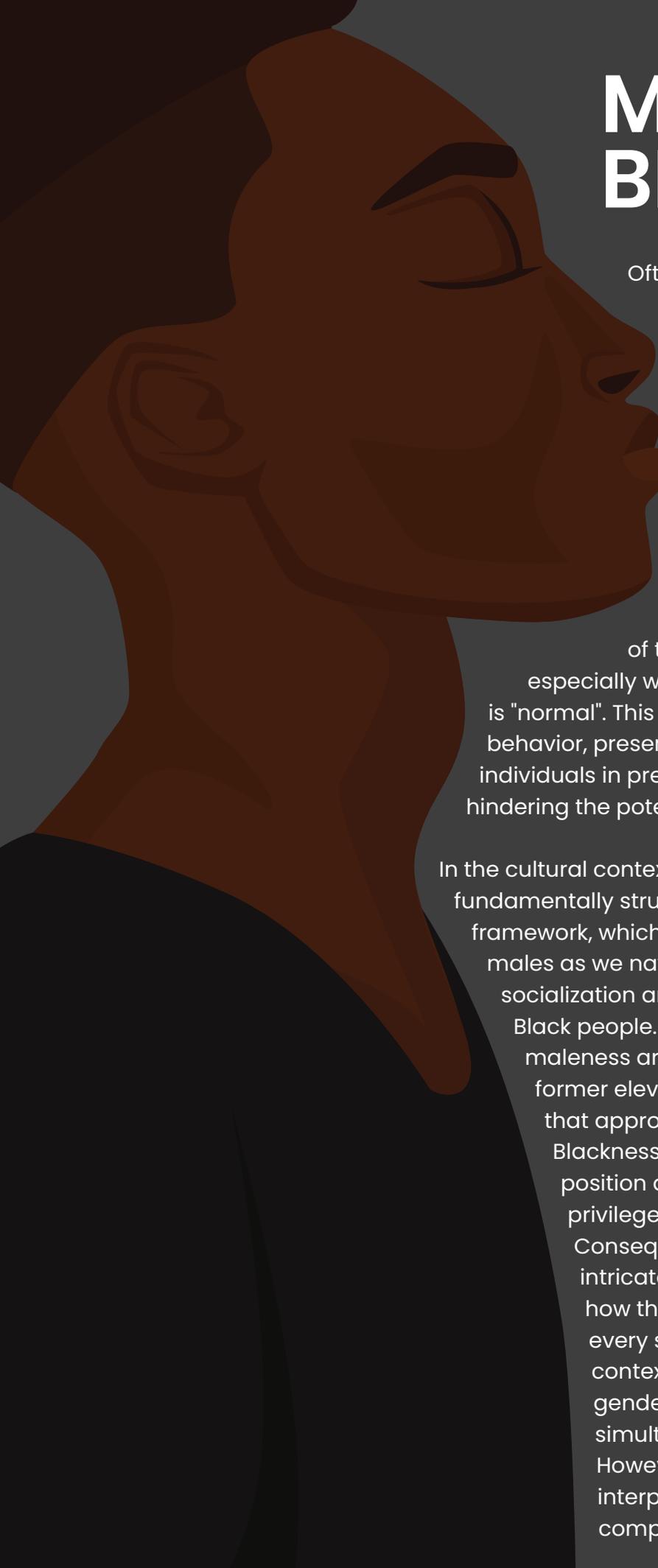# FROM MARGINALIZED

TO EMPOWERED

BLACK MALE
SIGN LANGUAGE
INTERPRETERS

Authored by: Kenton Myers of *Myers & Lawyer*

"

The essence of a man's strength resides in the depths of his heart and the vastness of his mind. He is a towering presence that earns the respect of others not through demands, but through the consonant balance of his confidence and assertiveness, with love and humility. The significance of who he is and what he embodies does not emanate from the depth of his voice, the swagger of his walk, or his physical stature. His true power is captured by the harmonious blend of his intelligence, wit, and practicality, reflecting his remarkable prowess and eliciting admiration and respect from all around him. His profound charisma and unparalleled influence leave an indelible impression.

MALENESS + BLACKNESS

Often, the concept of professionalism is narrowly defined through the lens of white supremacist cultural norms, with little consideration given to the rich cultural variations that exist among different groups. Unfortunately, this reflects a deeper problem rooted in anti-Blackness, which often goes unexamined in predominantly White spaces. Despite claiming to want diversity, equity, and inclusion, many White individuals still struggle with the idea of truly embracing the fullness of diversity, especially when it challenges their perceptions of what is "normal". This can manifest as a need to control the behavior, presentation, and representation of BIPOC individuals in predominantly White spaces, ultimately hindering the potential for true collaboration and progress.

In the cultural context of the United States, the system is fundamentally structured around a White male patriarchal framework, which poses a complex challenge for Black males as we navigate the norms and expectations of our socialization and institutionalization as men as well as Black people. The standards associated with our maleness are distinct from those of our Blackness. The former elevates us to a position of privilege in society that approximates that of White men, while our Blackness subjugates us, relegating us to an inferior position and denying us access to the full range of privileges enjoyed by both White men and women. Consequently, we are continually navigating the intricate interplay of our gender and race, and how they function in unison or in opposition in every space we occupy. In the broader societal context, Black males are granted gender-majority status while being simultaneously marginalized as a racial minority. However, within the field of sign language interpreting, Black males endure the compounding impact of double minority status.

> *Each of my intersectional identities comes with its own unique experience* ***– and baggage!***

> *Black men often feel the need to* ***protect their masculinity at all costs*** *as though it is something they could lose.*

The concept of Blackness is not homogeneous, and despite the diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds represented in the community, we are united by the shared experience of being defined by the color of our skin in The United States. Navigating our intersectional identities can be challenging, as we sometimes find ourselves having to choose between different aspects of our identity in various social situations. These struggles are often due to societal constructs that are perpetuated both within and outside of our communities. Furthermore, there are many misconceptions about what it means to be Black, such as how we should communicate or present ourselves. These misconceptions are compounded when Black people belong to multiple ethnic or cultural groups, such as AfroLatinos, each with their own distinct histories and cultural traditions that must be given the respect and attention they deserve.

> *Growing up with a Deaf family I've been privileged to be around Deaf folks and interpreters all my life. Most of the time I encountered white women or gay interpreters. Fast forward to today and that is still the case but this time* ***I am a part of the group.*** *The Deaf community is diverse and because of its diversity interpreters should also represent, be seen and appreciated for their contributions to the field as well.*

MALE PRIVILEGE

Male privilege refers to the structural and cultural advantages, rights, and benefits that are bestowed upon individuals who identify as male, solely on the basis of their sex. It is a pervasive and often subtle system that operates across various domains of society, perpetuating a power dynamic that marginalizes those who do not identify as and/or are not perceived to be male. The privileges associated with maleness often go unnoticed by those who benefit from them, yet their impact is far-reaching and reinforces the gender-based inequalities that exist in our society. Despite our small numbers within the current demographic of practitioners in the field of sign language interpreting, we cannot ignore the privilege that we hold by the simple virtue of our proximity to White males. It may seem paradoxical to suggest that Black men have privilege in a profession that is predominantly occupied by middle-aged White women. Nevertheless, being a double minority in an industry that is in dire need of diversity confers a certain amount of power and professional capital.

> I know **my male privilege has allowed me to get away with things** (i.e. wearing my hair in different protective styles as I please). **Black women don't have that luxury** and would have gotten a lot more hell (and still do) if they would have presented themselves the way I do.
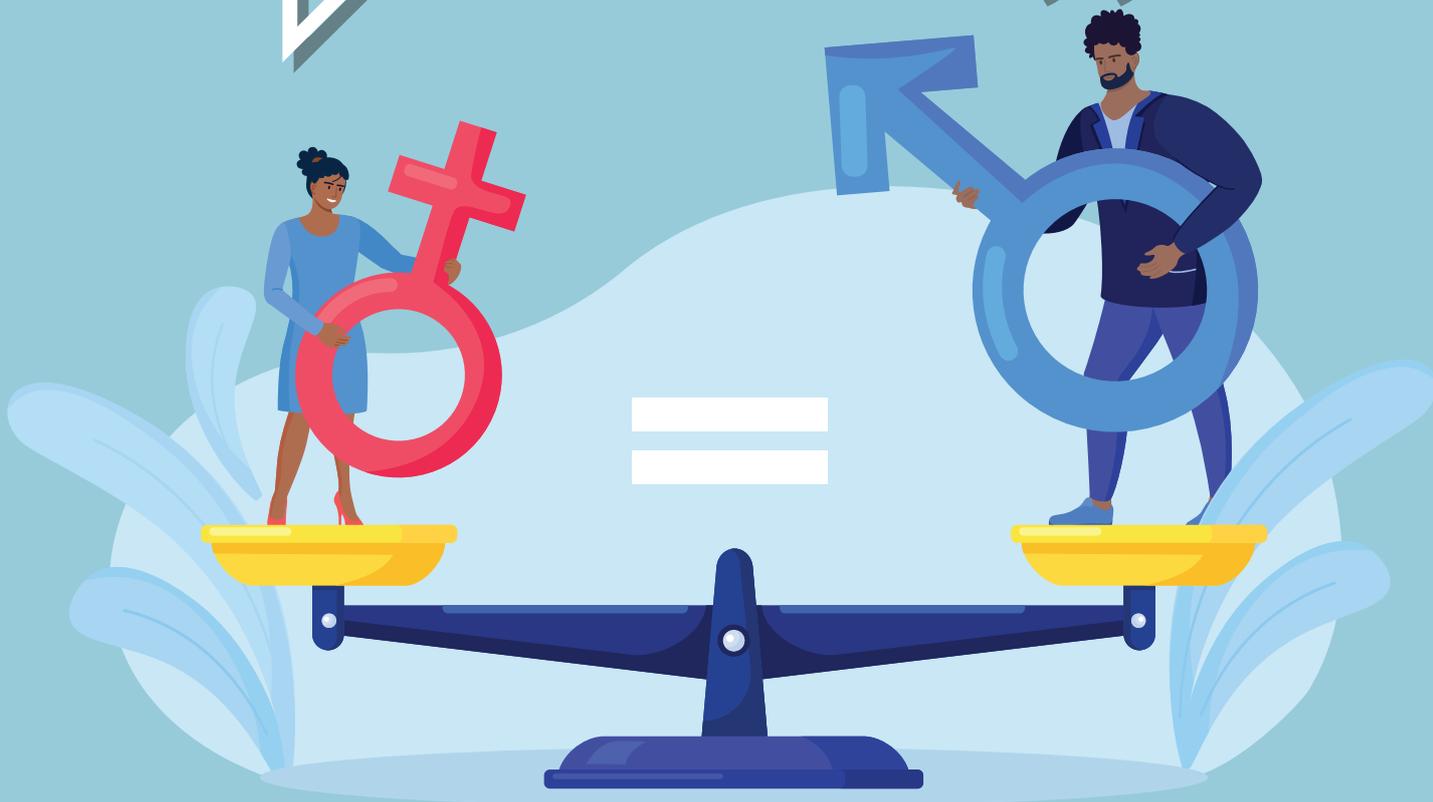
Sexism is unfortunately still very prevalent in our society today. In many cases, the longstanding "boys club" mentality affords male interpreters the ability to utilize our male privilege in spaces with mixed genders. For instance, in a situation where the consumer is not being heard, the dynamics of our male privilege can pull that person's voice to the forefront without speaking for or on behalf of them. This simply refers to the influential impact male presence can have. While all interpreters have the capability to do this, male presence is powerful and we are sometimes in situations where we need to leverage it. It's important to emphasize that this should never be done in a way that oversteps the consumer's agency. The perfect combination of great soft skills and maleness is truly powerful and influential.

> "
> *I know a female consumer that always has male interpreters for her board meetings. She always talks about the difference it makes as far as **how she is received and respected.***
> "

MASCULINITY[1]

Traditional Ideas of Masculinity

- Decisive/Strong-willed
- Physically Strong
- Assertive
- Provider
- Rational (not emotional)
- Protector

We often begin discussions on masculinity by contrasting it with femininity, but perhaps we should shift our approach to comparing it with humanity. The virtues of leadership, self-sacrifice, bravery, and industriousness are beneficial for any person and it is important to acknowledge that they exist in both genders, albeit expressed in unique ways. By recognizing and valuing these traits in all individuals, we can move away from limiting gender roles and towards a more inclusive definition of what it means to be human. However, the concept of masculinity today continues to perpetuate damaging gender stereotypes that limit men emotionally and socially. It is said to be shaped by one's upbringing, heavily influenced by socioeconomic status and proximity to poverty. Traditional expectations such as "boys don't cry" and the pressure to be the "man of the house" reinforce toxic masculinity.[2]

1.the quality or nature of the male sex : the quality, state, or degree of being masculine or manly (Merriam-Webster)

2.Toxic masculinity is a term used to describe the harmful effects of societal pressures that dictate how men should behave. These expectations often involve dominance, homophobia, transphobia, misogyny and misogynoir, and aggression. Recent research has identified three key components of toxic masculinity:

1. Toughness: The belief that men should be physically strong, emotionally callous, and behaviorally aggressive.

2. Antifemininity: The idea that anything considered feminine is weak, and men should reject it, including showing emotions or accepting help.

3.Power: The assumption that men must strive to gain power and status (both social and financial) to earn the respect of others.

FootNotes

> *I feel compelled to be* *hypermasculine* *when called to certain interpreting spaces because I think,* **"that's the reason they asked me to cover this particular assignment** *otherwise, anybody could have done it*

Oftentimes masculinity is presented as a means to devalue femininity, with anything in between seen as less valid or desirable in a man. There is an unspoken assumption that *less masculine equals more feminine* and as a result, the *weaponization of femininity[3]* leads many men to attempt to overly express what they perceive to be masculine in an effort to avoid anything perceived to be feminine. This can manifest in many ways including clothing choices, social engagement, posture, how a man sits, and the like.

3.The weaponization of femininity can be any actions that call into question a man's masculinity. This can be using pejorative language in an attempt to emasculate a man. The term 'emasculate' dates back to the 1600s and originally referred to castration. Today, it is used both literally and figuratively, the latter meaning to weaken or undermine. In the context of Black men, emasculation often implies that those who do not conform to heteronormative standards pose a threat to those who do.

FootNotes

> In addition to the definition of 'masculinity' are the strong influences of social and historical factors fostered by **the nefarious contribution of systemic slavery, oppression, legal marginalization and the spectrum of racism.** Therefore, masculinity takes on physical and psychological expectations including appearance of strength, power, status and position.

> When I think of masculinity, the first thing that comes to mind is, **"It is better to be a warrior in a garden than a gardener in a war"** which means that it is better to have the strength and ability to fight, but not have to use it because you are surrounded by peace and tranquility.

MASCULINITY IN THE BLACK COMMUNITY

Since slavery, the Black man has been relegated to labor-intensive roles defined by physicality, leading to a societal expectation of gendered occupational stratification. This, compounded by the traditional patriarchal structure wherein the man is the breadwinner and guardian of the family, has resulted in the division of professions into those that are more physically demanding, typically reserved for men, and those that are more service-oriented, commonly held by women – with sign language interpreting belonging to the latter category. However, societal shifts towards gender equality, LGBTQIA+ acceptance, and social justice movements have upended the traditional gender norms within the workforce. The interpreting field is no exception to this shift.

> " *White women do not mind asking you to do things for them! "Can you help set up the tables?" "Can you help this person get in the car?" "Can you get this for me?"* **I get tired of all the spoken and unspoken requests and expectations that any physical labor must fall to me.** *And I must have the words of wisdom to educate the public about Black people. My mom and dad raised me to be a gentleman.* **I truly don't mind helping, but I don't want to be exploited.** "

Black men have been indoctrinated with specific behavioral patterns that have evolved over time, yet the societal mindset remains rigid. The resulting trauma experienced by Black individuals is intrinsically tied to their approach to navigating the world and engaging with diverse individuals with varying ages, genders, socioeconomic statuses, and professions, amongst other variables through a framing that has been directly shaped by their upbringing.

> *I think the Black community overall allows **less latitude** in how we define masculinity.*

> *Black Masculinity is often **performative** as in the need to keep up with white standards but also **used to police other Black men's behavior.***

> *My experience navigating the field as a mixed-black person has been interesting. I have experienced feelings of **not being enough.** For example, whenever I work with White colleagues, they always ask, "What are you? Are you Black?" and when I tell them they say, "I would have never guessed that.". This, for me, is something **I do not take lightly** because it is not how I choose to identify, it's who I am. I did not choose to grow up in a Black and White family; I just did, but **because I am lighter skinned, my identity always gets questioned.***

While our shared Black identity connects us, it is crucial to acknowledge that this does not equate to a uniformity of ideas, opinions, or beliefs within our community.

> *"There are some people who are very rough, tough and overt with their masculinity while others are more covert. I think that the principals are all the same. I think that **you are either masculine or not, no spectrum.**"*

> *"My hope is for a world where Black men are able to **embrace their full spectrum of expression, free from societal judgment and expectations.** I envision a future where femininity and masculinity are viewed as complementary, rather than oppositional, and where individuals are free to explore their own unique expressions of gender and identity without fear of marginalization or discrimination.*

It is imperative that we approach language with caution and sensitivity, when defining men within societal constructs. In group settings comprising male-identifying individuals, we often observe some men actively engaging in what is typically associated with hypermasculinity (i.e. sports talk, oversexualizing women, increased physicality, to name a few), while others adopt a more passive "go along to get along" stance in order to avoid conflict and not draw attention to the dominant narrative.

> *The spectrum of masculinity is a beautiful place to explore and live in. Many men/boys are **trapped within their own bodies not being able to explore and live based on what others think of them.** To learn yourself and explore your masculinity is a personal journey that **deserves to be personally explored and not assigned.***

PHYSICAL AESTHETIC

In the field of sign language interpreting, physical appearance and societal expectations of gender roles play a significant part in determining the opportunities afforded to male interpreters. The visual nature of sign language places an undue emphasis on the outward presentation of male interpreters (and oversimplifying maleness to where it falls on the masculine to feminine spectrum). The concept of *pretty privilege*[4] also factors into the equation. Additionally, societally attributed qualities of maleness often expect the alignment of physical aesthetic with other traits such as deepness of voice and "masculine" mannerisms. When incongruency occurs, work opportunities and opportunities for professional growth and advancement are limited and even denied.

> *I'd say that I was pretty physically fit. I care a lot about my professional image and dress in a way that compliments my body like most people. I'd go as far as to say that I put more than a healthy amount of effort into my appearance when working in a way that, for me, **masks some of my interpreting insecurities.** I know from experience that **people are more forgiving the nicer you look.***

4. "Pretty Privilege" denotes the benefits afforded to individuals deemed aesthetically pleasing in accordance with societals standards of beauty and maleness which often require conformity to certain physical traits (e.g., lighter skin or proximity to whiteness, deep voice, height, athleticism, "masculine" mannerisms and features, etc.), which may confer advantages in various social and professional interactions. Any incongruence with these expectations can lead to limited opportunities and even outright denial without regard for an interpreter's skills and qualifications.

FootNotes

> *One thing that **I am very conscious of is my voice,** especially around people I don't know. I know that it gets high when I get excited*

> *When I'm with white colleagues or consumers, **my mind automatically shifts to making sure I sign as "clear" and "white" as possible** to not get DNS'd solely on how I appear. I usually have long hair which is almost always a point of discussion so **I have a script ready in case I need to defend myself.***

Other examples include the multitude of problems that result from natural and protective hairstyles. Despite the growing awareness and efforts to combat hair discrimination, negative stereotypes and biases surrounding locs and other natural Black hairstyles persist.

As someone who wears locs, **I am very aware of the potential backlash and judgment I may face in 'professional settings'** if my hair is not deemed **'neat'** or **'presentable'** according to societal norms.

White interpreters love to critique Black people on their physical appearance in Black spaces so I always have to keep in mind that **their opinion doesn't really matter** to me as long as **I'm creating a safe inclusive space for the consumers to receive access.**
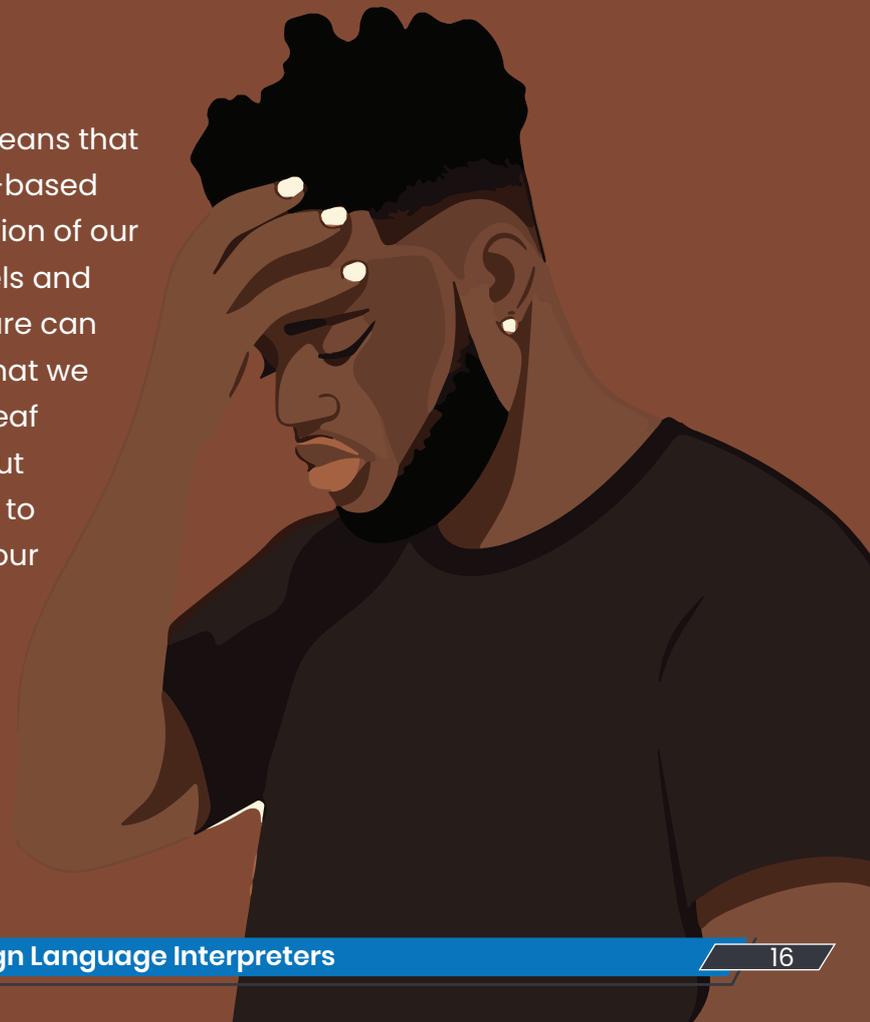
PRESSURE

> **"**
> *When I was around 16 or 17 years old, my uncle, who was like a father to me, told me one of the differences between being a boy and a man was that a **boy is indecisive.***
> **"**

When internalized, this can manifest as displaced or misinterpreted aggression. The pressures of being the "decision-maker" can cause tension in interpersonal relationships on all levels including personal and professional.

Men who are socialized and pressured from a young age to conform to gender norms may internalize beliefs that their self-worth is intrinsically tied to their ability to perform superiorly and assert dominance and control over their surroundings. However, when these men perceive themselves as failing to meet certain masculine standards, they may overcompensate with behavior that is deemed more conforming. This reaction, in turn, can have detrimental effects on professional relationships, contribute to horizontal violence, and foster an unwelcoming work environment.

The shortage of Black male interpreters means that we are often unfairly subjected to gender-based hiring practices without proper consideration of our qualifications, capabilities, or comfort levels and we are expected to acquiesce. This pressure can be particularly intense when we are told that we need to positively "represent" (all) Black Deaf males, regardless of our own feelings about readiness or goodness of fit. This can lead to feelings of fear and trepidation of having our concerns ignored or dismissed, which can ultimately impact the quality of our interpretations.

> As a Black Male in the field, **I often feel pressure and weight.** I have to represent both minority identities. Unknowingly, Black Consumers, or other consumers of colors will say, "We need you!" and **I internalize that as "Will I ever be good enough?!"** and "I can never quit and I must progress as quickly as possible." **You feel like EVERYONE is counting on you.**

In many instances, Black male interpreters feel pressure to stay in the field "for the culture" or because of the dismal representation. This decision can be harmful both mentally and psychologically as *code switching*[5] and navigating predominately White spaces as Black men is extremely taxing.

> "There is also constant pressure to code switch, which I do often, and then **justify every choice I make to keep my peers at ease and confident in my decision making / interpreting choices.**"

> "It's frustrating to be called on to be in a certain space because I **superficially represent diversity.**"

> "There are so many people **exploiting our talent and skill set** for their own benefit and agenda."

5. Code-switching refers to the practice of adjusting one's language, dialect, or accent depending on the social context and conversational setting. It is commonly utilized by minoritized groups when transitioning between interactions within their subculture and interactions with the dominant culture. This linguistic flexibility is often necessary for effective communication and can serve as a survival mechanism in contexts where the dominant culture holds more power. However, code-switching can also be mentally and emotionally taxing, as it requires a constant vigilance and awareness of one's surroundings.

FootNotes

The pressure of knowing that there are emerging Black male interpreters who are looking to us for guidance and as the only Black male representation they have feels like a huge responsibility - particularly when we are barely holding on by the skin of our teeth. While we enjoy and take pride in pouring into our fellow Black male colleagues, many times we have to stop and ask ourselves, "who is pouring into us?". Holding each other up is hard sometimes; it's heavy. Sometimes it is difficult to overcome the emotional and professional toll it takes to have to interpret for people that are overtly "tolerating" you, for people who treat you like nothing more than the help, or are obviously uncomfortable with your presence while you are trying to provide them with the best quality of service.

> *I feel like we are **expected to be protectors** in a field where **we are the least protected***

BEYOND LABELS: UNPACKING THE LGBTQIA+ SPECTRUM

It is plausible that the expressive nature of American Sign Language (ASL) may contribute to the prevalence of LGBTQIA+ individuals in the interpreting profession. ASL, as a language that is rich in affective and expressive features, provides an outlet for individuals who may have been conditioned to suppress their emotions and feelings due to societal pressures. Individuals who identify as LGBTQIA+ are often subjected to a culture of silence and are denied the opportunity to show up as themselves fully. The linguistic and cultural context of ASL, however, affords a space for increased freedom of the aforementioned. One of the unique aspects of ASL is that it creates an avenue for Black men to express ourselves in a way that can be perceived as both emotional and masculine, which historically has been oxymoronic.

> I think **the spectrum of masculinity is beautiful** when given the freedom to express it in whatever way one choses **without policing others or yourself.**

> As a member of the community, I don't feel the need to wear my identity as a "banner," but **I also don't feel the need to suppress who I am.**

Due to the prevalence of LGBTQIA+ interpreters some male interpreters may struggle to reconcile the impact the queer identity has on their perceived heterosexual male image simply by association. This leads heterosexual men to distance themselves from their LGBTQIA+ colleagues in the field, perpetuating toxic masculinity and reinforcing the use of queerness as a means to disqualify manhood. Consequently, they must confront rhetoric that challenges their self-constructed notion of manhood, such as the damaging insinuation that a "real man" would not engage in this type of work or behavior.

> When I first was introduced to American Sign Language in a formal setting, I was told that there was a high prevalence of gay men in the field. I shrugged it off. I really did not understand what I was being told. Fast forward almost 20 years, and now, **I know very few heterosexual men in the field. Those who are, are usually very religious.**

> Don't assume because I am an ASL interpreter, that I am gay. **I have considered leaving the field or limiting my participation in professional development settings because of unwanted attention from people from both genders**

With so much emphasis on "both genders", there is little acknowledgement given to the paralleled experiences of those who live across the gender spectrum. For example, Black trans male interpreters must weigh whether to openly disclose their trans identity or guard it when in interpreting spaces based on factors such as privilege, safety, outward presentation, etc. which can ultimately determine whether or not they are allowed into or disallowed from certain spaces. Additionally, their struggles are often invisibilized in discussions about masculinity.

> Amongst men, **I would be one of the guys** until they found out I was trans, then there would be a noticeable shift. **Cisgender men didn't feel comfortable when I would mention my trans identity.**

Black trans male interpreters are often confronted with questions related to their gender identities and microaggressive behaviors from cisgender interpreters who have not done the work to build intentional relationships with them. They can feel targeted for their race, gender, and/or trans status, either individually or in combination.

> Because of the way I look, most people don't know I'm trans, so I don't bring it up when interpreting if I'm not asked. So, I get **targeted as a Black man only.** However, if they knew I was trans, I would be **targeted for that too.**

The impacts of being targeted can be deeply damaging to one's psychological well-being and create an additional burden to establishing a professional image and advancing in the field. The process of pursuing certification in the interpreting field has always posed significant challenges for marginalized communities. Despite best efforts, some hurdles remain unaddressed, particularly those that impact the trans community. For some trans interpreters, the prospect of having to use their dead name[6] as part of the certification process can be a significant deterrent to credentialing, which is often viewed as a measure of legitimization in the field.

6. the birth name of a transgender person who has changed their name as part of their gender transition

FootNotes

NAVIGATING INTEGRATED SPACES[7]

In the field of sign language interpreting, it is rare for Black male interpreters to find themselves in a position of numerical dominance. As a result, optics often supersede reason and necessitate heightened sensitivity to and awareness of how our actions may be perceived by others, particularly when interacting with individuals of different genders or racial backgrounds. This is true in cases where passionate discourse may be misconstrued as aggressive or where thorough explanations may be interpreted as "mansplaining," creating a challenging dynamic for Black male interpreters in navigating communication with female colleagues.

> *It's a struggle to balance the perception of the alpha male –* ***standing firm vs. seeming aggressive***

Black male interpreters face an additional burden of ensuring the safety and comfort of their female counterparts. In light of recent incidents involving "Karens[8]," Black male interpreters must be conscious of moving in a way that is not perceived as threatening or predatory, while also guarding against the possibility of being wrongfully accused. In the United States, the power of "White tears" and "White fragility" cannot be underestimated, which affects not only interpersonal relationships but also public perception. As a result, professional spaces demand a heightened level of awareness when it comes to optics, such as avoiding being alone in a room with a (White) female interpreter, keeping doors open, and limiting one-on-one interactions.

7. Integrated Spaces are shared spaces consisting of Black males with female and/or non-Black professionals
8. Karen is a pejorative slang term for an obnoxious, angry, entitled, and often racist middle-aged white woman who uses her privilege to get her way or police other people's behaviors.

FootNotes

> *Most of the time, I find myself being the **only male interpreter on the team or in any given professional space.** As a result, I'm **hyper-aware** of how I present myself and how my interactions may be perceived. **I'm intentional in my movements, greetings, language, and even my distance and eye contact when engaging with people to make sure that my actions cannot be misconstrued or misinterpreted.** It's exhausting, yes, but it's important to me because I don't play about my reputation, and if something goes down, **we all know who will be believed.***

*"I've had inappropriate comments made towards me by colleagues and consumers, **I've had racial slurs thrown at me while working,** and I've had to bow out of jobs because of **racial trauma."***

*"In the beginning of my career, **I felt the need to conform** to my white colleagues. People made so many assumptions about my upbringing, culture, and language use. English wasn't the primary language used at home all my life and I wasn't allowed to socialize with most of my peers. I would oftentimes be put into uncomfortable situations as the interpreter where **I was not a good fit based solely on the color of my skin.** I was once told, 'I knew you were not Black American because you're so well behaved and mannered unlike them,' which was really uncomfortable."*

There is a considerable amount of additional effort Black male interpreters have to put in to show up and navigate integrated spaces. We carry the weight of knowing that our interaction could essentially set a precedent for how people will receive and engage with other Black male interpreters. There is this pressure that what one of us does represents how all of us are viewed. As a result, many times, we are afraid to show ourselves so we hide in culturally deemed 'safe spaces' like churches or less-public-facing high stakes spaces for fear of doing anything detrimental to our individual reputation, the collective reputation of Black male interpreters, and/or to avoid any type of regression in the little progress we have made. There is, with many, a lingering insecurity that if we mess up, we give credence to the narrative that we are not good enough. While our numbers are few, we have become more protective of the little space that we do have.

> " *White interpreters have the privilege of only representing themselves – **we don't.** A bad day for a White interpreter can just be that. Unfortunately, for Black male interpreters, **'the one** [Black male interpreter] **represents the many** so, my "bad day" can impact Black male interpreters everywhere.* "

As Black male interpreters, there are many considerations that must be made that go beyond interpersonal relationships with colleagues and the work itself. A good example of this would be ASL-to-English interpreting (voicing). We have to think about how our voices, as Black men, will impact this person's life. In legal settings, for example, we wonder: How are we going to be received as this person's voice? How much leeway will this person get compared to if the interpreter were a White man or woman? Even on my best day with near-perfect interpretation, is my sheer presence alone detrimental? Will the consequences/end result be attributed to me as the interpreter more so than the consumer?

> " *Polite racism is not a thing. Working in VRS, I've been told, candidly and concernedly, by White consumers that they were worried about me leaving a voice message for them because they feared that they would not get a call back based on my accent?!!? How sway?!* "

DOUBLE STANDARDS

As a Black male interpreter navigating integrated spaces, I would be remiss not to acknowledge the double standards that we confront on a daily basis as well as provide some examples.

Compliments: It's natural for people to give and receive compliments, and it's something most people are comfortable with. However, Black male interpreters often receive compliments on our physical appearance from female interpreters more frequently than the reverse. This is because, societally, it's more tolerated for women to express admiration for men's physical attributes in professional settings. Additionally, given the current composition of practitioners in the field, it is almost an inevitable imbalance. As a result, Black male interpreters are objectified by women in a way that would be deemed unacceptable if the roles were reversed. While compliments themselves are not an issue, the double standard surrounding who can give and receive them is problematic. Furthermore, the timing of compliments can impact the quality and accuracy of our work and potentially create psychological noise that interferes with the interpreting process.

> "
> A White female interpreter that I had just met came up to me when I finished interpreting and jokingly told me she could see that line from my boxer briefs through my pants. I immediately thought that if I walked up to a random White female interpreter and said, "I can see your panty line through your dress" **I'd be in somebody's jail**
> "

> " As a Black queer man I often see this happen to me and my peers. Not that it necessarily bothers me to hear it but it does become **a distraction and annoying when I'm actively working.** We are all really beautiful so I don't blame them. Just calm down lol. "

Mixed gender settings: Female interpreters often feel comfortable discussing personal and intimate topics in mixed-gender settings, such as their preferences for attractiveness, femininity, and hygiene. However, if Black men were to engage in similar conversations, they would likely be criticized for being inappropriate, vulgar, and disrespectful.

> " I've experienced a lot of **unsolicited touching.** Harmless flirting is flattering, yes, but there seems to be **confusion about boundaries when the person crossing them is female.** "

Intersection of race and maleness: Black males painstakingly consider clothing and physical appearance in preparation for assignments in an effort to not be perceived as "criminals, dirty, dangerous, and/or threatening."

> " Black Male interpreters spend way more time thinking about our appearance when preparing for an assignment than our white counterparts. **Many of us spend a lot of time hoping to look "less threatening"** given the historical and current composition of the field. As Black interpreters under a societal microscope, **we have to look more professional or we will be judged more harshly than our colleagues.** "

> "The truth is as a profession, we have normalized white interpreters showing up in sandals, head scarfs, and other **things that would be deemed unprofessional if we did it.**"

> "Many times it's **subtle** and **microaggressive** (i.e. the colors of our clothes, the level of professionalism, the assignment we felt we were a good match for, the word/sign choice we make)"

WHAT IT TAKES TO SHOW UP

"Being a Black male in a field of predominantly White women, **I often feel like an imposter.** This along with the microaggressions that I face from Deaf people as well as peers, usually the White ones, causes me to have a level of anxiety to even show up to work each and every single day! Then comes the thought, I don't get paid enough for this: dealing with microaggressions and sometimes **shouldering the burden of having to teach people to not be racist, on top of doing my job."**

"I projected a sense of benevolence **to conceal my insecurities,** ensuring that others felt comfortable approaching me despite any initial apprehension or professional skepticism. As I became more competent and self-assured, I shed the burden of always being the one to extend the "first welcome mat," and instead **channeled my cultural competence, social awareness, and grounded experience to make meaningful contributions to the field."**

"When I was physically present, I wasn't always emotionally present. I have to fight the negative talk because I have been reprimanded both by clients who did not take a moment to realize that **what works for my white colleagues might not work for me."**

"**I have a lot of fear when I show up to work.** Because I'm a Black man and outwardly present often as non-binary, I get scared about **how I will be perceived or accepted in spaces.** Oftentimes **I turn down jobs if I feel my safety will be compromised** and unfortunately this is more of a thought for me in Black spaces when heterosexual Black men will make up for a good part of the crowd. I usually think, **"how straight do I have to dress to not be physically or verbally attacked."**

WHAT WE NEED FROM BLACK FEMALE INTERPRETERS

"Work hard, enjoy the camaraderie. We are allies and your best makes me better."

"Continue to show up authentically. I feel like there is a synergetic connection when Black female interpreters bring their boldness, grace, skill, and heart to the job. When you show up with a wrap on your head, or beautiful lashes on, just know I am going to SEE you. I want you to know that if you say "aks" instead of "ask", I will think nothing of it and recognize it as just the same. I need you know when I say "boffum" instead of "both of them", that I need you to nod your head because you know there isn't any language prejudice about our language use."

"Call us in whenever we are taking up too much space or not showing up in a way that is respectful and inclusive. We understand that feedback from our Black female colleagues is not an attack on our worth, but rather an opportunity for growth and learning. Together, we can create a more equitable and empowering environment for all Black interpreters."

"I would say, continue to challenge us. Our White counterparts already put us on a pedestal for who we are, how we sound, and what we look like, but are afraid at times to give us feedback or correct us out of fear of being called a racist. That doesn't apply to you. Be hard on us, expect the best, accept nothing less, tell it to us straight up, support us and expect reciprocity."

"Support Black men! Black women in the DC area are the reason I am where I am. I was drowning when I first graduated from my ITP, and Black women were always there to support. If it wasn't for them, I probably wouldn't be interpreting right now."

FROM RECRUITMENT TO RETENTION

The retention of Black male interpreters presents an intriguing paradox. On one hand, recruitment efforts are ongoing, yet on the other hand, attrition rates remain high. This phenomenon is explored in depth in this publication, and offers a range of reasons and justifications for this continuous trend.

"
*It feels **isolating** at times. Nowadays, people seem to celebrate you as a "unicorn" (their words, not mine) but that serves to **isolate us even more.***
"

"
We must give paramount importance to the recruitment and retention of Black male interpreters, recognizing and respecting the invaluable, multifaceted, and nuanced cultural and linguistic perspectives that we bring to the profession and the communities we serve.
"

It is crucial to have mentors or colleagues who can relate to us and understand us without making race the center of the conversation. Many of us can recall feeling exhausted by colleagues who constantly brought up race and how it related to our skills as interpreters. While race is undoubtedly a significant factor, it can be frustrating when it becomes the primary lens through which our work is evaluated. It is not far-fetched to suspect that White interpreters, in the majority of their mentoring relationships, rarely hear feedback that begins with "As a white interpreter, you should..." and we deserve that same level of respect and consideration.

> *"Let's include Black interpreters in conversations around grooming and supporting interpreters from all backgrounds. It's crucial to go beyond simply inviting us to the table and instead actively give us **leadership roles** and **decision-making power** in these conversations. This requires **intentional** efforts to seek out and **elevate Black interpreters** into mentorship opportunities and leadership positions along with the supports in place to allow these interpreters to thrive in said positions. Providing us with the resources and supports we need to succeed is key to ensuring we are able to make even more meaningful contributions to the field."*

> ***Normalize the inclusion of Black Deaf and hearing interpreters and their experiences in all spaces*** *- from interpreter training programs to work meetings and workshops.*

> *"More visibility of Black male interpreters. **When you don't see others doing something, it's hard to see yourself doing it.**"*

THE POWER OF OUR PRESENCE

> "*Sadly, the invaluable cultural, linguistic, and experiential contributions that Black male interpreters bring to the interpreting field have been consistently undervalued, underappreciated, and taken for granted.* **Our experiences, insights, and presence are integral to creating an inclusive and equitable interpreting environment for all and proactive measures should be taken to promote our growth and development.**

> *We suffer together, but we raise each other up with **partnership, camaraderie, and accountability.***

> *I firmly believe that we bring a **different lens** to ethical decision making, teaming ideologies, and choices while working between languages.*

> ***Our ability to show up and know that our representation alone is powerful.*** *We are not seen often in mass media or in high-level jobs therefore many people (including Deaf people) don't even know we exist. As a Black male interpreter, I am proud to be a shape-shifter; **I can speak "job interview" and I can run circles with "pookie & dem".** You can catch me with some dope nike dunks on or polished tom fords*

Since the beginning of my journey in learning sign language, I've been reminded of a sobering statistic: only approximately 24% of certified interpreters in the U.S. are male and a mere 4% are Black. This remains a disappointing reality, and while we continue to make strides towards a more inclusive field, it's crucial that we engage in uncomfortable conversations and push boundaries. My aim is not to minimize, invalidate, or deprioritize the experiences of others, but rather to empower Black male interpreters and work towards concrete solutions for entry, retention, and inclusion in the field. I implore you to examine your interactions with Black male interpreters and identify areas where we can grow and learn from one another. Let these insights stimulate constructive dialogues in our community, and let us approach them with tact, sensitivity, and respect. This goes beyond numbers - we need investment and understanding from our colleagues. Don't take our presence for granted, but rather recognize the work it takes for us to show up. This is a call to action. The next step is up to you.

> *"Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we've been waiting for."*
> *– Barack Obama*

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