Black Respectability Politics: Implications for ASL Interpreters

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This publication examines the intersection of two minoritized communities in the United States: Black Americans and those who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing. It specifically explores how efforts to advance equality and social acceptance among the Black community, known as '*respectability politics,'* affect and shape the experiences and perceptions of Black American Sign Language interpreters in the United States. The following two key questions will be addressed: 1. How do respectability politics manifest in the work of Black ASL interpreters? and 2. What is the impact on the professional opportunities of Black ASL interpreters? By exploring these questions, this publication aims to demonstrate that Black respectability politics significantly affect the representation, professional opportunities, and daily experiences of Black ASL interpreters, often reinforcing systemic barriers and shaping perceptions both within and beyond the interpreting community.

Defining Black Respectability Politics

Black respectability politics refers to an approach to individual behavior, community norms, and public policy aimed at countering racism and gaining acceptance in the dominant social and political system of American life. The concept of a Black 'politics of respectability' was formulated by historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham in her 1993 book, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* as a framework for understanding the social reform efforts of Black Baptist women who wanted to "counter the images of black Americans as lazy, shiftless, stupid, and immoral in popular culture."[1] These community leaders emphasized temperance, sexual purity, politeness, and cleanliness as antidotes to these stereotypes.[2] By exhibiting '*respectable*' behavior that conformed to "dominant society's norms of manners and morals," they hoped to secure acceptance and equality in American society.[3]

While Black respectability politics represents an effort to reduce racism and increase equality for Black Americans, it has been criticized for undermining these objectives by stressing **conformity** and **repression of one's identity** as the means to achieving these objectives. During the Civil Rights movement of the 60s, marchers adopted a "clean-cut" look, seeking to build a

[1] Emily Chen and Jenny Dorsey, "Understanding... Respectability Politics," Studio ATAO, July 1, 2021, https://www.studioatao.org/respectability-politics, accessed July 22, 2024.

[2] Margot Dazey, "Rethinking Respectability Politics," *British Journal of Sociology* (2021), 72 (3), https://lilloa.univ-lille.fr/bitstream/handle/20.500.12210/93408/Dazey%20%282021%29%20Rethinking%20respectability%20politics.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y, accessed July 22, 2023, 3.

[3] Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920*, (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1993), 187, as cited in Hakeem Jefferson, "The Politics of Respectability and Black Americans' Punitive Attitudes," *American Political Science Review* (2023), https://web.archive.org/web/20230123183909id_/https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/7534E0245F5556699151A6020E18D120/S0003055422001289a.pdf/div-class-title-the-politics-of-respectability-and-black-americans-punitive-attitudes-div.pdf, 12, accessed July 22, 2024.

sense of shared values and identity with White Americans. While the Civil Rights movement did achieve significant gains, its adherence to respectability politics in dress and manner reflected and affirmed a fundamental inequality: White Americans retain the right to vote regardless of how they dress.[4]

Respectability politics also has been faulted for **diminishing in-group solidarity** and **sowing division within the Black community**. This instrumental view of respectability politics explains why Black voters support punitive social politics such as anti-sagging pants ordinances that further "disadvantage[s] the group's most marginalized and stigmatized members," diminishing in-group solidarity.[5] Advocates of respectability engage in a twofold dynamic: **adoption of 'respectable' behavior, manners, and manner of speaking** and **ostracism of those within the group who do not conform to such norms, leading to in-group stratification.**[6] Sociologist Margot Dazey attributes such "class dynamics," to an "uplift ideology that underpins respectability politics."[7] Respectability politics thus results in **blaming individual victims within the marginalized group, <u>rather than addressing systemic issues</u>**.[8] Dazey sums it up this way:

> A second criticism of respectability politics is that it psychologizes and privatizes social inequalities, making members of marginalized groups accountable for their plight. The search for respectability in order to transform negative representations of a marginalized group is premised on the idea that there is something inherently wrong with the group.[9]

Such criticisms, as valid as they may be, highlight the ways in which respectability politics is a socially reproductive process that reinforces the norms, views, and prejudices of the dominant group, without considering the 'processes of social change' it fosters.[10] Respectability politics is **reactive, socially coercive, and iterative**, in the sense that it is not a 'static attribute,' but instead depends on repeated action.[11] While respectability politics may not be 'explicitly disruptive' it challenges racial stereotypes and prejudices and advocates for fairness, justice, and equality.[12] There is perhaps no better example of this dual dynamic of respectability and resistance than the clean-cut, well-dressed and mannered Civil Rights marchers mentioned above: as much as its members may have conformed to the dominant groups sartorial norms, the Civil Rights movement achieved much in the way of racial equality and justice, not the least of which was the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which brought a formal end to the Jim Crow era.

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[4] Chen and Dorsey, citing Higginbotham.
[5] Jefferson, 2.
[6] Chen and Dorsey.
[7] Dazey, 2.
[8] Chen and Dorsey.
[9] Dazey, 8.
[10] Dazey, 10.
[11] Dazey, 3-4.
[12] Dazey, 10.

However, many Millennial and Generation Z Black professionals today refuse to abide by the expectations of respectability politics, such as norms regarding hairstyles and dress, which they view as a relic of the Jim Crow era that is no longer effective in combating racism and systemic inequality.[13] For instance, consider the historical context of Black women pressing their hair. Although not a law, there was a pervasive belief that straighter hair garnered more respectability and closer proximity to whiteness. This belief has been perpetuated within the Black community for generations, reinforcing white expectations that Black women should look a specific way. In professional settings, this has dictated which hairstyles are deemed acceptable, namely those that are straight, long and/or pinned up with no coils or excessive curls being revealed. There was significant backlash against the natural hair movement from older Black generations, who felt that younger generations were undoing the progress they had made. In addition to inter-community backlash, laws like the Crown Act (Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair) have become necessary in addressing dominant society to ensure that natural hairstyles (such as afros, curls, locs and braids worn in a variety of styles) are respected in the workplace and in spaces deemed "professional", as long as it is well-kept.

Despite generational shifts, many Black Americans still see respectability politics as a "vital" tool and a force in the Black community today for Black Americans seeking upward social and economic mobility[14]. In the current movement to "show up as your authentic self," as Black professionals, we often find ourselves facing harsher scrutiny and less grace compared to our White counterparts when making similar decisions. Consequently, we frequently have to carve out our own paths within our professions to sustain ourselves. This often results in Black professionals being pigeonholed or relegated to specific sectors where their "authentic self" has minimal impact. Many of these professionals are then led to believe that these limited sectors are where they truly excel, a tactic used to keep them content and confined.

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[13] Chasia Elzina Jeffries, *They'll Only Stop Killin' Us, If You Say Please: The Role of #BlackLivesMatter, Black Twitter, and Flint, Michigan in Modern Day Respectability Politics*, doctoral dissertation, University of Southern California, 2020, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1bjxkYgflk1LAAjJLvhq1bFeBuOP7oqSs/view, accessed July 25, 2024, 1-2. It should be noted that Jeffries regards the characterization of some Civil Rights marchers as exhibiting respectability politics; however, her own contrast between Millennials and Generation Z professionals and older generations tends to rather support instead of challenge that interpretation.

[14] Jeffries, 1-2.

Race, Professionalism, and Black Respectability Politics Across the Professions

Race and expectations of conformity are a factor across a number of professions. In demographic terms, Black and Latinx workers are underrepresented in higher-paying professional occupations such as business, finance, law, education, and healthcare, among other sectors, resulting in what the Economic Policy Institute describes as '**occupational segregation**.'[15] Such racial disparities have long-term impact on wealth, exacerbating existing racial economic inequalities as well.[16] Within professions, the gaps are striking across the board. In business and finance, for instance, White workers comprise 69.7% of the workforce while Black workers make up 9.7%.[17] The share of Black professionals is the smallest in architecture and engineering occupations (5.9%); life, physical, and social science occupations (6.0%), and legal occupations (6.9%), reflecting an underrepresentation of Black people in the workforce in all categories, which is 12.8%.[18] Such pronounced demographic imbalances and Black respectability politics come hand in hand, especially when Black professionals are confronted with racism and discrimination, indicating that today's corporate workplace is a difficult environment for Black professionals. According to one recent survey, over a third of Black professionals in the financial services industry had heard racial slurs directed at them multiple times over a 12-month period.[19] Over half – 52% -- said outright racial discrimination had held them back in their careers while 28% felt people of their 'background' had limited opportunities offered to them.[20]

In some cases, professions that have endeavors to increase diversity are falling far short of the goal, maintaining in subtle fashion what were once more overt discriminatory practices. A lack of diversity in a profession becomes a double-edged sword: it **burdens Black and other minority professionals with the pressure to conform** to the "assumptions of whiteness in professionalism" while also being Black[21] and **it deprives them of the peer support and mentors they need in order to resist such pressure**. Many of us are drawn to the earnings, stability, sustainability, and other benefits these professions could provide, but find a lack of

[15] Valerie Wilson, Ethan Miller, and Melat Kassa, "Racial representation in professional occupations," Economic Policy Institute, June 8, 2021, https://www.epi.org/publication/racial-representation-prof-occ/, accessed July 31, 2024. See also: "Race in the workplace: The Black experience in the US private sector," McKinsey and Company, Feb. 21, 2021, https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/race-in-the-workplace-the-black-experience-in-the-us-private-sector, accessed July 31, 2024.
[16] Wilson et al.
[17] Wilson et al.
[18] Wilson et al.
[19] Natalie Kenway, "Majority of Black financial services employees experience discrimination," Future Portfolio Advisor, Oct. 28, 2022, https://future.portfolio-adviser.com/majority-of-black-financial-services-employees-experience-discrimination/, accessed July 31, 2024. Kenway is citing a survey by Reboot.
[20] Kenway, "Majority of Black financial services employees."
[21] Marcus W. Ferguson, Jr. and Debbie S. Dougherty, "The Paradox of the Black Professional: Whitewashing Blackness through Professionalism," *Management Communication Quarterly*, Vol. 36, Iss. 1, May 29, 2021.

“**belonging, trust, and respect**” according to a report from Coqual titled, “Being Black in Corporate America.”[22]

As a result, those who adopt the approach of respectability politics often feel forced to ‘whitewash’[23] and ‘erase’[24] their Black identities, presenting a ‘vanilla’[25] version of themselves that is more palatable to the ‘white gaze’[26] of their coworkers. This bifurcation and sublimation of Black identity results in the creation of what W.E.B. DuBois famously described as the ‘double consciousness’ of Black Americans:

> [G]ifted with second-sight in this American world – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness … two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.[27]

Black respectability politics divides the self, granting access to the professional world only to those Black Americans who conceal their true identity in an effort to conform to white cultural norms. One form of Black respectability politics Black professionals engage in, known as ‘code switching,’ is another path to conformity. Code switching is defined as “alter[ing] one’s linguistic dialect, consciousness and behavior in ways **that allow those of power and privilege to feel comfortable in exchange for fair treatment, access to increased economic mobility,**

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[22] Lisa Rabasca Roepe, “Unlocking Opportunities for Black Professionals in the Workplace,” SHRM, Feb. 5, 2021, https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/news/all-things-work/barriers-black-professionals, accessed July 25, 2024.

[23] “Whitewash,” *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/whitewash, accessed August 1, 2024. For a further discussion of this, especially in the context of film and television and history, see Jamie Harrison, “What Is Whitewashing — and Why Is It So Harmful?” *Shape*, Nov. 4, 2021, https://www.shape.com/lifestyle/mind-and-body/whitewashing-definition, accessed August 1, 2024.

[24] For an example of the use of the term ‘erased’ in the contact of Black respectability politics, see Antoinette Landor and Ashley Barr, “Politics of Respectability, Colorism, and the Terms of Social Exchange in Family Research,” Journal of Family Theory & Review, June 2018, Vol. 10 Iss. 2: 330–347, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6150606/, accessed August 1, 2024.

[25] Mikaela Pitcan, Alice E. Marwick, danah boyd, “Performing a Vanilla Self: Respectability Politics, Social Class, and the Digital World,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, May 2018, Vol. 23, Iss. 3, May 2018, 163–179, https://academic.oup.com/jcmc/article/23/3/163/4962541, accessed July 31, 2024. Pitcan et. al. are discussing the ‘vanilla self’ in the context of social media and the workplace, but the basic concept is applicable to race and work in general.

[26] Ashlyn Aiko Sanders, “Re-orienting Madama Butterfly: From the “white gaze” to inclusive opera,” Boston Lyric Opera blog, September 1, 2023, https://blo.org/re-orienting-madama-butterfly-from-the-white-gaze-to-inclusive-opera/, accessed July 30, 2024. For idea of the white gaze and accommodation, see Abigail Isaac, “On the White Gaze,” Women Empowering Women, Nov. 6, 2021, https://w4w.ca/on-the-white-gaze/, accessed July 30, 2024.

[27] W.E.B. DuBois as cited in John P. Pittman, "Double Consciousness" *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* summer 2024 Edition, edited by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2024/entries/double-consciousness/, accessed August 1, 2024.

educational opportunities and social advancement."[28] In one study of Black professionals that work in the nonprofit sector, participants variously described code switching as a means of **professional survival**, advocacy for their communities, and a way of "creating a pipeline for others."[29] These nonprofit leaders also faced a second paradox within their communities: as they sought to create opportunities for themselves and others, they risked being perceived as "**selling out**" and **being inauthentic**[30] - a perception that, intraculturally, could be seen as *tap dancing for the man* hindering genuine intercultural relationships and trust. While such practices may be viewed as a necessary survival tactic in which the individual's actual choice and agency is diminished, they only serve to reinforce the lack of diversity and inequalities that is their root cause. These practices are often juxtaposed against Black professionals who resist white norms in order to retain their cultural identity and connections to the Black community.[31] While resistance provides "a sense of pride, power, and agency" it could also **limit opportunities for professional advancement** (e.g., promotions and leadership roles, influence and decision-making power, salary increases, among others).[32]

Experience and Perceptions of Black ASL Interpreters

American Sign Language interpretation's lack of diversity has been well-documented. According to the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, Inc. (RID), nearly 90 percent of interpreters are white, and 87 percent are women.[33] The lack of interpreters from their community can lead to "communication barriers when utilizing the services of an interpreter from different ethnic and racial backgrounds as themselves."[34] Because of segregation and exclusion from institutions like the National Technical Institute for the Deaf, Black Americans developed their own distinct form of ASL, known as Black ASL, or BASL.[35] In one anecdote recounted in the Washington Post, scholar of Deaf studies, Carolyn McCaskill, recalled attending an integrated school for the Deaf for the first time in 1968 where "she discovered that she couldn't understand white people."[36] Today, estimates for the share of interpreters who are Black range from 2 to 4 percent.[37] The lack

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[28] Ramona Crawford, *Is Being Respectable Enough?: A Critical Investigation of Code-Switching and the Lived Experiences of Black Leaders Who Work at Nonprofits in Bridgertown*, doctoral dissertation, Duquesne University, summer 2021, https://dsc.duq.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3030&context=etd, accessed July 25, 2024, 10 and 83. See also Ferguson and Dougherty.

[29] Crawford, 75 and 94.

[30] Crawford, 75, https://dsc.duq.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3030&context=etd

[31] Ferguson and Dougherty.

[32] Ferguson and Dougherty.

[33] Mariah Stewart, "Deaf and Hard of Hearing Community Suffers from Dearth of Diverse Interpreters," *Insight into Diversity*, Oct. 18, 2020, https://www.insightintodiversity.com/deaf-and-hard-of-hearing-community-suffers-from-dearth-of-diverse-interpreters/, accessed July 24, 2024.

[34] Stewart.

[35] Stewart.

[36] Frances Stead Sellers, "Sign language that African Americans use is different from that of whites," September 17, 2012, *Washington Post*, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/sign-language-that-african-americans-use-is-different-from-that-of-whites/2012/09/17/2e897628-bbe2-11e1-8867-ecf6cb7935ef_story.html, accessed July 25, 2024.

[37] Satchell et al., 4, "Resiliency: Experiences of African American/Black Sign Language Interpreters," *Journal of Interpretation*, Vol. 30, Iss. 1, 4, https://digitalcommons.unf.edu/joi/vol30/iss1/2/, accessed July 25, 2024.

of interpreters from shared communities leads to "further marginalization" of individuals who are members of both a racial and linguistic minority.[38]

The underrepresentation of Black ASL interpreters in the profession has been attributed to several factors. One barrier is the curriculum used in the typical ASL interpreting training programs (ITPs), which Black interpreters report as being white-focused, with minimal, if any, multicultural elements or discussion of race.[39] To the extent that Black and other non-white Deaf experiences are discussed, they are segmented into separate sections on 'diversity' or described, as recently as 2013, as a 'new reality' within the Deaf community.[40] As one survey respondent told a researcher, "Instructors' presentation of information dealt only with **DEAFNESS** as a cultural dynamic and **NO OTHER ETHNICITY**."[41] As one scholar notes, the focus on white identity is not unique to the ASL interpreting profession, but is instead "a common phenomenon to many major fields of study."[42]

Black ASL interpreters who enter the field often find that a lack of peers leads to isolation and diminished opportunities for mentorship, potentially hindering career growth.[43] Meanwhile, Black ASL interpreters face racism from their white colleagues, clients and from consumers. In one focus group, the interpreters recounted at least one instance of overt racism from either a coworker, client, or consumer. Likewise, a survey found that 39% of Black interpreters had experienced overt racism "moderately frequently" or "very to extremely frequently."[44]

In another study by F.M. Ford, Black interpreters reported being rejected and criticized for their physical appearance, such as having "lips [that] were too big" and "natural hairstyles" that could have negative repercussions for their career.[45] One scholar noted that consequently "[c]lothing, cultural garments, and overall appearance can be weaponized against Black professionals if he/ she/ they **stray too far away from the white woman archetype**."[46] This is often evidenced in scenarios with a non-specific, yet assumed "professional" dress code, wherein Black interpreters are often dressed more fashionably to avoid scrutiny and/or because of previous conditioning that how they are dressed will either be a reason to gatekeep them out or let them into certain professional spaces. Meanwhile, White interpreter teams attend the same job wearing clothes such as muumuus, flip flops, and T-shirts, communicating that no matter what

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[38] Erica West Oyedele, *Persistence of African-American/black signed language interpreters in the United States: the importance of culture and capital*, Master's of Arts in Interpreting Studies, Western Oregon University, March 2, 2015, https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/228830913.pdf, 38-39, accessed July 25, 2024; Cheryl Gallon, *Exploring the Racial Microaggressions American Sign Language–English Interpreters Commit*, Master's thesis, St. Catherine University, 2018, 3-4.

[39] Oyedele, 45; Gallon, 4-5.

[40] Gallon, 4-5.

[41] Oyedele, 46.

[42] Gallon, 4-5.

[43] Satchell et al., 4.

[44] Oyedele, 49-50.

[45] Folami M. Ford, *Interpreting while black: A phenomenological study of the lived reality of African American ASL-English interpreters*, dissertation, Gallaudet University, 2021, as cited by JaRon Gilchrist, "What to Wear? Black and Brown Interpreters' Perspective on Professional Attire and Appearance," in *International Journal of Translation and Interpretation Studies*, June 11, 2023, 24.

[46] Gilchrist, 27.

their attire, their skills will not be judged based on this and their access to professional spaces will not be impacted.

Likewise, another scholar, Erica West Oyedele, concluded that, "overt racism is still a significant factor in the lives of African American/Black interpreters and that White interpreters maintain these systems of oppression in both subtle and obvious ways.[47] Racism not only engenders a professional environment that is unwelcoming and uncomfortable for Black ASL interpreters, it also fuels unfounded questions and false assumptions about their competence.[48] Such racist views of qualifications have led to differences in the type of work offered to Black interpreters.[49] Racist attitudes towards appearance and assumptions about qualifications not only attribute to additional cognitive and emotional demands that our White counterparts don't have to experience, but they also lead to an uncomfortable and professionally frustrating work environment, creating additional challenges for Black interpreters who feel a "constant burden to 'represent not just themselves but their entire race.'"[50]

Media Representation of Black Interpreters

In addition to the challenges within our professions and in dealing with clients and consumers, Black ASL interpreters are often seen as objects of derision, facing racism, prejudice, and even villainization in how we have been portrayed in mass media, in contrast to white counterparts who are often celebrated, canonized, or even heroicized. Perhaps the archetypal instance of this disparity is the Black sign language interpreter at the 2013 funeral for South African icon Nelson Mandela, Thamsanqa Jantjie. At the funeral, Jantjie interpreted with signs that were unintelligible to a global audience of Deaf viewers. Jantjie was widely satirized in the media and assumed to be a 'fake' interpreter.[51] In one revealing late-night segment, an ASL interpreter – who happened to be a white male – came on Jimmy Kimmel to reinterpret Jantjie's signs.[52] It turned out in subsequent reports that Jantjie suffers from schizophrenia and was hallucinating during the event; the assumption that he was an imposter was unfounded.[53]

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[47] Satchell et al., 4; Oyedele, 86.
[48] Satchell et al., 4-5.
[49] Satchell et al., 4-5.
[50] Gilchrist, 24, also citing the Ford study.
[51] Marie-Louise Gumuchian, "Interpreter at Mandela memorial a fake, group says," CNN, Dec. 11, 2023, https://www.cnn.com/2013/12/11/world/africa/mandela-memorial-fake-intepreter/index.html, accessed July 26, 2024; John Eligon, "Interpreter at Memorial Service Said to Have Been an Impostor," *New York Times*, Dec. 11, 2013,
https://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/12/world/africa/interpreter-at-mandela-service-said-to-be-an-imposter.html, accessed July 26, 2024.
[52] "Sign Language Interpreter Translates Mandela Memorial Impostor's Signs," Jimmy Kimmel Live, Dec. 12, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X-DxGoIVUWo, accessed July 26, 2024.
[53] "Mandela memorial sign language interpreter fights back," CNN, Dec. 12, 2023,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7xX44YFTpQ8, accessed July 26, 2024; Nicholas Kulish, John Eligon, and Alan Cowell, "Interpreter at Mandela Service Says He Is Schizophrenic and Saw Angels Descend," *New York Times*, Dec. 12, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/13/world/africa/mandela-memorial-interpreter.html, accessed July 26, 2024.

Jantjie is not the only alleged case of a "fake ASL interpreter". Several other similar stories have captured attention in the media and on social media platforms, and most involved Black individuals. At a 2017 Florida news conference about a serial killer a woman named Derlyn Roberts who was not the interpreter hired by the agency showed up and was allowed to "translate".[54] An ASL teacher later confirmed that most of what she had signed, in fact, "made no sense"; a subsequent news report noted that a person with her name and matching her description had convictions for fraud and fraudulent use of personal information.[55] Such events have a doubly deleterious impact on members of the Black Deaf community – they deprive them of vital information at government events, and they reinforce stereotypes that Black interpreters are unqualified. In the field of ASL interpreting, anecdotal evidence indicates that the two aforementioned examples are the most highly referenced when Black interpreters show up to work in public-facing spaces; even some eleven years later. This undermines the collective efforts of the Black interpreter community to be recognized as legitimate and skilled practitioners. This also further undergirds the media's and the broader community's lack of understanding about the true function of interpreters, how to differentiate between effective and ineffective communication access, the politics of the Deaf community and Deaf/Hearing interpreter access in the media, and often reduce media coverage down to race, physical aesthetic, and virality potential instead of the quality of work.

While Black interpreters face **vilification by proxy** over stories about 'fake' ASL interpreters, white interpreters have become viral celebrities, and, notably, **it is often for work they have done in Black spaces**. One such example is Amber Galloway Gallego, who had a video of her signing at a concert held by Twista, a Black rapper, go viral.[56] In a striking juxtaposition with the coverage of Jantjie, Gallego and two other women – all white – also appeared in an ASL competition on Jimmy Kimmel to interpret the lyrics of another Black rapper, Wiz Khalifa.[57] A third instance of a white woman, Holly Maniatty, interpreting for a Black rapper, in this case Waka Flocka, also attracted attention on social media.[58] Some of the coverage of white ASL interpreters plays into historic racist narratives of the 'white hero' or 'savior.' For example, David Cowan, an older white man who did ASL interpretation at a Beyonce concert was later lauded as the 'dancing hero' for his animated imitation of her moves on stage.[59] Such depictions also presuppose the notion of the 'white gaze,' often defined as the assumption that the default audience is white.[60] **White ASL interpreters satisfy such a need for white audiences to consume Black performances through a white interpretative lens**. The

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[54] "Fake sign language interpreter delivered gibberish in Florida," Associated Press, December 6, 2017, https://abc13.com/fake-sign-language-signs-interpreter-derlyn-roberts/2743729/, accessed July 29, 2024.
[55] "Fake sign language interpreter," Associated Press.
[56] "Sign language interpreter goes viral over rap concert," ABC13 Houston, August 23, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dRl2uLh4Ru0, accessed July 29, 2024.
[57] "Sign Language Rap Battle with Wiz Khalifa," Jimmy Kimmel Live, April 8, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YyEQxJX8eN0, posted April 10, 2014, accessed July 29, 2024.
[58] "Waka Flocka Flame Mistakes Sign Language Interpreter for Dancer," Consequence, Facebook post, July 8, 2017, https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=10155286045691648, accessed July 30, 2024.
[59] "Sign language interpreter wows crowd during Beyonce's 'Get Me Bodied,'" Atlanta First News, Oct. 17, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pQMnsAE3HBA, accessed July 30, 2024.
[60] Sanders, "Re-orienting Madama Butterfly."

white gaze has a double effect: in order to appear before it, Black figures, such as artists, politicians, or ASL translators, must accommodate themselves to its expectations, generating the pressure to conform that manifests as Black respectability politics.[61] When Black professionals do not conform, they are often discredited as knowledgeable or skilled, with the focus shifting to culturally specific physical attributes. A recent example is Black Deaf performer Justina Miles, who gained national acclaim after her performance at Super Bowl LVII's halftime show. The Deaf community widely praised her, expressing that she "set the bar" for such performances. During her performance, Miles sported long nails, which were not a point of contention or the primary topic of discussion. However, in her recent TED Talk[62], those same long nails have now been labeled "distracting" and "hard to understand," despite her signing being well-paced, enunciated, and eloquent. The narrative shifted from "look at her shine for the [White Deaf] culture" to questioning her audacity to give a TED Talk while embracing her Blackness.

Future Research

While this publication has identified and addressed an important gap in the discussion on American Sign Language and Black respectability politics – including, the role that mass media play in reinforcing stereotypes and pressures to engage in cultural code-switching – it has pointed to areas of potential further research.

■ **Black ASL:** On the scholarly level, Black ASL currently seems to be a field of study dominated by Carolyn McCaskill, Ceil Lucas, Robert Bayley, and Joseph Christopher Hill whose book, *The Hidden Treasure of Black ASL: Its History and Structure* (Gallaudet University Press, 2011), is the authoritative text on the topic.[63] The field remains open for other inquiries that can build on the groundbreaking work of aforementioned authors. Questions for further scholarship include the role of Black ASL in today's Black Deaf communities and its enduring value and relevance in the field of ASL interpreting. This approach provides a valuable opportunity to engage with the Black Deaf community to fill the gaps in knowledge and wisdom, ensuring that these insights are documented and preserved and that Black Deaf community members are properly compensated for their time and expertise. It is crucial that these stories are shared promptly and with fair remuneration. This work is of great importance and must be approached with care and sensitivity, ensuring that Black Deaf community members and elders are treated with respect and not exploited.

■ **ASL and Civil Rights:** Building on the above, another area of research, is the history of the Civil Rights movement, focusing on the integration of schools in the context of Deaf students. This history can be approached from a number of perspectives, such as: What opportunities had been denied to Black Deaf students by exclusion from white schools that they were able to

[61] For idea of the white gaze and accommodation, see Isaac, "On the White Gaze."
[62] TEDx Talks. "What If You Couldn't Talk?" Youtube, July 1 2024. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ThgqK7lFEqw, accessed August 1, 2024.
[63] For more information see: "The Hidden Treasure of Black ASL: Its History and Structure," Gallaudet University Press, https://gupress.gallaudet.edu/Books/T/The-Hidden-Treasure-of-Black-ASL, accessed July 31, 2024.

access after the Civil Rights movement? What were the ramifications for Black Deaf culture and Black ASL and how do the vestiges of those ramifications impact the field of interpreting present day?

■ **Black Respectability Politics and the Civil Rights Movement:** Unlike Black ASL, Black respectability politics is not a neglected field of academic study. Nevertheless, there remain many avenues for new inquiry. In particular, the question as to whether Civil Rights movement leaders and members in the mold of Martin Luther King, Jr., engaged in respectability politics appears to be unsettled. It is important in the context of modern movements for racial justice and equality, which seem to have rejected the respectability-politics approach of past generations. To what extent is the Civil Rights movement, viewed from this perspective, a model to be followed and admired as well as critiqued?

■ **Black Respectability Politics Today:** Likewise, the prevalence, or lack thereof, of Black respectability politics in today's environment also merits further examination. Chasia Elzina Jeffries' study of respectability politics in Flint, Michigan can be used as a benchmark against which to investigate instances of Black respectability politics in other communities.[64] Are older generations still adhering to emphasis on social and cultural conformity, while Millennials and Generation Z have rejected it? Does the thesis that lower-income Black communities still engage in this form of politics as a necessary tool of 'survival' hold true?

■ **Black Respectability Politics and Employment Discrimination:** While there is no shortage of research and data on the topic of race, discrimination, and employment, a rigorous, comprehensive, qualitative study on the role that Black respectability politics plays does not appear to exist. Such a study could use as a model the many exemplary study of the topic in general, such as: the 2019 American Progress report, "African Americans Face Systematic Obstacles to Getting Good Jobs";[65] *The American Economic Review* study on discrimination based on analysis of resumes;[66] and the sweeping study of racial discrimination in employment, housing, credit, and consumer markets published about a decade ago in the *Annual Review of Sociology*,[67] among others.

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[64] Chasia Elzina Jeffries, *They'll Only Stop Killin' Us, If You Say Please: The Role of #BlackLivesMatter, Black Twitter, and Flint, Michigan in Modern Day Respectability Politics*, doctoral dissertation, University of Southern California, 2020, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1bjxkYgflk1LAAjJLvhq1bFeBuOP7oqSs/view, accessed July 25, 2024.

[65] Christian E. Weller, "African Americans Face Systematic Obstacles to Getting Good Jobs," American Progress, Dec. 5, 2019, https://www.americanprogress.org/article/african-americans-face-systematic-obstacles-getting-good-jobs/, accessed July 31, 2024.

[66] Marianne Bertrand and Sendhil Mullainathan, "Discrimination in the Job Market in the United States," *The American Economic Review*, 2004, 94(4): 991-1013, https://www.povertyactionlab.org/evaluation/discrimination-job-market-united-states, accessed July 31, 2024.

[67] Devah Pager and Hana Shepherd, "The Sociology of Discrimination: Racial Discrimination in Employment, Housing, Credit, and Consumer Markets," *Annual Review of Sociology*, Jan. 1 2008, 34: 181–209, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2915460/, accessed July 31, 2024.

Conclusion

Black respectability politics historically developed as a strategy for survival in which members of the Black community would adopt 'respectable' behaviors, mores, and manners of style, dress, and speech in order to gain acceptance and inclusion within white-dominated U.S. society. Respectability politics not only shaped political outcomes, it also has heavily influenced experience and access for Black Americans in the professional workplace, often tending to undermine the very goals which it purportedly aims to advance – namely, equality, racial justice, and expansion of economic opportunities for members of the Black community and their families.

The restrictive effects of Black respectability politics have manifested across many professions today, including the finance sector, law, architecture and engineering, and, of particular concern for this publication, the field of ASL interpreting. Many Black ASL interpreters encounter racism, prejudice, micro/macroaggressions, and discrimination in our respective field that limit opportunity and career growth, leading many to confront the pressures of Black respectability politics in matters such as clothing choice, word choice, and hairstyle. These inter- and intra-racial dynamics of Black respectability politics in American society, the professional environment, and in ASL interpreting specifically have been identified and addressed in the existing literature. This publication contributed to the ongoing critique by examining the role of mass media and social media in reinforcing stereotypes and expectations behind Black respectability politics as they apply to ASL interpreters at major public events, such as government press conferences, or concerts.

This analysis led to a call to action and reform that this publication issues to educational institutions, interpreting agencies, entities that hire and collaborate with interpreters, journalists and media organizations to engage in appropriate training to avoid the pitfalls of racial stereotyping and Black respectability expectations. Finally, more education is needed within the general public – about the historic role, limits, and racist assumptions of Black respectability politics; about ASL as language and its history in this country; and about the history of Black ASL and Black ASL interpreters. In addition to various reform efforts and education initiations, this publication also outlines areas where further research would contribute to increased understanding of the impact of Black respectability politics and the history of ASL and the Black community. It is hoped that addressing respectability politics through the recommendations outlined above will foster a more inclusive and equitable profession.

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