

THE EXOTICIZATION OF ASL INTERPRETATION OF HIP HOP

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In 2014, as videos of sign language interpreters at rap concerts began to circle the internet and go viral, late-night host Jimmy Kimmel invited three sign language interpreters and Wiz Khalifa onto his show for a sign language rap battle to Khalifa's song "Black and Yellow." The interpreters, Holly Maniatty, Joann Benfield, and Amber Galloway Gallego, went head-to-head, signing at an unimaginable speed to Khalifa's rap performance. The YouTube recording of the episode has been viewed by hundreds of thousands, and both the audience at the show and the audience around the world through YouTube loved it. Maniatty, Benfield, Gallego, and Khalifa are passionately into it, and the cheers of the crowd almost overpower the music. However, at a closer glance, this rap battle isn't as fun and innocuous as it seems. More specifically, Kimmel invites three white women to sign Black hip hop artist Khalifa's song to a non-Deaf audience. These pieces don't add up, and bring up various questions about race, ableism, and hip hop culture. Is the portrayal of the American Sign Language (ASL) interpretation as entertainment to a non-Deaf audience exoticizing the language of a marginalized community? What are the consequences and implications of three white women performing "Black and Yellow"? How does ableism intersect with racism in articles with descriptions that implicitly trivialize both hip hop and sign language?

More pointedly, all of these issues and red flags in this performance calls to question how these conversations surrounding Black ASL and the commodification of sign language interpretation illustrate problematic issues in Kimmel's video.

In order to understand the implications of the Kimmel performance, it's essential to establish a foundation surrounding ASL and African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Although sociolinguists defines language as a sociocultural construct that doesn't solely rely on a set of linguistic rules but rather represents a "way of

behaving, belonging, creating social identities and relationships” (Winford 24), both languages are often not publicly recognized as autonomous and equal to Standard English. AAVE has a deep history dated back hundreds of years, and the syntax, words, and structure of Black English can be traced specifically as a result of racism, discrimination, and segregation. Hip hop, a significant expression of Black culture, naturally heavily employs AAVE in its lyrics and music. As sociolinguist H. Samy Alim finds, rappers consciously divert from Standard English in order to better express themselves and connect with their and their audience’s identity (Alim). The use of AAVE in hip hop goes deeper than a simple linguistic choice; it’s a cultural one that reflects and incorporates the history, values, and aesthetics of hip hop and Black culture.

Standard ASL, while as equally grammatical and syntactical as spoken languages, is also heavily based on cultural and community norms. Although exaggerated facial expressions are sometimes looked down upon in spoken English, in ASL, facial expressions are a part of signs and essential in communication. In their paper “Facial Expressions, Emotions, and Sign Languages,” Eeva A. Elliott and Arthur M. Jacobs find that “the past 30 years of linguistic research on sign languages have revealed that there are facial expressions which are used together with manual signs and function as phonological features, morphemes, and syntactic/prosodic markers, for example brow raising marking conditional clauses” (Elliot 1). Facial expressions are quite nuanced in sign language and are depended on to convey various meanings. The linguistic role facial expressions play in Standard ASL is one to be noted, as we’ll see that it factors into the ways that the general public, and specifically Kimmel, treat sign language interpretation as a Cirque du Soleil performance.

With the importance of AAVE in the hip hop community and an understanding of Standard ASL established, I will now begin looking at how the two intersect through Black ASL. Published in *The Oxford Handbook of African American Language*, *Black ASL Project: An Overview* describes the history and linguistic features of Black ASL. In this article, Hill et al. examine how Black ASL developed due to the segregation and racial isolation of residential Deaf schools in the South after the Civil War. In investigating the linguistic characteristics of Black ASL, Hill et al note the ways that Black ASL

differs from Standard ASL in its handedness, location of the sign, size of the signing space, the use of repetition, lexical differences, and its incorporation of AAVE.

With respect to this paper, the signing space size, use of repetition, and inclusion of AAVE are the most relevant. It has been recognized that Black ASL uses a larger signing space, that is, signs extend beyond the standard signing space. Black signers use larger and more expressive signs. As The American Speech-Language Hearing Association identifies, these features of signing space, body movements, exaggerated facial expressions, and stylistic variances that differentiate Black ASL resonate strongly with the “high context/high verbal culture” of Black culture.

Repetition is another difference between Black ASL and Standard ASL that further illustrates the connection between Black ASL and AAVE. While repetition is an integral part of Standard ASL, in Black ASL, there is a greater emphasis on using repetition, especially when signing declarative statements. The frequent use of repetition is a feature that distinguishes Black ASL from Standard ASL and connects Black ASL to AAVE. Sign languages and their users interact with spoken languages and their respective communities, and therefore, sign languages naturally mix with and incorporate elements of the spoken languages. For example, Black ASL users are able to sign out popular Black AAVE phrases such as, “stop trippin” or “girl please.” Since Black signers are a part of the Black community, Black ASL has a noticeable connection to AAVE.

With the association between Black ASL and AAVE demonstrated, the question of why Khalifa’s song was not interpreted by Black ASL users in Kimmel’s video comes into question. Rap is known for its lyrical use of AAVE to express meaning. The expressive nature and extensive vocabulary of Black ASL allows it to be used as the perfect tool for the interpretation of rap. As Jeff Bowden, a Black interpreter, argues, “the essence of the music and/or the characters in plays must be adequately presented. This is often difficult for interpreters that are not familiar with the Black culture in the United States” (qtd. in Toliver-Smith and Gentry 563). Bowden further asserts the need for more Black ASL interpreters because a majority of interpreters, such as the white women in Kimmel’s rap battle, have a lack of experience with rap and its dialectal features. Due to the nature of ASL, interpreting is more than just

translating, rather, it is storytelling and thus requires an extensive knowledge and understanding of the music and culture.

With hip hop sign language, there is always a balance between fingerspelling words to incorporate all the lyrics, but also generally signing concepts because rap lyrics are so fast. In order to truly capture the soul of the music, it's necessary to take a step back and focus on how best to bring the song to life. As Vrinda Jagota writes of Chance the Rapper's Black Deaf interpreter:

In "No Problem," Chance says, "Ooh watch me come and put the hinges in their hands." When you sign that specifically, it doesn't make a lot of sense to say hinges in your hands, because you don't know what is being [referenced]. So when we interpret that, we interpret it as someone kicking in a door, picking up the door, and giving the door to that person like, "You're not closing my door of opportunity. You're not closing the door on me." (Jagota)

This example illustrates that absolute comprehension and connection to the music is imperative to successfully interpret hip hop music, making Black ASL interpreters the best fit for these performances. AAVE, including in-group-exclusive expressions like the "N-word," are a fundamental part of hip hop, and white women using standard ASL may be uncomfortable or incapable of interpreting them. A greater historical and cultural perspective of the deeper meaning of rap lyrics is necessary for their interpretation, and contrary to the Standard ASL interpretation used in Kimmel's video, Black ASL is the way to get there.

In addition to issues regarding the lack of Black ASL interpreters, Kimmel's video is problematic in its broader representation of ASL and deafness. For individuals in the hearing community who are unfamiliar with the Deaf community, the fast paced, expressive nature of ASL is captivating and visually pleasing. However, there is a difference between the respectful perception of ASL as a cool language and a degrading exoticization of it. Oftentimes, in pop culture and media, we fall on the latter end of this spectrum. At first glance, it's easy to praise and appreciate the greater exposure of American Sign Language in culture and news. For years and years,

a stigma surrounded deafness and sign language, with both often viewed as inferior or even illegitimate. Kristen Harmon, in the book *Disability and Equality Law*, writes of this historical stigmatization and points out how many believe “it is a hearing world” (Harmon 273). According to many, deafness is something to be fixed. Megan Jones further echoes this in her paper “Deafness as Culture: A Psychosocial Perspective” by establishing that “deafness as a disability has been the underlying premise of the education and rehabilitation of the deaf for decades” (Jones 51). As is the case with most disabilities, deafness and sign language was something not spoken of nor respected.

In 2014, all of this changed, and sign language began showing up on reputable news sites and social media. However, while sign language was beginning to be publicized, unfortunately, it wasn't necessarily being respected. *Vibe*, an American music and entertainment magazine focused predominantly on hip hop, described a sign language interpreter this way: “Interpreting for Kendrick Lamar made Amber Galloway Gallego a humping, tongue-wagging, viral sensation, delighting a world that knew nothing about her sign language craft” (Atkins). The offensive article goes on to describe Gallego's signing as the “downright dirtiest” and characterizes the signs as “sways,” “snarls,” and “grimaces,” adding that Gallego “puffs her lips, smacks her hips, and licks her fingertips.” In the same way that remarking on the sounds of various spoken languages is considered unacceptable, these derogatory descriptions of sign language cannot be ignored. In *Intersectionality in American Sign Language Hip Hop Interpreting*, published in *The Oxford Handbook of Hip Hop Music*, Elyse Marrero comments on this phenomenon, writing that, “hearing viewers who are totally ignorant of ASL could almost mistake what she [Gallego] is doing as an interpretive dance or pantomime, mistaking her interpretation as only a performance, rather than as a necessary form of accessibility for Deaf festigoers” (Marrero 2). As Marrero suggests, the *Vibe* article's description, and others like it, are a representation of the language legitimacy issues and lack of respect that sign language still faces in the present day. This article further exacerbates the major misconception that ASL is not a real language; instead, it is often perceived as a game of charades with gestures and exaggerated facial expressions. Furthermore, this mischaracterization continues

to occur, despite the fact that for decades linguists have researched and recognized sign languages as equally grammatically and linguistically complex as spoken languages. Rather, the conversation surrounding sign language interpretation of rap videos, such as the one seen in and Kimmel's video, is focused on a performative, entertainment view of sign language rather than its function as a mode of interpersonal expression and communication. While this stimulates greater interest in ASL, the marveling at the "cool" and "awesome" performance of sign language interpretation undermines ASL as a language and interpretation as a means of empowering a marginalized, underrepresented community.

The controversies about Black ASL and sign language interpretation performances can all be applied to an analysis of Kimmel's video. At the core, as the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf writes in its Standard Practice Paper on "Interpreting for the Performing Arts," "performance interpreting is not a vehicle for interpreters to become performers but rather a vehicle for the target audience members to enjoy the performance event" (2). Videos such as Kimmel's shines a light on the troublesome aspect of this focus on the "performance." Rather than using the space to send a different message by respectfully bringing attention to and creating a fun space for discussion on Deaf culture and community, Kimmel simply goes along with this offensive trend. Although Kimmel doesn't explicitly use derogatory language or condescension, it's important to look beyond what he does, and focus in on what he doesn't do. As a well-known late night host with media influence, Kimmel has the obligation to be more educated of issues surrounding sign language interpretation and aware of the message he conveys. The *Vibe* article illustrates general cultural prejudice and ablest discourses around signers, and therefore, Kimmel could have understood what's stake when a white able-bodied talk show host invites white women embodying Black hip hop swagger to be entertainment for a non-Deaf audience. Alternatively, with intentionality, Kimmel might have invited a Deaf school to cultivate a Deaf audience, or simply acknowledged that sign language interpretation is for the Deaf community, not the hearing community to enjoy. Furthermore, he could have invited a Black ASL interpreter instead; analogous to white audiences listening to hip hop and understanding Black English, this was a

missed opportunity to expose the white Deaf community to Black ASL. With two sidelined communities and languages interacting with one another, there is a great deal of potential for support and empowerment rather than exoticization and debasement.

Everyone loves Kimmel; other than the occasional Jimmy Fallon fan, almost everyone loves Kimmel and what he does for the entertainment industry. While it can be all fun and games, sometimes it's necessary to take a hard look at the "entertainment" and ask the difficult but pressing questions. Kimmel's sign language rap battle acts as a pop culture moment of the intersection of American Sign Language and hip hop in which these questions and theories arise. In Kimmel's video and others similar, controversies pop up surrounding white female interpreters of Black hip hop music, trivialization of both ASL and AAVE, and ableist characterization of the interpretation in the news. These issues often cloud the core purpose of the interaction between sign language and hip hop and all the good this relationship brings about. However, with further awareness and understanding, we can turn away from these derogatory messages and focus on cultivating a fun, appropriate intersection between these two beautiful languages.

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