

Why Black Deaf Studies: Global Perspectives in Ireland

Black Deaf Studies Symposium Proceedings

Lydia Gratis

lydiagratis@gmail.com

Abstract

Lydia Gratis shared her poignant journey of navigating dual identities - being Black and Deaf - at the CBDS presentation. Born in South Africa and raised in Ireland, Lydia's narrative uncovers the nuanced challenges of racial and ability biases. With no Black Deaf role models, she experienced alienation and was forced to confront systemic racism early in her academic journey. Lydia's struggle to reconcile her identity and the inherent systemic biases culminated in a powerful awakening. With her organization Saved By The Sign and her position as the President of EUDY (European Deaf Youth), she's now a vanguard for change, advocating for the recognition, inclusion, and empowerment of Black Deaf individuals in Europe and beyond. The narrative underscores the pivotal role of representation and systemic transformation in fostering inclusivity and equity.

Keywords

Identity, Racism, Advocacy, Empowerment, Representation

Presentation Transcript

[00:05 – Slide 1]

I feel that I am at home. I see all of your beautiful faces, and it is a sight to behold.

I'm going to introduce myself; I will explain a little bit about my journey. I can't explain my journey in Europe without explaining my work also. So, I hope you are all ready for that. Good?

I am Lydia. This is my sign name. Why that sign name?

It looks like you're coming in and saying Hi! Bye! But no. When I was a little girl, six years old, I remember going to a Deaf school for the first time. I was born in South Africa. My family is South African and Malawian. I moved to Ireland when I was seven. I flew by myself

to meet my mom. We were supposed to go for the holidays for two weeks before moving to America. But no, that woman wanted to stay there! I could have had this growing up, with all of you guys.

But anyway, I moved when I was seven. I went to a Deaf school. Growing up in the Deaf school, I spent a lot of my time transitioning from the hearing Black community and the white Deaf community. When in the hearing Black community, I often concealed my Deafness. I made my mom take me to a speech therapist three times a week so I could speak like the hearing people. It was traumatic.

When I transitioned to the Deaf community, all white – I tried to mask my Blackness. I mean, you can't mask this. All this Black girl magic, you can't. You can't. But I tried. I tried to straighten my hair; I tried to wash my skin; I tried to behave like my white friends; I tried to assimilate for the first fifteen years of my life – why? Because I believed I was the only Black Deaf person in the world. That was my reality. I didn't have Black Deaf teachers; I didn't have Black Deaf representation or role models. I didn't have any of that. So, when I was with the Deaf community, I wanted to fit in with them. When I was in the Black community, I wanted to fit in. So, I spent my time really, really trying to please other people. Please my instructors. My first year going into school, I remember not having the skills to read and write and I could talk but did not sign. I learned how to do that in school. My first year, I watched and observed my friends who signed a lot and that lit a fire in me. I decided, I'll read a lot by the end of this year. I remember being seven years old for that. My teachers were like– slow down, you have time. But I did not listen.

By the end of my third year in primary school – and by that time I was reading thick books – my teachers were like – I didn't expect that especially because you come from Africa, how you reading like that? And that was my first time really understanding racism, and I had experienced it my first week flying there but at that time, I was only eight. I'm like, okay, I'm different from all of you...

Proceeding until my last year in primary school, before going into high school, I remember doing the exams. The exams decide if you will be able to go to high school or not. I was like okay. I took and finished all my exams. My teachers spent that year telling my mom, wow she's amazing, she's so smart, oh, wow, wow, wow. But when the exams were over, they said – she can't go to high school, she's too young. They're all twelve and thirteen, she's only eleven, so you can't; we're holding you back. My mom was like, you guys said she's so smart, so why are you holding her back? Why? Why? My mom fought for that. That's one thing I'm really lucky to have.

My grandma was an advocate during the apartheid time in South Africa; my mom's been an advocate and I've grown up seeing that. She just missed the Deaf part.

So, I moved and luckily entered high school. High school, I really spent my time trying to be the funny person. Why? Because I could see that my teachers didn't like me. They didn't have an understanding of who I am. They didn't have the cultural knowledge to know how to deal with me.

My first year of high school, I started going to school – from Monday through Friday, I stayed at school. Friday through Sunday, I went home. That Monday through Friday... All my friends had bedrooms, three people each, and I was the only one by myself. When I asked them why am I the only one sleeping alone, they said, oh, your hair smells different, like coconut oil... you put too much shea butter on and we don't want to smell that. You use Black people things.

Hearing that as a kid, only 11 years old, that was painfully impactful. Okay, so I have to change myself more to fit you all? Okay. High school went on, and I really struggled to fit in; I struggled with my education. Seeing the Black hearing community, the Black excellence in that was motivating for me. I knew from age 11 that I wanted to do my PhD – I had seen my mom do that, and I wanted to go to the same university my mom went to. My mom is a very sentimental person, so I thought if my mom went to that university, I would go to that university too.

Then, when high school was almost finished, there was another exam period. The exams happened at the same time we had to apply for our top ten universities we wanted to go to. I put my topmost university as the one my mom went to - Maynooth University. I wrote down that university, and my teachers saw this and said – um... maybe pick a less advanced university – you put down five advanced universities, try to pick some less advanced ones. Why? They don't accept people like you. Um, people like me, what do you mean by that? We're all Deaf. We're all girls. Oh, I'm the only Black person- that's what you mean by "people like me." Okay, okay.

At that time, I didn't have any role model inspiration. I crossed out all my applications to the universities on my list. I didn't apply. That year was, wow. Very challenging year for me. I felt like the Deaf community really, really wanted me out – the one Black Deaf person in the Deaf community, they didn't have the space for me, so I left the Deaf community for four years. That four years I was totally submerged in the hearing world, submerged in the South African Black community in Ireland. I really, really internalized and learned my culture, learned my ways of life, learned my people's things – this really impacted me. My Deaf identity, I didn't have the space to grow it, but my Black identity? Snap, snap, snap, snap, I got that. I got my foundation.

But I felt something missing– with all the talking – like I’m Deaf, I want to go back to the Deaf community. I really wanted this, but I had disconnected from my friends, and I had disconnected from different situations – how do I go back?

Next slide, please.

[07:54 – Slide 2]

“Some of us didn’t choose to be activists, some of us were activated.”

I went back to the Deaf community and said, you know what? I want to be involved in social justice. You don’t have Black people, so. Here I am. I want to be involved. I was the president of a youth association for two years. Those two years were, wow, amazing. We started to see more Black Deaf youth in schools, so that was my opportunity to start waving them over, like let’s talk. Tell me about yourself. Do you love who you are? I want you to feel that pride in your Black identity. I don’t want you to feel what I felt growing up. What do you want to do for the next two years? Everything they wanted, it was taught. Identity, culture, community, representation – we pulled people, and they flew in to talk with those students – it was amazing.

But of course, we are still in Europe. So, by the end of my two years, people had come for the General Assembly (GA).... At that GA, I explained how, for the past two years, every Tuesday and Thursday I hosted a youth group where we discussed many topics, with representation and role models being brought in consistently – all of this being done for two years with the money already worked out, all these details worked out – all of this I did, and their response was: I guess, but you didn’t post enough on Social Media, so. You weren’t amazing.

What? I didn’t understand that. That was the point for me where the fires in me raged, like you let me work that hard and you still don’t see my impact? Okay, I will do more. I went to the board of the Irish NAD and got involved in that.

People were mad. You switched to the NAD from the youth organization, why? Because representation is important. My involvement as president of IAD, that meant a lot more Black and Brown youth would come. But as part of NAD, what can I do? Still, still, I was building my Deaf identity at that time so I didn’t really understand my impact, but I didn’t want the youth to experience what I experienced growing up in education.

So, then, moving to NAD, then two years ago, Black Lives Matter happened and hit Europe too. The Deaf community wanted to listen now.

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[10:29 – Slide 3]

They really, really wanted to know more. But why now? They started a conversation in Ireland and all over Europe about education representation – my work – and what that means. A lot of Black Deaf youth grow up in a country where they're the only ones in these countries, or they have more than one, but they don't mix with each other, they don't network, they don't try conversing with each other – why? Their Deaf identity is so strong, they don't want to be seen as different. They don't want another person to push away from them. They don't have a safe space in the Black community, they don't have a Black Deaf community, so what do they do? They get involved in the Deaf community. The Deaf community is the only place they can feel like – they have something here, they have access, they have these different resources, they have a network, they have all these things, so that means they have to push aside their racial identity and focus on their Deaf identity. I see that a lot. A lot. They don't have Black Deaf teachers who can validate their identity. Who can teach them their culture, their history, when you don't have those resources? We all know what happens then.

Relationships, standards, rules, you don't see that in Europe. We all know education, that's important. For youth – those youth are the ones who will be progressing to get BAs, MAs, PhDs – if they don't have that foundation and that confidence that they CAN, then they won't. We won't see them in third level education, only a miniscule amount. I can count how many Black Deaf people in Europe that I know that are aspiring for third level education. Very, very small.

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[12:26 – Slide 4]

So. ASL. I see many of you using ASL or BASL, mingling and chatting. From different states, still conversating. Wow. My mouth drops. This is the first time I'm seeing that in my life. I'm 30. I've never been in a space with Black Deaf people partaking in a large gathering like this. Every person I've chatted with, I've looked up at them feeling like a kid. I'm like hi, hi, hi. So beautiful! Really, really beautiful. This shows about community; community is so important. I wouldn't be here if not for Lindsay Dunn. It just takes one representative, one role model to say oh, you're from South Africa, I'm from South Africa- I can mentor you, I can collaborate with you, I can encourage and uplift you, I can tell you more about who you are. We need that so much.

Europe has eighty thousand Deaf people who sign. The percentage who know and use International Sign is unknown. But what I do know from my work and research – we went to many countries and the Black Deaf youth who didn't know International Sign – the foundation for learning International Sign was what? Going to different camps growing up, flying to other countries and meeting people from other countries. If you can't go into the education system and see Black Deaf teachers, why am I sending my kids to a camp with white leaders? Why am I sending my kids to a camp with all white people? They don't have access to language meaning a lot of Black people in Europe are migrating from Africa and moving to different places in the world, so they spend a lot of their time trying to survive, trying to navigate the system. Their focus is not on – my kid is Deaf, I am going to give my kid access so that you can get a good education, okay put you in a Deaf school, I've done my job, and I can focus on surviving and getting ahold of what I need to get ahold of. So, a lot of these kids, when we go to these places and discuss racism, they want to discuss audism. I have seven brothers and sisters, all hearing, one Deaf; my parents sent me and dropped me off at school, didn't care about me but were attentive to my brothers and sisters.

We tried to – You see me saying “we” a lot. Why am I saying “we”? I'm talking about me, and that Black man over there, the beautiful Black guy in African clothing, the red shirt, (Romel Belcher). That's “we”.

We went to different countries, talked to the youth, and there's always a conversation, a conversation about trauma. Making them understand – your parents don't not care about you, it's not that. It's not that. It's that they're spending so much time navigating the system to give you what you need. They don't know what they don't know. That's a privilege we don't have in Europe. Because the doctor places – white. Schools – white. Deaf education – white. Why would they want to learn sign? Of course, it's important for access for their kids, but they don't understand Deaf culture, they don't understand the Deaf community, so they don't know why they should learn. They're thinking, my kid's going to a Deaf school, so I've done my job. So, if you don't have access to these things, how do you have access to a third level education? How can you see yourself getting a degree, a PhD, how? Why would you think you have the possibility to do that when you were never told in your education system that you could? If you don't have the language to understand that?

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[16:40 – Slide 5]

Our heritage. We don't have Black Deaf history documentation in Europe. The research that's available was written by 18 white Deaf academics about Black Deaf (European) people's experience from different countries (European), about our history documentation, our language, our international sign (IS). The international signs are heavily white

influenced. A lot of the time when Romel and I were chatting in Europe, we noticed white Deaf people watching our conversation. They asked us where our signs were from. I answered IS – they said our IS is different, of course there was Ebonics in our IS as we, Black Deaf, spiced it up. We never realize that until other people ask us what that sign is, or comment that we sign differently with each other, saying wow that looks different. I was like what? There is no research documentation on that phenomenon.

Coming here (Black Deaf Studies Symposium) lit the fire back in me. Before, I was contemplating getting a PhD but I decided not to pursue it because of the white system, white education system, white Deaf academics and I don't want to put myself in this white space. But after this? I am like whoa!! I'm going to get my PhD!

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[18:20 – Slide 6]

My story revolves around the significant presence of Black Deaf youth in Europe and we grow up without representation, we grow up without who can advocate for us, without Black Deaf teachers as we are navigating the system that wasn't designed for us. For example, in my school I grew up in Ireland with two sign languages because there is a school for men and school for women separately, this is the result of having two sign languages within each group. The first sign I learned from the Deaf school is? What? N-O. I learnt that from the sign language classes at the Deaf school. Every morning I would be chatting with friends while learning this sign language for the first time. I signed an N-O when I was 6 years old, asked "Can I touch your hair?" – No. "Can I touch your skin?" – No. This my initial encounter with my Black Deaf identity. I urge you to look beyond African American experience.

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[19:47 – Slide 7]

I want us to understand that if we collaborate and work together, if we do research together collectively, if you guys came to Europe...! I really want that collaboration and work collectively under the principles of Pan-Africanism. I want Black Deaf children in Europe to see and look up to you all. I want them to be inspired by your work; I want them to understand that they can, too. I want them to see that they can go beyond their limitations.

[20:23 – Slide 8]

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So, they said I can't, but I can. I started my own company last year – We (Romel and I) started our company last year. We traveled to different countries throughout Europe to discuss anti-racism and various social justice topics with youths, interpreter companies, Deaf businesses. We tried to make them understand the importance of diversity, inclusion and equity. We set up an empowerment camp for Black Deaf youth to help them understand their identity and who they are. The first thing they said was, “I am human, I am Deaf and human.” I agreed that they are human, however they are more than that too.

On the last night of the camp, we discovered that Black Deaf tended to shorten their names because white Deaf had a hard time saying their names. But now, during the last night of the workshop, they would tell their full names (despite it being long) and they (white Deaf) would learn how to say their names too. During the last night of our camp, the kids were emotional and called their parents, saying “I understand now, I want a relationship – I'm ready.” The last night of our camp, the kids said, “I want to be involved in my education”, “I want to go to University”, “I want to dance in America”, “I want”, “I can! I can!”.

Last year when I visited Paris, there was a girl who happened to be a really good dancer. She wanted to be involved in dance but was tired of navigating around Black hearing world and was fed-up with navigating the white Deaf world. She really wanted to thrive in dancing (professionally). One month after she took my workshop, she flew here to the USA and danced for one of the top dance companies in LA. You all know what EUDY is? Europe Deaf Youth. We have EUD, which is the organization that advocates for Deaf people all over Europe. We have a youth department, and I am the president of that, EUDY. For 35 years, it's always been white staff, white presidents, white boards, everything white, white, white. Now, we have diversity -- we have a Black president; we have two board members who happen to be Black and Brown as well. We have Brown woman in the office; we have three Black people in LBGTIA+ group; we also have full Black team that managed the BIPOC groups. All that starts from our (Romel and I's) work three years ago. We also established the Ubuntu European Deaf Youth; this is how to sign it (youth + grow). I want you all to remember that because we will go big with that name, okay? You better remember it, yeah, that's right. This is the first ever for the BIPOC youth group. We met up two years ago; we discussed a lot in one week, talking about the identities, the culture and the communities we come from. Whew, it was emotional! 2021 was the first time we had that -- the first time ever since we met. All those youth went back to their European countries and started to get more involved.

One month ago, I received a message on my Instagram page. At first, I thought it was a scam and told Romel, this is not real. Romel said, just reply anyway. I rolled my eyes and said, fine I'll reply. The message said “Lydia, we want your email because the president wants to contact you.” I said, “I'm sorry, the president of what?” It said, “The president of Ireland.” I

was like “Sorry what? Me? Who? What? Okay.” So, I gave my email anyways, once I gave my email then I realized it really was from the president of Ireland and he wanted me on his youth advisory board. I was astonished and said “Okay.” I remembered that my teachers once said, “I couldn’t,” but now the President was saying I can. For two years, I was involved working with the President of Ireland, encouraging the youth. I already mentioned that I was on the board of a Deaf organization, Irish Deaf Youth Association for two years. That was a challenge of its own, but that conversation is for another day, who wants to talk about that now? There is a global level platform too, Deaf Women’s Space is where we get together and plan six months workshops for the Deaf Women all over the world to discuss various topics for Deaf women by Deaf women. I am the media manager for that.

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[25:40 – Slide 9]

EUDY - European Union for the Deaf Youth - our work there is to advocate for Deaf youth in 30 different member countries promoting education, promoting collaboration, promoting employment, promoting different topics and inviting different opportunities.

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[26:14 – Slide 10]

Ubuntu European Deaf Youth is under EUDY, which works with BIPOC youth in areas of education, elevation, empowerment, gives them a sense of identity, to show them and encourage them to pursue Deaf education. Now we are researching on how many Deaf youth there are in European countries, and trying to encourage their involvement in the organizations work and in leadership groups.

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[26:48 – Slide 11]

This is my baby. “Saved by the Sign”, like a butterfly transforming from two caterpillars, which resembles Romel and I as we come together to transform into a butterfly. We go out to provide workshops and we always try to leave the people better than we found them originally. Transformation, growth, elevation and we also love conversation. We want this to happen in Europe. We want to work on building things like this in Europe.

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[27:25 – Slide 12]

So, we established Saved by the Sign in February 2021. We provided workshops in nine European countries to discuss diversity, equity, inclusion, anti-racism, health, mental health, fitness, and other topics for Deaf youth, Deaf interpreters, hearing interpreters, Deaf organizations and many different places. We provided a 13-week training program on anti-racism to Deaf Australians; we learned Auslan, which is the sign language of Deaf people in Australia, so that we could learn about their history. I'm proud of our work during that 12 month of training. Many people encouraged us and asked, can you write a book? I said, sure, I can write a book. One of the biggest motivations in our work is that we meet people who can relate and say -- "That used to be me" as we see their transformation -- that is what keeps us humble and constantly reminds us: Remember where you came from. Don't forget that. Remember that, anywhere you're going, don't forget that. In the Deaf community, white people have so many platforms, so many opportunities, and so many resources, that they don't always realize that racism will limit BIPOC Deaf from benefiting from these privileges that they enjoy. Now Europe is evolving as we see a lot of fire, and a lot of people expressing their anger that there is too much diversity, too much anti-racism and that we are all doing too much. I was perplexed, we started two years ago, and you think that this is too much now? Please wait. We have more, I will do more!

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[29:33 – Slide 13]

Look how fast we got together, and I want us to work together. I want to learn from you all and I want you all to come to Europe-- I know I said it already, but I will say it again so you can remember. We need Pan-African connection in the Deaf community, we need to elevate and create more spaces like this one. Thank you very much. And thank you for welcoming me, thank you.

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