

Why Black Deaf Studies Matter: Black Deaf American Experience in Germany

Black Deaf Studies Symposium Proceedings

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Abstract

Nia Lazarus shares her personal and academic journey as a Black Deaf Ph.D. student in Germany, contrasting it with her upbringing in the U.S. Supported by a strong Black Deaf community in Oakland, California, Lazarus had access to sign language, role models, and open conversations about race and identity. In Germany, she encountered isolation, tokenism, and limited recognition of Black Deaf experiences. She highlights the urgent need for Black Deaf Studies in Europe to address systemic racism, support identity formation, and foster transnational collaboration. Her reflections call for increased documentation, representation, and collective organizing across global Black Deaf communities.

Keywords

Access, Black Deaf Identity, Documentation, Isolation, Racism, Transnational collaboration

Presentation Transcript

Hello. First, I want to thank you. I'm excited and honored to have been invited to the Center for Black Deaf Studies' inaugural event.

[Slide 1]

I am Nia Lazarus. And I will share about my experience living in Germany for the last two and a half years while conducting my Ph.D. research and previously growing up here in the United States.

[Slide 2]

First, I will share my experience growing up in the United States, and then make a comparison with my experiences over the last two and a half years living in Germany.

I was born and raised in Oakland, California. Oakland has a large Black population and that's what I grew up experiencing. And I have been doing Ph.D. studies in linguistics at the University of Cologne in Germany.

I'll take this moment to answer one of the common questions I'm asked: why Germany? The short and simple answer to that question is that I saw a job opportunity posted on Twitter. I was motivated to apply because I had already visited Germany twice and had acquired some German sign language. And I felt comfortable enough to actually go for it.

I have always been inquisitive and adventurous, and I applied that mindset to the possibility of doing research in another country. I know that at the age of 13, that was something I said I would do in the future, but over time, I forgot about it. As I have gotten older, I felt, why not take the opportunity to revive my dream from when I was 13 years old and wanted to do research in another country? Here I am doing my doctoral studies in Germany.

Prior to my Ph.D. studies, I was an elementary school teacher at the California School for the Deaf, Fremont (CSDF). I see some of my folks represented here in the room! Hello, hello.

I was there in California for a couple of years before heading over to do my Ph.D. at the University of Cologne in Germany.

I want to emphasize that my experience moving and living in Germany is based on my sole experience. Others may have a different experience. So don't expect that everyone will have the same experience as I did.

I live in Cologne, which is a town in Germany. Its name is signed that way because of the large church buildings. Which is different than other towns in Germany. For instance, than Berlin. I will explain more in my presentation.

[Slide 3]

My experience growing up, I come from a hearing family. And my family learned sign language for me. I became Deaf at the age of 11 months. And I became Deaf as a result of spinal meningitis. When my mom realized I was Deaf, she was accepting because she already had a Deaf family member, my grandmother's first cousin. And she was able to succeed in life, marry, have children, et cetera. So, my mom looked for ways to learned sign language and exposed me to the Black culture, Black Deaf community, and mentors as well. So, I had role models in my life. It really had a big impact on my life in terms of being able to identify myself as a Black Deaf person. It was transformative for me. Because I had language access because my mom learned sign language. And I was able to have deep conversations with my family members as a result.

So certain topics that may be taboo in the community or told to discuss later when you're older in certain forms of oppression like sexism, racism, those conversations we were having at home.

So, I was able to have those in sign language in a way that other hearing people could incidentally hear those conversations; my mom was intentionally making sure I had access to the conversations. That was key for me and opened up opportunities and doors for me to explore my identity and be confident in my Black identity and my Deaf identity.

I was never held back because of my Deaf identity. I realized I had a strong upbringing because of my mom's exposure.

I could pose challenging questions and identify racism and audism. I was able to succeed. I never went through life feeling like anything was unclear to me or experiencing negative mental health impacts.

There were things that I was able to openly talk about with my mom. I am grateful for my cherished upbringing. My mom is in the audience. So, thank you, Mommy, for that opportunity.

So, everyone is like where's Mom? Hi, Mom.

They are trying to compare you with the pictures [on screen].

So thankful to my mom. The other thing about the Black Deaf community is that I'm fortunate to live in a place where the Black Deaf community actually exists. We have the Bay Area Black Deaf Association. We have NAOBI - National Alliance of Black Interpreters. And my mother brought me to their conference when it was in Los Angeles when I was 3. My mom even found a Black Deaf babysitter when my brother was six months old and I was 2. My brother is hearing, and because of that, his babysitter's first language was ASL. I feel so emotional right now thinking about this. Just so touched [by my experience].

And that Black babysitter I had also had a day care. And she's also here. Hi. She was my babysitter. I love you so much.

And so again, I grew up with a community and have always had it. I share all of my experiences with my upbringing so that you can contrast them with my subsequent experiences in Germany.

[Slide 4] Next slide, please.

So now I want to share a little bit about racism knows no boundaries. And the similarities and differences between Germany and the U.S.

There are many similarities as listed on the slide and I could add so many more. But these are the ones that readily come to mind. When we envision the Deaf community, often what we think of equates to whiteness. If you go to a Deaf community event, you

will see white people who have organized those events. If you go to summer camps, for instance, the sleepaway camps like the ones my mom would send me to for a week or two. I started attending camps at the age of six years old. Oftentimes, they were predominantly white individuals.

This is what I saw when I was growing up and it's still the case today. That leads to events being held with us coming together. But I think about Deaf people wondering who will be hosting the event, who will attend the event and so on. That's in the U.S. But I saw similarities with that in Germany as well. In Germany, you are a lot less likely to see Black Deaf individuals at events.

There's also a lot of color blindness. Individuals say oh, we're both Deaf. I don't see color. So oftentimes, we see that colorblindness in both countries.

We also experience a lot of tokenism. We see a Black person who is displayed as the model and white people portray a wonderful relationship with them. But behind the scenes or away from the public view, there is no real engagement. We experience that in Germany as well as we do here in the United States.

Representation refers to not seeing ourselves reflected in the community. Now, at this Black Deaf symposium, which I am beyond grateful for, I see myself represented here. In Germany, you would not see this, and not at the level we do here at the present moment.

So, we see an assumption of inferiority towards us and treatment of us as if we are not competent, and we do not have knowledge and experience. People in Germany have been surprised when I say I was a teacher here rather than a teacher's aid or that I have a master's degree. Having to address those types of questions can be annoying. This type of surprise comes up often when I explain the different things I have done within my lifetime.

They will often say that they have tried to recruit BIPOC or Black people, but that they

get no response. Or that they have tried to reach out to Black people, but no one will answer them. That's another common issue we see.

And the last point: there are often discussions about Deaf identity and Deafhood, the importance of sign language preservation, and resistance of audism. However, they don't apply that systemic oppression frame to racism. Oftentimes, the focus is placed on Deaf identity and resistance. However, if we want to discuss Black Deaf issues or racism, we are met with indifference. I am always taken aback by that response and I can never make sense of it.

So that's one concept that I see there as well.

[Slide 5] Next slide, please.

So here are some things that have been very salient for me. In Germany, we don't have organizations like NBDA. Here in America, we have a long history of slavery, we have a long history of segregation in schools and other public places. We saw discussions and a presentation about that yesterday.

So, we see how that history has influenced the U.S. and the framework that's here in terms of how Black people come together, how we establish schools and organizations specifically for Black people, because we weren't welcomed. So, we created spaces for ourselves.

In contrast to the history of the United States, Germany does not have the same history. They do have a history of segregation. They have a history of ethnic cleansing. There is a history of societal segregation.

However, they have a different form of history wherein Black people are not a large percentage of the population in Germany because there was no mass slavery in Germany. People have, however, migrated to Germany over time. I am still trying to

figure out the reason behind the lack of collective organizing of Black people in Germany. But I think it's definitely because of the fact that their history is different and history always impacts and shapes what our societies ultimately look like. So that was my realization of needing to address that feeling of what Black people should be doing in Germany, but remembering that their history is different. I am often surprised by a lot of things in Germany. For instance, we can think of and list Black Deaf individuals with Ph.D.s here in the U.S. In Germany, there are none. Now, regardless of race, considering the number of Deaf individuals in Germany who have Ph.D.s, there also aren't many. I can't remember the exact number, but I probably can count them on both hands. As a doctoral student studying in Germany, I recently realized that I will be in their statistics as the number of individuals who have gotten their Ph.D. in Germany. I will be the first Black Deaf person to receive a Ph.D. in Germany. Thank you for the applause.

But I want to see Black Deaf Germans who receive their Ph.D.s. Not just those from the U.S. like myself living there. I am hoping I will be able to spark a fire in individuals there to pursue their doctoral degrees.

Now thinking about Black Deaf role models. Growing up here in the U.S., I can easily think of individuals whom I looked up to or who made me feel like I could do anything I wanted to do. For example, people like Claudia Gordon, who is an esquire. Learning that about her was a defining moment for me. And there are other people before her that I can think of as role models growing up. That's the context in America. In Germany, I know a few Black Deaf people, but it's hard to list several people or even to reference a person others might know of such as a Black Deaf teacher or someone involved in politics. That type of dialogue or even those types of facts are missing there.

I would say personally, I know of 2 Black Deaf individuals whom I met who are well known in the community. And I just would like to see more of that. I want to see the older Black Deaf individuals that our generation can think back fondly on and have as role models.

The last point on this slide is the most impactful for me and has been most impactful on my experience living in Germany. I struggled to find community and solidarity. Again, as a Black Deaf individual, we want connection. I have to be very honest, I don't have any Black Deaf friends in Germany. But I learned that there are a couple of Black Deaf children who are in nearby towns who are in high school- aged. But again, I have spent two years and some months not having Black Deaf friends in Europe. But last October, I left Germany to go and visit one of the individuals who came here to present as well, sending you love, Lydia; we went to Ireland for her birthday. That was the first time I realized that I do have a place here in Europe. Prior to that, I felt upended. I didn't need to feel rooted in Europe. But I wanted to feel like I stood on firm ground.

And I didn't feel that way until this past October when I met Lydia and other Black Deaf people as well from other countries. I finally felt like I had the opportunity to chat about the Black Deaf experience with other Black Deaf women. That, for me, felt like warmth, finally. I was disappointed I had to leave Ireland and go back to Germany because it was only a weekend visit.

So that's what my life currently is like.

I do have contact with Black Deaf communities throughout Europe. But they are not present with me. So that's my experience in Germany.

Often, when I met Black Deaf people in Germany, they do not have a strong sense of identity, of being Black and Deaf. Nationality, or the country their family migrated from and settled in, will often be prioritized over their Black identity. It's not a conscious thought to deprioritize this identity. But often they say, "Oh, I'm German" or "My family is from x country, but I am German".

So, for me, it's really hard to be able to find a place where I can actually meet someone and talk about racism. As someone new to the country, it took a while for me to find people I could talk with about being a Black Deaf person in Germany. Not having

someone who understood their system and processes and could give me advice made me feel trapped and stuck for a while. Then I started finding people here and there. Then I was able to connect with Black hearing people once at a conference we all attended. That was so nice. It was also my first time seeing Black interpreters in Germany. I was astounded! So, I am still constantly seeking Black people in Germany. That is a constant and finding them is not a given.

I think the struggles with developing a strong sense of identity in Germany are because these open dialogues about racism, and the lack of these conversations in educational settings, are lacking. As a previous presenter said, our school systems teach about Blackness. We can teach about what actually happened historically without whitewashing it with a white lens. In Germany, we don't have those conversations. We do, however, talk about the holocaust. Both countries minimize conversations on racism and tend not to promote the ease of talking about these issues. Both countries would rather make us a monolith and sweep the issues under the rug.

It's fascinating for me to see that's actually happening in Germany as well. And that's happening on a deeper level in Germany.

I also feel that Black Deaf people in Germany are isolated. I met one of the well-known Black Deaf people in Germany and had a conversation with them about their experience. They explained that while growing up in Germany and participating in sports, they would go to France. France has a large Black population. France, the UK, and the Netherlands are the three countries that basically have large Black Deaf communities, meaning you have a better chance of finding Black Deaf people. So that person grew up playing soccer. When traveling in France for sports, they would feel so comfortable because there were so many Black Deaf people. Once they were done with that sports week and it was time to return to Germany, they felt like they were leaving home and went back to a place they couldn't call home. A place where they were the only ones. The only Black person in their class.

Often, I would meet people like that. I have met a slew of them in Germany and other places who say yes, it is a lonely experience. Not only for Black people but also for those who migrated from India or various other countries, and it is constantly a mind-blowing experience for me.

I grew up where, again, there were -- the majority was white. My classes, I would say, I took advanced courses or the more challenging courses, or what have you. Black people were often not encouraged to be in those classes. Oftentimes, I was the only one. It didn't bother me because I had a community outside. I had a home. I belonged somewhere. I constantly saw myself out there in the communities. Now I say I saw myself everywhere, but I didn't see myself within the Deaf community. I was in Deaf spaces primarily for the communication aspect. So, I don't want to contradict myself by saying I saw myself everywhere.

But again, I didn't always feel connected with hearing spaces. But having the conversation about racism, conversations about identity, or conversations about seeing myself in the communities and not being lonely, are experiences that are impactful for me when people share about their experiences of isolation.

[Slide 6]

So, this quote here. So, this is the experience of a Black person in the U.S. "To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a state of rage almost all of the time." by James Baldwin. I can relate to this quote more now than I did before. I know James Baldwin intended this quote to apply to the U.S. But this is also applicable to other countries across the globe. Wherever you go in the world, because of the consciousness of whiteness, white supremacy, and racism, you see it everywhere, and rage ensues.

And I also feel this within my community, with my own peers of Black Deaf people in Europe, more broadly, but specifically in Germany. There's a sense that they have been

deprived. We feel deprived of knowing our own history. We feel deprived of connecting with our communities. We feel deprived. And that increases our rage. We need that social and emotional connection and engagement. We feel deeply connected with this Baldwin quote.

[Slide 7]

So, this is a quote that exemplifies not just the U.S. experience, but also in Germany. I already stated that Germany does not have an NBDA and other Black Deaf organizations. Germany has been trying to progress. There is one BIPOC group that is the equivalent of our NAD, but specifically for youth spanning the ages of 18 to 26 years old. Conceptually, it is the Youth NAD as the larger organization with several BIPOC, queer and other chapters or sections.

They are still active. I believe it was last October, I want to say, very recent, that they convened. A Black Deaf organization was recently established and is still in development. That started around late 2020.

A few people were recently sharing with me that there is a group with a few BIPOC interpreters in Cologne, where I live. They have a platform, an Instagram, and share information across social media. I was not previously aware of that. So that's what I have been seeing.

Right now, I'm missing something else I wanted to share. Maybe during the panel, it will come back to me. But this is what I've been seeing so far.

[Slide 8]

So, the question that begs is why does Germany need Black Deaf studies? We are from all over the world. The African diaspora is global. The Black experience is global. Anti-Blackness is global. White supremacy is global. Black Deaf people from all over the world deserve to have our history, our stories, and our values displayed. We deserve that.

We need to have documentation of those narratives. One critical issue is that we have rich documentation in the United States, which is in stark contrast to Europe as a whole because of the GDPR privacy laws. Whereas in the U.S., you can go to a school and ask about the demographics of Black Deaf students, or that we have a census, and forms that ask about our race, which helps with documentation.

In Germany, and across, that kind of information is not solicited. It is not allowed to even document race as a part of their census.

So, for instance, if you were to ask how many Black students are in your particular school to recruit them to join a BIPOC affinity group, that would not be allowed. You would have to hope for the best. Post flyers and hope that they're seen and that they reach out.

The lack of statistics on race impacts our efforts to track racism and to document it when you can't even ask about it. That's a huge difference between the U.S. and Germany because it's harder to get that information in Germany.

Black Deaf Studies will help to establish a foundation for having these conversations rather than dismissing the issue. So, what I'm seeing in the U.S. is that this conversation started quite some time ago. And more and more people are dropping their defenses to have these discussions. So, you don't have to explain yourself and contextualize the issue with background information. But in Germany, you do. With White people, I have to do that here. But in Germany, I can see the lack of knowledge with them, too. So, there is a need to provide background knowledge.

So, I do see that as very much of a challenge. With Black Deaf Studies, we can work to reduce that gap in knowledge and the gap in information. I shared my experiences growing up having a community and resources. I want to see the same in Germany as well.

In the United States, we have a lot of resources around race and racism. We have representation. We have Black people who sign Vlogs and a ton of resources in ASL and English, which is great. If you go over to Germany, we don't see that level of access to information and resources in sign language. We are now starting to develop more signed resources.

Often, people will say, "Just go watch a video". But not everyone has access to sign language. Not everyone is literate. So, the language barrier is another consideration. There are language, cultural and historical barriers because a lot of information is missing context that would allow Black Deaf people to be able to have that foundation to move forward,

[Slide 9]

So, what can you do? I encourage you to get involved in education and become a teacher. Get involved in research. We need us in education. We need us in research to preserve, document, and propel the next generation. This will create sustainability and a foundation. We need collaboration between the U.S. and Europe, Germany and all over the world. Blackness, racism, Black culture, and the Black experience are global. We can't thrive if we don't collaborate.

I added this picture because we were Black Deaf educators. Of the people in the picture, three of them are here. I am here. Thank you.

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