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by

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American Deaf Women Historiography: The Most Silent Minority

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American Deaf Women Historiography: The Most Silent Minority

by

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Report

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to the most important members of my family: my grandmother and parents, Ruth Y. Potter, Mark A. and Joan P. Nathanson; my two brothers, Harvey A. Nathanson and David E. Nathanson; my two sisters in law, Gloria V. Nathanson and Sharon C. Nathanson; my partner, Nicholas J. Perepelkin and our children, Ariella Rose, Giovanna Zana, Amaziah Ilan, and Avivanna Chaya.

Grandma, you are greatly missed and loved. Daddy, thank you for all the historical stories you used to tell, sparking my interest in our unique family heritage. Mom, thank you for all the support over the years, being a wonderful mom and showing me what an American Deaf woman is capable of! Harvey and David, thank you both for being there for me through thick and thin, sharing a common love for the scholarship in the field of Deaf Studies and History and all the encouragement and support throughout my life and studies. Gloria and Sharon, thank you for all the support and encouragement while sharing the trials of motherhood - both of you are the best sisters in law I could ask for! Nick, you are invaluable in terms of love, support, and encouragement: I couldn't have made through graduate school without your deep, unshakable belief in me! Ariella, Giovanna, Amaziah and Avivanna, thank you for all the kisses, hugs and love!

This work is also dedicated to all the American Deaf women that existed before us, currently exists with us, and will exist after us. We all have a place in history - even the American Deaf women. We are silent, not silenced.

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A deep sense of appreciation and love is extended towards my family who have supported me every step of the way of my journey in graduate school: my partner, Nicholas Perepelkin and our wonderful children, Ariella Rose, Giovanna Zana, Amaziah Ilan and Avivanna Chaya.

Abstract

American Deaf Women Historiography: The Most Silent Minority

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2011

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This report outlines the development and current state of the historical perspective of American Deaf women. Initially this paper reviews the historical study of people with disabilities and for the American Deaf. This paper concludes with a review of the small but significant selections of historical scholarship related directly to American Deaf women along with recommendations to preserve the rich and colorful Deaf-oriented heritage; especially of the women.

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INTRODUCTION

“Members of oppressed communities are frequently deprived from appreciating their own historical experiences and the glory of the actions of their own people.”

-Professor Arlene B. Kelly, Deaf Scholar and Historian, 2008

The historiography of American Deaf¹ women has always been an area of tremendous personal and professional interest. As a child, naturally, I sought information on historical women, seeking role models that I could emulate. After reading countless books on American women and their accomplishments, I was puzzled at the lack of information on American Deaf women. After asking my mother where the Deaf women were, who they were, and why they were not present in the mainstream history books, I was not able to find the answers which begun my participation in the historical scholarship on American Deaf women experience.

A preliminary survey of the mainstream American historiography indicated that the token representation of historical deaf woman was affixed to Helen Keller and Mabel Hubbard Bell. Granted, upon first glance, these women are indeed historical figures, for they both made numerous contributions that changed society. However, often overlooked was the fact that these women, despite their own deafness, had very little contact with the American Deaf throughout their lives. Keller had greatly distanced herself from any

¹ The capitalization of the letter, “D” refers to the people who share the same values, beliefs, language and behaviors based on deafness. These people are involved in the deaf community and culture, but may or may not be profoundly deaf. It also is a designation of a group that shares the same culture and specific characteristics such as hearing loss, skin color, bloodline, and so on. It is possible for a person to have a profound hearing loss and not identify with the American Deaf.

form of disability, advocating for eugenics and had minimal actual contact with the American Deaf.² Historical scholarship on Mabel Bell indicate that she, like Keller, avoided being seen as deaf, and went a step further by refusing to learn sign language, and purposefully maintained a distance from the American Deaf community.³

These discrepancies are deeply problematic from my personal and professional epistemological standpoint as a American Deaf feminist, as a woman, as a mother of four Deaf children (three daughters and a son, to be specific) and as a scholar/historian. How could Keller and Bell be claimed as “heroines” by the American Deaf, seeing the interactions or lack thereof by Keller and Bell? How could these women, having a hearing loss, put a distance between themselves and the American Deaf? How did they interact with the American Deaf when their paths intersected? How did the hearing loss shape these women’s lives, and their daily experiences?

² Scholarly interest on Helen Keller has significantly increased in the past few years, moving beyond the typical auto/biographical scholarship. For example, see the following body of work by scholar Kim E. Nielsen- *Beyond the Miracle Worker: The Remarkable Life of Anne Sullivan Macy and Her Extraordinary Friendship with Helen Keller*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2009, *Helen Keller: Selected Writings*. New York: New York University Press, 2005, *The Radical Lives of Helen Keller*. New York: New York University Press, 2004, and “The Southern Ties of Helen Keller.” *Journal of Southern History* LXXIII.4 (2007): 783-806. Print.

³ Mabel Hubbard Bell wrote in her diary several times discussing her misgivings of being associated as a deaf person, and her clear determination to distance herself from the American Deaf community. A common myth describes Mrs. Bell being heavily influenced by her husband, Alexander Graham Bell on her interactions on deafness. In fact, Alexander Graham Bell was fluent in sign language, and had professional and personal interactions with the American Deaf community. Despite his involvement with the American Deaf community, Mrs. Bell still chose to distance herself as a deaf person. She preferred to communicate vocally, and communicate via paper and pen if necessary. See the following: Bishundayal, Ann. *Mabel Hubbard. Biography of Mrs. Alexander Graham Bell, Deaf Mute from Age Five*. N.p.: Protea Publishing, 2002; Toward, Lilias M. *Mabel Bell, Alexander's Silent Partner*. Methuen: Methuen, 1984; and Bell, Mabel Hubbard. “Alexander Graham Bell Family Papers, Mabel Hubbard Bell Diaries.” *American Memory*. Library of Congress, n.d. Web. 30 Nov. 2011. <<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/bellhtml/magbellFolder1.html>>.

Putting Keller and Bell aside, the following questions beg answering: where ARE the American Deaf women in history? The ones that communicated primarily in American Sign Language and written English, and functioned equally as a member of the society and had close ties with the American Deaf? Who can the American Deaf, girls and women in particular, truly claim as their own, as one of their heroines and as historical figures in the books? A 1974 editorial addressed the importance of having historical role models for deaf girls, and of having positive self-image empowered by knowing one's cultural heritage.⁴ Adler emphasized the importance of the exposure to heroines that are identifiable for young deaf girls that provides reassurance that they do have a place in the world. A similar rationale was given in the introduction section of *Deaf Women: A Parade through the Times* of the need to preserve the history of American Deaf women for future generations as a means of empowerment for the female youth. Unfortunately, despite the clear need of empowerment via role models, the production of historical scholarship concerning American Deaf women has been sorely lacking. American Deaf women have been, and still are extremely under-represented in historical study.

This paper outlines the development and current state of the historical perspective of American Deaf women. Initially this paper reviews the historical study of people with disabilities and for the American Deaf. This paper concludes with a review of the small

⁴ Adler, Edna, and Women in the Deaf Community. "Women in the Deaf Community." *Gallaudet Today* 4.3 (1974).

but significant selections of historical scholarship related directly to American Deaf women along with recommendations to preserve the rich and colorful Deaf-oriented heritage; especially of the women.

MARGINALIZED HISTORIOGRAPHY: DISABILITY AND DEAF DISABILITY HISTORIOGRAPHY

“Disability is everywhere in history...conspicuously absent in the histories we write.”

-Disability Historian/Scholar Doug Baynton, 2005

Tremendous social and cultural changes in the United States during the 1970's led to a heightened consciousness for the marginalized. The field of history was revolutionized by a surge of interest in social and cultural histories, leading to conversations about the process of re-writing history. Much of previous historical accounts were written by the elite of society: white, middle-class to upper class, educated males. So dominant was the authorship, historians began to consider the necessity of bringing forth the voices of the marginalized to gain alternative perspectives of historical events. As well, a keen sense of collective responsibility was felt for the preservation of human memory for future generations that represented numerous perspectives rather than one grand historical narrative. Consequently, marginalized histories such as Women's history, African American history, Latin American history, Gay/Lesbian history gained critical scholarly attention in the past few decades. Despite the renewed vigor for marginalized histories, Disability history lagged significantly behind in developing a body of scholarly study.

Disability history, in the beginning, consisted of the pathological condition of bodies, and curative remedies. Authorship of this type of history often came from

caretakers and professionals, often leaving out the voice of the individual with the disability. Many historians have since tried to correct that oversight by recognizing that a disability can be considered a social construct rather than a medical condition. Disability history with this new recognition confronted the fact that a disability is a part of the life experience. In addition, it deconstructed the sheer power of inequality involved with ‘disability’ and questioned the concepts of humanity and societal response to perceived deviance from the norm.

Catherine Kudlick’s 2003 review essay insightfully raises critical questions regarding disability historiography. Her article addresses the need to regard ‘disability’ as its own analytical category equal to race, class, and gender. Related to this, the article also discusses the growth of the field and its biggest sub-genre: Deaf history. Through the lens of disability history, Kudlick challenges issues of humanity, of human body perceptions, of societal responses to differences, and of the lived experiences of disabled individuals. Essentially, Kudlick presses for the recognition that,

“...disability is not just another “Other”: it reveals and constructs notions of citizenship, human difference, social values, sexuality, and the complex relationship between the biological and social worlds.”⁵

Kudlick stresses the viability of disability as an analytical category for historical scholarship. To illustrate her point, Kudlick refers to the recent explosion of a sub-genre within Disability history: Deaf history. The uniqueness of the American Deaf experience,

⁵ Kudlick, Catherine J. “Disability History: Why We Need Another ‘Other.’” *American Historical Review* 108.3 (2003): 793.

the status of being a cultural and linguistic minority, the claim of ethnic equivalency along with autonomy provided fertile ground for scholarly work. The body of historical study on the Deaf outpaced other disability sub-genres. The progress made within Deaf history in its recovery of raw data, methodologies, and critical inquiry serves as an invaluable blueprint; to move beyond the perspective of disability as a pathological characteristic to a perspective of a social construction and a viable category for scholarly study.

Echoing Kudlick, Susan Burch and Ian Sutherland's 2006 essay outlined the evolution of Disability History as a scholarly field of study. Elaborating on the usefulness of disability history as a tool, the authors questioned prior historical interpretations (and exclusion) of people with disabilities. The numerous questions regarding the disability experience showcases the ethics involved with caring and care-taking; the social, cultural and public politics that often guides the policy-making process; the tensions between charitable care and entitled care; and the decision making and empowerment processes involved for those in positions of power are critically assessed. Essentially, according to the authors, disability forces us to recognize the constraints of rigid categories for historical study:

“...even the most fundamental and apparently enduring categories as ultimately artificial and imposed, and recognize the means by which those categories were

created and how they function in society as something to be analyzed and understood.”⁶

Burch and Sutherland points out the methodological challenges involved in disability history that is quite daunting for the historian. For one, sparse records often provides a very one-sided perspective into the disability experience. Centuries-old stereotypes and misconceptions of disability often influenced the documentation process. More specifically, the nature and complexity of the disability itself often influenced the type of records that are made, maintained and preserved.⁷ Echoing the historical experiences of the marginalized, those in positions of power controlled the disability experience on record prior to the 1970’s. Not only did the historians have to contend with the insufficient content, they also had to contend with legislations safeguarding the records of people with disabilities.

Regardless of the challenges, the authors asserts that disability offers a fresh lens in critically assessing the role of history within society, responses to differences by the society as well as the process of disability as a lived experience. Despite the relative youth of disability history, there is a developing body of theoretical and methodological frameworks that enables disability scholars to critically assess the role of disability as a

⁶ Burch, Susan, and Ian Sutherland. “Who Is Not Yet Here?: American Disability History.” *Radical History Review*, no. 94 (Winter 2006): 138.

⁷ Burch, Susan, and Ian Sutherland. “Who Is Not Yet Here?: American Disability History.” *Radical History Review*, no. 94 (Winter 2006): 142.

lived experience and as a social construct. This is not to say that disability history represents the collective experience of all individuals with disability - the sub-genre of Deaf history serves as an excellent example.

The American Deaf have long rejected the label of disability, preferring to be categorized as a cultural and linguistic minority. The experiences of being Deaf often differs from the mainstream experience of being an individual with a disability. The common bonding factor for Deaf people is the collective experience of having a hearing loss in a world that is primarily sound-based and sharing a language and communication method that is primarily visual-gestural. For example, the experience of alienation and isolation differs between the American Deaf and the collective experiences of individuals with disabilities within residential schools. Oral and written testimonies from people with disabilities have often referred to residential schools as a source of alienation and isolation from the mainstream society. For the American Deaf experience, in contrast, residential schools served as a safe haven from the mainstream society where they could freely communicate through sign language. This is an example of how the lived experience for the disabled individual and the Deaf individual may differ, influencing the outcome of the historical research.

AMERICAN DEAF HISTORIOGRAPHY

“...there existed a demand for a work giving a glimpse at the achievements of the deaf of America...to show the world the brilliant results of the American system of educating the deaf...”

-James E. Gallaher, Publisher and Author, 1898

In the past four decades, tremendous advances in the historical scholarship on the American Deaf experience paved the way for the contemporary scholars. There was a pressing need to preserve the unique legacy left behind for future generations. The legacy would then remind the new generation of American Deaf that hearing loss did not need to be a major obstacle in leading a full, productive life. Awareness was key to empowerment and autonomy as individuals and as a linguistic and cultural minority. The answer rested with having a written and oral versions of American Deaf history.

Unfortunately, prior to 1980’s, historical scholarship had largely been dominated by privileged hearing males in positions of power. Numerous biographies, short accounts within travel journals, diaries and/or periodicals, monographs and school histories written from a hearing perspective often served as the primary starting point for historical study involving the American Deaf.⁸ The nature of these historiographical studies on the

⁸ It would not be until 1893 that a collaborative effort was made to gather school histories that included Deaf contributors. Edward A. Fay edited a three volume edition entitled, “Histories of America Schools for the Deaf, 1817-1893” which is regarded as one of the most comprehensive accounts as a historical research resource. Rich detail on the histories of the schools, along with the inclusion of curriculum and schedules help scholars better understand the lived experience of being at a residential school in the 19th century. The participation of the Deaf educators is quite significant due to the scant opportunities for equitable participation. See: Fay, Edward Allen. *Histories of American Schools for the Deaf 1817-1893*. 3 vols. Washington, D.C.: The Volta Bureau, 1983.

American Deaf were often fragmentary snippets of information and/or data within administrative documents and school newspapers that led to the initial forays into mapping the Deaf experience within history.⁹

The historical scholarship often were a result of an upcoming celebration or milestone that required a review of past events and hagiographic studies of hearing individuals linked to the Deaf, which served as excellent starting points but often falls short of critical examination and connections.¹⁰ For example, a 1852 book on the eulogy of Reverend Thomas H. Gallaudet contained an appendix detailing the history of the school, American Asylum for the Education of Deaf and Dumb Persons (AAEDDP)¹¹ and its student roster between the years of 1817 to 1851. Of significant interest was the detail of the students-they did not contain grades, or physical characteristics. The roster held detailed information of the graduates of one's marriage status, occupation, and deaths.

⁹ To better appreciate the advent of early historiography of the American Deaf, see the following body of work: Gannon, Jack R. *Deaf Heritage: A Narrative History of Deaf America*. Ed. Jane Butler and Laura-Jean Gilbert. Silver Spring: National Association of the Deaf, 1981. and Van Cleve, John V., and Barry A. Crouch. *A Place of Their Own: Creating the Deaf Community in America*. Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1989.

¹⁰ Historians have questioned the limitations of the past scholarships, agreeing on the value of the seminal work, however, most of these histories fall short in presenting interpretative work. See the following: List, Gunther. "Deaf History: A Suppressed Part of General History." *Deaf History Unveiled*. Ed. John Vickery Van Cleve. Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1993. 113-126 and Montgomery, George. "Is Deaf History Bunk?" *Deafness: Historical Perspectives*. Ed. Mervin D. Garretson. Vol. 46. Silver Spring: National Association of the Deaf, 1996. 101-106. Print. A Deaf American Monograph.

¹¹ AAEDDP is now known as the American School for the Deaf . Established in 1817, the school is situated in Hartford, CT and still exists today on the same site. The school was co-founded by Thomas H. Gallaudet and Laurent Clerc, and holds the distinction of being the first school for the Deaf established in America.

The bulk of the book glorified the life of Rev. Gallaudet, and his accomplishments in the field of deaf education.¹²

Despite the rigid control over historical representation by the majority, the American Deaf had an innate desire to preserve their heritage with a specific cultural and linguistic minority perspective for future generations. Prior to 1981, the people who wrote formal American Deaf historical accounts were not deaf themselves. A sense of urgency grew amongst the American Deaf in preserving their unique heritage and sparked dialogue of how this could happen. This sense of urgency encouraged the National Association of the Deaf (NAD),¹³ the leading civil rights organization of the Deaf and oldest self-help organization in America, to locate an author for a history book project about the American Deaf experience. In 1977, Jack Gannon, the Director of the Office of

¹² Reverend Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet was one of the co-founders of the first school for the Deaf in America. For further reading on Rev. Gallaudet and his work, see the following: Barnard, Henry. *A Discourse in Commemoration of the Life, Character, and Services of the Rev. Thomas H. Gallaudet L.L.D. Delivered Before the Citizens of Hartford, Jan. 7th, 1852 With an Appendix Containing History of Deaf-Mute Instruction and Institutions, and other Documents.* Hartford: Brockett & Hutchinson, Publishers, 1852; Carroll, Cathryn. *A Father, A Son, and a University: Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, 1787-1851*. Washington, D.C.: Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Network at Gallaudet University, 1993. N. pag. *Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Network at Gallaudet University*. Web. 30 Nov. 2011. <<http://clerccenter.gallaudet.edu/InfoToGo/752.html>>; Gallaudet, Edward Miner. *Life Of Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1888. *Disability History Museum*. Web. 30 Nov. 2011. <<http://www.disabilitymuseum.org/dhm/lib/detail.html?id=1739>>; Neimark, Anne E. *A Deaf Child Listened: Thomas Gallaudet, Pioneer in American Education*. New York: William Morrow & Company, 1983; and Valentine, Phyllis. "Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet: Benevolent Paternalism and the Origins of the American Asylum." *Deaf History Unveiled*. Ed. John Vickery Van Cleve. Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1993. 53-73.

¹³ The National Association of the Deaf (NAD) was, and still is the leading organization for civil rights of the Deaf individuals in United States. The organization was established in 1881 by concerned American Deaf regarding their autonomy and representation within the mainstream society. NAD is one of the oldest existing organizations representing the American Deaf and their concerns. For further reading, see the following books and website: Gannon, Jack R. *Deaf Heritage: A Narrative History of Deaf America*. Ed. Jane Butler and Laura-Jean Gilbert. Silver Spring: National Association of the Deaf, 1981; Van Cleve, John V., and Barry A. Crouch. *A Place of Their Own: Creating the Deaf Community in America*. Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1989; and www.nad.org.

Alumni and Public Relations at Gallaudet College,¹⁴ accepted this monumental task.

Because of Gannon's long-standing dedication in preserving the memory of the college, along with the collective memories of the alumni, the NAD believed that Gannon had the best access to resources that would produce a comprehensive book on the American Deaf experience. After countless hours of traveling to numerous archives across the country, research and draft revisions, the book, "Deaf Heritage: A Narrative History of Deaf America" was officially published in 1981.

In the foreword, Ralph H. White, then president of NAD, emphasized the importance of having a volume dealing with the contributions of American Deaf to society. There were numerous trailblazers that made tremendous impact on the mainstream society, and what made their experience even more unique was their deafness. The primary focus of the book was to address "...events of import, deeds of courage, decisions of lasting influence, works of high quality, and moments of glory—all created by deaf people."¹⁵ To create a better perspective of the American Deaf, it was necessary, White concluded, to have a book that would provide recognition of the achievements. There also was a pressing need to preserve the unique legacy left behind for future generations. The legacy serve as a vital reminder for the new generation of

¹⁴ Originally known as the Columbia Institution for the Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb and Blind, the name was changed to the National Deaf-Mutes College in 1864. In 1954, by an act by the United States Congress, the name of the institution was changed to Gallaudet College in honor of Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet. By another act of Congress, Gallaudet was granted university status in October 1986. The name was changed once again to reflect the change in their status from a college to an university.

¹⁵ Gannon, Jack R. *Deaf Heritage: A Narrative History of Deaf America*. Ed. Jane Butler and Laura-Jean Gilbert. Silver Spring: National Association of the Deaf, 1981. xv.

American Deaf that hearing loss did not need to be a major obstacle in leading a full, productive life. White's foresight would prove to be fruitful, for the book served, and still serves as one of the most comprehensive source of historical authority on the American Deaf.

After the 1981 publication, no additional books on American Deaf history were published until the aftermath of the 1988 Deaf President Now (DPN) civil rights protest at Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C. The protest arose as a result of decades-old oppression of the American Deaf which prevented the consideration of a qualified Deaf candidate to be considered for the university office of presidency. Gallaudet University had served as an institution of higher education for the Deaf since 1864, traditionally administrated by hearing males (and later hearing females) in the positions of the President and the Board of Trustees.

In 1988, after the resignation of the interim President Jerry Lee from the university, the American Deaf lobbied the university in appointing a qualified Deaf individual for the presidency. The American Deaf felt it was time that the university was led by someone that shared their trait of deafness, seeing that other universities who had already moved with the times such as Howard University having their first African American president in 1926. Because of a small but powerful clique within the Board of Trustees that leaned towards the pathological perspective of the American Deaf, the Board chose a hearing woman, Dr. Elizabeth Zinser as the university president. A

tremendous backlash arose from the American Deaf community, resulting in one of the most powerful civil rights demonstration by a disability group in American history. After a weeklong proactive protests that captured the attention of the local and national media along with the rest of the world, the university accepted Dr. Zinser's resignation and appointed Dr. I. King Jordan as its first Deaf university president.¹⁶ The demonstration at Gallaudet University sparked a collective sense of cultural awareness and a shared sense of pride in being Deaf on local, national and international levels. Deaf people were now recognized as a unique cultural and linguistic minority by mainstream society, a status that led to a new body of historical scholarship.

Along with the DPN milestone, another major milestone breathed fresh air into the field of Deaf History. The 1989 Deaf Way: International Conference on Deaf Culture hosted in Washington, D.C. brought together over six thousand Deaf people internationally to celebrate deaf culture, serving as an important milestone for the professionalization of Deaf history.¹⁷ Amateur and professional historians of the Deaf had frequent conversations, which called for the rewriting of American Deaf historiography from a Deaf epistemological standpoint. The historians collectively recognized the need for further examination and interpretation of the American Deaf experience. A consensus

¹⁶ For further detail on the Deaf President Now protest, see the following: Barnartt, Sharon N., and John B. Christiansen. *Deaf President Now!: The 1988 Revolution at Gallaudet University*. Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1995 and Gannon, Jack R. *The Week the World Heard Gallaudet*. Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1989.

¹⁷ For further reading of the conference and its proceedings, see: Erting, Carol J., et al., eds. *The Deaf Way: Perspectives from the International Conference on Deaf Culture*. Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1994. Significant historical scholarship is included in the proceedings with its own section.

was reached to establish a conference focused solely on Deaf history, further professionalizing the field for scholarship. The Department of History at Gallaudet University took the initiative in establishing a committee for the first International conference on Deaf History at Washington, D.C. in 1991. The conference led to the establishment of the Deaf History International organization with main objective to “encourage the study, preservation and dissemination of Deaf people’s history.”¹⁸ ***The Deaf Way*** conference renewed an interest of the American Deaf experience, lending a vigor in historiographical studies.¹⁹ It was this conference along with DPN that laid a foundation to generate contemporary historical works and a new body of academic discourse focused on the experience of deafness, and its implications throughout American history.

Despite the new perspectives, historiographical scholarship of the American Deaf beyond the parameters of the American Deaf education system is limited, constrained by the challenges that make research difficult. Thus, the body of scholarship addressing the American Deaf experience is minimal comparatively to other marginalized histories. The next section addresses the three major challenges experienced in the historical scholarship of the American Deaf.

¹⁸ Carbin, Clifton. “A Short Account of the Origins of Deaf History International.” *Deaf History International* Summer 2009: 4-5.

¹⁹ Moore, Matthew S. “The Great Treasure Hunt: What We Can Learn from Researching ‘Deaf History’?” *Deafness: Historical Perspectives*. Ed. Mervin D. Garretson. Vol. 46. Silver Spring: National Association of the Deaf, 1996. 107-112. Print. A Deaf American Monograph and Schuchman, John S. “Oral History and Deaf Heritage: Theory and Case Studies.” *Looking Back: A Reader on the History of Deaf Communities and their Sign Languages*. Ed. Renate Fischer and Harlan Lane. Vol. 20. Hamburg: University of Hamburg, Germany, 1993. 515-532. Print. International Studies on Sign Language and Communication of the Deaf.

CHALLENGES IN AMERICAN DEAF HISTORY SCHOLARSHIP

“Why bother? Why write about the long-dead deaf people, including those whose work have been forgotten?...Because they come from a diversity of backgrounds and experiences...Our community is not limited to products of standard “deaf education.” We benefit from the diversity.”

-Matthew S. Moore, Editor and Historian, 1996

In light of the great strides made in the field of Deaf history, there are some challenges that hinders its progress in scholarship: language barriers, the chasm between the professional and amateur historians, and the availability of primary and secondary sources for historical research.

One of the more significant challenges facing historians is the language barrier. The primary language of the American Deaf is American Sign Language (ASL) which is a visual-gestural language with no written form. Due to the visual-gestural nature of the American Deaf, stories and historical testimonies were mostly told in ASL, passed down through generations. The implications of a language having no written form is enormous, for it creates a vacuum for historical documentation. Dr. John Schuchman, historian specializing in oral history with the American Deaf points out the importance of gathering testimonies via the medium of film in one's native language which often provides nuanced detail not available in written English.²⁰

²⁰ Schuchman, John S. “Oral History and Deaf Heritage: Theory and Case Studies.” *Looking Back: A Reader on the History of Deaf Communities and their Sign Languages*. Ed. Renate Fischer and Harlan Lane. Vol. 20. Hamburg: University of Hamburg, Germany, 1993. 515-532. Print. International Studies on Sign Language and Communication of the Deaf.

Adding to the complexity is the process involved with translation of two different languages. Any material that contains ASL would be dependent upon a direct translation by a bilingual individual well versed in both ASL and spoken English. In the process of translation, from a visual gestural format to a written format, a significant portion of the original message is often lost.²¹

Schuchman in his 1996 essay, “Oral History and Deaf Studies: An Essay” believes that oral testimonies provided an equalizing power for the American Deaf, especially those who did not feel comfortable expressing themselves in written English. Many American Deaf did not have access to superior writing skills, an aspect often dependent upon one’s educational attainment and social standing.²² Schuchman cautions researchers against full reliance on written English testimonies of the American Deaf, for it may not reflect what was actually conveyed in American Sign Language. The importance of gathering testimonies via the medium of film in one’s native language, which often provides nuanced detail not available in written English, is especially highlighted in the essay. However, Schuchman acknowledges the equal importance of written English for scholarship, and encourages historians to utilize both oral and written sources in seeking evidence regarding the American Deaf experience.

²¹ Schuchman, John S. “Oral History and Deaf Heritage: Theory and Case Studies.” *Looking Back: A Reader on the History of Deaf Communities and their Sign Languages*. Ed. Renate Fischer and Harlan Lane. Vol. 20. Hamburg: University of Hamburg, Germany, 1993. 515-532. Print. International Studies on Sign Language and Communication of the Deaf.

²² Scholars have called for a critical examination of textual readings on the American Deaf. For an excellent discussion of the problematic nature of “translating” information between American Sign Language and written English, see the following work: Harmon, Kristen. “Writing Deaf: Textualizing Deaf Literature.” *Sign Language Studies* 7, no. 2 (Winter 2007): 200-207.

The chasm between amateur and professional historians is quite considerable. For one, professional historians are often academically trained, and have access to resources that enable significant and vigorous historical scholarship such as funding. The amateur historical scholarship often is deemed as a personal labor of love, dedicated to preservation of the unique heritage for future generations. Funding for research is not as readily available for amateur historians, and research often occurred by personal funding.

In fact, Deaf history was not considered as a specialization within the American history field until the late 1980s and was largely ignored by historians. As a result, many historical accounts came from amateur historians that had collected basic data and wove the information into a narrative. Critical inquiry and theoretical frameworks were often absent in historical scholarship prior to 1980s. An excellent example of an amateur effort lacking of a theoretical framework and critical inquiry is the 1981 *Deaf Heritage* book. The author, Jack Gannon was never academically trained as a historian, and the contents in the book reflects the fact. The book contains is composed in an archival-type fashion, filled with basic facts and anecdotes. There is no significant historical analysis or framework in place. Regardless, the book serves as one of the primary starting places for clues and research that leads to new discoveries in American Deaf history.

The final challenge lies with the availability of primary and secondary sources for historical research. Because of the societal attitudes towards disability and deafness, numerous documents were lost over time as the value of preserving records on the Deaf

was considered as insignificant except for those who were involved with the Deaf.²³ Fortunately, there were some efforts by the nineteenth century American Deaf to preserve their heritage. The urgency of preservation was not lost on the previous generations of Deaf Americans, as several projects were launched such as the 1898 volume containing biographies on prominent nineteenth century American Deaf individuals and the film series on the preservation of sign language between 1913 to 1920.²⁴ Despite the efforts, much of the American Deaf history has been lost, because there is no written form of ASL and because so little has been included in the history books.

²³ The problematic nature of preserving documents when one is not considered as significant in history, and those who are in power has the ability to determine who is included/excluded in history. Many deaf people didn't see the value in preserving their papers--not fully appreciating the importance of preserving. Within numerous introduction/preview sections in the Deaf History books, historians reconstructing the American Deaf experience frequently refer to the problematic nature of the past scholarship. See the articles in: Hedberg, Ulf. "The Deaf Archive: Our History, Our Future." *The Deaf Way: Perspectives from the International Conference on Deaf Culture*. Ed. Carol J. Erting, et al. Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1994. 283-284 and Hedberg, Ulf, and Diana Gates. "No History, No Future: Preserving and Archiving Deaf History." *Deaf History International* 41 (Spring 2010): 7-10. Print.

²⁴ Gallaher, James E. *Representative Deaf Persons of the United States of America containing Portraits and Character Sketches of Prominent Deaf Persons (Commonly called "Deaf Mutes" Who Are Engaged in the Higher Pursuits of Life)*. Ed. James E. Gallaher. Chicago: James E. Gallaher, 1898. In the introduction section, Gallaher wrote of being endorsed by prominent nineteenth century American Deaf in pursuing the project. As for the film series, a deep concern of the possibility of a dying language spurred action. A major project to film Deaf and hearing individuals with near-native or native American Sign Language abilities was launched by the National Association of the Deaf in 1910. There were 22 films produced, and 7 have been lost. Approximately 15 films are still intact, due to preservation efforts and renewed scholarship on the American Deaf. For further reading, see: Olsen, Michael J., and John Vickery Van Cleve. "Preservation Serendipity: The Gallaudet University Archives and the Veditz Transcription." *Sign Language Studies* 4, no. 3 (Spring 2004): 239-243.

This is not to say that the researcher should lose hope - there is written sources presenting evidence on the American Deaf experience dating back to the early days of the Republic.²⁵

Other than the largest collection on the American Deaf and deafness housed at Gallaudet University Archives in Washington, D.C.,²⁶ residential schools and their archives have most of the enduring historic documents of the American Deaf. However, the archives at the residential schools for the Deaf, for following various reasons, often were and still are inaccessible. For one, the contents of the archives belong to the state. Historically, state governments established and funded their school for the deaf children. Therefore, the schools of the Deaf and its properties were, and still are owned by the state. The archives physical location is situated on-campus. It is difficult for scholars and researchers to visit the archives during the academic year due to privacy and safety legislation protecting the students. Because deafness is a legal disability, the body of

²⁵ For further reading on the American Deaf experience during the colonial era, see the following: Carty, Breda, Susannah Macready, and Edna Edith Sayers. “‘A Grave and Gracious Woman’: Deaf People and Signed Language in Colonial New England.” *Sign Language Studies* 9.3 (2009): 3287-323. Print; Jones, Thomas W. “America’s First Multi-Generation Deaf Families (A Genealogical Perspective).” *Deafness: Historical Perspectives*. Ed. Mervin D. Garretson. Vol. 46. Silver Spring: National Association of the Deaf, 1996. 49-54. A Deaf American Monograph; Lane, Harlan, Richard Pillard, and Mary French. “Origins of the American Deaf-World: Assimilating and Differentiating Societies and Their Relation to Genetic Patterning.” *Sign Language Studies* 1.1 (2000): 17-44; and Lang, Harry G. “Genesis of a Community: The American Deaf Experience in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries.” *The Deaf History Reader*. Ed. John Vickery Van Cleve. Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 2007. 1-23.

²⁶ Gallaudet University Archives contains the world’s most comprehensive collection of material relating to the language, history, and culture of D/deaf people. Photographs, artifacts, personal correspondence and family papers, publications and institutional records form the core of the repository. In addition, the Archive contains a film collection of more than 750 films which provide rare footage documenting deaf history and sign language used by American Deaf generations ago.

legislation designed for people with disabilities also applies to the American Deaf making school-related and archival records accessibility problematic.

The lack of standardization of preservation practices in the archives across schools for the Deaf has also contributed to the scarcity of historical material on the American Deaf. The head archivist of the Gallaudet University Archives, Ulf Hedberg, outlined the urgent need for standardization in material-collection preservation practices of Deaf-oriented repositories. If the practices were standardized, Hedberg suggests that the amount of materials and collections available for historical scholarship would significantly increase leading to more historical scholarship. Hedberg further cautions scholars not to limit their search to the archives at the schools for the Deaf and Gallaudet University Archives, but to actively seek individual and family papers in personal archives. In doing so, owners of individual and family papers can be persuaded to donate the items to archives with full reassurance of their long-term preservation for future generations and scholarship.

Given the aforementioned perspective of the progress and challenges related to disability and Deaf history, the following pages focus on the history of American Deaf women. Despite the small body of scholarship, the intersection of gender and deafness provide the underpinning for future scholarship. The primary themes of the scholarship are representation, the Deaf school experience, the Deaf community experience, and individuals.

AMERICAN DEAF WOMEN HISTORIOGRAPHY: WHERE ARE WE?

“...I had to search for Deaf female leaders- and found them - in the nooks and crannies of our history. Deaf women can, and do, have many kinds of careers, interests and skills!”

-Roslyn Rosen, Deaf Community leader and advocate, 1989

Because of the constant efforts of the American Deaf in gaining recognition as a unique linguistic and cultural minority, issues related to class, gender, and race often went unaddressed in earlier historiographical works.²⁷ Although American Deaf women may have been included in other historical scholarship in the past, it does not mean a full consideration of the gender dimension. A survey of past historical interpretations offered by scholars specializing in Deaf history constructed American Deaf women in an unflattering light: as passive, secondary, and lacking of autonomy in situations not related to the domestic sphere and social functions.²⁸

There is a recent publication focusing on American Deaf women, building upon the foundations of American Deaf historiography with women as the primary foci.²⁹ The

²⁷ Within numerous introduction/preview sections in the Deaf History books, historians reconstructing the American Deaf experience frequently refer to the limiting and problematic nature of the past scholarship.

²⁸ Historians in the field of Deaf History acknowledges that limited resources is an obstacle for developing a vigorous body of scholarship, such as the American Deaf women experience. It is quite difficult to conduct research with nearly nonexistent sources.

²⁹ For examples of recent publications on the nineteenth century American Deaf women experience, see the following: Jankowski, Katherine. “‘Til All Barriers Crumble and Fall: Agatha Tiegel’s Presentation Day Speech in April 1893.” *Deaf World: A Historical Reader and Primary Sourcebook*. Ed. Lois Bragg. New York: New York University Press, 2001. 284-295. Print; Patterson, Lindsey. “Unlikely Alliances: Crossing the Deaf and Hearing Divide.” *Deaf and Disability Studies: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Ed. Susan Burch and Alison Kafer. Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 2010. 144-161. Print; and Porco, Jill Hendricks. “Mary Ann Walworth Booth.” *The Deaf History Reader*. Ed. John Vickery Van Cleve. Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 2007. 74-84. Print.

authors illustrated aspects of notable American Deaf women who existed and thrived during the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, there is only one book on American Deaf women published, and the other historical scholarship are chapters or essays included in anthologies are scanty at best. Also contributing to the negative perspective is the scarcity of primary and secondary sources involving American Deaf women. The meagerness reflects the perceived value of American Deaf women within American Deaf historiography.

Despite the scarcity of sources by, of and regarding American Deaf women, recent discoveries, or shall we say, “re-discoveries” of material carry exciting implications for historical study. For example, the 1869 pamphlet by Adele M. Jewel, a profoundly Deaf woman who attended the Michigan Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb went unnoticed until 2000. The account provides a rich detail of the lived experience of a Deaf woman during the nineteenth century, and deserves its place in historical scholarship of American Deaf women. Currently, the piece is included in two historical anthologies: *A Mighty Change: An Anthology of Deaf American Writing 1816-1864* edited by Christopher Krentz (2000), and *Before They Could Vote: American Women’s Autobiographical Writing 1819-1919* edited by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2006). The first anthology focused on the writings of Deaf people whereas the second focused on the writings of women demonstrating the intersections of deafness and gender. Despite the great discovery and the inclusion in the anthologies, no one has taken the step to conduct a scholarly analysis, and to establish a better understanding of the historical implications of the account.

The following sections focuses on selections of historical scholarship on the American Deaf women experience, organized around common themes of representation, the deaf school experience, the deaf community experience and individuals.

EARLIEST HISTORICAL SCHOLARSHIP ON AMERICAN DEAF WOMEN

“Many pieces in this puzzle are missing...someday all these bits will go toward completing biographies of deaf women who have been of significance and impact...This explains why we decided to go ahead with this work, however incomplete. To wait until all pieces of the puzzle fit means to wait too long.”

-Mabs Holcomb and Sharon Wood, Authors, 1989

The 1989 Mabs Holcomb and Sharon Wood’s “Deaf Women: A Parade through the Decades” is the earliest known effort in bringing forth the voices of American Deaf women. The main objective of the book was to “*...bring notable deaf women out of the mists of history into the spotlight, and to recognize our contemporaries.*”³⁰ The authors sought to bring awareness of the accomplishments of American Deaf women from prior generations to convey a sense of empowerment for the present and future generations.

An additional rationale for the book was to address the gap of historical information of women in earlier works, such as Gannon’s 1981 *Deaf Heritage: A Narrative History of Deaf in America*. For example, in *Deaf Heritage*, a total of twenty-four schools were founded by Deaf men. Only one wife was provided an equal billing with her husband in the founding of a school for the Deaf, which is quite puzzling. Most of these founders were married, and in many school histories, the founder’s wife is often credited for her services as a matron, a motherly figure for the children and as the “lady” of the school. Another puzzling example of a gap within *Deaf Heritage* is the lack of

³⁰ Holcomb, Mabs, and Sharon Wood. *Deaf Women: A Parade Through the Decades*. Berkeley: Dawn Sign Press, 1989: 13.

attention on Deaf women's contributions in education during the nineteenth century.

Many Deaf women in the nineteenth century worked at the schools for the Deaf as teachers and matrons, and wielded considerable influence over the students.³¹

The *Deaf Women: A Parade through the Times* is organized thematically by a specific era, occupation and activities. There is no theoretical framework in place - the contents are primarily archival, filled with statistical information such as the birth and death dates, achievements, anecdotes and brief entries of the historical significance of the individual. For example, the chapter entitled "Feminists" does not truly detail what feminism was and what it meant to American Deaf women. Instead, brief biographies are given of American Deaf women and a few sentences detailing specific actions that are deemed as "feminist" by the authors without any clear criteria. To the authors' credit, they acknowledged the incompleteness of their work in the introduction section, and stated a hope that the book would serve as a starting place for future scholarship. Further, the authors hoped that the book would serve as a reminder for young Deaf women and

³¹ An example is Sophia Fowler Gallaudet. Born Deaf, she was educated at the American School for the Deaf in Hartford, CT. She eventually married one of the co-founders of the Deaf education system in America, Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet and had children. When one of her sons, Edward Miner Gallaudet had an employment offer to serve as the first superintendent for the Columbia Institution for the Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind (CIIDDB) in Washington, D.C., he asked his mother to move with him and to serve as the matron and a motherly figure for the people on campus. She also is considered one of the first deaf lobbyists for deaf rights in the U.S. Congress. For further reading, see: Carroll, Cathryn. *A Father, A Son, and a University: Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, 1787-1851*. Washington, D.C.: Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Network at Gallaudet University, 1993. N. pag. *Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Network at Gallaudet University*. Web. 30 Nov. 2011. <<http://clerccenter.gallaudet.edu/InfoToGo/752.html>>; Gallaudet, Edward Miner. *Life Of Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1888. *Disability History Museum*. Web. 30 Nov. 2011. <<http://www.disabilitymuseum.org/dhm/lib/detail.html?id=1739>>; Neimark, Anne E. *A Deaf Child Listened: Thomas Gallaudet, Pioneer in American Education*. New York: William Morrow & Company, 1983; and Valentine, Phyllis. "Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet: Benevolent Paternalism and the Origins of the American Asylum." *Deaf History Unveiled*. Ed. John Vickery Van Cleve. Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1993. 53-73.

girls of the accomplishments of those that came before them. The book was quite significant as a resource, as there would be no other publication that focused solely on the American Deaf women experience until late 1990's.

EMERGING HISTORICAL SCHOLARSHIP ON REPRESENTATION

“...being deaf and female was indeed a double-whammy! Both groups may suffer from stereotyped images, oppression by the majority...Being a deaf female...result in second-class membership of either circle and thus a double dosage of negative ramifications.”

-Roslyn Rosen, Deaf community leader and advocate, 1989

As the field of Deaf History matured, attention began to shift towards class, race and gender. Historians were ready to move beyond the decades old historical scholarship confined solely to the educational methodologies and language/communication debate.³² Critical inquiry now included race and gender, and tying these categories to the American Deaf experience.

The lives of American Deaf women captured the attention of contemporary historians, and generated a small but significant body of scholarship focusing on the intersections of deafness and gender. The body of scholarship had moved away significantly from the archival compilation on the American Deaf women experience to gender-specific critical inquiry. Representation was a theme that sparked the initial conversations of historians interested in the American Deaf women experience.

The 1997 significant essay by Henning and Wood entitled, “Does ‘Herstory’ Speak for the Deaf Community?” serves as one of the earliest examples of a formal framework evaluating the American Deaf women experience. The authors outlines the

³² Historical scholarship addressing the American Deaf experience have traditionally focused on the historical development and milestones of the Schools for the Deaf, which comes with a significant communication/language debate between “oralism” (to speak vocally without using any form of sign language) and “manualism” (using sign language as the primary vehicle for communication and language development).

framework composed of three main criteria in evaluating the American Deaf women experience: the social, cultural and economic influences. The social aspect involves one's own standing within the family structure, status, wealth and interactions with individuals and society whereas the cultural aspect influences the aspects of "living" - the family norms and values that are passed on through generations by the transmission of specific occupational traditions, a sense of social responsibility, and activities designed to rectify the perceived ills of the society. Finally, for the economic aspect, the level of affluence often is associated with one's mobility through society. The more affluent one is, the better opportunities for greater mobility through society is afforded to the individual, especially for women.

The flaw with the Henning-Wood framework, as acknowledged by the authors, is that it does not consider of the other factors that influences the outcome of an individual, such as intelligence, educational attainment, and other nuances of a personality. The lived experience varies from individual to individual, and at times, makes it difficult to set up a firm framework in analyzing the American Deaf women experiences. Additionally, the authors caution against the heavy reliance on historical American Deaf women life experiences - for these experiences do not represent the "average" American Deaf woman experience unless they belonged to the privileged class. For the privileged class afforded American Deaf women greater mobility and access to resources that were not as readily available for the average "Deaf Jane."

A contemporary Deaf Studies Professor, Dr. Arlene B. Kelly who teaches a course on Deaf Women Studies at Gallaudet University lamented over the lack of representation and invisibility of Deaf women in historical scholarship in the 2006 essay, “Where is Deaf HERstory?” Kelly insightfully calls attention to the far-reaching implications of American Deaf women’s continual historical “de-gendering” and invisibility in mainstream historical scholarship:

“The Deaf women’s view on themselves as Deaf persons rather than as Deaf women leads me to wonder if the serious absence of Deaf women, or even Deaf people, in generic historical texts is responsible for this perception, Had they been aware of achievements made by other Deaf women, especially in the late nineteenth century, would they have a different self-perception?... ”³³

Kelly elaborated on the importance of historic American Deaf women figures inclusion by adopting the four stages of placing women into history created by historian Gerda Lerner to illustrate the possibilities and implications of placing American Deaf women into history.³⁴ Kelly also noted that the Deaf American historiographies are largely interpreted by hearing scholars from their vantage point, stating in the essay:

“...As I look at my own bookshelves at home, I find so few books written by culturally Deaf women: Padden, Holcomb and Wood, Jankowski, Brueggemann. Most Deaf-related historical texts on my shelves are written by hearing men... ”³⁵

³³ Kelly, Arlene Blumenthal. “Where is Deaf HERstory?” *Open Your Eyes: Deaf Studies Talking*. Ed. H-Dirksen L. Bauman. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008: 261.

³⁴ Lerner, Gerda. “Placing Women in History: Definitions and Challenges.” *Feminist Studies* 5.14 (1975).

³⁵ Kelly, Arlene Blumenthal. “Where is Deaf HERstory?” *Open Your Eyes: Deaf Studies Talking*. Ed. H-Dirksen L. Bauman. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008: 261.

Kelly raises the question of whether the historical scholarship and overall interpretation of American Deaf women would be different through the lens of a Deaf historian, or more specifically, a Deaf feminist historian. Kelly believes so, and argues that the Deaf perspective is necessary to fully explore the historical experiences, akin to the feminist standpoint that have evolved to explore the historical experiences of women - to understand and examine the lived and historical experiences from a specific viewpoint. How would the descriptions and representations of American Deaf women change if presented by historians armed with both culturally Deaf and feminist life experiences?

With this perspective in mind, Kelly suggests a possible alternative in conducting historical scholarship on American Deaf women using Gerda Lerner's historical framework as the blueprint for American Deaf women historians. The framework clearly delineates four specific stages involved in writing women's history. The first stage, "compensatory history" entails stories about women who have accomplishments based their actions. The accomplishment or the deed is the detail. The second stage, "contribution history" involves descriptions of women's contributions to topics, issues and themes of the day. The third stage involves the movement away from basic facts to critical inquiry of the social constructs of those and the events involved. The fourth and final stage synthesizes the truly inclusive cultures and is the greatest challenge for scholars define history through a universal lens.

EMERGING HISTORICAL SCHOLARSHIP ON THE AMERICAN DEAF EDUCATION EXPERIENCE

“Woman should be free as the air to learn what she will and to devote her life to whatever vocation seems good to her. To cry out that she would be unsexed is to imply that she has not that divine element in her which is the prerogative of the highest form of creation and which craves instruction from all sources. Over and above the peculiarities which pertain to a woman as a woman are her needs as a human being. She has her own way to make in the world, and she will succeed or fail in whatever sphere she moves, according as her judgment is rendered accurate, her moral nature cultivated, her thinking faculties strengthened.”

-Agatha Tiegel Hanson, Class Valedictorian 1893

Traditional historiography of the American Deaf marks the 1817 establishment of the American School for the Deaf in Hartford, CT as the genesis of the American Deaf community. The narrative, passed down through oral tradition and written sources, establishes a misleading and skewed picture on the existence of the American Deaf. The narrative implies that the American deaf was able to evolve as a community after the school was established which is not reflective of the Deaf lives that were already in existence prior to 1817. Harry G. Lang, an esteemed Deaf History scholar pointed out the error in his essay, “Revisiting History: Sign Language in the Seventeenth Century” by presenting evidence of diary references and publications that indicated the existence of sign language in America dating back to the seventeenth century. He wrote,

“...references published during the seventeenth century indicates that sign language served both educational and social functions among deaf people within

*the community. Not only are these anecdotes of historical interest, they introduce questions that bear further investigation.”*³⁶

The 2008 essay by Edna Edith Sayers and Diana Gates entitled “Lydia Huntley Sigourney and the Beginnings of American Deaf Education in Hartford: It Takes a Village” challenges the near-universal acceptance of the patriarchal grand narrative of the historical events that led to the founding of the American Deaf education system in 1817 with gendered lens. Prior to the founding of the school for the deaf in Hartford, Lydia Huntley Sigourney, a well-known poetess, activist and educator taught at an all girls school. One of the students was deaf: Alice Cogswell, the daughter of respected politician and businessman, Mason Cogswell. This directly contradicts the grand narrative of Reverend Thomas H. Gallaudet as Alice Cogswell’s savior by education. Instead of placing the Rev. Gallaudet in the center of the story, Sigourney takes the stage in being the individual who gave Alice her first educational experience and the utilization of a communication system that used gestures to convey concepts in the classroom. The authors argue that by virtue of gender, Sigourney’s role in establishing a Deaf education system was suppressed from history. As well, the authors argue that Alice was not an uneducated and a hapless female as she was characterized in the grand narrative, having attended Sigourney’s school. In doing so, the authors paint a contradictory version of the

³⁶ Lang, Harry G. “Genesis of a Community: The American Deaf Experience in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries.” *The Deaf History Reader*. Ed. John Vickery Van Cleve. Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 2007. 1-23.

widely accepted historical narrative that strongly reflected paternalistic and patriarchal attitudes.

Another significant historical scholarship of the American Deaf women that challenges the assumptions within the American Deaf history through gendered lens is the 2006 essay “Family Matters: Family Dynamics within Deaf Schools” by Jessica Lee. Lee carefully dissects the dynamics of gender within the nineteenth century and early twentieth century deaf education system. The engendered landscape of the schools for the Deaf reflected the nineteenth century patriarchal attitudes of the administrators, faculty, staff and students. The primary objective for educating women in the nineteenth century was to create better prototype of wives and mothers, which schools for the deaf perpetuated. The dynamics involved in gender role modeling and conditioning illustrates the unique social network of female models serving in various capacities ranging from the dorm matrons to teachers. Lee suggests that the constant gender training experienced at the schools for the Deaf shaped the future interactions of the students after graduation. Female students became wives and mothers, often marrying and having children shortly after graduation. Marriage and family was a status that was heavily reinforced throughout the deaf community-periodicals by the American Deaf often touted engagements and marriages, implicitly instructing Deaf people to lead respectable lives. Lee concludes that the constant reinforcement of family at the schools for the Deaf created a strong sense of “cultural kin” - the constant connections with each other that would last for decades. However, she points out that the family model contributed to rigid

gender stereotypes that shaped the roles of American Deaf women as inferior and subservient.

Another challenge to the grand narrative involving the American Deaf education is the contradictory nature of educational opportunities extended to both sexes and the seemingly cohesive Deaf community despite gender differences. All schools for the Deaf, including the National Deaf-Mute College later known as Gallaudet University enrolled students of both sexes, however, school management, curriculum and policies was quite explicit on the gender expectations and roles. The 2008 chapter by Lindsay M. Parker exposes the false image of a completely cohesive Deaf community, for dissent did occur between the American Deaf men and women regarding coeducation. Outlining the experiences of American Deaf women who fought for the right to higher education and the experiences of the female students who faced the hostile environment of male faculty and students who were against coeducation at the National Deaf-Mute College, Parker suggests that Deaf women weren't readily subjugated behind the Deaf men as widely assumed in previous historical scholarship. The involvement of the Western Association of Collegiate Alumnae (WACA) by having a representative, Amelia Platter submit a letter to President Gallaudet on behalf of Deaf women in the struggle for admission into National Deaf-Mute College bespeaks of an alliance formed between the Deaf and hearing women based on gender rather than deafness.

EMERGING HISTORICAL SCHOLARSHIP ON THE AMERICAN DEAF COMMUNITY EXPERIENCE

“It is definitely OK to be DEAF, even more so to be a WOMAN! And in being both, what a way to go!

- *Betty Bounds-Wood, administrator, 1987*

Sara Robinson's 2006 essay, "The Extended Family: Deaf Women in Organizations" showcases the American Deaf women's participation within American Deaf organizations on the local, state-wide and national levels. The continual process of gendered negotiation of participation and contributions of American Deaf women within Deaf organizations illustrates the dynamics between deafness and gender within sociopolitical structures and cultural transmission. The Deaf associations and organizations had a significant impact on the American Deaf as a community and as an identity, and empowered the American Deaf women in redefining the established gender based boundaries. Instead of passively staying within the domestic sphere, American Deaf women saw organizations as an avenue to asserting their autonomy. Like hearing women, American Deaf women invoked authority of social functions by virtue of gender. The organizations often served as the main center for socialization opportunities for the American Deaf. The widespread acceptance of the organization as one of the vital social sites created a somewhat equitable space for both genders. American Deaf women were welcomed for their input and activism, especially at major events such as conferences that also offered numerous opportunities for social time.

An alternative perspective critical of the seemingly unified American Deaf community is presented in the “Beautiful, Though Deaf: The Deaf American Beauty Pageant” essay by Susan Burch examines the contradictory nature of the early twentieth century American Deaf beauty pageants and its notions of normalcy and beauty. Instead of emphasizing their cultural identity as a Deaf individual, American Deaf women would enhance their physical appearance to be constructed as “normal” and “beautiful” akin to the values of the mainstream society in the pageants. The denial of their “Deaf” self for their “female” self deconstructs the assumption that the condition of deafness is superior to the condition of femaleness as a lived experience. Burch also points out that despite the social and cultural gains that the American Deaf have made in the past decades, the gender roles and attitudes have changed relatively very little due to communication barriers that prevents the abilities of American Deaf women to fully evolve on an equal footing as the hearing women in the mainstream society.

EMERGING HISTORICAL SCHOLARSHIP ON THE INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCES OF AMERICAN DEAF WOMEN

“Deaf women have also been active in...social changes, but their contributions and their lives have been largely overlooked and have not been celebrated outside the Deaf community.”

-Martha Sheridan, educator and advocate, 1999

Biographies have gained significant attention from historians seeking to better understand the lived experience of American Deaf women as individuals and as a viable category for historical analysis. Dr. Harry G. Lang, an experienced biographer and historian of the American Deaf elaborates on the nuances involved in biographical research and writing to provide a framework for future scholarship on the American Deaf experience. Lang believes that by narrating Deaf lives, historians are better equipped to study individual human actions and events to acquire a deeper insights into the American Deaf experience. According to Lang, the insights help create a more complete narrative that showcases the cause and effect factor incurred by the actions and events of the American Deaf. Additionally, Lang emphasizes that the sense of empowerment stemming from knowing one's heritage often serves as a starting place for generating new body of scholarship. The recent surge of interest in nineteenth century biographies of American Deaf women is evidence of the sense of empowerment in historical discovery. For sake of brevity, I will focus on three nineteenth-century American Deaf women historical figures that recently gained critical scholarly attention in the biography genre: Laura Redden Searing, Agatha Tiegel Hanson, and Mary Ann Walworth Booth.

Laura Redden Searing was a journalist and published poetess who garnered critical acclaim and attention for her writings. Historian Judy Yaeger Jones became curious after she found out that a small town in Minnesota called Glyndon was named after an accomplished journalist and writer Howard Glyndon. Yaeger Jones discovered that Howard Glyndon actually was the nome de plume for Laura Redden Searing, an established and respected journalist and published poetess. During her research, Yaeger Jones located an article by Searing outlining the rationales for providing women with suffrage in the 1892 edition of the New York Evening Mail. Searing boldly declared her intent to add her own signature to the circulating petitions for suffrage, and urges supporters to do the same.³⁷ Yaeger Jones has since authored a book on Searing's life, detailing key milestones such as becoming a journalist and going abroad professionally to escaping an abusive marriage with a young child across the country aided by her Deaf friends in different towns to her writings as an avenue for self-expression.³⁸ The book illustrated how Searing navigated her life with grace while facing numerous obstacles, just like any other nineteenth century woman would be experiencing. Gender was a major aspect of Searing's life, from the struggles experienced in her family life to having to adopt a male nome de plume in order to be able to write and publish freely.

³⁷ Jones, Judy Yaeger. "On Signing An Appeal." *Deafness: Life & Culture II*. Ed. Mervin D. Garretson. Vol. 45. Silver Spring: National Association of the Deaf, 1995. 63-66. Print. A Deaf American Monograph.

³⁸ Jones, Judy Yaeger. *Sweet Bells Jangled: Laura Redden Searing-A Deaf Poet Restored*. Ed. Judy Yaeger Jones and Jane E. Vallier. Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 2003.

Agatha Tiegel Hanson holds the unique distinction of being the first Deaf female to graduate from Gallaudet College with a Bachelor of Arts degree. The class valedictorian, she was chosen to deliver a commencement speech at the graduation ceremony to quite prestigious audience of Congressmen, high-ranking officials and their wives, and the society members of Washington, D.C.. Her address, “The Intellect of Women” was a feminist commentary regarding the status of American Deaf women and their position in society. Within the speech, Tiegel Hanson addressed the constant societal reinforcement of so-called biological inferiority of women, and the dire need to eliminate the misconception. Drawing upon her personal experiences as a student at Gallaudet College, Tiegel Hanson addressed the absurdity of separate educational curriculum for the sexes and the need for mutual respect between the sexes in an educational environment. As well, Tiegel Hanson points out that just because people were accustomed to seeing women at a stage of development so far below her actual potential that they assume that women are intellectually inferior. In other words, women were victims of restrictive environment not of their own making. Moving beyond the dimension of deafness, Tiegel Hanson acknowledges specific gender differences which is quite significant from a historical lens. This public address was a feminist exhibition of opposition as well as offering tangible evidence of an American Deaf woman’s direct

acknowledgement of gender bias.³⁹ This directly challenges the rhetoric of being a part of the one “big happy family” so often claimed by the American Deaf community. This also illustrates the degree of autonomy that was actually exercised by nineteenth-century American Deaf woman, to express her perspective that was not necessarily considered as popular at that time.

The life of a pioneer woman, Mary Ann Walworth Booth who followed her husband Edmund Booth westward to Iowa serves as excellent biographical material. Porco’s 2007 essay on the life of Walworth Booth illustrated the intersections of gender and deafness, and the degrees of autonomy that is granted a woman with a disability, per se, without the presence of a husband.⁴⁰ Walworth Booth and Booth had met in school, and married shortly after leaving the school. When the California gold rush occurred, the couple agreed that Booth would go and seek gold to help support the family whereas Walworth Booth would stay behind with the children living with relatives.⁴¹ Due to the preservation efforts by the family, numerous letters between the husband and wife have survived. The correspondence outlined the daily life experience for Walworth Booth, as she navigated life as a single mother with children and supporting her family in her

³⁹ Jankowski, Katherine. “‘Til All Barriers Crumble and Fall: Agatha Tiegel’s Presentation Day Speech in April 1893.” *Deaf World: A Historical Reader and Primary Sourcebook*. Ed. Lois Bragg. New York: New York University Press, 2001. 284-295 and Fernandes, James J., and Jane F. Kelleher. “Signs of Eloquence from Deaf American Public Addresses.” *The Deaf Way: Perspectives from the International Conference on Deaf Culture*. Ed. Carol J. Erting, et al. Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1994. 176-185.

⁴⁰ Porco, Jill Hendricks. “Mary Ann Walworth Booth.” *The Deaf History Reader*. Ed. John Vickery Van Cleve. Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 2007. 74-84.

⁴¹ For more information on Edmund Booth and his experiences in the California Gold Rush, see the following work: Lang, Harry G. *Edmund Booth: Deaf Pioneer*. Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 2004.

husband's absence. What made this pioneer woman exceptional was the fact that she was Deaf, and communicated through sign language only. Her writings detail the life of pioneer woman while also highlighting the additional dimension of deafness.

CONCLUSION

Upon initial review of the literature regarding American Deaf historiography, it is understandable how historians have interpreted the experiences of American Deaf women negatively, in terms of stature and status within the community. Because of the historical struggles of the American Deaf in gaining legitimacy as a cultural and linguistic minority, the current representation of the American Deaf women has been largely disregarded and unexamined. The scant amount of historical scholarship on the American Deaf women experience illustrates this. The shortage of academically trained Deaf historians that are able to provide an interpretation situated in Deaf epistemological base surely affects the growth of historical scholarship.

The selections on American Deaf women illustrates a small but growing body of historic scholarship that moves beyond the rigid categories of gender and deafness to the lived experience that often is more fluid, flowing back and forth in both categories. I argue that, from a culturally Deaf lens, the current interpretation of American Deaf women barely touches on the complexity of the American Deaf women experience. Instead of being passive agents and possessing a secondary position, American Deaf women actually exercised different avenues of resistance and found ways to exercise their own autonomy. Representation, the Deaf school experience, the Deaf community experience, and the individual experience are but a few of many themes that are waiting to be investigated in historical scholarship. A viable approach to correcting this

misalignment is to undergo the process of rewriting history, guided by feminist principles illustrated by leading historians specializing in marginalized histories.

Along with educating Deaf historians, the Deaf community also needs to identify, locate and organize existing historical materials. The Deaf community also needs to work collaboratively with professional archivists, historians and preservationists in ensuring optimal preservation and continuation of their legacy. Through education, the Deaf community can then proactively work collectively towards greater rates of donations and preservation of personal and family papers/artifacts for future historic scholarship. As well, the Deaf community, especially the women, needs encouragement to write, produce films and art, and other forms of mediums celebrating their lived experiences with future arrangements for preservation and disposal in a repository. For more of the materials are left behind, the more future historians can understand the American Deaf women experience and its implications in the American society. The stories of the American Deaf women are just beginning to be told, appreciated and understood in historical context.

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