

# **Creating a Homeplace for Black Deaf Students: The Importance of Black Studies in K-12 Deaf Education**

Black Deaf Studies Symposium Proceedings

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## **Abstract**

*Akilah English, a Ph.D. student at the University of Maryland, shares her insights on the experiences of Black Deaf students facing anti-Blackness in educational settings. Drawing from personal encounters and academic insights, English outlines the intersectional challenges these students navigate, marked by systemic oppression and identity erasure. She underscores the prevalence of anti-Black linguistic racism and curriculum violence, advocating for a transformative approach in education. English calls for the integration of Black Deaf studies to affirm and celebrate the students' identities, urging a shift from traditional narratives steeped in white supremacy to counter-narratives that embrace, uplift, and empower Black Deaf students in their uniqueness and potential.*

## **Keywords**

Anti-Blackness, Intersectionality, Educational Oppression, Black Deaf Identity, Curriculum Violence, Counter-narratives

## **Presentation Transcript**

(Slide 1 – 00:00)

Good afternoon. I am so excited to be here for all the presentations today. Yesterday was inspirational. This morning has also been inspirational. So I am ready to share my work with you.

Again, hello. My name is Akilah English, and I am a third-year student enrolled in a Ph.D. program at the University of Maryland. My focus is on the experience of Black Deaf students and how they navigate through school spaces. I would like to share a brief story with you. I had not planned on enrolling in a doctoral program. I graduated from Gallaudet University in 2007. After graduation, I was like, okay, I am done with higher education. So I went on to a career in teaching.

There are two defining moments in my teaching career that I want to share with you. I can remember that during my third or fourth year as a teacher, there was a Black Deaf student in my classroom. I had been warned before he was assigned to my classroom that the student was struggling with behavioral issues. Before I met the student, I had already received others' negative views of him, and I had internalized their biases. When the student was assigned to my classroom, he began to thrive. He was no longer facing suspension, and he was no longer fighting. We developed a positive relationship with one another. I could not understand why others had expressed negative views of him. Right, this is a success story! It was so amazing to see him thrive.

That particular student had a Deaf mother who gave birth to him when she was only 15 years old. And of course, the student had a tough life. So he wanted to confide in me. He wanted to be loved. Later on, the student was expelled, despite the fact that he was making good progress in my classroom. I was confused, and I could not understand why he was expelled. I noticed that some of the other students in the classroom had behavioral issues as well, but they were not expelled. Only that Black Deaf student was expelled. So I spoke with the school administrator and asked her why he had been expelled. The school administrator stated that she could not discuss the issue with me because he was no longer my student. I was very upset. I spoke with one of the Black hearing teachers and shared that I did not understand why the student, who had been making good progress and had a great relationship with me, was expelled.

Do you know what the teacher said? The teacher said, "It's because he's Black!" That was a defining moment in my career as a teacher. I had a light-bulb moment. I realized that oh, so the whole time I had been teaching, I had not been truly aware of my whole identity. Before that, I had identified as a Black Deaf individual, of course. But I did not have an actual Black Deaf identity. I grew up in a mainstream setting with white teachers, and I had teachers who of course instilled in me a Deaf identity. But my Black identity was missing and not fully formed until that day, when I had the light-bulb moment. That was the first day of my life as a 25-year-old that I truly identified as a "Black Deaf" individual.

Looking back on my career trajectory, that moment was life changing. That journey was painful for me. Then I decided to figure out who I am and also determine how to hold space in terms of where I could analyze my own experiences in life and use the lessons I had learned from those experiences to empower my students.

Throughout that process, I tried to figure out the best language I can use to describe my experience as a teacher of Black Deaf students. I had some disturbing experiences, and I noticed things in the classroom, such as violence toward Black Deaf students,

particularly frequent episodes of violence and oppression. However, I lacked the appropriate language to describe what I had witnessed in the classroom. So this is what motivated me to go back to school and enroll in a Ph.D. program.

(Slide 2 – 04:08)

My doctoral research focuses specifically on how anti-Blackness manifests in Deaf education.

When I started my Ph.D. journey, I knew that I wanted to study Black Deaf students, but I did not know what my thesis was going to be about. I started taking courses, and my cohort consisted of all Black scholars. My advisors and professors were all Black scholars as well. That space was a space where I could fully be myself. I cannot even describe to you how amazing, phenomenal, and inspiring it was that we could freely unpack our painful experiences. It was emotional, overwhelming, and so much more. We engaged in robust discussions on anti-Blackness in the classroom, and that is when I decided to study anti-Blackness in depth.

(Slide 3 – 05:05)

How many of you are familiar with the concept of anti-Blackness? I can see that only a few of you have raised your hands, and some of you are not familiar with the concept.

So very broadly speaking, anti-Blackness refers to actions or behaviors that minimize, marginalize, or devalue the full participation of Black people in life. The spectrum of anti-Black actions and behaviors spans from unconscious bias to motivated acts of prejudice and the institutions, policies, and ideologies involved.

So to clarify things further, I assume that many of you are familiar with the broad definition of racism within American society, which applies to diverse groups of people. However, anti-Blackness refers to racism specifically against Black bodies. We know that white supremacy is instilled in our policies, practices, rules, and regulations. And that disenfranchises Black bodies and Black people. This is not a concept that is manifesting only within the United States. We also see it manifesting globally. We know that the United States was established in two ways: the genocide and extermination of Native American and Indigenous communities, which was perpetuated, and the enslavement of Black bodies. So anti-Blackness did not end with the abolition of slavery; it persisted in Jim Crow laws, through wage gaps, health care disparities, and so on. Anti-Blackness is rooted in American society.

Now I will discuss how Black children experience violence in the educational arena. I have learned about the IDEA process, which is a law. And there are actually 13

categories in the IDEA process. IDEA applies to students who are Deaf, autistic, and students who have learning disabilities, etc. Of all 13 categories, the most overrepresented are Black students.

So what this means is that most students who are labeled as “Deaf” are Black. Furthermore, the suspension rate of Black students is extremely high, and Black students are being hyper-surveilled. Think about schools that have dress codes. Who are the most targeted? Black girls. That type of policy persists in order to maintain anti-Blackness.

(Slide 4 – 08:09)

Now let us examine the concept of anti-Blackness and how it applies to or manifests itself in a K-12 environment in terms of Deaf education.

I have read a lot of articles by Black Deaf scholars, such as Dr. Anderson, Dr. McCaskill, and Dr. Moges. I have studied their work and delved into it in order to understand how anti-Blackness emerges in Deaf education. What does this look like? I have identified three common themes from the literature review.

The themes are as follows.

The first theme is intersectional erasure. I am curious about the white people in the audience; I want to know how many of you white individuals have experienced people asking you this -- just raise your hand if you are comfortable responding to this question. How many white individuals in the audience have experienced being asked if they are white first or Deaf first? I want the white individuals in the audience to answer.

For the Black audience participants, how many of you have been asked if you are Black first or Deaf first? Every hand is up. That is very telling. It is clear that as Black Deaf people, we are often forced to choose between binaries. Are you Black or are you Deaf? So people see the world in binaries and ask us to subscribe to that ideology.

White Deaf people ask us that type of question in order to test our loyalty to the white community, hoping that we will be loyal to them by only identifying as Deaf and rejecting our Black identity. Oftentimes, when Black Deaf individuals enter Black Deaf spaces, they instantly connect with other Black Deaf individuals in those spaces without having to choose only one identity. So intersectionality helps us to understand that Black Deaf students do not show up in school spaces with only one identity. They have multiple oppressions that they experience because of their multiple identities. Forcing Black Deaf students to focus on one identity actually supports and perpetuates anti-

Blackness. For us to help Black Deaf students to thrive, we have to dismantle the notions that stem from white supremacy.

The second theme that I encountered in research literature is anti-Black linguistic racism. This framework was created by April Baker-Bell, a hearing high school ELA instructor who actually studied Black students, and she is a Black scholar as well. Baker-Bell had Black students in her class, and those students experienced codeswitching. Although she created a welcoming environment and invited them to classroom conversations, the Black students often struggled to express themselves in their Black language. They did not know how. While Baker-Bell gave them a window of opportunity, they would often shut down during classroom exercises. They would discard their Black language and focus only on using white standard English. In linguistics, we often discuss language only and exclude the discussion of race. That is inappropriate; we cannot discuss language without discussing race. Black students experience both linguistic violence and racial violence simultaneously. So I have noticed that many Black students experience code switching due to being unable to use African-American vernacular English. I have seen the same occurrence in the Black Deaf students in my classroom. Anytime they show up in a dominant space, they are expected to code switch. They sanitize, and their ASL becomes more like the ASL used by the white Deaf majority. They do not use Black ASL. If they use Black ASL, they are criticized. They are scolded. So those Black Deaf students begin to feel that their language is something to be ashamed of and avoid using it. That is an example of linguistic violence.

Anti-Blackness and racism are happening not just to Black students, but these issues are also happening to Black Deaf students. Baker-Bell states that we need to shift from linguistic violence and think of language as a provider of linguistic resources. Language provides us with resources. Baker-Bell had to encourage her students to learn how to navigate spaces. She taught them the difference between Black English and white standard English. She created spaces where students could see the difference and embrace both languages. She encouraged her students to write freely without criticism. The overall goal was to have students express themselves authentically.

The last theme that I want to discuss is curriculum violence. And that refers to the school curriculum; the curriculum in the United States was designed to suppress Black people's intelligence and their social-emotional wellbeing. The majority of the curriculum in the United States was written by white individuals. And so you as Black bodies are traumatized by that white curriculum. That curriculum is often interjecting the master narratives and perpetuating the master narratives we have from the traditional

pedagogy. That trauma is perpetuated and manifests in the classroom in different ways. It was not designed to meet the needs of Black Deaf students.

How many of you learned about Black history? Of course you learned about Martin Luther King, Harriet Tubman, and a few others. But there are more than those few. We are retraumatized when those few are reintroduced. In Black Deaf education, we may learn about Dr. Andrew Foster and Dr. Glenn Anderson. But our Black community is so rich. We have Black people with various identities. We have Black joy. We have Black literature. We have so many aspects of our Blackness that remain hidden and are not mentioned in the traditional curriculum. That is what we call curriculum violence.

(Slide 5 – 15:03)

A home place. This is a concept that we get from Bell Hooks. And I will describe it in further detail. A home place is a site of radical possibility. A space of resistance. A central location for the production of a counter discourse that is not just found in words. A site one stays in, clings to even because it nurtures one's capacity to resist. It offers one the possibility of a radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives and new worlds.

So Bell Hooks came up with this concept in remembrance of her mother, grandmother, foremothers, and her ancestors. Let us examine the early 1900s and the era of segregation in the United States. Black folks had to walk very carefully in a white supremacist world. When you have been subjected to feelings of oppression and not being safe, segregation, or over surveillance, what happens when you get home? You disconnect and feel free from white supremacy and the outside world. The women in Hooks' home created a space where the family felt affirmed. The family felt liberated. The family felt safe. And this was an act of resistance against white supremacy. So in their home, they would have conversations. And Hooks talks about this concept of a home place and what it gives all of us, that we have to create spaces where we can emerge, resist, believe, and escape from the violent spaces to enter a space of security. In comparison with hook's concept of a home place, when Black Deaf students are in the school space, we want them to say, "I am home."

We want our students to have a home place in their schools where their identities are acknowledged and affirmed, where they are uplifted and can experience a home place.

(Slide 6 – 17:18)

Creating a home space for Black Deaf students is important. It is a space where Black Deaf students can articulate the politics of refusal and re-imagine themselves in opposition to anti-Blackness. Remember that when I discussed the three themes, I

shared that Black Deaf students experience intersectional erasure, and I also discussed linguistic violence, including the third theme, which is curriculum violence.

Now let us discuss how we can flip the narrative and create a space where Black Deaf students refuse to identify with those three traumatic themes, saying, “That is not me, that is not my story, that is not how you represent me!” That space is a space of resistance against anti-Blackness. So how do we accomplish the creation of that space?

Black Deaf studies is one of the many ways to resist anti-Blackness. I am not saying it is the only way, but it is one avenue for us to resist anti-Blackness.

Next slide, please.

(Slide 7 – 18:30)

I will now explain in depth the importance of Black Deaf studies and the importance of sharing it with the world. I am certain that when many of you left high school, you had not fully developed your Black identity. But my expectation is that when a Black Deaf student graduates from the fifth grade, the student has already developed a strong Black identity and says, “Hey, yes, I’m Black!” As a matter of fact, I want Black Deaf children to leave kindergarten saying, “Hey, mom, I’m Black! Guess what I learned?” I want them to passionately share the things they learned in class about Blackness and Black history.

That is what I want instead of them experiencing intersectional erasure, linguistic violence, curriculum violence and all those traumatic events. I do not want them to grow up and miss the opportunity to discover their Black identity.

For years, we have been traumatized as Black people, and Black Deaf studies creates a space where Black Deaf students can confirm and affirm their Black Deaf identities.. Black Deaf studies will allow Black Deaf students to celebrate both their Deaf identity and their Black identity.

Now let us talk about Black joy. We could talk about it all day. During the period of slavery in America, enslaved Black people picked cotton in the fields, sweating profusely and suffering abuse. They toiled from sunrise to sunset.

And then in the evening, they would go back to the slave quarters and dance. And the rhythm of the African drum would call them to community and call them to connections. Even in the face of enslavement, they never forgot where we came from. And because

of the joy of Blackness, there was a song to sing and a dance to dance in order to forget about violence and hardship. Because of that, we still have that Black joy that has been passed down from generation to generation by our ancestors. And we have the responsibility to pass that on to future generations as well. We have to uphold it. We have to validate those experiences and Black Deaf studies. Black Deaf students want to feel loved and affirmed. And it is through Black Deaf studies that we can achieve that.

It is wonderful to be able to share Black Deaf history with Black Deaf students. Can you imagine the smiles on their faces when they are immersed in Black Deaf history? They light up a room. Their smiles are so powerful. They are empowered because they feel acknowledged and also represented in the curriculum. And as a result, they are inspired to continue to learn.

Counter-narratives – this is what we have been engaging in all day yesterday and today. You listened to Black Deaf scholars and their narratives. All of their presentations are examples of counter-narratives. It is important to listen to Black scholars who are centering their research through a Black Deaf lens to challenge master narratives that have been handed down from white supremacy, telling us who we are. And our act of resistance is a counter-narrative. As we think about the master narratives in terms of race, racial injustice, and racial inequalities, we have to say, “Not today!” Those master narratives do not reflect who we are as a people. We offer this counter-narrative to resist and bring authentic stories to the forefront in order to have an authentic representation of who we are. That becomes an act of resistance in itself.

So I think the three themes that I have shared with you really demonstrate the traditional (anti-Black) narratives that are present in Black Deaf history. But there are narratives that are yet to be uncovered. Narratives that are yet to be told. Narratives that are yet to be documented. Our history is being unearthed. So we cannot depend on those grand historical truths that are actually untrue. We need to disrupt those master narratives and discover, share, and disseminate counter-narratives.

Our Black Deaf students will be able to employ the methods that I discussed to resist anti-Blackness, especially in our K-12 educational spaces.

By sharing my research, I am not necessarily saying that all the methods I have discussed will suddenly dismantle white supremacy and anti-Blackness. The system is embedded and operating in the background every day. In order for us to challenge and disrupt it, there are those small acts of resistance. We acknowledge that for Black Deaf students and tell them that we have to practice self-care. And this is done by caring for ourselves. We claim our spaces. We claim our identities. I want to pass that gift on to

the students I teach. This is an emerging skill for them or a skill that has not been developed for them. We are aware that anti-Blackness is in the room, in the classroom, and in the curriculum. But we have to make sure that we keep our Black Deaf students happy, because they are constantly traumatized, retraumatized, and oppressed. And they do not need to be reminded that those negative experiences will be perpetuated.

Again, thank you.

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## **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.