

Black Deaf Studies Matter, Black Africana Studies Matter

Black Deaf Studies Symposium Proceedings

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Abstract

Dr. Jowers-Barber reflects on her personal and scholarly journey as a historian and stepmother to a Black Deaf daughter. She emphasizes the need to document, centralize, and celebrate Black Deaf history through initiatives like the Center for Black Deaf Studies. Drawing connections between broader Black Studies and the lived experiences of Black Deaf individuals, she highlights the importance of inclusive scholarship, oral histories, and representation. Her advocacy work bridges communities and institutions, advancing awareness and access. Through storytelling and activism, she calls for greater visibility, documentation, and understanding of Black Deaf lives in American historical narratives.

Keywords

Advocacy, Black Deaf History, Community, Documentation, Representation, Scholarship

Presentation Transcript

[Slide 1]

Good morning, everyone. It is a pleasure to be here. I am so excited. I remember when I first came here. I wear two hats: I wear the hat of a scholar-historian. I wear the hat of a stepmother of five children, one who spent most of her life here at Gallaudet, at Kendall School and Model Secondary School for the Deaf. She didn't want to go to Gallaudet. She went to NTID. And I have been tracking her this morning. She has driven from Indiana, where she and her partner have three children, to Texas to scout because they are going to relocate. So, she's letting me know she's in Missouri. She's in Illinois. As soon as I finish here, I'm running back to my phone to see if she's home safely.

She told me to make sure I let the interpreters do their work. So, Dr. Ralph, you are not the only one who does not sign well enough to do this. I am grateful.

I remember when I first met her father, my late husband, who was very well known here because he was very involved. Ashley and I went out together. I was taking her to the zoo. And she made me stop. She went and got a book and showed me the sign and the pictures so I would be able to have some communication with her.

And I was showing her a history book. And she wanted to know who is Deaf. Who is Deaf? And there was no one Deaf in this history book. She said I'm bored. She didn't want to see it anymore. And I realized right then that I could show her Black history, African American history, but I needed to be able to show her Deaf history, especially Black Deaf history.

So, I got married in October 1999. I started Howard grad school in January of 2000. And the very first thing I wanted to do was to look at something that was relevant not only as a scholar, but as a stepmother. And being a member of Shiloh Baptist Church, there were members there when they found out I was going to graduate school, who said, "You have to look at this case." Miller versus DC Board of Education. And they pushed me to do that, and I did. That's where I got started. My dissertation is on the education of Black Deaf children in Washington, looking at that case. I love Howard. All my faculty said this is important. It's critical that you do this, that you write this. It is critical that you connect this with Black history. As DuBois said, there's a dualness in being Black in America and being American. There's a tripleness of being Black Deaf in America. There is a natural connection.

What I'm looking at today is the overview of Black Studies and then the Center for Black Deaf Studies. A lot of this was born in turmoil and struggle. It was not easy. As the previous presenters have said, no one woke up and said, "Here is your history, here is the Center, we love it, go". You had to struggle for it and fight and look for it to make sure it's in the narrative. And some historians say we are fabricating the narrative, but my response is that we are expanding the narrative to be more authentic and to include the voices that were never included in the original narrative.

[Slides 2 & 3] So, as we're looking here, we can go to the next slide.

Just some defining moments. We know Dr. Carter Woodson right here, not born in Washington, but lived in Washington, DC. The Carter Woodson house is part of the National Park Service. If you have not gone, please go. Make sure your students go. My faculty always has to take students out in the city to see these historical sites.

And we talk about the history of African Americans in this country. Dr. Woodson is one of the earliest activists for making sure that it was documented. And that's the Negro history in 1922. Very few people were writing about this. And in schools, most people weren't teaching it because they thought there was no history. That's what propelled him to publish this book and found Black History Week, which has evolved into Black History Month.

[Slide 4] Next slide.

Miseducation of the Negro, a classic book talking about the ways miseducation has been used and weaponized. Right? So, he is pushing back against that and offering strategies as to how to avoid that.

[Slides 5 & 6] Next slide.

First -- next slide, please.

And I will date myself. I remember this. I was alive and well and a student at Howard University when San Francisco State College was having the longest student takeover in history. And part of the demands was for a Black Studies program. So, there may be controversy, there are a couple of other institutions that say, well, we had Black Deaf Studies in 1964, we had courses, we had some in 1967. But historically, they are given the title of the first Black Studies department in the country. And it came out of that struggle. It came out of that demand for appreciation of self-awareness, for the ability to empower oneself to take control of the narrative.

[Slide 7] Next slide.

These are some of the members who came together after 50 years for a reunion. It was the Black Student Union. And if you see in the middle there, that's Danny Glover, the activist and actor who was one of the members.

Next slide. Go back one. I apologize.

I wanted to say it is also important to celebrate and commemorate these occasions. They were acknowledging this. And now, of course, San Francisco State is San Francisco University, the Black Studies program is now Africana Studies. They have recognized, and I think Dr. Humphreys, the previous presenter, talked about the global perspective. They have done this, and the program has expanded. And there are scholars from all over the world involved in Africana Studies.

[Slide 8] Next slide.

I was also here, much to the chagrin of my parents, I was part of that freshman class. We were taking over the A building, demanding a Black Studies program. Initially, my parents called and said we did not send you down there to take over the A building. I said, but you raised us to be proud of who we are and to take action when we see injustice. We need to know about our history. I never got another phone call after that. But I was told to make sure I came home that summer and not stay in DC.

Here we are looking for a Black university. What did that mean? We wanted to know our history. We wanted our history taught. Now, we had an African Studies program, and no one was denigrating or thinking less of the African Studies program. But we want an African American Studies program. And we were Black Studies then. We want a Black Studies program. This is a Black university. So that was part of our demand there.

[Slides 9 - 13] Next slide.

So now we come to a Center for Black Deaf Studies. And this was so critical. When Dr. McCaskill, who has been a role model for my daughter for years, was telling about this and was struggling with this and trying to -- she and her team, because she always shouts out it's a team of people, they were trying to make this happen. I wanted to do everything I could. I have considered myself a bridge as a Black hearing scholar to make that bridge to incorporate Black Deaf scholars. And to be mindful of the privilege of hearing, not to go in thinking I am going to tell you your history and help you with your history. But go in thinking, how can I be of service? Use me to make this work. Right?

And I think that is so critical. So I have tried to do that. And I think that has earned me the respect of being asked to present here. And I do not take it lightly.

So, one of the first things I wanted to do, Dr. McCaskill, Dr. Joseph Hill, and Dr. McCaskill, I cannot remember the last name of the late scholar, Dr. Isaac. I formed a panel. And I went to the American Association for the Study of African American Life and History, of which I'm a member, and I said we have to have a panel and we have to have Deaf scholars on the panel. And they were very kind. And they looked at me and said, "Okay". Well, I said we will need interpreters. Okay. We can get one. I said no, no, we'll need more than one interpreter. And they said, "I don't think we have any money for that". And I said you let the panel go, we'll work it out. We were in Memphis that year. And we went to Memphis. And something happened with the interpreters. And I was livid. Who was it? Who was my fellow colleague who presented and talked about being hot? I was hot. How could you not have -- how did this fall apart? Why are there no interpreters? I have these Deaf scholars, they're my friends, my people. I said okay. We're going to work this out. So, we got together. There is an interpreting service, of course, in Memphis. We went to them. I said Look, you do the interpreting, I will get you in the conference at no charge. And they said yes. I went back to the conference director, and I said the interpreters said they will do the interpreting if you let them into the conference at no charge. And they said okay. And I was very happy because I was just saying this, hoping that everyone would agree.

So, the interpreters came and got in the conference at no charge and worked with us for the panel. The first time the Association for the Study of African American Life and History had Deaf and hearing scholars on a panel together. How does that happen in the city where you have Howard and Gallaudet? But that's okay. Because I'm that kind of scholar who's a bridge builder. That's our first time.

Then there's a conference, the DC History Conference. We convene the panel again. First time ever that they had a panel of Deaf and hearing scholars. And we got the biggest response. We had more people there because people were interested in Deaf history, especially Black Deaf history, especially Black Deaf history in the city where they live, which they know nothing about. And that's not saying anything bad about people, because if you don't have Deaf friends, if you're not aware, if you're not intellectually curious, how are you going to know?

So it's not to beat anyone up, okay. You don't know, now you know. Here is information. Here is history that needs to be incorporated into the fabric of American history, that's part of American history. Let's put all of this together. Let's not have a conference and talk about Deaf history and don't have Deaf scholars. Right? No longer should anyone be surprised that there are Black Deaf Ph.D.s.

I remember starting out when I could name people. And now I can't. And I'm so excited. I'm always looking for new work and new ways to provide my faculty with ways that they can inform our students and expose our students. And many of our students have Deaf relatives.

So it's important that this Center is here. And it's important to have a central location where people can go, where you can tell people when they get that blank look on their face, "look, go to the Center for Black Deaf Studies. Here's the website, the director, here's what you need to know. You can start here". It's so important for us to remember that we need to document our lives. You need to document what you do. You need to be in contact with the Center. What can you donate? What are the papers of your relatives?

And also, we need to start -- I'm an oral historian and a public historian. I believe history is learned outside of the classroom. You have to be in places and talk to people. But now we need to do an oral history project of younger Black Deaf and younger Deaf adults. My daughter is in her 30s, college educated, drives, works, is a mother of three children. Her children are CODAs, completely different from what CODAs were 30 years ago. Completely different. Everybody has technology. They don't have to intercede for their mother. But some of the issues and some of the challenges that Dr. Ralph was talking about in the music are the same. As she's driving from Texas to Indiana, I'm praying that a police officer doesn't stop her and misunderstand that she's Deaf and she's not disobeying an order. Every time she walks out the door, I have that fear. The same fear I have every time one of my sons walks out the door.

And we need to give those histories of those younger individuals. How did she do that? How is she a mother? How is she working? How is she college-educated and Deaf in a hearing world? What are some of the challenges she still has?

I remember going to visit her in Indiana and people, they fell along two lanes. One was "Oh my God, she's Deaf and she drives? Oh, she's just so amazing. We just love her." And part of me was like, well, I'm glad they love her. But yeah, she drives. Have you not ever seen a Deaf person driving? Or maybe not a Black Deaf person driving?

And the other side was "Oh, she's Deaf", and they would start yelling at her. Right? If I yell loud enough -- does she understand what I'm saying? Fortunately, there were more people on the "Oh, we love her, she's so amazing" side than there were on the "Can she hear?" side.

So, there's still challenges that we have to face. Many times, when a Deaf parent is going to school, there's no interpreter. Or the interpreter has to reschedule and reschedule and someone wants to write a note. Well, I'm offended because my child is an educated woman. It's the 21st century. A note? Not even an iPad? We are slipping paper across? So there are still many challenges to go.

As a scholar, many times I have had to just take a deep breath and not let the mother part come in when I'm in situations where the ignorance about Deafness comes into play.

So, I have gotten much better at it as I have advanced. But this Center is just so critical for the collection, the centralization, the celebration, the presentation, and the documentation of Black Deaf history. And all of us need to celebrate it. And I'm so happy to have come from that very first time when I walked on Gallaudet's campus and all I could do was this and nothing else. And Ruth Green, Leslie Page, Francesca, and a lot of others were just so kind to me. It was just amazing. And I knew then that this was the scholarship I wanted to do.

So, my daughter keeps asking me about the book. So, my next project is going to be on Black Deaf interpreters. And I'm looking at that calling. And that is a special gift. And in the Center for Black Deaf Studies, that is one of the pieces that needs to be in there as well. Because those are bridge builders. Right? That history needs to be documented as well.

And then I had the opportunity, as I wrap up, the opportunity to have met and sat with the late Ruby Fry Hughes. Yes. And she was amazing. I interviewed her. She and her husband were among the first people who had signs for President Obama during his first term. She told me about coming to Gallaudet. She was a Howard student, Dr. Ralph. She went to Hunter College. And she gave me her original contract when she was hired at Gallaudet. So my next project is writing about her and her life.

So, I look forward to being here many more times. And Ashley texted me this morning and said to tell everyone hello. She has very fond memories here of your support. And when she comes back, she always brings the children. She brings them up here and I take them to Howard. Because I'm going to get a grandchild going to Howard. I'm going to do that.

But that connection is just such an organic one for me. So again, thank you so much for this. Dr. Carolyn McCaskill, thank you.

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