

# Exploring the Curriculum of Colonization and U.S. Deaf Education and Deaf Studies

Black Deaf Studies Symposium Proceedings

**Gloshanda Lawyer**   
glawyerphd@gmail.com

## Abstract

*Dr. Gloshanda Lawyer discusses the intersections of race, ethnicity, nationality and deafness, emphasizing the global experience of Blackness beyond the U.S. context. Lawyer reflects on her personal journey, grappling with her Hard of Hearing, racial and multiethnic identities amidst a predominantly white Deaf community and systemic injustices. She exposes colonization's role in the establishment of social constructs which shapes identity development and embodiment and erases linguistic practices. Lawyer urges the importance of decolonization from and for Deaf peoples indigenous to various lands, appealing for a nuanced, individualized yet collective approach to addressing systemic oppression while respecting the diverse experiences within Black Deaf communities. She underscores the need for dismantling multiple forms of oppression, including audism and linguisticism, as a collective effort to forge an inclusive, equitable future.*

## Keywords

Intersectionality, Blackness, (De)colonization, Oppression, Identity

---

## Presentation Transcript

(Slide 1 – 00:00)

Hello, everyone. Hello, hello. Just to let you know, there are some rules here. There's an X that we're supposed to stand on, which I am not used to because I'm not really a rule follower. Just FYI.

So I am the last of the presenters this afternoon. And I know some of you may be ready to take a nap. But I want to follow my culture in everything that I do. Therefore, first, I want to do a roll call. So everyone knows what a roll call is, right? You have experienced that before? So where are my elders in the house? Where are they? Hey. Ho. I see y'all.

All right now, where are the youth? My young'uns in the house. Let's party like it's hot. I see you over there, Darius. I see some of the elders trying to get the young ones together.

So where are my teachers in the house? Where are my students in the house? Where are my activists? The radicalists? Yes. Hey.

All right. Community leaders, can I see you? Where you at? Yes. Can I get a wave going?

Now, where are my scholars? Let's see the scholars, the researchers in the house. Hello, babies. All y'all should be raising your hands. We are all scholars and researchers.

So you know that Black people, we are a people of unity and of solidarity. So we roll together as a pack. If one leaves that pack, we have to go find them and bring them back. So therefore, I'm here to roll as a pack. So I know that as I vibe out, I'm expecting you to catch my vibe. And as you catch my vibe, you bring it back and forth and thereon. All right? You ready? You ready to rock with me? I'm sending my vibe out and the energy to this space. Bring it on back. Bring it on back.

All right. Y'all ready on this side? I'm sending my energy out. And we're bringing it back in. All right. Now let's do the wave. Let's bring all that energy. A mist of this entire crowd. I love it. These are my people. This is my space.

Good afternoon, everyone. I am Gloshanda Lawyer.

(Slide 2 – 00:17)

I want to acknowledge my ancestors. This picture is representative of cotton. This is from my family farm and used to be inhabited by slaves at that time. My family came from slaves in the state of South Carolina. My dad's family is Black and indigenous. Particularly from the Cherokee Tribe. Hey, I see you.

And my mom's family is from the Taino tribe inherited from the Dominican Republic region.

And so we have those lineages of ancestry.

I want to emphasize that this conference has been two days in length, and we have been discussing Black, Black, and more Black. But it's also critical and important for us to understand Blackness is not just within the United States of America.

We have Black Indigenous peoples. Black Latinx peoples. We have Black people in Asia. We are Black people in the Middle East. We have Black people all over the world.

And so now, as I present this afternoon, I'm not just presenting as a Black person from the United States, but it's Blackness that extends across the diaspora. In the Caribbean, the immigrant experiences those who speak different languages. All of that is in me, which I will then share with you all.

Next slide, please.

(Slide 3 – 02:06)

So I have a narrative to share. And as you know, we're all storytellers. That's a part of our culture. We have shared stories over the last couple of days. I have some to share this afternoon.

So this represents my birth. My birth into the Deaf community. I had two experiences. First one was in 2007. I was born into the Deaf community. I have experienced hearing loss since I was of the age of two. My parents were aware of my hearing loss. And it would fluctuate, and they didn't know why. But it is who I am, and they were fine with that.

My mother had a Deaf aunt who was oral, and so she knew what to do and the importance of eye contact for engaging with me. I had a great education! Growing up, my teachers were Black. I had a community, an environment, and a host of villages that were supporting me who were Black. I come from a culture of collectivists. So whether they were Deaf, disabled, or had a physical disability, we all as a family knew their needs. And we would corral together to make sure they were supported.

An example is a cousin of mine who experienced epilepsy. It's normal in our family, we all knew how to handle the cousin if they experienced epilepsy. We didn't call other people to come and help. But instead, if they were to experience a seizure, we knew how to take care of this cousin of ours.

In 2007, I thought to myself something is missing in me. My entire life, I had community support. But something was missing within me. Language access. Language access, particularly in sign language.

I grew up in a bilingual family, Spanish and English. Access wasn't always fully available to me, but I did have access. I thought to myself, I need something else. Sign language because suppose if later on in life, I become completely Deaf, where will I go? What will I do? What is my backup plan? Therefore I needed that something else.

So I moved to Minnesota in the year 2007. At the age of 17. I didn't have any family. I didn't have any friends, any support system. I gave up everything that I knew growing up, I relocated to learn the Deaf community so I can have that language access of sign language. I started picking up American sign language. And it blew my mind. I relinquished all of those experiences.

But when I entered the Deaf community, they were all white. I said wait, are there no Black Deaf individuals? But I chugged along. And I still was a part of the Deaf community. I became a teacher at a Deaf school. And I was the only and first Black teacher in that school.

When I left that school, they still never hired another Black teacher after me. This is the year 2023. And imagine, they have not hired another Black teacher. They have aids, but never another Black teacher after me.

Dr. Matthews mentioned her research would have Black aids, but where were the Black teachers? We see this issue reoccurring often where Black people have access to becoming aids but not teachers or leaders in Deaf schools.

My second coming of life or birthing was in the year 2015. Until now, I would have to say I was probably in the stages of labor. I don't know if any of you understand the concept of being pregnant and labor pains before a child is born. Sometimes you need more time. Sometimes you need support. Sometimes you need encouragement that you can do it.

And so right now, I have been laboring since 2015. And that is where I feel as though I'm finally going through this work. And this is the presentation you will see this afternoon. Where people have been supporting me through my research, publications, about what's happening in Deaf communities.

And often being asked why I was resistant to identifying as Deaf. People would question me, are you resistant to your Deaf identity? I didn't believe I was. They would ask why don't you label yourself as Deaf? That has been a quandary for me since because it is important for me to name my privileges.

I am a multilingual individual. I can hear. I can speak. And so sometimes people may question are you really Deaf? So I call myself a hard of hearing individual. And so I am right now in that birthing state of knowing who I am and my identity.

So this is the conference that I feel at home. This is the first time since I have entered the Deaf community that I feel at home. This is a home place for me.

In case you don't know what you have done, I want to let you know that you have saved a life and a defining moment for me

Next slide, please.

(Slide 4 – 08:23)

I don't want to intellectualize this afternoon. But instead, I'm thinking it's very important for us to understand and be aware that all of us can be activists and we can be theorists. And we can be both at the same time.

Sometimes within academia, if you don't publish or you don't have the paper or you don't have the peer reviews or the research justifications, et cetera, then you are not a theorist. You are just a community organizer. How they will label you. You are taking steps within the community.

I said wait a minute, I'm going to challenge that. My culture and the indigenous ways of being, we have always, always acknowledged who we are. There's a concept of living in a world of knowledge. So that concept is that knowledge itself is living outside of the physical body. So therefore, that's what we take out of ourselves. That's publications, articles, references.

However, indigenous people, we think about bodies of thought that we are actually bodies with specific thought. It's not literature or it's not separate from us, we're in one. It's intertwined. We think about universities, colleges, higher education, all of that. We're all scholars. You still have a body of thought and knowledge within you that you can create on a daily basis.

You have lived experiences. So therefore, this applies to the topic of theorizing the curriculum of colonization.

So whatever you write or publish, that documentation, that knowledge is a body of thought, and it's an action.

So therefore, we're going to be speaking about our experiences that we have lived thus far.

(Slide 5 – 10:36)

So for the last couple of days, I have watched each presentation. And I see how everything is interconnected. For me, I have taken a step back, a bird's eye view of this topic. Every presenter has touched on, I would probably say different types of oppression, different types of experiences, et cetera. And I now want to set a grander picture for everything that we have presented thus far.

We look at imperialism. It isn't necessarily something I will go in great depth about. It's a concept, an idea, an ideology that influences colonization.

Next slide, please.

(Slide 6 – 11:40)

We look at Colonization, and we have discussed over the last couple of days, for instance, colonization of land, information, et cetera. Minds and bodies. So we think of that bigger picture as colonization that really impacts every part of our very being.

We have the concept of five faces of oppression. Five ways that it can manifest.

We have cultural imperialism, which essentially means you see a culture and you think, wait, mine is superior than yours, and there's an assimilation process that happens.

You experience marginalization, exploitation, violence, physical and psychological or emotional violence. All of that is inclusive.

And you also have the powerlessness as well.

So we think of the concept of a majority of groups, stratification, if you will, of these various groups. So stratification is based on humanity. And next, we think about science. I'm not saying science is bad. But science does exploit and influence and has a significant impact on people and their lives. Let's take, for example, the concept of indigenous tribes. The blood quantum. How many of you are familiar with the blood quantum? Basically -- so with that, that colonizers, they would measure how many indigenous individuals, how many of them, what percentage of them, indigenous blood did you have? And what percentage of white blood did you have? So the tests were

done to see how much of indigenous culture you had within you. So they would then know how to treat you. That's an exact example of racist science.

For example, schooling in the U.S., we would ask ourselves to be involved in indigenous groups. Are you indigenous? If you said yes, what's your percentage is the question that is asked.

And if I said well, my blood is not that much, then that's an example of how science can impact. If you have a specific percentage of blood, you are put in a school that is going to colonize you and train you a specific way, follow the Christian religion, follow X, Y and Z. If your blood percentage is less than expected, you would be placed in a different school.

So the concept of science. Science is not bad. But it can exploit or do harm to indigenous people. And indigenous people or other people who already experience marginalization.

So colonization also is a result of erasure. Dr. Glenn Anderson yesterday was talking about the state of Arkansas and how Black Deaf culture was there. But he could not find any of the artifacts or resources that would actually show Black Deaf experience. That's erasure. That's the erasure of your history, of our history, of our language. If you think about the separation of people, how do we bring them back together?

You saw how I was pushing out my energy, and you sent it back to me during this presentation. That is an example of unification. How can we do that with our history? How can we bind together? If we don't know what we don't know, then we can't unify. We can't come in solidarity. And that is a result of colonization and erasure.

You see here schooling. I call all of this a system. The system of curriculum of colonization. Which essentially means that through the schooling system, it's developed in a way to simply colonize us without any ifs, ands, or buts. You may enroll in school and you're watching the teacher teach me and you think that everything you are saying is exactly right. You matriculate through the school and start to question, wait, was that teacher telling me everything that was right? Wait a minute, were they oppressing me? You start to question the things that were taught and distance yourself from perhaps what was taught. That is curriculum colonization you have experienced.

So you see here an upside down pyramid. Sorry, I'm struggling to do the correct shape on my hands. Nonetheless, you see social institutional systems. The systems of oppression. That's something that we have taken or adopted from what's super ordinate



and what's subordinate. And we adopt those behaviors every single day. Suppose I say the sign rich. If I say rich in English, what's the opposite of rich? Someone says poor. Suppose I say Black. What's the opposite of Black? White. Suppose I throw out, let's see. I'm trying to think here. Educated. What's the opposite of educated? Uneducated.

And so you already know, and you've already adopted those ideas of what's super ordinate and what is subordinate. You already see those binary thoughts.

So we go through every day that it's either this way or another way. And that is from a socio-institutional perspective.

And it's something that we have adopted, and we do share it with our colleagues. It's always in my practice.

For example, restrooms. Everyone needs to use the restroom at some point in their life or during the day. And what do we do with restrooms? We have binary labels. We have male or female restrooms. Hmm? Can I ask the question of why? We all just have to use the restroom. Right? We have adopted those socio-institutional concepts. And we see them even in restrooms, male or female. Well I identify as female. So therefore, I go to a female restroom.

It's our behaviors that continue to perpetuate or support the system. We even look at grammatical and linguistic manners. Suppose I use the phrase blacklisted. What does that mean to anybody? Means that you are no longer requested, no longer needed, or what have you.

Suppose I use the phrase white lie. What does that mean? Right? It means, oh, it's no big deal. That lie was no big deal. It was something small. Right?

Think about how we use the concept of black in one situation and white in another. Language repeats this system of colonization.

Suppose I was to say Black Deaf. What immediately comes to your mind with that concept? Power. All right now. Yes. Black power. Agreed.

But some people may assume that it's only for the U.S. Is that so?

If we don't make things explicit and clear that Black Africana, Black African, why and, though? If Black is applicable to all globally, why is there an and? We need to start recognizing how the system, how society has basically created us to think Blackness is



only applicable to the U.S. And that is an example of colonization. Blackness is everywhere.

Next slide, please.

(Slide 7 & 8 skipped)

(Slide 9 – 21:04)

So let's look at schools and colonization within Deaf schools. Everyone has experienced, every presenter talked on different levels of linguisticism or audism or anti-Blackness, et cetera. But have we spoken on vidism? Has anyone discussed distantism? What about those concepts in the Deaf community?

So we avoid experiencing life through touch. That's distantism. I'm not saying oh, in Deaf community, can you tap my friend? But Deafblind touch. Where you are on the other person's body, hand other hand doing Deafblind tactiling. Think about school settings. As I mentioned, I was a teacher and taught ages two to seven. And eventually started teaching from birth to three years old.

And I look back on my experience and when I was reading to Deaf children, I would have my book of philosophy with me, and I would be signing the story to these children. And Deaf children, typically what would they do? They wanted to touch the book. Excuse me, miss, can I do that? They want to feel the book. Oftentimes, teachers say what? No. Sweetie, Johnny, sit down. They don't want them to touch the book. Johnny, go back and sit down. That is distantism. Johnny, sit back over there is distantism.

All of us are born already ready for touch. That actual body to body experience. So oftentimes, when that is in the classroom, it is barred. We're trained to say that you are supposed to be over there. And we are here in the distance. And there's nothing closer.

(Slide 10 – 23:11)

So this may be visually challenging to see. One thing I want to highlight in the PowerPoint is the different concepts that are here. These are all related to identities. For instance, Deaf, Deafblind, Deaf disabled, individuals who experience immigration status, Deaf queer, people of color, immigration status, these are all used. Homelessness, et cetera.

We all see how Black Deaf students use different languages. But oftentimes, they are corrected. You must use ASL. You must use English. There's a binary perspective even when dealing with Black Deaf children. Black Brown Deaf children. Black and Brown children come into classrooms already having language, spoken, signed, gestural, it

does not matter. It is innate with them. When they come to school, they have the language. Unfortunately, it is colonized. That's erasure. And they have to adopt either ASL or English. That binary status.

(Slide 11 – 24:33)

So thinking about relationships again. So whether we do research in academia or employment or community-based work, we have to think about indigenous pedagogy. The indigenous community passed that down and it influenced us, and it influenced me as to how I apply that to my studies and my teaching.

(Slide 12 – 25:06)

CRT. Critical race theory, as we talked about. CRT has been talked about and discussed in various different lenses. And we have to think about how that passes down and how we will use that going forward.

(Slide 13 – 25:27)

In our culture, we are storytellers. So for my research, I use narratives. Again, what society tells me or what society says, they don't necessarily know how that system oppresses us. And that is not designed for us. So therefore, we have to do the work. We have to know what our ancestors passed down to us and what we are supposed to do. And forward. And what we know, we share with others. The same way I started the top of the presentation, the joy inside of me I shared out with everyone else.

Next slide, please. Next slide.

(Slides 14-17 skipped)

I'm almost out of time. Just one more time. Wait. Go back.

(Slide 18 – 26:32)

So often, again, we discuss problems. And we realize that things are problematic. We think the problem is not white people. White people are within the system. And the system has oppressed us. But we have to really take a look at ourselves to know how to decolonize that experience.

So if you think about it, if you're white yourself, you may say well, you know, they have been saying it's us all this time. Well, I'm not focusing on that. I care about Black people. We as a people, we have to look at the system and see how the system colonized us and what work we need to do to make sure we are decolonized. Again, we have discussed this problem for years upon years upon years. And what is the solution going

to be? Our ancestors offered us a solution for the present and the future. And that's called decolonization.

And decolonization plus intersectionality framework. So on the left, you realize okay, myself, how am I a colonizer? Really unpacking that for one's self. And then realizing after you remove the colonizer's cloak, there are the methods and pedagogy that we can offer to address colonization. Because the system has already told us that is a cookie cutter approach, a standard. But we all know that there is no cookie cutter in this world. We are all unique and special in and of ourselves.

And so the methods here in the U.S. may not apply to one living in Germany or another living in South Africa. It is applied specifically to that person.

So we as an individual have to really look at us as a community. What is our gain? And what can we share to improve the Black Deaf community?

And then lastly, we have to do it. Decolonize the performances and address intersectionality. How can I not repeat the system? How can I not repeat history? And we look at perhaps the educational policy and how that has caused harm for so long. How we can look at laws. Higher education contexts. Teacher preparation. Interpreter preparation. ITP programs. Research preparation. All of those intertwined. They impact schooling. Impact education.

And so if we make those changes, it will be revolutionizing if we tear down those paradigms.

On the right, you see the different Isms, or types of oppressions. Audism, ableism, linguisticism, et cetera. All of those need to be dismantled. There are all types of oppressions that continue to happen. And if one continues, then all will continue.

Thank you for your time and attention.

## **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.