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# Articulating a Deaf Identity: Education, Poetry, and the Deaf Experience (1827-1914)

## Introduction

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, American educators fiercely debated the best methods for teaching deaf[1] and mute students. Educators were divided between a manual system in which signs and hand gestures were used to communicate, and an oral system where students were taught to read lips and to speak. Advocates for the use of American Sign Language, otherwise known as the manual system, were often deaf themselves. The oralists, most of whom were hearing, alternatively believed that deaf students should be taught only to read lips and to speak. The first American schools for the deaf, opened around 1817, were modeled after European schools and used almost exclusively manual instruction. However, by 1880, a group of educators had begun to question what had been, at least from the perspective of deaf students and instructors, an effective and enjoyable system. Oralists questioned the merits of signing as a language and its suitability in the classroom, thus setting off what Jennifer Esmail has described as the "Nineteenth-Century Sign Language Debates" —debates that ended with oralist victory and the suppression of sign language in the classroom. In this essay, I will focus on the role that "vocal culture," a system of societal

[1] It is common practice within today's fields of Deaf studies and Disability studies to make a distinction between Deaf (uppercase) and deaf (lowercase). James Woodward first employed the capital letter in 1972 to denote people who identify as culturally Deaf—that is, they identify as part of the community of people who celebrate their Deafness and do not identify it as a disadvantageous condition. The lowercase, deaf, is used to refer simply to the audiological condition of hearing loss. However, within the scope of this paper (1827-1914), the Deaf identity as such was still in the process of being formed. Many of the poets discussed in this paper struggled with their condition. Attempting to characterize whether or not groups of people and specific poets would have identified as deaf or Deaf is nearly impossible, and would over-simplify an individual's complex and personal journey. Therefore, in this paper I will simply use the lowercase term, unless specifically referring to the Deaf identity in contemporary use.

values that prioritized rhetoric and oration, played in the oralist's success. Additionally, I will examine the vocal nature of nineteenth-century poetry and its role as a battleground for deaf and manualist resistance. The mere act of writing engaged deaf poets in the debates over education, *and* the concurrent debates over whether or not deaf people were capable of writing poetry. I will argue that deaf poets John Carlin, James Nack, Laura Redden Searing, and Angeline Fuller Fischer developed a preliminary sense of a communal deaf identity as a response to those two debates. My research demonstrates an important cultural connection between education, poetry, and the conception of deaf identity.

## Historical Context: Deaf Education and Culture, 1817-1880

The foundation for the manualist's position in the sign language debates was simple: history was on their side, as manual education had been the dominant method of instruction for the last few decades. The story of deaf education in the United States as it is commonly told begins with a hearing minister named Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet and his young neighbor, Alice Cogswell. "Deaf and dumb," as was said at the time, Cogswell knew no signs and was unable to communicate with anyone in her family. Yet Gallaudet sensed that she was a bright student with much potential when he was able to successfully teach her how to write a few words. Inspired by his relationship with Alice, Gallaudet championed the cause of deaf education, traveling extensively to study European schools for the deaf. After finding the oralist schools in England unwilling to share their methods, Gallaudet traveled to France to study the manual system of instruction. While there, he convinced Laurent Clerc, a deaf instructor at Paris Royal Institute for the Deaf, to return with him to America to found a school for the deaf. Clerc agreed, and the two men taught each other French Sign Language and written English on the return journey. They went on to form the Hartford, Connecticut Asylum for the Education and Instruction of the Deaf in 1817. The first school of its

kind, it is still in existence today as the American School for the Deaf (Crouch 38-39). It was here that the unique form of communication, American Sign Language, was born. Teachers and philanthropists like Gallaudet quickly gained an exalted reputation. Edwin Isaac Holycross published a volume in 1913, *The Abbe De L'Epee and Other Early Teachers of the Deaf,* citing the Abee (founder of the Paris Institution), Gallaudet, and Clerc as the three main figures in the advancement of the Deaf identity. The book contains biographies that painstakingly catalogue the contributions and generosity of these men, as well as various other philanthropists. Poems such as Angeline A. Fuller Fischer's "The Three Immortals" end the book with a loving tribute to these influential philanthropists.

Before the debates began in 1880, uninterrupted years of manual education in American schools for the deaf created a network of intelligent and capable signing individuals, many of whom preferred communicating in signs over speech. The creation of Gallaudet's school in Hartford, Connecticut was the impetus for the creation of a Deaf community and a larger network of schools and institutions for the deaf throughout the country. The manual method of instruction had fostered a means of communication and education: wherever deaf people signed together, they created culture. Deaf people formed not just schools, but social clubs and artistic groups. The Gallaudet University photographic archives document a vibrant social and educational environment with countless clubs, sports, and other activities. The Pennsylvania School for the Deaf, for instance fostered the active Chirological Literary Society in 1888, and numerous groups published periodical and newspapers exclusively for deaf audiences, such as *The Silent Worker* and *The Catholic Deaf-Mute*. There were even a number of geographic communities with a high deaf population. Harlan Lane archives the genealogy and history of communities formed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, including the famous example of Martha's Vineyard, a small

colony in Massachusetts. Historians claim that in late nineteenth century, "one in every 155 people on the Vineyard was born Deaf (0.7 percent, almost twenty times the estimate for the nation at large)" (Groce, qtd. in Lane 56). The high rate of marriages between deaf and hearing individuals may have accounted for the trend. As a result, nearly everyone living in Martha's Vineyard knew and regularly used sign language, whether they were deaf or not. Signing communities were absolutely flourishing. There was even talk, in the late 1850s, of creating a new, entirely deaf state in the Western territories, so that the deaf could come together and further develop their unique culture (Krentz 161). Even today the Deaf community views Gallaudet and Clerc as heroes, their work in the manual method of instruction bringing language, education, culture, and a sense of community to a formerly isolated set of people.

## Historical Context: The Rise of Oralism (1880)

The sign language debates began in the year 1880 when many educators began to advocate the use of the oral method, a system that emphasized teaching deaf students how to speak and read lips, but forbade any use of sign. Oralism was not a new idea, but it had not been widely adopted in the United States due to Gallaudet and Clerc's conquering legacies in the deaf community and the effective manual practices already in place. In the 1860s and 1870s, some schools had begun slowly integrating articulation into their curriculum, moving towards what was described as a “combined system.” However, the 1880 Milan Convention, an international gathering of teachers of the deaf, decreed that oralism was a superior method of instruction and should be used exclusively. The educators at the Milan Convention passed the following resolutions:

> 1. The Convention, considering the incontestable superiority of speech over signs, (1) for restoring deaf-mutes to social life, (2) for giving them greater facility of language, declares that the method of articulation should have the preference over that of signs in the

> instruction and education of the deaf and dumb.
>
> 2. Considering that the simultaneous use of signs and speech has the disadvantage of injuring speech and lip-reading and precision of ideas, the Convention declares that the pure oral method ought to be preferred. ("The Milan Convention" 5-6)

These resolutions signaled the beginning of the end for sign-language education in this period, both in the United States and internationally. Edward Miner Gallaudet, the son of Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet and President of the Columbia Institution (which later became today's famous Gallaudet University), vehemently opposed the conference. It was, he said, "wholly partisan in its management and not at all representative in its composition or manner of voting" and "deserving of no weight whatever with broad-minded, candid, and progressive friends of deaf-mutes" ("The Milan Convention" 8). Yet, in the face of so-called "incontestable evidence," administrators of many schools quickly moved away from the teaching of sign language.

After the Milan Convention, schools across the country quickly adopted pure oral instruction, threatening the fledgling sense of a deaf community. Hearing teachers, often women, were trained in "normal schools" and "exploited as a source of cheap labor, as they supposedly possessed the characteristics necessary for educating Deaf children with oral methods" (Greenwald, 138). They quickly replaced deaf teachers, who could not teach articulation, further diminishing a sense of community and a source of employment for many deaf individuals. Instead of signs, teachers used uncomfortable articulation drills and invasive tools to show students how to mimic their tongue and mouth movements and produce speech. Volumes such as Alexander Melville Bell's *English Visible Speech in Twelve Easy Lessons* (1895) contained diagrams of the mouth and throat, an alphabet of symbols that created a system of "visible speech," suggestions for articulation drills, and a series of Readings (in both "visible speech" and plain English) that a deaf

child should practice reciting aloud. His son, Alexander Graham Bell, published *The Mechanism of Speech* (1914), which demonstrated other treatment methods for the, including manipulation of the child's breathing and tongue movements. Bell suggests that teachers use a tool called a "manipulator (for example; a paper cutter), and hold it in the pupil's mouth so as to cover the top or front part of the tongue" ("The Mechanism of Speech" 12), while the student attempts to produce a particular sound. Most articulation drills then required the students to watch their own movements in a mirror until they had perfected the sound. These intense, laborious processes of learning were made more difficult by the fact that students were often forbidden from using signs in the classroom. Gallaudet predicted that attempting to undertake pure oral instruction would be unsuccessful due to the practical limitations of most schools: "On the other hand, with a period of teaching restricted to four or five years, and funds so limited that but one teacher to twenty or more pupils can be allowed, then we do not hesitate to claim that results of greater practical value to the deaf-mute have been reached and will hereafter be attained under the method of De l'Epée [manualism] than under that of Heinicke [oralism]" ("The Milan Convention" 12). Gallaudet's prediction would turn out to be correct: historians and members of today's Deaf community agree that oralism was largely ineffective. Jack R. Gannon describes this period as "the dark ages for deaf education in America" (*Through Deaf Eyes)*.

Hearing activists who viewed deafness as a defective and socially dangerous condition were the main proponents of the oral method, Alexander Graham Bell being one notable example. Bell's historical legacy is quite complex; in today's Deaf community, Bell is actually viewed quite negatively for his staunch support of oralism. Bell was deeply invested in the arguments over deaf education and steeped in family connections to the issue. Both Bell's mother and wife were deaf, and his father, Alexander Melville Bell, was a notable oralist as well, since the publication of

*English Visible Speech*. Though Bell's advocacy for oralism helped lead to the so-called "dark ages," his intentions were based on the theory, similar to today's arguments for "mainstreaming," that an isolated deaf community that never interacted with the hearing world would ultimately be self-destructive and a drain on society's resources (Greenwald 139).

According to historians, Bell and other oralists were so successful in their push for pure speech training because their reasoning dovetailed with two popular American movements of the time: eugenics and nativism. Eugenics, also known as social Darwinism, was the planned genetic improvement of the human race. People with undesirable traits were discouraged from reproducing, and in extreme cases, were even forced to undergo sterilization. Bell himself was an active eugenicist; though he supported no mandated sterilization efforts of the deaf, he did discourage them from marrying deaf partners, so that their population would not grow too large (Greenwald 139). Bell carried out a scientific study of deaf marriages, writing that "If the laws of heredity that are known to hold in the case of animals apply to man, the intermarriage of congenital deaf-mutes through a number of successive generations should result in the formation of a deaf variety of the human race" ("Memoir" 4). For what he believed was their own good, and the good of the nation, Bell discouraged deaf people from forming an exclusive community. The second cultural movement, nativism, was a cultural response to the influx of immigrants in the 19th century; in popular rhetoric, this was threatening to the mainstream "American" way of life. In this post-war era, many Americans feared the idea of cultural separation and despised ethnic groups for their isolation from the broader culture, symbolized their use of foreign languages. The deaf were viewed in a similar lens; their use of signs, which Bell described as a foreign language because of its origins in French sign language, led many Americans to believe that a deaf culture was "not supportive of American society" (*Through Deaf Eyes).* The movement against sign language and

for oral education was extremely effective because it played directly into the nation's strongest worry: that cultural differences would ultimately separate the nation beyond repair.

Despite these changes to the educational system and their way of life, the deaf community still remained active, albeit in smaller and less centralized ways. Many deaf people continued to sign together within the home and on social occasions. The writers behind periodicals and newspapers for deaf audiences, such as *The Silent Worker,* continued to publish their work, and hearing and deaf writers continued to advocate for the validity of their language. And as the introduction to Holycross's volume makes plain, resistance to the idea of pure oral education still existed in 1913, over thirty years after the Milan Convention. In the introduction, Robert P. McGregor and Holycross both call for reform, citing a recent "international gathering of the deaf in Paris" that celebrated the Abbe de l'Epee and his use of manual instruction. "The spectacle at the Paris Congress was a stupendous object lesson as to the utter futility of the pure oral method" (6), McGregor writes, noting that the thousands of deaf persons at the gathering were communicating to each other purely in sign language. "The deaf know that the fruits of the pure oral method, as exemplified in *their own* lives, are as Apples of Sodom—fair to they eye of theory, but crumbling to ashes at the touch of the hard practical experiences of real life, causing, to the great majority, only bitterness, disappointment, ruined hopes and lives," MacGregor continues. "This is the verdict of the educated deaf all over the world… Nobody is authorized to speak for them. They insist on speaking for themselves" (7). Though the educational system had all but eliminated the teaching of sign language, deaf people themselves ensured that their community and language were not eliminated. This early sense of community would later allow deaf poets and writers to articulate a sense of a deaf *identity.*

## A Third Movement: Vocal Culture

As the prominence of oral education in America rose, so too did the sense of a "vocal culture" that emphasized the primacy of speech making, oration, and articulation among deaf and hearing people. Oral education was not simply a means of cultural cohesion and improvement; oration had been of distinct cultural value, in and of itself, as a hallmark of artistic and professional expression for many years. Elocution, articulation, and oratory skills were already being widely taught to *hearing* children, and researchers have extensively documented[2] the cultural frenzy surrounding speech-making, recitations, and pantomimes. Most American educators and artists of the time viewed speech as the purest and highest form of expression, not just for daily communication, but also for meaningful artistic expression. Numerous authors published guidebooks, manuals, or instruction on how to best teach elocution. One such example is Andrew Comstock's *A System of Elocution, with Special Reference to Gesture, to the Treatment of Stammering, and Defective Articulation,* which was printed in its twentieth edition in 1862. The volume contains suggestions on how defective speakers might improve, but also includes material for competent speakers looking to improve as orators. There are a wide variety of gestures to be used for emphasis, "exercises in articulation, pitch, force, time, and gesture," and "exercises in reading and declamation" (Comstock viii-ix). Many parents hired private elocution instructors for their *hearing* children, so it was a natural logical extension to do the same for deaf children. In fact, some teachers of the deaf were active participants and contributors to mainstream vocal culture. Florence Josephine Ensworth was an accomplished performer (the Ohio State University and University of Iowa archives each house a brochure for her poetry recitations with rave reviews),

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[2] *The Jerry Tarver Elocution, Rhetoric and Oratory Collection* at Ohio State University has extensively catalogued the minutiae of this culture, preserving everything from recital programs, brochures for oratory schools, books on proper methods of speaking and collections of poetry and literature suitable for public readings.

but she was also a "oral instructor" at the American School for the Deaf in Hartford, Connecticut (Fay, 69). There were even numerous oratory colleges and institutes, including one on Martha's Vineyard, an area with a historically high deaf population. In 1889, "The Twelfth Annual Session of the Martha's Vineyard Summer Institute" allowed oratory teachers from across the nation to gather and hear lectures on topics such as "Vocal Culture," "Physical Culture and Expression," and the "Delsarte Philosophy of Expression" from Dr. C.W. Emerson, the head of the prestigious Monroe Oratory School in Boston. (That school still exists today, but as "Emerson College," a prestigious liberal arts college.) Oration and vocal abilities were exclusively prioritized in both education, and the production of art and culture; this culture would continue to dominate popular thought throughout the early twentieth century.

The dominance of this vocal culture, however, easily allowed oralists to de-value sign language and the deaf identity. An extreme reverence for speech was coupled with a fundamental misunderstanding of the linguistic properties of American Sign Language, leading many to believe that speaking was inherently more effective and expressive than signing. In fact, many people incorrectly assumed that sign language simply representational means of communication that lacked the capacity to express more abstract ideas. In fact, American Sign Language is capable of all forms of expression, and contains its own syntax and language structures that make it completely unrelated to English. Rebecca Sanchez writes that "sign language was misunderstood at the time, by supporters and detractors alike, as an inferior method of communication: not a complete language in its own right, but merely a broken kind of English on the hands" (Sanchez, 135), adding that this view did not change until the 1965 publication of William Stokoe's American Sign Language dictionary. It would take a long time for the negative perceptions of sign language and the deaf condition to change. Deafness was viewed almost exlusively as a disability

or a disorder. Lillie Eginton Warren's *Defective Speech and Deafness* (1895) conflated deafness with other speech impediments such as stuttering, stammering, lisping, or other “careless speech.” Her volume sets up a clear hierarchy to educating these "defective" speakers: she allows for the use of signs among young children as a foundation for learning, but clearly prioritizes the development of writing abilities, and ultimately speech. Warren views perfect speech as the ultimate and most desirable goal for all students, concluding that "being without full command of his organs of articulation, [the deaf child] is at a positive disadvantage" (37). Vocal instruction was viewed as a necessity; otherwise, how would a deaf child communicate, or even experience the wider benefits of American culture or art?

## Poetic Culture and Deaf Writers

In the late 19th century, poetic culture was intimately connected with vocal culture in that the dominant theory of poetry stressed recitation and performance of poetry. Most poets of the period used rigid rhyme schemes and meter, and was written with the intent of being read aloud. In his 1892 article, "What is Poetry?" Edmund Clarence Stedman commented on, among other topics, the nature of poetry as essentially rhythmic and vibratory: “vibrations, and nothing else, convey through the body the look and voice of nature of the soul” (52). Stedman also claims that true poets are born, not made:

> Equally true is it that natural poets in sensitive moods have this gift of choice and rhythmic assortment, just as a singer is born with voice and ear, or a painter with a knack of drawing likenesses before he can read or write. It is not too much to say that if not born with this endowment he is not a poet: a poetic nature, if you choose, —indeed, often more good, pure, intellectual, even more sensitive, than another with the 'gift,'— and, again, one who in time by practice may excel in rhythmical mechanism him that has the gift but slights it;

> nevertheless, over and over again, not a born poet, not of the total breed that by warrant roam the sacred groves. (53)

Stedman's work guided the thinking of a whole generation of poets, but the rigid limits of this definition would seem to exclude deaf writers. Another popular theory of poetry, espoused by Edgar Allen Poe, connected poetry to music. “Contenting myself with the certainty that music, in its various modes of metre, rhythm, and rhyme, is of so vast a moment in poetry as never to be wisely rejected—is so vitally important an adjunct that he is simply silly who declines its assistance—I will not now pause to maintain its absolute essentiality” (Poe, qtd. in “The Poetry of the Deaf” 200). It would not be until much later that the culture of poetry would become accepting of breaks with formal tradition. During the late nineteenth century, for a poem to be a popular and critical success, it had to adhere to specific set of traditions and rules.

Based on this rigid definition of poetry, many mainstream critics questioned whether or not poetry by deaf writers could even exist. Critics were shocked upon learning that John Carlin, who was congenitally deaf, or deaf since his birth, had produced poetry. Critics found it easy to believe that poets who were deafened later in life, and who thus had some experience with sound, could easily produce poetry with "a good degree of merit" ("The Poetry of the Deaf and Dumb" 14). But when the *American Annals of the Deaf, and Dumb,* a journal for educators of deaf students, printed a poem by the congenitally deaf Carlin in 1847, an editor’s note preceded the poem and discussed this "very different" case. He or she expressed surprise and disbelief. "How shall he who has not now, and who never has had the sense of hearing; who is totally without what the musicians call an 'ear;' succeed in preserving all the niceties of accent, measure and rhythm? We should almost as soon expect a man born blind to become a landscape painter as one born deaf to produce poetry of even tolerable merit" ("The Poetry of the Deaf and Dumb" 14), the editor writes. Carlin’s work

threatened to undermine the very definition of poetry as vocal and musical. Significantly, the metaphor of painting (which also recalls Stedman's definition of a poet) repeats over and over in the discussion of poetry and the deaf, proving that mainstream critics were not allowing their ideas about poetry to evolve or become more inclusive. In 1881, Sidney Lanier, author of *Science of the English Verse*, wrote on how the deaf might learn poetry. He imagined a process of teaching rhythm through the visualization of syllables, but he still stubbornly claimed that the deaf would never fully master poetry because of their disadvantage. He offers yet another painting metaphor:

> This subject is quite analogous to the conception of a complex painting by a man always blind. He could obtain some primary ideas of the forms in the painting; but of the different hues, the lights and shades, the values, the effects of related colors, he could not, by any possibility, have the least conception in the absence of that sense which is the prime originator, or, at least, channel, of such ideas (Lanier, qtd. in "Miscellaneous: The Poetic Sensibilities of the Deaf." 261).

Despite clear evidence that it was possible for a congenitally deaf person to produce poetry, and technically sound poetry at that, many critics remained skeptical. Even as they confronted the evidence of a deaf poet's ability and reluctantly allowed for this new possibility, many critics still described poetry with the same narrow definitions. Their position was simple, and backed up by ears of scholarship: poetry was *inherently* vocal and musical. The contributions of a few deaf poets would not so easily cause them to re-examine that definition.

## Poetry as Resistance: The Other Side of the Debate

Advocates for the deaf such as Edward Miner Gallaudet took up a different opinion, arguing that poetry written by the deaf was not only a possibility, but a flourishing and substantial reality. The major task for critics like Gallaudet was, it seemed, simply to prove that deaf poets were active and

capable writers. Gallaudet published an article in *Haper's Magazine,* reprinted in an 1884 issue of *The American Annals of the Deaf and Dumb,* challenging Poe's claim that poetry was dependent on the influence of music. Gallaudet questions this idea because it is inherently exclusionary to the deaf. "If this *dictum* of so great a master of the music of verse is accepted, the declaration that poetry may be fully appreciated, and even produced, by those bereft of the sense through which alone music can be enjoyed, presents an apparent absurdity" ("The Poetry of the Deaf" 200), Gallaudet writes. In his article, he provides biographies of numerous deaf poets, including John Carlin, James Nack, John R. Burnet, Howard Glyndon (Laura Redden Searing), Mary Toles Peet, William L. Bird, and Laura Bridgman. Gallaudet explains each poet's experience of deafness, focusing specifically on whether they were born deaf or deafened later in their life. Gallaudet then prints excerpts of their work, occasionally analyzing its literary and formal merit. "The interesting fact appears that the deaf, in no inconsiderable numbers, have essayed to mount on the wing of poetic expression" ("The Poetry of the Deaf" 201), Gallaudet writes. "We leave this to the reader, contenting ourselves with having made what we believe to be a unique collection of writings by representatives of a peculiar and most interesting class of persons—a class hitherto commanding little attention in the world of letters, but destined, we feel assured, with increasing advantages afforded it, to contribute in the future its due share to the aggregate of intellectual production" ("The Poetry of the Deaf" 220). Gallaudet, then, made great strides to convince the hearing world that deaf poetry was not an anomaly, but a genre that should be appreciated and valued. Ultimately, however, the work of the deaf poets themselves would prove the worth and literary merit of their poetry and identities.

The simple act of writing and publishing poetry engaged deaf poets in this debate over poetry: their work, formally and technically sound, served as evidence of a deaf person's abilities

and skills and allowed them entrance into the medium. Many deaf poets displayed a mastery of all the proposed hallmarks of poetry: despite expressing his disbelief at Carlin's abilities, the editor of *Annals* did offer a few words of praise for it. The editor says, "It is now published precisely as it came from his own hand. We have not felt ourselves at liberty to add, subtract, or change the position of a single word. Mr. Carlin sometimes employs rhyme as well as blank verse in his poetical efforts" ("The Poetry of the Deaf and Dumb" 15). Deaf poets, in order to participate in the debates and prove their abilities, made sure to do so within the rigid poetic tradition of the time. John Carlin, in a short autobiographical sketch, admitted his own insecurities about the limits of his deafness. Because he was born deaf, he had absolutely no conception of sound; a case different to that of many other deaf poets, who lost their hearing later in life. He mentions his initial difficulties mastering rhyme and rhythm, and how this almost thwarted his earliest poetic attempts. At a friend's suggestion, Carlin taught himself to write poetry by studying John Walker's *Rhyming Dictionary* and *Pronouncing Dictionary,* large volumes that included lists of "allowable rhymes" and arranged groups of words by their terminations and explained the English language's "orthography" or unique peculiarities. Using sight rhyme, Carlin was able to create poems that were just as formally effective as those by hearing writers. This was the beginning of a trend that would continue throughout deaf poetry in the late nineteenth century. Though their message would evolve, deaf poets would always be obliged to convey that message within the same formal poetic means.

The debate over the existence and validity of poetry by deaf writers was intimately connected to the debates over oral or manual education; both were instrumental in the development of a deaf identity. Deaf poetry proved that cultural contributions by deaf persons were valid and necessary; their poetry also, according to Jennifer Esmail “rendered ridiculous the

oralists' argument that deaf people would never attain a high level of English literacy without the eradication of signed languages and the introduction of speech training" (363). Thus, deaf poets used their writing to engage in two debates, for the same purpose: to prove the worth of both their culture and their language. Examining the content of their poetry, however, leads to a third purpose: the early development of a deaf identity. In examining the writing of poets John Carlin, James Nack, Laura Redden Searing, and Angeline Fuller Fischer, it becomes clear that the a deaf cultural identity (that is, of a sense pride in one's deafness) was slow to develop. Yet these poets, over time, change their attitudes about being deaf. From lamentable, to unremarkable, to celebratory— each of the four poets I will now examine plays an important role in the use of poetry to develop a preliminary sense of a deaf cultural identity.

## (1827-1847): Nack and Carlin's Lamentable Condition

Two of the earliest American deaf writers, James Nack and John Carlin, struggled with the idea of being deaf, and seem preoccupied with compensating for their disability. Their poetry often tells of something they are *lacking*, defined by inabilities rather than their abilities. In his book *The Legend of the Rocks*, James Nack addresses the instance of his hearing loss with mixed feelings. Deaf from the age of nine, Nack wrote the poems in this volume between the ages of fourteen and seventeen, and many of them address his feelings of loss. In "The Minstrel Boy" he bemoans that he is "denied forever / The blessings that to all around are given" (Nack 58). Additionally, he complains that he is reduced to interpreting facial expressions to understand and communicate: "Vacant unconsciousness must *me* enthrall! / I can but watch each animated face, / And there attempt th' inspiring theme to trace" (Nack 59). Nack also feels that his hearing loss prevents him from forming a meaningful romantic relationship; this is the subject of many poems, including a number that specifically address his loss of a woman named Mary, including two poems on "The Grave of

Mary," and "The Blue-Eyed Maid: To Mary." The whole volume has a melancholy tone, beginning with an epic poem about a warrior fighting the elements of nature. His work was a critical success, with some critics even hailing him as similar to Lord Byron (Krentz 33). Nack, however, also discusses more practical matters: the need for proper education of the deaf. In "The Minstrel Boy" he states "What heathens need / More eloquently for your aid can plead?" (Nack 60); and in the poem "Written on the New-York Institution for the Deaf and Dumb," he rhapsodizes on how the school introduces deaf children to the happier spheres of science, social discourse, and religion. His discourse is a bit degrading, very much centered on the need to save and uplift the deaf, "of ignorance the former victims" (Nack 197), yet at the same time his words are faithful and hopeful of a brighter future for deaf children.

John Carlin's 1847, "The Mute's Lament," also expresses a struggle with the idea of deafness. The poem is indeed melancholy: Carlin calls himself "a silent exile on this earth; / As in his dreary cell one doomed for life." Throughout the poem Carlin lists a number of beautiful sounds— as a flowing stream, a bird's cry, music, a passionate orator— and repeats in a sad refrain "*I hear them not*" ("The Poetry of the Deaf and Dumb" 15). At the end of the poem, he writes of being able to hear in heaven, "For Paradise replete with purest joys, / My ears shall be unsealed, and I shall hear; / My tongue shall be unbound and I shall speak, / And happy with the angels sing forever!" ("The Poetry of the Deaf and Dumb" 16). Clearly, Carlin shares the belief that speech is superior to signing; in fact, he views it as the ultimate goal of the afterlife. Carlin reportedly had a complex relationship with his deafness. He belonged to the deaf community by using sign language and marrying a deaf woman, but at other times he felt a deep contempt for it (Krentz 89), as evidence in poems like "The Mute's Lament" and the essay "Advantages and Disadvantages of the Use of Sign" (Krentz 94-100). Carlin's mixed feelings on the best methods of communication

and education, and his poetry's sense of loss and melancholy, clearly demonstrate the painful liminal space that many deaf people were forced to occupy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

**(1865-1870): Redden's Unremarkable Deafness**

By later in the century however, deaf poet and journalist Laura Redden Searing was displaying a more nuanced and accepting attitude towards her deafness; in fact, she did not let her condition wholly define her work. Laura C. Redden was an accomplished poet and journalist who published under both her real name and under the pen name Howard Glyndon, and often both simultaneously. After writing and publishing a series of poems in *Annals of the Deaf* while still in school, Redden's career as a journalist and poet began with her coverage of the Civil War. Searing wrote the words to the popular troop song "Belle Missouri" and published *Idyls of Battle and Poems of the Rebellion* in 1865. During her work as a Civil War correspondent and political reporter, Redden rubbed elbows with a number of famous and powerful people. In the Preface to *Idyls of Battle,* Redden acknowledges, among others, President Abraham Lincoln and General Ulysses S. Grant for their "friendly encouragement and active cooperation with me in the work of getting out this volume" (Glyndon 1). Redden was deafened art the age of thirteen; throughout her spectacular career, she used both sign and speech to communicate, learning to sign at the Missouri School for the Deaf and later working with Alexander Graham Bell to improve her oral capabilities (Jones 10). Though she wrote a few poems on her experience of deafness, Redden's work focuses mainly on political, historical, and social issues, or poetry entirely unrelated to being deaf. Unlike Nack and Carlin, her works do not seem to have been preceded by any author's notes or critical commentary expressing shock at the fact of her deafness. But neither was her identity a secret: she openly acknowledged both her female identity and her deafness. Redden's works and life are proof

of the success of what Holycross and McGregor called the Combined System: by mastering both speech and sign, she was able to live and prosper as a poet and writer. When Redden performed her poetry, she did so using both sign and voice (Krentz 130). Absent from her work and biography is any sense that being deaf prevented her from living a full and meaningful life.

Redden's poems about her deafness strike an entirely different chord from Nack or Carlin's; rather than bemoaning her deafness, she accepts it and even comes close to celebrating it. Her poetic essay *The Realm of Singing* (1870) tells the story of a small bird that has an imperfect singing voice and a broken wing: the bird cannot belt its song from the highest branches, and is thus an outsider in the Realm, forced to occupy the lowest twig on the tree. The notable difference here is that Redden does not simply pity the bird, but emphasizes the very importance and beauty of her song. "It told of sorrow, worthily endured and nobly over-lived. Of the strength, the ripeness, the sweetness that came with it. Of the perfected joy which lies behind it; of the sublimity of the plan which out of the keenest pain brings the noblest pleasure!" (Redden, qtd. in Jones 211) An obvious metaphor for the poetry and experiences of the deaf, Redden's work is an uplifting affirmation of the complex joys of the deaf experience.

**(1883): Fuller's Celebratory Identity**

Angeline A. Fuller-Fischer's poetry takes this trend of deaf acceptance even further in her 1883 book of poems *The Venture,* which celebrate deafness and articulate a preliminary deaf identity. The first section of the book is dedicated to "Poems of the Deaf and Dumb," which includes commemorative poems of important events in deaf history, reunions of alumni of deaf schools, as well as poems dedicated to specific deaf individuals. Fuller's poems include numerous Biblical references (the opening line of the first poem reads "Behold a miracle! a bush on fire"), and operate within a regular rhyme scheme. That is, they seem to conform to the poetic

conventions of the time. But the content, which seems to be advocating for wider acceptance of the deaf, or at least to prove that the deaf are equally capable of writing poetry, is a bit more revolutionary. Rebecca Sanchez identifies this revolutionary tendency:

> First, Fuller highlights the presence of disability within the Bible as a way of demonstrating that, far from existing only at the margins of society, the deaf and disabled have always played central roles in our foundational texts. Secondly, Fuller provides what we might now refer to as a social constructionist critique of deafness, naturalizing it and arguing that its associated disability is located not in deaf individuals themselves, but rather in the social conditions that sometimes make it difficult for them to communicate with others. (134)

Interestingly, Fuller's book begins with a note admitting that the author is herself deaf, though the content of the poems would have likely made that fact obvious. In this note, she describes the "Deaf and Dumb" as "a class whose position and experience is largely more prosy than poetical" (Fuller 3). She apologizes for any imperfections in the work and hopes that the poems will still be read and accepted. Though this note seems to be a humble nod to her own limitations, the content of Fuller's poetry belies any sense of this opening apology. Fuller’s celebratory poems do not apologize for deafness; in fact, Fuller may have been one of the first poets to truly own her own deafness. The radical content of Fuller’s poetry would have made it immediately off-putting to the hearing poetic establishment, who still maintained that poetry was inherently vocal and musical. According to Sanchez, Fuller "tempers this risk by operating within nineteenth-century poetic conventions" such as iambic pentameter and regular rhyme schemes, "all of which create the appearance of propriety" (Sanchez 134). A necessary step to ensure that her innovative poems, likely the first to articulate an idea of a deaf identity, would still be acceptable to the wider poetic culture.

Evidence suggests that all deaf poets in the nineteen century took similar steps to ensure their work, radical content or not, would be accepted and disseminated among a hearing audience. Deaf writers, still in marginalized social positions, appeased what amounted to a shocked and confused public by following the rigid rules of poetry to the very letter. This was a necessary step for them: the deaf identity was still being formed, and deaf people were still largely obliged to prove their status as fully-literate members of society who were capable of producing poetry. The manual method of instruction was still largely unaccepted, with oral articulation and vocal culture dominating public schools. Deaf writers, then, used their poetry and literature to prove the worth of their language and identity, and to suggest the value of manual education over oral education. Later works by Deaf poets would become much more innovative (namely the now-large genre of ASL poems composed and performed entirely in sign), but at the time, deaf poets knew full-well that for their voices to be heard they would have to adopt the language and poetic style of the dominant vocal culture.

## Conclusion

The history of deaf education and culture in the United States is fraught with debates, disagreements, and misunderstandings. Even today, many hearing people fail to understand the complexities of Deaf culture, a group of people who identify not as disabled or disadvantaged, but who embrace sign language as a different, but valid means of communication. The Deaf cultural identity as it exists today took a long time to form. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for instance, it barely existed. The United States was dominated by a "vocal culture" that prioritized speech, rhetoric, and oration in daily life, but especially in art. This culture led to an education system for deaf students that did not address their need to sign, instead teaching speech exclusively. It also led to a poetic culture that questioned the very abilities of deaf poets. However,

these limiting historical circumstances did not prevent deaf poets such as John Carlin, James Nack, Laura Redden Searing, and Angeline Fuller Fischer from writing and disseminating poetry that spoke to the deaf experience. In fact, their poetry articulated the thoughts and feelings of the wider deaf community, both positive and negative. In fact, one might even suggest that their work laid the foundation for the Deaf cultural identity as it exists today, preparing later writers and thinkers to see deafness in a complex and even positive light.

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Deaf identity research instead has mostly focused on how deaf individuals construct their identities across the life course (Ahrbeck 1995;McIlroy and Storbeck 2011), how deaf individuals look to others in the Deaf community to create a cultural identity and a shared, meaningful existence (Holcomb 1997), how Deaf identity is socialized via the education system (najarian 2008;nikolaraizi and. Hadjikakou 2006), and how to measure Deaf identity development (colangelo-Fischer and McWhirter 2001;Glickman and carey 1993).Â As new information about oneself emerges, mostly through lifelong, ongoing experiences and the responses of others toward the self, there is often a process of identity restructuring (Grotevant 1992). The deaf students who perform best academically usually are the ones whose parents have effectively communicated with them from an early age.Â  The book provides a comprehensive review of the current state of deaf studies. Raising and Educating a Deaf Child: More than 50,000 visitors have come to www.educatingdeafchildren.org since its inception in 2009. Deaf education is the education of students with any degree of hearing loss or deafness which addresses their differences and individual needs. This process involves individually-planned, systematically-monitored teaching methods, adaptive materials, accessible settings, and other interventions designed to help students achieve a higher level of self-sufficiency and success in the school and community than they would achieve with a typical classroom education. A number of countries focus on training