

**CONTEXTUALIZING WHAT IT MEANS TO BE DEAF:
Foundations, Education & Activism**

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INTRODUCTION

Opening a piece of writing with a definition can seem uninspired or expected. However, this time, it may be an interesting exception. “Deaf,” according to Merriam-Webster Dictionary is an adjective: “having total or partial hearing loss.”¹ It seems simple enough, and to many it is their primary understanding of Deafness. That being said, if you were to ask someone in the Deaf community to define Deafness, their answer would likely be different. In the United States, many Deaf people consider themselves part of their own, rich culture. Deaf culture consists of a shared language, experience and history that are passed from generation to generation. To people in the Deaf community, the definition offered by Merriam-Webster defines what is known as “lowercase d deaf.” However, there is also “uppercase D Deaf,” which refers to people who are culturally Deaf. In this work I will utilize this convention liberally. But that also means I will be making a choice as to which use of the word fits which use. As this thesis will detail, it’s sometimes difficult to assign this title. Doing so assigns a sense of identity to people and movements, which also works against what I am doing: adding layers of complexity and appreciation to the diverse set of people and factors that interacted with Deaf culture in the United States.

When the Mind Hears, published by Harlan Lane in 1984, details the foundations of Deaf culture in the United States. In his forward, Lane states that “hearing loss of most members of the signing community has proven disastrous for them because it has played into the hands of those who seek to dispose of social problems by medicalizing them.”² This assertion frames the rest of his publication. He details the life of Laurent Clerc and the work he did in the United States and abroad (more on this later). The book ends with the rise of oralism in the United

¹ “Definition of DEAF,” accessed November 8, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Deaf>.

² Harlan Lane, *When the Mind Hears* (New York, New York: Random House, Inc., 1984), XIII.

States, describing that the negative impacts of the movement have transcended time and last to this day.³ Although Lane is a psychologist, he often uses a historical approach when analyzing and contextualizing the Deaf community.

Lane places a majority of his focus on the individual in *When the Mind Hears*. In 1999, Lane published *The Mask of Benevolence*, which has a broader cultural focus. *The Mask of Benevolence* describes how “in the hearing stereotype, Deafness is the lack of something, not the presence of anything. Silence is emptiness.”⁴ In this publication, Lane details the ways in which hearing people have oppressed the Deaf community. Much of his argument stems from hearing people’s infatuation of labeling Deafness as defectiveness, a view juxtaposed to that of the Deaf community. As the forward of *When the Mind Hears* also notes, the Deaf community’s inability to hear has caused a great deal of strife and oppression in the Deaf community. To the hearing world, Deafness is an issue to be remedied, which has led to historical and contemporary forms of oppression.

Harlan Lane, as both an advocate and an academic, has had a tremendous impact on the Deaf community. I do not disagree with Lane’s work, instead I want to build on it. In both seminal works, Lane goes to great length to detail the foundations of the Deaf community, the impacts of oralism and how the Deaf and hearing world perceive their inability to hear. In three chapters, I intend to add further layers of complexity to what it means to be Deaf, specifically looking at its interactions with a more diverse set of actors, ideas and policy. However, I will also provide background and context, which are needed to join this conversation and understand the complexity of the issue. Ideas about what it means to be Deaf have long been debated, which I

³ Ibid, 399.

⁴ Harlan Lane, *The Mask of Benevolence* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1992), 7.

argue is part of deaf heritage, and is more revealing than having a neat definition of that it means to be Deaf in the United States.

In *Words Made Flesh: Nineteenth Century Deaf Education and the Growth of Deaf Culture*, Rebecca Edwards notes that the “residential school created a community that many students immediately recognized as their own.”⁵ Many Deaf people felt alone in the world, as they were born into hearing families and lacked Deaf peers, or becoming Deaf at a young age due to childhood disease, which was isolating and intimidating. These schools made the Deaf experience a communal experience and provided a means of manual communication, which many students formerly lacked. Moreover, they provide insight into how individual Deaf student experiences turned into a shared history.

In time, and as Edwards points out, “deaf people increasingly grew to view the handicap of deafness as a social construction.”⁶ This is an important point as most Deaf people today do not see Deafness as a disability; that their inability to hear does not constitute a disability. This theme is central to understanding Deaf culture. People in the Deaf community do not see themselves as disabled. Deafness does not limit their ability to learn, communicate or participate in society: the only thing they cannot do is hear. This understanding, inspired first by residential schools, was and still is common in the Deaf community. However, elucidating that message to the broader hearing American society was hard, and a battle they still are fighting.

The first chapter, in three sections, goes into greater detail about the rise of Deaf culture in the United States. First, it will discuss how Deaf residential schools came to be in the United States, highlighting the work pioneered by Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, Mason Cosgwell and

⁵ *Words Made Flesh: Nineteenth-Century Deaf Education and the Growth of Deaf Culture*, The History of Disability (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 53.

⁶ *Ibid*, 84.

Laurent Clerc. Second, it will highlight how this newly formed Deaf community inspired various organizations and agencies that advocated for the Deaf, creating new spaces for them. Finally, it will detail the ban of manualism and growth of oralism in the classroom. Each of these three sections will also attempt to complicate the classically understood roots of Deaf culture, by noting the various other social groups that existed and interacted with the Deaf community at this early stage.



Figure 1. A statue of Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet and Alice Cogswell on the Gallaudet University campus. (“Gallaudet, Thomas Hopkins,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Edward-Miner-Gallaudet#/media/1/224249/129435>)

The oral method used speech and lip reading exclusively, going against the manual method utilized by early residential schools. Oralists believed that manual signed languages

halted speech and articulation development. Without the ability to speak and read lips, oralists feared that an isolated Deaf class would form. Using preliminary genetic investigations, often only showing only a causal link, people like Alexander Graham Bell sought to reform Deaf education. The oral method would then be used to dismantle the Deaf community and integrate Deaf people into hearing society. They focused on preserving residual speech from people who went deaf during childhood, which was even more difficult. This same method was also applied to students who were born Deaf. The reign of oral education in the United States is now known known as the dark ages of Deaf education.⁷

Alexander Graham Bell's legacy, specifically as it pertains to his involvement in the Deaf community, is extremely complex. When people hear the name Alexander Graham Bell, they likely only think of the telephone. However, Bell was one of the biggest proponents of the oral method of the Deaf in the United States. In addition to his role as a Deaf education "expert," Bell was also a scientist by practice, breeding and researching sheep genetics and applying those understanding to his study of the Deaf.⁸

The first school in the United States that used the oral method was the Clarke School founded in 1867. Samuel Gridley Howe used his position on the Board of State Charities in Massachusetts to coax the state into founding an oral-based school for the education of the Deaf. Though there was strong debate and pushback by those who favored manualism, the institution was eventually founded, funded by John Clarke, and lead by Gardiner Green Hubbard. Howe's main goal was to "'fashion [the Deaf] to common social influences, and to check the tendency

⁷ "Oral Education as Emancipation," Gallaudet University, accessed November 8, 2022, <https://gallaudet.edu/museum/exhibits/history-through-Deaf-eyes/language-and-identity/oral-education-as-emancipation/>.

⁸ "The Influence of Alexander Graham Bell," *Gallaudet University* (blog), accessed November 8, 2022, <https://gallaudet.edu/museum/exhibits/history-through-Deaf-eyes/language-and-identity/the-influence-of-alexander-graham-bell/>.

toward isolation and to intensification of the peculiarities which grow out of their infirmity.”⁹

Essentially, he shared Bell’s goal of assimilating the Deaf into the hearing world. Howe saw the disuse of manualism as the means to do so. His school opened, and it was not long after that oralism dominated the Deaf educational sphere.

Brian Greenwald and John Vickrey Van Cleve, two scholars from Gallaudet University, drew some important conclusions about Bell’s role in the Deaf community during this time. They bring together two common themes: “a nascent deaf community, threaded by residential schools and the use of a shared visual language... [and] the American eugenics movement, determined to eliminate perceived social problems through reproductive restrictions.”¹⁰ They use these two social developments (the nascent Deaf community and eugenics) to analyze Bell’s actions against the Deaf community. They determine that “Bell’s acceptance of the common view of deafness as a tragedy, and as a ‘defect’ that a progressive society ought to remedy, has influenced historical memory and overshadowed his actual words and deeds.”¹¹

To many in the Deaf community, Bell stands as an antithesis to their culture and way of life. So, what do the authors mean when they talk about his historical memory? Greenwald and Van Cleve’s work focused on Bell’s role in the eugenics movement. More specifically, the imposed laws that restricted Deaf-Deaf intermarriage and procreation, which Bell opposed. Even in Bell’s *Memoir Upon the Formation of a Deaf Variety of the Human Race*, he did not propose any restriction upon marriage or procreation, instead he focused on educational reforms. Bell went as far to condemn marriage restrictions, and even attempted to distance himself from any

⁹ Edwards, *Words Made Flesh*, 185.

¹⁰ Brian H. Greenwald and John Vickrey Van Cleve, “A Deaf Variety of the Human Race: Historical Memory, Alexander Graham Bell, And Eugenics,” *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 14, no. 1 (January 2015): 28, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781414000528>.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 43.

official relation with eugenics.¹² However, Bell's research and work was used to support negative eugenics and intermarriage restrictions. This, in addition to his strict opposition of signed education and residential schools, has left him with a very poor reputation in the Deaf community. Although Bell was not the steward of negative eugenics on the Deaf community, his work fueled the fire and had lasting consequences.

In summary, the second chapter will detail one of the most dramatic setbacks the Deaf community has ever faced in the United States: oralism. The first of three section details the start of oralism in the United States. Second, the chapter will discuss Alexander Graham Bell's authority. It will detail both his authority in education and his authority in science of Deaf genetics, contextualizing this within the broader Eugenics movement of the time. The third section will discuss Bell's legacy and the lasting impact that oralism has had in the United States.

Come the late twentieth century, Deaf people were still not immune from the many struggles they faced historically. Primary, Deaf people in the United States faced issues of accessibility and they lacked adequate representation. The notion widely perpetrated during the oralist movement that Deafness was something that needed to be fixed was still very much an issue. However, the activism and context of the late twentieth century gave them greater authority to make decisions about their lives and inform others about their stance and beliefs.

The third chapter of this thesis will analyze the continuities and changes that happened within the Deaf community at this time. Each of the chapter's three section will detail how the complexity of the time lead to a complex (non)resolution. First, it will detail a shift in policy that led to the end of the oral methods widespread use. Detailing how Deaf culture and language gained legitimacy in academic communities and will note some of the monumental scholarly

¹² Ibid, 38.

works that created a foundation for many forms of Deaf studies. Second, it will detail the Deaf President Now movement, the most substantial Deaf social movement of the late twentieth century. Finally, it will contextualize the Deaf President Now movement in terms of the disability rights movement.

Wholistically, this thesis will attempt to join the conversation of what it means to be Deaf in the United States. In detail, it will look at the various sets of people and circumstances that interacted with the Deaf community in the United States at different moments in history. Moreover, it will reaffirm existing understanding of what it means, and has meant, to be Deaf. Unlike, Merriam-Webster Dictionary, defining what it means to be “capitol D Deaf” in the United States is more fluid than can be simply written. Like many identities, a shared set of culture and history has led to an adapting sense of what it means to belong or identify with a community throughout time.

CHAPTER ONE THE FOUNDATIONS OF DEAF CULTURE

I. Introduction to Manualism and the Foundations of Deaf Culture

The formation of a Deaf culture in the United States paralleled the formation and evolution of a manual signed language. American Sign Language is a foundation point of Deaf culture in the United States, even prior to its classification as a true language by William Stokoe in 1960. Deaf people's shared language and culture sets them apart from many other activist and cultural groups in the United States. As unique as Deaf Culture is, however, it is important to note that its fruition did not happen independent of other movements in the United States in the late nineteenth century. Many scholars attempt to delineate the distinctness of Deaf culture and Deaf activism from other movements: attempting to contextualize the movement in time, while ignoring the immense importance of collateral movements in actually defining what Deaf activism and culture is. Examining the role of religion and other wider definitions of what it meant to be American are also key to contextualizing Deaf existence in the nineteenth and twentieth century. That is, how their classification led to a sense of isolation that was seen as a threat to American values. This also stripped their ability to enact change without the support of hearing people in positions of power, many of whom were slowly becoming more and more nervous about the formation of Deaf community and culture.

The formation of Deaf culture in the United States coincided with the formation of Deaf residential schools, which acted as the crucible for the formation of American Sign Language. The success of the first residential school, the American School for the Deaf, paved the way for numerous other sign-based institutions. Access to these schools meant access to other Deaf people and a manual, signed language. These schools were integral to building a very firm sense of community among the Deaf who attended. However, despite the success of manual

institutions in the early nineteenth century, the struggle for recognition and validity of Deaf existence continued to be a hard-fought battle. People looked down upon Deafness and feared its results (mainly its distinct culture). Ideas about religious condemnation and social ostracization continued to plague the credentials of the Deaf and their supporters. In response, the Deaf organized to consolidate their message and spread awareness. By 1880, the Deaf community faced one of their hardest battles: oralism. But to understand the Deaf response to oralism, there must be an established understanding of the cultural foundations the Deaf had in the nineteenth century.

The first instructor of the Deaf in the United States was Laurent Clerc. He was born into a privileged family in the south of France where he attended Institut National des Jeune Sourds-Muets, the first public school for the Deaf in the world. Though an exceptional student, part of his education was in speaking. As the story goes, he struggled to verbalize certain syllables, and once was struck by an assistant instructor, causing him to bite his tongue. Later in his life he became a Deaf educator and advocate for the exclusive use of sign in the instruction and education of the Deaf.¹³ He went on to build his career in Europe as an educator and came to the United States with Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet in 1816.

Gallaudet first became interested in Deaf education when he noticed Mason Cogswell's daughter was having trouble communicating and socializing after she went deaf at a very early age from an illness. At the time, there was no public means or structure for educating the Deaf. Mason Goswell, as governor of Connecticut, helped facilitate Gallaudet's travel to France in 1815. So, Gallaudet traveled to Europe to bring back a structure or framework that would work

¹³ Canlas, "Laurent Clerc: Apostle to the Deaf People of the New World," Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center, accessed November 8, 2022, <https://clerccenter.gallaudet.edu/national-resources/info/info-to-go/Deaf-culture/laurent-clerc.html>.

in the United States. While there, he was introduced and tutored in sign by Laurent Clerc. Gallaudet, inspired by the craft and ability of Clerc, invited him back to the United States to build the foundation of Deaf instruction in the United States.¹⁴

The first state-sponsored school for the Deaf in the United States was then established on April 15, 1817 by Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet and Laurent Clerc with assistance and support from Mason Gogswell. Together they were able to build a foundation for the future of Deaf manualist instruction. Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet was then able to encourage legislatures across the east coast of the United States to establish other Deaf residential schools. According to his son Edward Miner Gallaudet, it was not his mission, but Gods to spread manual education in the United States: “‘But as it is written, to whom he was not spoken of, they shall see; and they that have not heard, shall understand.’ Romans xv: 21.”¹⁵ To Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, this was not only a personal mission but a divine mission. He believed that he was fulfilling Gods plan by giving Deaf people in the United States access to manual education.

Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet was not alone in his sentiments. Religion played a critical role in United States during the early nineteenth century. Alice Cogswell, the inspiration behind the school in Hartford, wrote to Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet that she was worried about her salvation, and inability to read the Bible.

Hartford, April 1816
My dear Sir;

I am very much afraid God thinks me very wicked, and bad heart. I am not good heart, I wish good heart so very want not I am feeling bad very sorry. I sometimes day little prayed morning...I think so very wicked...God made me deaf and dumb...perhaps me very bad...perhaps blind and deaf and dumb.

I hope not. God, Jesus Christ know best... God made me feaf and dumb. I was a little Child 2 year old Spotted fever...

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Edward Miner Gallaudet, *Life of Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1888), 22.

I dont know reading Holy Bible. I am very sorry. I wih and very want read I know and did not.

Mrs. Terry has got a very little baby name Eleanor Terry very sweet and very beautiful week old face very handsome, I see many. Mrs. Hudson has got a very little baby name Henry W. Hudson I see not. I write letter to Mr. Dwight he has grown a man very good live in New Haven...

*Your affectionately friend
Alice Cogswell¹⁶*

Manual education allowed Deaf people to extend their relationship with God, which is why so many Deaf individuals rallied around it. Although not the exclusive reason, religion gave Deaf individuals in the United States a cause worth fighting for. In 1849, *The American Annals of the Deaf* published a poem by an anonymous author, titled “Plead for the Dumb.” *The American Annals of the Deaf* is a peer-reviewed academic journal that deals with the Deaf condition and Deaf instruction in the United States. The introduction to the journal notes the urgency “for the best minds among instructors of the deaf and dumb to come together; to destroy each other’s errors, and quicken their diligent search” for a better means of education for the Deaf.¹⁷ The poem then goes on to explain the way in which the Deaf should be pitied, as they cannot reach salvation. Thus, not only was education about standard curriculum, but Deaf people’s ability to interact with Christianity.

Alice Cogswell’s concern regarding her ability to read the bible was not unique to her. Other people, including the author of the poem in the *Annals of the Deaf* had consistent fears about how uneducated Deaf individuals couldn’t interact with God. Not only could they not hear

¹⁶ Alice Cogswell, “Alice Cogswell – ASD Pioneers,” accessed February 6, 2023, <https://asdpioneers.com/people/alice-cogswell/>.

¹⁷ “Plead for the Dumb,” *American Annals for the Deaf and Dumb* Volume 2 (1849): 139–41.

sermons on Sunday, but they could not read the Bible. Similar sentiments regarding salvation also surrounded blind people in the United States during the nineteenth century. Some believed that blind children inherited “the stain of Adam’s sin, and [they] were predestined by God to eternal punishment.”¹⁸ This sense of eternal condemnation led to a general sense of hopelessness when it came to the lives of Deaf and blind individuals. However, as Ernest Freberg details, that sentiment started to change as more Deaf and blind children became educated.¹⁹ The similarities between how Deaf and blind children were categorized adds an additional facet of interaction between Deaf and blind education. Moreover, it helps contextualize the religious sentiments of the time in which Deaf and blind education came to fruition in.

During this period, many institutions that sought to educate the Deaf also served the blind. In 1829, the Massachusetts State Legislature approved the founding of a school for the blind. Led by Samuel Gridley Howe, the institutions framework served as a guide to successive schools opening across the east coast of the United States at the time. Howe is also considered the first successful instructor of a student who is both Deaf and blind. The success of this student, Laura Bridgman, was proof that even students who were condemned as unteachable “idiots,” could be educated.²⁰ This coincided with opening of the Hartford School for the Deaf in April of 1817. Thus, both Deaf and blind education stimulated one another.

One area of contention when it comes to historical contextualization of Deaf culture in terms of education, is the way in which Deaf education and blind education interacted. Many asserting Deaf educations distinct positioning in this context. Instead, it is more productive to understand that Deaf and blind schools integrated rise is crucial to the foundations of Deaf

¹⁸ Ernest Freeberg, “The Meaning of Blindness in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* no. 110 (2000): 126.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 122.

²⁰ Brian H Nordstrom, “The History of the Education of the Blind and Deaf,” 1986, 7.

culture in the United States. Both stimulated one another, and supported the idea that the Deaf and blind could be educated. The shared sense of hope brought to those lucky enough to be educated happened at the same time, not independently. One way that they differ though, is that Deaf people established a Deaf culture in residential schools that differed from the sense of community blind students may have felt. Signed language was the commonality among Deaf students that helped them to build a distinct culture.

Deaf culture was not rooted in religion, rather a culmination of shared experiences which include religious contextualization. In an 1818 Address to the Connecticut legislature and Governor, Laurent Clerc spoke on the progress of the school at Hartford after one year. In the address, Clerc echoed the importance of religion in educating the Deaf at the Hartford. Moreover, he commented on their salvation, saying that he believed their “Deafness precedes from an act of providence... from the will of God.”²¹ At a time where religion was so central to life in the United States, and a time when many believed the Deaf couldn’t reach salvation, Clerc rebutted. These sentiments show an early sense of unity, not only highlighting the importance of education, but their validity as people, going as far as to “thank God for having made [them] deaf.”²² Even one year after the founding of the American School for the Deaf, a sense of community and belonging being built, using Clerc’s religious sentiments as an example. Laurent Clerc was incredibly well respected, and for him to address the legislature and governor and pronounce pride for his Deafness showed the strength and unity that was already forming amongst Deaf individuals.

²¹ Laurent Clerc, “An Address, Written by Mr. Clerc: And Read by His Request at a Public Examination of the Pupils in the Connecticut Asylum before the Governour and Both Houses of the Legislature, 28th May, 1818,” 1818, 12.

²² Ibid, 12.

Religion, and people's perception of their ability to practice was only one part of their shared experience. Another example is the creation of name signs, which began in the early nineteenth century when students would come to residential school. "Name signs were often students' first introduction to signing," and subsequently their first exposure to Deaf community.²³ Name signs are a small part of Deaf culture, but represent the sense of community and belonging students felt in Deaf residential schools. Moreover, poetry, Deaf jokes and stories also originated in these residential schools. These culturally significant features are missing from institutions and groups of blind individuals as they lack the cultural foundations that the Deaf community was gaining. In 1840, an aunt writes to an unknown student at the American School for the Deaf that she's "glad to hear [she is] happy in [her] new set education."²⁴ Moreover, in 1819, Alice Cogswell notes that the "providence has good blessings to [them] for a new asylum."²⁵ These are not lone examples, rather a very small sect representing positive experiences shared by a majority of students. Overall, students had a very positive perception of the American School for the Deaf and felt as though they belonged. Moreover, many of these students, people like Alice Cogswell, would go on to continue to support Deaf manual education and its expansion.²⁶

Helen Keller is a cultural icon in the United States and may be the first person that comes to mind when thinking about Deaf and blind education. Although her life postdates the beginning of Deaf and blind education in the United States, and coincides with the reign of oralism (she

²³ "A Language Shared by Hand and Heart: Laurent Clerc Brings Sign Language from Paris - Formation of a Community," *Gallaudet University* (blog), accessed February 6, 2023, <https://gallaudet.edu/museum/exhibits/history-through-Deaf-eyes/formation-of-a-community/a-language-shared-by-hand-and-heart-laurent-clerc-brings-sign-language-from-paris/>.

²⁴ Unknown to unknown on March 12, 1850, box 1, folder 1 Rowe-Curtis Family Papers, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI.

²⁵ "American School for the Deaf Annual Report," 1820.

²⁶ Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopedia. "Deafness." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, December 27, 2022. <https://www.britannica.com/science/Deafness>.

was born on June 27, 1880), a discussion of her is warranted. Kim Nielson, a historian who specializes in disabilities studies, notes that the “virginal... peace-loving international figure,” we know is not an accurate historical portrayal.²⁷ Keller serves as the keystone example of overcoming adversity, but that still required a certain public perception. Ironically, she “sought and worked hard to attain physical *normality*,” despite her identity being entirely wrapped up in her disability.²⁸ First, her attitude toward her image was as problematic as it was understandable. A common theme in the history of the Deaf in the United States is the greater cultural desire for assimilation. She gained status as an icon not only because she overcame immense obstacles, but because people saw her as someone who could fit in, despite the challenge’s she faced. Moreover, it was understood that her brand would affect donations to the American Foundation for the Blind. Second, and building off the prior thought, her perceived purity juxtaposes the early sentiments that Deaf and blind people were condemned, or damaged: acting as a rebuttal to early religious sentiments. Moreover, the way that sentiment dehumanizes her is exactly what people in the deaf community had been fighting against. Keller’s one note historical memory is false, and understanding why it is false highlights how the perception of differentness and the value of conformity were understood across time.

The foundations of Deaf (and blind) education in the United States were strong. With the support and inspiration of the Cogswell family, Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet and Laurent Clerc established the first permanent school for the Deaf in the United States using the manual education method. The manual method used signs exclusively for the education of the Deaf, and subsequently allowed the formation of American Sign Language and Deaf culture. Students responded positively to the method of instruction and felt as though they could participate in

²⁷ Kim Nielson, *The Radical Lives of Helen Keller* (New York, New York: New York University Press, 2004), 126.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 133.

more aspects of life. The foundation of Deaf culture was built on the back of Deaf residential schools, like the one at Hartford. These schools are key to understanding Deaf autonomy, belonging and self-worth. These aspects of Deaf existence explain their historic drive and motivation towards recognition and validity.

II. The Roots of Deaf Advocacy

In 1847, *The American Annals of the Deaf and Dumb* (now *The American Annals of the Deaf*) published their first volume from the American School for the Deaf in Hartford, Connecticut. The publication was an academic peer reviewed journal that focused on Deaf experience and Deaf education in the United States.²⁹ The first published volume included an introduction by Luzerne Ray which stated that they wanted to bring a journal like this to the United States to shed light upon the condition of the Deaf in the United States.

Our enterprise is one of a novel character, and its success or failure can only be determined by actual result. But if, in consequence of this undertaking, a more general interest should be excited in behalf of that unfortunate class of persons to whose moral and intellectual welfare our lives and the talents we possess are all devoted; if, in any manner whatever, direct or indirect, the thousands of the Deaf and dumb in this country, or any considerable portion of them, receive benefit from the publication of this work, the great object at which we are aiming will be accomplished, and we shall feel that our labors have not been altogether in vain.³⁰

The journal represented a major step toward validating Deaf voices. The first volume included the works of people such Thomas Gallaudet and Laurent Clerc. As an academic journal, however, other voices were also featured, and the journal was not explicitly a proponent of American Sign Language or Deaf culture. For example, even Ray's introduction refers to the Deaf as an "unfortunate class of people." But still, *The American Annals of the Deaf and Dumb*

²⁹ "American Annals of the Deaf on JSTOR," accessed March 26, 2023, <https://www.jstor.org/journal/amerannaDeaf>.

³⁰ Luzerene Ray, "Introductory," *The American Annals of the Deaf and Dumb* Vol. 1 (1847): 1.

was an important outlet for legitimizing Deaf voices, even if it also boasted the voices of those who didn't value Deaf culture or language.

Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet was a prominent figure in Deaf education long after his time in Harford. He continued to support the manual method across the United States and was an advocate of Deaf experiences and culture. *The American Annals of the Deaf and Dumb* was now a means in which Gallaudet could share his message. In its first issue, Gallaudet published "On the Natural Language of Signs; And its Value and Uses in the Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb." In the introduction, he talks about a young, Deaf child who is born into a hearing family. Despite his inability to hear, he has a means of communicating his wants and needs: "the natural, spontaneous facility with which the Deaf-mute child is able to make his thoughts and feelings known to those around him by the expressions of his countenance and appropriate signs and gestures."³¹ Here, Gallaudet is attempting to legitimize the natural nature of a gesture-based language for the Deaf. He then extends this rhetoric to its use in education stating that "an intelligent, uneducated Deaf-mute, arriving at the Asylum, is always found to hold communication with its inmates."³² He goes on to state that there are two reasons: the similarity of self-made signs with other Deaf peers and the ability to acquire a language that is natural to them. Gallaudet had tremendous credibility in the field of Deaf education, and he is legitimizing the idea of manual education of the Deaf. To him, the use of signs is natural, and key to the successful education and socialization of the Deaf.

Laurent Clerc was also featured in the first volume of *The American Annals of the Deaf and Dumb*. Clerc was an esteemed professor at the Royal Institution for the Deaf and Dumb in

³¹ Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, "On the Natural Language of Signs; And Its Value and Uses in the Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb," *The American Annals of the Deaf and Dumb* Vol. 1 (1847): 56.

³² *Ibid*, 57.

Paris, France. When he came to the United States with Gallaudet his prestige followed him. In the second volume of *The American Annals of the Deaf and Dumb* published in 1849, Clerc tells the story of Jean Massieu, a Deaf educator in France who he had been instructed by. As an instructor Massieu “identifies himself with their imperfections, and his observing mind never loses sight of them. He is seen constantly to follow them, step by step, in proportion as they advance towards that state of civilization, to which his wisdom gradually conducts them. He already knows their strength of mind, and the progress of which their intelligence is perceptible.”³³ In France, there were established educational intuitions for the Deaf, and a fully formed French Sign Language. Thus, there was a greater presence of Deaf culture in France. Clerc shares this story to not only highlight and recognize a tremendous teacher of the Deaf, but a sense of pride for being Deaf that is felt in France. Moreover, he highlights the capabilities and potential of Deaf student who have access to adequate, manual instruction. A sense of Deaf pride and capability is foundational to Deaf culture, and Clerc is sharing that with the journal’s readers in the United States. Overall, the journal established an academic conversation regarding Deaf education and shows the early growth of Deaf peoples cultural connection to their Deafness.

In 1864, the Columbia Institution for the Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind (now Gallaudet University) first began to confer degrees. This was the first institution in the world for the advanced education of the Deaf. Especially striking is the support from congress and President Abraham Lincoln.³⁴ Although there is no direct record of why Lincoln supported the chartering of the institution, there is evidence Lincoln had many positive experiences with Deaf people throughout his life, and he also supported the establishment of a Deaf residential

³³ Laurent Clerc, “Jean Massieu [Concluded],” *The American Annals of the Deaf and Dumb* Vol. 1 (1847) 1849, 206.

³⁴ George Sanger, ed., “The Statutes at Large, Treaties, and Proclamation, of the United States of America from December 1863 to December 1865” (Dennis & Co, 1866), 45.

school in Illinois while serving in the state House of Representatives.³⁵ This was major for two reasons: it allowed access to higher education that was previously unobtainable and it also gave legitimacy to the prospects of Deaf higher education by high level government officials.

Although degrees were certainly not accessible to all Deaf students in the United States, it still allowed some Deaf Americans to access higher education. Moreover, it gave broader legitimacy to Deaf peoples capacity and ability to be educated.

Edward Miner Gallaudet, son of Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, was the first president of the Columbia Institution for the Deaf and Blind. In his inaugural address given in 1864, he made it clear that the work pioneered before him, by people such as his father and Laurent Clerc, was not the end, but rather the beginning of the educational future for the Deaf in the United States. He further goes on to explain that a college is necessary for the Deaf to “engage successfully in scientific or literary pursuits.”³⁶ Going on to quote William Wolcott Turner, an instructor of the Deaf, who said “that knowledge is power; that the condition of a people is improved in proportion as the masses are educated... with equal weight to the Deaf and dumb.”³⁷ Gallaudet shares this because he believes that this institution will empower an entire new generation of the Deaf. The knowledge and access that this institution grants, will give power and opportunity to the Deaf, who previously didn’t have that opportunity.

The degree granting power of the Columbia Institution for the Deaf and Blind was a tremendous step in the education and empowerment for Deaf people in the United States. Opportunities in higher education for Deaf people in the United States during the mid-nineteenth

³⁵ Roberta Cordano, “A Charter and a Champion: The Meaning of Lincoln’s Legacy at Gallaudet | Office of the President,” *Gallaudet University* (blog), December 10, 2018, <https://gallaudet.edu/president/a-charter-and-a-champion-the-meaning-of-lincolns-legacy-at-gallaudet/>.

³⁶ Edward Miner Gallaudet, “Inauguration of the College for the Deaf & Dumb at Washington, District of Columbia,” 1864, 24.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 25.

century were very rare as there were no other such schools. The Columbia Institution for the Deaf and Blind was a major step in expanding those opportunities. Although access to the institution was limited, its inauguration and support by the federal government was a major step in validating the intellectual capacity of Deaf people at the time. The Institution would continue, and still does continue, to empower Deaf voices and brings validity to Deaf culture.

The first degree was conferred in 1866 to Melville Ballard. After graduating he returned to the institution as a faculty member, where he taught for 50 more than years. It was a common theme for graduates to become educators of the Deaf, or do social or historical research in Deafness.³⁸ Although, earning a degree from Gallaudet was an impressive accomplishment, it did not mean they were free from discrimination, or anywhere near the status of hearing individuals. And, with generalized fears of otherness at the turn of the twentieth century, opportunities for Deaf Americans became even more limited.³⁹ However, the Deaf retained their identity, and some graduates went on to found or work for several other Deaf advocacy organizations.

The National Association of the Deaf is one of the largest and most prominent organizations for the Deaf. The National Association of the Deaf was formed in 1880, the same year the Milan conference banned the use of sign in classrooms. The organization was founded as “Deaf Americans were beginning to realize that if anyone was going to resolve their problems it would have to be themselves. They were concerned about the educational conditions in schools for the Deaf and about the methods of instruction.”⁴⁰ Deaf individuals realized they would need

³⁸ David Armstrong, *The History of Gallaudet: 150 Years of a Deaf American Institution* (Gallaudet University Press, 2014), 7.

³⁹ Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopedia. "Deafness." Encyclopedia Britannica, December 27, 2022. <https://www.britannica.com/science/Deafness>.

⁴⁰ Jack Gannon, *Deaf Heritage: A Narrative History of Deaf America* (Gallaudet University Press, 2011), 64.

to organize in order to have their voices heard, and understood the need for a clear, unified message. The founding of the National Association of the Deaf is one of the first prominent examples of Deaf peoples systematic organization as a result of oppression in the United States.

In 1880, the National Association of the Deaf held the first National Convention of Deaf-Mutes in Cincinnati, Ohio. On the second day, Jerome Elwell, an early proponent of the oral method, started discussion on the use of the oral method, and the use of the combined method (parallel use of sign and oral instruction). He suggested that education for the Deaf adopt the combined method of instruction. In response, George Viditz, who would later become president of the National Association of the Deaf said that the “value of the power of speech to the Deaf has generally been greatly overestimated by those who hear.”⁴¹ Thomas Francis Fox, who later also was elected president, noted that the “men arguing in favor of the oral method, who from personal experience, know comparatively little of the general subject of Deaf-mute education.”⁴² Both Viditz and Fox share important points on the majority Deaf opposition to oralism. Viditz highlights the sentiment that Deaf people are often not fixated on their inability to hear; it is simply a matter of fact. And although this sentiment may not be shared by all, this shows that there was a healthy foundation of Deaf pride established in the United States from an early time. Moreover, Fox highlights how many people pushing oralism are not experts on the education of the Deaf calling into question their credibility.

The principal reason for the founding of the National Association of the Deaf was to unify and legitimize the Deaf voice. It’s formation, and the formation of other of various other institutions that uplifted Deaf voices, both coincided, and was partially the result of the oral

⁴¹ *Proceedings of the First National Convention of the Deaf-Mute* (Ohio: The New York Institution for the Deaf and Dumb, 1880), 39.

⁴² *Ibid*, 41.

education movement that was gaining traction in the United States. The convention gave a diverse number of Deaf people the opportunity to speak on a diverse range of topics and policies regarding Deaf people in the United States. However, despite the strong sentiments against oralism held by the Deaf community, oralism would soon dominate their educational sphere, starting with the resolution of the Milan Conference in 1880.

III. The Ban on Manualism in 1880

At the turn of the twentieth century, the United States was becoming more diverse. With the influx of immigrants, to the United States, there was a generalized xenophobic attitude not only in sentiment but policy.⁴³ This sentiment, was not isolated only to immigrants, but to many marginalized groups that existed in the United States, including Deaf Americans. In response to fears of Deaf employability, the National Association of the Deaf started “Hire Deaf People—It’s Good Business!” campaign. This was followed by a series of other programs attempting to protect the employment rights of Deaf Americans.⁴⁴ However, employment was not the only thing under siege, their education method had been overhauled in an effort to assimilate Deaf people into hearing culture.

As will be discussed in depth in the next chapter, manualism was threatened by a new wave of people who sought to institute the oral method in the United States. The oral method was a means of retaining speech, through instruction in lip reading and vocalization. From its in the United States, it was designed to integrate the Deaf into a hearing society, essentially attempting to dismantle Deaf culture. Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone, was often seen as the expert of this method and its implementation in the United States. As Harlan

⁴³ Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopedia. "Deafness." Encyclopedia Britannica, December 27, 2022. <https://www.britannica.com/science/Deafness>.

⁴⁴ “NAD History,” National Association of the Deaf - NAD, accessed March 23, 2023, <https://www.nad.org/about-us/nad-history/>.

Lane establishes not only was oralism ineffective at the time, but it “has reduced the educational achievements of the Deaf since the days of Laurent Clerc and James Denison.”⁴⁵ James Denison being the only Deaf representee present at the 1880 Milan Conference and another influential actor in early Deaf education. Thus, understanding that oralism is an event isolated in time, but rather one that has generational effects is incredibly important. Not only has this effected the educational outcomes of Deaf people in the United States, but has affected the way Deaf culture operated within, and resisted against, structures in the United States.

In 1880, the Second International Congress on Education of the Deaf, known simply as the Milan Conference, declared “that the oral method ought to be preferred to that of signs for the education and instruction of the Deaf and dumb,” due to the “incontestable superiority of speech over signs in restoring the Deaf-mute to society.”⁴⁶ After this resolution, signed languages were no longer recommended in the classroom, and the dark ages of Deaf education began. This was a significant blow to the nascent Deaf community, as the oral method began to spread and dominate the instructional method of the Deaf.⁴⁷

With the resolution of the Milan Conference, there was a very rapid shift from manualism to oralism in the United States, despite ardent Deaf opposition. Many Deaf manual method advocates expressed concerns regarding the practicality and feasibility of the method. Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet stated at the conference that “having used the sign language for fifty years, he believed fully in its importance to the Deaf-mute, and that it is necessary, in order to lift him up from ignorance to ideas.”⁴⁸ Other individuals at the convention shared this sentiment. To proponents of the manual method, signs offered hope and a practical, natural method of

⁴⁵ Harlan Lane, *When the Mind Hears*, 399.

⁴⁶ *Proceedings of the First National Convention of the Deaf*, 1880, 149.

⁴⁷ Harlan Lane, *When the Mind Hears*, 373.

⁴⁸ *Proceedings of the First National Convention of the Deaf*, 1880, 149.

communication. Manualism removed communication and educational barriers. However, the majority hearing committee decided that the oral method should be the sole educational method for the Deaf abroad.

Proponents of the oral method note that Deaf children are born equal to hearing children, and they only differ when instructed in the manual method: “They differ from the rest of mankind only when they are taught signs. Moral development is then prevented. Writing should be considered only as a secondary form of communication. Speech must be learnt by practice, not by grammar.”⁴⁹ This encapsulates the tone and sentiments of many at the convention who support the oral method. To the hearing representatives present, the ones making this decision, signs were causing a moral lapse, grasp on written English was not enough. For the Deaf to be equal to their hearing peers, the Deaf would need to be able to speak. Ultimately this sentiment dominated, and the oral method was adopted.

The sentiments and ideals that prompted the United States to adapt the oral method were shared across western nations. In France, Alexander Blanchet, a medical doctor at the Paris Institute, became interested in Deaf social standing and education starting in the mid 1840s. With the “French government’s desire to create a modern society with one unified political and cultural identity,” Blanchet’s early notions of oral education was a means of social integration, and his philanthropic investment into the oral method, was well received by the government at the time.⁵⁰ Similarly to the United States, oralism didn’t dominate the education sphere of the Deaf until after the 1880 resolution at the Milan Conference. However, early notions of social integration and uniformity were what guided the use and implementation of the oral method in

⁴⁹ Kinsey, “Speech for the Deaf. Essays Witten for Milan International Congress. Proceedings and Resolutions” (International Congress on the Education Of The Deaf, Milan: W.H. Allen & Co, 1880), 34.

⁵⁰ Anne Quartararo, *Deaf Identity and Social Images in Nineteenth-Century France* (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 2008), 86.

the countries it was practiced. Early actors and advocates of the oral education method, like Blanchet in France and Alexander Graham Bell and John Clarke in the United States, foreshadowed the decades of oral education that were to come.

Despite this major setback, however, the Deaf continued to lobby for the manual method. The foundation of Deaf culture created by residential schools created a space for Deaf organizations and spaces such as the National Association of the Deaf, the academic publication *The American Annals of the Deaf* and the world's first Deaf college. Deaf activists continued to fight for their voices to be heard, and their understanding of Deafness to be validated. These organizations inspired hope and promoted change, despite the constant setbacks and diminishment posed by oralism and an overwhelming hearing-centered society. The context for how Deaf culture was established in the United States, through a shared language and proximity in residential schools, meant Deaf people were less isolated from one another, but seen as more isolated from broader society. Interestingly, this notion of isolation carried across time. Prior to education, Deaf children were isolated from their families, community and religion. After more Deaf children became educated under the manual method, their culture then meant they were also isolated from broader society once again. Despite the broader contexts, religion, their co-education with the blind, they were always seen as an isolated class. Come 1880, hearing people from across the United States had another idea to integrate the Deaf: oralism. But this time, it irreversibly damaged the Deaf individual, and did little to breakdown their culture.

CHAPTER TWO THE “SCIENCE” OF EDUCATING THE DEAF

I. Introduction to Alexander Graham Bell and the Oral Method

While Alexander Graham Bell was central in the swift transition toward oralism in the United States, he was part of a larger international movement. Throughout Western Europe, oralism became a widespread method for instruction of the Deaf. Bell’s legacy looms large and had a profound impact on the Deaf community that lasts to this day. Bell, born to a deaf mother and married to a deaf woman, assisted in the establishment of the first oral based school for the Deaf in the United States and became a scientific authority during the eugenics movement, specifically in the sphere of the Deaf. Understanding Bell is key to understanding the policy and attitude of the time. The oral education movement had received staunch push back by many in the Deaf community yet progressed and dominated for several decades. Bell’s authority, both personally and professionally, is key to understand how the “dark ages of Deaf education” lasted as long as they did.

The oral has three essential components: lip reading, acquisition or preservation of speech, and disuse of manual signed language. Lip reading, “an artificial mode of hearing,” was the most important step in the implementation of the method.⁵¹ This step is essential for chipping away at the deficit, a way to enable the Deaf to understand speech not through the ears but the eyes. Because the “power of imitation increases daily,” Deaf students, would eventually be able to understand what is spoken.⁵² Breath and vibration (in addition to imitation, a recurring theme) are essential to the next step: learning speech. Just like a child learning speech, the Deaf are allowed to make mistakes and to use one-word sentences, but they must “dispense with natural

⁵¹ Van William van Praagh, “On the Oral Education of the Deaf and Dumb : A Paper Read at the Teachers’ Conference.,” January 10, 1878, 5.

⁵² Ibid.

signs.”⁵³ The process is slow and gradual, but essential to ensuring the Deaf overcome their inability to integrate. With this method, proponents of the oral sought to assimilate the Deaf into a hearing world.

In 1862, Mabel Hubbard, a four-year-old child in the United States, lost her hearing due to a complication from scarlet fever. Her parents were anxious as she began to regress in her spoken language abilities. However, her parents were reassured that the German system was the solution. Mrs. Henry Lippitt was an instructor of the oral method, and she successfully used the German oral system to allow Mabel Hubbard to use speech and read lips.⁵⁴ In 1864 Gardiner Hubbard went to the state legislature and proposed founding a Deaf education institution that utilized the oral method for those who could once hear and speak. This application was rejected by the legislative committee, with one opponent being the American Asylum in Hartford (now the American School for the Deaf). Hubbard decided to create his own school with Bell, under the teaching of Miss. Harriet Rogers. In 1866, this school had seven students. After being educated in speech and lip reading, the students were brought before the State Legislature. Bell and his students convinced the legislature of its success. An advocate of the method, Mr. John Clarke, offered fifty thousand dollars for the school to be established in his town of Northampton, Massachusetts. The school opened one year later, in 1867.⁵⁵ Ten years later in 1877, Alexander Graham Bell married Mabel Hubbard. Mabel Hubbard would continue to inspire Bell’s work and would serve as a posterchild for the use of the oral method over manualism in the United States.⁵⁶

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Alexander Graham, “The Growth of the Oral Method in America,” 1917, 9.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 11.

⁵⁶ Harlan Lane, *When the Mind Hears*, 351.

In his studies of the manual and oral method, Alexander Graham Bell made a remark that “sign teachers... looked down upon the oralists as visionary enthusiasts pursuing impracticable schemes.”⁵⁷ From the success of Bell and Rogers, it would seem that proponents of signed language instruction were wrong. But opposition to oralism in the Deaf community was based on its effects, not on the improbability of the method. At the Milan Conference in 1880, Edward M. Gallaudet, the first president of the Columbia Institution for the Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb and Blind, argued that “signs were the natural language of the deaf.”⁵⁸ His father, also present, made the same case. Dr. Isaac Lewis Peet, another American delegate at the conference noted that “signs grew naturally out of the mind-picture of a deaf-mute, and two deaf-mutes placed together would unquestionably develop a language of signs... Those who say that the sign language injures the English language should make the deaf mute blind as well, for nothing they see is in the English language; but all in the language of signs.”⁵⁹ The comments from these delegates, show that Bell misrepresented their position on language and perception of ability. Instead, it seems that they have two opposing views of nature.

The sentiment that sign language was the natural language of the Deaf was not solely an American argument, but one made by many nations, including France. One notably and vocal opponent of oralism in France, Claudius Forestier, director of the Deaf school in Lyons, told the city’s municipal commission that ““sign language is in [their] nature, it is the life of [their] thoughts.””⁶⁰ Victor-Gomer Chambellan, a professor at the Bordeaux and Paris Deaf institutes, echoed these sentiments, adding that access to sign language was actually the means of “progress toward social improvement,” and the new oral method would diminish their social standing in

⁵⁷ Bell, “The Growth of the Oral Method in America,” 9.

⁵⁸ Kinsey, “Speech for the Deaf. Essays Witten for Milan International Congress. Proceedings and Resolutions,” 17.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 22.

⁶⁰ Anne Quattararo, *Deaf Identity and Social Images in Nineteenth-Century France*, 93.

French society, not improve it.⁶¹ Deaf opposition to oralism was not only found within the United States, but across Europe: sharing the sentiment that signing was natural to the Deaf, and oralism was not a means of integration, rather a roadblock. Chambellan and Forestier both ardently opposed the transition toward oralism but, like their counterparts in the United States, were ignored.

On January 10th, 1878, William van Praagh addressed the Teacher’s Conference of England to detail his success with the German method, which inspired the very similar oral method Alexander Graham Bell would research.⁶² In his own words, “the only defect is ‘Deafness,’ and dumbness is the unfortunate result.” A perceived deficit being that hearing children bring with them to school “a mass of knowledge acquired through conversation.”⁶³ To him, speech could be brought to the Deaf through the oral method. Throughout the address, van Praagh alludes to a natural course of human development. He repeatedly refers to Deaf students entering the education system as newborns, without knowledge of the world or surroundings. This appeal works to support his argument that the German system of educating the Deaf is a thoughtful resolution because without it, Deaf children will never be able to integrate into a society without speech. The three points he outlines in the rest of his address to Deaf educators echo this theme.

Mechanistically, oralists taught the Deaf to speak as though they are newborns, to follow the natural, slow, steady learning process to obtain speech.⁶⁴ However, to proponents of sign

⁶¹ IBID, 95.

⁶² Often the term “oral method” and “German method” were/are used interchangeably; however, the German method was a means of combined education (encouraged *all* modes of communication) created and used by Michel de l’Epée in German starting in 1790. Practitioners of the pure oral method used the term as a synonym. See Klaus Günther, Johannes Hennies, and Manfred Hintermair, “Trends and Developments in Deaf Education in Germany,” in *Deaf People Around the World: Educational and Social Perspectives*, 2009, 178–93, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2rcngqz.17>.

⁶³ Van Praagh, “On the Oral Education of the Deaf and Dumb : A Paper Read at the Teachers’ Conference.,” 4.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 6.

language, signing came naturally to the Deaf, so there was no reason to speak. As Dr. Lewis Peet argued at the Milan conference, the development of sign is natural to the Deaf individual. The opposition to the oral method was not the improbability, but the way it went against Deaf individuals' natural language development, essentially calling it out as a hyperbolic pretense. As described, the conference still concluded that oralism be the primary instruction for all Deaf students. Important to note, though, is that Oralism in the United States was founded and first practiced on people like Bell's wife, Mabel Hubbard, who lost hearing after acquiring the basic skills of speech. This almost complete adoption of the oral method in the United States had complications that last to this day (which will be discussed later in this work). Written communication as not sufficient for a Deaf person to fully participate in society; Deaf people would have to be able to speak. Bell used the oral method's cherry-picked success to prop up a solution that wasn't effective for everyone in an attempt to prevent the spread of Deaf culture and a natural language from developing.

With the rise of the oral methods dominance in the United States, Bell argued that the Deaf were no longer a mute class. As Bell outlined in his 1917 speech "The Growth of the Oral Method in the United States," Bell argued that "deaf children of America are no longer stigmatized as 'deaf-mutes' or 'deaf and dumb,' and that they are universally recognized as children who are simply Deaf."⁶⁵ This name shift represents a larger cultural shift. As Deaf children learn to read lips and gain speech skills, they just aren't suffering from the "unfortunate result" of muteness as William van Praagh calls it.⁶⁶ In the same vein, the American Association to Promote the Teaching of Speech to the Deaf formed, with Bell as President. They resolved that "no child in America shall be allowed to grow up 'deaf and dumb' or 'mute,' without earnest

⁶⁵ Bell, "The Growth of the Oral Method in America," 17.

⁶⁶ Praagh, "On the Oral Education of the Deaf and Dumb : A Paper Read at the Teachers' Conference.," 4.

and persistent efforts having been made to teach him to speak and read lips.”⁶⁷. The attitude of these legislative and lobbying bodies is key to understanding the shift.

This new classification Bell and his colleagues that the Deaf were broadly no longer mute was powerful assertion. Broadly, they set the expectation that Deaf children could speak, which was not always the case. There are many instances of Deaf people, especially those who never had any exposure to spoken English, who could not master speech or lip reading. Furthermore, this shows that their effort was not to educate rather assimilate them. The emphasis was placed on speech and articulation, not actual education. This creates an interesting dynamic where the Deaf were supposed to assimilate with their hearing peers but lacked access to the same level of traditional education their peers had. However, Bell had a sense of authority over the matter, so what he said was widely accepted by those outside of the Deaf community, and those in positions of power.

II. Nature and Scientific Inquiry: Alexander Graham Bell’s Authority

As the first section of this chapter details, Alexander Graham Bell became an authority figure on Deaf education. However, he also became a regarded authority on the scientific study and understanding of Deafness. So, how did ideas of Deaf identity interact with eugenic policy and practices of the time? And how does that connect to the oral method pincerd by Bell in the United States? Health and wellness were (and still are) as personal as they were societal. The United States in the nineteenth century was plagued by disease. Societal and cultural shifts such as immigration and urbanization lent to new ideas about health and disease. Germ theory was discovered, and modern techniques were developed in response. Cholera outbreaks across the United States laid the foundation for modern day public health practices. New notions of health

⁶⁷ Bell, “The Growth of the Oral Method in America,” 19.

and wellness were understood as science adapted.⁶⁸ With the rise of germ theory came the rise of governing bodies that held a stake in health and wellness. These new institutions needed experts, people who were specialized in specific areas of health and science. Specialization led to conflict, as each had their own unique stake in societal health and wellness. Martin Pernick, a historian of health and medicine, describes that “the conflict between eugenics and public health resulted in large part from different values, interests and methods fostered by two competing medical specialties.”⁶⁹ Though there certainly was considerable consensus and overlap between the two specialties, the difference in their values was critical.

Both public health and eugenics were plagued by bias, racism and prejudice. The system is flawed, and a reliance upon empirical data and fact does not mean the absence of bias. However, eugenics relied upon the fundamental belief that there were certain people who were more fit. Using ideas about heredity and Mendelian genetics, they established principals, policies and guidelines to support an array of eugenic policy. As specialists, they gained immense authority to do this. Specialization also gave incredible autonomy. People began to specialize in an array of diverse fields and some even gained monopolies over their specialties.⁷⁰ Alexander Graham Bell’s specialization into hereditary Deafness and education left him as the sole authority in this realm of science: “practitioners of negative eugenics understood that Deafness was Bell’s domain and did not interfere with his work.”⁷¹ Understanding Bell’s role of authority in this singular realm of science is key to understanding his influence.

⁶⁸ Deborah Brunton, *Health and Wellness in the 19th Century*, Health and Wellness in Daily Life (Santa Barbra, California: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2014).

⁶⁹ M S Pernick, “Eugenics and Public Health in American History.,” *American Journal of Public Health* 87, no. 11 (November 1997): 1767–72, <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.87.11.1767>.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Brian H Greenwald, “The Real ‘Toll’ of A. G. Bell: Lessons about Eugenics,” *Sign Language Studies* 9, no. 3 (2009): 258–63.

With the 1880 Milan conference establishing that the oral method of education should be adapted as the primary instruction method for the Deaf, Alexander Graham Bell and his colleagues were now one step closer to their sought after social integration of the Deaf. This coincides with the rise of the eugenics movement in the United States. In 1883, Francis Galton, a cousin of Charles Darwin, first coined the term eugenics. Published in his book the *Inquires into Human Fertility and Its Development*, eugenics was a way of improving the quality of the human race via heritability.⁷² That same year, Alexander Graham Bell presented to the National Academy of Sciences that intermarriage of Deaf congenially Deaf parents was associated with having Deaf children.

We cannot control the marriages of men as we can the breeding of animals, and at first sight there seems to be no way of ascertaining how far human beings are susceptible of variation by selection.

Such a conclusion, however, would be incorrect; and I desire to direct attention to the fact that in this country *deaf-mutes marry deaf-mutes*.

An examination of the records of some of our institutions for the Deaf and dumb reveals the fact that such marriages are not the exception, but the rule. For the last fifty years there has been some selective influence at work which has caused, and is still causing, the continuous selection of the deaf by the deaf intermarriage.⁷³

Alexander Graham Bell's introductory remarks to the National Academy of Sciences establishes what he believes to be the causal factor of the Deaf population in the united: intermarriage of the Deaf. Although not a classically trained scientist, Bell became interested in much of the work being pioneered by geneticists at the time and sought to elucidate the genetic basis of deafness. Using family histories and records from Deaf residential schools, Bell was able to tease out that deaf parents were more likely to have deaf children.⁷⁴ However, it's now understood that around 90% of deaf children have hearing parents, which would mean his focus on deaf couples was not

⁷² Francis Galton., "Inquiries into Human Faculty and Its Development," 1883, 387.

⁷³ Alexander Graham Bell, *Upon the Formation of a Deaf Variety of the Human Race*, 1884, 4.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

only wrong but widely unproductive.⁷⁵ But contrary to many eugenicists that will proceed him, Bell didn't call for regulation of marriage or any other negative eugenic practice. Instead, Bell sought to integrate the Deaf into the culture of the United States, and eliminate isolation that was a seeming byproduct of Deaf communities and Deaf residential schools.

Bell was accredited as an expert on Deafness by many in the scientific community. In 1908, Bell was named a committee member for the American Breeders Association's Committee on Eugenics. In his speech he had an entire section titled "Legislative Restrictions Upon Marriage Unwise," in which he denounced the need to regulate marriage "unless the interests of the community are demonstrably endangered".⁷⁶ Bell instead wanted to "appeal to reason and sound judgment."⁷⁷ Again, this section highlights Bell's steadfast opposition to the regulation of marriage and procreation over time, and his tone showed disdain for negative eugenic practices (important to note though that Bell's speech still echoed xenophobic, racist and white supremacist sentiments of the time). In contrast, Bell proposed positive eugenic practices overall, encouraging people follow the advice given by eugenic scientists, such as himself. To him, the problem was that the Deaf were isolated from hearing society, a process aided by community formation as a result of Deaf, manual residential schools, not their inability to hear. Oralism was a means of ensuring that Deaf communities were broken up. Deaf students were encouraged to adapt the lifestyle of hearing peers, which could break down the cultural structure that Deaf students and families were building prior to oralism.

In 1891, Alexander Graham Bell told the Literary Society of Kendall Green that he had "no intention of interfering with [their] liberty of marriage," and understood that many in the

⁷⁵ Sam Supalla, "Through Deaf Eyes," January 10, 2007.

⁷⁶ Alexander Graham Bell, "A Few Thoughts Concerning Eugenics," 1908, 122–23.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 120.

Deaf community didn't believe him when he said that.⁷⁸ In public and private, Bell consistently refuted claims that he wanted to bar Deaf intermarriage, yet he still faced significant backlash from the Deaf. And, in the closing remarks of his speech he pleads they “should *believe what a man says himself, rather than what people say he says.*”⁷⁹ Moreover, going as far as to ask journalists to hold reporting until a transcript of his speech was made available to them. Bell found himself as a middleman between the Deaf and the eugenics movement.

Though Bell's introductory and concluding remarks paint him as an advocate, the bulk of his speech focuses on the very reasons why the deaf shouldn't intermarry. He notes the “considerable risk of having deaf offspring,” a “tendency to transmit the defect” and offers “probabilities of guidance” to ensure the “risk” and “defect” are mitigated.⁸⁰ Though he does not advocate for regulation over Deaf people's right to marry and procreate, he makes it clear what his position is. Reinforcing the idea that he does not “desire to interfere with [their] perfect liberty of choice. [He] claims the right to advise [them] as [he] would advise [his] own children, or any young people in whom [he] felt interest.”⁸¹ However, Bell was an isolated scientific authority figure over the matter. Therein lies the problem: although Bell opposed negative eugenic policies, his work and ideals paved the way for others to do so. His attitudes and misguided research into the Deaf world was imprinted on many. In the midst of a eugenics movement in the United States, Bell described Deaf marriage as inherently risky, and their children defective. For that, he needs a level of historic accountability.

Thus, oralism was not only a method of instruction, but a method of ensuring a Deaf class and culture didn't grow, and that Deaf children were brought up as similarly as possible to

⁷⁸ Alexander Graham Bell, “Marriage an Address to the Deaf,” 1891, 4.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 3.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 5.

⁸¹ Ibid, 12.

their hearing counterparts, despite the overall consequences. Oralism predated the rise of eugenics in the United States, so to say that oralism was expressly a eugenic tool is wrong. What is true, though, is that Bell both sought to promote an idealized class of people through the guise of science. Bell held tremendous authority over the lives of Deaf Americans in this period, arguably to this day, perpetuating a common theme in Deaf culture: Deaf people are often left out of the conversation, leading to immense consequences for the Deaf community. The story of Alexander Graham Bell and oralism establishes the importance of including Deaf voices. Today, Deaf people are still fighting for recognition and authority against a hearing majority that believes they are acting in the best interest of the Deaf community: one way dialogue is historical unproductive and damaging to the Deaf community, and sadly oralism and Alexander Gram Bell is only one example of the harm done.

III. Legacies of the Movement

Despite Alexander Graham Bell's ardent support of the oral method throughout his life, it was widely unsuccessful. Especially when considering students who were born Deaf, and those who became Deaf very early in life. Their lack of prior exposure to speech or hearing meant they were barred from an effective means of communication under oral education method. Although there are definite gaps in the records and statistics regarding the efficacy of oral method in the nineteenth century, its major focus on speech and verbalization meant there was less focus on standard curriculum (math, science, humanities, geography, etc.).⁸² Harlan Lane also asserts that contemporary academic achievement of the Deaf has been negatively impacted by the oral methods legacies.⁸³ Though some students may have mastered lip-reading and verbalization by the time they left oral institutions, they were not on a level playing field with their hearing

⁸² Harlan Lane, *Journey into the Deaf-World* (San Diego, California, 1996).

⁸³ Harlan Lane, *When the Mind Hears*, 399.

counterparts, despite their ability to speak or communicate. Again, highlighting the paradoxical nature of the oral methods initiative of trying to integrate the Deaf. Those who didn't master speech or lip reading were left in the dark and known as oral failures.

In the documentary *Through Deaf Eyes*, Ben Bahan notes that his dad was an "oral failure."⁸⁴ Meaning, he was unable to adequately verbalize to the expectations of a hearing society. Kristen Harmon, noted that she was an oral success, but goes on to realize that "How hard [she] was trying to lip read," and understood that her time would be better spent in other ways.⁸⁵ Thus, oral failures left schools missing both a proper education and language, and oral success left with an idle skill. Despite Bell's lofty goal of integrating the Deaf into hearing society, for many that was not a possibility, and those who did know how to speak were left struggling to keep up. The foundations of the oral method were weak and the science of its efficacy were curated to support it. Widely the oral methods mission was a failure, but unfortunately it took decades for the broader public to acknowledge that, despite it being well understood in the Deaf community.

This period was also plagued by very xenophobic sentiments. As more Eastern and Southern European immigrants came to the United States, many feared that their way of life was a threat to American values, in turn they sought to integrate them into broader society. Immigrants often formed communities with people of similar backgrounds, sharing their language, schools and churches.⁸⁶ This practice, was an already established practice in the Deaf community. Therefore, Deaf people who could not assimilate into hearing culture via the oral method were stigmatized and looked down upon similarly to that of foreign immigrants. Now,

⁸⁴ Supalla, "Through Deaf Eyes.," 33.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Bernard A. Weisberger, "Social Developments.," *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

Deaf people were not only stigmatized by their non-hearing status, but as a sort of adjunct ethnic group, which further lessened their credibility and standing in broader society.

Joanne Webber, a researcher of Deaf education, speaks to Bell's stained legacy. Notably pointing out the disparity in his understanding of the oral methods success. As stated, many oral successes had exposure to hearing early in life, that aided their understanding and capacity to learn how to speak and lip read. She points out how many Deaf, people who didn't master the oral method were seen as "unfortunate. [people that] just didn't work hard enough. [People that] didn't have enough intelligence."⁸⁷ This sentiment, along with the nativist sentiments of others, placed the Deaf community very low on the social ladder. Even today, sentiments regarding Deaf intelligence and capacity rack the Deaf community.

Despite the mission of Bell and other oralists, the Deaf community, while disparaged, maintained hope. Moreover, its failure and harm inspired a new generation of people who sought to advocate for themselves. Oralism failed to eliminate Deaf culture in the United States and, like many immigrants of the time, Deaf people continued to share their language and culture with one another. Practices like giving name signs and storytelling were carried across generations of the Deaf and with other Deaf individuals. But the oral movement added a dark stain to the history of the Deaf community and coerced many Deaf people to diverge from Deaf culture in order to maintain status in hearing society. The policy, scientific discovery and education of the Deaf at this time was drive by bias and nativism, not reason: that is why bias and perception must be taken as seriously as data and statistics. However, the oral method did not last forever. As the

⁸⁷ C. B. C. Radio, "Alexander Graham Bell's Oralist Mission Still Harms Deaf and Hard of Hearing People, Say Critics," CBC, May 16, 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/unsound-the-legacy-of-alexander-graham-bell-1.6020596/alexander-graham-bell-s-oralist-mission-still-harms-Deaf-and-hard-of-hearing-people-say-critics-1.6025659>.

United States became more diverse, notions of integration and coercion became as impossible as they were derogatory.

CHAPTER THREE

THE DEAF PRESIDENT NOW MOVEMENT

I. The Beginning of the End: The Oral Method

From the initial conception of the oral education movement in the United States through its implementation, many in the Deaf community advocated against it. However, their response was not met with any sort of action by the hearing majority that instituted the policies. It was not until the late twentieth century that the oral method was widely dismissed as a failure. This was also a time of rapid social change where advocacy groups were able to maintain and grab the attention of a wider audience to effect change. Just two years prior to the signing of the Americans with Disabilities act in 1990, students at Gallaudet University organized one of the largest protests ever by Deaf people in the United States. The March 1988 movement was known as the Deaf President Now protest. Popularly, the Deaf rights movement has been indexed as a subset of the disability rights movement. However, to people in the Deaf community, Deafness is not a disability. Thus, the goals of the Deaf community are often misconstrued. This chapter will detail the fall of oral education method and the impacts of the Deaf President Now Movement in the contexts of the disability rights movement. It will draw parallels and highlight the dissimilarities between the disability rights movement and Deaf president Now movement in the late twentieth century. Specifically, it will be outlining that the more complex social narrative of the time was key to the movement's success, but also a complicating factor in the movements mission and impact.

In 1965, a report was issued to the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare on the status of Deaf education in the United States (known as the Babbidge Report). The report deemed oralism a “dismal failure” and that there was a “failure to develop more systematic and

adequate programs for educating the Deaf at all levels.”⁸⁸ Although there was no widely used standard to measure the efficacy of the oral method in the classroom, the report used several metrics to prove that the oral method had failed.⁸⁹ The report, compiled by an independent advisory committee, was led by Homer Babbidge, President of the University of Connecticut. The report and acknowledgment by Congress was one of the most important steps to ending the predominance of Oralism in the United States. After this report, there was serious considerations into Deaf education and the true lack of efficacy of oralism. The report points out that “for 100 years emotion has been accepted as a substitute for research in the education of the Deaf,” [pointing out that oralism was primarily an unsuccessful attempt to integrate the Deaf into hearing society, not an educational system].⁹⁰

Around the same time, there were various other developments in the categorization and understanding of Deaf education and American Sign Language. In 1967, Eric Lenneberg published his theory “The Biological Foundations of Language,” asserting that “language [is] a biological phenomenon,” meaning that language development and acquisition are based upon “built-in biological schedules.” There are set stages of language development that are innate to humans. In his article, Lenneberg notes how across categories (including Deaf children) set stages are apparent across environments. Also that children from different regions and backgrounds exhibit the same language development stages. He explains that a “critical period” exists from the age of two and extends to the age of twelve.⁹¹ While Lenneberg does admit gaps

⁸⁸ Homer Babbidge, “Education of the Deaf: A Report to the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare” (United States Department of Health, Education and Welfare, 1965), XV.

⁸⁹ Candance McCullough and Sharon Duchesneau, “Psychological Effects of Oralism,” in *The SAGE Deaf Studies Encyclopedia* (SAGE, 2015), 724.

⁹⁰ Homer Babbidge, “Education of the Deaf: A Report to the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare,” XVI.

⁹¹ Eric H. Lenneberg, “The Biological Foundations of Language,” *Hospital Practice* 2, no. 12 (December 1967): 59–67, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21548331.1967.11707799>.

in his research (primarily neurological and biochemical understanding), he asserts the legitimacy and thoroughness of the research in which he grounds his theory.

A bulk of Lenneberg's evidence concerns how people of different backgrounds, age and skill are able to understand language. In his study of people with little to no verbalization, he finds that they have the ability to understand and comprehend language. He extends this argument to Deaf children and posits that "Deaf and hearing preschoolers have equal underlying capacities for language development," contrary to William van Praagh's 1878 sentiments that only hearing children bring a wealth of skills and knowledge to their classrooms.⁹² Lenneberg goes on to encourage that Deaf children be provided with "as much language as possible" and to make "the fullest possible use of the visual modality."⁹³ He also points out that untrained hearing adults perform as well in lip reading assessments as Deaf adults who were trained extensively in lip reading.

Although Lenneberg's article is not the gold standard for understanding language development in the Deaf, it brings to light the idea that language skills are biological, verbalization and language are not equals, and it also promotes the use of visual modalities in Deaf language acquisition. The work he pioneered in this article and his several others, has had a tremendous impact to this day. Studies since his publication "have provided strong support for the existence of such a critical or sensitive period," and, only counter or disprove small specifics of his theory.⁹⁴ His work was a major part of verifying American Sign Language and set a

⁹² Eric H. Lenneberg, "Response to Reviews of Biological Foundations of Language," *Journal of Communication Disorders* 1, no. 4 (October 1968): 320–22, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0021-9924\(68\)90007-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/0021-9924(68)90007-5).

⁹³ Lenneberg, "The Biological Foundations of Language," 66.

⁹⁴ EL Newport, "Language Development, Critical Periods In," *Encyclopedia of Cognitive Science*, January 2006, 737.

precedent in the scientific and linguistic community surrounding the biological basis for primary language learning.

Today, it is accepted in most academic circles that American Sign Language is a true language, and that understanding has been adapted by many in the United States. The national Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders (NIDCD) explains that “American Sign Language (ASL) is a complete, natural language that has the same linguistic properties as spoken languages, with grammar that differs from English.”⁹⁵ However, that definition is new. Historically, ASL has not been recognized as a true language. In fact, it wasn’t until 1960 that William Stokoe published a dissertation proving that ASL was a real language, not just a gesture form of communication as many previously regarded it as. Instead, ASL had all the components of a real language: unique grammar, syntax, and a set of rules that dictate it. This publication was four years prior to the unofficial end of the oral education movement brought about by the Babbidge Report.⁹⁶

The Babbidge Report, Eric Lenneberg’s theory and William Stokoe’s dissertation were three incredibly influential publications that assisted in the downfall of oralism in the United States. These works led a succinct cultural shift away from placing value of Deaf integration, toward placing value on understanding the Deaf condition. The Babbidge report was instrumental to effect policy change. Lenneberg and Stokoe were both pioneers who made room for American Sign Language in linguistic research. Notably, however, each of these three individuals were not Deaf. Furthermore, much of their sentiments were already shared amongst the Deaf community, and had been for some time.

⁹⁵ NIDC, “American Sign Language,” The national Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders, NIDCD, n.d.

⁹⁶ W C Stokoe, “Sign Language Structure,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 9, no. 1 (October 1980): 365–90, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.an.09.100180.002053>.

Overall, Deaf people across the United States had limited access to resources which negatively impacted their credibility. Since the 1880 Milan conference, Deaf people were educated using the oral method. The Babbidge report of 1965 established that the oral method had failed to educate Deaf Americans. Moreover, it restricted Deaf peoples access to a manual, true language. The goal was to integrate Deaf people into society, but that mission was largely unsuccessful.⁹⁷ Thus, many Deaf Americans were left desolate, with improper education and communication ability. This affected the credibility and reach of many Deaf advocacy groups. As people began to turn away from oralism toward manualism again, however, more Deaf people were empowered to advocate for themselves. American Sign Language was a means of connecting Deaf people to Deaf culture, and as people began to feel a sense of unity, organizations like the National Association for the Deaf gained traction and extended their reach.

There is no strict timeline to the end of oralism in the United States. Today there are still private schools that instruct primarily through “listening and spoken language” for Deaf and hard of hearing children, a modern spin on the oral method.⁹⁸ Furthermore, the invention of the cochlear implant in 1961 further complicated Deaf education. However, there was a general shift away from oralism toward manualism in most public, state-sponsored schools for the Deaf after the Babbidge report. Deaf people gained greater access to American Sign Language, and thus greater access to Deaf advocacy groups and Deaf culture. These advocacy groups then continued to promote Deaf voices and Deaf perspectives, allowing them into more spaces regarding policy and perception than they had been before. However, despite this new traction, many Deaf people still felt as though their concerns were not being listened to.

⁹⁷ Homer Babbidge, “Education of the Deaf: A Report to the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare.”

⁹⁸ “Oral Based Hearing Impaired Schools,” Pursuit of Research, May 1, 2018, <https://pursuitofresearch.org/2018/05/01/oral-based-hearing-impaired-schools/>.

The Deaf people of France shared these same sentiments. In the 1970s, the United States aided in France's Deaf Revival. Many of the structures and organizations that were built in the United States survived oralism, but similar organizations in France failed. Harry Markowicz, a linguist from the United States, traveled to France where he aided in the establishment of the first academic journal of the Deaf in 1977, *Coup d'oeil*, or *At a Glance*, which focused on disseminating information from the French School for the Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences, specifically reports on discussions and seminars regarding Deaf culture and experience. Another example was the establishment of the International Visual Theater for the Deaf, founded in France by the Deaf American actor Alfredo Corrado and Jean Grémion, a hearing French actor. Slowly, many similar agencies for Deaf culture were built, and an entire class of Deaf French people began to gain access to community and structure that was lost during the reign of oralism.⁹⁹ In a similar lag, France didn't officially recognize French Sign Language as a language until 2005.¹⁰⁰ But the Deaf in France still showed a healthy incline in their autonomy and status as time progressed.

In terms of social and political authority in the United States, the Babbidge report highlights that even in the middle of the twentieth century, Deaf people were not the ones making decisions or providing input regarding their lives and outcomes. When oralism ended, it ended when the hearing majority realized oralism didn't benefit broader American culture, with no regard to the existence or importance that Deaf culture plays in the issue mentioned in the report (not to discount the work and guidance of the many Deaf people who helped make this possible, but to point out figures of authority). The report states that "the American people have

⁹⁹ Maartje De Meulder, Joseph Murray, and Rachel McKee, *The Legal Recognition of Sign Languages: Advocacy and Outcomes Around the World* (NBM Publishing, 2009), 148.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 150.

no reason to be satisfied with their limited success in educating Deaf children and preparing them for society,” nodding only toward the benefit of the United States as a whole, not the Deaf community.¹⁰¹ Although the report does acknowledge the complexity of the issue, it makes no specific reference toward Deaf culture¹⁰². Deaf people wanted to be able to lend their knowledge and expertise to policy in a way they haven’t been allowed to do. The Deaf President Now movement of 1988 at Gallaudet University illustrates the battle Deaf people face to have their voices heard and acknowledged. The Deaf President Now Movement showcases the complexity and hardships Deaf people have faced to gain access and representation, and the ways in which it interacted with broader social movements of the time.

II. The Deaf President Now Movement of 1988

Gallaudet University was federally chartered in 1864 as the first university in the world for the Deaf. By the mid-twentieth century, enrolment doubled from around one hundred to over two hundred by 1950.¹⁰³ Enrolment continued to grow, with around 2,200 students enrolled in 1988 during the Deaf president now movement.¹⁰⁴ In 1984, Jerry Lee was named the new president of Gallaudet University, after working in various administrative roles within the institution since 1971. Lee led Gallaudet through a massive expansion, where the college became a university, enrollment climbed and ““restored [Gallaudet’s] credibility with the Congress and improved the academic standing of [Gallaudet] students,”” according to Jane Bassett Spilman, Chair of the University’s Board of Trustees.¹⁰⁵ Lee also admitted the first hearing students to the

¹⁰¹ Homer Babbidge, “Education of the Deaf: A Report to the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare,” XV.

¹⁰² Ibid, 101.

¹⁰³ David Armstrong, *The History of Gallaudet: 150 Years Od a Deaf American Institution*.

¹⁰⁴ Lena Williams, “College for Deaf Is Shut by Protest Over President,” *The New York Times*, March 8, 1988, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/1988/03/08/us/college-for-deaf-is-shut-by-protest-over-president.html>.

¹⁰⁵ Lawrence Feinberg, “Gallaudet U. President Resigns For Executive Job,” *Washington Post*, August 27, 1987, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1987/08/27/gallaudet-u-president-resigns-for-executive-job/a1e221cc-9b37-44d4-a396-ccfb9d2f4a93/>.

University, which was met with mixed reception in the Deaf community.¹⁰⁶ However, after serving the institution for only three years, he resigned to take a job in the private sector. He became vice president of Bassett Furniture, a company owned by the husband of the Board of Trustee's chair Jane Bassett Spilman.¹⁰⁷

The search for a new university president began led by the Board of Trustees. The trustees established a committee made up of students, faculty, staff and alumni that worked in conjunction with an independent consulting agency. The national Association of the Deaf and various other lobbying groups expressed concerns that the next president be Deaf.¹⁰⁸ Then Vice President George Bush even expressed the need to “appoint a president who is not only highly qualified, but who is also Deaf.”¹⁰⁹ The committee received 87 applications, and recommendations were given to the board. On February 28, 1988, the Board of Trustees announced three finalists, two Deaf and one hearing candidate: Harvey Corson, Irving King Jordan and Elizabeth Zinser, respectively.¹¹⁰

On March 6, 1988, at 6:30PM, the Board of Trustees announced that Elisabeth Zinser, the only hearing, final-round candidate, would be the next president of Gallaudet University. Students, outraged and confused by the decision, marched from Gallaudet's campus to the Mayflower Hotel where the Board of Trustees was located at the time of the announcement.¹¹¹ Outside of the hotel, Jane Bassett Spilman addressed the crowd and answered their questions. Of note, Jane Bassett Spilman does not know American Sign language and interacted with the

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ John B. Christiansen and Sharon N. Barnartt, *Deaf President Now! The 1988 Revolution at Gallaudet University* (Washington, D.C: Gallaudet University Press, 1995), 12.

¹⁰⁹ George Bush, March 1, 1988, United States National Archives.

¹¹⁰ “The Week of DPN - The Deaf President Now (DPN) Protest,” *Gallaudet University* (blog), accessed March 20, 2023, <https://gallaudet.edu/museum/history/the-Deaf-president-now-dpn-protest/the-week-of-dpn/>.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

crowd via an interpreter. There, she admitted that each of the four Board of Trustee members who were Deaf, did not vote for Elisabeth Zinser, instead opting to vote for a Deaf candidate. She suggested that students meet with board members the following day, but after giving into student pressure, agreed to meet with a small group of students that night. During the meeting, several sources confirmed that Spilman said that “Deaf people are not able to function in a hearing world.”¹¹² She denies the claim. Nonetheless it resonated with many protestors in the Deaf community, confirming their suspicion that a serious disconnect existed between the Deaf community and the operation of Gallaudet University.¹¹³

On March 7, the protest escalated, fueled by not only by the appointment of Elizabeth Zinser, but by the discontent with Jane Bassett Spilman’s handling of the issue the night prior, affirming that the Board of Trustees “cannot undo the damage, and [that they] don’t call it damage.”¹¹⁴ With campus barricaded by cars and protestors, students met with the board once more, this time with four demands: Elisabeth Zinser must resign and a Deaf president appointed in her place, Spilman must resign from the board, the board must maintain a Deaf majority and that no protestors (including faculty and staff) should face retaliation. At the conclusion of the meeting, Spilman announced the board would not comply with any of their demands.¹¹⁵ They proceeded to the university’s auditorium, where she would announce that decision to the rest of the student body. Before she could, Harvey Goodstein, a member of Gallaudet faculty, took the stage announcing that the demands had not been met, and there was no reason to stay. The vast majority of students left the auditorium, where they marched to the Capitol Building.¹¹⁶

¹¹² Williams and Times, “College for Deaf Is Shut by Protest Over President,” March 8, 1988.

¹¹³ “DPN 1988 Vol. 7 - Dr. Spilman Speaking in Front of Hotel 3 of 4 March 6, 1988,” Gallaudet University, accessed March 20, 2023, https://media.gallaudet.edu/media/DPN+1988+vol.+7+-++Dr.+Spilman+Speaking+in+front+of+Hotel+3+of++4+March+6%2C+1988/1_ch5vof3o.

¹¹⁴ “DPN 1988 Vol. 7 - Dr. Spilman Speaking in Front of Hotel 3 of 4 March 6, 1988.”

¹¹⁵ “The Week of DPN - The Deaf President Now (DPN) Protest.”

¹¹⁶ *Field House Protest 1 of 3*, vol. 13, 1988.

Tim Rarus, a student at Gallaudet University, describes that the students felt they “had been punched right in the face,” and that the Board of Trustees “obviously they didn’t understand how [they] felt.”¹¹⁷ To Rarus, the board was meant to act in the best interest of Gallaudet, which meant electing the institutions first Deaf president. However, the board did not do that, instead opting for a hearing candidate. This exhibits the disconnect between the majority hearing board and the majority Deaf student and alumni body at Gallaudet University. Deafness is not only a physiological condition of students, but part of their identity. Thus, students believed that having Deaf leadership would not only act as a symbol of strength and unity but would strengthen the mission institution. Members of the student body had an understanding that to be a qualified candidate, they had to be Deaf. The majority hearing board did not share that view.

Deaf President Now protestors shared the sentiments that, historically, the Deaf community has held: Deaf people have not only the right, but a necessity to govern and make decisions that have a direct impact on themselves, oralism being an example. The four demands posed by the students highlight this historic struggle. The first demand, as already detailed, was that Deaf students wanted a Deaf president, someone with a shared history and culture. Second, students wanted Jane Bassett Spilman to resign from the Board of Trustees. To the students and broader Deaf community, Spillman was the archetype hearing person who felt as though they had a superior authority when it came to make decisions that dictate Deaf lives. Whether or not Spilman really said that “Deaf people are not able to function in a hearing world,” protestors were willing to believe it, and electing a hearing president was enough proof to the matter. Third, students demanded that the Board of Trustees maintain a mandated Deaf majority. Important to discern, however, is that students are not asking for this as a symbolic gesture, but because a

¹¹⁷ “Deaf President Now,” *Deaf Mosaic* (DCMP, 2009).

majority Deaf board would make the most qualified board. A Deaf background would mean that the board would have a more wholistic and complete approach when governing Gallaudet University, a leading higher education institution for the Deaf. Moreover, this was reinforced as a necessity as student learned that each of the Deaf board members opposed Zinser, in support of a Deaf candidate. Finally, the students sought amnesty for the students, faculty and staff involved in the protest. Due to the scope and disruption of the protest, even at its early stages, students wanted to ensure a form of protection for everyone involved. Of note, the protest was civil, and non-violent at all stages.¹¹⁸

Each of these four demands highlight how Deaf people, even in the twentieth century, were facing the same challenges they always did for representation and authority when it came time to make decisions that directly impacted them. Moreover, it is an example of how Deaf people struggles to delineate themselves with many other disability rights movements of the time. Returning to Harlan Lane, well regarded in the Deaf and scholarly community for his seminal works on Deaf social conditions in the United States. He attempted to untangle what it means to be disabled. He asserts that Deaf people do have a loss of function, but because “Deaf people do not generally seek what people who are disabled say they seek... disowning the disability label is therefore the prudent thing to do.”¹¹⁹ Moreover, he explains that for the Deaf to completely dissociate Deaf from the disability label, they would need to meet it “with at least as much vigor as the technologies of normalization seek to institutionalize those meanings.”¹²⁰ Lane’s assertions are very true, and can be extrapolated when analyzing the Deaf President Now movement. This was an eight-day movement, with four simple goals. A tremendous amount of

¹¹⁸ “The Week of DPN - The Deaf President Now (DPN) Protest.”

¹¹⁹ Harlan Lane, “Do Deaf People Have a Disability?,” *Sign Language Studies* 2, no. 4 (2002): 369.

¹²⁰ *Ibid*, 376.

work was required to have four demands met. However, as isolated as the movement may have seemed, it garnered a wide range of public interest. Thus, they were able to edge themselves away slightly from the disability category. But, at the same time, the movement also bolstered the disability rights movement, which makes a sense of measurable clarification between Deaf and disabled even more complicated.

The movement, despite the obstacles and seeming inevitability, did have a wider impact. I also assert, that the Deaf communities' ties to the term disabled, and their struggle to free themselves from it, is an important part of their heritage, and a common theme in the United States from the founding of the first residential schools to the Deaf President Now Movement to today. The ideologies and aspirations that sparked the first protests of the Deaf President Now movement would continue to inspire faculty, staff and students at Gallaudet for the next several days and would draw wider attention not only from the Deaf community, but the general public. However, the Deaf President Now movement, was not the massive campaign that some have claimed, that Lane suggests is needed to dissociate from the term disabled. The Deaf community to this day still struggles for people to understand their position when it comes to their Deafness.

On March 8 some barricades to campus were removed, but students boycotted most of their usual academic routine, opting not to attend classes. At this time, the movement also became more coordinated and legitimized forming the Deaf President Now Council. Four vocal students also became the national face of the movement: Jerry Covell, Tim Rarus, Bridgetta Bourne and Greg Hlibok.¹²¹ In addition, the movement gained momentum as major national news organizations began to report on it, landing on the cover of *The New York Times*, an article

¹²¹ "The Week of DPN - The Deaf President Now (DPN) Protest."

in *The Washington Post* and a wide variety of televised coverage including interviews with the students, which continued throughout the next several days.^{122 123}

On March 9, the four noted student leaders met with the president elect Elisabeth Zinser, and encouraged her to step down, despite her hope for a reunification of the campus and easing of the campus climate. That afternoon, faculty and staff voted to continue to support the student protest and demands. David Bonior and Steve Gunderson, two United States Congressmen serving on the Board of Trustees, met with Elisabeth Zinser and urged her to tender her resignation, with Bonior publicly stating his support for the now movement.¹²⁴

¹²² Lena Williams, "College for Deaf Is Shut by Protest Over President," *The New York Times*, March 8, 1988, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/1988/03/08/us/college-for-Deaf-is-shut-by-protest-over-president.html>.

¹²³ Molly Sinclair, "Students Close Gallaudet U.," *Washington Post*, March 8, 1988, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1988/03/08/students-close-gallaudet-u/439dff39-836b-4787-ad75-777f9f2c4cc8/>.

¹²⁴ "The Week of DPN - The Deaf President Now (DPN) Protest."



Figure 2. The four student leaders of the Deaf President Now movement: Tim Rarus, Bridgetta Bourne, Greg Hlibok and Jerry Covell (pictured left to right). (“Student Leaders,”Gallaudet University Archives <https://gallaudet.edu/archives/archives-collections/photograph-collection/events-photograph-index/>)

The New York Times published an article titled “College for Deaf is Shut by Protest Over President” the morning of March 8, featuring an image of the protesting crowd on the cover.

Having a story featured on *The New York Times* was a feat that legitimized the movement at the national level, which gave the movement momentum and power. Not only was this an isolated issue at Gallaudet, but it was becoming an issue of representation for marginalized groups across the United States. Moreover, it shed light on the reasons why Deaf students felt so strongly about the issue. The article notes that literature distributed by students said Zinser’s appointment was

as “‘unacceptable’ and ‘paternalistic.’ as having a white president appointed at Howard University, the predominantly black college.”¹²⁵ Not only is this attention grabbing, but it speaks to the scope and foundation of the movement. This inadvertently establishes that Deaf culture exists, and that they deserve to be represented by people in their community. Howard is not only a school for people who were black, but people who have a shared history and culture within the United States. I digress that comparing the fight for racial equality with the Deaf President Now movement is outside the scope of this thesis. However, this comparison is important for establishing the sort of cultural connection protestors had to their identity as Deaf. Gary Olsen, Executive Director of the National Association of the Deaf, shared his organizations support for a Deaf president since Jerry Lee announced his resignation months prior. In a speech to protestors, he said “‘we won’t give up until we win.’”¹²⁶

Jerry Lee’s resolve is shared by others in interviews conducted by *The Washington Post* also published on March 8th. The California School for the Deaf in Riverside, California closed in solidarity with the Deaf President Now movement. Larry Newman, their associated superintendent notes how protestors are “‘stunned and outraged’” by the decision to appoint a hearing president. He goes on to note that “‘there’s only one place for Deaf people to move up and that’s Gallaudet.’”¹²⁷ Although, the sentiment that Gallaudet is the *only* means of Deaf people to move up in the United States is not entirely true, it does feel like a reality for many Deaf individuals, as it is the only major institution dedicated to the higher education of the Deaf. Both of these stories, in addition to bringing credibility and attention to the movement, illustrate how the Deaf President Now movement was not an isolated struggle, but one that would have broader

¹²⁵ Williams and Times, “College for Deaf Is Shut by Protest Over President,” March 8, 1988.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Sinclair, “STUDENTS CLOSE GALLAUDET U.”

impacts on the Deaf community. Having their demands met would not only be a means of gaining control over their university, but their place in society. Gallaudet represents the ways in which Deaf people can break down barriers and transcend to levels that hearing people may believe they cannot reach. Moreover, the attention drawn to Gallaudet University, makes those accomplishments visible to a wider audience.

Gary Olsen and Elisabeth Zinser were interviewed by *Good Morning America* the morning of March 10, 1988. Gary Olsen the executive director of the National Association of the Deaf said that the group is not worried about Zinser's general qualifications as a leader, but that the Board of Trustees was not listening to the concerns of students. Moreover, he goes on to say that other two Deaf candidates exceeded her qualification in terms of "knowledge of Deaf culture and Deaf people in America."¹²⁸ Olsen addresses the root of the issue very clearly, stating that a hearing president is not in the best interest of Gallaudet University, as they lack the social-cultural understanding of what it means to be Deaf. Elisabeth Zinser responds that she wants to open the dialog between herself and the students, Olsen rebuts that would not be a possibility.¹²⁹ This helps to establish not only the extent of the protests demands, but the reasons for them in a very public fashion. Deaf protestors were adamant that the next leader of Gallaudet University would be Deaf: that was nonnegotiable.

On March 10, following ABC's coverage of the Deaf Presidents Now movement on *Good Morning America*, the campus was once again barricaded, this time by flat tired school busses to prevent Jane Bassett Spillman and Elisabeth Zinser from entering campus. Moreover, Students from across the country came in bus loads to support the protest. Now, there were a mix of people and identities coming to support the students and faculty of Gallaudet University. Moe

¹²⁸ "Good Morning America" (New York, New York: ABC, March 10, 1988).

¹²⁹ Ibid.

Biller, the president of the American Postal Workers Union even hand-delivered a check for \$5,000 to the students. But things were about to change. Finally, university Dean and Deaf board member Irving King Jordan, renounced his support of Zinser in favor of a Deaf president. Following this cascade of events, Elisabeth Zinser announced her resignation.¹³⁰

On March 11, students were pleased with Zinser's resignation, however, they remained steadfast that their other demands be met as well. Student protestors began wearing buttons with "3½" printed on them to signify that Zinser's resignation did not mean the end of the protest. At noon, students began their first organized march on the capitol.¹³¹ While on their march to Capitol Hill, students carried a banner protesting "we still have a dream."¹³² This banner, a clear symbol of Martin Luther King Jr.'s March on Washington, highlights the very real, and visceral feelings felt by protestors. On ABC News *Nightline*, Marlee Matlin, a Deaf, Oscar award winning actress, said that "124 years of one-way conversation is something that has to change... there has to be new everything."¹³³ Since the founding of Gallaudet University 124 years prior, Matlin asserts Deaf people have not been able to take control of the University. Deaf people have long felt a sense of oppression, and at this moment, they had the chance to change that. In the same Interview Greg Hlibok reaffirms this view by saying "we've got to break this cycle." Matlin chimes in in agreement, signing "again," and "again" and "again," they didn't want to hear about someday any longer, they wanted a Deaf president now.¹³⁴ Thus, the allusions to the March on Washington that happened just 25 years prior, where people from across the United

¹³⁰ "The Week of DPN - The Deaf President Now (DPN) Protest."

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² "The Week of DPN - The Deaf President Now (DPM) Protest"

¹³³ "Special Interview about the Deaf President Now Protest," *Nightline* (ABC, March 11, 1988).

¹³⁴ Ibid.

States came together to protest the oppression, segregation and violence facing the black community.

Although Elisabeth Zinser's resignation was a substantial feat for the protestors, it did not mean the end of the Deaf President Now movement. In a way, the movement's name was misleading. Students did not feel resolved by the resignation of the newly elected hearing president; they needed the rest of their demands met, starting with the appointment of a Deaf president to replace Zinser. First, they wanted university leadership that was reflective of the students and wider Deaf community. Second, maintaining the protest showed the resolve, and highlighted that their mission was more robust than just a Deaf president, it was about representation. As stated, this was not an isolated movement, it gained a greater audience. The audience not only legitimized the movement but gave the Deaf community power in its mission. Students were not exclusively fighting for a Deaf president, but for representation at a national level. With the broader United States watching, Deaf protestors had the ability to leave a lasting impact. It was not only about their university, but about representation and a wider cultural understanding of what it meant to be Deaf in the United States.

March 12 was a day of organized rest, with students preparing to remain on campus through spring break the following week, however they would not need to. On the eighth day, Sunday, March 13, 1988, the demands of protestors had been met by the Board of Trustees. After an emergency meeting with the Board of Trustees, Jane Bassett Spilman announced her immediate resignation from the board, and that she would be succeeded by Phil Bravin. At the same time, they announced that the board would work to implement a Deaf majority, that there

would be no reprisals for protestors and that Irving King Jordan would be the next, and first Deaf president of Gallaudet University, meeting all of the students demands.¹³⁵

Although the Deaf President Now movement was only eight days, it had tremendous impact on the visibility of Deaf activism and culture. Most major new organizations reported on the issue, and conducted interviews with students, faculty, and Gallaudet leadership. This broad sense of validation is something that historically Deaf actors have not had. Historically, Deaf people have always vocalized their concerns regarding practice and policy that affected them, but they lacked the ability and authority to enact change like the change seen during the Deaf President Now movement. The concerns and demands raised by students highlight that this was not only a fight for a reform in university leadership but, provided the means to change how people perceive the Deaf community. This, however, did not happen in a vacuum, instead it occurred during a time of expansive social reform. Their momentum and traction had to do with the broader social landscape of the time. This, however, as much as it bolstered the movement, also complicated it.

III. The Broader Landscape of Activism and Social Identity in the Twentieth Century

Deaf advocacy gained tremendous traction and authority between the release of the Babbidge report in 1965 and the Deaf President Now movement in 1988. Deaf people, however, became uniquely positioned in the system that granted them authority and the ways in which they were allowed to benefit and use the systems that coincided with them. Deaf people have benefit from numerous laws and policies, most notably the Americans with Disabilities Act signed into law 1990.¹³⁶ Their assimilation by the majority of the United States into the category

¹³⁵ *Embassy Hotel 2 of 4*, vol. 46, Gallaudet University Archive, 1988.

¹³⁶ Doris Fleischer, *The Disability Rights Movement: From Charity to Confrontation* (Temple University Press, 2011), XXVIII.

of disabled and the mixed reception of the Deaf by those in the disability rights movement left them somewhat disfranchised. As scholar Harlan Lane, and countless other have asserted, the Deaf do not view themselves as disabled. Thus, the complexity of where specifically they are positioned in these movements is blurry: and most prominent social and historical publications disagree when they do try to define these boundaries. Rather, it would be more fitting to say that their unique position is one of the ways in which the movement is defined. The complexity of Deaf advocacy, with both its intersections and departures from the disability rights movement is what defines it. Working to understand these complex interactions helps ground our understanding of what it means to be Deaf in the United States in a time of rapid social and technological change.

Throughout the twentieth century polio epidemics spread across the United States. In a time where diseases seemed to be waning, polio incidences were increasing. Due to the paralytic effects of the virus in those who caught after early childhood, it caused a great amount of fear across the United States.¹³⁷ Around the 1930s, many people had committed themselves to supporting polio survivors and finding a cure. One of the most well-known organizations committed to the cause was the March of Dimes which was founded 1938 and championed by polio survivor President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his associate Basil O'Connor. Due to the lack of public health infrastructure in the United States at the time, the March of Dimes provided financing and access to individuals and researchers.¹³⁸ Polio survivors and their advocates had a dual motive: prevent the spread of the disease, and support those affected.

The motives of polio advocates share the same sentiments of many other disability rights movements (prevent, when it cannot be prevented or cured, accommodate). However, those in

¹³⁷ Daniel Wilson, *Polio* (Santa Barbra, California: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2009), 2.

¹³⁸ Julie Silver and Daniel Wilson, *Polio Voices* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2007), 95.

the Deaf community are not seeking a cure for Deafness. Instead, Deaf people are fighting for representation and understanding of their viewpoint. Survivors of polio facing lifelong physical disabilities have fought for access in areas like employment and education, just as the Deaf have; however, the Deaf community does not see reason or benefit for a cure, as their Deafness connects them to a cultural identity and equal viewpoint of the world.¹³⁹ Sure, Deaf people have fought and continue to fight for accommodations, but they do this as a means of establishing voluntary coexistence within the hearing world: they do not seek accommodations wishing they were different. I digress, that some people who are deaf may hope for a cure, just as people who were deaf may have supported the oral education method, but as a community, cures and quick fixes juxtapose their beliefs and existence. The sentiments of the Deaf President Now Movement share these historic beliefs and values, adding complexity to how the Deaf President Now movement is positioned in the disability rights movement.

Some disability rights activists such as Nadina LaSpina, President of Disabled in Action of Metropolitan New York, take issue with how the Deaf community positions itself within the disability rights movement. In 1996 she said that the Deaf community has “accepted the nondisabled majority’s definition of disability... because they don’t want to shoulder all the negative baggage that comes with the territory.”¹⁴⁰ From a Deaf culture perspective, however, LaSpina’s viewpoint could be discredited. First, as Lane detailed, the Deaf do have a loss of function: hearing. However, there’s a Deaf saying that the only thing they cannot do is hear, they can do everything else. They do not view their Deafness as a disability, whereas a majority of the public, perhaps understandably, would.¹⁴¹ Second, Deaf activists don’t want to “shoulder all the

¹³⁹ Ibid, 112.

¹⁴⁰ Doris Fleischer, *The Disability Rights Movement: From Charity to Confrontation*, 27.

¹⁴¹ Harlan Lane, “Do Deaf People Have a Disability?”

negative baggage,” because they do not see their Deafness as baggage. The Disability Rights movement and Deaf advocacy have fundamentally different motives. Disability rights activists look for physical solutions to their disability in addition to acceptance, whereas the primary motive of the Deaf community is autonomy and acceptance that their inability to hear does not leave them disabled. Where this become even further complicated, however, is that Deaf people have sought accommodations, many of which were granted in the Americans with Disabilities Act. But to the Deaf community, accommodations are part of insuring Deaf people can interact with society, and it’s not something they wish they didn’t need. Deaf and disabled people, on practical, physical level, are not after the same things.

Again, it is not important to specifically discredit or credit someone’s notion of how Deaf advocacy does or does not fit within the umbrella of the Disability Rights Movement, rather how the contention of its categorization has become part of what defines modern Deaf advocacy. Joseph Shapiro, author of *No Pity: People with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement*, acknowledged the Deaf President Now Movement as a “defining moment for the disability rights movement” due to its media coverage and reach.¹⁴² Not only does Shapiro inadvertently acknowledge Deaf advocacy as part of the disability rights movement, but speaks to how the Deaf President Now movement caused the disability rights movement to gain greater visibility. The attention afforded to the Deaf President Now movement supported the broader disability rights movement by making the broader movement more conspicuous.

The tendency of the general public to neatly frame the Deaf President Now movement in the context of disability rights movement may have also been a source of authority for the protest. In 2006, Michelle Murphy published the book *Sick Building Syndrome and the problem*

¹⁴² Joseph Shapiro, *No Pity: People with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement* (New York, New York: Times Books, 1993), 74.

of Uncertainty. In the book, she details how office spaces and employee practice at the turn of the twenty first century gave rise to the condition known as sick building syndrome. Symptoms of sick building syndrome arise from chemical exposures made possible by the modern office building. Symptoms include fatigue, headache, dry skin and irritation of the eyes, nose and throat. She asserts that as real as the causal chemical exposures are, understanding it was equally “imperceptible and unreal.”¹⁴³ Moreover, she says that the complexity of what it means to be exposed or effected “were not just accidentally but purposefully generated in the history of knowledge practices.”¹⁴⁴ Although sick building syndrome is seemingly unquantifiable, it does not mean that sick building syndrome is a non-problem. Rather, the issue is precariously placed in the context of the human condition.

Although progress has been made to understand sick building syndrome, it is hard to perceive, understand and contextualize. While Deafness is not seen as a disability in the eyes of the Deaf community, using the disability rights movement as a framework to understand Deaf activism can be incredibly beneficial: it allows for the delineation of contradictions and similarities between the two. Moreover, it may be a reason that the general public took interest in the Deaf President Now movement: they had the context of other social movements at the time to understand it. These points of reference allow for the contextualization of what Deaf activism meant at the time.

The symbiotic nature of the Deaf and disability rights movement is clear. In the late twentieth century both movements coincided. Each movement benefitted from the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Deaf President Now Movement, intentional or not, gave

¹⁴³ Michelle Murphy, *Sick Building Syndrome and the Problem of Uncertainty: Environmental Politics, Technoscience, and Women Workers* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2006), 8.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 9.

the broader disability rights movement greater visibility. However, the fundamental principles and values that have historically existed within the Deaf community differ from the core tenants that guide the disability rights movement. Moreover, the growing diversity of thought and identity within both the Deaf and disabled communities make exclusive categories ineffective and can marginalize disparate people and actors who play an equally as valid role in these movements.

Actor-Network Theory has not been readily applied to Deafness the United States. Actor-Network theory is a means of approaching social sciences by analyzing a complex web of interactions and associations. It was proposed in the 1980's by Michel Callon, Madeleine Akrich and Bruno Latour as a means for the empirical analysis of the social sciences.¹⁴⁵ This is, of course, a very brief, perhaps incomplete, explanation for an incredibly existential research method. However, it can be used not only to empirically approach a subject but illustrate the incredible level of complexity involved. While making a network, humans and non-human objects are placed, then connected through interaction, giving human and non-human actors the same level of authority. Although I think the method has practical flaws, it can be a useful tool when trying to establish relationships and explain complex social phenomenon. A specific perceived flaw is its avoidance of any interactions with conceived or established social structures, instead asking the network to redefine those structures, which is an additional reason why I think an exclusive Actor-Network theory approach is insufficient.¹⁴⁶

Nonetheless, an abridged Actor-Network application can highlight the point of complexity well. Even from a purely logical mapping of the Deaf and disability rights movement, without the fuss of stipulation, mapping the people and technologies shows how

¹⁴⁵ Dave Elder-Vass, "Actor-Network Theory," in *Sage Research Methods*, September 17, 2019.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

much interaction there is happening. How does Greg Hlibok from Deaf President Now connect to Nadina LaSpina? How do they connect to the Americans with Disabilities Act? It's technologies? How do Hilbok, LaSpina and the Americans with Disabilities Act connect to Alexander Graham Bell? How does all of that connect to the cochlear implant? Does it? This could go on, and on, exhausting every actor and item. That's why I think measuring or placing a line between Deaf and disability activists does not seem like a logical approach. Perhaps an exhaustive application would tell us more than we know, but that is beyond the scope of what I am trying to do. What I am arguing is that the complexity in and of itself is, although less satisfying, is a more accurate answer.

Dually important to the complexity of the issue, is the understanding that the inability to place or categorize is not a flaw or weakness. Instead, the inability to place something acknowledges the culture and diverse set of people, inventions and contexts that put them there. One of the contexts in which the Deaf found themselves in during the twentieth century was the wider activist landscape. Deaf advocacy and disability rights activist coincided and interacted with one another to fulfil their unique and overlapping missions. But to say that they are one functioning body is false, to say they are entirely separate is false. Instead, we should turn toward acknowledging the interactions they share.

CONCLUSION

While this is by no means a seminal work in the history of Deaf culture, it adds to the broader conversation of what it means to be Deaf. Not only do I outline some of the key actors and moments in Deaf history, but present some new, more complicating factors that contributed to Deaf culture that have previously only been understood or reported on as only context. Moreover, it highlights the battle for authority when it comes to making policy that effects Deaf culture. The appreciation of complexity is also key understanding Deaf culture at different points in time, even beyond the moments covered in this thesis. Also, as identity becomes more complex in the United States, this more wholistic approach may be more fitting when it comes to understanding Deaf identity. That being said, some of the core tenants, values and struggle of the Deaf community have remained.

Of course, even my own position within the subject matter is precarious. I do have a working proficiency in American Sign Language and have taken courses on Deaf culture. However, in all respects, I am outsider to Deaf peoples culture and community. Even Harlen Lane, a staunch advocate and supporter of the Deaf community, has received constructive criticism about his role within the subject. From my thesis I hope you can understand why a hearing perspective on the Deaf community can be more harmful than it is productive. However, I also rebut that in my research and writing I wasn't hoping to be right, but hoped to be fair and informed. I believe that this thesis has contributed to the conversation in respectful manner. I was able to incorporate various threads of Deaf history and culture to expand, hopefully not only my own, but my readers understanding of what it meant to be Deaf across different periods in the United States. Furthermore, I sought to understand and explain the ways in which different social and cultural contexts contributed to that meaning.

Debate regarding Deaf identity is complex today, not only because of our sustained hearing-centric culture, but because more and more actors are entering the conversation. The cochlear implant, popularity and ease of mainstreaming Deaf students in public schools and advanced research in the genetic basis of Deafness are all having vast implications on how Deaf people can or not cannot to connect to their identity as Deaf. Moreover, a lack of Deaf representation in these conversations and fields is a justifiable cause for concern in the Deaf community. It's important to understand how their historic struggle for representation ties into conversations people are having today.

Even from an early stage, Deaf culture did not develop in a vacuum. Although Deaf culture developed into a very distinct community, exclusive to those who were Deaf or hard of hearing, it developed alongside the culture and people it interacted with. One example being the establishment of both separate and integrated schools for the Deaf and blind in nineteenth century. From a broad perspective, Deaf and blind children's experiences in residential schools can be used to understand how their experience was different socially, but similar in terms of the residential school. Moreover, both Deaf and blind children faced similar ostracization. Specifically, Deaf and blind children prior to their education felt a general disconnect from religion, which was central to the overall culture of the United States at the time. Many people sharing a concern that Deaf or blind children were subject of punishment by God. Education provided a liberation from these negative connotations for many Deaf and blind children. Also, there was a difference in Deaf and blind experience that explains why Deaf culture exists, but a distinct blind culture does not. In 1880, though, the community and education of the Deaf went under attack by oralism.

The oral education movement had drastic negative impacts on the Deaf community. Founded to integrate rather than educate the Deaf, it had listening impacts on the Deaf community and their broader position in society. One of the most vocal stewards of the movement, Alexander Graham Bell, established himself as an authority over the education and scientific understanding of the Deaf. Using oversimplified ideas of genetics and inheritance, Bell determined a correlation between Deaf intermarriage and likelihood of having a Deaf child (which only accounts for only about 10% of Deaf children, something somehow not recognized then). He was an opponent of negative eugenics and marriage restrictions, although that did not stop the implementation of such policy. He instead turned to positive eugenic methods of controlling Deaf intermarriage by attempting to dismantle the Deaf community found in residential schools. However, by this time Deaf culture was already established, making that task impossible. Instead, Deaf people faced lasting repercussion and stigma regarding their education level and perceived intelligence.

By the late twentieth century, Deaf people rode on a wave of activism that many other groups found hope in at the time. In 1965, the Babbidge Report was issued to the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare. The report confirmed what many in the Deaf community knew: the oral method had failed to educate Deaf children. Moreover, credibility for Deaf culture and American Sign Language was more broadly established with the publication of Eric Lenneberg's theory on the biologic basis of language acquisition and William Stokoe's dissertation establishing that American Sign Language was indeed an actual language. This wider sense of credibility lent to the success of the Deaf President Now movement at Gallaudet University in 1988. Despite its name, it had a far broader impact than just electing a Deaf president, and was a broader movement toward advocating for acceptance, autonomy and understanding. Through the

students demands, we see that their guiding principles echo the sentiments of history; Deaf people in the United States have struggled for people to understand their identity. Many people cannot comprehend their attitude that Deafness is not a deficit despite their continuing advocacy against the notion. And, like any social phenomenon, it occurred within a broader social landscape. One area in which there has been contention is its place in regard to the disability rights movement. But I would assert that placing it within or outside this category is not as important as understanding the complexity and nature of its interaction. In fact, this struggle is part of Deaf identity, not a roadblock to its understanding.

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