way we communicate and the ways we design

information. How can we best design information in a way that appeals to audience members with various identities and that promotes a sense of community? How can instructors use the body and online technologies to design for accessibility in a way that allows us to connect with all students, both deaf and hearing? Morse's book challenges us to redesign the ways in which we convey messages to any community, and to rethink the ways our messages are interpreted by community members.