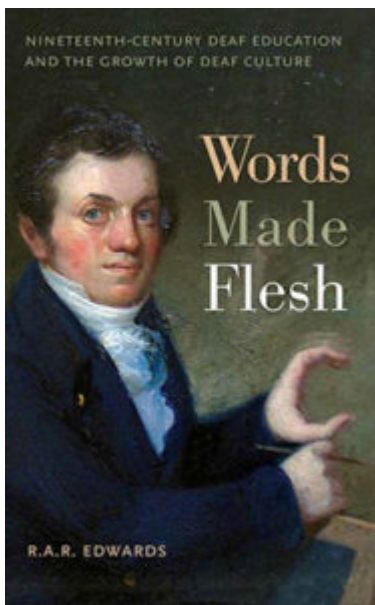
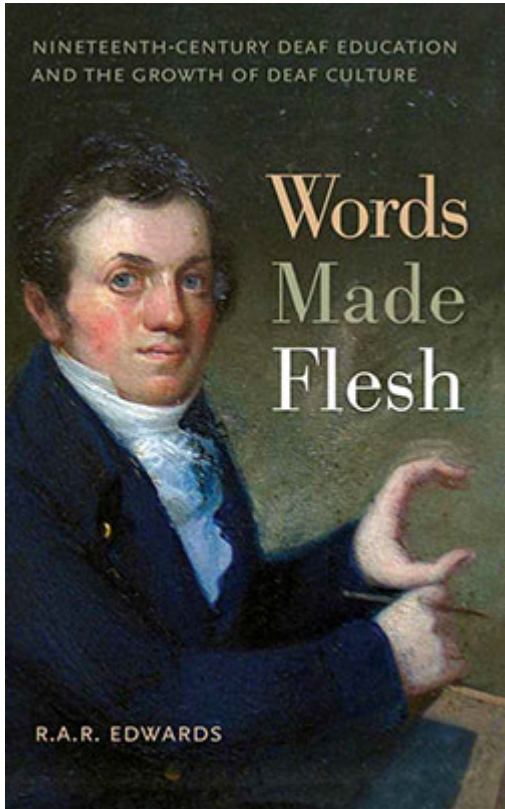


# And Then There Were Three: A New Generation of Scholarship in Deaf History



R.A.R. Edwards, *Words Made Flesh: Nineteenth-Century Deaf Education and the Growth of Deaf Culture*. New York: New York University Press, 2012. 263 pp., \$55.

R.A.R. Edwards' *Words Made Flesh: Nineteenth-Century Deaf Education and the Growth of Deaf Culture* is a brilliant study of the emergence of a deaf community in nineteenth-century America. Centered on research conducted at the American School for the Deaf in West Hartford, Connecticut, Edwards' work is firmly rooted in the view of deaf people as a sociolinguistic minority and places Deaf people at the center of their own history. From this viewpoint, Edwards offers a more complex narrative of the origins of the cultural American Deaf community that emerged during the early nineteenth century, tracing the story of how deaf people first became Deaf in the cultural sense. In a masterful stroke, Edwards also presents a fresh perspective on the war over the use of sign language in deaf education. She puts forward that tension within the pedagogical debate surrounding deaf education created an impetus for Deaf culture to flourish. This monograph is also a narrative of the numerous cultural struggles that set Americans against one another during the nineteenth century. This cultural war over deaf education and deaf people's belonging in American society took place alongside many manifestations of the other forms of contestation that emerged during the nineteenth century surrounding religion, ethnicity, politics, slavery, and temperance.

What is most innovative in Edwards' book is her argument that bilingual-bicultural education, as we understand it today, is not a modern, late-twentieth-century invention, but rather was developed as early as 1833 and served a vital role in the development of a cultural Deaf community. Edwards complicates the previously held understanding of the struggle over deaf education as being divided firmly into two factions: the oralists and the manualists. She challenges the long-held belief that manualists—those who supported the use of sign language in deaf education—represented a single, unified group. Edwards argues that manualists were actually divided into two camps: methodical signers and advocates of natural sign language. Methodical signs are artificial modes of visual communication based on spoken language. To their opponents, the methodical signers were wolves in sheep's clothing. On the surface, they appeared to support the preservation of sign language, but they insisted on using sign language as a manual mode of English. Methodical signers attacked Deaf culture and tried to assimilate deaf people into American society while severing them from their own cultural community. Advocates of natural sign language promoted the use of a sign language that developed naturally over time with use by native speakers, and subsequently had its own syntax. This natural language, later known as American Sign Language, became the basis of defining the American Deaf community as a sociolinguistic cultural group. Thus, those who favored the natural language of signs and Deaf culture faced not one but two foes: manualists who wanted to strip deaf people of their culture by removing their natural language and replacing it with manually coded English, and the oralists who wanted to do away with sign language entirely. Edwards builds on historian Douglas Baynton's assertion in his 1992 article, "A Silent Exile on this Earth," that nativist and nationalist sentiments in the postbellum period were largely responsible for the assault on sign language. Edwards traces the roots of those assaults on sign language to the early nineteenth century, and suggests that those assaults on sign language and deaf

culture began much earlier.

Through this work, Edwards' object is to recover "the Deaf historical experience precisely as that of the first disabled Americans to engage in a public struggle over the meaning of their disability." This recovery "allows us to explore Deaf history as a case study of disability, a case study with which we can probe the limits of acceptance and tolerance for disabled bodies in the American body politic, our shared past, and, quite possibly, in our common future" (9). *Words Made Flesh* presents a compelling case that attacks on sign language were attacks on cultural and bodily differences. Those attacks on sign language, and the deaf community's response to such attacks, were not as one-dimensional as previous historical scholarship has led us to believe.

Edwards begins *Words Made Flesh* with a retelling of the origin story of the American Deaf community, featuring Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet and Laurent Clerc. The first two chapters explore the founding of the first permanent school for the deaf in the United States, the decision of the founders to root the school in the manual method, and the birth of the bilingual approach to deaf education. Following the establishment of the school, Edwards delves into the early formation of a common Deaf culture within the residential schools for the deaf. The emergence of this culture as a result of bilingual-bicultural schools contributed to the rise of oralism and attacks on Deaf culture as outlined in the book's final three chapters, where Edwards explores the debates between the manualists and oralists.

In this work, Edwards has added depth to the conversation in deaf history surrounding the emergence and formation of the American Deaf community, and has added nuance to the understanding of the battle over deaf education that has lasted for almost two centuries. Edwards challenges two luminaries in the field of deaf history, John Van Cleve and Barry Crouch, by suggesting that Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet's decision to pursue the manual method of deaf education was not as straightforward as Van Cleve and Crouch claim in their groundbreaking work, *A Place of Their Own*. She suggests that Gallaudet's decision involved complex factors beyond his distaste for the Braidwoods, a family that established a for-profit oral school in Scotland, and their pursuit of financial gain. Edwards offers a more careful examination of Gallaudet's background and character that ultimately contributed to his decision to adopt the manual method. Nevertheless, this dialectic between manualism and oralism continues to this day. Through her example of the recent controversy surrounding Governor Mitch Daniels' appointments to the board of the Indiana School for the Deaf, Edwards deftly connects her work with contemporary debates surrounding deaf education and makes it relevant to a broad audience, including those who continue the struggle to preserve bilingual-bicultural education for deaf children in the twenty-first century. Edwards highlights the fact that attacks on bi-bi education—both then and now—are less about educating deaf children and more about monoculturalism, monolingualism, and rejection of disability as a valid state of being.

*Words Made Flesh* is a significant contribution for those who teach the history of the American Deaf community. The historiography in the field has been sorely lacking in its attention to the antebellum period. Those who teach history of the American Deaf community will find that *Words Made Flesh* segues nicely into the mid-nineteenth century, where scholarship by other historians of the deaf community picks up the narrative. This work is also beneficial for those who teach Deaf studies, disability studies, and broader courses in disability history. As Edwards explains, "the example of the Deaf community has much to teach us about the ways in which American culture has handled questions of the body, disability, and diversity over the course of its history" (7). Deaf history has long struggled in its relationship to disability history and disability studies. Edwards addresses this by making a sincere effort to connect deaf history with the field of disability studies, and she has successfully placed deaf history within the broader narrative of disability history. This work, then, is a chapter in a larger American narrative of disability history.

This monograph is a rich addition to the field of American history. *Words Made Flesh* is not limited to those interested in the history of the American Deaf community or disability history. Those with an interest in the broader narrative of American history and the cultural struggles that make up the fabric of American history will find this to be an engaging read. This book is useful for teaching upper-level courses centered on the nineteenth century, the many cultural, religious, and moral debates of the period, and efforts to assimilate those deemed as "other." This monograph also contributes to the ongoing conversation in American history about the meaning of citizenship and how Americans define and claim membership in the body politic. Edwards offers a paradigm shift for the mainstream American historian by suggesting that the emergence of a cultural Deaf community also saw the emergence of a hearing identity. The scholarship in U.S. history, then, is a history of a hearing identity. With this, how does examining American history through the lens of a hearing or able-bodied identity challenge or enrich our historical inquiry and influence our thinking about the past?

*Words Made Flesh* is a work with many strengths and few weaknesses. While Edwards makes an attempt to treat race and gender in her work, she acknowledges that her analysis of the impact of race and gender on the formation of American Deaf culture is limited and needs further examination. There is a tendency in Deaf studies to treat the deaf community as a monolithic community, with the default being whiteness. There is also a pressing need for more critical inquiry of intersectionality in the history of deaf people. Edwards's treatment of race and gender in *Words Made Flesh* establishes the groundwork for further study of these categories of analysis as applied to early Deaf history. This work might have been strengthened if Edwards had offered more context situating her subjects in the broader landscape of antebellum cultural ferment, and helped the mainstream historian frame this pedagogical debate as part of a broader struggle over culture and the meaning of belonging in America.

Beyond a more nuanced account of the emergence of the American Deaf community, this monograph is ultimately a revisionist history of the ongoing conflict over pedagogical methods in deaf education. Building on the established historiography produced by a small cadre of deaf historians, Edwards represents a new generation of scholarship in the field, offering a revisionist thesis of the ideas originally presented by Van Cleve and Crouch over twenty years ago. *Words Made Flesh* is a fine addition to New York University press's history of disability series.

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