

Why Black Deaf Studies: Global Perspectives in Ireland

Black Deaf Studies Symposium Proceedings

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Abstract

Dr. Michael Ralph, Chair of African American Studies at Howard University, discussed the intersectionality between Black studies and Deaf studies, illuminating the overlooked narrative of the Black Deaf community. Drawing examples from hip-hop culture, Ralph critiques the superficial engagement with Deafness and highlights an opportunity for enrichment and depth in understanding. He cites Nas and Foxy Brown, noting the inadvertent invocation of Deafness and contemplates the potential insights that a profound engagement with Black Deaf studies could unveil. He calls for an integration of Deaf studies into broader discourses, suggesting it as a pivotal lens through which social issues, particularly within the Black community, can be examined and understood.

Keywords

Black Deaf Studies, Hip-Hop Culture, Deafness, Identity, Social Issues, Intersectionality

Presentation Transcript

Thank you for the invitation to join you. I feel a little bit like one of the professors from Dr. Anderson's research that didn't know how to sign. Because I don't know how to sign. And I do want to learn. I look forward to learning and look forward to joining as a more active member of the signing community.

So I'm the Chair of African American studies at Howard University. I'm excited to be here. The idea of the movement and the momentum you put forth behind Black Deaf studies is exciting. I want to say a little bit about how I think we can enrich them more broadly. I want to show images, showing a brief clip of a video. And these images and this video invoke Deafness, but without the insight of the research or the support of a project around Deaf studies and without actively engaging with Deafness as an identity or as a community. And so what I'm interested to know more from all of you and to think and reflect more about is what insights can we gain from how Deaf studies, Black Deaf studies can enrich Black studies more broadly.

I have written a book called forensics of capital that explores how a person's profile, which seems like a social profile, let's say a Facebook profile, can be seen as a credit profile in the sense that often the network, your network shows what access you have to capital. But each person's profile is also a kind of forensic profile in a sense that it is related to your legal standing.

And I have also sort of worked on how a country's diplomatic profile is like a credit or forensic profile. And thinking about that, it speaks to the way that any given person or country, there's an argument on the table about that country or person's capacity for self-governance. Often, when you're marginalized or disadvantaged, people raise questions about your ability for self-governance and your capacity for self-governance. Those questions have always driven my research and led me to think about questions as disability and ability.

And then I have also sort of observed the way something like Deafness is more specifically invoked into my research, for instance, in the research about hip hop and hip hop culture and things like that. So the questions of listening, understanding Deafness are often invoked, but without attention to something like Deaf studies as tradition.

I guess the first thing I want to do is share a clip of a video by a rapper named Nas, which is called thief's theme and talk about what the video is trying to do and also how the video deploys Deafness and pose questions about what works well and what doesn't work as well from an intellectual standpoint about what's happening there.

So what you will observe in the video is that Nas is making an argument about deception. And deception as a crucial feature of American life. So there are a number of different people in this video who are wearing ski masks, from everyday people to members of clergy to elected officials to intimate partners. And so the question he's posing is like can –

Okay. Thank you.

So, Nas -- about deception and about theft and about deception and theft as American traditions. And importantly, he's saying that they affect every aspect of life.

And in particular, Nas' body of work talks about the drug game and crack cocaine epidemic of the '80s and '90s and the effects on the African American communities. It's the theme in his work.

One of the most extraordinary moments of the video and also the lyrics are that he has this line where he says something like Deaf crack who can't speak squeak noises because they bought a drum of soap from one of my boys.

You're like what exactly is he trying to say? Is he suggesting it's the use of drugs that led to the Deafness? Is he saying that the drugs themselves weren't what the person thought they bought, which is what led to the Deafness? Is it any illegal drug use that leads to it? Were the drugs switched which caused a devastating effect? Or was he saying the drug user was already Deaf and had a keen insight about the drug game or about narcotics or about deception by having already been Deaf? It's not clear what he means.

You can stop the video.

So the thing that I reflect on is what would it mean if he actually engaged with questions of Deafness or Deaf studies, the history of Deafness in America, Deaf Black studies? How might that enrich what he's trying to say? How might it turn from not a fleeting, passing insight into kind of a project to understand the unique perspective, the unique insight that Deaf people and Deaf scholars had about these devastating dynamics he's trying to capture? What would it mean to try to understand these devastating consequences of the crack cocaine epidemic through the lens of Deaf people and what they experienced and researched?

Later in the Q and A, the moderator worked with Deaf group homes and things like that. I think there's an opportunity to talk about what social problems look like through the lenses of Deafness and how we might enrich Black studies with both of the experiences and those intellectual contributions.

The next example I want to talk about that comes from hip hop as well is the experiences of the rapper Foxy brown. And Foxy Brown is a rapper who sort of really made her mark from 1996 onward. Foxy had performed with Jay Z, Nas, and was sort of understood to be one of the few women as artists who could rival men lyrically.

And here is an image of Foxy and Jay Z. Next image, please.

Thank you. Here is an image from her magazine cover. Foxy Brown is featured with Jay Z and a times stair performance. It testifies to sort of the high esteem with which rappers regarded her. And Foxy Brown was even in a music group with Nas referred to as the firm.

And so she made her debut in 1996. And she had an album in 2001 and took a step back to prepare for the album she thought was going to be her big album. And around 2005, as she was working on it, she started realizing that she was suffering from hearing loss. And initially, it felt mild, and she was trying to manage it on her own with sort of modest engagement with her own physicians and things like that. She's taking medication for it.

And then by 2006, she lost her hearing entirely. And when she lost her hearing entirely, she started seeing specialists. They said it was likely due to a rare viral infection and that's why she lost her hearing. But I think one of the most disturbing aspects of this story as it was recounted was not just sort of the trauma and the struggle of sudden and kind of complete hearing loss, but it was also that in the narrative, both her own narrative and the narrative around it, it was only seen as a negative. There is a way in which it was seen merely as something that she had lost and merely as something detrimental. There was no conversation about what it might mean for her to engage with Deaf artists, with Deaf scholars, with Black Deaf studies, with Deaf performers. It could have been an opportunity for her to pivot as an artist, grow as an artist, connect with a community of artists who had been performing in various ways and making innovative artistic and musical contributions. And instead, it was merely just framed as what it means for a hearing person to lose hearing, as if it meant she could not be an artist anymore.

Ultimately, her hearing has improved to some extent. And Foxy Brown is again performing. And most recently in 2020, she had a song on the Grammy award winning album *Kings Disease* by Nas. And so it's useful to see how she sort of is learning and continuing to grow in her artistry even with the hearing loss and navigating that. And yet, I still think that what would be most profound about her life and legacy is to learn from artists and scholars who have been making innovative contributions around what it means to navigate the world in ways that are non-typical and in ways that are sort of ambitious and innovative even without sort of the assumption that what an excellent rapper needs to be prolific is the benefit of hearing.

So I think I'm very interested and most interested in what kind of possibilities can come from making Deaf studies and Black Deaf studies more central to Black studies more broadly in all kinds of ways. Whether it's recovering the important histories that Dr. Anderson flagged that we need to document and institutionalize while those who helped to make the history are still alive. Or looking at something like hip hop and understanding how artistry can be enhanced by greater **INLT ma SI**. And there's assumptions about what is happening with music. I'm struck by how much of

conversations in hip hop around music incorporate attention to sort of the feeling of the music. Like at the reception last night, I was appreciating how much of the bass you could feel and the way that -- the DJ was performing. Or for Deaf break dancers and dancers after all kinds who are kind of attentive to what they're feeling and experiencing in the rhythms of the music or vibrations of various kinds and allowing them to lead their performance strategy.

So I think that there's a lot there to actually think about how much Deaf study and is Black Deaf studies can enrich hip hop music in terms of the performance and the technology. It's been written about a lot of the early pioneers in DJing and things like that were students at vocational schools and students who learned about the electrical structure. And the understanding of sound systems and equipment came from those innovations. So again, I wonder how many of the pioneers of hip hop DJing and the electrical inventions of hip hop were Deaf and did that factor into their strategies in terms of what they wanted the audiences to feel and the music they were making and performing.

For me, these are all sorts of research possibilities that I'm excited to explore. And in particular that I look to see what scholarship on Black Deaf studies can provide and enrich so many of the conversations. And I like the fact that this discipline has emerged to kind of challenge some of the naive assumptions that hearing scholars have made.

I look forward to the Q and A and appreciate the opportunity to share with you.

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