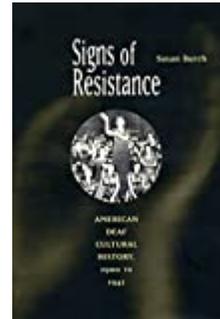




**Susan Burch.** *Signs of Resistance: American Deaf Cultural History, 1900 to 1942.* New York: New York University Press, 2002. 230 pp. \$38.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-9891-1.



**Reviewed by** Brad Byrom (Department of Social Science, MiraCosta College)

**Published on** H-Disability (March, 2003)

## Deaf Culture under Siege

### Deaf Culture under Siege

The attempt to eliminate sign language in American schools for the deaf is perhaps the pivotal event in Deaf history, and is the subject of Susan Burch's new book *Signs of Resistance: American Deaf Cultural History 1900 to 1942*. This book begins at a time when the advocates of oral methods, led by Alexander Graham Bell, reached their peak of influence. For advocates of American Sign Language, at stake was nothing less than the continued existence of a unique and cohesive Deaf culture, for sign language served as the single most important bond holding the Deaf community together. The first several decades of the twentieth century would be a pivotal period in the annals of Deaf history during which Deaf educators and a few hearing allies succeeded in preserving sign language within schools for the deaf.

The long battle, which began around the time of the Civil War and continued well into the twentieth century, is one that has been described by a number of individuals, including Harlan Lane, Douglas Baynton, and R. A. R. Edwards. The volume of writing on this subject makes the effort to preserve ASL one of the most impor-

tant topics within the increasingly rich field of disability history. Quite naturally, with an increasing number of historians writing on the topic, healthy debates have ensued. For example, in her recent contribution to *The New Disability History*, R. A. R. Edwards challenges the periodization of Deaf history put forth by both Baynton and Lane (" 'Speech Has an Extraordinary Humanizing Power': Horace Mann and the Problem of Nineteenth-Century American Deaf Education") and emphasizes the importance of Horace Mann in bringing about the oralist crusade.

The presence of scholarly disagreements over such matters is a positive sign that disability history is maturing into an increasingly important aspect of American history. Burch's work furthers this process less by challenging the conclusions of others than by correcting a glaring void in the literature surrounding Deaf history. Despite their differences, Edwards and Baynton share an approach with most other chroniclers of Deaf history in that their focus is upon the hearing leaders of the oralist movement. They pay relatively scant attention to the response of the Deaf to this campaign. Given their em-

phasis on the roots of oralism and the fact that the oralist movement was led largely by hearing elites like Bell, such an approach is to be expected. However, this approach does beg the question of what role Deaf people played in this pivotal moment in Deaf history? Burch makes this question central to her study and concludes that “Deaf people played an active role in their own history” (p. 4). Through a systematic investigation of the strategies of resistance employed by the Deaf, Burch provides the reader with a view of Deaf agency lacking in other studies of the movement. Demonstrating this is the single most important contribution made by Burch, who deserves great credit for her innovative approach to the topic and for providing us with a much greater sense of Deaf historical agency.

As with Baynton and Edwards, Burch approaches the topic with a cultural perspective, differentiating between Deaf culture and deafness. “The latter is an audiological condition,” she explains; “the former refers to a particular group of people who share American Sign Language (ASL) as a primary means of communication” (p. 2). Those who resisted oralism recognized it as an assault on the culture of the Deaf—an attempt not only to destroy a very effective form of communication, but to destroy Deaf identity. Burch writes that in response to this threat the Deaf “both actively and passively resisted the attempts to deny them this cultural identity, preferring to attend residential deaf schools, join Deaf clubs and churches or synagogues, marry other Deaf people, and communicate primarily in sign language” (p. 4). Thus, her study explores the overt resistance of Deaf educators and their allies as well as the unintended, everyday forms of resistance displayed by common Deaf folk.

In addition to telling the story of Deaf resistance, Burch’s book offers a number of interesting insights, perhaps none more original than that explored in her first chapter entitled “The Irony of Acculturation.” Here, Burch argues that once under the fire of the oralist campaign, the Deaf community reacted by pulling together in a way that reinforced their own sense of separateness. Ironically, she writes, the resistance to oralism “galvanized” the Deaf “as a separate community” (p. 41). Clearly, the oralist assault did lead the Deaf to retrench. The question then becomes, how best to interpret this retrenchment? For Burch, the answer to this question is a complex one that involves a good deal of compromise on the part of Deaf leadership. Ultimately, however, it seems apparent that she interprets the increasing separation of the Deaf as an important part of the process of creating a distinctive deaf culture—hence the great irony

of acculturation.

To make the point that Deaf separateness increased during the first half of the century, Burch explores the full range of Deaf culture—an exploration aided by comparisons between the Deaf experience and that of other cultural minorities. In recognizing such parallels, Burch helps bring the Deaf experience into focus. For example, in one section she assesses the experience of the Deaf in relation to children placed in boarding schools for Native Americans. She explains that in both cases acculturation was a goal of the educational system, and that English became the primary tool of acculturation. However, in each instance acculturation failed, thanks largely to the fact that students lived in locations where non-English language and culture thrived. In the case of the Deaf, schools served as the location of cultural continuity, while Native Americans found traditional values at home (pp. 15-16). In another instance, Burch demonstrates how Deaf churches provided a safe location for cultural development and continuity, much as occurred and continues to occur in Black churches (pp. 46-52). In both cases, religion seemed to play a more significant role than in the broader American culture, perhaps because it served as a sanctuary for both religious and cultural expression. Such comparisons are quite useful in that they provide a greater understanding of how the Deaf experience fits within the broader historical context of the early twentieth century.

In another respect, however, Burch’s comparisons are somewhat unsatisfactory in that they focus predominantly on comparisons that substantiate the growth of Deaf separateness. What we do not see are comparisons that illustrate the extent to which Deaf culture was weakened by the tremendous emphasis the Deaf placed upon meeting the cultural expectations of hearing Americans in virtually every way except language. Perhaps owing to the intimidating power of the oralist campaign, Deaf leaders consistently put forth a public image of cultural conformity. Even in regards to their chief concerns—the maintenance of ASL and a separate system of deaf education—Deaf leaders made compromise their chief strategy of resistance by promoting a combined method of oral and manual teaching methods in schools for the Deaf. Such compromise is certainly understandable in light of the power of the oralist campaign. Oralists had money and power on their side. Not only did they have Bell’s leadership and wealth, but the support of powerful educational establishments such as the National Education Association, along with the support of many families of the deaf who were promised

that oralism would bring closer relations with their deaf children and siblings (pp. 12-14). Ultimately, however, the strategies of Deaf resistance seem to have prevented the cultural flowering apparent in other cultural minority groups of the same era—a point that Burch noticeably avoids.

Burch's description of Deaf churches, for example, does not suggest a distinctiveness comparable to that which one would find in African American churches. In fact, aside from the use of sign language, Deaf religious practice seems to have been well in line with mainstream, protestant Christian theology. Even more revealing, the movies produced by the Deaf demonstrate that conformity outweighed cultural creativity. In producing movies Burch tells us that the Deaf proved to be "fiercely proud and protective of their distinctive history and educational backgrounds." >From this statement one gets the sense that Deaf movies might well provide viewers with a glimpse of a Deaf cultural distinction such as that we might find in early Yiddish films. In reading further, however, we find that the movies are more about demonstrating the basic conformity of the Deaf to traditional American values. Through their movies, Burch writes, the Deaf ultimately sought "to prove their commonality with hearing Americans and their loyalty as American citizens" (p. 59). Similarly, we are told of the emphasis the Deaf placed upon athletics, again with the intent of demonstrating the basic normalcy of the Deaf (pp. 82-83). The great importance placed on presenting an image

of self-reliance, patriotism, masculine athletic prowess, religious devotion, and other valued American characteristics suggests that Deaf culture was as much a product of cultural conformity as it was of Deaf separateness. While Burch's essential point that the Deaf resisted oralism by reinforcing certain institutions of Deaf culture is certainly valid, they did so in such a conformist manner that Deaf culture may well have lost some of its uniqueness. At the very least, the evidence presented fails to convince me that Deaf culture was "enhanced" through the process (p. 168).

More so than creating cultural separation, it seems to me that the conformist strategies employed by Deaf leaders led to accommodation of mainstream values. In fact, the whole story of Deaf resistance reminds me of the black "accommodationists" of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The approach of the Deaf leadership is strongly reminiscent of the philosophy put forth by Booker T. Washington in his famous Atlanta Compromise, where he pledged to lead blacks down a path of conformity to white norms, even while accepting segregation. One might also recall that Washington's compromise gained tremendous support from whites, and helped increase the validity of his educational program at Tuskegee and elsewhere—strong parallels to the Deaf experience. Though surely this comparison dulls some of the shine of Deaf resistance, it helps to demonstrate that, like Washington, Deaf leaders understood the importance of surviving to fight another day.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-disability>

**Citation:** Brad Byrom. Review of Burch, Susan, *Signs of Resistance: American Deaf Cultural History, 1900 to 1942*. H-Disability, H-Net Reviews. March, 2003.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7364>

Copyright © 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.org](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.org).