Text of the spoken component of the presentation:

(slide 1) Writing Bodies, Blurring Boundaries:

SignWriting practices reflecting and producing new analyses of language

(slide 2) Hello everyone! My name is Erika Hoffmann-Dilloway. I am an associate professor of linguistic anthropology at Oberlin College. I've worked on two major research projects: first, studying Nepali Sign Language and deaf social networks in Nepal, and second, studying emerging transnational writing practices using SignWriting. Unsurprisingly, it's this latter project that I'm going to talk about today.

My research about SW has involved participating, observing, analyzing texts, and conducting interviews in several sites of SignWriting use – including the SignWriting listserv, Stefan Wohrmann's classroom in Germany*,* Maria Galea's lab in Malta, Valerie Sutton's home in the US, and the SW workshop in La Jolla last summer. So far, I've published two articles based on my research about SignWriting (Hoffmann-Dilloway 2011; 2013), to which you can find links on my presenter page. Also, I am – slowly! – working on a book on the topic.

 In my presentation for this symposium I'll be giving you a brief overview of the kinds of issues I'm interested in for this work in progress. I certainly welcome any feedback and would also love to work with more of you on this project – do get in touch if you'd be willing for me to visit you and allow me learn about how you use SW.

(slide 3) Usually when I give presentations on my research concerning SignWriting, it's to groups of anthropologists or linguists who know nothing – or next to

nothing – about the system. Consequently, I typically have to devote much of the presentation to orienting the audience with basic information about how SW developed and how it works. It's a fun change to be presenting to this audience, where it's fair to assume that we are all familiar with SW, even though we may use it in different ways and to different ends.

Today I'm going to reverse my usual approach - instead of giving other linguistic anthropologists background information about SW before talking about my specific research, I'm going to give you SignWriters some background information about linguistic anthropology. That is, I'm going talk a little bit about the kinds of questions linguistic anthropologists tend to be interested in, in general, to contextualize the particular questions I'm asking about SW practices.

So, what is linguistic anthropology? Linguistic anthropologists study how humans use language. Our approach to doing so, however, is different than some other fields such as formal linguistics. Rather than study decontextualized language structure or work to uncover a presumed a-social biological basis for language in humans – two major areas of focus for many types of linguists - we analyze how language is used in context and how language is influenced by, and influences, social and cultural practices (indeed, we don't tend to think language and culture can be treated as separable phenomena).

Because we are interested in actual language use in cultural context then, we can't just focus on what people might deem a priori as the linguistic components of an interaction – that would never be enough to account for how people do things and make meaning together. Rather, we need to analyze and account for the whole "communicative

ecology" of semiotic – or meaning bearing - forms people use in communicating with and interpreting others.

Additionally, many of us, myself included, are interested in what we call language ideologies, the "ubiquitous set of diverse beliefs" whether implicit or explicit, that are "used by speakers of all types as models for constructing linguistic evaluations and engaging in communicative activity" (Kroskrity 2004: 497). We are interested in how these beliefs affect and are affected by what people do with language. We don't just study the language ideologies of so called 'everyday" people – but also of scholars, including ourselves; we want to understand how cultural beliefs and social practices affect the assumptions scholars make when they study language, as well as how scholarly claims affect popular understandings of language.

(slide 4) Here's where the study of writing systems becomes relevant. The creation and use of any particular writing system is always an ideological process, by which some aspects of a communicative ecology are deemed vital for representation and some are not. In turn, the beliefs and assumptions that affect the creation of a writing system are often perpetuated by its use (Duranti 1997). For example, writing systems can reinforce users' awareness of some aspects of language and, particularly when a writing system is thought of as the best or ideal representation of that language, make it harder to be aware of other aspects (Silverstein 1981).

Modern linguistics emerged from the ability to objectify language through writing, in a context in which alphabetic writing was seen as the best and most developed form of writing. Consequently, aspects of human communicative ecologies not represented in alphabetic scripts – such as stress, intonation, pitch, volume, gesture, eye

gaze, facial expressions, even sign languages until relatively recently! - are often erased from scholarly understanding of what constitutes language or are relegated to paralinguistic status - that is, as elements that co-occur with and modify language use in context but which aren't themselves granted linguistic status (Farnell 1995; Tedlock 1983).

(slide 5) Linguistic anthropologists who want to better understand language use in context have to attend to such multimodal elements of communicative practices - but have struggled with how to analyze and represent these phenomena in their research through writing: essentially, we've had to contend with the ways the writing systems we use in conducting and sharing our research "constrains the range of phenomena we are likely to study and taints them with particular ideological implications" (Duranti 1997:125).

We have tried to push past these constraints by being creative in how we transcribe language use - using photos, drawings, and videos – here are a few examples from Haviland's (2007) research about Tzotzil and Tseltal co-speech gesture and Goodwin et al's (2012) study of embodied displays of emotion among pre-teens in the U.S. That's how I first discovered SW –I was struggling with ways to create detailed transcriptions of language use in context for my research with Nepali Sign Language without reducing them to English glosses (Hoffmann-Dilloway 2008). I started experimenting with SW for this purpose, joined the SW listserv for help, and soon became interested in the writing system as a topic of study as well as a research tool. In particular, I wanted to explore how the use of SignWriting can help us analyze aspects of language use that may be obscured by language ideologies that influenced and are

reinforced by dominant writing systems.

(slide 6) As you all know, SW was not originally intended as a system for representing language, but emerged from Valerie Sutton's dance notation and was only later developed into a writing system in cooperation with the Deaf Action Committee. As a result, I suggest that the development of SW was less influenced by prevailing ideologies about the nature of language and writing than other (I feel, less successful) attempts to develop writing systems for sign languages. For this reason, and because the system diverges so radically from many currently widespread writing systems – in being featural, visually iconic, and written from the expressive perspective – I argue that its use provides an opportunity for users notice - and potentially challenge and refigure – many taken for granted ideologies.

(slide 7) Today I want to talk briefly about the ways in which that SW practices provide a chance to think in new ways about three kinds of boundaries 1. between linguistic and paralinguistic phenomena 2. between communicative modalities 3. and between different social groups.

First: linguistic vs. paralinguistic:

The symbol inventory of SW did not arise from a phonemic analysis of a given sign language. Rather, it is flexible system that can encode a wide range of movements. This quality means that the system does not formally distinguish between phonetic and phonemic or linguistic and paralinguistic phenomena – it's up to writers to decide what to write. That decision-making process is, I suggest, a very productive and valuable part of the system, leading users to ask questions about language and writing they might not have otherwise.

(slide 8) Here's an example of how writers grapple with these decisions, drawn from an article I published in 2011 about the SW listserv: When creating a written version of her videotaped performance of an ASL translation of The Cat in the Hat, Cherie Wren wrote to the SW listserve to discuss her struggle to decide how to represent in writing her use of eye gaze. She circulated a video clip of a segment of the story on which she was working. As you might know, The Cat in the Hat tells the story of two children, the narrator and his sister Sally, and an exciting but reckless cat that visits their home. The sentence she circulated online describes the moment when the children first see the cat enter the house. In English the line reads, "We looked! Then we saw him step in on the mat!" I play this clip, from the SW website…

As you can see when watching the video clip, when Cherie Wren performed this sentence in ASL the fact that the "we" in the sentence refers to Sally and her brother is marked clearly when she performs the first sign, "LOOK", from the signing location allocated to those characters toward the signing space assigned to the door through which the Cat in the Hat would soon enter. Her slight body shift and eyegaze from the children's signing space toward the signing space of the door marks the fact that she, as the storyteller, is grammatically speaking in the voice of the child who narrates the experience. In the next sign, however, though the sign "WE-SAW" moves from the children's signing space toward the signing space of the door, Cherie Wren's eyegaze is focused on the audience/videocamera who was present when she performed the story. Her eyes remain focused on the audience during the third sign, "DOOR-OPENS", but return to mark the perspective of the characters in the fourth sign, in which they see the cat step onto the mat.

(slide 9) Regarding the shifts in eyegaze, she wrote to the list: "How much of it needs to be written?... I am looking at the door, and the cat coming in, and back to the audience several times in that very short sequence. This is something I struggle with on a regular basis. How much detail is too much, how much is necessary? I am trying to tease out the required grammatical bits…" The eyegaze used to reinforce spatial grammatical relations between characters and places or figures in the story is widely accepted by sign language linguists as a required non-manual grammatical marker (Lucas 1998; Liddell 2003). But, Wren's question poses, can the eyegaze toward the story's audience also be treated as "required" and "grammatical" "linguistic" and therefore necessarily written?

(slide 10) Ultimately, she decided to include in the written text the eyegaze toward those viewing the story. What might have informed that choice?

I would argue that the decision was likely influenced by the genre of the text: ASL story telling. While for most of its history ASL has not had a widely used written form, it has a rich corpus of face-to-face signed literature, including poetry, drama, and a range of storytelling genres. This tradition has often involved a great deal of awareness of the ways in which audience, as part of the performance context, affects the telling of a story. Ben Bahan argues, for example, that "the teller, the tale, and the audience" are inseparable in the ASL performance tradition. Further, status as a good storyteller, or "smooth signer", hinges an ability to attend and respond to the mutually constitutive nature of these three elements (Bahan 2008:28). This concern is not unique to ASL storytelling contexts; but is not always attended to as explicitly.

Attempts to record and circulate this body of literature, whether in print or via video-recording, have therefore sometimes been controversial, as removing the story from the face-to-face moment of telling would seem to preclude the author's ability to respond to the projected future audiences who read or watch the performance (Bahan 2008). Those attempting to preserve ASL literature have consequently not been as inclined to idealize the purported (if debatable) "context independence" of writing and other detachable forms. This concern may have influenced Cherie Wren's decision to retain eye gaze between storyteller and audience in the written version of the story, despite the fact that this eyegaze would not be treated by most linguists as an obligatory NMG, but more closely parallels the ways in which eyegaze is deployed to manage joint attention in spoken language contexts as well (Goodwin 1981).

Because SW is most frequently written and read from an expressive viewpoint, marking the relation between the teller and audience in this way helps those reading the text to simultaneously occupy the role of teller and addressee, allowing the three roles identified by Ben Bahan to co-exist even in a private reading. In addition, because the intended audience of the SW written version of the Cat in the Hat was deaf children, encoding these uses of eyegaze creates a text that can help teach young readers what's involved in being a good ASL storyteller by drawing their attention the tradition's focus on audience. The questions posed in the creation of the SW text, then opens up space to think about the eye gaze between teller and audience as potentially "necessary" and linguistic, not for ASL grammar as an abstract structure, but for ASL as performed in this context. (you can see how a script that raises these sorts of questions and allows this type

of encoding could be useful for linguistic anthropologists who likewise are interested in communicative ecologies in context).

(slide 11) Now I want to draw on an article I published in 2013 to talk about how SW practices create possibilities to think in different ways about boundaries between communicative modalities. Linguistic anthropologists have long been sensitive to the fact that boundaries between linguistic codes are not given but are ideologically and interactionally mediated (e.g., Gumperz 1958; Irvine and Gal 2000). Similarly, I've argued for attention to how likewise mediated perceptions of boundaries between communicative modalities affect and are affected by assessments of the boundaries between codes. Both popular and scholarly discussions comparing spoken and sign languages often explicitly center on modality in either accounting for differences or masking similarities between them. Spoken languages are typically framed as sound-based (e.g., Saussure 1906-1911/1986) in contrast with visual signed languages (e.g., Vediz 1912). However, this dichotomy erases the now well-established importance of visual modalities (such as co-speech gesture) in the performance of "spoken" languages (e.g., Gullberg 1998; Kendon 2008; Streeck et al. 2011), ignores the ways in which signers can engage sound as a semiotic resource (e.g., Friedman and Helmreich 2012), and downplays the overlapping kinesthetic processes through which each type of language is performed. Thus, as a recent body of literature has begun to make clear (e.g., Enfield 2004, 2009; Meier et al. 2002; Vermeerbergen et al. 2007), comparisons between signed and spoken languages that fail to take into account the multi-modal aspects of the ecologies through which they are performed and perceived miss relevant points of

similarity and difference between these languages – and thus make it more difficult to make claims about language in general.

A simplistic code-modality mapping is also likely an artifact of the ways in which both academic and popular ideologies about language broadly have been informed by alphabetic writing in particular. However, once again, the different perspective offered by SW provides an opportunity to think about linguistic modalities in alternative ways. Of particular relevance to this issue was the shift from receptive to expressive writing. Valerie Sutton recalls that when she was first presented with the idea by the DAC, she was concerned that, given that SW is often used to represent facial expression, a shift to expressive meant that, as she put it, "For goodness sakes, we're going to be looking through the back of a person's head. You can't see your own face! You can only feel it." To this objection a DAC member reportedly replied, "I see through my face, I feel my face." This change in perspective, then, led to a shift in SW from a script that records "what you see", focusing on the receptive visual modality of sign languages, to one that also records "what you do" – a script that visually indicates the kinetic movements involved in producing language.

(slide 12) This, in turn, opened up space to think about using SW to write the kinesthetic movements by which spoken languages are produced. Indeed, though most SignWriters use the system exclusively for writing sign languages, SignWriting has been adapted to write spoken languages as well in some sites, in particular Stefan Wöhrmann's classroom in Osnabrück, Germany. There, he offers his deaf students instruction in German Sign Language (DGS); German; German Sign Language literacy through SW; and German literacy through both German orthography *and* SW. The

pedagogical purpose of writing German this way is to help students become literate in German first by allowing them to become literate in the more accessible DGS, and then in German by using script that visually maps on the aspects of German modality that are most accessible to them –the ways that the vocal tract is physically manipulated to produce words. This can then be a bridge to becoming literate in traditional German orthography, which maps onto sound contrasts.

(slide 13) I had the opportunity to observe, participate in, and record classroom practices in Stefan's classroom during the summers of 2010 and 2012. Stefan is participating in this symposium, so of course I will leave it to him to describe in more detail his innovative classroom practices, including his particular adaptations to the SW system, such as *Mundbilder* and *Mundbildschrift*.

For my purposes, it suffices to note that writing both DGS and German using SW complicates a stark modality divide between the codes, while still encoding formal similarities and differences in the ways each code is performed, allowing the students to more productively compare, and increase their control of, both codes. In my 2013 article, I wrote in particular about how these practices provide insight on the question of the often vexed question of the linguistic status of mouthings in DGS, and though I don't have time to detail that work today, I refer you to the article if you're interested in this question.

 (slide 14) I mentioned at the outset of this talk that linguistic anthropologists see language and socio-cultural processes as mutually constitutive. So, finally, I want to think about the social effects of the circulation, comparison, and discussion of SW texts online. The SW listserv and other online platforms related to SW – like this symposium! – bring

together people using a wide range of languages, both spoken and signed, to post and comment on SW texts and issues about SW literacies, despite geographical constraints.

These online SW spaces might be termed "affinity spaces": sites where participants work to communicate about a shared interest or passion, despite great diversity in their linguistic repertoires, (Black 2008; Hayes and Gee 2010; Rymes 2014). Though access to participating on these sites is not evenly distributed – it is clear from even a brief review of the SW archives that English literacy greatly facilitates participation – affinity spaces are characterized by participants' work to both find communicative strategies shared in common and to treat each others' diverse backgrounds, knowledge, and repertoires as a resource rather than an inherent problem - such that expertise is not an individual but a distributed property (Rymes 2014:6).

In my articles (2011, 2013), I've argued that by bringing diverse signing publics into productive and sustained contact, the listserv facilitates both the production of a global signing network and the relational production of social differences, as participants become aware of and sometimes engage in debates about variation in their ways of both signing and using SignWriting. What I hope to explore further as I work on my book, is whether the production of relational difference through the listserv interaction is less a matter of "labeling and demarcating" essentializing or stereotyped groups (Rymes 2014:6), and more productive of awareness of how differences in language use emerge from biographical trajectories, which differ, but of which listserve participation is an overlapping component for participants.

Of course, what I've been describing applies to many emerging affinity spaces – such as transnational fan fiction discussion boards. In future research for my book I'd like

to explore how the particularities of SW use might affect these social processes. For example, how does the aforementioned freedom to represent phonetic aspects of signing (such as accent, or other regional or stylistic differences) affect this process? How might reading texts written from an expressive perspective affect the way participants affectively relate to one another?

I'm about out of time, so I'll stop here, again reminding you all to please get in touch if you'd like access to my existing articles or have any input about my future research trajectory. Thank you to Valerie, Adam, Stefan, Maria, listserv members, and everyone else who has worked to create or participate in this symposium!

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