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The Power of Deaf Poetry: The Exhibition of Literacy and the Nineteenth-Century Sign Language Debates

In 1886, at the height of the nineteenth-century sign language debates in Europe and North America, Edward Miner Gallaudet, a leading figure in American deaf education, was called before the British Royal Commission on the Blind and the Deaf and Dumb. His goal was to defend the use of signed languages in deaf education and the wider deaf community.[1] The commissioners were charged with investigating the best ways to educate both deaf and blind children in government-funded schools. This mandate included settling the controversy over which of the competing systems of deaf education—oralism, manualism, or a combined system—would be best for the deaf students and the nation. The commissioners, who were especially concerned about oralists' claims that, without speech, deaf people faced poor economic prospects, asked Gallaudet about the current professions of the non-orally trained graduates of the American National Deaf-Mute College. Gallaudet gave examples of graduates who communicated "entirely by writing or by the fingers" and were prospering in various fields (1889, 468). Through these examples he aimed "to show that the practice of the oral method with the deaf is

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not essential to the highest success in the various pursuits which they take up" (ibid.). And then, to emphasize his point, Gallaudet read aloud a sonnet written by one of the deaf graduates of the college.

While a sonnet seems like an anomalous piece of evidence for the vocational success of deaf people when considered alongside the various reports, statistical analyses, and other concrete data presented to the commission by various witnesses, Gallaudet's recitation of Amos G. Draper's sonnet was an example of a common practice of refuting oralists' arguments by exhibiting the skills of manually-educated deaf people. Furthermore, this poetry reading at the British Royal Commission was only one example of a larger movement that mobilized the poetry that deaf people created to defend their rights to use signed languages and resist the oralists' imperative to speak. Though the oralist movement waged its battles against signed languages in government commissions, congresses of educators, educational journals, and even the popular press, various members of the deaf community, who were often denied a "voice" at these more official forums, attempted to resist oralism by creating counternarratives to the traditional oralist denigrations of signed languages. By publishing poetry, as well as articles about deaf poetry (such as Gallaudet's survey of the field, "Poetry of the Deaf," published in *Harper's Magazine* in 1884), members of the deaf community and their supporters were able to both offer their own perspectives on signed languages and provide evidence of signers' capabilities. In fact, after reading Draper's sonnet aloud, Gallaudet submitted his article on the "Poetry of the Deaf" to the commission as evidence.

Carol Padden and Tom Humphries argue that American Sign Language (ASL) poetry played a role in the important Deaf cultural movement that took place from the 1960s through the 1980s. They suggest that this poetry contributed to a new sense of pride in ASL, in addition to offering a Deaf cultural perspective on the value of signed languages (2005, 131). In this article I extend Padden and Humphries's assessment of the political and social value of Deaf poetry to another important historical moment for the deaf community: the nineteenth-century British and North American sign language debates. I demonstrate that the poetry written by deaf people played an important and unique role during these debates in defending signers' abilities and deaf

people's rights to sign against the oralist ideology, which claimed that, without speech, deaf people would be unsuccessful with language and therefore unsuccessful in their lives. Nineteenth-century oralists claimed that signed languages were inferior to spoken languages for a variety of reasons, including their belief that signed languages prevented their users from functioning abstractly in both thought and language and interfered with their English language acquisition. Those who wished to defend signed languages and signers were repeatedly forced to prove that these claims were untrue. An essential tactic in battling oralism involved offering an alternative and positive construction of signed languages and demonstrating that signers could write in English and think abstractly. This need for a defense resulted in the nineteenth-century cultural practice of publicly exhibiting deaf students. Before considering the poetry written by deaf people, I contextualize its political role by briefly discussing these public exhibitions of deaf students. There is a continuity between the public exhibitions and the way that Gallaudet and others marshaled this poetry as evidence of the success of the manualist educational system. Like the public exhibitions of signers, the existence of deaf poetry refuted oralists' denigrations of signed languages and signers by celebrating signed languages in their poetry and demonstrating that deaf people who used signed languages were able to master written English and access abstract thought and language.

One of the problematic and pernicious symptoms of the nineteenth-century sign language debates in deaf education was the educational practice of publicly exhibiting deaf pupils. During these school demonstrations, deaf pupils presented readings in signed languages, gave dramatic performances, executed mathematical and other exercises at the chalkboard, and answered questions from the audience. As various historians of deaf education, including Jonathan Rée, Lennard Davis, Christopher Krentz, Douglas Baynton and Harlan Lane, have stated, these exhibitions were meant to demonstrate signed languages' positive attributes, as well as the deaf students' intellectual capacities, including their understanding of abstract concepts and ability to write in English and other languages.

These deaf students were put on public display to refute specific oralist arguments about the weaknesses of signed languages and sign-

ers. The entire oralist project was buttressed by the idea that signed languages were inferior to spoken languages in every way. As Baynton (1996) has shown, for nearly a century oralists criticized signed languages through the rhetoric of xenophobia, racist and speciesist invocations of the "primitive" nature of signed languages, and phonocentric constructions of the superiority of orality. Signers were continually compelled to defend their language, and they did so, in part, through signed demonstrations at these exhibitions. In fact, these visual presentations in signed languages, languages which Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet called "highly poetical" (1847, 56), often contained poetry. For example, at an 1857 exhibition of students in Mississippi, a poem called "The Mute Sister" was presented in sign language (Brown 1857, 115). This poem by James S. Brown, principal of the Louisiana Institute of the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind, was about a deaf child whose only deaf sibling succumbs to illness. The poem's "speaker" mourns the loss of the one person whose "signs alone I could freely read."[2] The poem emphasizes both the value of signed languages and the importance of deaf community in a hearing world. The signed presentation of this sentimental poem at a deaf school's exhibition underscores its thematic content; the importance of signed languages and deaf community is doubly reinforced. Krentz notes that, at these public demonstrations, "the students' visual performance provoked wonder and fascination; they were seen as possessing a beautiful language and skills that most hearing people did not have" (2000, xxii). Deaf students displayed their skill in, and the qualities of, these signed languages in order to disprove oralists' assertions of their inferiority

Deaf students also had to refute the oralists' argument that signed languages were inferior to speech because of their belief that signs could not convey thought as fully as speech. Some oralists maintained that, as languages of the limbs, signed languages were concrete languages that could not effectively represent abstract ideas; thus, signers could not think abstractly unless taught speech. One proponent of this position, Thomas Arnold, who was Britain's leading oralist and educator of oralist teachers, argued in *The Education of the Deaf and Dumb* (1872):

> Signs are pictures of objects, and therefore resemble them. The one suggests the other from this semblance. But by what signs shall we

> express abstractions, purely mental states, operations and intuitions? As none of these can be reduced to a material form it is impossible to figure them by signs. . . . The processes of the understanding cannot be described on the fingers. (ibid., 5–6)

Clearly, in his insistence on the pantomimic nature of signed languages, Arnold completely misunderstood their qualities and capacities. One of the major goals of the public demonstrations was to prove that signing deaf students could think abstractly in opposition to the belief (widely held by oralists and even the public) that signed languages could transcend neither the materiality of the body nor the objects they were supposedly representing iconically. During the question period at these exhibitions, audiences often asked students what they thought about abstract ideas like God, whether they could distinguish between closely related concepts like "authority and power" or "mind and intellect," and how they imagined sensory experiences they were unable to access aurally, such as music (Rée 1999, 196; Lane 1984, 34–38). As Lane notes, the public exhibitions and the questions from the audience during these exhibitions were "a kind of test of [a deaf person's] intelligence, and if they particularly dwelt on abstractions it was because hearing people were under the misapprehension that the deaf could only deal with concrete things" (ibid., 38). The frequent and varied attempts to exhibit signing children's abstract linguistic and reasoning skills, which appeared in various places beyond the auditorium, including articles submitted to deaf periodicals and books published by educators,[3] testifies to the strange and destructive permanence of this insistence on the concrete nature of signed languages and signers' intellectual limitations.

Beyond demonstrating deaf students' abstract thinking abilities, these public exhibitions proved that deaf people who did not speak could use written English. Most oralists claimed that using sign language to any extent, even alongside speech and writing, interfered with the acquisition of English language skills. For oralists, the "inverted" logic and grammar of signed languages so marred their users' minds that signers were unable to access the superior linguistic qualities of English (Ackers 1880, 116). For example, the most prominent oralist, Alexander Graham Bell, who, like Gallaudet, testified at the

British Royal Commission, argued that a deaf person could not successfully use both English and a signed language. In his testimony Bell claimed that a signing deaf child:

> has learned to *think* in the gesture language, and his most perfected English expressions are only translations of his sign speech. As a general rule, when his education is completed, his knowledge of the English language is like the knowledge of French or German possessed by the average hearing child in leaving school. He cannot read an ordinary book intelligently without frequent recourse to a dictionary . . . and he can generally make people understand what he wishes in broken English, as a foreigner would speak. (1889, 353)

For Bell and other oralists, "thinking" in signed languages was inferior to thinking in English and prevented the acquisition of written English. The exhibitions of deaf students aimed to refute these claims in defense of the manualist system of training. In his introduction to a public presentation by his students, James S. Brown argued that the "great work" of the deaf pupil is "to receive and acquire a knowledge of written language" and that it was the audience's role to judge the pupils' success (1855, 179, 182). A central element, then, of these exhibitions were the written exercises that usually took place at a chalkboard and demonstrated, as Krentz notes, the students' "mastery of logocentric forms" (2000, xxii).

The exhibitions of deaf pupils' literacy in both signed and written languages were an indication of the harmful effects of the sign language debates on deaf children. Clearly, manualist educators, placed on the defensive by oralists' accusations about the deficiencies of signed languages and signers themselves, believed that deaf children's abilities could be mobilized publicly and politically to defend the use of signed languages. Understanding Gallaudet's recitation of his pupil's sonnet according to the logic of exhibiting deaf students illuminates his motivations for using poetry as evidence alongside statistical analyses of his graduates' occupational success rates. However, Gallaudet's recitation and his article about the "Poetry of the Deaf" were only one aspect of the way in which nineteenth-century deaf poetry was involved in the deaf community's resistance to oralism. I maintain that this wider mobilization of poetry also shared the logic of the public

exhibitions. By using the work of some of the major nineteenth-century deaf poets, including American writers Amos G. Draper, John R. Burnet, John Carlin, and Laura Redden Searing, as well as British writers William Henry Simpson and John Kitto, I argue that these poets present a counternarrative of the benefits of signed languages and refute oralists' accusations of signers' limited capabilities. The political and cultural work of this poetry parallels that of the public exhibitions, which actually involved many of the poets themselves as either students or teachers. In order to demonstrate how deaf poetry was marshaled to defend signed languages, I examine three features of the corpus of nineteenth-century deaf poetry: the combination of poetry and politics that characterized publications of deaf poetry; the poetry's frequent celebration of the features of signed languages; and the subgenre of "sounds unheard" poetry, which demonstrated a poet's grasp of words' abstract meanings.

Nineteenth-century deaf poets frequently combined their poetic pieces with historical information and political statements about signed languages and deaf education, which suggests that they saw their poetry as integral to their political objectives. For example, John R. Burnet's book *Tales of the Deaf and Dumb with Miscellaneous Poems* (1835) is dominated by its preface and introductory section, which present information about signed languages and deafness; in fact, the literary pieces do not appear until page 150 of the 230-page book. As Burnet himself admits, the title of the book, which indicates its literary slant, "may make it necessary to inform the reader that nearly two thirds of its contents consist of facts and documents" about "the principles, history, and present state of the art of instructing the deaf and dumb, statistics of the deaf and dumb and anecdotes of deaf and dumb persons" (ibid., 3). Even though Burnet's book was marketed as literature, the bulk of the text focuses on the political realities of signed languages and deaf education. Though Burnet acknowledges that "the poetical pieces at the end of the volume might appear to more advantage if published separately," he expresses the hope that they will not be overlooked even when prefaced with the factual information he provides (ibid., 4). Burnet, a teacher of deaf children, wrote his book early in the nineteenth-century when the Oralist program had not yet exerted as much influence as it would later in the century. Neverthe-

less, Burnet suggests in his preface that his goal is to offer information about and to celebrate the manualist system of deaf education. By including his poetry with this treatise on deaf education, he clearly considers the publication of his poems as instrumental to this aim. Furthermore, his poetry was used later in the century, by Gallaudet for example, in order to defend the capabilities of signers. Burnet was not alone in appending political and historical information about deaf education to the publication of poetry; other deaf poets, including William Henry Simpson and John Kitto, also published their poetry alongside facts about deaf history, education, and language use.

In addition to discussions of deaf education and signed languages, some nineteenth-century deaf poets included actual diagrams of the sign alphabet in order to support their defense of signed languages. Burnet's book, for example, is not only a vehicle that celebrates the role of signed languages in education in both its preface and its poetry but also an educational text for the propagation of signed languages among his readers. Burnet explains that the engraving on the frontispiece of the one-handed manual alphabet was included so as "to enable any person to acquire the art of talking on the fingers in a few hours" (ibid.). British missionary and deaf writer John Kitto, who communicated primarily through the manual alphabet, included diagrams of both the one- and the two-handed manual alphabets in his book *The Lost Senses* [1848], which also contains chapters on deaf education and Kitto's own poetry. Kitto enumerates the manual alphabet's benefits and encourages his hearing readers to acquire the skill. To help them do so, he included the alphabets used in both Britain and North America (ibid., 99). The readers of Kitto's and Burnet's books are therefore not only learning about deaf education while reading English poetry by deaf poets but also exhorted to become familiar with the sign alphabet in order to communicate with deaf people on the latter's own terms. Like Gallaudet's recitation of a sonnet while testifying about the vocational prospects of manually-educated deaf people, this appending of factual information about deafness and signed languages to English poetry written by signers demonstrates that these authors saw their poetry as integral to their textual resistance to Oralism.

In addition to affirming the importance of signed languages in their prefatory material, nineteenth-century deaf poets constructed a

positive image of signed languages by validating their features in poetry. Many of them attended to nonverbal features of communication, including facial expression and arm and hand movement, in their poetry. By acknowledging the communicative potential of these forms of "body language," these deaf poets were celebrating the actual features of signed languages. While poets like Kitto, Laura C. Redden Searing, and Burnet widely diverged in their own personal experiences with signed languages and their explicit reference to signed languages in their poems, they nevertheless each appreciate the value of communication outside of orality.

The speaker in Kitto's ten-stanza poem, "Mary," who bemoans the loss of his hearing and the "long silence" in which he has lived his life, celebrates the vast communicative possibilities that exist outside of oral communication. While the speaker begins by mourning all of the sounds that he can no longer hear, "from the organ's rolling peal / to the gay burst or mournful wail / of harp, psaltery, and lute" (lines 31–33), in the sixth stanza he begins celebrating his dear Mary's eye and its ability to communicate:

> But Mary, when I look on thee
> All things beside neglected lie,
> There is a deep eloquence to me
> In the bright sparkle of thine eye.
> How sweetly can their beamings roll
> Volumes of meaning to my soul,
> How long—how vainly all—might words
> Express what one quick glance affords. (ibid., 83–90)

The speaker's synesthetic description of Mary's eye as eloquent attributes the communicative powers of speech to the formerly mute gaze. Furthermore, Mary's eye can communicate with the speaker more effectively than words. While the speaker initially laments that "the human voice divine / falls not on this cold sense of mine" (ibid., 67–68), the poem eventually argues that the eye's communicative powers are superior in both "eloquence" and efficiency to spoken words, which are cumbersome and even ineffective.

American poet and journalist Laura C. Redden Searing's poem "My

Story" (2003) shares Kitto's validation of communication outside of the oral and the aural. The speaker of "My Story" describes her struggles with deafness and her discovery of compensations for her deafness:

> I learned to read in every face
> The deep emotions of the heart;
> For Nature to the stricken one
> Had given this simple art.
>
> The world of sound was not for me;
> But then I sought in friendly eyes
> A soothing for my bitter loss,
> When memories would rise.
>
> And I was happy as a child,
> If I could read a friendly thought
> In the warm sunshine of a face,
> The which my trust had wrought. (ibid., 17–28)

In Searing's poem, as in Kitto's, eyes communicate with eyes, and faces are texts to be read. These facial texts are especially transparent to the deaf speaker, who can read the normally hidden "deep emotions of the heart" on the faces of those around her. The speaker suggests that the emotions normally obscured in conventional spoken conversation are made visible to her as a compensation for her deafness. This construction of faces as texts for deaf people to read appears throughout the writings of various nineteenth-century deaf poets. Kitto, for example, argues that because deaf people do not have the ability to judge a person's character by "tone of voice and manner of speech," "every one who is deaf must become a physiognomist" (1848, 61). These poets participate in what Deidre Lynch calls "the Victorians' fascination with the insights to be obtained from the sight of another's countenance" (2007, 229) in order to suggest that visual communication trumps oral interaction in its efficiency and its revelation of truth. Furthermore, for Kitto and Searing, who figure this reading of faces as a form of compensation for their deafness, deaf people are better physiognomists than hearing people. These poets appropriate the cultural

authority of the rhetoric of physiognomy in order to validate nonoral methods of communication.

In addition to her eyes, the speaker of "My Story" uses her hands to negotiate and communicate with the world around her. The speaker refers to hands three times within the first four stanzas, when she "grasp[s] the hand" of her interlocutor (line 1),* describes her deafness as the "hand of God" falling "heavily / upon [her]" (ll. 6–7), and tells of how her

> poor life, so silence-bound,
> Reached blindly out its helpless hands,
> Craving the love and tenderness
> Which every soul demands (ll. 13–16)

This focus on hands as the medium of communication between the speaker and those around her (and even her God) implicitly reveals that she uses sign language While this focus on deaf people's nonverbal communication—on eyes, faces, and hands as communicative tools—recurs frequently in this body of nineteenth-century British and North American deaf poetry, many poets are even more unambiguous in their references to signed languages and the manualist cause than are Kitto and Searing.

Burnet's long narrative poem, *Emma,* describes deaf students learning sign language, a "new language—all their own / where mind was visible—and knowledge shone" (ll. 308–309). The poem is about a young deaf girl's journey out of isolation to intellectual enrichment and community through learning sign language and attending a school for deaf children. Burnet, like Kitto and Searing, invokes the visibility of thoughts and feelings for deaf people in this new language, where "mind was visible." At the school for deaf children:

> from the speaking limbs, and face divine,
> At nature's bidding, thoughts and feelings shine,
> That in thin air no more her sense elude—

*When l. appears, followed by a poem line number, it refers to one line of a poem; likewise, when ll. appears, followed by a poem's line numbers, it refers to two or more lines of a poem.

> Each understands—by each is understood.
> Here can each feeling gush forth, unrepressed,
> To mix with feelings of a kindred breast. (ll. 330–35)

Like Kitto's celebration of the eloquence of Mary's eye, Burnet's synesthetic yoking of speech and visible limbs affirms the communicative capabilities of signed languages albeit in the hegemonic rhetoric of orality. The potentially problematic synesthesia of "speaking hands" and "listening eyes" (Peet 1859, 105, 109), which grants the properties of speech and hearing to visual mediums of intercourse, recurs frequently throughout nineteenth-century deaf poetry. Clearly the phonocentric "resonances" of the vocabulary of communication are nearly impossible to escape. However, by yoking this terminology of speech and sound to celebrations of signed languages these poets appropriate the language to buttress their sign-positive agendas. In opposition to oralists' claims regarding the superiority of spoken languages and the absolute necessity of speech for literacy, Kitto, Searing, and Burnet celebrate the avenues of communication that exist in the reading of people's faces and limbs, outside of orality and aurality.

This attention to the communicative role of faces and hands appears again and again in nineteenth-century deaf poetry, revealing its suitability for reflecting the experiences of deaf poets. While some may characterize facial expression and the motion of the hands and arms as merely "body language," I believe that the poets' attention to nonverbal communication reveals that they were attuned to the properties of signed languages even when not overtly referring to them. Linguists now know what nineteenth-century users of signed languages had not yet linguistically theorized or quantified: Facial expression and spatial motion of the arms are integral parts of the grammar of signed languages. In contemporary signed languages such as British Sign Language or American Sign Language, the component parts of one sign are hand shape, movement, location, orientation, and nonmanual signals (facial expression) (Valli, Lucas, and Mulrooney 2005, 17). Moreover, facial expression and arm movement are not merely incidental or extralinguistic but are essential elements of the meaning of a sign. The ability to read faces and attend to the motion of the hands and arms is less a compensation for deafness—which is how many of these poets constructed

it—than a reflection of the linguistic properties of the language that Searing, Burnet, and, to a lesser extent, Kitto are using. By celebrating the communicative powers of signed languages and even suggesting that this visual language of "speaking limbs" was superior to speech in its communicative capacities, nineteenth-century deaf poets used their poetry to resist oralists' constructions of signed languages as limiting.

While most nineteenth-century deaf poets extolled the properties of signed languages in their written poetry, some of them, including Searing and Mary Toles Peet, created some sign poetry. Though evidence for sign language poetry of the 1800s is sparse, sign poetry appears to have been an element of the poetry culture in deaf communities of this period. As noted earlier, at public school exhibitions deaf students presented signed readings that included Bible verses, poetry, and other material typically used in elocutionary exercises. For example, at the closing exercises of the New York Institution of the Deaf and Dumb in 1859, a deaf student "recited" Coleridge's "Mont Blanc" in signs, which "elicited a great deal of applause" from the audience ("Institution"). Mary Toles Peet, who had graduated from the institution six years earlier, then presented her original composition "The Castle of Silence" in signs. The reporter for the *New York Times* declared that her "words were fitted together . . . euphoniously" and applauded her muse ("Institution").[4]

Searing signed her poem "A Farewell" at her 1858 graduation from the Missouri School for the Deaf (Yeager Jones and Vallier 2003, 29). Additional reports state that other people presented Searing's poems in sign language. At the 1889 dedication of the statue of Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, Searing's poem "Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet" was presented in both sign language and oral English versions (ibid., 74). Krentz has noted that at that historic moment, "deaf Americans showed just how self-respecting and independent they were" (2000, xxvii); surely one demonstration of the self-respect of this community and its endorsement of Gallaudet's advocacy for signed languages was its desire to create and present poetry in what most of its members considered their natural language. The simultaneous presentation of Searing's poem in signed and spoken language affirmed the communicative and expressive capabilities of signed languages while also demonstrating Searing's skill in written English.

While the prefatory material on the political realities of the sign

language debates, the inclusion of sign alphabet engravings, the celebration of the superior communication capacities of signed languages, and the creation of sign poetry are important examples of how the nineteenth-century community of deaf poets upheld the value of signed languages, deaf poets also challenged oralists' denigrations of the abilities of signers themselves. As we have seen, oralists argued that deaf people who had not been orally trained were linguistically and even intellectually stunted. As I noted earlier in my discussion of educational exhibitions of deaf children, deaf people had to, in Rée's words, "satisfy the public's curiosity as to whether they would really understand abstract or artificial terms, words whose meanings were linguistic rather than sensory" (1999, 196). I maintain that the very existence of a body of English poetry written by signing deaf people refutes the oralist construction of signers as unable to access abstraction in language and thought. This performance of linguistic abstraction through poetry is especially apparent in a major subgenre of nineteenth-century poetry written by deaf people that I call "sounds unheard" poetry. This body of poetry points to deaf poets' facility with, in Rée's terms, the "linguistic" rather than the "sensory" meanings of words. In fact, these poems provide virtual answers to the absent and yet always implied public interrogations of deaf people's ability with abstraction in language and thought.

The sonnet that Gallaudet read aloud to the British Royal Commission, Amos G. Draper's "Memories of Sound," is an example of this subgenre. In Draper's poem, the speaker describes various sounds that he was able to hear before his deafness to which he no longer has access including "the buzz of bees" (line 8) and "the melody of raindrops as they fall" (1892, 9). The other sounds unheard poems share similar formal features: They comprise long, descriptive lists of a variety of sounds, including those of nature, music, and human voices. Almost all of the published nineteenth-century deaf poets have a sounds unheard poem in their oeuvre.[5]

While the sounds unheard poems are often lamentations on the speaker's deafness, the poems nevertheless affirm the abilities of the signing deaf community. For example, American artist and poet John Carlin's "The Mute's Lament" begins: "I move—a silent exile on this earth . . . my tongue is mute, and closed ear heedeth not" (1847, ll. 1, 3–4). The rest of the poem mourns sounds like "murmuring . . .

streamlets" (ibid., ll. 6–7), "the linnet's dulcet tone" (ibid., l. 10), and the "orator's exciting strains" (ibid., l. 21) with the refrain "I hear them not." The speaker's only compensation for his exile is that, when he arrives in paradise, "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" (ibid., ll. 52–54). For all of this expression of grief, however, which Krentz explains as Carlin's "self-hatred" and "ambivalen[ce] about his deaf identity" (2000, xxvii, 89), Carlin's poem was still showcased by Gallaudet in his *Harper's Magazine* article about the "Poetry of the Deaf" (1892). Gallaudet used Carlin's work to demonstrate the poetic skill of a signing man who was born deaf and never orally trained (ibid., 87–88). Not only could Carlin write skillfully in the genre, but his poems also demonstrated that he could understand the linguistic meanings of the words he used to describe sound since, for Carlin, these words did not correspond to a sensory experience.

The popular subgenre of sounds unheard poetry illuminates the fact that deaf poets were composing poetry about sound that they could not have experienced aurally. The poets thereby prove their grasp of the linguistic meanings of adjectives used to describe sound. While a hearing audience might think of the sounds of oceans or birds as concrete sensory experiences, for deaf poets, especially those who were deaf from birth, these descriptive words are abstract concepts. If Draper, for example, had never heard the roar of an ocean—or at least become deaf before having experienced the sensory referent of the word "roar"—how would he know whether to describe an ocean as roaring rather than babbling or murmuring? These poets were able to describe sounds they had never heard because of their comprehension of conventional definitions rather than because of their own sensory experiences. For them, an ocean's roar or a linnet's dulcet tone is meaningful in the realm of language rather than in the realm of sound; for them, sound is a discursive experience.

These sounds unheard poems were one way for deaf poets to engage with the sign language debates, especially the oralists' arguments about the importance of speech to thought. In an article for the *American Annals of the Deaf and Dumb,* Burnet argued that there is no gap between thought and writing that requires traversing by the interme-

diary of speech (1854, 99). For Burnet, deaf people could use either signed languages or writing to access and convey the highest mental abstractions without any oral training. In practice, his poetry proved his assertions by describing concepts such as "whispering zephyrs" and "murmuring rill[s]" (ibid., line 18) Deaf poets, then, publicly exhibited their facility with abstraction—both linguistic and intellectual—by creating poems that were not buttressed by their personal experiences with sound. These public demonstrations refuted the pervasive, oralist-supported, belief that deaf signers were mired in concrete thought and language use.[6]

This group of accomplished poets skillfully writing poetry—complete with measured rhythm and elegant rhyme—also 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. Therefore, the existence of deaf poetry makes the case for English literacy *through* sign literacy. During his testimony to the British Royal Commission, for example, Gallaudet was asked about the validity of oralists' assertions that users of signed languages could not understand English idioms and were generally deficient in their English literacy. Gallaudet argued:

> In manual schools where thoroughly competent and judicious teachers are employed the use of signs is not only found to be no impediment in the acquisition of the power of using language idiomatically, but is found to be a great help in reaching that end. (1889, 461)

Gallaudet's argument (made by many supporters of the combined and manualist systems) was that, rather than harming English language skills, the use of signs allowed deaf students to perform better in all areas of study. The proponents of this line of reasoning gave various explanations for their support of English literacy through sign language. They claimed that signs were used "for the purpose of explanation" (ibid.) so that students would better understand English idioms. They also argued that the manual or combined system resulted in higher English literacy levels because fewer classroom hours were spent on articulation and lipreading instruction.

In the context of these beliefs about the influence of signing on English language skills, the political implications of Gallaudet's inter-

est in deaf poetry become clear. While at first it seems curious that Gallaudet read a sonnet in response to questions about the occupational prospects of manually-educated deaf people, evidently he saw a connection between the ability to write English poetry and the capacity to succeed, economically or otherwise, in the hearing-dominated, English-speaking cultures of Britain and North America. As with his students' presenting public "recitations" in signed languages and writing on chalkboards in filled auditoriums, Gallaudet used deaf poetry as a public exhibition of the manually-educated deaf community's language skills.

This legacy of defending manualism through the public exhibition of deaf people's signing and writing skills suggests the important role that deaf literary endeavors played in the nineteenth-century sign language debates. These signing poets valued what most of them considered their natural language and offered a counternarrative to the oralists' construction of signers as intellectually and linguistically limited. Because writing poetry in English required both English fluency and the use of abstraction in language, the genre was a suitable battleground for refuting oralists' claims. Furthermore, because, as Jan Branson and Don Miller have argued, a misunderstanding of signed languages is "at the heart of the discrimination against deaf people" (2002, ix), the construction of signed languages as languages that are equal or superior to English, as expressed though the hegemonic form of written English poetry, allowed some members of British and North American deaf communities to resist oralism. Through poetry, they offered a new, public, and more accurate construction of signed languages' properties and the signing deaf community's abilities.

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Notes

1. While it has been standard practice in Deaf studies to use a lowercase *d* to refer to the audiological condition of deafness and an uppercase *D* to refer to those deaf people who identify with a Deaf community and use a signed language, this practice has recently been called into question. The major objection to the *d/D* practice is that it cannot accurately reflect the complexity of a deaf/Deaf person's experience in the world or the range of possibilities for deaf/Deaf identity. An additional issue for this article is the difficulty of categorizing deaf people who lived in the nineteenth century as either deaf or Deaf. While all of the poets I discuss used signed languages in some form, some of them, including John Kitto, may not have self-identified as culturally Deaf. Because of the inability of the *d/D* practice to address the complexities of nineteenth-century deaf identities, I reluctantly use the potentially problematic term "deaf" in this article unless referring to contemporary Deaf issues, where I maintain the *d/D* distinction.

2. The term "speaker," used in literary studies for the narrator of a poem, is obviously unsuitable for describing poetry written by signing deaf poets, especially those who were attempting to resist the cultural drive to force them to speak. I use the term first within quotation marks and then without in order to highlight the problematic critical investment that literary studies seems to have in the orality of poetry. Like American Sign Language poets who created a new sign for ASL poetry in order to divorce it from the idea of music that underpinned the original sign, I want to question the validity of this approach to poetry. Thus, perhaps it is time to create new terminology that better reflects a genre that exists in myriad poetic modes, including written and signed.

3. For example, Luzerne Rae's "Questions" presents complex issues that deaf students raised with their instructor, such as "How did God create himself before Adam and Eve were born?" and "What is the difference between good and bad?" in order to demonstrate that "the human mind, whenever it reaches a certain point in its development, almost universally plunges into the depths of . . . mysterious subjects" (1847). In 1845 H. B. Bingham, the principal of the College of the Deaf and Dumb in Rugby, England, published a collection titled *Essays by the Pupils at the College of the Deaf and Dumb, Rugby, Warwickshire.* In his introduction to the book, Bingham explains that he is presenting these compositions to the public as "proof" that many deaf students, "when educated, possess a quickness of apprehension, and a scope of imagination equal to those of their own age who are not naturally deaf" (ibid., xi–xii). These essay topics echo the types of questions posed by the public to deaf students at the public exhibitions. The Rugby students were asked to write about pertinent social issues like slavery, revolution, and the advantages of the railway, topics related to their deafness, such as whether it is worse to be deaf or blind, and abstract concepts like "death" and "light."

4. There are various reports of deaf people signing their own or other people's poetry at the public exhibitions of deaf schools or at graduation exercises. Another example appears in the *New York Times* of June 27, 1872. At these closing exercises of the New York institution, a student signed Oliver Wendell Holmes's "The Voiceless." The reporter describes the sentimental performance in detail and then writes that the young signer exited the stage to "plaudits [that] were almost deafening in vehemence" ("Our Deaf Mutes").

5. These poems include Burnet's "Lines Written after a First Visit to the Passaic Falls at the age of nineteen (since corrected)" (1835); John Carlin's "The Mute's Lament" (1847); Draper's "Memories of Sound" (1892); Angie A. Fuller's "The Semi-mute's Soliloquy" (1892); Kitto's "Mary" (1848?); Mary Toles Peet's "Thoughts on Music" (1892); Searing's "Ten Years of Silence" (Yaeger Jones and Vallier, eds., 2003); William Henry Simpson's "Recollections of Hearing" (1858); and James Nack's "Spring Is Coming" (1845).

6. In fact, as Brenda Jo Brueggemann has noted, these false beliefs about the inability of signed languages to represent abstract ideas persist even today (1999, 171).

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