

INTRODUCTION

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THIS COLLECTION OF WORKS in the field of Deaf history is drawn from new research on deaf lives between 1780 and 1970. The contributors examine unexplored areas in Deaf history that intersect with important subthemes in historical studies. These themes include Southern history, religious history, and Western history, as well as new perspectives on the histories of eugenics, African Americans, women, and religion. The commonality of these chapters is that they trace the development of deaf people's attempts to carve out spaces for themselves within the larger society. Most of the contributors focus on developments in the United States, but one offers a perspective from a turbulent period in Australia's history.

Scholarship in Deaf history has traditionally concentrated on the national scale.¹ This book takes a closer look at the local and regional landscapes as deaf people asserted their rights in local and national settings. The chapters in this collection explore deaf peoples' claim to autonomy in their personal, religious, social, and organizational lives, and reveal how these debates overlapped with social trends and spilled out into particular physical and social spaces such as clubs, churches, and even within families. The contributors show how deaf people had agency and used this agency to engage in vigorous debates about issues that constantly tested the values of deaf people as Americans (or Australians).

Yet other earlier works have documented instances where agitation to attain equality was contested by other individuals or organizations. Breda Carty's study of breakaway social organizations in New South Wales and Queensland in Australia during the 1920s and 1930s shows how the presumption of authority by hearing men was unabashedly used to control the Deaf societies in these states. The societies provided religious, welfare services, and were centers of sporting and social

activities for deaf people. In a meticulously researched article, Carty details the struggle for autonomy that led to the creation of deaf-controlled organizations in these two states. The Australian government eventually forced the organizations to merge back into the societies, and the process of merger showed the power hearing people maintained over deaf organizations in this time.

Anja Werner's chapter focuses on hearing people's perceptions of deaf people. Werner traces discourses on deaf people and deafness in 1200 newspaper and journal articles that appeared in English-language periodicals between 1780 and 1914. She divides this span into four discrete periods defined by waves of educational change during the time. Werner notes the shift in public discourse over the course of the nineteenth century from talking about deaf people to objectifying deaf people through medical discourses in the latter part of the period covered by her chapter.

The remaining chapters in this volume reveal a more complete portrait of deaf activism in the United States that expands the traditional East Coast focus to studies in the South and the West. Kati Morton Mitchell examines the life and advocacy of Alice Taylor Terry, a deaf female leader and writer in California in the first half of the twentieth century. Terry was politically astute and maintained leadership positions in deaf organizations dominated by deaf males during a time when women agitated for suffrage. Her writing covered many topics of interest to deaf people, including oralism, eugenics, and driving rights, and she constantly exhorted deaf people to support their state organizations in addition to the National Association of the Deaf. She placed deaf agency at the center of her arguments for deaf people's right to a place in larger society.

Two chapters in this volume focus largely on the US South. Carolyn McCaskill, Ceil Lucas, Robert Bayley, and Joseph Hill look at the broad sweep of the history of African American deaf people from 1820 to 1990. They examine agency through the lens of education. Records of African Americans attending schools for the deaf are sporadic up until after the Civil War. Following that war, seventeen schools opened segregated "Colored Departments," sometimes on the same campus as the white school, and other times on a different campus.² These separate schools lasted long after the 1954 *Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka* decision, the last one closing in Louisiana in 1978. Many of the teachers at these schools were white, and African Americans who wished to teach at

these schools could not find teacher-training programs until after World War II.

Jean Bergey's biography of the Reverend Robert and Mrs. Estelle Caldwell Fletcher uses oral history, film, photographs, and family documents to portray the life and work of an Episcopalian preacher from the 1930s to the 1970s. Bergey's chapter introduces new material on deaf leadership in churches, access to religious services, and on the community's role in caring for elderly deaf people. Issues of race, class, and gender are interwoven in the story of how the Fletchers served multiple congregations across the South. Bergey's research on Rev. Fletcher, who lived in Alabama, offers insight into everyday life for white deaf people in the South and, via his work, gives us glimpses into the lives of deaf African Americans.

Organized religious activities played an important role in creating spaces for deaf people to meet and interact. Jannelle Legg's chapter relates the controversy over the loss of one such space, the sale of St. Ann's Church in New York City in the 1890s. Key members of the deaf community, most prominently Edwin Allen Hodgson, used the public press and public forums to advance their arguments for an independent deaf church. Legg underlines the multiple ways in which deaf and hearing lives intersected within both the physical space of the church and the church community. St. Ann's Church played a large role in the deaf community. Aside from its obvious religious functions, it also provided social services such as sign language interpreting and financial assistance, and it served as a space for socializing and conducting cultural activities. However, paralleling to some degree the Australian societies covered in Carty's chapter, St. Ann's Church was run by a hearing pastor and deaf people had little influence over decisions concerning the administration of the church, including its eventual sale. Hodgson's actions (with a hearing ally) show how deaf people seized agency by going outside the boundaries of an ostensibly "deaf-centered" institution and bringing their issues to a larger public.

Several of the chapters in this volume look at how the rise of eugenic theories in the late nineteenth century affected deaf people's lives. Attempts to restrict deaf people's autonomy, most notably through eugenic practices, has most often been studied in Deaf history by looking at the late nineteenth century and, particularly, at Alexander Graham Bell. However, research on the National Association of the Deaf and the Clarke School for the Deaf, a prominent oral school in western

Massachusetts, has revealed that both institutions attempted to curtail deaf people's autonomy by preemptively suggesting certain deaf people should not marry one another.

Brian Greenwald's chapter provides a close textual analysis of Alexander Graham Bell's most widely known publication on deaf people, *Memoir Upon the Formation of a Deaf Variety of the Human Race*. Bell originally presented the paper as an address to the National Academy of Sciences in 1883. Although the *Memoir* typically has been criticized for its eugenic stance, particularly on marriage, Greenwald reveals that Bell also challenged language use and social relationships among deaf people. Ultimately eugenics proved to be less threatening to deaf autonomy than Bell's other concerns, and the widespread educational and social acceptance of Bell's work among hearing educators of the deaf was the real tragedy. Greenwald ends his chapter noting deaf autonomy was contested in many arenas that were influenced by the ideology of Alexander Graham Bell.

Melissa Malzkuhn examines the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) through the lens of eugenics. The NAD promoted full citizenship for its members, a goal articulated at the first NAD convention by Theodore Froehlich—"As deaf-mutes among the other inhabitants of this country, we have interests peculiar to ourselves, and which can be taken care of by ourselves."³ Malzkuhn combed through NAD conference proceedings and deaf residential school publications and found a tightly focused public "voice" that offers a collective perspective protecting deaf people from the potential impact of eugenicists. While insisting that agency remain firmly in control of deaf bodies, the NAD sought to maintain marriage autonomy for most deaf people by encouraging those with hereditary deafness to abstain from marriage. By this point, the white deaf Americans who made up the leadership of the NAD had apparently acknowledged the impact of eugenic ideas in American life.

Following Malzkuhn's chapter, Marion Schmidt discusses research that the Clarke School for the Deaf undertook starting in 1929. The school established research divisions in audiology, psychology, and heredity that utilized cutting-edge genetic and medical knowledge to learn more about the hereditary background of Clarke's students. Researchers worked to reduce the incidence of deafness in future generations and to identify how best to integrate deaf and hearing students. Schmidt concludes that these researchers held complete agency over the testing,

studying, and advising of deaf children who enrolled at Clarke School for the Deaf.

In another chapter on the work of NAD, Octavian Robinson discusses campaigns led by that organization and the National Fraternal Society of the Deaf (NFSD) that projected deaf people as independent citizens and denigrated those who participated in forms of peddling, casting them as paupers and second-class citizens. Using extensive primary sources, Robinson pieces together a story of deaf people seeking to gain economic independence. The NAD and NFSD aggressively mounted anti-peddling campaigns to demonstrate deaf peoples' ability to contribute to the larger society. These organizations utilized ableist discourses while also reinforcing a narrow form of citizenship.

Joseph Murray's chapter looks at how supporters of the National Deaf-Mute College, now Gallaudet University, promoted the university from its founding in 1864 to the 1890s. Murray reviews Presentation Day exercises and other public events chronicled in the college's annual reports to uncover how supporters of the college promoted it as an institution that fostered the national ideal of equal citizenship for all people, including deaf people. The mission of the college was to ensure that students would succeed in "the race of life," and the college's alumni and faculty made sure to publicize the success of its graduates, despite the discrimination women and African Americans faced at the university.

Deaf education was a common battleground where agency was constantly tested. With the heyday of the Progressive Era as a backdrop, Motoko Kimura examines deaf agency in the Chicago public day schools. Combing through a variety of records, including municipal data, Kimura tells the story of a seemingly strong deaf community through the Illinois School for the Deaf at Jacksonville and the Pas-a-Pas club in Chicago. In 1875, with the establishment of the first day school in Chicago, the number of deaf children in Chicago attending the city's public schools grew, subverting traditional placements at the Illinois School for the Deaf. One of the leaders in the initial attempt to establish education for deaf children in Chicago was Philip Alfred Emery. His actions apparently alienated him from the existing deaf community power structure that successfully campaigned for his removal from his post. However, the Chicago Board of Education then resisted efforts by the Pas-a-Pas club to influence the curriculum and other education matters related to deaf education, leaving an opening for oralists to shape deaf education in the city. Their actions minimized opportunities for deaf

parents and hearing people from a lower socioeconomic strata to influence public school education for deaf children.

As the chapters in this volume show, deaf people's autonomy in managing their own affairs was often contested by hearing people. Yet, as the contributors demonstrate, deaf people constantly pressed for autonomy in political, social, and religious avenues, and the results were decidedly mixed. In 1880, NAD President Theodore Froehlich called for deaf people to keep "interests peculiar to ourselves" to themselves, a sentiment later echoed in a 1932 call by the *British Deaf Times* for "a fuller appreciation of the rights of the deaf to manage their own affairs."⁴ Such calls to agency are especially relevant in contemporary times as deaf people are engaged in questions about the value of residential schools, the rapid progression of medical research on hearing loss, genetic engineering, and even the right to use sign language at home and in organizations and schools.⁵ The value of this collection, then, is to remind us that challenges remain. These episodes have much to teach us about the fragility of autonomy and the perils resulting from the loss of agency. We believe that deaf history has much to offer scholars who continue to study deaf people in relation to the societies in which they live.

Notes

1. Some examples of studies of deaf history on a national scale in the United States include Jack R. Gannon, *Deaf Heritage: A Narrative History of Deaf America* (Silver Spring, MD: National Association of the Deaf, 1981); John V. Van Cleve and Barry A. Crouch, *A Place of Their Own: Creating the Deaf Community in America* (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 1989); Douglas C. Baynton, *Forbidden Signs: American Culture and the Campaign against Sign Language* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); John V. Van Cleve, ed., *Deaf History Unveiled: Interpretations from the New Scholarship* (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 1999); Robert Buchanan, *Illusions of Equality: Deaf Americans in School and Factory, 1850–1950* (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 1999); Susan Burch, *Signs of Resistance: American Deaf Cultural History, 1900 to World War II* (New York: New York University Press, 2004); Hannah Joyner, *From Pity to Pride: Growing Up Deaf in the Old South* (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press; Brenda Jo Brueggemann and Susan Burch, eds., *Women and Deafness: Double Visions* (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 2006); John V. Van Cleve, ed., *Deaf History Reader* (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 2007); Susan Burch and Hannah Joyner, *Unspeakable: The Story of Junius Wilson* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Brian H. Greenwald and John V. Van Cleve, ed., *A Fair Chance in the Race of Life:*

The Role of Gallaudet University in Deaf History (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 2008); Carolyn McCaskill, Ceil Lucas, Robert Bayley, and Joseph Hill, *The Hidden Treasure of Black ASL: Its History and Structure* (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 2011); and R.A.R. Edwards, *Words Made Flesh: Nineteenth-Century Deaf Education and the Growth of Deaf Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

2. Carolyn McCaskill, Ceil Lucas, Robert Bayley, and Joseph Hill, *The Hidden Treasure of Black ASL: Its History and Structure* (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 2011), 14–15.

3. Theo. A. Froehlich, “Importance of Association Among Mutes for Mutual Improvement” in *Proceedings of the National Convention of Deaf-Mutes* (New York: New York Institution for the Deaf and Dumb, 1880), 39.

4. “Overseas Page. Australia,” *British Deaf Times* 24, no. 337–38 (Jan-Feb 1932): 3. As quoted in Breda Carty, this volume.

5. For example of a discussion on the right to use sign language, see *Sign Language Studies* 15, no. 4 (Summer 2015).