

## Why Black Deaf Studies in Canada Matters?

Black Deaf Studies Symposium Proceedings

**Jenelle Rouse** 

multi.lens.existence@gmail.com

### Abstract

*Dr. Jenelle Rouse discusses the importance of Black Deaf studies in Canada. She delves into Canada's multicultural identity, highlighting its appreciation for diverse languages and cultures but notes a lack of focus on the Black Deaf community. Dr. Rouse outlines the challenges associated with accessibility in Canada, drawing a parallel with the United States' Americans with Disabilities Act and underscores the late establishment of the Accessible Canada Act. She identifies a significant gap in data and resources related to the Black Deaf community, emphasizing the absence of their history and narratives in Canadian literature and education. Dr. Rouse underscores her journey as a Black Deaf individual, her efforts to uplift the community, and the inception of a collective project of Black Deaf Canada to bridge the existing gaps.*

### Keywords

Black Deaf Studies, Canada, Accessibility, Multiculturalism, Education, Identity

### Presentation Transcript

(Slide 1 – 00:00)

Greetings, everyone. I have a quiz, a very important quiz. If you know how to spell my name, raise your hand. Is that the right spelling? There is no A in my name. A very important quiz to begin the day. My name is spelled J-e-n-e-l-l-e. Just think about Jenelle and my large beautiful smile, Es all the way.

I am Dr. Jenelle Rouse. Thank you. Next slide.

And this is my topic for today. I want to talk about why Black Deaf studies in Canada matters. Why does it matter? Why is it important to me? I am Canadian and will be speaking to you from the Canadian perspective.

It is such an honor to be here to talk about my country where I was born and grew up—in Canada. Canada is a part of North America. It is part of the Americas. It is right there on top of the continent.

But it is considered an international country from the U.S. perspective.

(Slide 2 – 00:50 )

I will share with you just a few quick facts related to Canada.

(Slide 3 – 00:58)

As I just explained, Canada is on the top of North America. But it is considered an international country from the American perspective. We have about 38.6 million people who live in Canada from east to west. Out of the population, there are about 7.5 million people from other countries who have moved to and settled in Canada.

When we look at the entire country, it is huge. I mean, the land mass itself is massive compared with America, which has about 50 states. Alaska is on top of Canada, even though it is a part of North America, or we can say, a part of our “family.”

And why do I say we are family? President Biden visited Canada and had a conversation with our Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau. They talked about economics and how to solve different situations. And that was considered the first time there was actually a focus on developing a working relationship between the two nations. In the past, there have been debates, and the U.S. and Canada were considered to be rivals before becoming siblings—a family.

Back to the point about the population in the country of Canada. Can we please go to the next slide for me to elaborate?

(Slide 4 – 02:42)

See that word on the slide? Multiculturalism.

I am going to speak about the Multiculturalism Act in Canada. It means a lot of people from various cultures, different languages, and from various ethnicities live in Canada. And it is their Canada. That is the way Canada is run, as a multicultural, multilingual country. And in fact, the prime minister's father back in the 1970s–80s was the one who established the Multiculturalism Act in Canada. His father's goal was to value and respect the different languages that were being maintained rather than eradicate the languages and force people to speak only English. Under the act, everyone could have their own language. And that was honored. Canada is a multilingual country with 10 provinces and three territories. Canada, especially its territories, honors the Indigenous population's long history of caring for the environment and animals, including their cultural heritage, lands, and languages. This honor applies to everyday people as well.

So when we think about that area, everything is part of that multicultural point of view.

The Multicultural Act is something that we have had in place for over 50 years. However, today, it seems that people are starting to question if the act has really been effective. Of course, 7.5 million individuals living in Canada agree about the act being effective. Most of them were once refugees and immigrants who came to Canada to feel safe and to look for opportunities. They have different reasons for moving to Canada, which range from fearing for their safety, seeking a home away from home, living their lives as they see fit, and because of Canada's preservation of their cultures and languages. I know that is the fact.

How do I know that? Well, my parents are immigrants, they moved and settled in Canada from Barbados. And there is a funny story about the two of them. They did not meet in Barbados, even though they grew up there and lived there. They met and fell in love in Canada before having me. This is an interesting story and a valuable point for North America and Canada.

Next slide, please.

(Slide 5 – 04:58)

There is an important point that I want to share with you in terms of accessibility. Accessibility is the ability for people to gain general access to information and knowledge about, for example, their history, languages, and identity based on their relationships with their families, communities, and educational settings. Now that we have an idea of what accessibility is, we can examine our experiences as Deaf people. We could identify as Black, other, or whatever we choose to identify with. However, to access such critical information is not always easy.

In Canada, information is not easy to obtain as in America. Not always.

So you have the United States Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which was signed in 1990, right? I can see head nods in the audience.

In that same year in 1990, we were not able to establish an accessibility act in Canada.

Next slide, please.

(Slide 6 – 06:04)

So it was not until 2019 that the Accessible Canada Act was implemented. Its goal is to break down the barriers that we all face to open up opportunities and greater

opportunities for all Canadians who have a disability, enabling them to integrate into mainstream life in Canada. That is the point of the act. And it was not passed until quite recently. In fact, as I mentioned, it was passed in 2019.

After the establishment of the Accessible Canada Act, it did not become widespread overnight. Consider the American ADA that was passed in 1990. Are Americans 100% familiar with it? No. Is it a part of the American mainstream? No. Not yet, even though it was passed in 1990.

So full accessibility did not happen overnight in the United States. It has been the same in Canada. Even with the passing of the Accessible Canada Act, we are still behind and struggling in terms of linguistic access, gaining access to information, and many other points of life.

So there is that obstacle. And we must consider how to overcome it.

Next slide, please.

(Slide 7 – 07:27)

Throughout all the provinces and territories of Canada, a survey that was conducted by Statistics Canada in 2019. It shows that there are 37,410 Canadians who identify themselves as Deaf. They did the survey again and thought oh, wait a minute, let us look at this next figure.

(Slide 8 – 07:54)

They did not look at the number of respondents who identified themselves as racialized and/or Black and Deaf. So we do not have those statistics. Typically, surveys are very broad. The answers they receive are very broad. And Statistics Canada thought that okay, these people are Deaf and that is it. The survey focused only on Deafness. Statistics Canada believed that it had done its work and that is all that was required. The company believed that all it needed to do was to place a checkmark there and say the job is done. But really, no, more information is needed. There is the need to identify who Deaf people are in order to provide the appropriate resources, the appropriate language supports, et cetera.

(Slide 9 – 08:33)

Now let us focus on language. Statistics Canada found that 49,530 Canadians reported knowing and using sign language. Either American Sign Language or LSQ (Langue des Signes Québécoise).

What is missing in that picture? Let us see. The next bullet, please.

(Slide 10 – 08:57)

In that survey, there is no identification of indigenous sign languages or Black American Sign Language. That was not considered and appreciated, as we discussed yesterday, until 2020. In Canada, there was no exploration of that either.

The survey only mentioned “sign language,” and again, it was generalized, just as the Deaf population was generalized.

The Accessible Canada Act was supposed to focus on access. I will use the acronym ACA from here on out.

ACA was established in 2019. In 2017 and 2018, political organizations got together and worked with various governmental authorities to say we need this act, we need access. And the authorities heard them but did not listen. All they heard was the conversation. But the authorities did not really listen to what the need was.

We worked with organizations, petitioned, and talked about sign language and how to transform that into the ACA. At the very last minute, right before the act was signed, in the fall, the government put in an amendment. And that particular amendment recognized sign language as a language. So now there are three Deaf languages in Canada, which are ASL, LSQ, and then the third is Indigenous Sign Language or ISL.

Those three sign languages were recognized in the act. But at the last moment, right before the act was approved and the Deaf community was absolutely thrilled, we thought, wait a minute, we are excited, but there is something odd about how the act is framed.

Can you go back to the slide on the ACA, please?

(Slide 6 return – 11:05)

Thank you. There we are.

Do you see the word Accessible Canada Act? Think about what you see there and what those symbols underneath it mean. Although it is related to people with a disability to have access, does it acknowledge our linguistics, culture, strong sign language community, and how we form self-identity as Deaf individuals? Not really. And that was our disappointment. So we thought we definitely, definitely have work to do because the act’s focus is only on physical disabilities.

Perfect. Thank you for advancing the slide.

(Slide 11 – 11:39)

So as you can see, we had to roll up our sleeves, get engaged, and do more work in order to build on that foundation. They created a survey about people who are Deaf, and they created a survey about people who use sign language. But that is all they created; there is so much more information that they have excluded. We exist, Black American Sign Language exists, and we are thankful to Dr. Carolyn McCaskill and her team for their research work on BASL, which has been widely recognized in the continent since 2011 or even before that year.

However, of course, here we are right in the COVID era. So people are becoming more aware, and we had the Black Lives Matter movement, the grieving that happened around that period of time. When people sought optimism, they learned more about Black American Sign Language due to its appearance on the internet. People began to wonder if Black ASL also exists in Canada. People then reached out to me to interview me and ask me about Black ASL. As a researcher, ethically, I could not immediately say oh, yes. Or oh, no. I had to do the research before responding. I had to have data and statistics in order to support my response to their inquiry. That is my accountability as a researcher.

So again, that motivates me to continue to do the work, roll up my sleeves, to dig in. That is when I started working on a particular project and we got more excited. I wanted to know, as it says in the bold print, out of the 4,965 Canadians who use ASL, how many of them use Black American Sign Language?

And you might wonder how we found out. It was a lot of work. We still have a long way to go in terms of doing the research. In case you are wondering why it took so long to conduct the research, it is because I have so many responsibilities. I have several other projects that I am involved in. Perhaps if I broke down my schedule and did not eat or sleep, maybe I would have completed the research in a shorter timeframe, right? I do not think so. I cannot be an army of one, doing everything by myself. So others who have expertise in language, history, education, and access collaborated with me to combat the issue and make progress.

And so we got together and thought about what it is that we want to accomplish, including the appropriate methodology to use in order to accomplish our goals.

We created a schedule. But we were in different countries. Some of us were in different provinces within Canada. Others were here in North America. We had to respect each other's time zones. But at the same time, it was an honor to work on the project, even though it did consume quite a bit of time.

(Slide 12 – 14:50)

I want you to be aware of the foundation of where we started. And that means speaking of past influences that influence our present and future as well.

Take a look at this quote about education. I will give you a moment to do so. The quote is related to Black Deaf studies in America and what it has been like, and it is one of my favorite quotes because it is so true to life. The quote comes from Anderson and Bowe, who recently published the book containing this quote and have published other books in the past. What we found still exists today. We discovered that in schools for the Deaf, Black Deaf students learn very little about themselves. Very little about the problems of their people. Very little about the contributions of their ancestors. In fact, Black Deaf students are exposed to text oriented toward a belief in white supremacy. That is what they learn about in schools: slavery, including when slaves escaped and what led to freedom. So teaching and learning focuses only on what happened in Africa, what happened with slavery, and escaping from slavery. Those limitations are encountered when we talk about education from the perspective of North American history. These limitations do not only pertain to the United States. Canada has the same limitations.

As a child, I watched a movie, and I saw someone Black like me in the movie. I was heartbroken to see the movie about Black people, slaves in particular, who were struggling and fighting again and again for freedom. I was wondering what has happened now.

And this is something that I experienced as a child, and I thought, "Does this mean that I am a slave and I am going to experience this kind of pain my entire life?" If I was thinking that way at that time as a child, imagine what other children are thinking now if they saw this movie or are being taught that way.

During my educational journey and my career as a teacher, the majority of people in my classes were white. I was not surprised about it. That is the reality of where I am from and where I work. Let's examine the month of February. What do you think happens during the month of February where I am from? Several activities celebrating Black people and their accomplishments take place. During that one month, people would look at me and say, "Hey, Jenelle, why don't you run the program about Black history month?" Okay. We have done this for many years, and every February of every year, they relied on me to provide the information. I only agreed to do it for the children's



sake. I had a friend from America, and we would talk about setting up some fun activities for the children there. We would come up with quizzes and questions and things for them to really learn about their history. And we would help them independently to do research on their own as well. And we would model for the staff, I would model for the staff. I would ask the staff to watch what I am doing so they will learn and do it by themselves the following year.

And then when the next year came, what do you think happened? They did not do it for themselves. They relied on me. Again, they would say, “Dr. Jenelle, can you lead Black History Month activities?” So I would come up with new projects and fun activities again. And then the following year, I said, “You know what? I’m not doing it. You have seen what I’ve done. I’m going to work with my class. You do your thing.” But no one did anything for those Deaf Black children. And it was heartbreaking. It was really heartbreaking. So they would put the blame on lack of knowledge about Black people and expect me to run the program because I’m Black.

When we think about the curriculum, it has to be infused year round. When we engage in conversations, we want to show the students that we see them and want to celebrate them, instead of saying, “Oh, poor you. Poor you. You don’t have a history,” thus disparaging them.

Next slide, please.

(Slide 13 – 19:14)

And continuing with this theme of education, looking at these quotes, they definitely fit what we see today. I picked three significant quotes to share with you from Simms, Rusher Andrews, and Cory. The quotes are from a publication in 2008. You can see that all of these comments still apply to what we are experiencing today.

The first quote talks about the fact that Deaf people of color are most often stuck in a bottleneck on the highway to opportunity. Quite true. Quite true.

The second quote says the more fortunate ones find ways to make it through and further their education. And in a little bit, I will talk about how they do that.

The third quote here says the politics of authority structures, racism, audism, and oppressiveness in terms of language and in terms of academic policies, recognize that they often work against Deaf children. They work against Deaf children in terms of their struggle to acquire language. Their struggle to acquire an academic foundation. And their struggle to acquire a healthy cultural identity.



All of the three quotes relate to my life experience.

When you think about the pipeline and those who make it through the bottleneck, it is because they have good teachers. I had good teachers along the way, teachers who recognized me as a human being, as an individual. And the best example of that I will share with you next.

Next slide.

(Slide 14 – 20:59)

And there we go. There is a picture. Back in the third grade, I had a teacher who said, “Jenelle, I want you to find out about who you are.” And I was like, “What do you mean who am I? My name is Jenelle.” The teacher said, “No. Talk to your parents. Who are you? Where are you from?” Can you imagine? That is an early research practice starting in the third grade. Good teachers believe in having students do research on who they are as individuals and allow the sharing of their identity. Teachers who recognize students as individuals are important. Such teachers tell students as young as third graders to go out and find out who they are.

So I did just that. All the members of my family are hearing. I am the only one in my family who is Deaf. So I chatted with my parents and said, “Mom, where are you from, and where are you from, Dad?” We began that type of conversation. We began to develop a stronger bond as a result of that conversation. And that helped me as a child to be excited about language, to be excited about what I was learning throughout those huge encyclopedias. I found a tab that said B for Barbados in an encyclopedia. I asked my parents what the word meant, and my parents would explain. I wrote a paper on Barbados at home and brought it to school, and gave a report about my identity. I had typed it all up on a giant computer. I was so excited while I was printing my report out of a large printer. That was my first book! And I have kept it ever since.

That was when I was in the third grade. That experience built confidence in me. And it helped me build a strong sense of identity. So when challenges came up for me, I remembered that moment. That was a key point in my life.

(Slide 15 – 23:04)

Now let us talk about Canada and what is happening now. We have Black studies in Canada, and we do have Black Deaf studies in Canada. I would like to share a quote with you from James and Turner. The quote states that: “Without the data or research studies, the experiences and concerns may never be taken seriously by school

administrators, school board, and educators.” This leads to the topic of lack of racial diversity.

The lack of racial diversity among teachers, Black people, and Black history are not reflected in the curriculum. Streaming Black studies into courses below their ability or Black students dropping out or being discouraged from attending university is parallel to what has happened here in America.

(Slide 16 – 24:12)

Take a look at these two quotes. The first of which asserts that inner city students are more likely to be perceived as a problem. That is not true. I am from the inner city. I am not a problem. It actually depends on the teachers and school staff. Inner city students are often misjudged and wrongfully placed in special programs of all kinds. And they are compared to “normal” students or what is called the “total elementary school population.”

The second quote emphasizes that Black students are being inappropriately streamed into schools and are disproportionately dropping out. Maybe it is because their families are not there often, so they assume that Black students are insignificant and put them in particular programs so that doors for opportunities are slammed shut. As a result, we are not able to raise them to the level where they should be.

And next slide.

(Slide 17 – 25:08)

So now we get to Black Deaf studies in Canada. (With sarcasm): Where is the quote? Oh, do you see a quote there? I do not see a quote. A publication? There must be one. Let us go to the next slide.

(Slide 18 – 25:30)

Oh, dear. Oh, what are we missing? I thought there were some publications. Apparently not.

This demonstrates that we have a serious problem. If we look at publications from the past, there is nothing about Black Deaf people in Canada. Our history is missing. Our present and future are missing.

So when we think about a joyous celebration in Canada, particularly Black Deaf people’s accomplishments, we look at me as the first Deaf Black Canadian to get a

PhD. Although it is a celebration, it is somewhat of a burden when people rely on me for everything. It certainly is a lot.

(Slide 19 – 26:14)

So I had to think about what I can do to improve the situation. What does inclusion look like for me? And that meant having a foundation, having a language base, and figuring out what resources look like at home, out in the community, and at school. What is out there that we can rely on?

And if they don't have anything, we need to create something.

(Slide 20 – 26:50)

Did you see that? Did you see that? It went away. It was there a minute ago. Black Deaf Canada.

So the Black Deaf Canada organization was established with the goal of being an organization, not only for me, but for all people, for your everyday Deaf person who is wondering why there are so many gaps in their history, those who lack a strong self-identity. We established Black Deaf Canada. Can we show that slide?

(Slide 21 – 27:30)

So there are possibilities. There are possibilities coming down the road. Many possibilities. And I could name those for you for another half an hour. But we do not have that time.

During the panel, perhaps I will have an opportunity to share some of those possibilities with you.

(Slide 22 – 27:43)

So this is significant. A group of us came together with various skills to talk about our areas of expertise and interests. Take a look at this photo. There is one person missing in the photo, I will tell you who the missing person is. For now, if you look at the photo, you can see Abigail Danquah. She currently focuses on gathering statistics, and her position is of great significance. She is the person I can actually reach out to when I need information. Next to her, I am pictured there along with Amy Parsons, who specializes in accessibility, and Amelia Palmer. Amelia is one of you who is involved with us in this study. Along with many skills, she is going to graduate soon and come back to join us so we can really get the project going.

The person missing from the photo is in this audience; this person is a Gallaudet alumni and has focused on education and critically studies gaps in education. This person is a great person — I see you there.

So we do want the project to continue now that it has been established, to continue to be our future.

(Slide 23 – 28:53)

So in summary, this is why Black Deaf studies matter in Canada. Thank you very much for listening.

## **PUBLICATION TEAM**

Patrick Boudreault, Executive Editor  
Rezenet Moges-Riedel, Co-Editor  
Lissa Ramirez-Stapleton, Co-Editor  
Megan Konstandtinidis, Assistant Editor  
Brenna Smith, Assistant Editor

Carolyn McCaskill, CBDS Director  
Lindsay Dunn, CBDS Scholar Fellow  
Evon Black, CBDS Associate Director  
Kristina McKinnie, CBDS Assistant

Theodore Doresette III, Lead Videographer  
Cem Barutcu, Videographer  
Amelia Palmer, Videographer  
JC Smith, Videographer  
Blue20 LLC, Editing and Transcript

## **PUBLICATION FUNDING**

This symposium proceeding was made possible with generous financial support from Sorenson Communications and Gallaudet University; The Office of the Provost, and Gesture Literacy Knowledge Studio.