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Douglas C. Baynton. *Forbidden Signs: American Culture and the Campaign against Sign Language*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996. xi + 228 pp. \$27.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-03963-3.

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The small world of disability history has struggled for years to understand its place within the broader currents of what is often called mainstream history, or the study and understanding of the past of people who fit some definition of “normal.” The obvious though usually unmentioned question related to disability history is this: What could the past of individuals who have a physical stigma so profound that it affects nearly all their interactions with others possibly tell “us”—who believe that “we” are not marked by such stigma—about ourselves? This question implies, though mainstream historians are unlikely to admit it, that persons who are disabled have been without ability to influence significant historical trends and that they lack some of the characteristics of humanness that others have. Their history, therefore, has no broad applicability. One might study them out of pity, or out of a need to design enlightened public policy, or perhaps out of some accident of one’s fate—a disabled parent or sibling or one’s own disability—but not out of a genuine belief that such study could be useful to the larger issues historians address. In his wonderful book, *Forbidden Signs: American Culture and the Campaign Against Sign Language*, Douglas Baynton suggests that there is a legitimate and important place for the study of one particular group of disabled people: those who are deaf.

I will summarize later on what Baynton says, and says so well, about the history of deaf people in nineteenth-century America, but what sets his book apart from others of this genre is that he tries to do more than either simply narrate what happened to deaf people or demonize those who hear. Baynton states at the outset that one of his purposes is to use the experience of deaf Americans to “illuminate the landscape of American cultural history.” He believes that hearing people projected onto

deaf people their own cultural fears and prejudices. And thus seeing the ways in which the hearing talked and thought about the deaf, the way they constructed deafness, tells us about the hearing majority’s history, as well as helps to explain the experiences with which deaf people have struggled. Some background may be useful to set the context for Baynton’s subtle and suggestive arguments.

Many people familiar with deaf people’s past would argue that, during the early nineteenth century, deaf culture flourished in the United States. After deaf Frenchman Laurent Clerc brought his sign language-based teaching methods in 1817 to the nascent American School for the Deaf in Hartford, Connecticut, deaf people individually and as a group made rapid intellectual, social, and economic progress. Other states followed Connecticut’s example and soon began funding residential schools for deaf children. These institutions hired deaf teachers and conducted their classes in what became known as American Sign Language (ASL), a visual language presented on the hands, face, and body that was readily accessible to any person with sight, unlike spoken language. By mid-century, deaf clubs, newspapers, and churches began to appear. Deaf people started to marry at rates approaching those of persons with hearing. In many respects, full citizenship was accorded to deaf people for the first time in history, and it appeared as though American society was open to the development of an ASL-based deaf culture, one that permitted deaf people autonomy and acknowledged the validity and value of their signed language.

The late nineteenth century, however, saw radical change in the affairs and status of deaf Americans, ac-

cording to this argument. Suddenly, the deaf community was under attack for a variety of reasons. Hearing people denigrated sign language and pushed ASL out of the schools for the deaf. Eugenicists criticized the institutions of the deaf community—the schools, clubs, newspapers, and churches—because they led to deaf social interaction and deaf intermarriage. Some even suggested that deaf people should be prohibited from marrying so that they would not propagate future generations of deaf children. At the very least, behaviors or institutions that facilitated deaf people’s interaction with each other should be discouraged and the deaf dispersed. Deaf teachers were fired from their jobs, and speech and lip-reading replaced sign language as the medium of instruction in nearly every school for the deaf in the United States. Intolerance of a deaf cultural minority, cemented with the ties of a common signed language, dominated American attitudes toward those who were deaf. The predictable result was that deaf Americans were held back educationally and professionally for more than a hundred years, their language and cultural institutions forced underground, their history denied, and their early progress reversed.

This brief overview of the common interpretation is not without foundation. The earliest schools for deaf children did employ sign language in their instruction. Deaf teachers were hired in schools for the deaf in substantial numbers until the 1870s. Until well after the Civil War, hearing people raised few objections to the secular and religious associations or the newspapers that deaf people were founding to tie together their community. These apparent indicators of deaf educational, economic, and social progress were welcomed at first. It’s also true that later these developments were seen in an entirely different light.

Beginning in the late 1860s, the sign language that once was viewed as an indispensable vehicle for reaching the minds of persons who could not hear was slowly eliminated from schools for deaf children. By 1920 it was all but gone from classrooms. Speech and lip-reading were now forced on reluctant and uncomprehending deaf children, often with disastrous results. Those who could not learn to speak or to lip-read satisfactorily were termed “oral failures” and branded mentally deficient, an altogether spurious and hateful claim that stunted generations of deaf people.

But how did all of this happen and what does it mean about the hearing majority? Some authors have demonized virtually all hearing professionals involved in any

way with the deaf community. The strongest statement of this position is in Harlan Lane’s *The Mask Of Benevolence: Disabling the Deaf Community* (New York: Knopf, 1992) which posits a virtual conspiracy of the hearing to deprive the deaf of their rightful place as full equals in American society. As attractive as such an interpretation may be to those who are angry about what has happened to deaf people and the oppression they have endured, there is little historical evidence to support the view. Indeed, anyone who has studied the papers of oralists, as proponents of speech and lip-reading are termed, must be struck by their sincerity. However deleterious the results of their work, they seem to have believed whole heartedly that their methods were progressive and would allow deaf people to move into the mainstream of American life. The denial of oralists’ sincerity—the refusal to accept at face value what they stated as their goals—has been an impediment to understanding this whole unfortunate history. One of Baynton’s virtues is that he does take seriously what the oralists wrote.

Baynton begins by questioning what others have assumed is self-evident, that is, why did hearing educators in early nineteenth century America overwhelmingly accept sign language as the best medium of communication with and among deaf people? His most important contribution to this question lies in his analysis of two things. First, he demonstrates that, to the evangelical Protestants who were prominent in early American deaf education, the most important “deficiency” of deaf people was not their lack of intelligible speech but their inability to access the gospel, to understand Christianity either through reading or through religious services. They were cut off from religious experience and truth. Sign language provided the most ready and quick means to connect the deaf with this aspect of life, and thus it had a greater utility than speech and lip-reading, given the essentially theological objectives of early educators and the widespread social concerns characterized by the Second Great Awakening.

Second, and here is where Baynton’s insight is most effective, he demonstrates that attitudes toward sign language were not static but were outgrowths of cultural attitudes toward language generally. To the pioneers of deaf education, sign language was a natural language, perhaps the first means of communication among humans. More iconographic than speech, it was (they believed) more readily understood across cultures and among humans with widely different language backgrounds than speech or writing. They saw it as at once primitive and glorious, an earlier language and

thus a language closer to God than the many mutually-unintelligible tongues of the speaking world.

In the late nineteenth century, however, these same characteristics of sign language were interpreted by hearing people in negative terms, Baynton argues. In an increasingly secular and diverse society, connecting deaf people with the gospel was no longer as important as connecting deaf people with their hearing fellow citizens, and speech and lip-reading in English were more appropriate for this purpose. The belief that sign was the original language, or the form of communication first used by mankind, was seen by evolutionary thinkers as a reason for its abolition. If speech had replaced sign as the most widespread communication system through natural selection, according to American Darwinists, then to allow deaf people to use sign language or to encourage its use in the schools was a step backwards toward barbarianism. The hearing world, the majority, had rejected signs and thus deaf people should do the same. The fact that gestural communication was used by “primitives,” such as certain American Indian groups, in some of their interactions just proved how backward the language was. If American society was to progress and not be retarded by various outmoded cultural practices and backward habits then it would need to bring all of its minorities, whether Indians or deaf people, into the linguistic mainstream and obliterate their inferior, divisive, and backward languages. In other words, the intellectual context in which deaf Americans found themselves underwent a radical change from the community’s first awakening in the years prior to the Civil War to hearing society’s attempts to destroy it at the end of the nineteenth century.

Baynton develops several ancillary and important arguments that add complexity to the rather simple picture I have drawn. He discusses, for instance, the well-recognized but poorly understood connection between the growth of oralism and the feminization of deaf education. In the early schools for the deaf, virtually all teachers were male, but as oral methods spread and sign language was eliminated, women took over the teaching force. By the early twentieth century, they far outnumbered male teachers and virtually monopolized all deaf instruction except in vocational classes and a few of the advanced courses. Baynton suggests, though he does not convince me entirely, that women were drawn to oralism because it attempted, literally, to give deaf students a “voice,” something which American women felt that they were denied.

Interestingly, Baynton also suggests that oralism did not penetrate schools for deaf African-Americans as thoroughly as it did white schools precisely because racist beliefs denied the importance of giving this group a voice. Baynton’s limited data indicate that manualist methods continued at segregated southern deaf schools long after they were all but eliminated from schools for whites. Here, as in so many other places, *Forbidden Signs* breaks new ground. The written history of deaf Americans has been overwhelmingly concerned with whites, and usually white males, alone, but Baynton’s research and thoughtful approach have shown how much more there is to be learned.

Baynton does not conclude his book on a happy note. On the contrary, his powerful epilogue, “The Trap of Paternalism,” discusses the present day situation of deaf children critically. He points to the ironies in the broad movement known as “main-streaming” or “inclusion” that attempts to educate the hearing and the deaf together in public schools but results in denying deaf children full and easy access to what they need most, a comprehensible and flexible visual language, which Baynton defines as ASL. Neither is Baynton’s look back over the controversy of the nineteenth-century heartwarming, for he finds that the manualists, who generally had the support of the deaf community, and the oralists, who did not, were not so different:

Paternalism was what nineteenth-century manualists and oralists had in common. Both of them saw deafness through their own cultural biases and sought to shape deaf people in accordance with those biases. Both used similar clusters of metaphors to forge images of deaf people as fundamentally flawed, incomplete, isolated, and dependent. And both used that imagery to justify not only methods of education but the authority of the hearing over the deaf. This was the constant (p. 150).

And perhaps this was the tragedy.

Whatever the reader may conclude about the controversies Baynton outlines so well, though, *Forbidden Signs* is a fine piece of American cultural history, and it is clearly the finest example yet published of disability history turned on its head to illuminate the world all of us, whatever our disability, share.

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