

FAMILIAR WITH THE DEAF WORLD: THE INFLUENCE OF ALEXANDER  
GRAHAM BELL AND ORALISM ON THE HISTORY OF THE NORTH AMERICAN  
DEAF COMMUNITY

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by

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## **ABSTRACT**

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This research examines the history of the North American deaf community over the past century and how the influence of Alexander Graham Bell, eugenics, and Oralism shaped the course of deaf history. Through the control of social, political, and education policies, the hearing public was able to institute a curriculum that replaced signed communication with a speech model aimed at teaching the deaf population to speak. The Oralists agenda sought to assimilate the deaf community into society by dissolving the communal bonds of linguistics and the control of deaf historiography. The deaf community eventually succeeded in gaining control of its own affairs through resistance and protest. The cultural identity of the deaf community was shaped by Oralism and influenced how the deaf community wrote its own history. Examining both the traditional hearing historiography and the emerging deaf historiography, the research seeks to blend the two into a single intersection narrative that tells the history of the deaf community through deaf and hearing perspectives. It was discovered that the history of the deaf was controlled by the hearing community and that the response of the deaf community was both reactionary and biased. Emerging deaf historians have set about correcting this history and have changed the academic landscape of deaf studies.

**KEY WORDS:** Eugenics, Oralism, Manualism, Correct speech, Elocution, Phonetics, Cultural deafness, Linguistics, Identity, Signed exact english, American sign language, Cultural genocide, Historiography, Hearing, Deaf

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **AGB and Oralism in North America**

In trying to address the current state of the deaf community in the United States, the origins of this community must be examined from an intersectional perspective that takes into account the opinions of hearing and deaf individuals, and how the intersectional nature of this relationship influenced and shaped the formation of the deaf community in the twentieth century. Intersectionality considers the cultures and beliefs of individual groups within a shared space and uses this knowledge to formulate an unbiased narrative that retells history as accurately as possible according to the parties involved. The complexities of this history are directly related to the issue of cultural differences. Both the hearing and deaf communities of Canada and the United States live by different sets of rules and standards dictated by cultural and social understandings, but the frequent interaction of the two communities means that their individual histories overlap and share the same events, places, and periods within history. As is often the case, the convergence of two distinctly different cultures in a shared time and space will result in different interpretations of the events that took place. One of the involved interpretations will assume the dominant role, dictating the collective memory of the event and shape the narrative that is formulated in the years following. As with other minority groups within the narrative of North America, the position of the deaf community is perceived as an outsider. The history of this community has largely been recorded in text and filmed from the hearing perspective but fails to address the nuances of community and how the role of society and science greatly influenced the formation of the North American deaf community and its recorded history. The purpose of this

research is to address the inequities of the prevailing narrative, examine how and why it was written, introduce responses from deaf scholars and academics, demonstrate how this rebuttal was formulated by the deaf community, and the role this reinterpretation of history had on the deaf community going into the twenty-first century. Lastly, this research seeks to merge the traditional hearing perspective with the interpretation provided by deaf scholars who are members of the deaf community. In dealing with two distinct cultures, it is necessary to address the existing narrative proffered by the hearing community and the effects this historical interpretation had upon the social, educational, psychological, and cultural development of the North American deaf community.

To many in modern Canada and America, Alexander Graham Bell (1847-1922) is customarily heralded as a leading innovator and progenitor of twentieth century scientific progress, contributing a medley of original ideas and technologies that propelled America to the forefront of global scientific research and study. For the purposes of this research, Bell serves as the de facto figurehead of the hearing model of history due to his preeminence in deaf education and social intervention. Most North Americans are quick to latch onto heroes, with Bell being a scientific hero to the continent; the typical American, possessing little knowledge of Alexander Graham Bell or the breadth of his innumerable works, would thank him for the primitive ancestor of a familiar friend that resides daily in their pocket or purse. While this critical acclaim is well placed given Bell's revolutionary work, the historiography of Bell falls short in addressing the totality of his works and its effects on the silent public. It tends to center on his scientific endeavors and biography while glossing over his pursuits in social theory, namely eugenics and his application of the ideology upon a small subsection of the American

public, the American deaf community. Alexander Graham Bell's words and works championed the ideology of eugenics, the belief that humanity can be improved upon by correcting genetic heredity through controlled breeding and carefully monitoring and eliminating perceived inherited flaws. Bell's research with speech and sound and his publications concerning social theory focused on the North American deaf community, seeking to correct the issue of deafness in society. Much of Bell's personal correspondence and research notes are archived in his former laboratory, the Volta Laboratory and Bureau, just outside of Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. The lab was used a workshop where Bell conducted research and experiments with telecommunications and the science of sound; the location also served as a temporary home and office space where he spent time producing most of his works and patents. The flaw within the traditional historiography of Bell is its strict adherence to a dominant narrative, framing Bell's work in eugenics as a footnote in a longer history of North American scientific development. The prevailing narrative is displayed through a one-dimensional interpretation of events and fails to address the most profound effects the eugenics movement had on the American deaf community, leaving a portion of his legacy in the mire of speculation. As with any notable figure, it is compulsory to have knowledge of Bell's educational development to better empathize with the aim of his endeavors. In viewing the contemporary historiography, the intersectional layers of American scientific history may be peeled back to see where the American deaf community falls within this narrative.

Bell's relationship with the deaf community began at an early age. Bell gained a familiarity with the dynamics of speech and human communication from infancy,

engaging in several pursuits that put him on a lifelong trajectory toward understanding the mechanisms of speech and its application in society. Alexander Graham Bell was born in 1847 in Edinburgh, Scotland into a respected family of European phoneticians who were also heavily involved in elocution education. Western society during the years leading up to and following Alexander's birth would undergo a moral and educational transformation throughout Europe and the British Isles, later reaching Canada and the States. The romanticism of the Victorian era in Europe was marked by a shift away from rationalism towards improving both the individual and society by reforming the concepts of morality and introducing reforms in social etiquette. Elocution and phonetics played a pivotal role in social improvement; Victorian era morality emphasized the improvement of oneself and communication became a central aspect of this improvement process. Personal appearance was the visual representation of a person, but speech is necessary to convey ideas and emotions. Academics began studying language and connecting sound patterns to parts of speech and how the sound is articulated. Speech was broken down into individual sounds and tones and written in correspondence with its visual counterpart. Elocution evaluated the dynamics of speech through a careful assessment of linguistic patterns, grammar, and intonation, while phonetics was the study of speech formation in humans and how sound was generated by human speakers. Phoneticians utilized elocution to instruct people on how to speak a language based on physically producing sounds in a grammatical pattern. Understanding how speech was produced by the vocal cords and the mouth, and how it was perceived by others, coupled with education in how to properly organize these speech patterns into a grammatically coherent structure meant that individuals could improve their linguistic abilities in



accordance with Victorian ideals. Both his father, Alexander Melville Bell, and grandfather, Alexander Bell, worked as phoneticians who specialized in elocution, a profession young Alexander followed intently, creating a reputation for himself as a capable and rising star in linguistics.<sup>1</sup> Bell, along with his father and grandfather, improved upon the existing models of phonetics and elocution, carefully deconstructing the science of speech and reapplying it in a way that was palpable to the growing Victorian middle class. The Bell family used their skills in the fields of elocution and phonetics to improve the speech of their students, garnering success and financial stability.

The successes of the Bell family with elocution and phonetics placed the family at the forefront of Victorian linguistics education and exposed them to a broad cross-section of society, including members of the deaf community. Alexander Graham Bell's relationship with his mother, Eliza Grace Symonds Bell, forged the initial bonds between Bell and the deaf community. As Bell entered adolescence, his mother began to suffer progressive hearing loss that caused her to become deaf, an experience that drove the young Bell further into his pursuits. The loss of his mother's hearing prompted Bell to improve the methods of language input and compelled him to pursue elocution and phonetics as a vessel to provide society with a method for complete language acquisition. In a number of journal entries, Bell reflected on his mother's condition and the efforts he went through to ensure she would not be left behind during conversations and events within his childhood home.<sup>2</sup> In these letters, Bell's motive for serving the deaf

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<sup>1</sup>Robert V. Bruce, *Bell: Alexander Graham Bell and the Conquest of Solitude*, (Boston: Little & Brown, 1973),9.

<sup>2</sup>Journal of Alexander Graham Bell, 1867 to August 26, 1875, Records of Alexander Graham Bell, Volta Laboratory and Bureau, Georgetown, Washington, D.C.

community is partially revealed, claiming “you [Eliza] would be hurt and indignant if someone were to refer to you as ‘deaf-mute’”.<sup>3</sup> Driven by Victorian ideals, Bell perceived the education of the deaf community and the successful acquisition of language as a mission in morality, providing society with a method to improve communication.

Returning to the Victorian ideals of moralism, Bell’s education of the deaf community would serve both to elevate the deaf to the same social position as hearing people while simultaneously improving society. Using elements of manual communication, the youth regularly tapped with his finger or hand the events that occurred in and around them, allowing his mother to gain some awareness of the happenings going on.<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that while tapping is a form of manual communication, it is relatively primitive and lacks the linguistic complexities of an actual signed language. Signed language is primarily visual, relying on carefully constructed hand shapes and movements to serve as representations of spoken words and is organized in a way that allows for the recipient to read and organize the signs into a grammatical comprehensible order. The communication between young Alexander and his mother was simplistic, sensory, and used to alert Eliza to the various conversations in a room. By selectively tapping on the table or on his mother’s leg, she could be directed towards the conversational flow and attempt to grasp the conversation through lip reading and contextual inference. Eliza would keep her hand or leg in contact with the table and feel the vibrations of the tap which signaled to her that an auditory shift was occurring. Beyond simply alerting Eliza of where the conversation was in the room, it is unknown if

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<sup>3</sup>Alexander Graham Bell to Eliza Symonds Bell, Aug. 18, 1875, Records of Alexander Graham Bell, Volta Laboratory and Bureau, Georgetown, Washington, D.C.

<sup>4</sup>Charlotte Gray, *Reluctant Genius: Alexander Graham Bell and the Passion for Invention*, (New York: Arcade Publishing),9-10.

Alexander and his mother developed complex conversation within the taps. Tapping lacks the communicative abilities of signed language but tapping has remained an aspect of modern deaf culture as a method for gaining attention or alerting a deaf individual.<sup>5</sup> It is a regular site during deaf social gatherings to see individuals tapping on tables or stomping their feet on the floor to alert another person and get their attention. To the average hearing person, this can be construed as rude behavior, but within deaf culture, it is an integral aspect of group communication and is regularly used in group conversations.

Along with this manual language, Alexander was trained by his father in the finer mechanics of Visible Speech, a methodology developed by the elder Bell to educate and instruct elocutionists on how to clearly enunciate words as well as how to read lip movements to discern what was being spoken.<sup>6</sup> Visible Speech relied upon a phonetic alphabet that utilized symbols as notations for sound. Letters were assigned symbols and through the application of the Visible Speech alphabet, the phonetics of language could be written in shorthand notation that provided the reader with a means to pronounce and enunciate spoken words.<sup>7</sup> The younger Bell quickly excelled in Visible Speech and could write and symbolize sounds and speech in a multitude of languages. The education received from his father in Visible Speech included courses on phonetics and elocution. Bell was trained in how sound was produced in the vocal cords and how the shape of the mouth and placement of the tongue distorted or enhanced the acoustics of speech. Understanding the generation of speech in humans and the mechanisms that make this

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<sup>5</sup>Thomas K. Holcomb, *Introduction to American Deaf Culture*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>6</sup>Robert V. Bruce, *Bell*, 36.

<sup>7</sup>Alexander M. Bell, *Visible Speech: The Science of Universal Alphabets*, 1867.

function possible was central to elocution. Once a firm grasp of acoustics was achieved, the formation of speech patterns and grammatic structuring was simplified. The teaching of elocution involved instructing how to shape the mouth and position the tongue to produce the phonetic sounds linked to letters and words. Armed with a sound knowledge of acoustics and speech, Alexander and his brother, Melville, began experimenting with sound, attempting to create a mechanism for mimicking human speech and the transmission of sound. The brothers were successful in creating a mechanical speech apparatus, constructing a device that possessed an artificial larynx placed in a mock head. Forcing air through the mechanism and altering the shape of the lips and tongue, the device was successful at producing simple words.

Following the completion of his education, Bell continued his works with sound as a hobby while working a string of menial jobs, but elocution and the propagation of Visible Speech remained his initial passion. Unfortunately, tragedy would befall the Bell family as Alexander's siblings were stricken with illness that proved fatal. His younger brother, Edward Bell, died from tuberculosis in 1867, and Melville died from similar complications of tuberculosis in May 1870. The death of his brothers, coupled with his own declining health, prompted Bell's father to petition for the family to move to Canada. The younger Alexander went to North America ahead of the family, settling in Ontario. Believing that Canada would be beneficial to Alexander's health, the family emigrated in 1870, where he established a workshop and continued his work with language and artificial speech.<sup>8</sup> With the workshop up and running and the assistance of his father, the Bell's began their elocution and phonetics practice in North America; by

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<sup>8</sup>Brian H. Greenwald, "Alexander Graham Bell through the Lens of Eugenics, 1883-1922." Ph.D. Dissertation, George Washington University, 2006.

this time, the dispersion of Visible Speech became the primary mission of the Bells. In Canada, Alexander became involved with eugenicists who introduced him to the growing eugenics movement in North America. Emboldened by eugenics ideology, Bell looked towards the deaf community and the study of elocution as a vehicle for social improvement.

Bell's growing interest in eugenics and the inheritance of undesirable genetic traits influenced his belief in Oralism. The concept of eugenics was not a new one when Alexander Graham Bell joined the growing collective of scientists and scholars who believed in the efficacy of the principle. Selective breeding is and has always been a critical component of animal husbandry, with the careful selection of desired qualities expressed through mate pairing resulting in animals that possess greater genetic traits and limited genetic defects. The application of this concept to humans shares a similar lineage in antiquity. Plato argued that careful breeding could produce a guardian class of humans, and warrior societies such as Sparta and the Germanic tribes in ancient Europe desired to sire children who were physically fit and tempered towards combat and conquest. Strong members of society could mate while weaker individuals were unworthy of siring children who would have the same flaws as their parents. Selective breeding of humans also played a prominent role in the determination of social and financial status as seen in the patriarchal Rome and the marriage arrangements that secured political and religious alliances in nearly every culture across human history. It was not until the genesis of Charles Darwin's evolutionary theory that a more concentrated effort was placed on the selective breeding of human when Francis Galton determined that genes and heredity were responsible for expressed desirable traits, leading to the establishment of eugenics

as a scientific theory in 1883.<sup>9</sup> Following Galton's scientific discovery and until the end of the century, eugenics gained traction within various circles among North America's premier academic and scientific communities. Eugenacists propagated the belief that perceived human flaws and social discrepancies could be corrected with direct intervention in the realms of social policy, medicine, and heredity.<sup>10</sup> The overall goal of the nascent movement was to elevate the caliber of North American society to an ideal and to eradicate any elements which may be perceived as detrimental to this goal. The policies that eugenacists began to introduce were targeted toward North America's minorities such as African Americans, Native Americans, newly arrived immigrants from Europe, and the physically and mentally disabled.<sup>11</sup> In grappling with the morality and ethics of these policies, many were careful to point out that these demographic outliers were an undue burden to society and must be corrected to ensure the survival of polite, white society and to forward progress toward a uniform civilization. In justifying their actions, many eugenacists carefully labelled these minorities as existing as an "other" in the form of another race separate from healthy whites. The identity of the minority was replaced by a label, making it easier to subjugate them. Among the groups targeted was the deaf community, in which Bell was perceived as a figurehead, and he was tasked with developing a pedagogical approach to "correcting" the flaws of deafness.

Using Visible Speech to notate Native American languages, Bell achieved moderate success in Ontario, but his move south into the United States and application of

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<sup>9</sup>Francis Galton, "Eugenics: Its Definition, Scope, and Aims." *The American Journal of Sociology* 10 (1904): 1.

<sup>10</sup>Francis Galton, "Eugenics", 3.

<sup>11</sup>Mark H. Haller, *Eugenics: Hereditarian Attitudes in American Thought*, (New York: Rutgers University Press, 1963), 22.

Visible Speech to human subjects proved more fruitful. Hearing of the senior Bell's successes in educating deaf-mutes in the United Kingdom, elder Bell was invited to the Boston School for Deaf-Mutes by headmistress Sarah Fuller. Fuller received training from Bell in teaching speech and went on to work with Helen Keller, her most successful pupil. The institution itself was established in 1869 as a day school for deaf Bostonians, later being renamed the Horace Mann School for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. Prior obligations compelled the senior Bell to send his son to the school in his stead where he achieved great success in educating pupils in acquiring an appropriate degree of language acquisition and speech ability.<sup>12</sup> Capitalizing on this triumph, Alexander received an invitation to the Clarke School in Northampton, Massachusetts, where his pupils achieved success comparable to those at the Boston School. Alexander realized the efficacy of this work and in the fall of 1872 established a private institution of his own geared specifically to the education of speech to the deaf.

While working at his school, Bell forged two significant relationships with former students that would further shape his perception of the deaf community and how best to elevate it to the same level of speech as its hearing counterpart; George Sanders would remain with Bell even after his completion of school, offering his assistance in educating future pupils, while Mabel Hubbard would become Bell's wife and a participant in many of Bell's later experiments with speech acquisition. Bell's relationship with Mabel Hubbard, revealed through letters found in the Volta Bureau, reinforce the motive previously displayed in the letters about his mother's condition: Bell perceived deafness and the inability to hear as a physical barrier that kept the deaf community isolated from

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<sup>12</sup>Sarah Fuller to Alexander Graham Bell, July 28, 1871, Records of Alexander Graham Bell, Volta Laboratory and Bureau, Georgetown, Washington, D.C.

the larger hearing world.<sup>13</sup> It was at Bell's private school that his philosophy of education and curriculum shifted dramatically, as he abandoned Visible Speech for Oralism, opting to teach his pupils the mechanics of lip-reading and vocalization. The successes of Visible Speech were impractical when applied to a community that relied on sight rather than sound for communication. Oralism implemented lip-reading and mimicry to educate deaf individuals to speak. Teaching deaf people how to shape their mouths and identify and correlate these mouth shapes with spoken word, Oralists could provide the foundations of speech to the deaf community. The method gained popularity in the various deaf institutes and promoted the idea that the suppression of sign and the education of speech was the most effective education model. Through careful instruction, hearing instructors could teach deaf individuals to shape their mouths and position their tongues to mimic the speech of hearing people and gain limited linguistic abilities. Oralism became Bell's *modus operandi*, believing that manual communication, in fact, limited the deaf community. Bell was convinced that this linguistic threshold could be overcome by the suppression of signed language and might lead to the social integration of the deaf community.<sup>14</sup> Bell's experience with the deaf led him to conclude that they constituted an individual race with its own cultural and linguistic customs not compatible with the perceived superior modalities of larger hearing American society.<sup>15</sup> Bell's ambitions steered toward correcting these cultural restrictions and introducing policies that would allow for deaf citizens to become an asset to society rather than a hindrance.

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<sup>13</sup>Alexander Graham Bell to Charles Benedict Davenport, Dec. 27, 1912, Records of Alexander Graham Bell, Volta Laboratory and Bureau, Georgetown, Washington, D.C.

<sup>14</sup>Alexander Graham Bell, *Memoir Upon the Formation of a Deaf Variety of the Human Race*, (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Library Deaf Collections and Archives), 45.

<sup>15</sup>Bell, *Memoir*, 4.



The most outward of these corrections was his decision to abandon the curriculum of Visible Speech in favor of Oralism and the introduction of Controlled Speech in deaf-mute education, which combined the codified language of Visible Speech with the physical manipulation of the throat and mouth to produce the speech to create a practical method of teaching speech to the deaf.

To ensure the success of Oralism's adoption, Bell began to introduce social policies that targeted the core of the deaf cultural identity, their perceived self-imposed isolation through common communal relations, and their continued use of manual or signed communication. Using his own private institution as a pseudo-control group, Bell began by forbidding the use of sign language in classroom instructions and in the private sectors of student dormitories and public communal areas.<sup>16</sup> His original staff of deaf instructors and administrators was promptly replaced with hearing counterparts who were trained in speech pathology, merging deaf instruction with hearing instructors. Once manual communication was forbidden, he used his previous experiences with the sciences of acoustics and speech to impose a curriculum that instructed deaf-mute students on how to properly formulate speech. Students were taught Controlled Speech, or how to shape their mouths and to position their tongues to properly articulate the sounds of letters and words. While reading phonetics, a student would form the sound shapes in his mouth and express his vocal cords to produce sound and speech. To ensure further integration, Bell established non-residential day schools that put hearing and deaf students in regular contact with one another and promoted the regular use of oral communication by deaf pupils. Many of these deaf students worked alongside hearing

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<sup>16</sup>Richard Winefield, *Never the Twain Shall Meet: The Communications Debate*, (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1987), 43.

students in speech courses where they developed lip-reading skills to overcome the cognitive input deficiency of being unable to hear voiced communication. Working near hearing speakers allowed deaf students to experience speech firsthand. The hearing students were selected by instructors based on their linguistic abilities and their deaf peers would spend time working alongside them to observe how to properly articulate speech. A common practice to aid in the proper articulation of speech was through the physical method of tonal vocal vibrations in which deaf-mute students placed their hand on the throat of a speaker to better understand what vibrations correlated with word and sound formation. Supplemented with elocution training and Bell's Visible Speech model, these deaf pupils deconstructed speech and sound letter by letter, combining the various tonal vibrations with the correct mouth and tongue shapes to produce comprehensible speech. Alexander Graham Bell was keen on the fact that opinion and public favor would ensure the success of his model; if people felt that Bell's model could improve the lives of deaf people, their support would ensure its widespread adoption as the primary model for educating the deaf community. Using public sentiment in his favor and drawing from his critical acclaim as an accomplished scientist, Bell was able to gain support by casting pity upon the downtrodden deaf person who was unable to have a healthy relationship with his family, peers, and society due to the linguistic barrier.<sup>17</sup> A common theme Bell promoted was the divide between hearing parents and their deaf children, promising to help these parents to provide a better opportunity for their children. In the residential schools, deaf students were indoctrinated with the belief that achieving spoken linguistic

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<sup>17</sup>Bell, *Memoirs*, 43.

success would allow them to gain a place in society and that future success was dependent on being capable of clear speech and communication with the hearing public.

The cultural bonds of the deaf community inhibited the success of oral education and the assimilation of the deaf community into hearing society. Noting how deaf people tended to flock to members of their own community, he sought to break this social bond by championing policies, first in his school and in residential schools, which sought to separate deaf people and place them in constant close proximity to hearing people. Bell's own understanding of heredity and genetics also influenced his decision to target the social bonds of the deaf community. Francis Galton's research into genetic heredity introduced the concept of selective breeding in humans but it was through his studies of sheep and rams that Bell and his peers realized that genetic traits shared between parents could be manifested and expressed in the offspring. Selective breeding could eliminate undesirable traits while fostering desirable traits.<sup>18</sup> Bell applied this same logic to the deaf community, taking notice of the trends of deaf expression in families with multiple deaf relatives. He noted that the children of hereditarily deaf parents were more likely to be born deaf at a higher rate than children born to hearing parents. In a calculated series of decisions, Bell introduced the idea of selective breeding within the deaf community to restrict the growth of future deaf generations and to eliminate deafness in white civilization. Targeting the reproductive abilities of the deaf community, Bell sought to break the cultural and communal bonds of the community by proffering a policy that forbade the marriage of deaf individuals to other deaf people. While never federally legal, states took it upon themselves to pass ordinances aimed at curtailing deaf people

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<sup>18</sup>Chloe S. Burke and Christopher J. Castaneda, "The Public and Private History of Eugenics: An Introduction," *The Public Historian* 29, no. 3 (2007): 6.

congregating and limiting the rights of deaf individuals. Many deaf institutions and educators in North America began to encourage its residents to marry hearing people in an effort to produce offspring who had a greater chance of being hearing.<sup>19</sup> Disguised as a moral quandary, Bell and his instructors challenged their deaf pupils by questioning if it was morally sound to marry other deaf individuals and siring future generations of deaf people, or if it was selfishness that drove deaf people to procreate with other deaf people, further burdening society. This policy was adopted by the scientific community at large as a solution to the perceived “deaf problem” and was championed by eugenicists as an effective means of correcting the negative traits of hereditary deafness. Within the deaf community itself, the policy sparked a division. Groups were divided on the issue with some arguing that it was the responsible of the deaf community to correct this genetic flaw, while others saw the continued reproduction of deaf individuals as a necessity for the survival of the deaf community.

The success of Bell’s Oral curricula and his advocacy of social intervention in the deaf community propelled him to the forefront of the debate about how to best educate the deaf community and to integrate them into the larger hearing society. Taking his policies on an international tour, Bell was invited to join the Second International Congress on Education of the Deaf held in Milan, Italy in 1880 where he sat among a cadre of his peers and only a few of his detractors.<sup>20</sup> Of the 164 conference delegates in attendance, all but one was hearing, and most of the conference shared a bias toward

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<sup>19</sup>William Thomas Ennis, “Hereditarian Ideas and Eugenic Ideals at the National Deaf-Mute College,” Ph.D. Thesis, University of Iowa, 2015.

<sup>20</sup>Report of the Proceedings of the International Congress of the Education of the Deaf, Milan, Italy, September 6<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup>, 1880 (London: W.H. Allen & co., 1880), Deaf Rare Books Collection, Gallaudet University.

Oralism as the organizer of the conference, the Pereire Society, was an advocate for the suspension of signed language. Adding to the bias was the fact that the conference's president, Abbe Giulio Tarra, was a member of the Church, reinforcing the moral mission of Christianity to improve the plight of the global deaf community. Bell's primary detractors were Thomas Gallaudet and his son, Edward Miner Gallaudet, staunch advocates of signed language who argued that it was the most effective method to educate the deaf community. Despite their fierce defense of manualism, they were outnumbered by the Oralists and held little sway over the assembly's decisions. Merging North American and European deaf policies, the Congress deliberated on the proper education of the deaf community with Oralism being widely accepted as the best methodology for educating the West's deaf populations.<sup>21</sup> Chaired by a majority of hearing educators, the congress passed several resolutions declaring signed communication a detriment to deaf education and that a purely Oral curriculum afforded deaf communities with the best opportunity at a meaningful contribution to society. The initial backlash from pro-sign educators and organizations such as Gallaudet College (now Gallaudet University) was suppressed by the Oralists and the Congress was deemed a success in favor of the Oralist agenda. The success of the conference in banning signed communication in deaf education meant that deaf education rested in the hands of hearing Oralists, further deepening the rift that was already growing within the deaf community.

It is imperative to comprehend that Bell's deaf policies were merely a stopgap to the growing concerns surrounding the question of how best to educate the deaf and to

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<sup>21</sup>William F. Sharkey, and James W. Hikins, "Edward Miner Gallaudet's "Remarks on the Combined System": An Analysis of the "Preservative" Function of Rhetoric of Education," *Communication Education*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (1993), 62.

provide them with a better position in society. Despite his obvious biases, many of Bell's actions and policies were targeted towards to the deaf community in an effort to provide them with a better quality of life and a sense of place in the hearing world.<sup>22</sup> Bell serves as both champion and villain to the American deaf community. The policies proposed by his contemporaries would eradicate the deaf population within generations. His policies produced undue difficulties and inflicted suffering onto deaf people, but his position as the premier advocate of deaf education and social policy served as a buffer against his more radical colleagues. Alexander Graham Bell's social policies towards the deaf isolated many within the community and deprived them of the cultural and social connections that created the deaf community. Many deaf people in North America were left to question their validity as a person in hearing society and were morally at odds with the decision of how best to ensure the future of the peers and children. Despite these issues, Bell's methodology offered a degree of protection for the more extreme policies proposed by his peers in eugenic research. Many of his contemporaries sought to eradicate the deaf community as a means of cleansing society of its undesirables. Sterilization was an idea that many supported, arguing that the deafness could be physically removed from society. Thus, the deaf community would lose its ability to reproduce and within a matter of generations, the deaf problem would eliminate itself.

One such contemporary was Charles Davenport (1866-1944) who like Bell, was a prominent eugenicist. Davenport served as a de facto figurehead for the movement, applying his understanding of Mendelian genetics and the inheritance of expressed

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<sup>22</sup>Brian Greenwald, "The Real "Toll" of A. G. Bell: Lessons in Eugenics" *Genetics, Disability, and Deafness* (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 2004), 39-40.

physical traits to his own approach.<sup>23</sup> This approach sought to implement social isolation and surgical intervention as a method of reducing the appearance of deaf offspring. Davenport pushed for the sterilization of deaf individuals as well as surgical practices that sought to correct physical deformity to bestow hearing onto the deaf community. Davenport looked to Bell and his work with the deaf population of Martha's Vineyard as a source of material. Martha's Vineyard was chosen as the control because of its unusually high percentage of deaf residents and the commonality of sign language used by deaf and hearing residents alike.<sup>24</sup> Due to the isolation of the location and the frequent intermarrying that occurred on the island, the hereditarily recessive deaf gene was expressed in greater frequency, and most of the families living on the island had a deaf relative or interacted with deaf people on a regular basis. In defending his position, Davenport expressed his opinion in his seminal work, *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics* (1911), "It is a reproach to our intelligence that we as a people, proud in other respects of our control of nature, should have to support about half a million insane, feeble-minded, epileptic, blind and deaf, 80,000 prisoners and 100,000 paupers at a cost of over 100 million dollars per year."<sup>25</sup> Davenport argued that the economic burden placed on society for the care provided to the aforementioned demographics could be alleviated by eugenics policies and proposed that these demographics be reduced by surgical and social means to relieve some of these stresses. Davenport was not alone in his opinions and

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<sup>23</sup>D.J. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity*, (London & Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 41-42.

<sup>24</sup>Nora Ellen Groce, *Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language: Hereditary Deafness on Martha's Vineyard*, (London & Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 16.

<sup>25</sup>Charles B. Davenport, *Heredity in Relation to Genetics*, (New York, Holt & Company, 1911), 4.

many eugenicists supported the theory that North America could be improved by reducing the number of undesirables through aggressive intervention.

By offering a means of societal integration to the deaf community through cultural and linguistic dissolution, Alexander Graham Bell was able to shelter the community from the same devastating policies that were placed upon other minority demographics. The deaf community would lose what made it a separate, isolated culture, but by shedding these cultural markers, the deaf population in North America would be spared from the aggressive eradication practices proposed by more extreme eugenicists. While his policies may be perceived as less severe in comparison to other social policies, Bell's work with the North American deaf community altered the trajectory of the community in the larger historical narrative and produced unforeseen ripples that continue to manifest in the twenty-first century. The policies enacted by Alexander Graham Bell towards the deaf community would lead to issues surrounding the cultural identity of deafness, the appropriate educational requirements of the deaf community, and the degree of autonomy held by deaf leaders in making decisions for their respective community.

The combination of Oralism and the social policy had profound effects on the deaf communities, many of which have resurfaced in new manners that are more veiled than the overt tactics of nineteenth and early twentieth-century eugenics. The program of eugenics has been discredited but the social and communal stigmas held by the hearing community, particularly in North America, persisted into the twentieth century. The deaf community continued to be viewed with pity and the hearing public viewed signed language as an inferior communication model. The hearing community continued to



address the question of deafness in society and sought new avenues that would offer an answer to the “deaf question”. Medicine and technology each gained prominent roles in answering the question. New scientific discoveries have revealed the genetic markers that contribute to the expression of deaf traits and medical intervention has reduce the frequency of these undesirable traits in newborns.<sup>26</sup> At Martha’s Vineyard, the development of better transportation and the influx of more hearing residents to the island in the early twentieth century has reduced the number of deaf residents to a fraction of its original number. By expanding the genetic pool, the recessive traits of deafness were suppressed.<sup>27</sup> The social policies restricting marriage between deaf individuals impacted the recurrence of deafness in society by a degree, but innovation has had a greater effect. These effects would manifest toward the end of the twentieth century, with medicine and science being the main areas of focus. Surgical intervention and technology have progressed to address the slack that medical intervention may not be able to address. Corrective surgeries are often imposed on newborns at the behest of hearing parents who dread the thought of raising a child with hearing difficulties, and a technological cottage industry has sprung up to supplement these interventions. The hearing device industry alone was worth four billion dollars in 2018.<sup>28</sup> Hearing aids, cochlear implants, and FM systems have been developed to provide a means for deaf people to overcome their perceived “disabilities” and to become more like their hearing counterparts. Technology changed the issues surrounding deafness and has offered the deaf community with a

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<sup>26</sup>Harry Lang, *Silence of the Spheres: The Deaf Experience in the History of Science*, (Westport, Greenwood Publishing, 1994), 131.

<sup>27</sup>Nora Ellen Groce, *Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language*, 63.

<sup>28</sup>Associated Press, “Global Hearing Aid Devices & Equipment Market Report, 2020”, *Business Wire*, Nov. 14, 2019. Dec. 20, 2019. <https://apnews.com/0eeea2b949b446f884b39c5d0d493110>

means to escape the perceived condemnation of deafness. Many of the fears and apprehensions about deafness resulting from Bell and his fellow eugenicists still pervade the larger hearing public perception and contribute to the continued efforts of many to resolve the issues of deafness and to provide deaf people a means of accessing hearing society. These fears generated a psychological rift within the North American deaf community, leaving many to question how best to integrate into hearing society and what it means to be a deaf individual living in a hearing world.

Alexander Graham Bell's legacy within the North American historical narrative extends beyond his work with communication and the science of speech. Bell's social theory was accepted by the hearing public and was the most effective method of deaf education. Deaf policies would remain in the hands of hearing leaders and instructors well into the twentieth century; the influence of Bell and his deaf policies have affected the identity, autonomy, and legitimacy of the deaf community. What made the deaf community a unique cultural group was stripped, and the community was subjugated to control of hearing individuals in the determination of social, education, and cultural decisions. The policies and ideas he championed still reverberate, and directly impact a community that has gained more visibility and prominence in the twenty-first century. As newer generations of historians begin to conduct their own research, the legacy of Bell is increasingly becoming a subject of historical analysis and is being criticized of elitist ideology and biased historical interpretation. The fact that the hearing public and Oralists controlled and wrote the early history of the deaf community means that much of the recorded history is biased in favor of Bell and the Oralists. Hearing perception of deaf history lacks knowledge in understanding the intricacies of deaf culture and signed

language. From the outside looking in, signed language looks like an indecipherable collection of hand and arm movements and fails to address the linguistically complex nature of sign language and the culture that has evolved around this shared method of communication. Scholars within the deaf community are constructing a narrative around the effects of Bell's Oralist policies and are spurred by a community eager to tell their story from their own perspective and to illuminate the other side of Bell's legacy: the story of those targeted and affected by the advent of Oralism and social engineering.

The following chapter of this research will examine the other side of this history and address the interpretation promoted by the deaf community. Looking at the resistance of the deaf community during Bell's preeminence and the shifts that occurred in the twentieth century, the chapter will examine how the prevailing history of the hearing public fails to consider the history of the deaf community through deaf eyes. The changing politics and growing autonomy of the North American deaf community resulted in reforms in deaf educational and social policies. The lives of deaf students at Oralist schools, the identity of the deaf community, and the culture surrounding signed language will be examined. Lastly, gaining autonomy over deaf affairs by deaf leaders results in a shift toward manual education and the growth of a deaf historian caste that recounts deaf history in the same manner of hearing history. By looking at the intersectional nature of this history, a more complete interpretation of North America's silent minority provides greater insight into the relationship between the hearing public and its deaf counterpart.

## CHAPTER II

### Culture War: The Resurgence of Manualism

On the evening of March 6<sup>th</sup>, 1988, in a small corner of Northeast Washington, D.C., the students of Gallaudet University eagerly walked to the school's gymnasium to find out the decision made by the school's Board of Trustees. In the weeks leading up to that night, the Board of the university had been in serious debate about the appointment of a new university president; split by three potential candidates, the Board had to decide whether to appoint Elisabeth Zinser, I. King Jordan, or Harvey Corson. When students arrived at the gym doors, they were met not with an assembly of staff and students to receive the decision, but instead found the floor and walls outside the gym strewn with flyers declaring the university's newly appointed president was also its "first female president." The excitement that electrified the air in the days prior to the announcement was quickly replaced by a pensive anticipation. The decision was met with ire, not elation, and the student body convened to air their grievances in what they perceived as a slight by the university's hearing administrators. Zinser was a hearing woman who had been selected by hearing trustees over two equally qualified deaf candidates. A consensus swept through the student collective and a protest was organized to garner the attention of the Board and those who were affected by the decision.<sup>29</sup>

The following morning, the student body assembled in a scene reminiscent of the opening days of the Roman social wars, barring the gates of the university with bicycle locks and hijacking university buses to blockade other access points. Incensed, the collective marched throughout the campus, picking up additional supporters and

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<sup>29</sup>John B. Christiansen and Sarah N. Barnartt, *Deaf President Now!: The 1988 Revolution at Gallaudet University*, (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 2003), 67-68.

displaying banners declaring that the school's undergraduates and staff demanded a "Deaf President Now!" After lapping the whole of the university and the adjacent residential and elementary schools, delegations from the student body and members of the Board met to negotiate terms, but when the demands of the students were rejected, the mass erupted in further protest and marched on the United States Capitol. Over the course of the next week, the student body continued their protest, burning effigies of Board members and refused to capitulate until their simple demands were met. In the last days of the protests, the collective would again march to the Capitol Building, this time proclaiming that they "still had a dream."<sup>30</sup> Facing public scrutiny and political pressure both internally and externally, the Board relented on its position and gave into the demands of the students. Zinser was ousted, the constitution of the Board and its members were reorganized, and Irving King Jordan, was elevated to the position as the first deaf president.

In looking at this event only three decades removed from today, many questions begin to arise about the nature of the protest and what brought on the sudden and explosive reaction of the students. In the 124 years leading up to the watershed event, the university had never had a deaf president and was administered by a staff of hearing administrators who oversaw the affairs and education of a community to which they possessed no fundamental connection.<sup>31</sup> The deaf students of Gallaudet saw an opportunity to grasp the reins of power and take control of their own cultural history. This narrative examines the challenges presented to the traditional hearing historical

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<sup>30</sup>Molly Sinclair, *1,500 At Gallaudet Urge "Deaf President Now"*, The Washington Post, March 2, 1988.

<sup>31</sup>Jack R. Gannon, *The Week the World Heard Gallaudet*, (Washington D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 2009), 33.

narrative and provides insight into how the deaf community was able to maintain at least an iota of autonomy over the interpretation of their history. Contrasted by the domineering Oralist history presented in the previous chapter, the written works of the deaf community during the eugenics craze of the United States during the 1880s and up to 1920s, recast the deaf individual in active historical role and provides an alternative perspective to the early history of the North American Deaf community.

The historiography of Alexander Graham Bell, along with much of the historical American narrative of the nineteenth and twentieth century is dominated by a one-dimensional interpretation. This interpretation follows an analysis placing the hearing populace in a superior position but fails to address the intersectional histories of America's minorities that impacted, and were impacted by, this overarching narrative. North America's white history follows a formula and has been repetitive since the colonial establishments by the European empires. Arrival in a new territory, the settlers begin to exert their own ideological and cultural identity on the indigenous populations and through dominance, forcing the natives to submit and comply with the foreign power or be eradicated either through assimilation or wholesale genocide. The history of the United States and most of Western Europe has followed this model, and in nineteenth century North America, it was the actions of able-bodied Anglo-Saxon Protestants who controlled this domination. Through sheer force of numbers and the control of political, social, financial, and authoritative powers, this group was able to maintain its power; this same ideology was applied to the deaf community. In controlling the flow of social and political policies, the larger hearing public was able to exert control over the affairs of the deaf community and force them into a submissive role. The power of hearing white

Christians has lessened, providing the submissive demographics of North America a growing allotment of control. The latter half of the twentieth century saw the emergence of a new field of historical research aimed at providing inclusion to this traditional history. The traditional history of early North America has been broadened to include the perspective of oppressed groups and has changed the view of history from a singular domineering perspective to one that looks at a shared event from the viewpoint of everyone involved. Observing events with an omniscient perspective ensures that every aspect of an event is documented and interpreted; the victory of one group and its rise to power is the defeat of another and their flight from relevance. Racially oppressed and socially marginalized groups have used historical academia as a vehicle to revise their history and to provide depth to their past apart from victimization and oppression. This effort can be seen in the revisionary works of African American and Native American historians who are rewriting the history of their place in the larger American society and attempting to gain legitimacy for their people; the same holds true for the American deaf community. In a direct revision of Bell's research, the deaf community began to look to its past to place themselves within this corrected narrative. The emerging alternative histories of America's minority classes contribute to the correction of America's historical narrative, but as with Alexander Graham Bell's historiography, the historiography of the American deaf community struggles with objectivity and limited perspective.

In the first few decades of the twentieth century, eugenics was widely accepted as a legitimate study into human interaction and policies shaped by the theory were

implemented by governments across the globe.<sup>32</sup> Further research into genetics and biology eroded the support of the movement in the late thirties. The forties signaled the end of the popularity of eugenics. A shift occurred in the psyche of America's collective minority. The viability of the theory was called into question and was demonized by the extreme eugenics' practices utilized by the Nazis. The experimentations conducted by the Nazis revealed the darker aspects of the movement and many governments and institutes quickly denounced the study as a pseudo-science in order to distance themselves from Germany. As the yoke of oppression was gradually lessening its weight, the minorities of America began to seek enfranchisement, establishing themselves in pivotal public positions and cultivating a wave of social change that would manifest itself in the middle decades of the twentieth century. While more visible demographics such as the African American community and the feminist movement occupied the forefront of this change, lesser known demographics were also effecting change in their own communities; the growing Chicano movement in the American Southwest, the Stonewall riot during the gay liberation, and the resurgence of manual linguistics and the push for educational autonomy in the deaf community all served as significant catalysis for social legitimacy. The deaf community associated the legitimacy of their culture with greater control over internal affairs. The ability to control educational administration and the practice of cultural practices such as signed language allowed the North American deaf community to claim an elevated position in society.

Much of what is written about Bell centers on his scientific achievement and fails to provide an adequate explanation of his Oralism policies. The perception of Bell and his

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<sup>32</sup>Chloe S. Burke and Christopher J. Castaneda, "The Public and Private History of Eugenics: An Introduction," *The Public Historian* 29, no. 3 (2007): 8.



involvement with the eugenics movement portrays the effects of social intervention within the deaf community as a necessary step in correcting a problem within society; the resulting damages wrought upon the deaf community were a necessary evil in the march toward progress. During this era, academic writing was circumstantial and superficial, discussing the policy and methodology of how best to alleviate the “deaf plight” without clarifying what these policies did to the members of the community and how they placed themselves within society during this time period. The hearing world lacked an understanding of how the deaf community perceived itself and saw the loss of hearing as a burden, but when asked by Tom Humphries and Carol Padden in their book, *Inside Deaf Culture* (2005), the people interviewed claimed that hearing loss was “gaining deafness.”<sup>33</sup> Entrance into the deaf community was marked by acceptance into a community that shared in the burdens of living in a hearing world and through acculturation, people gained a new sense of self. The identity of a culturally deaf individual is linked to signed communication and the behavioral customs that come with visual language. If a hearing person were to enter the deaf world, they would be shocked to find how similar the lives of deaf people are to hearing people, but that these similarities are also capitalized with distinct differences that make deaf culture its own entity. A simple conversation around a table is accompanied with foot stomping and banging on the table as friends try to gain the attention of one another. Men and women must be careful of what they sign and share with one another due to the open visibility of manual language; intimate or private conversations have the same visibility across a room that a classroom lecture has, and signers must be aware of who is around and who is

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<sup>33</sup>Carol Padden and Tom Humphries, *Inside Deaf Culture*, (London & Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 51.

watching. Deaf culture itself possesses unspoken social cues and rules that can only be learned through experience in the deaf world.<sup>34</sup> Conversations continue despite distance or obstacles, the layout of spaces are organized to allow for easier communication, and the very signs used vary between regions, nationalities, and ethnicities. Spaces within the deaf community are organized in a way that assists communication and are often large open areas with few obstructions that allow for signs to be seen by a large collective of people and is easily distinguishable at a distance. People possess different signing styles and occupy their signing space in different ways; signing space is the space around a signer and can be described as small signs close to the body or by large signs that take up the whole of a person's body and include fast or slow signs. Differences in signing space change the messages being communicated and add additional expressions. There is even a racial distinction within signed language. African American signers commonly use Black American Sign Language, or BASL, which is less formal than traditional ASL and uses a combination of shortened signs and slang that are characteristically different from formal signed language. The style used by these signers is visibly different from formal signs, being broader and typically faster.<sup>35</sup> Clothing also plays a distinct role in deaf culture. Presenters who give orations and interpreters who provide linguistic interpretation are expected to understand skin tones and the effects of color contrasts on sign comprehensibility. A person with darker skin should wear lighter colors so their hands are more visible to the recipients and vice versa. The nuances of deaf culture are something unique to the deaf community, and to the outside hearing observer, these

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<sup>34</sup>Thomas K. Holcomb, *Introduction to American Deaf Culture*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 40-43.

<sup>35</sup>Carolyn McCaskill, Ceil Lucas, Robert Bayley, and Joseph Hill, *The Hidden Treasure of Black ASL: Its History and Structure*, (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 2011), 116.

subtle social cues are missed. A central issue that arose within the deaf community regarding its history was the sentiment that their history was told from the outside looking in, from a hearing perspective that had no concept of the intricacies of deaf communal bonds and the significance of a cultural language that was appropriated by non-native signers.<sup>36</sup> Signed language is a central component of the deaf identity and its history belonged to the deaf community. This is not to say that the deaf community was a monolith; in fact, the efforts of Bell and his contemporaries created a rift within the community that prevails to this day.

Deaf historians have begun constructing an alternative narrative that recasts the deaf individual and highlights the efforts of a community desperate to save itself from a perceived cultural genocide. This idea of a cultural genocide would become the cornerstone in the deaf historian's arsenal in constructing this new identity. While not a genocide in the traditional sense, the deaf community regarded the dissolution of their language and the destruction of their communal bonds as an effort to reduce and ultimately eradicate their community. Teresa Blankmeyer Burke of Gallaudet University is the first deaf woman in the world to receive her doctorate and her studies into the ethics of deaf gene deletion discuss society's relationship to deafness. Burke argues that the dissolution of the deaf community through genetic manipulation is a bioethical issue and is nothing short of a cultural genocide.

The use of gene therapy to cure hereditary deafness would result in smaller numbers of deaf children. This, in turn, would reduce the critical mass of signing deaf people needed for a flourishing community, ultimately resulting in

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<sup>36</sup>Brian H. Greenwald, "Beyond Oralism: Alexander Graham Bell and the American Eugenics Movement, 1883-1922." *Research & Scholarly Achievement*, Gallaudet University Press, (Fall 2012).

the demise of the community. Most deaf children are born to hearing parents in families that have taken up the values and norms of a society constructed for hearing people. Most of these deaf children are not given a choice about whether to pursue their bimodal and bilingual birthright—that choice is made for them by their culturally hearing parents.<sup>37</sup>

Teresa Blankmeyer Burke further claims that cultural bias normalizes hearing and compel parents of deaf children to conform to the mainstream hearing identity. The normalization of hearing in North American society has pushed many parents to have their children identify as hearing. Hearing aids, FM systems, and cochlear implants are options to overcome deafness, and as such, the deaf community sees this technology as a tool in the cultural genocide. Burke argues that this assimilation into the hearing community drains the deaf community of its populace and creates further social issues for the ones who are unsuccessful in their assimilation. The lack of proper language acquisition leaves these individuals socially and culturally isolated and weakens cultural bonds.

Bell's decision to ban signing within the residential schools and in the public deaf community stripped the community of a cultural cornerstone and was perceived by many within the community to be an assault of the deaf lifestyle. The ban on sign language isolated the deaf community and relegated them to social obscurity. In 1913, during the height of Bell's popularity, leaders in the deaf community highlighted that sentiment in a film titled, *Preservation of the Sign Language* (1913). In the 14-minute film, George William Veditz, then president of the National Association of the Deaf, explains how the

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<sup>37</sup>Teresa Blankmeyer Burke, "Quest for a Deaf Child, Ethics and Genetics", Ph.D. Dissertation, University of New Mexico, 2011.

loss of signed language would serve as the undoing of the deaf community and how it was the duty of the deaf community to maintain their identity through the preservation of their language. Communicated solely through sign language and without subtitles, Veditz begins by expressing gratitude and love for his deaf peers before delivering an impassioned speech on the need to protect the deaf community's right to sovereignty in their decision to use manual or oral communication.<sup>38</sup> Returning to the question of deaf continuity, Veditz gave his reasoning for creating the film, stating that this film would serve both as a gift to the NAD and the American public and as a medium of preserving sign language. Veditz, along with his peers, felt that the Oralists would succeed in erasing the deaf community and that the only memories of the deaf would be his film. The eradication of signed language leaves the deaf community without a means to connect with one another and disrupts the social ties within the community. While Oralism had the potential to provide the deaf individual with the ability to speak and interact with the hearing public, the lack of a visual language restricts language input and interrupts the community's ability to act as a single body and mind. The reduction in the number of native signers would hinder the deaf community and assimilation of the community into the hearing public would destroy the last vestiges of a cultural identity.

Despite the decline of Oralism following World War I, the feeling of cultural destruction would remain a central theme to the deaf community and again, this would be highlighted in another short film released nearly a century after Veditz's film. The film, *The End* (Evans, 2011), conveys the same fears felt by Veditz and his peers about the

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<sup>38</sup>George W. Veditz, "The Preservation of Sign Language," Library of Congress, 14:40, <https://www.loc.gov/item/mbrs01815816/>.

disappearance of the deaf community, but from a British perspective.<sup>39</sup> The film takes this sentiment a step further and explores developing medical and surgical interventions that are also disrupting deaf culture. Told from four perspectives over the span of sixty years, the film follows the lives of deaf individuals as they navigate a hearing world, with some opting to receive surgery later in their lives to correct their deafness while others retreat into the deaf community in an effort to maintain their identity. At the film's conclusion, one deaf man remains as the sole user of sign language, leaving the audience to wonder what becomes of a community when everything sacred to the community is stripped away. The themes of isolation and the ensuing identity crisis are a symptom of this cultural genocide, another element in the history of the deaf community. The rise of new technology has exacerbated this cultural destruction because of its normalization of hearing. In pursuing the message that life can be improved with hearing aids or surgery, the common trope of deaf inadequacy is reinforced. As members of the deaf community seek medical and surgical options to transform their hearing, the dwindling deaf population experiences a disappearance in its cultural traditions and the values places upon a common identity and language are eroded by an easy means of assimilation.

As deaf historians attempt to address these social issues, they look to the individuals who were subjected to the policies of Bell and his Oralist companions for answers. Despite the efforts of Oralists to erase the communal bonds of the deaf community, the residential and day schools established by the Oralists became a tool in maintaining and strengthening these bonds. The schools served a dual purpose for the

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<sup>39</sup>Ted Evans, "*The End*," Vimeo Video, 23:50, June 7, 2011, <https://vimeo.com/24804168>, Accessed Jan. 3, 2020.

deaf; they were where deaf-mute individuals would be indoctrinated in Oralism, but it also served as a trade school to provide these individuals with the necessary skills to function in American society. Common trades taught in these schools was the printing press and the production of circulated media. Several of these schools would produce their own newsletters, as a means of generating supplemental income and to inform distant loved ones of current events. Schools would regularly trade with one another and, as a result, the deaf world became a little smaller as news and information across the deaf community became regularly available. A large catalog of these newsletters and circulations have been collected and stored in the archives at Gallaudet University.<sup>40</sup>

Known collectively as the “Little Paper Family”, they contained articles and personals written by deaf authors for a deaf audience and have become a tool for deaf historians in documenting the identity development of the deaf community. In articles, a personal look into the lives of deaf individuals provides historians with clues into the identity struggles that many young deaf students faced as they were caught between Oral instructors (who pushed Bell’s policies) and a community committed to remaining independent. Within the Little Paper Family are articles that reinforce this collective indoctrination of deaf youth and the effects of Oralism on their social interactions. One article discusses the predicament a young deaf man finds himself in as he prepares to become a husband and a father. The man questions the morality of marrying a deaf woman and fears the possibility of having a child who is deaf. He grapples with the thought of instead marrying a hearing woman to avoid the possibility of fathering another

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<sup>40</sup>Little Paper Family: Deaf School Newsletters, Gallaudet University Library Deaf Collections and Archives, Washington, D.C.

deaf person, wondering if he “is contributing to the problem of deafness.”<sup>41</sup> Another article explores the dorm life of a residential day school, highlighting the disconnect that students felt when they visited their deaf parents and relatives on holidays and weekends. A young girl remarks that after visiting her parents during Christmas break that she “can no longer communicate with her father, his signs and gestures have become unfamiliar to her.” In the dorms, several boys sign to one another in private, but are caught by a prefect who proceeded to “lay lashes upon their hands until they could no longer curl their fingers to attempt a sign.” Corporal punishment was a common practice in the residential school and was used to break the habits of students who refused to give up signing. Despite the threat of punishment and reprisal, students continued to sign to one another. Another girl writes to her friend back home that “one of the new boys won’t stop talking with his hands. He looks like a fool and all the other boys will gang up on him because he can’t speak. I don’t think he will last long here; he is too dumb to be of any use.”<sup>42</sup> This instance demonstrates the influence the Oralist agenda had on the social psychology of young deaf individuals. Having seen the young man signing, the young girl recognizes that the boy is doomed to fail because of his inability to adapt and adhere to the perceived superior communication model. Despite this, signed communication seemed to flourish in some schools, one student recounting that “when the mistress is facing away toward the board, we throw signs across the room and make fun of her silly mouth shapes.” One

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<sup>41</sup>Henry C. White, Henry Spieler, and J.W. Murray, “The Marriage Question”, *American Annals of the Deaf*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (January 1890): pp. 19-21.

<sup>42</sup>R.A.R. Edwards, “Chasing Aleck: The Story of a Dorm”, *The Public Historian* 29, no. 3 (2007): 90.



student goes so far as to question the education system, stating, “I don’t need to talk, I’m deaf. It would be much easier for hearing people to just learn sign.”<sup>43</sup>

Resistance to Oralism offers a glimpse into the natural adherence to signed language and was seen by some as a means of resisting the efforts of Oralists. One issue that many deaf historians ponder is the nature of this defiance; was it the sheer stubbornness of children? Or was it a conscious effort to resist cultural erosion? Within the Little Papers, a rift is noticed. Some elements of the deaf community fully embrace the Oralist agenda, seeing signing as primitive behavior and something deplorable, while others simply comply to avoid punishment, but sign in secret. In his book, *Forbidden Signs*, Douglas Baynton found that a subculture developed in the residential and day schools, highlighting the secrecy of the culture. Students would meet in secret to sign with one another where they would talk about the difficulties of learning speech, using informal home signing as a way to remain connected to their families back home and as a subtle pushback against Oralist policies.<sup>44</sup> It is in this subculture, Baynton argues, where the deaf identity began to evolve as an independent culture in the same way one may latch onto a national identity. The polarization of the American deaf community resulted in strong supporters of both manual communication and Oralists. The policies of social isolation and limited cultural linguistics created a rift within the deaf community as the community struggled to decide the best course of action going forward.

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<sup>43</sup>George W. Veditz, and L. Heidsiek. “The Education of the Deaf in the United States. Report of a Visit, and a Further Contribution to the Question of Methods.—III.” *American Annals of the Deaf*, Vol. 44, No. 6 (November 1899), 451.

<sup>44</sup>Douglas C. Baynton, *Forbidden Signs: American Culture and the Campaign Against Sign Language*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 22.

As children grew into adults, sign remained an integral aspect of their social lives. Evident by the numerous social clubs that sprang up across the United States in the 1910s, where former classmates and old friends would meet whenever possible in private locations. At the private conventions, attendees would eat, drink, and socialize with one another and sign language was central to these meetings. Known as deaf clubs, the meetings would often be the only time deaf individuals spent time among their peers and in these rendezvous, they discussed the nature of the deaf community. Deaf clubs served more than just a social role. Many of these clubs acted as figurative town hall meetings where large groups of deaf people met to discuss issues surrounding the community and the effects of the hearing world on the deaf community. The subculture that was bred in the residential and day schools was continued in these deaf clubs and the identity of deaf community was developed by the continued interactions formed in these informal gatherings.

Eugenics would lose its prominence in North American society in the late forties but public opinion toward the deaf community formed during the early twentieth century persisted. The eugenics movement generated unfavorable sentiment for minorities, and such perceptions pervaded the minds of many hearing Americans for the rest of the century. The deaf community was still viewed by the hearing public as a collective of unintelligent handicapped people incapable of fitting into society because of their language deficiency. Despite the waning influence of eugenics, the Oralist ideology continued to guide the policies of the deaf community into the mid-twentieth century. The initial successes of Oralism and Corrected Speech in deaf pupils spurred instructors to continue to implement the Oralist policy. The dominance of the speech model over

manual communication influenced the administrative politics of deaf education and much of the educational control remained in the hands of hearing leaders and educators.

The curriculum of deaf education remained unchanged for several decades with the ban on signing in residential schools still firmly in place and deaf students still utilizing Correct Speech as their primary method of communication. The Civil Rights movement in the post-World War II era introduced the beginnings of change in the deaf community. While the Civil Rights movement produced reforms in North American race relations, the enfranchisement of the African American community paved the way for other marginalized communities to seek their own rights. Leaders in the deaf community began to recognize the similarities shared with other minority demographics and began to push for autonomy and self-determination in the decisions of the deaf community.

African American social and political legitimacy during the Civil Rights Movement spurred the deaf community to seek greater control of its own political sovereignty. The rights of the disabled community prevailed in business sectors and the employment rights of the deaf community were strengthened as it became illegal to discriminate based on disability. The legal protections against discrimination were eventually codified in 1990 under the Americans with Disability Act which provided stipulations against discriminatory business practices and made the provision of reasonable accommodation a legal requirement for businesses.<sup>45</sup> Businesses and public entities in the United States were legally compelled to provide adequate accommodations in public spaces and Equal Employment Opportunity guarantees that deaf individuals could not be rejected from employment considerations without just cause. The deaf community also achieved

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<sup>45</sup>Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990. Public Law 101-336. 108th Congress, 2nd session (July 26, 1990).

victory in the form of more control over the public education of deaf youth. Residential schools saw an increase in deaf instructors and oral education was replaced by manual communication.

In the late sixties and early seventies, a shift occurred in deaf education as Correct Speech and Oralist policies were slowly phased out in favor of Signed Exact English (SEE) and American Sign Language (ASL).<sup>46</sup> Both models were forms of manual communication that relied upon signed language and the signed alphabet to communicate to deaf and hard of hearing students. Despite this shift, the emphasis placed on SEE in deaf education meant that hearing people controlled the community, overshadowing the development of ASL. Under the system of SEE, deaf pupils were educated in the syntax of English grammar, but through manual signing; the issue became one of incompatibility. The SEE model was a literal translation of English into a signed form and utilized the same grammar and syntax as spoken and written English. While SEE afforded students with a greater ability to read and write in English, the manual system did not translate fluently to native ASL signers and resulted in a secondary rift within the deaf community. SEE users were unable to fluidly comprehend by ASL users.<sup>47</sup> In SEE, the subject-verb syntax is matched with traditional English syntax, but the syntax of ASL uses a different syntax that places the verb and adjective before the noun. The formation of ASL sentences dropped conjunctions and used handshapes that were incompatible with SEE. The exact English translation of SEE added appropriate

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<sup>46</sup>Brian H. Greenwald, "Revisiting the *Memoir*: Contesting Deaf Autonomy and the Real Tragedy of Alexander Graham Bell." *Our Own Hands: Essays in Deaf History, 1780-1970*, Gallaudet University Press, (2016).

<sup>47</sup>Harry Bornstein, *Manual Communication: Implications for Education* (Washington. D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1990), 121.

conjunctions and made reading SEE visually taxing to ASL signers. The handshapes and the signs of SEE used letter signs to distinguish between different nouns and introduced adverbs and plurals to signs. While the sign for mother or father in ASL is an open hand with the thumb on the chin or forehead respectively, SEE used the handshape P in the same locations to indicate PARENT + WOMAN or PARENT + MAN. The subtle differences in handshape and the addition of -ing, -ly, -s, and other adverbs muddled the reception of sign for ASL users and caused confusion between SEE and ASL signers. To demonstrate the grammatic difference between the two models, an example for the sentence, “I’m going to the store, want to join?” is provided below:

In ASL: “[signed] Store, [signed] Go, [signed] Me, [signed] Join, [signed] Want”

In SEE: “[signed] I [spelled] Am [signed] Go + [spelled]ing [spelled] to the [signed] store, [signed] want [spelled] to [signed] join + [signed] Question mark.”<sup>48</sup>

The difference between the two systems is indistinguishable to the uninformed hearing observer, but to those who use American Sign Language, the sentence structure is confusing, and the addition of conjunctions and adverbs was unnecessarily wordy. The SEE system allowed for signed language to be controlled by English grammar rules and alienated ASL users. Under the SEE system, hearing influences still pervaded the deaf community and threatened the newfound sovereignty awarded to deaf administrators.

Bell’s introduction of hearing instructors into deaf education meant that deaf education rested solely in the hands of hearing administrators and educators. In the late

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<sup>48</sup>William C. Stokoe, *Semiotics and Human Sign Languages*, (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter).

seventies and early eighties leaders of community began to push for greater control over policies that impacted the deaf education. Leaders within the deaf community expressed the sentiment that deaf education was a deaf problem requiring a deaf solution, a solution that hearing educators could not solve.<sup>49</sup> Central to this issue was Gallaudet University and its controversial Deaf President Now Movement. Opened in 1864, Gallaudet University, was established as the sole collegiate institute geared towards the post-secondary education of deaf individuals. Despite the role of Gallaudet as an institution of higher education for the deaf community, the operation of the college remained in the control of hearing administrators and presidents well into the 1980s. In the history of Gallaudet, the president of the college had always been a person from the hearing majority, but the “Deaf President Now” protests challenged this tradition.<sup>50</sup> In March of 1988, Gallaudet issued a statement announcing their selection for a new university president. Elisabeth A. Zinser, a hearing woman from North Carolina, was selected as the seventh president of Gallaudet, a decision that was met with monumental backlash by the student body and deaf members of the administration staff. Staging a university-wide walkout, the students and staff of Gallaudet boycotted classes and marched on Capitol Hill, issuing their list of demands to the university. Their demands were simple but profound: Zinser and Jane Spilman, chairperson of the Board of Trustees, were to step down immediately with a deaf president being implemented in each of their stead. In an additional push for autonomy, the student body demanded that the deaf to hearing ratio of the Board remain fixed at 51% to 49% in favor of deaf Board members. After a brief week standoff, the university capitulated and the university’s eighth president, I. King

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<sup>49</sup>John B. Christiansen, and Sharon N. Barnartt, *Deaf President Now!*, 19.

<sup>50</sup>Harry Bornstein, *Manual Communication*, 30-31.

Jordan, became the first deaf president in Gallaudet's history. Irving King Jordan was born hearing to hearing parents in Pennsylvania in June of 1943. A motorcycle accident at the age of 21 would render Jordan deaf in both ears. He went on to receive his doctorate in psychology and was employed by Gallaudet University. Jordan was serving as dean of the College of Arts and Sciences when he was considered for the vacant presidency in March 1988.<sup>51</sup> The elevation of Jordan to the presidency and the reconstitution of the Board of Trustees meant that the deaf community would have greater control over its decision-making process in terms of the educational curriculum.

Despite success in achieving educational autonomy, the deaf community was still left to deal with the social implications that had developed over the past century. The implementation of social policies and intervention by Bell and the Oralists left the deaf community fragmented and divided about their social value in mainstream American society. The threat of cultural genocide resurfaced in the late eighties and nineties as the development of medicine and technology provided new opportunities to escape deafness, sentiments highlighted in *The End*.<sup>52</sup> The film discussed how science can rid society of deafness and what that does to members of the deaf community.

The invention of the cochlear implant threatened the nature of deafness and was viewed with ire by the deaf community. While the hearing aid was external and could be removed at will, the cochlear implant was a surgical implant that revolutionized the deaf community and brought about a recurring fear that surgery would eradicate the deaf individual. The implant surgery involved cutting into the skull and attaching a magnet to

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<sup>51</sup>Lawrence Hott and Diane Garey, *Through Deaf Eyes*, (Arlington: Public Broadcasting Service, 2007), DVD.

<sup>52</sup>Ted Evans, *The End*.

the auditory nerve. Once implanted, the recipient would return to the doctor after a period of several months to have the device attached to the magnet and turned on. The hearing device would then be placed on the ear and transmit sound for the wearer.<sup>53</sup> The division of opinions over the nature of surgical and genetic intervention would spark a debate within the deaf community and lead many to question the morality of the implant, and deafness itself. Improvements in auditory technology are changing the social landscape of deaf America as the community begins to dwindle in size. Coupled with this is the advent of social media in the twenty-first century, a platform that has helped to mainstream and normalize deafness and sign language to the hearing American public. While some proponents of the deaf community have embraced new technologies in the hope of generating public favor for its deaf minority, there are elements in the deaf community who perceived the rising popularity of ASL and deafness as a form of cultural appropriation, having their language and culture coopted by hearing individuals with no cultural ties to the community and no understanding of the etiquette surround sign language and deaf culture.<sup>54</sup> After more than a century of struggling to find their identity in America, they are apprehensive to embrace a hearing public fascinated with their way of life. The popularity of sign language tutorials on the internet and an interest in deaf studies attests to this fact. However, the deaf community perceived its language as something more than a baby raising tool.

The shifts within the deaf community have been dramatic and profound. After a period of oppression and hearing rule, the American deaf community has gained a

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<sup>53</sup>Mario Sanna, Rolien Free, and Paul Merkus, *Surgery for Cochlear and Other Auditory Implants*, (Stuttgart: Thieme, 2019).

<sup>54</sup>Carol Padden and Tom Humphries, *Inside Deaf Culture* (London & Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 163-165.



semblance of control over their educational and social rights, but the newfound fascination with sign language in the twenty-first century has left many unsure with how best to proceed. The work of deaf historians has begun to shed light on the legacy of America's relationship with its deaf-mute minority and is becoming a tool for deaf academics in constructing the cultural and social narrative of the community. These historians are met with a monumental challenge as they struggle to separate fact from fiction while maintaining the necessary objectivity required to be taken serious by their academic contemporaries, hearing and deaf alike.

The third and final chapter of the present work explores divisions that have fractured the deaf community over the issues of surgical intervention and what it means to be deaf, both physically and culturally. The chapter also address the new histories being written by a new generation of deaf historians attempting to decipher and accurately interpret the history of the deaf community. The legacy of the policies and control exerted by Bell and the Oralists has left the deaf community unsure about its cultural history and these new historians are trying to piece together this history to tell the story of the North American deaf community. Utilizing the writings of two premier deaf historians, Chapter 3 seeks to merge the existing hearing historiography of the deaf with an emerging deaf interpretation of events. Tackling the growth of a deaf identity, addressing the issues of morality, and blending an intersectional history that has been dominated by the hearing perspective, the last chapter frames the history of the deaf community within the larger history of the twentieth century in the United States.

In order to correct the prevailing historiography and construct a more accurate interpretation of events, both hearing and deaf historians must acknowledge the logical

flaws of each existing historiography and addresses these independent of the other group. Once each side has corrected their narratives, the two are obligated to merge them into a single narrative that provides the perspectives of all parties involved, regardless of their sentiments towards Oralism. The legacy of Alexander Graham Bell needs to be combined to include his works with the deaf community and how it affects the American deaf, while the deaf community needs to recast Bell in a more culturally significant role. The duty of deaf historians is to include Bell in the history of the deaf community as one of the catalysts of the rise of deaf autonomy and the growth of public visibility generated by popular acceptance of its silent minority. The current model of history surrounding Alexander Graham Bell and the deaf community is still incomplete, but by overlapping the two individual histories, the overall historiography might evolve to include both sides in the overall discussion.

### Chapter III

#### Correcting History: Deaf Identity

On March 21<sup>st</sup>, 2007, the Public Broadcasting Service released a documentary titled, *Through Deaf Eyes* (2007). The two-hour documentary examined the past two centuries of North American history told from the perspective of the deaf community, exposing the feelings generated by the control exerted at the hands of the hearing community over the affairs of deaf political, educational, and social rights. Notable figures within the deaf community, including critically acclaimed actors and actresses, leading scholars and researchers, and accomplished writers, were interviewed and asked about their perception of deafness and its influence on their lives. Hollywood actress and Academy Award winner, Marlee Matlin explained that, “It’s not my dream [to hear]. I’ve been raised deaf. I’m used to the way I am. I don’t want to change it. Why would I ever want to change? Because I’m used to this, I’m happy.”<sup>55</sup> Fellow Hollywood actor, CJ Jones, shared Matlin’s sentiment and explaining:

What’s wrong with being deaf? I’m deaf. I’m fine. I function fine. I drive. I have a family. I’ve made a baby. I make people laugh. I travel. What the hell is going on? Like I have to hear that has nothing to do with it. It’s all about knowledge; it’s about the heart. It’s about abilities, about doing something you want and getting what you want out of life...Knowledge is the most powerful vehicle to success, not hearing, not speaking...<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup>Lawrence Hott and Diane Garey, *Through Deaf Eyes*, (Arlington: Public Broadcasting Service, 2007), DVD.

<sup>56</sup>Lawrence Hott and Diane Garey, *Through Deaf Eyes*, (Arlington: Public Broadcasting Service, 2007), DVD.

Irving King Jordan, first deaf president of Gallaudet and central figure of the Deaf President Now! protests of 1988, said that when he talks to hearing people about what deafness is like, he found that they were negative and would exclaim that they “couldn’t do this” and would repeat “can’t, can’t, can’t,” listing what would become impossible, prompting Jordan to reply, “...I don’t think like that. Deaf people don’t think like that. We think about what we can do.”<sup>57</sup> The documentary revealed that the deaf community did not view its deafness as a hindrance, but rather was a hurdle that the community crossed in its own fashion and that this deafness defined much of who these individuals are.<sup>58</sup> The identity of the deaf community is intertwined with deafness and inspires deaf individuals to promote the idea they can do all the things that a hearing person can but in their own way. *Through Deaf Eyes* is an exposé of American history through a deaf lens that proffers a dialogue about the nature of deafness and what it means to the deaf community. Deafness is not seen by this community as a condemnation to a life of isolation and exclusion from hearing society, rather it is a vehicle through which a community develops a shared cultural, social, and political identity. The issue of deafness is not about perceiving the world through impossibilities, but how to adapt life to make these impossibilities possible.

The previous chapters of this research have examined the hearing dominant history of the early North American deaf community and the subsequent response by recent deaf historians who have provided an interpretation of events from the deaf perspective. The control exerted by the hearing community and the policies enacted

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<sup>57</sup>Lawrence Hott and Diane Garey, *Through Deaf Eyes*, (Arlington: Public Broadcasting Service, 2007), DVD.

<sup>58</sup>Lawrence Hott and Diane Garey, *Through Deaf Eyes*, (Arlington: Public Broadcasting Service, 2007), DVD.

under Bell's Oralists affected the deaf community in terms of its cultural practices, group identity, and internal sovereignty. In understanding the intersection between these two shared histories, it is important to dissect the nature and reason behind the proposed historical interpretation. Observing how and why a history is written offers clues into the actual events that occurred and how it shaped the opinions and perceptions of the parties involved. The deaf community of the late nineteenth century was dominated by hearing instructors and existed during a period when social undercurrents were guided by a political and ideological platform that professed the inferiority of the deaf. The historiography produced involving the North American deaf community was inherently biased toward hearing opinions and left the deaf community in the background of its own historical record. The social policies and public opinions generated by the Oralists produced roots that spread deep into the deaf community's future and permeated the social, cultural, political, and moral underpinnings of the community. Because of, and in reaction to, these Oral policies, the very identity of the deaf individual is reconstituted, and the history of the community is being reimagined to account for this ideological transformation. This chapter explores the effects the Oralist agenda has on the deaf community and how the enfranchisement of the deaf community has introduced a reinterpretation of the events of deaf history. The communal bonds that were once dissolved and then reestablished within the deaf community by hearing outsiders and the growth of new moral dilemmas surrounding the nature of deafness and culture will provide insight into what the future holds for the deaf in North America.

As the deaf community finds its identity and place within the predominantly hearing American narrative, corrections must be made to the existing historiography of

Alexander Graham Bell and the relationship between America and its deaf-mute minorities. It is acknowledged that history is often one-sided and told from the dominant party's outlook; the history of the deaf community is no exception. It has been written by hearing authors and historians. The relegation of the deaf community to the lesser role within the hearing historiography limited the community's role in its collective history, but new historical practices have shed rigid interpretations to broaden this observation and provide all involved parties with input into the history. Failing to address historical intersections such as race, class, disability, and morality narrows history's efficacy. New generations of deaf academics are pursuing historical research that is actively working to dislodge the myths and speculations regarding the deaf community that have developed over the past century. The attitudes and beliefs of the hearing public toward the deaf minority have been shaped by the influence of eugenics and Oralism's control over deaf affairs. Facing an uphill battle, these historians face a two-front issue; having to fill in the blanks Bell's legacy while also removing the painful emotional history that prevents the deaf community from creating a historical narrative that takes into account the interpretations of all who were involved in the Oralist campaign. The success of removing this subjectivity allows for more complete delivery of this history and allows for all sides to be active participants, rather than a one-sided narrative of a hearing interpretation of deaf history.

A critical issue facing modern historians is addressing how the prevailing history was written, by whom, and what was the author's connection to the subject material. The most visible critique of Oralism's history is the fact that much of the source material was penned by hearing authors who sympathized with the agenda of eugenics and the Oralism

campaign. As evident by the sentiments shown by Bell, a humanitarian belief taints this history and stymies alternative interpretations.<sup>59</sup> Bell perceived himself in a paternal role, protecting the deaf community while also educating the deaf in a method he deemed superior. Oralism was regarded as the solution to the deaf plight by many hearing educators during the first three decades of the twentieth century and this belief in Oralism's superiority drove the hearing community to exert complete control over the education and political administration of deaf affairs. Seeing the movement as an effort to alleviate the troubles of the deaf community, much of the writing is aggrandizing and shares the same emotional investment projected by early Christian missionaries who saw their campaigns into the frontiers as a humanitarian mission; providing speech to the Deaf meant that they could be elevated from a primitive way of life and assimilated into American society.<sup>60</sup> These hearing educators, like missionaries, saw their role in the deaf community as leaders and guardians of a society. The implementation of speech education within the North American deaf community preached success for speaking deaf individuals and would lead the community out of the silent wilderness. Inversely, the emerging deaf historiography of the twenties and thirties comes from a defensive position, committed to casting off the shackles of a hearing oppressor and gaining sovereignty for their community. The deaf community was fine just as it was and the use of signed communication and sympathetic understanding by the hearing public would grant the community an equal footing in Western society.<sup>61</sup> In order to construct a truly

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<sup>59</sup>Alexander Graham Bell, *Memoir Upon the Formation of a Deaf Variety of the Human Race*, (Washington, D.C., Gallaudet University Library Deaf Collections and Archives), 45.

<sup>60</sup>Gerald Allen, "Eugenics and American Social History, 1880-1959," *Genome* 31 (1989): 885-889.

<sup>61</sup>Brenda Jo Brueggemann, "The Coming Out of Deaf Culture and American Sign Language: An Exploration into Visual Rhetoric and Literacy," *Rhetoric Review*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (Spring 1995), 409-420.

accurate reinterpretation, the history of the American deaf must be constructed by deaf historians who wish to simply set the record straight without projecting a century's worth of emotional and physical turmoil. Members of the deaf community who were themselves culturally deaf could provide the best description of the community and the sentiments that prevailed during the Oralists' reign. Cultural deafness is distinctly different from a person who viewed themselves as deaf or having hearing loss. Existence within deaf culture meant that the individual understood the social and communal rules of the community and part of their identity was linked to their deafness. Culturally deaf people have ties to the deaf community that extend beyond having a language input deficiency; these members of the community know the importance of deafness and signed language to the greater community and that this importance was what dictated the lives and decisions of the deaf population.<sup>62</sup>

At the forefront of this reinterpretation are historians Dr. Brian Greenwald and Dr. William Ennis, both of whom are employed at Gallaudet University as faculty instructors. The men share the common thread of coming from deaf backgrounds and growing up within the deaf community. Cultural deafness is apparent in the writings of both men and this position provides their work legitimacy as an accurate deaf historical analysis. Experience within the community has afforded the men with an insight into the subtleties of the deaf world. Both men have presented research that critiques the fallacies of Bell's historiography and have taken the initiative in leading an emerging sector of historical academia aimed at providing an empirical timeline of deafness in America. Despite a commonality in their research, each man presents an argument that targets different

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<sup>62</sup>Harlan Lane, Robert Hoffmeister, and Ben Bahan, *Journey Into the Deaf World*, (San Diego: DawnSignPress, 1996), 72-73.



aspects of the prevailing historiography; Greenwald's research centralizes on the actual history of Bell and the eugenics movement, while Ennis' body of work sets about critiquing emerging deaf histories and how best to incorporate these new histories into the overall narrative. The dominance of the hearing interpretation of Alexander Graham Bell and eugenicists toward the deaf community is neutralized by the addition of a deaf interpretation. Greenwald's research into the early twentieth century provides an insight into the reactions of the deaf community as it chafed under hearing education. While not the sole historians working to correct the inadequacies of historical academia, each man is held in high regard by their peers in the deaf community and has produced the most relevant research in addressing both the history of the American deaf and Alexander Graham Bell's relationship with the community. Ennis' critique of fellow deaf historians confronts the subjective opinions that dominate the deaf perception and is a commentary on the shortsightedness of many deaf writers who are rewriting the historical narrative.

The focus of Dr. Greenwald's research examines the history of Alexander Graham Bell as it was written and how it is being written in the modern era. Looking at material produced during the Progressive Era, Greenwald found that the source material from the period was divided and relegated to two extremes. At one end were the supporters of Bell, most of them being hearing and Oralists. Bell's supporters lauded the Oralism agenda and saw the movement as a vehicle of positive change for the deaf community. Citing the innovations in speech pathology and linguistics that grew under the guidance of Bell's camp, the writers of Bell's historiography portray the deaf community as a passive group whose fate was the unfortunate side effect in the push for social improvement and progress. In stark contrast to the Oralists, the writing produced

by the deaf community responded to the policies of Bell. The carefully cultivated image that projected Bell as the benevolent gatekeeper of the deaf community is presented as a ruse propagated by the hearing media. Hearing biases in historical writing has elevated Bell and the Oralists to a superior position in the narrative and diminishes the validity of deaf reactions to hearing control. Within the community, deaf authors perceive Bell as an aggressive eugenicist bent on dismantling a marginalized people. While Oralists claimed the agenda of Bell was a humanizing mission that sought to elevate the deaf, supporter of Manualism labelled him as “Alexander the Aggressor” and claimed that his mission of elevating the deaf was a false pretense given his previous interactions with the deaf community. Supporters of Manualism promoted the idea that signed language and the education of deaf pupils through manual communication would net the greatest benefits for the community. Communicating to students in their native language ensures total language acquisition and fosters a communal identity centralized on the benefits of sign language for the community. Manualism followers demonize Bell and his policies as a form of culture genocide designed to strip the community of significant linguistic characteristics that erode the social solidarity of the deaf population. Leaders went so far as to accuse Bell of creating the telephone as tool to further isolate the deaf community.<sup>63</sup> In researching the period, Greenwald found that this polarized bilateral interpretation of events fails to generate an intersectional history, and that the collective writings of deaf authors about the subject were suppressed in the wave of pro-Bell texts that flooded the era. The two separate streams of historical interpretation muddle the effects of Bell’s

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<sup>63</sup>C.R. Barns, “Speech at 11<sup>th</sup> Convention of the National Association of the Deaf”, (1916), *National Convention of Deaf-Mutes. Proceedings of the National Convention of Deaf-Mutes. New York: Deaf-Mutes' Journal, 1910-1920*, (Washington D.C., Gallaudet University Special Collections).

policies and writes the benevolence of Bell's beliefs as a façade to mask darker intentions. Reading through the texts of deaf authors, the common theme of a reactional retort seems to pervade most of the works with much of the writing possessing a defensive point of view. Detractors of Oralism saw the campaign as an attack on the deaf lifestyle and in response, their writings denounce the agenda as erasure of their culture. It is here that the fallacy of the deaf historiography becomes visible. While the reaction is logical, it pollutes the entire body of work and allows for subjectivity to taint historical interpretation. Deaf reactions to Bell and Oralism cloud their judgment of events and narrows their understanding of cause and effect; the focus on Bell blinds deaf historians to the broader eugenics attitudes that pervaded the psyche of the North American public and their attitudes to socially marginalized groups during the twentieth century. In focusing the blinders solely on Oralism and Alexander Graham Bell, deaf historians fail to account for the ideological divisions within the deaf community itself and the supporters of Oralism who themselves members of the deaf community.

In Greenwald's dissertation on Bell, he simultaneously challenges the validity of both camps and their historiographies. Acknowledging the effects that Bell and Oralism had on the deaf community and its history, Greenwald presents a version of Bell that is more moderate than previous deaf historians have conveyed.<sup>64</sup> In comparing Bell to his scientific peers, namely Charles Davenport, another respected scientist and eugenicist, Bell assumes the role of a buffer, simplifying policies and protecting the community from the harsher programs that eugenicists sought to implement; the subjugation of the deaf community could have, and was planned to be, much worse than what actually occurred.

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<sup>64</sup>Brian H. Greenwald, "Alexander Graham Bell through the Lens of Eugenics, 1883-1922." Ph.D. Dissertation, George Washington University, 2006.

The stewardship of Bell protected the deaf community and this is reflected in how Bell saw himself in relation to the community, adopting a paternalistic role.<sup>65</sup> Planning surgical invention and castration at the hands of the hearing public is an attitude shared by more extreme eugenicists and this failure to acknowledge these extreme attitudes is what inhibits deaf interpretation. Despite the scholarship of Greenwald, the cultural identity of the deaf community, and deaf academia, inhibits the historical development of this narrative.

This pushback by the deaf community is divided into two distinct epochs: the initial defensive harangue produced at the offset of Oralism's rise; and the identity crisis that emerged during the wake of Deaf President Now and the autonomy awarded to the deaf community. While the initial rebuff was from a reactionary standpoint, the newer historiography cultivated by the deaf community is equal parts resistance and legitimacy. The successes of the deaf community in wresting control of their educational and social rights from hearing hands left the deaf community stranded with no discernable past or future. The cultural bonds and linguistics connections of the deaf community have survived, but the history of the deaf was left fragmented; the historical foundations of the community would have to be reconstructed to support its resurgence and growth. As a result, the works produced by late twentieth century historians about the subject are contradictory and without a clear narrative. Dr. William Ennis has set about attempting to dispel these contradictions by analyzing this new wave of deaf history and addressing the common drawbacks that limit its efficacy.

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<sup>65</sup>Bell, *Memoir*, 45.

Dr. Ennis began this undertaking by viewing the literature produced by deaf historians in the decades leading up to and following the Deaf President Now era. The success of the protests in 1988 was a watershed moment for the deaf community. Deaf President Now awarded the deaf community control over its own educational administration at the highest level; control of deaf collegiate administration allowed for control of secondary and primary deaf education to be guided by deaf instructors and administrators.<sup>66</sup> The reintroduction of manual communication in education provide the community with a proverbial shot in the arm and elevated the primacy of signed language within the cultural and social identity of the North American deaf population. Ennis found that much of this newer literature was repetitive and stagnant in terms of its scholastic content. A sizeable portion of the works produced fixated on the oppression of the deaf under the rule of Oralism and offered unoriginal work. The literature that was being produced was a collection of secondary sources that recounted the lives of the deaf community during the Progressive Era. The works that did offer original content began to address the new deaf culture that had developed in the wake of deaf rights. The reacquisition of signed language underwrote much of this new writing. Stepping away from Bell and his campaign against the deaf, the most significant works that arose from the eighties and nineties came to be the narratives of what happened to the culture and the community of the deaf under the Oralists, how these changes created these cultural shifts, and what was the state of the new deaf identity and culture. Using *A Place of Their Own*, or APOTO as its known in the deaf community, as a model, Ennis found that following

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<sup>66</sup>Jack R. Gannon, *The Week the World Heard Gallaudet*, (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 2009), 35.

the rise of deaf control in deaf institutions, a new academic discipline was formed that had profound effects.<sup>67</sup>

In the fall of 1986, nearly five months after the Deaf President Now event, Gallaudet offered its first courses in the field of deaf studies. Prior to the formation of the discipline, the writing of deaf history was written in a style that was inaccessible to the average deaf person, written for higher academia and contained archived secondary sources collected over a century. Stuffy and pompous, this academic prose closed off deaf history to anyone but clinical and professional researchers. Deaf studies prompted the academic community to begin seriously looking at the formation of a cultural, social, political, and economic history of the deaf community, shifting the focus of deaf history from the limited scope of Oralism to a broader range of topics. The intersections of race and cultural background were introduced in deaf studies and the research began to look at the deaf community as a collection of individual sectors that converged over the identity of deafness to create a single community. Deaf studies looked at African American signers and their styles compared to Anglo-Saxon signers, the custom signs created for specific communities such as the LGBTQ and deaf-blind, and what role did the onset of deafness play in an individual's introduction into deaf culture. Late-deaf individuals, people who lost their hearing, were compared to culturally deaf people who were born into the community.<sup>68</sup> The roles of medical intervention also played heavily into this new field of study. Users of assisted listening devices like hearing aids and cochlear implants were distinctly different from native deaf people who grew up with no hearing at all.

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<sup>67</sup>Brian H. Greenwald, and William T. Ennis, "Reflections of Teaching Deaf History at Gallaudet University," *Sign Language Studies* 17. no. 1 (Fall 2016): 96-100.

<sup>68</sup>Harlan Lane, Robber Hoffmeister, and Ben Bahan, *Journey Into the Deaf World*, 93.

Ennis proposes that the establishment of the deaf studies program is what allowed the deaf community to evolve its existing historiography. He also argues that APOTO is the beginning of a legitimate body of historical research that addresses the changing environment and culture of the American deaf community.<sup>69</sup> Finding a common communal place that serves as both a research institute and an archive, Gallaudet University and the deaf studies program would serve as an environment that took an objective look at the history of deaf people in America. An academic deaf community meant that the deaf community could control its own input into the narrative and generate legitimate bodies of work about cultural topic that could not be generated by hearing outsiders. *A Place of Their Own* would compel the hearing scholastic community to take the study of deaf history into serious consideration as an underserved discipline. Despite the success of APOTO, Ennis does note that the trend of cultural victimization has continued despite a quarter century of independence, something that hinders the historiography of the deaf community.<sup>70</sup> There is still a sizable section of the deaf community that remain avid Bell detractors who retain the defensive position of early deaf authors, promoting the image of Bell as a genocidal oppressor despite recent research showing the contrary. While this interpretation is necessary to express the shared psyche of the deaf community during this period in deaf history, it is not the sole event and should not consume a large portion in the overall historiography.

North American deaf history benefits from its study of the deaf identity and the culture surrounding deafness. As mentioned in the second chapter, the Oral residential

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<sup>69</sup>William T. Ennis, "A Conversation: Looking Back on 25 Years of *A Place of Their Own*," *Sign Language Studies* 17. no. 1 (Fall 2016): 27-28.

<sup>70</sup>Ennis, 33.

schools of the twenties and thirties transformed the nature of deafness and how members of the community saw themselves in relation to the hearing world. In *Forbidden Signs*, Douglas Baynton's proposal that a subculture grew within the Oral schools demonstrates a significant shift in the identity of deaf America.<sup>71</sup> Aware of the fundamental nature of signed language within the deaf identity, the subversive attitudes of the students who signed in secrecy represents a pragmatic shift in the deaf community. The banishment of manual communication in favor of Oral speech meant that the deaf population complied with the dominant attitudes of the hearing public but maintained their identity in secret. Like the early Christians under Roman rule who practiced their faith behind closed doors away from the purview of their rulers, the deaf community submitted to hearing policies but signed in privacy. Evident in the widespread popularity of deaf clubs in the forties and fifties, the secretive nature of signed language reveals that the deaf cultural identity survived the Oralist social genocide. The book, *Journey into the Deaf World*, highlights this fact and explains that the Oral attitudes of the hearing public and the retention of sign in secrecy strengthened the communal bonds of the deaf community, not weakened it as previously believed. The secret conversations in residential school dormitories and the open discussions in the deaf clubs demonstrates that signed language has always been the foundation of the deaf identity and is what drove the deaf population to persist under hearing oppression. Once deaf leaders and educators gained control over education curriculums and political rights, this identity was revealed publicly and magnified by the proliferation of new works that highlighted the struggle to keep the community alive. If deaf historians wished to produce an accurate history of the North America deaf

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<sup>71</sup>Douglas Baynton, *Forbidden Signs*, 22.



community, culture and identity through the shared connection of sign language would be its greatest asset.

The works of both Greenwald and Ennis gauge the condition of the deaf community and diagnose the symptoms of its illness. The historiographical flaws of both Bell's history and the deaf community inhibit a complete understanding of the layered narrative that involves two sectors of American society and the ramifications of one group's hegemony over the other. The trends of historical research spotlight the effects of America's social domination of its minorities and the deaf community must follow these trends if it wishes to truly control its history. The retelling of social and cultural history in North America is the responsibility of each demographic and must be told through an objective lens that separates popular opinion from historical fact. The narrative of oppressor and the oppressed is a two-sided description of a shared period in history and the multiple interpretations present on both sides of the aisle are required to address the breadth of this shared history. The involvement of multiple parties requires intersectionality to be acknowledged and through joint effort, an accurate portrait emerges.

The historiography of the American deaf community and Alexander Graham Bell is constantly evolving and is a multifaceted entity that requires multiple perspectives to provide a coherent understanding of the events. While the traditional historiography of Bell is largely tainted by a hearing perspective, it is necessary to incorporate that aspect into the overall narrative because it provides the motivation and rationale behinds the attitudes and decisions made by the Oralists, but their interpretation of events must be restricted to only the hearing component of the era. The deaf perspective is the

responsibility of deaf historians. The hearing community must alter the imagery of Bell from the prevailing image of a savior to the more accurate role of protector. By acknowledging the faults of Bell and his eugenics beliefs, the hearing community allows his historiography to adopt a neutral perspective that places Bell in a position as the best option out of only bad options. This will provide clarity to deaf historians who dedicate their research to the demonization of Bell, a research that keeps the deaf community locked into a single period in history.

In order to accurately construct the history of the deaf community, it must be researched by members of the community who possess an understanding of the intricacies of a culturally and linguistically independent demographic. The cultural splits within the deaf community are also essential to this construction because it offers a window into the complex feelings generated by the restriction of cultural practices and highlights the how and why behind the deaf community's reaction to being granted control of its own affairs. The deaf people who supported Oralism convey the moral and psychological crossroads experienced by many within the community while those who adamantly opposed the agenda provide context into the later decisions of the community. Through learning about the initial pushback from the deaf community, the waves of protest and revisionist literature becomes comprehensible, providing a causal chain of events that results in monumental shift in the community. In merging the two opposing strands into a single thread, the desire of the deaf community to become a part of American society, while retaining their own identity, becomes evident.

Following this chapter is a short epilogue that reemphasizes the overarching contribution of this research and provides an insight into the emerging works and

attitudes that have been generated within the deaf community in the past three decades following the “Deaf President Now” protest and the autonomy gained following the relinquishment of hearing control. The recorded history of the Oralists has been dominated by the hearing public and recent scholarship by culturally deaf historians has made strides in plugging some of the gaps in this historical narrative. The historiography of Alexander Graham Bell and his relationship to the Oralists and North American deaf population is also the historiography of the American deaf. The intersectional nature of this history is difficult to dissect and requires the input of neutral observers from the hearing and deaf community alike.

## CHAPTER IV

### **Epilogue: The Deaf Community in the Twenty-First Century**

As a student at Gallaudet University in the current decade, incoming freshmen and transfers are required to take courses relating to deaf studies and deaf history. In these courses, discussions on Bell and the Oralism liken the hearing attitudes of the twenties and thirties to the policies of Nazi Germany in the 1940s. While an exaggeration, the fact that Bell is demonized by the deaf community to this degree shows the impact Oralism and Alexander Graham Bell had on the identity of the population. Hearing control over deaf affairs, the rise and domination of Oralism in deaf education, and the decline of this control in favor of Manualism and greater deaf autonomy shaped deaf culture and the identity of the community. In turn, this restructuring of the deaf community gave rise to deaf rights and the protests of the Deaf President Now movement and awarded the community with an equal position alongside hearing society regarding political, education, social, cultural, and historical verdicts.

While the hearing public lauds Bell for his innovations in telecommunications, the deaf community has an alternative opinion of him. This issue is compounded by the growing popularity of sign language and deafness in mainstream media. Hollywood blockbusters and television series are producing works with more deaf actors and deaf characters and the hearing public has become fascinated with the community and culture. A confusion arises within the North American deaf population over how to properly incorporate themselves in hearing society. Growing popularity with sign language and the rise of digital media has thrust the deaf community in the limelight and has received generally warm receptions from the hearing masses. Young children are taught the

alphabet and how to count in sign language through interactive media and colleges have introduced American Sign Language as a “foreign” language elective. Despite the popularity and acceptance of their customs, the deaf community remains uneasy about hearing attitudes towards their community. Parents who have deaf children still opt for surgical intervention and the occurrence of cochlear implants has grown exponentially in the past decade. Within the United States’ National Institute of Health, the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders (NIDCD) reports that percentage of cochlear implant users exceeded projected numbers in the decade between 2000 and 2010. The NIDCD also reported that in 2010, forty percent of deaf babies underwent cochlear implantation, a twenty-five percent increase from the 2005 report.<sup>72</sup> There seems to still be a push from the medical community to correct deafness, and improvements in genetics research has allowed parents to screen fetuses and delete deaf genetic markers months before the baby is born. The hearing public, according to the deaf community, is continuing its policy of eugenics, reforming its tactics to be less overt and in the guise of technological progress. There is also a growing concern over the use of sign language by the hearing public. While happy that American Sign Language has been legitimized and preserve, the issue of cultural appropriation and ignorance has drawn the ire of some within the community. The lack of knowledge and understanding of deaf culture makes the use of sign language by a hearing public seem like a mockery to some. Deaf academics fear that the acceptance of sign language by the hearing public will result

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<sup>72</sup>U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Institutes of Health, National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders, “Cochlear Implants Fact Sheet,” 2018, Retrieved from <https://report.nih.gov/nihfactsheets/viewfactsheet.aspx?csid=83>

in hearing exertion of control over its modalities, transforming the language into a diluted form of its natural state.

The history of Alexander Graham Bell, the Oralists, and the deaf community has been under the control of hearing scholars for decades. The preservation of sign language and deaf cultural in secrecy during the Oralist era has made the language sacrosanct to the deaf community. The cultural practices and social identity of the modern deaf population are influenced by Oralism and came out something uniquely deaf. Going forward, the North American deaf community continues to understand its history and position in hearing society and is actively trying to preserve and retain a language that they feel is rightfully theirs and theirs alone. If the deaf community is going to have any success in reimagining its history and controlling its future, it will have to actively work to create an intersectional history that involves hearing and deaf perspective, and try to come to terms with a hearing public that has finally embraced sign language while keeping it uniquely a deaf characteristic. Coming to terms with this popularity will further reshape deaf culture and identity, and the inclusion of the hearing community into traditionally deaf spaces means that intersectionality can dictate history. Gaining control of deaf history is a double-edged sword. As the deaf community revises its historic narrative, its control over its sacred affairs, namely sign language, becomes part of the public domain and is open to hearing influences. For America's silent minority, we have only recently gained their voice and we are still trying to figure out how to use it.

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