Reading Victorian Deafness

signs and sounds in victorian literature and culture

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Introduction

*I*n a series of paintings made between 1883 and 1900, Scottish painter William Agnew recorded a conversation between a hearing person and a deaf person that took place in signs. The deaf woman, Elizabeth Tuffield, lying in her sickbed, is the daughter of a postmaster on the Isle of Wight. The hearing woman offering comfort and signed conversation to the invalid is Queen Victoria. This moment of "Royal Condescension," as some versions of the painting are titled, not only depicts a unique conversation between a monarch, known for her fingerspelling fluency, and one of her poor and ill subjects but also allows us a rare glimpse into the visual language of deaf Victorians (figure I.1).[1] The Queen's "condescension" involved her willingness to use her hands to communicate, rather than expect Tuffield to use spoken or written English. Indeed, Queen Victoria insisted on accommodating Tuffield's linguistic orientation; as a deaf periodical noted in 1898, the Queen always "talk[ed] to [Tuffield] in our language, '*never allowing anyone to interpret for her.*'"[2] Furthermore, Agnew's paintings of Victoria signing, one of which won a prize at the 1890 Edinburgh

FIGURE I.1. "Royal Condescension." By Henry Ash after William Agnew's painting. Wellcome Library, London.

exhibition and was displayed at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, were simultaneously aesthetic and political statements because Agnew, like Tuffield, was deaf and communicated through signs. His preference for signing, and, indeed, even the Queen's own use of signs, was controversial because over the course of the nineteenth century, deaf people faced extraordinary cultural pressure to relinquish signing for speaking in English. It was during Victoria's reign that "oralism," a widespread movement to force deaf people to speak and lip-read instead of sign, burgeoned and became extremely influential in deaf life. Created in the midst of this cultural battle over deaf language use, Agnew's paintings were artistic validations of the linguistic preferences and rights of deaf signers. If signing on the fingers was suitable for the Queen of England, then it was certainly a mode of communication fit for her deaf subjects.

The Queen's willingness to engage in dactylogical communication irked those hearing doctors, educators, and parents of deaf children who were proponents of oralism.[3] Despite the almost unanimous opposition of deaf communities, oralists aimed to entirely eradicate signed languages by mobilizing various strategies, including establishing speech-based schools, lobbying governments for educational reform, and deriding signed languages in public forums. As

this book will demonstrate, oralists charged signed languages with being primitive, with being rooted in iconicity and materiality, with lacking intellectual and linguistic rigor, and with isolating deaf people from the society of hearing people. While one key oralist goal was to institute speech-focused education for deaf children, the oralists' wider desire to efface the linguistic, sensory, and cultural differences of deaf Britons exceeded the strictly pedagogical. That the century-long oralist program has been called a form of cultural "genocide" reflects the threat that the eradication of signed languages posed to deaf people who, instead of understanding their sensory and linguistic difference as a problem, often expressed pride in their language of signs.[4]

The moment captured in Agnew's painting belies the oralist construction of sign's inferiority to speech and instead aligns signing with the status and sophistication of royalty. The delight taken in Agnew's paintings by deaf communities both in the late nineteenth century and today resides largely in their endorsement of sign language. As a prominent and vehement opponent of oralism, Agnew argued that oralists, who were almost exclusively hearing, "'do not know what we deaf folks know of the people they deal with, and we must try to open their eyes as well as enlighten the public.'"[5] Agnew and his Scottish deaf contemporaries, then, used the attention Agnew's paintings received from hearing people to promote their vision of deaf communication and education—a vision centered on the visual language of signs. For example, in addition to being showcased and celebrated at the Edinburgh exhibition, the 1889 version of "Royal Condescension" was exhibited to Queen Victoria, after which she agreed to patronize Agnew's building fund for the Glasgow Institute for the Deaf and Dumb, where signs were used in the classroom.[6] Agnew used his considerable artistic and administrative talents, then, to resist oralism, promote a deaf perspective on signed languages, and establish an institutional space for deaf self-determination.

Reading Victorian Deafness traces the cultural conditions that led to oralism's overwhelming success in Victorian Britain. By the mid-nineteenth century, deaf people (whose literacy had been increasing, who had been teaching other deaf people in schools, and who had been standardizing and spreading the use of signed languages for a century) were prevented from continuing their efforts at political and social independence. By the turn of the century, signed languages were outlawed in many deaf schools, deaf communities were being dissolved, and signed languages were being disparaged as inferior forms of

communication. Oralism was much more than a pedagogical movement, and this book addresses both its broader cultural influences and its social import. I move beyond the schoolroom to attend to widespread Victorian conceptions of both disability and language. Victorians understood signed languages in multiple, and often contradictory, ways: as objects of fascination and revulsion, as having scientific import and literary interest, and as being both a unique mode of human communication and an apparent vestige of our bestial heritage. This book argues that deaf people's marginalization in the nineteenth century was, in part, attributable to Victorian misunderstandings not only of signed languages but also of the concept of "language" altogether. Language was an overdetermined category for the Victorians, who used it to define notions of Britishness, normalcy, and the human; when definitions of language are invested with such cultural power, their expansiveness has important consequences. Unfortunately, as I argue, "language" was consistently and narrowly constructed as a product of the voice in a wide range of Victorian disciplines. While this approach to language is not limited to the Victorians—Lennard Davis has argued that "one of the foundational ableist myths of our society [is that] the norm for humans is to speak and hear"[7]—it was during the nineteenth century that definitions of language and the human—and the important relationship between the two— were under extraordinary pressure and subject to redefinition in the service of Victorian Britain's various national and ideological projects, including imperial, scientific, and technological endeavors. This book, then, illuminates the cultural factors that contributed to the Victorian movement that sought to limit the modes of human language in favor of an insistence that everyone, hearing and deaf, should speak.

In addition to closely examining Victorian understandings of signed languages, this book focuses on two related topics: Victorian cultural constructions of deafness and the lived experiences and self-representations of deaf Victorians. By weaving these three threads through the following five chapters, this book creates a comprehensive account of Victorian deafness that reveals central Victorian beliefs about language and its relationship to human ability. *Reading Victorian Deafness,* then, uses an exploration of the Victorian controversy over sign language to illuminate wider Victorian cultural developments and debates that regularly hinged on definitions of human language: changes to literary genres and models of authorship, imperialism and colonialism, eugenics, the nature and origins of language, the species question in the age of evolutionary

thought, nationalism, the "woman question," and institutional developments in social welfare and education. In these disparate areas, Victorian ideas about the parameters of both language and the human were subject to constant scrutiny and contestation in the face of new developments in medical, scientific, philological, technological, and cultural knowledge.

In this historical moment when categories of both language and the human body were epistemologically vulnerable, deaf people's language use became increasingly important in establishing the parameters of human language use and, by virtue of that, the human itself. As I argue in the chapters that follow, deaf people were used as imagined limit cases and as material test subjects as part of the Victorian process of understanding the scope and dimensions of human language use. Indeed, *Reading Victorian Deafness* argues that the very specific marginal position of deaf people in Victorian culture—that is, their sensory and linguistic difference—meant that they afforded Victorians an important imaginative space for interrogating ideas about the connection between the body and language, including the fraught question of the materiality of language. One of this book's central contentions is that thinking *through* deafness was a consistent rhetorical practice that spanned a wide range of Victorian discursive fields interested in human language use.

A principal thread of this book's interrogation of the Victorian understanding of the relationship between language and the body, including, more specifically, the connection between language use and constructions of disability, is focused on literature. Literary texts from a range of genres, including poetry, fiction, and life writing, are deployed in the five chapters of *Reading Victorian Deafness* to investigate how they textualize both deafness and signed languages. The somewhat discordant relationship between signing and writing, which springs from a range of causes including the basic fact that signed languages have no written equivalent, reveals important dimensions of Victorian beliefs about what it means to be deaf, to not speak, and even to write literature.[8] Indeed, I argue that attending to how deafness and signed languages are represented in fiction or poetry provides a unique lens through which to understand generic practices that may be taken for granted by literary critics. For instance, Charles Dickens's and Wilkie Collins's constructions of silent deaf heroines highlight what I suggest (in chapter 2) is a pervasive Victorian imagining of the novel as a transcription of orality. Furthermore, deaf people's own literary production often contains aesthetic meditations on their unique relationship to English

writing as nonspeakers. For example, deaf British writer and missionary John Kitto includes tightly rhymed and regularly metered poetry in his book *The Lost Senses* immediately following his declaration that deaf people, including himself, are *incapable* of writing poetry.

Inherent in my attention to literature as both a product of and a challenge to Victorian cultural beliefs about language and human ability is an interrogation of Victorian perceptions about the triangulated relationship between speech, writing, and sign. Various contemporary critics of Victorian literature have attended to the role of "voice" in Victorian literature or the contradictions of the perceived relationship between speech and writing.[9] *Reading Victorian Deafness* augments this critical attention to the dyad of speech and writing by attending to the third mode of human language use that has hitherto been ignored. My focus on signed languages creates a lens through which to interrogate Victorian ideas about language that may be taken for granted when the signer's perspective is overlooked. For instance, a critical attention to sign language reveals the untenability of the belief that speech and writing are bound inextricably. That is, a deaf person who does not speak can still write in English, and this use of visual language without recourse to oral/aural language troubles many Victorian (and, indeed, contemporary) beliefs about what language is, what language does, and the mutual interdependence of speech and writing.[10]

Reading Victorian Deafness also contributes to the broad and growing concern with the Victorian sensorium, including the expansive body of scholarship on Victorian visual culture and, more recently, the increasing critical interest in Victorian touch, taste, smell, and hearing.[11] In all of these critical endeavors, scholars have attempted to illuminate Victorian conceptions of the relationship between the subject, the body, and the world by attending to how sensory experience bridges these entities. Victorians interested in medicine, education, psychology, and literature were all intently drawn to tracing how the senses mediated an experience of the world, which they often articulated through using examples of sensory disability. For instance, Laura Bridgman, the deaf-blind American woman who was reportedly the most famous woman in the world after Queen Victoria in the mid-Victorian period,[12] was a frequent subject for biomedical, educational, and philosophical musing and experimentation. In the realm of fiction, Wilkie Collins used a blind character in *Poor Miss Finch* and a deaf character in *Hide and Seek* to meditate on the psychological, philosophical, and social consequences of sensory difference. Considering how Victorians

understood the senses, including the vast continuum of sensory difference, permits new insights into Victorian approaches to larger questions about subjectivity, body-mind dualism, and human existence. In particular, *Reading Victorian Deafness* is in conversation with the recent and burgeoning scholarship in Victorian sound studies, a field that is formulating a way to understand the Victorian soundscape. By situating my study of Victorian deafness within this emerging critical paradigm of Victorian sound studies, I offer a new, and necessary, perspective on how Victorians understood what it meant to hear and not to hear.

While my reference to "not hearing" seems to frame deafness as a lack, this book follows the practice of most of the deaf Victorians it describes by resisting an understanding of deafness as necessarily disabling; as deaf people have argued for more than a century, deafness becomes disabling through social conditions and need not be inherently problematic or undesirable. My approach is aligned with the cultural model of disability as it circulates in contemporary disability studies, and *Reading Victorian Deafness* aims to contribute to the burgeoning field of Victorian disability studies.[13] As a field, disability studies generally posits, in Davis's words, that "disability is not a minor issue that relates to a relatively small number of unfortunate people; it is part of a historically constructed discourse, an ideology of thinking about the body under certain historical circumstances. Disability is not an object—a woman with a cane—but a social process that intimately involves everyone who has a body and lives in the world of the senses" (*Enforcing,* 2). Following the approach taken by Davis and other disability studies scholars who emphasize the importance of contextualizing disability in a critical and historical framework, this book attends to the historical specificities of Victorian understandings of what we now call the category of "disability." It is also allied with those theorists who have criticized the "medical model" of disability that considers certain kinds of physical, mental, or intellectual difference as inherently deficient and as requiring recuperation, isolation, or cure.

These articulations of disability as a social construction have revolutionized the study of disability in the humanities over the past two decades and have catalyzed a perspective that is focused on power, including how various incarnations of hegemony can pathologize difference for their own ends. However, this dichotomous system of a medical model versus a cultural or social-constructivist model oversimplifies the vast range of approaches, and their respective strengths and weaknesses, in contemporary disability studies. While the medical model has

garnered criticism for its insistence on understanding diversity as a problem, for largely ignoring the perspectives and rights of people with disabilities, and for adhering to an oversimplified binary of ability and disability, the cultural model also has its limitations. For instance, the cultural model has been accused of effacing the important issue of impairment: that is, the deafness or paraplegism or autism that is being medicalized and given cultural meaning. *Reading Victorian Deafness* is deliberately less concerned with the physiological experience of deafness, including its physical causes or medical treatment, than it is with the culture that constructed the nonphysiological effects of deafness in particular ways.[14]

How, then, can we—as critics, historians, and members of these communities—create a responsible and progressive model of thinking about social categories such as race, gender, sexuality, and disability that balances the reality that bodies are simultaneously cultural formations and material entities? In recent writing, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has registered her concern about how to theorize disability in a way that keeps difference itself in tension with a critique of a culture that constructs this difference in the first place. That is, she asks how we can attend to disability without reinscribing the flawed ideological system that devalues certain kinds of bodies. In writing about Victorian freakery, Garland-Thomson advocates a "shift[] from a social-constructivist understanding of freakery to a rigorous materialist analysis. . . . The virtue of this analysis is that the freaks cannot be relegated to metaphorical figures of otherness, but rather they are enfleshed as they are enfreaked, always particular lives at particular moments in particular places."[15]

In its attempt to balance these myriad questions facing the field of disability studies, *Reading Victorian Deafness* follows both Garland-Thomson and Davis in arguing that historicizing how concepts of disability came to be *and* the material realities of those people who have been labeled, or who identified as, disabled are both necessary steps. This book is invested in finding a third space—a space that simultaneously eschews metaphorical or transhistorical accounts of deafness, avoids effacing bodily diversity or impairment, and still interrogates the cultural meanings granted to those impairments. Accordingly, then, I examine how deaf people came to be understood in the nineteenth century as a pathologized Other who violated the norms of human communication while simultaneously addressing how particular deaf people lived among, created, and responded to those constructions of what it meant to be deaf in Victorian Britain.

VICTORIAN CULTURAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF DEAFNESS

In part, then, this book traces the various appearances of deaf people and signed languages in Victorian culture to examine hearing people's interest in sign language and, more specifically, their attempts to use signing deaf people as a site for exploring larger concerns about the relationship between the human body, ability, and language. While today deaf people and their languages are typically studied in the disciplinary margins of education and medicine—couched in the rhetoric of rehabilitation, assimilation, literacy, and cure—I argue that over the course of the nineteenth century, understandings of deaf people and their language use informed broader cultural debates around the nature of language, the meaning of bodily and linguistic difference, and the definition of the human. This is not to say that this rhetoric of assimilation, illiteracy, and cure was not in use during the Victorian period; in fact, much of our contemporary discourse around deafness can be traced explicitly to Victorian constructions of what it means to be deaf.[16] One contribution of this book to contemporary disability studies, then, will be to adumbrate the nineteenth-century roots for many of the pervasive and recalcitrant cultural constructions of what it means to be deaf today. However, alongside this Victorian relegation of deaf people to the margins, I also wish to underscore the significant role that deaf people and their very marginality played in the wider cultural discourse of the Victorian period, which I discuss in the chapters that follow. For now, I will emphasize the pervasiveness of figures of signing deaf people in Victorian culture; they fascinated the various Victorians who encountered them, whether through Queen Victoria's silent conversations; the popular life writing of deaf writers, including Harriet Martineau and John Kitto; the well-attended, public exhibitions of deaf schoolchildren across Britain; the debates around oralism that appeared in the pages of the *Times*; the discussion about deaf people's "bestial" and "primitive" language use in the evolutionary debates; or the deaf characters penned by popular novelists including Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins.

While the various, and competing, constructions of deafness in Victorian culture changed through the decades, some conventional images of deaf people appeared with some persistence. Above all, hearing Victorians understood deafness as a pathology, believed that deaf people were suffering under a heavy misfortune, and assumed that deaf people needed pity and charity. This is also the construction of deafness (and, of course, disability more generally) that largely persists in the twenty-first century; I wish to underscore that this

denigration of deafness is neither straightforward nor natural but instead is a historical construction and, in particular, is a Victorian idea that presages our own contemporary approaches to deafness.[17] The pity response I have noted—what Garland-Thomson has called the "diminishing, too frequent response to disability" that becomes an "emotional cul-de-sac"[18]—inhered, in part, in the pervasive construction of deaf people as alienated from essential Victorian institutions and values: mainstream culture, Judeo-Christian religion, the English language, national affiliation, family relationships, employment and independence, education, and higher cognitive abilities. As will become clear in later chapters, oralism and related disenfranchisements of deaf people were often framed as gestures of inclusion. As Douglas Baynton, Christopher Krentz, and Neil Pemberton have demonstrated, this construction of deaf people as outsiders to a dominant national or religious culture fueled the various attempts by missionaries and educators to assimilate deaf people into the hearing and speaking world in both Britain and North America.[19] Another dimension of this construction of deaf person as outsider that was of even more concern for hearing Britons and North Americans was termed "deaf clannishness." Hearing people who wrote about deafness often constructed deaf people as a race apart and described their books and articles as passports to a "land of silence" or to "a world of deaf and dumb; or, a land with 1,000,000 deaf-mute inhabitants."[20] As historians including Baynton and Jonathan Rée have noted, Victorians increasingly understood this group of people, with an unintelligible language and a distinct culture, as a kind of "enigmatic secret society."[21] It was not only hearing people who understood deaf people as a nation apart. Deaf writers, too, constructed their world as quite distinct from the hearing culture that surrounded it. For instance, John Kitto borrowed the generic paradigm of his travel writing when he wrote his autobiographical account of deafness in *The Lost Senses.* Kitto argues that a deaf person "lies under the same obligation to the public of describing his own condition, as a traveler is under to render his report respecting the unexplored countries which he has traversed in his pilgrimage."[22]

Before moving to an assessment of how deaf Britons responded to these kinds of constructions of their marginality in Victorian cultural and national life, I want to attend to the ideological resonances of the Victorian terminology for deafness. The terms used most frequently to refer to deaf people in nineteenth-century Britain and North America were first *deaf and dumb* and then *deaf-mute.* These terms attempted to capture the dual nature of deafness: deaf people cannot hear

and often sign instead of speak. The distinct terms were also useful in distinguishing deaf people who signed—typically those people who were born deaf or became deaf at a young age and generally did not use speech—from those people who experienced deafness because of illness, injury, or age but used speech to communicate. This, admittedly oversimplified, distinction is often maintained in contemporary Deaf culture and Deaf studies by a difference in case. That is, a lowercase *d* in the word *deaf* refers to the audiological condition of deafness: someone who does not sign and is not part of the Deaf community or Deaf culture is referred to as deaf. Uppercase-*D* in *Deaf* refers to a particular Deaf identity that typically involves communication through sign language, membership in Deaf community and culture, and an orientation toward what is called Deaf pride (which is often aligned with a rejection of the medicalized model of deafness). However, this practice has recently been called into question. The major objection to the *d/D* distinction is that it fails to encompass the complexity of a deaf/Deaf person's experience in the world or the range of possibilities for deaf/Deaf identity.

Furthermore, categorizing deaf people who lived in the nineteenth century as either deaf or Deaf is extremely complicated. In its interest in the cultural iterations of Victorian deafness, this book predominantly focuses on those people we might consider culturally Deaf: users of signed languages, attendees at schools for the deaf, and members of a larger deaf community. However, while almost all of the deaf people I discuss used signed languages in some form, some of them may not have self-identified as culturally Deaf. Figures such as John Kitto, who signed but was not active in a deaf community, and Harriet Martineau, who spoke and often denigrated the capacities of "deaf-mutes," render any attempts to define parameters around "deafness" inadvisable and problematic. In general, however, because of my focus on signed languages and deaf culture, this book concentrates most of its attention on those whom Victorians would have understood as "deaf-mute" rather than those who experienced partial or progressive hearing loss due to illness, injury, or aging. Because of the inability of the *d/D* practice to address the intricacies of deaf identities, I use the potentially problematic term *deaf* with a lowercase *d* in this book unless referring to contemporary Deaf issues, for which I maintain the *d/D* distinction. Although the term *deaf-mute* seems pejorative today, the resistance to the term in the Victorian period arose not from deaf people themselves but instead from oralists who wished to divorce deafness from muteness and insisted on the fact that deaf

people were physically capable of creating speech.[23] While oralists were accurate in claiming that deaf people could produce speech physiologically—muteness is, in fact, remarkably rare despite its frequent literary presence[24]—they effaced the distinction between functional capability and the importance of cultural learning, sensory barriers, communal orientation, and personal choice.

DEAF VICTORIANS: THEIR LIVED EXPERIENCES AND SELF-REPRESENTATIONS

This book moves beyond the Victorian cultural reception of deafness to also consider the lived realities of deaf people in the Victorian period and their own textual constructions of what it meant to be deaf in Victorian England. These communities often resisted the cultural construction of deafness that circulated in Victorian culture. Agnew, who, as I noted, believed that deaf people should educate hearing people about deafness, and not vice versa, was only one deaf Victorian among many who wrestled with the cultural meanings attached to his or her sensory difference and sought to defend deaf people's rights and abilities. After all, deaf Victorians were neither passive victims nor "silent" followers of dominant discourses around deafness or policies authored by hearing people (even though most institutional locations discounted their perspectives).[25] Many deaf Victorians resisted the imposition of the speech paradigm on their lives, argued unremittingly that signed languages were as sufficient as spoken languages, and insisted that deaf people should not be pitied, patronized, cured, or ignored. From their unique cultural perspective, deaf signers revealed important insights about the ideologies and prejudices of hearing people about language and ability.

Nonetheless, deaf Victorians certainly faced societal barriers including difficulties finding employment, struggles with an educational system that was increasingly eliminating the use of signs, and daily existence in a culture of hearing and speaking people that sought to assimilate rather than accommodate them. But this, of course, was only one element of being deaf in Victorian England. While fighting for access to employment or education, deaf people also created opportunities within their own deaf communities. There were a variety of spaces, including deaf schools, churches, associations, clubs and families, where deafness was predominant and signs were the primary mode of communication. Many deaf people described their experiences as contradictory; they understood their cultural location as an interstitial space, one captured by American deaf poet

Angie Fuller Fischer in "The Semi-Mute's Soliloquy" when she declares herself "an alien though at home, / An exile even in my native land."[26] For Fischer and many of her contemporaries, the use of a different mode of language than the majority, a visual orientation in the world, and a feeling of alienation from a hearing culture that denigrated deafness meant that a deaf person was simultaneously an insider and an outsider in his or her society. Some deaf people used the audist rhetoric of their cultures to describe what they believed were the deficits of deafness while simultaneously participating in deaf culture and agitating for deaf rights. Christopher Krentz has described these contradictions as examples of how some deaf people "internalized the majority's attitude that cast[] [them] as . . . subordinate other[s]."[27] However, deaf Victorians also continually emphasized that their differences need not be understood as deficits. In their writing, they expressed pride in their unique language, celebrated their close communities, and highlighted the fact that they were as capable as hearing people. From writing autobiographically to publishing poetry to asserting their linguistic and reproductive rights, deaf Victorians (and their North American counterparts) created their own representations of physical and cultural deafness. In the pages that follow, *Reading Victorian Deafness* attends to the varieties of Victorian deaf self-representation and analyzes how deaf people constructed and communicated their own ideas of what it meant to be deaf in a largely hearing world.

Deaf Victorians understood that the sign language debates were momentous in the history, and to the future, of deaf communities. The debates pitted a growing community that was increasingly proud of its abilities, particularly its language use, against a majority perspective that considered signing deaf people less than human because they did not speak. This battle played out in various forms throughout the Victorian period, when a range of marginalized groups advocated and agitated for what they saw as their human rights: whether to be free from enslavement, as in the case of Africans, Afro-Caribbeans, and African-Americans; to escape colonial tyranny, as in various British imperial locations including India and Jamaica; to have space for community cultures, languages, and self-rule, as in Ireland, Scotland, and Wales; to have voting and representation rights in government, as embodied in the various reform movements; to have the right to one's own property after marriage, as in the case of British women—to name only a very few of the various examples of embattled minorities struggling for the recognition of their rights, aims, abilities, and

even humanity. Deaf people fighting oralism, then as now, often saw themselves as fighting the epic battle of the marginalized and disenfranchised against the powerful.[28] In this battle, language was the instrument both of oppression and of resistance.

The third focus of this book, which of course is connected to both the Victorian reception of deafness and the self-representation of deaf people, is Victorian understandings of signed languages and the oralist movement that grew out of them. The book traces how Victorian beliefs about what language is and how it should function culturally underpinned the changing fortunes of signed languages over the course of the nineteenth century. Signed languages, as contemporary linguists have shown, are natural and complete human languages in every way, with their own distinct lexicographical and grammatical systems. The components of signed languages are neither universal nor transparent gestures. For instance, the signed language used in Britain (British Sign Language [BSL]) and the signed language used in English Canada and the United States (American Sign Language [ASL]) are mutually unintelligible. Both ASL and BSL are not simply gestural representations of English words but are, instead, their own complete languages. Deaf Britons, then, use BSL as their first language and English as a second language.[29] Many contemporary misunderstandings about signed languages date back to the nineteenth century and, indeed, were often deployed as part of the oralist argument for speech.

The oralism movement, what H-Dirksen L. Bauman has called a "medico-pedagogy,"[30] began in nineteenth-century Britain and North America. Although there had been individual cases of speech training for deaf people for centuries, and even of specific schools that were speech-oriented, oralism as a widespread pedagogical trend began and burgeoned in the mid-nineteenth century. As various historians including Lennard Davis, Douglas C. Baynton, Jonathan Rée, Christopher Krentz, Harlan Lane, and Jan Branson and Don Miller have documented, European and North American deaf schools, languages, and communities were largely established in the latter part of the eighteenth century and early part of the nineteenth century. Branson and Miller explain that the British "historical record prior to the sixteenth century is scanty as far as the use of sign languages is concerned, but from the sixteenth century,

we find clear evidence that, in Britain, sign languages were regularly used among people who were deaf and between deaf and hearing people."[31] Davis identifies the eighteenth century as the point at which the category of "deaf people" coalesced and sign languages became standardized. He argues, "It was only by attending the residential schools created in the eighteenth century that the deaf became a community. The dramatic rise in the number of deaf schools in Europe—there were none at the beginning of the eighteenth century and close to sixty by the end—indicates the groundswell that made this new ethnic group self-aware."[32] These developments were accompanied by, or perhaps were a product of, a wider cultural and philosophical interest in deaf people and signed languages.[33] Davis argues that "deafness was for the eighteenth century an area of cultural fascination and a compelling focus for philosophical reflection."[34] This cultural fascination with deafness in eighteenth-century Europe revolved largely around philosophical inquiry into the nature of reason and language. Philosophers and other writers sought answers about language and the senses through examining the case of deaf people as demonstrated in the numerous plays, books, treatises, and public demonstrations of deaf children that appeared over the course of the century.[35]

These historians have claimed that in the early part of the nineteenth century—and continuing over the course of the century—significant changes arose in the cultural construction of signed languages and deafness.[36] The enlightenment interest in reason and universal languages transformed into Victorian concerns about "man's place in nature," the origins of language, and imperial encounters with colonized groups.[37] The relevance of these emerging cultural issues to the situation of deaf people is investigated in the chapters that follow. The most significant change that occurred over the course of the nineteenth century was the growth of the oralist movement. Branson and Miller suggest that in the first half of the nineteenth century the "education of deaf students began to expand and diversify as schools were established throughout Britain and Ireland."[38] While there were certainly earlier isolated attempts to train individual deaf children in speech, not until the foundation of deaf schools, and the development and propagation of signed languages within them, did a broader movement to advocate for speech-based rather than sign-based education emerge. According to Branson and Miller's evidence, some of these schools employed some articulation training and some rejected it entirely.[39] However, oralism clearly became more and more influential over the course of the nineteenth century.[40] The oralist movement gained

strength as the century wore on, culminating with the oralist victories of the 1880s and '90s (including the recommendations in favor of oralism at the various commissions concerning the issue of deaf education, including the Second International Congress on Education of the Deaf in Milan [1880] and the British Royal Commission on the Blind and the Deaf and Dumb [1889]).[41]

Deaf people were almost entirely absent from these commissions and, more importantly, were almost entirely opposed to oralism.[42] Even when they accepted the arguments for some classroom speech training, they rejected the total elimination of signed languages from deaf education and deaf life. This point is essential to understanding the sign language debates. It was entirely hearing people—hearing parents, hearing educators, and hearing governmental representatives—who paternalistically advocated oralism in opposition to the desires of deaf communities. By the end of the nineteenth century, oralism was the predominant pedagogy in British and North American deaf education and continued to be so until the 1960s and '70s, when sign language was finally reinstated to centrality in deaf education.

While this sketch of oralism focuses mainly on deaf education, oralism's scope extended far beyond pedagogical matters; this extension, rather than the pedagogical specificities of British deaf school programs, is the focus of this book. I aim to expand our understanding of oralism's mandate and demonstrate how it participated in key Victorian concerns. The oralist movement sought the complete eradication of signed languages from deaf life and the assimilation of deaf people as speaking and lipreading members of a hearing society. As will become clear in the chapters that follow, oralists aimed to eradicate deaf cultures, communities, and identities. The widespread movement attempted to influence all areas of deaf people's lives, from their language use in both educational and social spaces to their occupational choices to their selection of marriage partner to whether they should have children. Where sign language was constructed as an insidious threat not only to deaf people themselves but also to society more generally, oralists constructed speech—particularly certain European languages—as the pinnacle of the human language hierarchy and the only suitable option for European and North American (white) deaf people. The sign language debates of the nineteenth century were fundamental threats to deaf culture and language use. They are an essential feature of deaf history that inform how deaf communities in the West today understand their language, their history, and their place in the world.

These incursions into deaf life were not limited to Great Britain. Oralism appeared throughout Europe and North America. This book, therefore, extends its focus beyond Victorian England, particularly toward North America, to address the transnational struggle over signed languages. Although this book is centered on Victorian deafness, isolating deaf Britons from their North American counterparts would be impossible. Not only were the sign language debates simultaneously occurring in Britain and North America, but also both sides of the Atlantic featured the same key players and created similar constructions of deafness and signed languages. Deaf communities considered their transatlantic peers in their creation of culture and community. Just as national boundaries did not confine the efforts of those various Victorians and North Americans—the women's rights advocates, antivivisectionists, and abolitionists—who crossed the Atlantic literally and figuratively for their causes through shared visits, literature, periodicals, and scientific research, deaf people formed transatlantic alliances. As Joseph J. Murray notes, deaf people of this time "created and maintained consistent contact with each other over national and continental boundaries."[43] They shared strategies at deaf conferences, reported each other's news in their English-language periodicals, and expressed solidarity with the fights against oralism that the others were waging.

Considering the influence of Alexander Graham Bell, the most prominent oralist in Britain and North America, illuminates the value of a transatlantic perspective in British deaf history. Bell's oralist efforts spanned four countries. He was born in Scotland, apprenticed at Susanna Hull's oralist school in London, and then spent the rest of his life in Canada and the United States promoting this oralist method. He established oralist organizations in the United States, wrote to the Canadian government about his concern regarding deaf settlements, and testified at the British Royal Commission on the Blind and the Deaf and Dumb. A study bounded by a focus on particular national contexts risks omitting important elements of the sign language debates and effaces the fact that deaf people often felt as though they shared more in common with deaf people in other countries than with hearing people in their own (including their educational interests, mode of language, and visual orientation to the world). Keeping my analysis of the reception of deafness and signed languages in Victorian Britain in conversation with the events and discourses of North America will allow a fuller understanding of the nature of these transatlantic debates about signed languages as well as the way that a focus on national

boundaries can obscure the importance of transnational affinities based on language or disability.

Reading Victorian Deafness posits that the Victorian period was an important time in British deaf history. As many historians of the deaf community have noted, it was then that deaf people became a *community*. Brought together through the forces of urbanization, industrialization, and the establishment of deaf educational institutions, they created their own cultures, languages, and literatures and increasingly constructed group and individual identities that grew out of deafness. Second, it was in the nineteenth century that the greatest threat to these identities emerged in the form of oralism because it aimed to disintegrate deaf communities and assimilate speaking and lipreading deaf people into the hearing population. In these decades deaf people both created their identities, languages, and communities and fought for their very existence. While it was in the eighteenth century that widespread deaf education emerged and in the twentieth century that the dominance of the oralist regime finally came to an end,[44] it was during the nineteenth century that the fight was waged for what it means to be deaf and to use a mode of language outside of speech and writing. That fight is an important area of study not only because it oppressed deaf people but also because of what that oppression exposes about Victorian beliefs about language and humanity.

Each of the five chapters that follow examines Victorian constructions of signed languages and, more broadly, the parameters of language itself, in a range of cultural locations. They each highlight a particular Victorian understanding of the triangulation of speech, writing, and sign. These chapters also trace the cultural work performed through marginalizing signed languages and the deaf people who used them, which generally involved using the concept of language to delineate the parameters of ability and humanity. Each chapter, therefore, also uncovers Victorian cultural constructions of disability, constructions that registered in divergent ways in different disciplinary locations.

The first chapter of *Reading Victorian Deafness* focuses on a little-known body of literature—poetry written by deaf Victorians and their North American counterparts—to suggest that this poetry can provide us with a new insight into how Victorian poets, deaf and hearing, may have understood the aesthetic conventions of their art. This chapter also demonstrates the inextricability of literature from cultural constructions of disability; in this example, deaf people and their advocates used poetry as a weapon in their fight against widespread

cultural myths about deaf people's intellectual and linguistic deficits. Indeed, considering this body of work not only demonstrates how literary form can be a source of resistance to oppression but also, I argue, forces us as critics of poetry to reconsider the requirements of the genre.

In chapter 2, I address the textual barriers that appear in Victorian attempts to represent deafness in fiction. While characters with disabilities appear frequently in Victorian fiction, deaf characters, specifically, are almost entirely absent. In fact, the only deaf characters in Victorian fiction are Madonna Blyth in Wilkie Collins's *Hide and Seek* and Sophy Marigold in Charles Dickens's "Doctor Marigold." Grounding its analysis in these two texts, this chapter contends that a deaf character's relationship to language, in particular, is what disqualifies him or her from conventional representation in Victorian fiction. Through contextualizing *Hide and Seek* and "Doctor Marigold" amidst Victorian deaf history, interrogating Collins's and Dickens's realist impulse in representing disability, and highlighting Victorian generic conventions rooted in transcribing orality, this chapter argues that the absence of deaf characters reveals the investment of mid-Victorian fiction in a particular and normativized relationship between bodies, spoken language, and textuality.

I contend, in chapter 3, that the oralist desire to eradicate signed languages grew out of a variety of wider social concerns including British imperialism and the dissemination of evolutionary theory with the publication of Charles Darwin's works *The Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man.* When contextualized amidst the sign language debates, these broader cultural issues appear inextricably linked because of an influential strain of Victorian philological thought, linguistic Darwinism, that hierarchized not only kinds of language (English, Cree, British Sign Language) but also modes of language (writing, speech, and sign). The problematic, though widespread, yoking of those groups perceived as linguistically inferior to the literate Englishman—whether indigenous North Americans, Africans, deaf signers, or nonhuman animals—depended on a teleological model of language development from "primitive" expression tied to the body to advanced literacy emanating from the mind. Chapter 3, then, addresses a range of nineteenth-century texts, from dictionaries of indigenous American and deaf American signs to the transatlantic public battle over evolution between philologists F. Max Müller and William Dwight Whitney to oralist treatises that describe signers as apes to literary texts by Rudyard Kipling and H. G. Wells that exemplify how language threatened to bridge the

animal-human barrier in the Victorian imagination. By considering the rhetoric of primitivism that surrounded Victorian signers, this chapter reveals the important role of the concept of language in defining the human and the ways in which humans who did not speak challenged hierarchies of worth, whether speciesist, racist, or ableist.

Chapter 4 examines the Victorian and North American cultural reception of deaf marriage and deaf community, primarily during the eugenicist turn taken by oralism from the 1870s onwards. In this chapter I attend to a range of texts including Alexander Graham Bell's eugenicist projections of a "deaf variety of the human race," various oralist educational treatises, and deaf-authored schemes to establish deaf settlements. Each of these texts touched on the cultural anxiety around deaf people's bodies and the potential for their reproduction. This chapter demonstrates that signed languages were increasingly understood as the mechanism enabling this oralist projection of a dystopian future of isolated and self-reproducing deaf communities. This chapter also examines the value of these same signing deaf communities through the eyes of deaf people who increasingly sought refuge among themselves from a hearing world that threatened to strip them of their language, their community and culture, and even their right to be married or bear children. Inherent in these utopian schemes to form deaf commonwealths is the belief that deafness is disabling only in certain cultural contexts. For these deaf communities, disability was a product of social conditions rather than inherent physical difference. This social-constructivist model of deafness and disability anticipates contemporary Deaf and disability studies' theorization of disability as a social process.

Like chapters 3 and 4, chapter 5 can be read as an important case study of how nineteenth-century science was marshaled to eradicate difference. I contend that the central nineteenth-century sound technologies, the telephone and the phonograph, were products of the Victorian interest in deafness and a related faith in technology's potential to remedy the perceived deficiencies of disability. In particular, various Victorian technologies grew out of attempts to write sound by inventors explicitly interested in deafness. In fact, Alexander Graham Bell used the proceeds from his development of the telephone to form an oralist advocacy group that still exists today. This chapter reveals how we owe most of our modern sound technology to research on how to teach deaf people to speak and interrogates the Victorian discursive logic around prosthetics for deafness.

This book, then, is insistently interdisciplinary in its focus. My first two chapters are linked in their attention to particularly literary concerns, and I argue, in both cases, that important facets of Victorian generic conventions are uncovered through attending to the relationship between deafness and literary aesthetics. In chapters 3 and 4, the book's concern with language shifts away from the realm of aesthetics and into the domain of science. These two chapters attend to the scientific rhetoric around signed languages to demonstrate how deafness was imaginatively deployed to both access human prehistory and speculate about the future of the species. Finally, chapter 5's attention to language and technology reveals the culmination of Victorian and North American attempts to manage both deaf people and their use of a third mode of human language. The chapter examines how technological incursions into deafness were imagined as a prosthetic solution to the challenges deaf people posed to the cultural reverence for both speech and "normalcy." This final chapter traces a desire for, indeed even a faith in, technology's ability to dissolve intractable differences.

Together, these five chapters contend that the Victorian cultural reluctance to accept both the validity of signed languages and the variability of human abilities was rooted in particular historical concerns about the definition of language and its relationship to the human. Signed languages—which exist outside of the imagined language dichotomy of speech and writing—destabilized the precarious Victorian notion of human ability that was buttressed by particular conceptions of language, including the belief that human communication was tied to orality. Davis has argued that the category of "disability" is a "product of a society invested in denying the variability of the body";[45] building on Davis's argument, this book's consideration of Victorian deafness reveals that the oralist enterprise was a "product of a society invested in denying the variability" of language. Through their use of a visuo-spatial mode of human language, deaf people offered, and continue to offer, important insights about language and disability. *Reading Victorian Deafness,* then, aims to shed new light on familiar themes in Victorian studies—subjectivity, identity, culture, nation, and difference—through the lens of deaf Victorians, a group of people who celebrated, and fought for, a unique mode of human language.

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