Black American Sign Language Matters
Panel Discussions

Black Deaf Studies Symposium Proceedings

Mary Perrodin-Singh - Moderator
Gallaudet University

Candance Jones – Panelist
Gallaudet University
Carolyn McCaskill – Panelist
Gallaudet University
Rezenet Moges-Riedel – Panelist
California State University, Long Beach

Abstract
In a compelling session at the Black Deaf Studies Symposium, panelists examined the cultural, historical, and academic dimensions of Black American Sign Language (BASL). The conversation highlighted the influence of *The Hidden Treasures of Black ASL*, the urgency of preserving community language practices, and the structural challenges within Deaf education. Panelists introduced Black Deaf Gain as a transformative theoretical lens and discussed the ethical implications of AI, interpreter bias, and linguistic erasure. Emphasis was placed on intersectionality, identity, and grassroots research. The session concluded with calls to expand documentation efforts, foster academic inclusion, and strengthen community-based collaborations.

Keywords
Black American Sign Language, Black Deaf Gain, Intersectionality, Deaf Education, Linguicism, Community Documentation, Cultural Preservation

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Panel Transcript

Mary: Hello, everyone! Was this not an electrifying and inspiring set of presentations and learning?! Thank you for your contributions to this Black ASL and ASL symposium.

All right. What I would like to do is basically ask some questions of the panelists. Then I will allow the audience to come forward and ask questions as well. Please stand in the center of the room, and give us an opportunity to hear what you have to say. I'm sure you have a lot of thoughts, as I do, and would like to pose questions to the panelists.

My first question is for Dr. McCaskill. First of all, thank you again for this opportunity and for this treasure of a book. This truly is a treasure.

Dr. McCaskill: Thank you. Thank you.

Mary: This is the reason why we are here, “The Hidden Treasures of Black ASL”. We recognize that you have given Black Deaf people all around the world a sense of pride, they have a sense of their language matters. You let white Deaf people around the world, even here in America, know that our Black ASL is important, and an important part of the signing ecosystem. Thank you for that contribution.

When you published this book in 2011, did you know the ripple effect? In recounting how far we have come, do you think there is more work to be done? What are you envisioning in the future?

Dr. McCaskill: I'm happy that you asked this question. The book was published in 2011. Since that time, the Black ASL team has done a number of presentations. We were invited to present at a number of places. Numerous hearing colleges and universities have heard about the work and have invited me to present at their institutions. The years between 2011 and 2015 were extremely busy.

And then in 2020, Black Lives Matter became prominent, drawing a lot of attention. Issues that impact Black people, such as racism, social justice, and inequities, all came to the forefront. This cued the resurgence of interest in Black ASL, and with that, the number of individuals reaching out to us for interviews and to give presentations increased again.

The “Signing Black in America” documentary was released, I would say, around 2018 or 2019. That documentary was popular. We received a number of presentation engagement requests during that time as well. The Black ASL interviews we did for the

book were then added to Gallaudet's video library as well as YouTube to make sure that the videos were open and accessible to other people who needed access to them.

So that has been good traction from 2011 up until now. But the work that we started is not finished. Like I said, there is more work that has to be done. What we did was great!

Oh, and we updated the book. We previously only had the hard copy, and it was sold for $75, which was expensive. So now the paperback version is a more reasonable cost for more people to afford it. And again, as I have said before, more work needs to be done. We know there are regional sign variations like the West Coast, the North, and the East Coast. But this symposium is about you all and your work. I encourage you to collaborate with others and with other departments and pursue your musings and curiosities.

Mary: I agree. Thank you so much.

Dr. McCaskill: Other panelists?

Mary: Well, the question was specifically for you because you started Black ASL. In your presentation, you spoke about the idea of new curiosities, research ventures, and other aspects of BASL. In your presentation, you talked about missing aspects, such as facial expressions being more exaggerated, as people say. What do you think about that question, Candace?

Candace: It's percolating in my head. I tend to be slow at responding.

Dr. Moges-Riedel mentioned critical race theory and how critical race scholars tend to focus on Black, Latino, Indigenous communities and bilingualism. This work can be applied to Black and Brown Deaf people. Research has proven that Black and Brown individuals broadly are natural dual language users. We know how to naturally adapt to our environment. If we are in a White space, we code-switch and change our language

to appear more formal and appropriate to the space. When we are in Black space, we can be ourselves, and we tend to code-switch.

Or the more formal term, use translanguaging. So, we automatically do the work of monitoring our language in white space and checking how we sign before we express ourselves. It's automatic for us to move in and out of languages.

We do this codeswitching work to avoid misunderstanding and minimize confusion. BASL can confuse some when we have exaggerated facial expressions. For example, I could be read as being pissed off or angry when I'm not. So, we can be misinterpreted by others.

In my doctoral program, I'm researching the characteristics of academic BASL, bringing the explorations of both home and school contexts into the conversation.

I'm still at the learning stage, you know, where we have to read previous research and publications and literature reviews, blah, blah, blah. Which, of course, both doctors sitting to the left and right of me are used to. Though I'm still an infant in this doctoral process.

Mary: Yes, to your message about the doctoral process and literature reviews. Dr. Riedel, your paper on Black Deaf Gain (BDG) is such a new concept. It's a new theoretical framework that we, future Black Deaf publishers and researchers, can carry forward. To be transparent, I'm a doctoral student and I'm using Black Deaf Gain as part of my theoretical framework. So, thank you. Without the work you have done, I would be struggling to find a framework.

Your paper was published in 2020 at the height of the Black Lives Matter movement. I reached out to my committee and said, "Look at this, I have something on which to base my work." So, thank you.

So, I'm wondering what your advice would be to young Black people who will publish and become researchers? What is your advice for how to apply your work as a theoretical framework using your tenets, or using DeafCrit and Black Deaf Gain?

Dr. Moges-Riedel: As I previously mentioned, Black Deaf Gain is really from Black Deaf history, I want to be able to reframe this narrative from the deficit view of Black Deaf History to the perspective of the Black Deaf voice and bring that forward.

Earlier this morning, Tom Humphries mentioned that sometimes it's hard in the academy to present an academic study because there are politics around what is considered academic. But a literature review is also political. Right? Who are you selecting to be included in your literature review? Are those researchers unethical, which means I should exclude their work? I engage in political activism, and I think about what is appropriate and inappropriate to be included in any given paper.

There are scholars who have a right to be included and we have to amplify their work. Sometimes we have to apply a more bird's-eye view to our work and reflect on others whose work may be more distant from ours. Is the history of ASL influencing my work? Are their biases influencing my work?

I have become so appreciative that I am part of NBDA and Black Deaf Village on Facebook; it has been impactful. We have to interrogate what is considered academic. We need to move beyond "academic" and the system standards that have been established and look at these other sources. Who's to say that's not academic? The system is so rigid. Shake it up and make waves. Call it academic.
There are many of us who champion the use of BASL, but interrogate to what purpose. Is it to challenge the old Deaf Studies status quo? We now have Black Deaf Studies, and people ask, "What's next?". My goal is to see more Critical Deaf Studies across the board. Dr. McCaskill has already opened the gates with Black Deaf Studies. Now I want to us to push it further to include more identities, like me as a Queer. I want to see more! Disability is another one we need more of. So let's push the paradigm.

Mary: I love it. I love it! I don't know if the audience is aware or if the panelists are, but last week, we had a group of Deaf folks together. And we actually talked about this specific victory with the U.S. Supreme Court, where they voted in favor of a Deaf man, Miguel Luna Perez. He decided to sue the public education system where he attended because he felt that he didn't have access to the appropriate accommodations and no sign language interpreters. His case was already settled with the lower courts. But the NAD lawyers felt they needed to sue for violating his ADA rights. What they did was bring the case before the court. And the lower court told them they had to exhaust his IDEA, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act rights first. The attorneys said no, these are two different laws. ADA and IDEA are two distinct laws, so we can sue. So that was denied at that level. They went to the appellate court, and it was denied. So, they brought it to the U.S. Supreme Court. All nine justices voted in favor of his case to say yes, they are two separate laws. And that is a big win not just for Miguel, but for Deaf people across the nation.

So, Candace, I know you have a teaching background. I'm also a former teacher. Learning that news was absolutely amazing for those in mainstream programs. What do you think about the future landscape of forcing Deaf kids to go to mainstream schools rather than schools for the Deaf? How do you predict this historical decision will influence the face of mainstream education programs?

Candace: I think parents will start to take control and take back power to make the decisions that are best for their child, rather than allowing the IEP team – Individualized Education Plan – to decide to place their child in hearing schools with accommodations. In the state of Georgia, Deaf children are required to go to mainstream schools first. If we notice regression in literacy or signing, because of the LRE – Least Restrictive Environment –they are thrown into the Deaf schools. It's the "dump" school. Teachers work extremely hard to try to recover the child's language acquisition, academic, and literacy skills with low pay. This victory or law can help parents make better decisions for their child and send them to the school for the Deaf first, rather than the mainstream

first. Because the school for the Deaf is where they have their language models and a full signing academic environment. The students would be challenged to excel there and let the mainstream be the last consideration, not the first, until they fail. We've been doing this process wrong. I think this law will benefit Deaf and hard of hearing programs as well as schools for the Deaf.

Mary: I have to agree. IDEA focused on K through 12 education. However, the ADA focuses on all Americans from birth to death. So, it will really change the landscape of our educational system for Deaf children, and hopefully, everyone will begin to think about how they can go back to support their communities and their states. Because we know that we care about the pipeline. The incoming scholars. That's the whole purpose of these presentations we have had. Always look to the future. So, using this particular decision by the U.S. Supreme Court in terms of suing and having it separate from the IDEA and the ADA, and how we can leverage them to force the school systems to change, so that we can have more Deaf leaders.

It's going to look like those children.

Dr. McCaskill, do you have any other thoughts or ideas in conjunction with that point from any of the panelists?

Dr. Moges-Riedel: This brings to mind how intersectionality emerged. You have a Black woman who is fighting to have her two identities recognized in her denial of the privilege to access employment opportunities. Black men did not experience the same concerns with employment, nor did white women. Therefore, Black women have two factors of intersectionality. The courts said you have to pick one. But Black women experience both racism and sexism simultaneously and you can't disentangle them. So, this case can spark new dialogue about disability and language rights as simultaneous points of intersectionality. This is a step in the right direction to see how we can actually apply our legal rights. We often discuss the law but never engage with how it applies to us. We can't separate that from the education system and the families. I'm excited for

this step forward and how it will transform the educational landscape. Could that mean more schools for the Deaf? A sufficient number of teachers, like Candace said?

Mary: All right. Are there questions from the audience? Please come forward if you have a question for the panelists.

Audience question: I work for Google, and my job is research-related. I am in a position now where I want to help identify different risks so that we can mitigate harm for different groups. My company is working to find different ways to help the Black Deaf community too. But in my experience, I noticed that in identifying and training machine learning for different groups of people, Black Deaf people are a mystery, which can cause more harm to the Black Deaf community because it's not the same as ASL, right?

My question is: what are your thought processes about the generational changes with technology, meaning how do you see artificial intelligence being connected with BASL, your knowledge, and even interpreting with many interpreters not being skilled at BASL, and other communication breakdowns that happen as a result. I think it would be really wonderful if we could develop artificial intelligence related to Black ASL. Do you think that AI is going to be beneficial to the Black Deaf community?

Dr. McCaskill: Great question.

Mary: You know, right now, technology is the future. And what you said is amazing. We are learning more and more about artificial intelligence and how we can read people. You're at Google.

You are a change maker. Why don't you bring what you have learned here back to Google? You can be a change agent and tell Google that we need to develop something for Black Deaf people, for Black and Brown Deaf people in the community.

Dr. Moges-Riedel: I'm curious. You both mentioned signing, with a lack of facial

expressions. I'm wondering if AI can capture facial expressions, nonmanual markers, role shifts, etc. But that has yet to be researched, right? That would be the ninth feature of BASL's linguistics. So that would have to be completed before feeding information to the AI to recognize the difference between

Candace: Right.

Mary: Very true. You will have to collaborate with Candace. Another thought?

Audience question: If interpreters aren't skilled with Black ASL and a hearing person is training the model, but the interpreter needs to translate BASL in order to train, there will still be communication breakdowns because the interpreter is not knowledgeable about the Black Deaf community. So, we can still cause harm to Black Deaf communities.

Dr. Moges-Riedel: Exactly right. But do you see what we have? A Black Deaf CDI needs more to provide more communication repairs and to feed the information that is needed so that Deaf clients don't experience harm.

Mary: Thank you. That was a really good question. Wow.

Candance: Really expands our thinking!

Mary: Right. It was a very good question. All right. We have another question from the audience. Yes?

Audience question: You briefly discussed that there are not many Black Deaf educators. But within the Black Deaf community, we do have many Black Deaf teachers, but they are not in the classroom. Within the community, however, often young Black Deaf students are learning and watching different people within the community who are Black Deaf elders, but not in the classroom, per se. But if we want to document and include videos and focus on BASL, we can because the community is

small. I see so many people using sign languages that can be filmed for documentation, but I'm not skilled at that. I do not have the resources for that. So, how do we document that? There are so many people who are skilled at BASL and have the experience, but the community is small. So, what do I do if I am not a professional, an expert, or a "researcher" and have no resources? How do we document that language use?

Dr. McCaskill: We encourage that. We support that. We do conduct some interviews, and we do oral history and documentation. One person who works with us, Reggie Bess, he's over there, he has started to conduct interviews and filming stories as a means of documentation. But it's not enough.

So. we encourage people in other states to apply for grants and funding to support this work. You can pay individuals who are willing to conduct interviews, and the money from the grant can also be used to purchase professional background and filming equipment. That is one way you can go about this process.

Candace: I wanted to comment that Vyron Kinson– the interpreter standing before you, Reggie and me to go to the Georgia Association for the Deaf conference for interpreters about two summers ago. We went to the conference, and it was my first time presenting to an adult audience. I gave a presentation on linguicism, which is language discrimination. After I finished the presentation, a few people came up to me and asked if I had any data on how many Black Deaf instructors are in the classroom and the community, and on the differences between BASL and ASL. I said we didn't have the data, but we anecdotally know this information. People continued to challenge me because they wanted data. So, I figured I had to go and get a doctoral degree to prove my case. Real experiential knowledge is powerful, and it trumps the "data".

I mean, we lived through racism, we have lived through audism, every day! That's powerful enough. But it's not good enough for the hearing world, and that is white supremacist thinking. So, I have to get a Ph.D. to prove our theory.

Dr Moges-Riedel: This person posed a seriously important question: how can the community do this work? I encourage organizations to host events locally to provide training and support on how to document. That's called language documentation. In the field of anthropology, we have this method, and we encourage Indigenous communities to engage in language documentation. We don't expect you to automatically know how to do this and how to use the equipment. But you can reach out to the subject matter experts, like the subject matter experts in the Center for Black Deaf Studies. And they can perhaps connect you to local organizations and chapters. We have to think about the future and what inroads we can make that will improve the collaborations and partnerships between local organizations. Gallaudet can't do everything. So maybe having a resource list of experts, for example, videographers. Maybe even students, because Black Deaf youth also need those experiences and opportunities.

From where we stand, it's easy to say, "You can do it!" and that's probably not the right thing to say. But that's just the vibe! But we also want to ensure it's done ethically; that you have the right resources you need, the right training, and you know who to reach out to. You can reach out to us, academics, to doctoral students who can give you tips along the way. Someone might have innovative ideas they can share. So, reach out.

Mary: I would focus more on finances, and Dr. McCaskill mentioned grants. Reach out to local organizations and see if they are willing to support you with your grant writing proposal. You could meet with them and share your ideas and support you as you write the grant proposal. I know of places in Texas where they will support you with your proposal, help you write and refine it. And you can find those types of resources online. There are companies who can help you with that. Some do it pro bono, others for a small fee. Getting funding can help kick it off so that you have seed money to get the project off the ground.

Audience question: First, there was a discussion about who could use the two signs used for Black, one with the B handshape and the other with the one handshape. When we look at the community as a whole, how do we determine what is BASL and what is

not? BASL has been dwindling in use. However, there are some families who have passed down BASL. There is community engagement with the language. On the other end, there are huge communities of white people, too. So, who decides what Black ASL is? Does a community determine what is Black ASL? Or do I, as a Black person, say I'm using Black ASL? What are your thoughts on that topic?

Candace: Well, the queen of BASL is right here, Dr. McCaskill.

Dr. McCaskill: What a great question! We can't be the police of Black ASL! Who wants to be the Black ASL police? Someone previously asked me if Black Deaf families own Black ASL? I would say that's a negative. Yes, it helps that they can carry the language forward. But in terms of who owns the language? We all do. It's the community's use of the language. We all own it. I'm not the police. Black Deaf people feel that sense of cherishing their language.

Candace: I think there's a spectrum. There are some Black Deaf individuals who have gone to Deaf schools and been exposed to white friends, white instructors, and the like. That does not make them less Black. They are Black every day!

Dr. McCaskill: Yes, they are Black.

Candace: On the other hand, some Black Deaf students grew up in mainstream schools that were Black, with Black peers, and they identify as using BASL. And that's fine. That's their decision. It's a spectrum. I shared this before. I went to a school for the Deaf. But white Deaf instructors and friends, et cetera. I have been colonized by whiteness, ASL, the white Deaf way. But I have both my children, they're CODAs and experiencing their Black identity in Black schools. I'm reclaiming my Blackness with my children at the end of the day.

Does that mean I'm less Black? No, I'm Black at the end of the day. As I walk down the street, they see I am Black. I am Black first and second, and I am Deaf. I can't separate

the two. I am Black Deaf. And basically, you have to decide how you want to label yourselves.

Dr. Moges-Riedel: I experience a dilemma… I think I can be transparent here. This is something I have never shared before.

Candace: Let me open up the water. This is the tea right here. She's going to throw it.

Dr. Moges-Riedel: Okay. Well, supposedly, the first Black ASL showed up on Cartoon Network with Craig on the Creek. It was fantastic and it was actually fabulous exposure. So, I was actually a part of the Southern California BDA chapter. I am not a BASL user. And this doesn't make me less Black, right?

Candace: That's right, now.
Dr. McCaskill: Wait a minute, girl. Wait a minute. I saw the way you were signing. I was like, look at her. Look at you.

Dr. Moges-Riedel: Right. But that was just my style of signing, my butch style. I didn't grow up with BASL. So, I wouldn't say I'm a native Black American sign language user. But the other members of the Southern California BDA chapters used Black ASL. So, the question stands: who decides? So, I turned down the offer from Cartoon Network and suggested that they hire a consultant. There were many arguments with people saying, “I’m from this area” or “I’m from the Southwest”. I stressed to them that BASL has variations too. So, community members need that confidence in themselves as users too. BASL is not only about those from the South. I know there is a particular history in the American South, and the origins are in the South. But BASL is across the country because of AAVE. But some people may feel they don't belong to BASL because they aren’t connected to the South. So, the network gave a list of certain words they wanted signed in BASL. The downside was that some of the English translations did not work out. But be that as it may, you live and learn. I had that experience. And I would definitely say that the Black Southern California community was extremely proud.

And there were certainly criticisms that ensued from that experience. However, at the end of the day, we made history, and we have Black hearing people asking about BASL because of the yellow box and the white box meaning ASL. That is a paradigm shift for the masses, where they are no longer thinking just about ASL.

Mary: Amazing! I see you coming up to the front. Did you want to comment? Sure.

Audience question: Black Deaf schools and how language needs a community. Is Black ASL perhaps at risk? Will it -- is there a way for language preservation without Deaf schools and institutions in order for younger generations to be able to get together to use the language? How will BASL be able to preserve itself?

Dr. McCaskill: As I mentioned, Black ASL is evolving. Especially with the younger generation. If you just look at how they sign and how they incorporate Black English into their signing structure, looking at how they include references from hip hop in their sign language as well. I would say Black ASL will survive and will thrive in this community.

But again, documentation of our history is necessary. We need to interview those individuals so that we can capture their stories of what inspires them and what is happening with them. We need to know what is happening with them when they express the language. Like I said before, our work on our particular research stopped in 2011. Now, we have moved into 2023, and a lot has happened over the years. I would say that it's definitely time to get the young people together and interview them. There are many gaps from the older generation who experienced segregation. Now it’s time we get with the younger generation.

Dr. Moges-Riedel: Dr. McCaskill, I have a question for you. You talk about language preservation, is there anything in terms of a database that we should look at? I know that Dr. Hill mentioned Signing Across America, which focused on the white versions of ASL. Is there something like this for BASL to examine the different lexical features? For example, the different signs for “pregnant”. Are there any accessible databases to view

the lexical items in BASL?

Dr. McCaskill: Not that I'm aware of. But I think we can create one. I think it is now possible to work on a database.

Candace: I want to clarify that there is a breakdown of BASL. So, the true BASL, emerged during segregation. That's where we see different signs for concepts like "pregnant". I'm not from a Black Deaf family, so I don't know others. But that was true BASL; older people and Black Deaf families use this BASL. Then we have BSL which is influenced by African American Vernacular English. And that's been shown by research. We want to make sure there are two distinguishable groups of language we're discussing.

Dr. Moges-Riedel: And maybe research will show that they are distinct.

Candace: I don't have access to the old BASL signs. So, I have no idea how to use it. But BSL has been influenced by my hearing family who speak a certain way and tell me the meanings, which influences how I produce signs as a Black person.

Dr. McCaskill: BSL, Black Sign Language, occurred before integration. I used BSL before I used ASL. So the Black Sign Language team worked on BSL. Not so much BASL. But we do have some documentation of BASL that we can look at. We talked a bit earlier about the study of Dr. James Woodard, a linguist who did some research on BASL and we found some of his work that dated back to that time.

Audience question: Thank you, good afternoon. This has been enlightening and exciting. Two quick things. As a historian, I am concerned about the pushback that's being pressed on schools in terms of what history to teach and what history not to teach. How people are uncomfortable with teaching slavery. Uncomfortable about teaching queer history. So this becomes problematic when we look at schools that are funded by the state or funded by the federal government. How are they going to fare,

what is going to be the state for not only Black Deaf children, but for Black children, for children of color, for BIPOC? Where are they going to get the history? As we look at what Dr. Woodson talked about initially, it's not necessarily going to be just in the schools. It's going to be on the Center for Deaf Studies, on the organization, on those individuals in the community who decide that they are going to hold classes after church on Saturday or whatever. But there's going to have to be a concerted effort. Because there is -- it's not paranoid to think that they are out to get rid of that history. So, we have to respond to that.

And the second thing, we are always concerned about losing people, as Dr. McCaskill said. You have to do these oral histories. You want support, you want funding, you want all that. By the time you're writing the proposal, you may lose your grandmother. So, what I'm saying is that I encourage you to get the recorder out, get the iPhone, and record it. It doesn't have to be professional. You can do everything else later. But get the stories now.

And also for those young people who are involved in Black Lives Matter, #metoo, all of these movements, that was a collaboration of hearing, Deaf, Black, brown, white. Those Deaf students, those experiences need to be captured also. Those oral histories. Leadership was formed. People stepped up. They used their experiences. George Floyd, all of these things that have occurred, there have been Black Deaf youth there. And so, where are those experiences documented? Where are they going to be housed? So, I think we just need to think about an inclusive oral history project that deals with our seniors and also deals with our young people who are going to be the leaders and responding to the aftermath of all of this turbulence that we are experiencing again. Thank you.

Mary: Use your phone and just record those histories. Make sure that we preserve them. And later, we can figure out how to compile them all and just get started.

Dr McCaskill: Yes, that’s a good idea.

Mary: Just get out there and shoot video, shoot film. And then collect those from people. People post things on Instagram, and it says “original”. Then reach out to them and say Hey, can I collect your videos? And get a database of the oral histories together.

I'm sorry, okay. One last -- really last question. This is our last question. Can you come to the middle, please?

Candace: We are out of time. The alarms are going off.

Audience question: You talked about the example of Black ASL like “I'm down with it,” and I see it influencing white students too. I see white students say, “I’m down”! So, is that some sort of cross-pollination in terms of language? Is that appropriation? I don’t know how to ask this. How do we interpret that? Is it improper for us to use that? Just wondering what to think?

Mary: This is a good question, an excellent question. Black people are the most imitated people in the history of people. Everything we do, the way we dress, our bodies, our look, everything we do, people want to imitate us. They want to be us. I think that's good. All right. I'm flattered by it. What can I say? What can I say?

Candace: Beautiful closing right there.

Mary: Thank you.

Dr. McCaskill: When I see my white Deaf students signing this way, I laugh. I'm like, what have you been doing? Who have you been around? I know you have been around some Black people. I mean, really.

It makes me feel good. Because we have a shared language. And we are sharing with

one another. So, I'm not mad at it.

Mary: That's true. And this is how we wrap it up. Thank you.

Candace: Thank you. Mic drop.

Dr. Moges-Riedel: Sign drop.

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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.