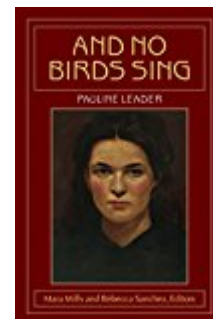


Pauline Leader. *And No Birds Sing*. Edited by Mara Mills and Rebecca Sanchez. Washington DC: Gallaudet University Press, 2016. 280 pp. \$34.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-56368-668-9.



Reviewed by Susan Burch

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The republication of Pauline Leader's 1931 memoir *And No Birds Sing* offers a fascinating combination of three interconnected projects. These have relevance not only to deaf and disability studies scholars but also to literary, cultural, transnational, and general US historians. A vigorously researched, extensive introduction by coeditor Mara Mills, titled "Underdog Bohemia: A Biography of Pauline Leader," lays out a broad historical context in which to understand the deaf poet's life and work. As Mills explains, Leader was born in New York City in 1908, but grew up in Vermont with Jewish immigrant parents who had fled eastern Europe in the late nineteenth century. As a young teenager, Leader became deaf after contracting meningitis. Already living at the margins of a small, rural New England town, Leader's isolation and sense of alienation deepened. Writing became a vital inward pathway for self-reflection and outward avenue for social commentary and artistic expression. As Mills deftly notes, Leader "was the consummate onlooker, not a sightseer but an eyewitness" (p. xi). Leader's poignant de-

scriptions of interlocking discrimination nested within antisemitism, audism, heteropatriarchy, capitalism, and xenophobia convey the human cost of material and social exclusion. In Mills's critique, Leader is both extraordinary and common, an astute non-signing deaf writer connected to leading cultural figures in 1920s Greenwich Village and a young person struggling to navigate crosscurrents of early twentieth-century American society. Her contentious relationship with her parents sheds light into the everyday life of immigrant families in the rural North. Family tensions ripple across Leader's account: arguments fueled by Leader's English-language proficiency, formal education, resistance to menial labor, friendships with men outside her household, religious beliefs, and understandings of being deaf. A spirited commitment to her art, gender nonconformity, and struggle with identity also define Leader's life story. Leader experienced what deaf studies scholar Brenda Brueggemann has called "betweenity," a constructed identity that shifts and moves, but always in relationship (to other people and things).

[1] Identified as, but not especially “with,” the Jewish and immigrant communities in Bennington, Vermont, and holding social beliefs that contrasted sharply with classmates, some neighbors, and her immediate kin, the poet often represented herself through contrast with the world around her. Her life story also exists outside the mainstream deaf cultural narrative that dominates most contemporary deaf cultural histories; Leader did not attend a deaf residential school, communicate in American Sign Language, associate with culturally deaf people, or otherwise belong to deaf cultural worlds. Her regular reflections on being deaf in relation to non-deaf society further underscores experiences of betweenity.

At seventeen, Leader broke free from southwestern Vermont, heading to New York City. Mills offers incisive observations of her subject’s time in Greenwich Village. She outlines Leader’s evolution as a poet, fascination with the Bohemian art scene, and struggle to find and maintain employment, avoiding overcomer narratives or similar stereotypes. Her memoir ends, according to Mills, shortly after her incarceration, in 1927, at a “Home for Girls” (a reformatory) under suspicion of being an unwed pregnant person. The biographical study extends beyond this time period, helpfully identifying the longer trajectory of Leader’s writing career, relationships, reflections on being deaf, return to Vermont, and family life. The wide-ranging materials informing this introduction, including family artifacts from Leader’s two sons, Daniel and Jonathan, provide an excellent resource for future research.

As the coeditors correctly note, Leader’s memoir is remarkable. Vividly depicted, at times achingly so, this work invites additional historical engagement. As a feminist scholar of deaf and disability history who is descended from Russian Jews and hardscrabble rural New Englanders (and who has spent considerable time in Vermont), I was swiftly drawn into the detailed worlds she inhabited. Others likely will be, too.

Leader poignantly captures complex entanglements of embodiment and struggle. Her mother’s ongoing efforts to financially sustain the family, for example, touch every corner of Leader’s childhood: “My mother snatching a few minutes from the market to iron clothes in the back room. Her hand, red, swollen from hard work, moved over the white expanse of sheet and pillow-case” (p. 21). Simultaneously self-conscious, vulnerable, and feisty, the memoirist details a confluence of external and internal forces that compounded her sense of isolation. As just one illustration demonstrates: “I have bad habits. The perpetual sucking in of the lip, a wrinkling of the nose, a jerking of the shoulders, these were only a few of the bad habits, and they came as regularly as the seasons.... They were visitations of the devil against which I was helpless. I was whipped to within an inch of my life, threatened with being ‘sent away,’ but with no success. I would not, because I could not, stop doing ‘those things.’ But no one understood that I could not help myself” (p. 24). This passage takes on additional haunting meanings when she later describes her time incarcerated at the reformatory, the threat of being “sent away” materially realized.

Among the most striking features of Leader’s memoir are her descriptions of being deaf. Having spent her childhood as a non-deaf person with no exposure to culturally deaf people, Leader not surprisingly struggled to make sense of her changed bodymind. “The gnome”—Leader’s metaphor for the source of her becoming deaf and being deaf—conveys trauma, loss, and threat of deepening harm and isolation. It haunts her, leers at her, holds her captive. At the same time, its supernatural qualities seem to draw wonderment, echoing fairytales in literary forests. Gnomeland is inhabited by a king and this realm bustles with the activity of other gnomes. The king suggests to Leader that she entered his room voluntarily, and to let her return to hers, like Persephone, requires sacrifice: she must return to her world with one of the gnomes. She must re-

turn to the non-deaf world as a deaf person. Passages describe how she transversed between her previous and current life, between reality and fantasy, at times throttled by the grief, misfitting, and sense of insurmountable loss. Drawing on memory and imagination, she writes, “I opened my eyes and saw people around me. I made out voices around me. And I listened more closely. There were no voices. The voices I had heard a second before I had heard only in my memory. The people around me moved without sound, except what sound my imagination supplied. I shut my eyes tight, to close my imagination away, to close the *within* sound I strained my ears to hear the sounds from *without*, the sounds the people made around me. Their mouths were opening and shutting without sound, like the mouths of fish” (p. 57).

Meeting deaf people who communicated in sign language also repulsed her, the signing bodies reflecting a capitulation to the gnome. “To make me really deaf. That seems to me from the beginning to be the battle between myself. I wanted to go out into the world, by which I meant to go out into the streets as I had done before—before the gnome. The rift between myself and my mother came again. While I have been sick, I had been dependent, but now I was as well as ever again—except for the gnome” (p. 71). Literally detained in her family’s home, denied opportunities to explore and to express her individuality, Leader blamed both the gnome (being deaf) and others’ prejudice against her as deaf for the unfair exile she experienced. Cumulatively, this memoir offers a poignant depiction of the damaging power of ableism and audism, among other oppressive systems. Its insistent call for recognition reminds us in deaf and disability studies, too, of the need for more expansive understandings of lived experiences.

The book closes with Rebecca Sanchez’s excellent afterword, which extends Leader’s memoir and builds on Mills’s introduction. For Sanchez,

the modernist memoir challenges, in form, language, and identity itself, standard depictions of disability embodiment. Astute insights abound in this critique, all pointing to the capacious meanings of “deaf” and Leader’s artistic prowess. The poet’s contradictory representation of deafness as essential and as constructed complicates her identity as multiply marginal, and deaf as both a threat to her individuality and critical to her creative process and sense of self. These layered, sometimes contradictory experiences defy scholarly and social binaries of deaf/hearing (non-deaf). Sanchez adroitly unpacks this point, demonstrating shifting frameworks within disability studies and situating Leader’s memoir historically and theoretically within them. As she notes, “critically, the memoir also enacts a form of thinking about disability through the juxtaposition of competing narratives that gesture toward the complex ways disabled individuals (indeed, all individuals) perceive their bodies and identities.” Sanchez continues, “Leader does not attempt to resolve the logical inconsistencies in the description of her deafness (or her Jewishness, or her relationship with her parents). These relationships are all depicted as context and time dependent, moving away from the idea of disability as singular and stable, either as biological fact or identity category, and capturing something about the flux and flow of inhabiting an intersectional identity” (p. 222).

Sanchez concludes her critique of Leader’s memoir by centering on the theme of assimilation and resistance. Placing Leader’s life story within broader cultural, political, and material historical forces effectively reveals violent and sometimes seductive forces to conform. Spotlighting early twentieth-century eugenic efforts to “Americanize” immigrants, suppress American Sign Language, and institutionalize “wayward girls,” Sanchez clarifies the crosscurrents Leader sought to navigate throughout her lifetime. She compellingly argues that Leader’s memoir remains es-

pecially relevant today in large part because it refuses to conform to a singular story.

This work may be a useful addition to the reading of multiple audiences, including undergraduate and graduate classes in deaf and disability history, critical ethnic and gender studies, literary studies, and broad US history courses.

Note

[1]. Brenda Brueggemann, "Articulating Betweenity: Literacy, Language, Identity, and Technology in the Deaf/Hard-of-Hearing Collection," *Stories That Speak to Us: Exhibits from the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives*, ed. H. Lewis Ulman, Scott Lloyd DeWitt, and Cynthia L. Selfe (Logan, UT: Computers and Composition Digital Press, 2012), <http://ccdigitalpress.org/stories/brueggemann.html>.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-disability>

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