

Loving Black Deaf Bodies

Black Deaf Studies Symposium Proceedings

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Abstract

Andrea Sonnier Babin discusses her experiences and challenges in addressing racial issues in the Deaf education system. Drawing from personal encounters and professional engagements, she highlights systemic racism and recounts the inadequacy of existing methodologies to tackle deep-seated issues. Babin emphasizes the disconnect between intellectual discussions about racism and the lived, bodily experiences of trauma endured by Black Deaf individuals. She underscores the necessity for a holistic approach that integrates emotional and physical healing, advocating for Black Deaf Studies to foster such holistic healing and understanding. Babin's perspective underscores the importance of redefining care and love within educational settings to genuinely support Black Deaf individuals beyond theoretical discourse.

Keywords

Deaf Education, Racial Trauma, Systemic Racism, Holistic Healing, Black Deaf Studies, Emotional Well-being

Presentation Transcript

(Slide 1 – 00:00)

Hey, everyone. My name is Andrea. To be honest with you, I am feeling a little bit out of sorts today. And the reason for that is because this is the first time I am presenting about a new topic that is based on my experience in research and practice over the past decade. Actually, now that I think about it, it is based on my entire life experience.

During my academic journey – in K-12 Deaf education, in college, in my master's program, and in a PhD program here at Gallaudet – I have pondered about issues I have witnessed, wondering why they still exist from the time I was a child and also wondering how they can be transformed. I have had these thoughts since I was a child. I even studied these issues in my academic programs and in my work as a consultant with different deaf schools all over the country. I looked at the harm that was being caused and wondered about why it is being perpetuated, how change can be achieved, and why change is necessary.

In May 2020, when George Floyd was killed by a police officer, many Schools for the Deaf joined the hype and started saying “Black lives matter!” and “We care about our Black Deaf students!” They were also agreeing that there was a need for change in the schools, saying that “We need training, we need consultants, we need workshops, we need all of these things...” And many of those schools reached out to me.

I told them I was willing to partner with them based on one condition – in order to partner with me, they would have to commit for at least an entire school year. Not a one-time, two-time, or three-time series of workshops. I stated that, “Systemic issues such as anti-racism can’t be transformed in just a one-time workshop so please don’t play with my time, my energy, my emotions. Don’t play with Black Deaf students and school staff or their time, energy, and emotions. To work with me, we would have to go deep into this work for at least a year. And then hopefully, the tools I provide would help you continue and lead this work within your own school community.”

Throughout the work I have conducted over the past two to three years with different schools, I noticed that a big piece is missing – something that we do not talk about: Black Deaf bodies. Here is what I mean by that: in my partnership with schools, I would provide workshops that start with lectures to an audience, followed by group discussions among audience members about issues they aim to address within their school or organization. In addition to that, I would have one-on-one consultation sessions with members within the school or organization. Many individuals would book sessions with me to address issues they face in their classrooms, offices, in the dormitories, in administration, in cafeterias, and other settings within schools. Looking back at how this work played out, I thought I was failing at my job. I thought I was not doing this work well enough. This is because out of those many one-on-one sessions and hours, only about 10% of the time was actually spent on discussions about the issue – for example, naming the issue that was happening in the office such as anti-racism, anti-blackness, or other harms; understanding why the harm was happening, such as harmful policies, white supremacy culture, etc., and then transforming those issues via direct conversations, policy changes, collaboration with parents, hiring practices, different training, and/or other ways to create change.

That process of discussion was my intended work with schools. Those one-on-one sessions were opportunities to ensure we were doing our jobs to change the culture of the school and whatever needed to be done.

But I have to tell you, 90% of the time, here is what actually happened when a client and I met via Zoom – someone would book an appointment with me and show up, and we

would have a conversation. And I would say, "Hi, what's up? How are you? What do you need to talk about? Let's figure out what we need to do to solve your issues." And more often than not, about 90% of the time, the person would break down and bawl saying, "I'm not okay. Students are hurting. My heart is broken. People are traumatized. And these people are not listening. They're lying. They're creating stories. They're faking it to make it. The students are struggling. I'm struggling. We're all struggling. This happened to me 20 years ago in the same school, and I'm traumatized." This has happened 90% of the time. When I look back, I was thinking to myself, we're supposed to go through the specific process of solving an issue. But instead this person in front of me just wanted that safe space during one on one time with me to break down, be raw and real, and show me that their body was not doing okay. Even when the school around them was changing its curricula and discussing new values, their body was still impacted by past trauma. The mental work that the school was undergoing to transform into an anti-racist space was not helping harmed folks feel reconnected and whole, safe to bring their whole self to the environment, and better able to support their students in ways that truly align with Black Lives Matter movement.

I would like to thank Dr. Carolyn McCaskill and everyone who has been involved in establishing CBDS. I remember when I entered the Ph.D. program here at Gallaudet ten years ago in 2013. I came into the program ripe and ready to go, desiring to understand how to transform Deaf Education. Unfortunately, in my classes, we read and explored many journal articles centering the white Deaf experience, language oppression and Deafness, audism, and all of that. I took in all of this necessary information and the readings indeed helped me develop a strong foundation for critical thinking.

One day, one of my classes required us to read an article about Black/BIPoC, specifically Deaf students of color. I remember I went home and read the article, and I thought to myself, "Yes, we are going to have a conversation about this article! Yes, yes!" And I was delighted. The next day in class, we had three or four different articles, including the article on Deaf students of color. When it was time to talk about Deaf students of color, I could not wait. I was ready. We had a discussion, and I shared all of my opinions and thoughts. Some of the students in the class disagreed about the article related to Deaf students of color and said such as "I didn't read this article because it was written by a hearing person." Another student said, "I didn't read the article, I didn't have time." Their resistance to this article shocked me but still I persisted in discussing the article in its entirety.

So a week after class, someone came to me and told me that a few white students in the class had complained that I was too aggressive, that I was too passionate in our discussion about the article on Deaf students of color.

Throughout my experience in schools, I've loved learning and engaging in intellectual discussions. I have always been a passionate learner. But that week, my experience here at this school changed after someone told me that I was too aggressive and too excited when we discussed an article that was in fact the only article related to Black Deaf students in the entire program. And now ten years later, here we are with a Center for Black Deaf Studies, talking about the Black Deaf experience with the fam. Thank you, Dr. McCaskill. Thank you so much! It is so good to be back in this space.

Related to that experience, that example, I just shared - the comment about me being aggressive triggered health issues I started experiencing during my time here as a Gallaudet student.

(Slide 2 – 09:07)

In summary, this quote talks about how all of the research, discussions, and naming of all the issues - the intellectualizing many of us engage in, saying "That's white supremacy. That's white privilege. That causes harm. That, that, that. Look at the charts! The statistics! Research proves we need more of this and we don't have enough of that" and calling out anti-Blackness, racism, all the things I've covered in my trainings - all of that intellectual labor doesn't bear fruit if we don't also acknowledge how trauma from anti-Black violence affects our bodies. This quote resonates with what would come up in 90% of my one-on-one meetings that I mentioned earlier - didn't go far enough to acknowledge the real physical ways trauma lands inside of our individual bodies. Discussing, intellectualizing, theorizing, researching, talking, engaging in dialogue doesn't take us far enough if we ignore the visceral experiences, the violence, the trauma that is affecting our bodies, which is inherited generationally. And it is still happening today.

Let me share another example of a one-on-one. I had a white Deaf teacher who came to me, and this white Deaf teacher talked about the curriculum. She had really rolled up her sleeves to make sure that the curriculum was inclusive and equitable, and she was passionate about it. The white Deaf teacher wanted to make sure that Black Deaf students in the classroom really benefited from her curriculum.

She really worked hard to create this content herself because she could not find what she needed out there. I applauded her for her efforts and I worked with her to think about how to make the changes she needed to make. Before we wrapped up the one-on-one session, she said to me, "Well, I have to tell you I'm still kind of upset because when something happens - something traumatic for Black hearing folks and Black Deaf folks - and when the Black students leave to join a healing space, I'm upset about that. And I don't like it. Because they're taking those kids out of my classroom. I remember

when I was a kid being pulled out for speech therapy. They took me out of class and it wasn't fair. And now these Black Deaf students are pulled out to go to a healing space, and it's ruining my class dynamics and they're missing out on the work I've done. And the white Deaf students are hurt because their Black Deaf friends have left the classroom. We should be able to leave the classroom too and witness and learn from Black Deaf folks in that healing space. It's not fair. It's not right."

I was shocked, to be honest with you. I had to wrap up the meeting and I have to tell you all this: I was not okay. Once I regained my composure, I had another conversation with that teacher to address and resolve that issue. The point of this example I'm sharing is that even if we discuss all day and night and do what we say we are going to do about changing the system, including more Black-centered education and having more diverse perspectives, including more equity and providing resources, at the end of the day, until we acknowledge how white supremacy is traumatizing our bodies, there is no benefit to the people who are being hurt.

As a white Deaf person, how are you ultimately centering yourself in that discourse rather than focusing on the Black students that you purport to be supporting through your curriculum?

(Slide 3 – 13:18)

"Without love, our efforts to liberate ourselves and our community from oppression and exploitation are doomed. As long as we refuse to fully address the place of love and struggles for liberation, we will not be able to create a culture of conversion where there is a mass turning away from an ethic of domination," [- Bell Hooks in *Love as the Practice of Freedom*]

creating what Akilah English talked about - a home place, an alternative place. That concept of home-place was also discussed by Bell Hooks. So, while I was providing workshops, I noticed again and again that people were not feeling whole. Even in the midst of important intellectual work, folks were not grounded in their experience because they hadn't yet healed from traumas that had happened in their workplace and environments. They said, "I am not okay. Yes, I see the changes being made around me but I'm still not okay." It was then I realized it was time for me to shift the direction of my workshops and include opportunities to discuss what caring for and loving Black bodies, Black Deaf bodies, looks like.

In different schools which I consider as different communities, I have asked teachers and staff and community members in audiences to give me an example of how they show love for Black Deaf bodies. It was critical that I didn't limit this work to discussing

only trauma or anti-Blackness or other problems we were causing in schools. I needed to also ask, how are you showing love? How are you showing care in the school?" Because when you name what is "care," you can focus on continuing that practice. Just as when you name harm, hopefully focus on how to transform that. Different schools, based on their community values, had their own examples of "love." They'd say, "We do this. We do that. We provide support during prom. We provide support to parents. We provide support to students who need food. Those things came up in the conversations we had about how school staff showed love and care for their Black Deaf students and other students who are marginalized on the basis of race and other identities.

Then I noticed when most of the staff - whom were white - talked about showing love and care for their Black Deaf students, it was very different from how the Black Deaf teachers talked about showing love and care for their Black Deaf students, those students' families, their histories, and their experiences.

So again, I changed my workshops to include discussions about what love means. There is a definition of "love" by Bell Hooks in which she describes it as the combination of six different practices. Here they are on the slide:

(Slide 4 – 16:34)

The six characteristics of love are affection, care, commitment, respect, responsibility, mutual respect, responsibility, and trust.

So shifting the conversation, I started asking school audiences about how they are showing commitment to Black Deaf bodies. I asked them how they are caring for their Black Deaf bodies. I also asked them how they are showing responsibility for Black Deaf bodies.

There was also a need to define responsibility beforehand. During previous workshops, I described responsibility as different forms such as self-reflection, apologizing, accountability, repair, and behavioral change. I wanted to make sure we were all on the same page about what the terms meant, first of all. However, in asking questions about love, I noticed again and again that what white Deaf people described as practicing responsibility and commitment to anti-racism and making sure their behaviors aligned with Black Lives Matter conflicted with how Black Deaf school staff defined and described, with examples, care, affection, trust, and more for Black Deaf students.

Here's an example of the difference between one Black Deaf teacher's perception of care and responsibility for a Black Deaf student in comparison to one white Deaf teacher's perception of care and responsibility for a Black Deaf student: the white Deaf

teacher said, "I make sure I'm engaging with my Black Deaf students, making eye contact with them, and don't just focus on the white Deaf students." That's one example of a white deaf teacher showing care for their Black Deaf students.

Now an example from a Black Deaf teacher, a Black Deaf teacher from Nigeria - and this is such a beautiful example. She actually shared this with me during a one-on-one meeting because she did not feel safe sharing it in front of the school audience when the school's values differed greatly from her own.

Here's how she showed care: in a Zoom meeting during the pandemic, that Black Deaf teacher was in a one-on-one meeting with a student, and the student's mother arrived home from work during the meeting. The mother interacted with her kids and then had to take care of cooking dinner and also needed a break. Even though the teacher's one-on-one time with the student was over and it was her time to log off for the day, she remained online with the student so that the mother could do what she needed to do and relax for a moment. This teacher knew what it meant to be a Black Deaf mother herself. She took the time to interact with that student so that the mother could rest. That is how she showed care.

But, as we discussed, the way schools evaluate teachers' performance, there is no perceived value in the way she supported a student and their family. Due to norms of white supremacy culture within that teacher's school, there is no appreciation for the teacher's efforts outside of what could be measurable in terms of achievement such as the student's language acquisition and test scores. The teacher said, "But the way I supported this student's well-being at home with their family - that is most valuable. That was a way of showing care." That!

Circling back to the reason why I felt uneasy in my stomach about giving this presentation today...my hope is that we understand the critical importance of a Black Deaf Studies lens in Deaf Education and beyond. We need that lens to be able to zoom in on issues and understand how issues such as oppression and harm happen and why they happen. We need that lens to understand how and why it impacts our whole selves - minds and bodies. We also need that lens to know what it means to love not just Black Deaf folks' presence, but their bodies.

That's what it'll take to understand how to love not only our minds, but our minds connected with our bodies and our spirits.

My hope is that a Black Deaf studies lens will incorporate naming and practicing the ways of love that truly align with what affection is for Black Deaf folks, what care looks

like for Black Deaf folks, what commitment looks like for Black Deaf folks, what respect looks like for Black Deaf folks, what responsibility looks like for Black Deaf folks, and what us trusting each other looks like. We need to document that and talk about that and discuss that and share that. Because at the end of the day, white folks do not know what all of this means for Black Deaf people. They do not know. You know, some white people may say, "I care. I'm good to the Black Deaf community." But honestly, without the lens from Black Deaf studies saying, "Hold up, this is what 'care' looks like for us," they can't really know.

Then, who knows, maybe administrators in Deaf Ed will create new policies related to school staff evaluation, hiring new staff, and more with perspective from Black Deaf Studies regarding who is truly highly qualified to work with Deaf students of color. Counter-narratives from Black Deaf Studies could guide those with the most power to shift the culture in Deaf schools and Deaf Education to rectify the policies and practices that reflect what Black Deaf studies folks are demonstrating, "This is how you show that Black lives matter."

So, let me take you back to the first time I arrived on Gallaudet campus. I was so delighted, I was elated. Every single day, I happily arrived at Fowler Hall, where my classes were going to be held. Until that situation I mentioned earlier, in which I was thought to be too aggressive about the article on Deaf students of color, I was so elated.

And then when that situation happened, when I would arrive on campus, I would feel disjointed. My shoulders would tense up. And I found myself feeling as small as possible. I would hide from my professors and other students. And I was not comfortable in my own skin.

I tried to figure out how I could succeed in spite of my struggle. I knew that I needed to do the best I could in my studies as a way to prove to everyone else that this topic was so important. Also to prove that I was capable of making a significant contribution. However, the harder I worked, the more my body broke down. The process of trying to prove my worth by participating in a white supremacist narrative that I should be calm and not disrupt things and tolerate white folks' feelings and beliefs and perspectives caused even more disconnect within myself. I researched and trained my mind to try to see problems and show my worth by solving those problems intellectually. I achieved success operating this way - I had proven how brilliant I could be in ways that white folks ultimately approved of. Again, the more I operated in ways that were in conjunction with what white folks wanted me to do, the more it took a toll on my body.

I was not really aware of this impact on my body until I experienced birth trauma, almost two years ago. In 2021. It happened during the birth of my daughter, who is my first child. Now, before I gave birth, while I was pregnant, I was already aware of how trauma is passed on, and I knew it had a presence in my body. But still, I relied on research alone for understanding and tried to intellectually heal my body. As usual, I was operating only cerebrally, and I was disconnected physically.

I gave birth and during recovery, I realized that it was time for me to figure out how to heal my body. I had to connect my mind with my body in order to do so.

And so far, the experience of connecting my mind to my body has been life-changing in ways that I cannot even describe. I have shared this with you because I really have hope that Black Deaf studies will create a space for Black Deaf students, staff, and teachers to heal amongst themselves. I have had one-on-one meetings with people on Zoom, and during those sessions, I have seen them break down and be vulnerable, telling me that they are not okay. They said things like, "I'm working day and night until 9:00 or 10:00 at night and also on the weekends to support the school - students, principals, etc. Even doing work for principals who aren't doing their jobs. They want me to teach, and counsel, and do so many things at the same time. And I'm still not okay in the midst of it all. They're hurting me. And my body is not okay." As time went by with each and every one of those meetings, I could see their bodies breaking down. Even though I was lecturing and training and saying, "Yes, that's white supremacy, that's anti-Blackness, that needs to change, we're going to change that, and that's how we're going to do it," while we were having those conversations in the one-on-one meetings, I could still see their bodies breaking down. At the end of the year, they would tell me, "Thank you, Andrea, you really helped us with initiating much-needed conversations." But while they were thanking me, I could still see that they were completely exhausted and burnt out.

So having said all of that, I want you to know that my hope is that Black Deaf studies creates a home place for Black Deaf folks to go to be able to connect their bodies, their minds, and their spirits.

And at the same time, I hope it becomes a place where non-Black folks can look to us and learn how to show care for us. Looking to Black Deaf folks and learning from Black Deaf folks and their stories and their counter-narratives...maybe then, I'm really scared to say it, we will see change. Change is going to come. Thank you.

Thank you for allowing me into this space to talk about something that I have never really talked about. It has been an honor to be here. Thank you so much.

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