

IT'S YOU, NOT ME!

Black Deaf People's
Experience of
Cultural-Linguistic
Deprivation



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It's you, not me! **Black Deaf People's Experience of Cultural-Linguistic Deprivation**

For years, discussions of the United States signing communities—including Deaf, children of Deaf adults (CODA) and interpreter populations— have centered the White Deaf, able-bodied experience. In more recent years, particularly with the rise in popularity of social media and other technologies that allow for expeditious information sharing, more and more Black, Indigenous, and Deaf People of Color have begun to create space for their cultures and signing communities in discourses where they were previously ignored. At the same time, it's important to recognize the disproportionate amount of research and “scholarly” content available regarding these populations, which perpetuates their relegation to a ‘second-class’ status within the epistemologies and their lived experience as Deaf People of Color. As Black Deaf, Hard of Hearing, and hearing authors of this publication, we want to contribute to the uplifting and centering of the Black Deaf experience. It is our goal to provide a lens of analysis from the Black perspective which, perhaps, can also be applied to other marginalized Deaf communities. It is not, however, our intention to write as a voice for, or a representative of all Deaf communities of color. By sharing the information contained herein, we also hope that readers and viewers from all signing communities are able to recognize: a) How the Black Deaf experience, and similarly, but not equally, the experiences of other Deaf People of Color, is intersectional regarding racism and its interactions with sexism, audism, classism, or any combination of -isms which manifest themselves in the lives of Deaf People of Color and b) The contemporary implications of historical marginalization on Black Deaf people in the United States and those who work with them.



How the intersections of racism and audism impact BIPOC communities



Though we discuss marginalization and intersectional oppressions of Black Deaf people in the United States, it is important to state that the Black Deaf experience is not solely characterized by subjugation. For example, we can reflect on the era of segregation in the United States when Black and White people were legally banned from fraternizing or cohabiting in public spaces. This is a period of time in which many would describe the Black experience as inherently negative, yet what is often not mentioned is how Black cultures and languages flourished, including Black American Sign Language (BASL) within Black Deaf communities. Despite the inequitable economic and social status within the broader society in comparison to White people, both hearing and Deaf Black children were educated in Black mainstream¹ schools and schools for the Deaf with social, cultural and linguistic role models.

So when the Milan Conference of 1880—a convention exclusively attended by White, majority hearing men – passed a universal ban on the use of signed languages in school settings without the mention of Black Deaf schools, it signaled that Black Deaf students were not deemed worthy of advancing their oral and literacy skills, while White Deaf schools were forced to shift toward oralism. When White Deaf students were forced to abandon American Sign Language in favor of (re)habilitation in spoken English, Black Deaf communities were able to sustain both their language and their culture. The maintenance of Black Deaf culture and BASL should have been a lifeline for White Deaf communities to recover from linguistic and cultural deprivation when desegregation became legal. However, the intersections of anti-black racism, audism, classism, etc. fueled the decision to fire all Black Deaf teachers (mostly women), and forbid the use of BASL; proof that concepts such as "pure ASL"² and "Deaf Gain"³ only apply to whiteness. Instead of welcoming Black teachers, Black students, and BASL into their schools, White Deaf educators and administrators chose not to embrace the exchange of their abundant resources for the wealth of BASL and Deaf culture. As a result, Black Deaf families were affected economically and Black Deaf children were forced to assimilate and surrender their language and cultural practices in favor of a language and culture in the process of being restored. The intersections of racism and sexism are repeated several times over when analyzing historical

1. Mainstream school is a general, non-specialized school where Deaf students attend classes with hearing/non-Deaf students and staff; these schools provide general education classes and curricula that are standardized by the education board.

2. Standardized, widely-accepted, published forms of sign language typically produced and promoted by White signing bodies from "elite" (multigenerational) signing Deaf families

3. Deaf Gain is a framework proposed by H-Dirksen Bauman and Joseph Murray to counter the prevailing schema of being Deaf as a "loss" and uplifts the bio-cultural diversity of Deaf people.



moments in Deaf history. For example, Gallaudet University was federally chartered in 1864 as a school for the Deaf and Blind, however, neither women nor Black Deaf pupils could enroll. The first Deaf woman, who was White, was admitted in 1887. Interestingly enough, documented history about the first Black Deaf matriculant, Hume LePrince Battiste, is not as clear. The debates about whether a Black Deaf man had to pass as Indigenous to enroll in Gallaudet demonstrates that even when we achieve “firsts”, those accomplishments are still marred by attempts to erase either the feat of overcoming obstacles and/or the very identities of Black Deaf and Deaf People of Color. Another example lies in the establishment of the National Association of the Deaf, founded in 1880, when the association explicitly prohibited the membership of Black peoples until 1965 (Ogunyipe, 2021). These actions against Black Deaf people, evidence the belief that Deaf Gain only applies to White Deaf people, while Deaf People of Color are expected to exist in a perpetual state of cultural deprivation, outside of that provided to them through the lens of White Deaf culture and ASL.



How does assimilation happen on the micro (residential schools) and macro (Deaf culture and societal) levels? How does this result in cultural deprivation?

Deprivation can be defined as the damaging lack of cultural, linguistic, and material benefits considered to be basic necessities in a society. We refer to cultural deprivation as the absence or denial of expected and acceptable cultural socialization that results in the failure of an individual to communicate, engage, and express themselves in the most appropriate manner in a given context. Cultural deprivation can manifest itself in various aspects of a person’s identity and is context-dependent. Additionally, a person can experience cultural deprivation in many ways in regards to their race, ethnicity, social class, and/or disability. Consider the example of Deaf children who are deprived of common childhood incidental learning opportunities in favor of speech and language training that prioritizes accessing and producing speech sounds. It is common for Deaf children with these experiences to not recognize or identify symbols related to familiar restaurants in their environment like McDonald’s and Wendy’s; which are precursors for early literacy development. As a result of this type of cultural deprivation due to disability, when they enter school settings with hearing children, Deaf children are often at a disadvantage in developing literacy skills. Similarly, when considering deprivation based on social class, working poor class people often do not have access to information and/or do not have the economic currency to generate experiences outside of their social class. Oftentimes, in academic settings testing materials used to rate intelligence or satisfactory skill development make reference to background knowledge that working poor children do not have, causing them to appear less intelligent or capable when compared to their middle and upper class classmates.



The consequences of cultural deprivation become multi-layered for Black Deaf children as they may experience both of the aforementioned examples in addition to deprivation based on their race. The effects of cultural deprivation are evidenced and have a complex multidimensional impact on Black Deaf people leading to a lack of social capital in more than one facet of life, with unique implications for academic settings.



Academic trajectory is one of the many polarizing decisions parents of Deaf children have to make – deciding on whether to send them to a mainstream public school or a school for the Deaf. This decision is based on many complicated factors from personal preference to geography and resources. It is also often made with a focus on language, disability, and Deaf culture, without the consideration of Black culture. Unfortunately, the layers of cultural deprivation are particularly exacerbated for many Black Deaf people during their formative school years. As a Black Deaf person navigating the United States' educational system, deciding whether to attend a mainstream school or a school for the Deaf can be even more daunting than that of a White Deaf person. Being of a minoritized group, the decision is based on so much more than language and communication alone. A myopic approach is to look at the here and now which often focuses exclusively on communication modality, while ignoring the many considerations that should be made through a cultural lens including, race, ethnicity, language, and disability. We would be remiss to not mention there are always pros and cons to all decisions, however, due to the historically disproportionate access to education for Black people in the United States, these decisions are paramount since the impact on a person's identity is long-lasting and can be detrimental to their sense of self. Below you will find a list of the advantages and disadvantages for a Black Deaf person in either mainstream schools or schools for the Deaf from a Black Deaf cultural lens.



Mainstream	School for the Deaf
Pros	Pros
Access to Black Culture and the Black Community	Access to sign language (White academic ASL)
Inside Jokes, Slang, Traditions, Customs, References, Pastimes, etc.	Exposure to lots of resources and teaching models
Exposure to Black non-Deaf ways of thinking	Exposure to Deaf connections.
Exposure to African American Vernacular English (AAVE)	Ability to communicate with peers
Exposure to more Black educators	
Exposure to more cultural approaches to situations	
More experience navigating a hearing world.	
Cons	Cons
Lack of exposure to Deaf culture	Lack of access to Black culture
Lack of access to sign language (communicates mostly with adult ASL Interpreter)	Lack of representation in every facet of education hindering career aspirations.
Treated through pathological lens (need to be fixed)	Lack of exposure to non-White ASL
Black Deaf have historically been pushed toward a vocational track instead of higher education.	Educated through White Deaf Lens
	Lack of diversity among teachers and faculty

Understanding the challenges Black Deaf people continue to face today, parallel to the advantages and disadvantages of choosing mainstream schools versus schools for the Deaf, cannot be considered without recognizing their historical marginalization and oppression. Though Deaf children of color comprise roughly fifty percent of all Deaf school-aged children in the United States (GRI, 2013), ninety percent of teachers of the Deaf are White and ninety percent do not identify as Deaf (Ausbrooks et al., 2012; Simms et al., 2008). A lack of Deaf academic ASL role models for Deaf children of color is an indication of the disproportionate representation of teachers of the Deaf. This also includes the lack of access to Black Deaf Gain (Moges, 2020) in their formative years (Nicolarakis, English and Lawyer, in press). This type of cultural-linguistic deprivation has yet to be explored. What we do know is that years of conditioning and



assimilation into White Deaf culture and ASL use can manifest as internalized racial and linguistic oppression into adulthood. This includes, feelings of inferiority due to the ways one uses sign language; policing others' use of sign language; and the uplifting of ASL used by White signers as the superior, aspirational standard.

These feelings of inferiority are amplified in postsecondary academic settings due to systemic, linguistic, and cultural traumas Black Deaf people have habitually experienced. These traumas indoctrinate Black Deaf people to work twice as hard to retain half of the access and opportunities their non-Black counterparts seemingly receive with considerably fewer obstacles. Black Deaf that dare to excel are often confronted with the sense of having to prove themselves after constantly being underestimated and undervalued, while overcoming regularly both overt and covert microaggressions.

Black Deaf people are constantly forced to shift and accommodate the contexts in which they find themselves. In the example of a Black Deaf person who has Black (hearing) cultural capital from attending an historically Black college or university (HBCU), this capital does not transfer into a predominantly White Deaf space.



Perceived lack of social capital

Existing as a multiply-marginalized Deaf person means that in certain spaces, aspects of one or more of your marginalized identities will be diminished, causing internal resentment of that identity. For example, after experiencing linguistic deprivation and entering into an environment that is fully accessible in BASL or ASL, a Black Deaf person may feel resentful of their prior lack of language access and internalize feelings of not being “good enough”. Similarly, a Black Deaf person who may have grown up with full access to ASL through the school for the Deaf, who is now in adulthood experiencing Black culture and BASL, may harbor resentment towards their cultural deprivation within the school for the Deaf.





Experience of being mainstreamed and then attending an HBCU

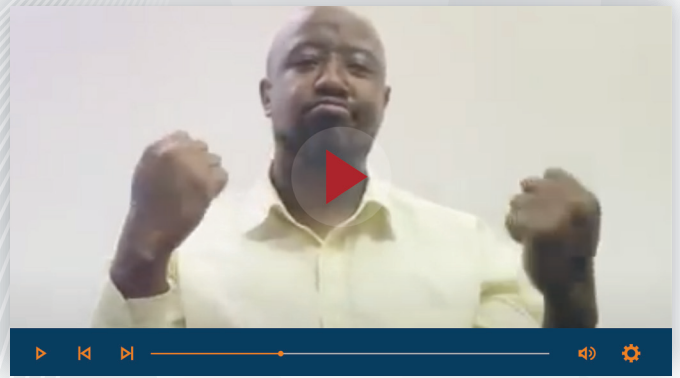
This lack of cultural capital transfer is not only limited to interactions with White Deaf people or Black hearing people, but also applies to White hearing professionals who work with Black Deaf postsecondary students and professionals. This is evidenced in encounters with interpreters, who are disproportionately White and female. Though a large percent of the U.S. population of Deaf adults are People of Color, about 3/4 of the interpreter population is White (see Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf). This implies that in addition to potential internalized racial and linguistic oppression, Black Deaf people bear the constant burden of “code switching” in hopes their message is faithfully delivered through a conduit that has little to no cultural background or exposure to their communities. Sign language usage by Black and other signing communities of color, are often perceived as anomalous (in production, style choice, grammar use, etc.) and often misunderstood, misinterpreted, and/or corrected by interpreters and other White Deaf people. The burden of this perceived incorrectness or abnormal production is often put on the Black Deaf sign language user under the guise of if it’s not white (ASL)⁴, it’s wrong - reinforcing the social construct of intelligence as characterized by fluency in what is referred to as PURE ASL which is couched in White ASL. This means that Black Deaf people are constantly required to assess the spaces they occupy (in regards to social status, language use, etc), identify their standing within said space, and make shifts to accommodate and navigate that space, all before deciding if/how they want to engage given the stakes at hand.



Call to Action

It is imperative that White Deaf people recognize Black Deaf Gain and the value Black Deaf people bring to Deaf culture and signed languages

White interpreters need to seriously analyze whether they are accepting jobs that are CLEARLY for and about Black peoples



Residual impacts of language discrimination

We all need to:

- Expand our idea of “Deaf culture” to include ALL Deaf peoples
- Show that Black Deaf people are valued by working to remove systemic barriers and gatekeeping
- Relinquish ownership of ASL and embrace the diversity of signs

TO OUR BLACK DEAF PEOPLE

Embrace your Blackness, Embrace your Deafness, Embrace your Black ASL!

To our greater Deaf communities of color who are navigating similar struggles to what we have shared – *Know that it's not you, it's them!*