

## Revisiting Demissionization and Black Deaf Gain with a Critical Lens

Black Deaf Studies Symposium Proceedings

### **Rezenet Moges-Riedel**

California State University, [www.csulb.edu](http://www.csulb.edu)

[rezenet.moges-riedel@csulb.edu](mailto:rezenet.moges-riedel@csulb.edu)

### **Abstract**

*Dr. Rezenet Moges-Riedel explores the nuanced complexities from the field of Black Deaf Studies and what its discipline can offer in the broader context of the academics and global Black Deaf communities. Explaining her coined term, "demissionization," she delves into the intersection of language, culture, and power dynamics, drawing from her Eritrean background and the influence of missionaries on language development. Dr. Moges-Riedel highlights three significant themes: demissionization, Black Deaf Gain, and Deaf critical race theory, unveiling the intertwined facets of linguistic oppression, racial identity, and resistance. The conversation illuminates the urgent need to recognize, value, and integrate the diverse linguistic and cultural identities within the global Deaf community, particularly in the context of Black Deaf studies.*

### **Keywords**

Black Deaf Africans and African Americans, Demissionization, Black Deaf Gain, Deaf Critical Race Theory, Intersectionality, Linguistic Oppression

### **Presentation Transcript**

(Slide 1 – 00:00)

Good afternoon. Good afternoon. How is everyone doing this afternoon? For those of you who don't know me -- all warmed up and ready to go here this afternoon.

Dr. Carolyn McCaskill, you certainly set the tone for us. It has been an honor to work with Dr. Carolyn McCaskill from day one, we have been inundated, our thoughts have been percolating, and we have been planning. So my hats are off to Dr. McCaskill and Gallaudet University for gathering us together and making this dream a reality.

This session focuses on Black American Sign Language and why it matters. Looking not only at Black sign languages, I will also be taking a global perspective and thinking of the African diaspora. I do want to disclose that here at the beginning of my talk.

I am Eritrean. For those of you who don't know, it is next to Ethiopia. And I am an Eritrean American. My family immigrated here to the United States. I feel an obligation to my family and history of origin. So I am sharing some of my country's history with you today.

In my session, I'm going to be talking about the gaps and deficiencies we see in the research paradigm at this time. So I would be remiss if I were to do anything else in my session today.

(Slide 2 – 02:03)

And we will see how much I can get through here. But I have three major themes in my work in terms of what my work contributes to the Black Deaf studies and Black Deaf experience. It isn't just limited to those in the Gallaudet or Black Deaf community. I think we have to think more globally. It's not just an issue pertinent to America, it's an issue pertinent to the world.

So my first topic will be demissionization. And this is how I sign that concept.

I'll talk about Black Deaf Gain or BDG.

And I will conclude my talk this afternoon with expanding upon Deaf critical race theory or Deaf CRT.

These are lofty notions to examine and unpack during my 20 minutes with you. I'm hopeful in this time together, we can galvanize around these topics.

You might have heard the phrase before, "It's a small world" after all. I'm going to be talking about that and interweaving that amongst the three topics that I will cover.

(Slide 3 – 03:14)

As we think about the history of Black African Sign Language and why they matter, here at the symposium, we're focusing on Black Deaf studies and why it matters. So the question of "why" is one that is very thought provoking.

(Slide 4 – 03:37)

As I think about demissionization, that is actually a word or term that I have coined. And that word is actually from my master's thesis. As I think about my journey as an academic and look back to that I think, okay, it wasn't perfect. But there were notions that I brought forth that are quite intriguing for us to examine further.

As I mentioned, my family is from Eritrea. [Giving you some background here], in Eritrea, there are [two] missionary schools established. The first actually was established in 1955. And that missionary was actually from Sweden. And they also had Finnish teachers they brought to the school. It was a mixture of sign languages that then were intermingling with Eritrean sign language usage.

As we think about language etymologies and where language mixing was happening, we saw mixing between all three of those languages.

What we have to do is look at language hierarchies and which languages are more dominant and which languages are subordinated when you have languages of privilege and power working with languages that may be seen as substandard and less than.

So the position of religion in a society, the position of Evangelism in a society, where some languages are seen as better than others. In African culture, there's a great reverence or respect for schools, for having an opportunity to be educated, for your teachers. What we saw happening on the ground and what I explored in my thesis, and again, I basically did nothing but listen. I sat and listened. I listened to my research participants. There were five Deaf individuals and two linguists who are also interpreters. We looked and examined the issue of language planning. This is where I came up with the term demissionization. The team of researchers and working with our research participants determined that the influences coming from the missionaries that are educators in the school did not align with local Eritrean Deaf folks' goals in terms of what they wanted to accomplish with their school. Instead, looking at being able to disconnect and disaggregate ourselves from the missionary influences, which [demissionization] became an act of resistance.

(Slide 5 – 06:26)

Here is the definition. Demissionization is a process of language purism, the ideology of the language planners entailed language ownership and indigenous identity to disassociate any linkages to any alien culture or foreign identity in history.

So what I am excited to share with you today is although I coined that term demissionization, it also is very similar to decolonization. Decolonization looks at being able to release yourselves from those ideologies. And demissionization is looking at making sure that we are looking at it from the terms of education. But decolonization is looking in the spheres of politics and the law. Demissionization is looking at a culturally specific locality and making sure that in this particular case, they had opportunities while missionaries were respected in that culture, they had disseminated research, but we also wanted to be able to decouple ourselves from language imperialism happening because of the missionaries' influence.

So being able to recognize that, that's a consideration that we certainly have to think about in terms of who we are serving at the end of the day? Are we also respecting indigenous sign languages in those cultures in [their] country?

(Slide 6 – 07:59)

So we have the book, “It's a Small World” by Michelle Friedner and Annelies Kusters, editors. And I believe we have [one of] them, [Annelies,] with us.

So this title is something you want to explore a little bit further. “It's a Small World,” which in some cases may be true but when we think about that, it really points to the fact there are similarities in our Deaf identities. Nonetheless, we have to hold that thought in advance at times. We want to connect, and we want to highlight our [DEAF-SAME concept]. But we have to acknowledge there are differences. Right? We want to certainly preserve those differences. We want to acknowledge those differences and we want to bring them to the floor.

[In that book, the chapter] about Eritrean Sign Language, I [explained how it is often] misunderstood when people will say all Deaf people are the same. That dismisses our intersectional identities and the languages we have [with] Eritrean Sign Language that [they] use. We have our own culture and religions. So we have a very rich and vibrant culture, community and [tribes]. This is where I don't want to say that the book was in error. It

certainly gave us some frameworks, but we have to be cautious about the framing we put forth as academics.

In the 1950s through the 1970s in Africa, there were various missionaries who came to the continent spreading their versions of education, their versions of religion. And so we had religious missionaries coming from European countries, from the Americas [assuming the misconception of “DEAF-SAME”]. And [doing so,] they also exerted great influence on education as it was offered to Deaf individuals.

And so just to wrap up this concept of demissionization, I think it is a very useful concept. It's utilitarian in nature and gives us a way of diving into the issues further. We have to think about [whether] it's a written language, spoken language, or sign language. Any of those languages or cultures can be influenced from outside missionaries coming to a culture to evangelize and proselytize a certain community. And so we have to think about what that means for those indigenous people who are from that culture.

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(Slide 7 – 10:22)

Now, we might ask the question why does Black Deaf research literature matter? When we think of literature, we may think of something that's actually documented, a textbook, an article. Maybe it's something that's online. I think Joseph Hill was showing us examples of that in his chronological timeline that he laid out. As we think about the Black Deaf experience, there isn't a lot of literature we can draw upon. As a Black Deaf academician, it has been frustrating at times, even as I think about myself as an Eritrean and learning about American history and trying to find resources not extant in the literature.

(Slide 8 – 11:12)

As we think about the concept of Black Deaf Gain, it really is a product of what I would call a literature review. You have to dive into the literature. You have [some written literature], you have that one chapter [here and there] and you have got to pull in the literature from a variety of sources. What that means is I want to see something that I can include in my body of work. And so as I think about how I frame my research and the work that I'm undertaking, I look to the literature. So one particular frame that I think is helpful is first we have to step back and see where the connections lie. As a researcher, you're always looking

to see okay, where can we look at and explore Black Deaf Gain. What is the master narrative that we have to investigate, that we have to unpack?

And it does become an act of resistance when you are proposing a regimen or narrative that is different than the master narrative. Being able to look at that, the historical oppressions, the historical oppressions of racism and also of anti-blackness. How that then connects to audism.

And we have Tom Humphries, [sitting] here who coined that term in 1977. [We need to recognize] linguisticism [as well]. When we look at those and how they are interwoven together, we have to think about that in terms of Black Deaf Gain. As a Black Deaf signing community, it is not just for the Black Deaf community, it benefits the entire community. We know that we have been through trials and tribulations as a community. The acts of resistance have benefited us to flourish and transform to be able to thrive in the area of education. And so we really do have to give credit where credit is due.

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(Slide 9 – 13:15)

Now back to this idea of “It’s a Small World.” You may have already seen this video clip, and some of you may and some of you may not have seen it. It really provides us with a snapshot of this concept of Black Deaf Gain and really fleshed it out for us further.

This was published first on Facebook. So I saw it and my mind was blown. And this was actually before I published on Black Deaf Gain. And so I said oh, my goodness, who is Mr. Samuels? Who is this gentleman? You see a photograph of Mr. Samuels. This is Johnny. And he actually attended the Florida School for the Deaf and Blind. And he would term it FSD. He would leave off the B. So the Florida School for the Deaf. Even though it was technically the Florida School for the Deaf and Blind. I wanted to know who he was. I said you know, I was in California, he was in Florida. How can I meet him? I knew his last name, I definitely wanted to get to know him a little bit better.

So someone connected me and said I know someone who went to FSDB. And so it just actually happened that they had attended around the same time as Mr. Samuels, which was in '67. And so I had this conversation. And I'm like so how do you know someone this age?

And we had this connection. And they were like no, this was my roommate. Oh, my gosh. Look at the universe responding to the need that I had articulated.

And so Johnny Samuels, what a small world that less than six degrees of separation led me to him.

And let's go to the next slide.

(Slide 10 – 15:12)

I actually wanted to show the film, but for the sake of time, I have pulled out an excerpt from the film. There is a transcript on the screen. This is what was used in the captions. Let's go to the next slide.

(Slide 11 – 15:31)

Now you see the bolded font in the transcript. And I will go ahead and sign this. This is again comments directly from, direct quotations from Mr. Samuels. This is a quote that I want to share with you.

So he said the following. At the Black Deaf school, we got the best education when it came to reading, language, as well as any subject that demanded rigorous reading, the Black students here did pretty well. Students here could write well and had good English skills. That was because we had Black Deaf teachers who used sign language. And they came from Gallaudet, let it be noted. This FSDB was considered the mecca for Black Deaf teachers who migrated here from Gallaudet University.

So you see what we have there? We actually have a direct connection where there was access, where there was exposure to sign language. You then had Deaf teachers who could sign and pass that down to other teachers. So really, this is a Black Deaf [man] just saying that I am better and more well educated as compared to my white Deaf peers because of those Black Deaf teachers who invested in me.

So this is a counter-narrative. Mr. Johnny Samuels presented us with a counter-narrative that interrogates the information and ideologies coming from the master narrative. So these are something that we actually have to decolonize our minds and hearts from so that we can achieve Black Deaf Gain.

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(Slide 12 - 17:19)

And I also want to emphasize at this point that I'm not glamorizing this experience or idea of oh, Black Deaf education, there's nothing wrong with it or there aren't issues that we also have to unpack. Of course, we know that the experience of segregation was an experience of deficits. That's also something for us to explore.

Mr. Samuels continues and says the white school got brand new textbooks and would dump the older versions at the Black school. So we have that experience as well. And I think that points to some of the negative experiences that we saw in segregated schools.

So again, when we say this quote of "It's a small world after all," I did feel that was true when I got a chance to chat with Mr. Samuels.

And is this the right name sign? Someone correct me if I'm wrong. Mr. Samuels. What a great smile [or beard]. Okay, got a couple of different name signs. Carolyn is giving me another one for him.

I actually was able to be in touch with him recently. So I said when you said -- I can just see that large number of Black Deaf teachers coming to that school in Florida. And he said oh, yeah, six, you remember. Six in particular. I said okay. Let's talk about that. And just even seeing the disconnect at FSDB where they do have some of the names, and Mr. Samuels said you don't have to look at the archives, I can tell you the names from memory. He knew all of their names. And here they are.

So sometimes we have to say their names. And so he finger spelled them each and every one immediately. He didn't even have to think about it. It rolled off his hands. And their class. He knew what class they had graduated from.

And so just looking carefully at the years, look at those years up there. Take a moment and see when they graduated. The class of '55. There might be some fellow classmates here in the audience, I don't know. Anybody from the class of 1954? '55? In 1953, even though we know it was 1952, we had Miller versus the Board of Education. And 1954, we had Brown versus



the Board of Education. In the same year in 1954, Gallaudet actually [admitted] the first Black Deaf student, let the record state, Andrew Foster.

And then after that, we have a long line of graduates, very illustrious alumni 1956, '57, '59. And year after year, more joined the ranks. So the fact that Mr. Samuels nominated them, named them and said I was a witness to their greatness is quite something.

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(Slide 13 – 20:35)

So we see how all of this connects? Okay? Why are we also talking about CRT or critical race theory and why that matters in Black Sign Language studies?

(Slide 14 – 20:47)

I think it's really important as a scholar that any time we have Black Deaf or Deaf studies scholarship that is happening, we have to make sure that we also include it within the wider narrative of disability studies. And we want to make sure we disseminate that information to all of the disciplines. It definitely has a contribution not just for our own community, but for other communities as well.

My dissertation focused on Deaf CRT. I'm trying not to dismiss what we call “intersectional erasure.” I certainly do acknowledge the work of other scholars that have come before me. We know that exploring [all] racial identities is difficult. Right? At the same time, as we think about videoing participants, that can also pose challenges as a researcher. You have to think about your own positionality and the risk participants can take when they participate in studies and agree to be videoed. Sometimes it's hard to document this experience in the literature because of this phenomenon. We think about the number and the work we have to do. If you're on camera, people can see you. So you can be identified and you're not able to be anonymous for that reason. We know that there is sequential work [in this field].

And so being able to look at the sequencing in our work -- we start there. That's Deaf critical theory by none other than Dr. Genie Gertz, who is here with us this afternoon.

That was in 2003 when her study was published. And we have Dr. Lissa Stapleton, and [hyphenated with a] new last name, Ramirez due to marriage. [She established] Black Deaf

Project and she looked at [Black] Deaf critical theory. That was in 2014 and 2016 as a follow up study.

And then we also had Deaf Latinx Crit, by Dr. Carla Garcia Fernandez. So these are scholars who made phenomenal contributions to our understanding of looking at this Deaf studies through these particular lenses. And they each have their own [framing] ideas of what the theories and concepts entail.

But it's all also very challenging to look at as we try to sift our way through all of the literature. I know that we have Deaf Crit which focuses on audism primarily. And Deaf Crit is something that is a particular direction that it offers us. But today, after Black Lives Matter, we cannot forget or ignore intersectionality. We're getting and redirecting ourselves as we deal with current events, with the news. And so we [need to go back and] start at a particular place with Deaf [lens]. And that looks at critical studies, which [originally] is based on legal studies and work with antiracism. So you have to go back through the research literature and the body of work that we can draw on and also look at okay, there are scholars investigating Deaf communities and scholars investigating race as a lived experience or identities. Where are the scholars looking at both? Race and Deafness. Looking at issues of anti-Blackness. Looking at issues of anti-racism. And we want to make sure in the work with [linguicism], we're here to talk about Black American Sign Language. And as we look around the world in other global communities, there may be other schools, schools of thought, there may be other [higher] statuses that we have to investigate, other lenses that we have to attend to.

Now for Black Deaf Crit, we think about [what it is combined with] the work of Deaf Crit and the subjectivity that [it] offers us. But I wanted to use the certain principles including four tenets which Deaf Latinx Crit entails . With understanding, of course, that we're using the Latinx epistemologies. And being able to look at epistemologies, which are ways of knowing. Thank you to Garcia-Fernandez for that contribution. Looking at and being able to study what is the body of knowledge that we can actually pass down as a legacy to others. [But] I am not a Latinx-identified individual. And so I trust my Latinx sisters and brothers to explore those issues further for us.

(Slide 15 – 25:34)

Now as we think about CRT or critical race theory, we also have to think about all of the studies that are available to us and how they all fit together. If we have this mixing bowl and

we're trying to cook something beautiful, what are we cooking? What are the elements or ingredients that are going to make up that recipe? As we think of Black Deaf studies and what we need to do to incorporate that, we have to actually contribute toward other disciplines. And explore Deaf ontologies or ways of being.

What are the ways that we are? What does it mean to be Deaf? You can't teach someone to be Deaf. You are Deaf. You are born into a community. You're adopted into a community. And then you have to navigate that community.

Also, we look at racial and ethnic epistemologies. And so unpacking those epistemologies, we also have to think about what are those dominant ideologies operating in certain spaces? What are the dominant ideologies operating in white spaces? There are already barriers that we have to go up against. There are times when we have those [shared] frustrations. The system is always operating in the background. So go back for me, please.

Now the last four is actually from our Deaf Lat Crit theorists and provide us with the elements that actually will comprise, again, Deaf ontology, racial and ethnic epistemologies, intersectionality, dominant ideologies, and counternarratives.

And of course, consciousness raising. I think that's what we have been exploring all day today. In the morning sessions and afternoon sessions, we have been talking about collecting the counternarratives. And what I would call the missing or hidden literature that we actually have to expose and elevate and so ensure that we actually have a structure and a framework in place for all of us to utilize.

And in the end, all Black Deaf signing spaces, our literature, our narratives, fulfill our Black Deaf studies.

(Slide 16 – 27:52)

[We are changing] from “It's a Small World,” to “It's a Black Deaf World.”

(Slide 17 – 28:17)

So if you ever need to be in touch with me, please get in touch. And I will do my best to respond. Thank you.

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