

## **Black Deaf Studies Matters: Global Perspectives Panel Discussions**

Black Deaf Studies Symposium Proceedings

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### **Nia Lazarus – Panelist**

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## **Abstract**

This panel discussion explores the global perspectives of Black Deaf individuals, focusing on identity, collaboration, education, and community empowerment. Panelists from North America, Europe, and Africa share personal experiences, challenges, and strategies for building transnational solidarity. Topics include the need for documentation, representation in research, the power of social media, and the importance of respecting cultural and linguistic diversity. Emphasis is placed on shifting narratives away from Euro-American dominance to center Black Deaf voices worldwide. The panel advocates for community-led approaches, youth empowerment, and sustained international partnerships to advance Black Deaf liberation and visibility on a global scale.

## **Keywords**

Black Deaf Studies, Community Empowerment, Decolonization, Global Perspectives, Linguistic Diversity

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## **Panel Transcript**

**Lindsay:** First of all, let's give another round of applause to this amazing panel in front of us.

I was thinking about how to punish all of them. Because they made this old man cry, that's just not right. I'm so proud of you. And I am just amazed after what you have accomplished. And the tears flowed. They are tears of joy, excitement, and hope

because the future looks much brighter. I know that the future is in good hands.

I will try to reduce my questions to allow the audience to ask the panel a few questions. We probably won't get to all of them, but perhaps a few. And we will keep it pretty short.

First question: having seen each other's presentations, what are your thoughts about what you could have added to your presentation that was missed, or something you want the opportunity to say now?

**Jenelle:** Actually, two things come to mind. The first of which, in terms of what was missing, is that, obviously, when you take the step onto American soil and see this greatness before you, people think that Europe and Africa are so far away. When we think about collaboration, it's such an interesting issue. I never really thought of that. There are so many wonderful resources available. We tend to focus on what we can do in our sphere and not think outside of that box. If we do, it's with a very close neighbor, and we collaborate with them. But how can we extend beyond that [into Europe and Africa]?

The second point is what I would want to add? I don't think you all caught the picture shown at the very end. There was a logo. In addition to that, there was a group of people who came together to form the logo of Black Deaf Canada. And I wish I had talked about the significance of the logo itself. The B hand shape was presented in different colors. The B handshape also signifies, in many ways, that we have historically migrated to the country (whether through boat or land, etc). The water signifies that we can achieve our goals.

And you also have the B representing the colors of Black people. The spirit of what we want is in the logo. This is just a start. We do not know if it will change in the future or remain the same. That's all I wanted to comment on.

**Nia:** So, just thinking about your comment about extending a collaborative hand to

Europe. I can relate to that. When I moved to Germany, I realized that we are not so different and aren't so geographically far either. But for me, I know that it would have been hard to conceptualize the experience of a Black Deaf person in Europe if I had not moved there.

I remember before I visited Europe for the very first time, I didn't think it would be difficult for me to understand what life would look like. Upon reaching there, I realized, wow, that's something I'm looking at for the future. For Black Deaf people here in the U.S. and those who live in respective countries of Europe, some people have a conception of what Black Deaf experiences look like in other places of the world. We here represent respective international experiences. Now, after watching our presentations, you may have an Aha moment, and your perspective may have changed. Like the previous panelist mentioned, we have that moment where now that I'm in Europe, I'm realizing, wow, I'm enlightened that we're close, but I wish it had happened sooner.

And we do need to have more collaboration. And I think it would make a big difference if we continued collaborating. It sparked a fire in us. And we have to continue to burn that fire. And we do so by stepping out of our borders. That's what I would add.

**Lindsay:** Yep. You have to get out of your comfort zone.

**Nia:** Exactly. Our borders and comfort zone.

**Lydia:** Just to add to my fellow panelists' remarks. I think we all know a story about other people in other cultures and other communities, and we hyperfocus on that story. Those stories are not documented from the experience of Black Deaf people, and it's the narrative that's promoted that then has control over us. Which is not a narrative we should follow if we are trying to open perspectives to collaborate. The more we do that, the more we will realize we have in common. Many people think that Europe is great for Deaf people. But it's not always the best for Black Deaf people.

People assume Africa doesn't have much, but Africa has a lot to offer. America is also developing rapidly, and yet many Black people feel they are still behind the times. So, how do we build in a way that allows us to all gather together, thrive as a collective Pan African community from all over the globe, and find a way to show we are more alike?

**Lindsay:** Sam?

**Dr. Lutalo-Kiingi:** Two points to your question. I think research is of utmost importance, as well as documenting and being able to find sources of funding. Globally, as we know, COVID has impacted economies worldwide, and we know that funding has limitations as a result. How do we continue to engage in research and data collection under these conditions, especially in the African continent? Of the 54 African countries, in addition to smaller communities, we have to consider potential sources of funding and where they come from, finding donors and contributors to enhance our work.

If our work is not done or published, it isn't disseminated. It is important to disseminate the work by publishing and sharing it with other countries to learn about us, including after we do presentations like these.

My second point, as we look at Deaf people in Africa, as Deaf people can access higher education and the workplace, we need to be there to support those communities. We need people like you to go to other countries and support their educational efforts, and teach them so that they have opportunities for upward mobility. We want to see African Deaf people. I know you have this in the U.S., but I mean African Deaf people in Africa obtaining doctorate degrees and working at universities. As I said, 54 countries all over the continent, if we had Deaf people working in universities in each country, then we would be able to see societal change realized. And we need to support each one of them.

**Lindsay:** This will probably be my second and last question, and then I will open it up to

the audience. I promise.

How do you see us moving forward? And what do you see the role of the Center for Black Deaf Studies in supporting that movement towards Black Deaf liberation? What does the Black Deaf liberation movement look like?

**Lydia:** You know, we have to document our narratives and our histories. We need to chat with Black Deaf adults, we have to make sure we are capturing their stories of their upbringings and how they differ from now. We need to ask them what more we need to do. Also working with our Deaf youth, looking at their identity development and their self-awareness development. It's absolutely critical because you can't become a successful adult without a strong childhood identity. We need to instill in the youth to respect our elders because that's a characteristic of Black Deaf culture all over the world. That's the concept of community, family, and Ubuntu: we are all in this together, and a unified village is so very important.

**Jenelle:** One commonality I recognize with today's generation is the use of social media. They can get ideas out there pretty quickly, whereas previous generations did not have that. As you just said, Nia, we need to encourage connections and collaborations. Social media is the key. Use technology. Get the message out there on social media. Talk about the educational system. Research can be shared through that medium as well. Social media is the way.

**Lindsay:** Looking at social media, it requires some degree of literacy, and that's our job to help them succeed in that. You all said we need to empower our youth and younger generations. Our youth are experiencing challenges. How do you envision us approaching those challenges?

**Jenelle:** I will let you go ahead, please, Nia.

**Nia:** Sure. My comment ties into both of your comments. Social media is a great way for

Deaf people all over the world to connect because of our use of sign languages. Social media does not limit us to one language, whether that be ASL, International Sign Language, German Sign Language, or others. Dr. Dunn, you mentioned literacy. I feel as though our generation, the younger generation, are great with using technology and social media.

I think for us, the issue is how to share and exchange information on those platforms about race and racism, and share our stories. I'm sure you can think of a famous social media person who always shares vlogs.

Who are they? Are they from the Black Deaf community? We can all think of Black Deaf content creators. So now, how can we leverage that?

We could share our stories, our experiences with racism, and share about Black joy. You could share, for example, your journey of being a Black artist. Sometimes I feel as though I'm a little behind, just in terms of doing my part. Well, I'm always doing my part as a researcher. But I feel I could be more involved by sharing vlogs about my experience as a doctoral student to spread awareness and show that I'm here.

From what I have seen within Germany in the BIPOC group, often we defer to the American Deaf and the UK Deaf to share vlogs and signed content. We say things like "well, as Black Deaf Germans, it's not our place to make that content, oh well". But we are also experiencing world issues.

All that to say, please leverage social media, make your vlogs global, and try to learn International Sign as well. So, we can all stay connected. And don't be afraid to visit or move to another country as well.

**Lindsay:** Go ahead, Lydia.

**Lydia:** I want to make sure we don't get ahead of ourselves here. I think we often do

things based on what the public needs. But we need to go back to the basics and consider what the community needs. Our next steps should be to step outside of America, fly to different European and African countries, meet with one another, and have those conversations. That's where we need to start, and then we can share things on social media and engage society at large. But right now, we need our stories shared with one another and our communities. Before we jump to feeding the global needs, we need to feed ourselves and eat together.

**Lindsay:** That's an interesting point of view. Sam?

**Dr. Lutalo-Kiingi:** I agree with everything that has been shared. However, there are two big problems. One of the biggest challenges with YouTube, specifically, is that we see a lot of videos that are disseminated. However, we have to think about protecting the integrity of the videos. The second challenge is with the academic communities, the World Federation of the Deaf, and International Sign, which are all linked in an important way, with guidelines for how to come together and dialogue. For example, the WFD may decide on important issues for Deaf people to know, and they will have academic discussions and presentations on these issues. American Deaf people will disseminate that information, which becomes a hierarchical passing of information down to the Deaf communities. But how do we establish a mechanism for the communities to share a backup of this informational hierarchy?

I know that America and Europe have strong networks, but in Africa, we do not; even funding access is different. So, access to information is critical. An additional point: I know Academia has research agendas and imperatives that can align to secure funding. How do we advocate for change in that system to make these imperatives and opportunities accessible for the African continent?

**Audience question:** Thank you so much for all of your presentations. This has been absolutely incredible. You have also talked about language issues, the strength of networks, and how important it is for us to make sure that we are disseminating the information.

So, focusing on Black Deaf history, Black Deaf narratives, and Black Deaf people. You are all talking about these perspectives on a global scale. Yesterday, the American perspectives were presented. Americans are changing, as you can see with the large turnout here. We have always followed Europe and America's model and learned about culture from them, but those are their stories. We want our Black Deaf stories of the people in the global community, the Black Deaf stories, because that's what we lack. And we must disengage ourselves from what's happening in America and Europe, right? Is that what we need as Black Deaf people?

**Lydia:** I 100% agree. As we think about America and Americans, of course, we know that we need partnerships with Black Deaf Americans. So I do not mean dismiss and become disconnected from America. We also have to want to learn from other countries, other cultures, and other truths of different people across the globe. So while we extend the hand of partnership to America, we also need you to extend it to us and decenter yourselves to center us. There are so many Black Deaf people in Africa, and often we have to follow the American way. But we exist! But we don't have the resources and networks you all have here in America. America is a force to be reckoned with. Share some of that power.

**Audience question:** My name is Ryan. Thank you so much for having me here. I just wanted to say that I'm an indigenous Canadian from the Northwest Territories in Canada. We have 11 official languages, nine of which are indigenous. I understand very personally the loss of ancestral languages, as well as the idea of language hierarchy. My grandfather was a Korean interpreter, and my grandmother was an interpreter of indigenous languages. And I have a multilingual family. My spouse is a Japanese immigrant. And my experience of ASL is mediated by a Japanese immigrant, a different immigrant. So yeah, all the topics we are discussing here today resonate with me.

I want to talk about the idea of building coalitions across language community lines. So, in indigenous language revitalization in the Northwest Territories and elsewhere, there's



a strong movement to recognize data sovereignty when it comes to research. It's a very important concept to understand and respect. Nevertheless, I guess I would like to know what the panel has to say about building coalitions across language community lines and how -- not to break down people's ideas about data sovereignty, but how do we sort of like promote the idea that we can sort of work together around doing documentary research, telling people's story, documenting the languages that people use while also respecting data sovereignty? Thank you.

**Lindsay:** In regards to respect for languages, in South Africa, we have 12 sign languages and 27 spoken languages. Nigeria alone has 250 languages. And there are six signs of Igbo alone. There are thousands of tribes in Africa that speak thousands of different languages. So language is very important to our cultures and to our identities.

So, any foreign language that tries to colonize our languages meets defeat. As Sam stated, our cultures are strong. Colonization and slavery will never be able to separate us from our blackness. Period.

I'd like to extend our time to allow these two people who have been waiting to ask their questions. Is that acceptable? Can we extend our time a little? Okay, come forward with the questions.

**Dr. Lutalo-Kiingi:** If I may share something. This conversation has been focused on Deaf history and Deaf culture. However, there are other issues such as science, health, and education. So, there is a lot of work to be done, and we are just focusing on history.

However, there are many more areas of study and issues to address. At the university level, when designing programs, think about these other issues. Do not abandon them. Consider the context and structure of your university and what those needs are. However, I am not advocating simply fitting our issues into those structures. For example, in 2013, a university in Uganda and my university created a partnership, and our university structures were different. What was important was that we negotiated and created a shared agreement. There are other communities that have their own

structures, and we still need to ascertain how to uplift those communities and preserve those languages. So, we need to conduct research, publish, and give presentations. We did so at the WFD. We need more folks to support us and become part of the World Federation of the Deaf to continue this work.

**Audience comment:** I am Dominique. And I wanted to say thank you. I know many of us are afraid to step out there and go to other countries to give presentations and workshops. And really, I want to be on the front line regarding speaking up for our communities. So, your action of taking the front-line position also motivates us.

So, thank you.

In terms of Liberia and your presentation, the opportunities, power, and knowledge, we don't have that in African countries, we don't have that in many places in the world. And we hope that many of you or all of you will do something similar to what Andrew Foster did, a Black man who brought power, education, and knowledge to Africa. I hope you will do the same. Nia has that network with Black Deaf people all over Europe, and each of you does as well, and presentations to share. And Sam, you travel all over Africa. I want to go back and stay, but I can't. So please continue to bring this work back there. That's all I wanted to say.

**Audience question:** I am Zeleie. You all have been impressive and incredibly inspiring for us all today. There are many more Black Deaf youth who are taking prominence in different fields. They are our future "possibilities" as we educate our Deaf, CODA, DeafBlind, and disabled children.

How did your parents, after realizing you were deaf, educate you? You are all successful. How do we learn from your experiences to give opportunities for future Black Deaf children and our underserved youth? The pandemic had a tremendous impact. What can we do to help elevate our youth and enable these hearing parents, because 90% of them have hearing parents? What can we contribute to them?

[off camera] The point is, what do we need to do to get through to the parents? So that they give our future generations the same opportunities as this very illustrious group sitting before us.

**Jenelle:** Publish. That's the one thing I can say is publish books, photographs, and articles. Have something documented that can get out there so they can apply it and see it. It's simple: dissemination.

**Lydia:** I think it's also important to welcome those hearing families and parents to your community, community-wide events. So, they can see that Black Deaf and hearing communities are so similar. For example, I grew up in the white Deaf community. My mom would go to school events. I had Deaf friends and Deaf camps, and my mom was right there with me. She has that disposition to be in the community, but never learned sign language. About 3 months ago, we went to Ireland, and my mom came to care for me in the hospital. Within one week, my mom communicated in sign language without using her voice. In 30 years of my life, you have never done this, and it only took you a month? As Black Deaf people, we need to pull hearing parents into our world and the Deaf community. What the physicians say will become their reality unless we welcome them into our world, events, parties, and holidays so that they can see for themselves. As a result, they will want to embrace our language and culture, and it will benefit their children too.

**Nia:** Yes. And I wanted to add to that. Hearing parents need to see us because, as I said before, it's hard to imagine it if you don't see it, if you don't go, if you don't witness it. It's exactly what you said. Last week, I went to Jamaica with a friend to attend their family member's wedding. There were 2 of us who joined that friend. That friend said, "I brought the two of you because this will be the first time my family actually sees Deaf people signing." Their first time in their 32 years of life! And the family was so amazed by it.

**Dr. Lutalo-Kiingi:** Just a brief comment. So, we think about the American and the

European education systems, specifically looking at mainstream programs or residential schools for the Deaf with dorms, the two types of Deaf educational systems we see in both continents. However, in my context in Uganda, the education system is very different. There are no residential schools with dorms. Many live in remote areas far from the three schools we have. There are families with wealth and financial means to drive their learners to school. Some families have a median income, and some are impoverished and are making do with their means to be able to send their child to school. Many of these families are farmers and live in rural areas.

So, we have to prioritize those families because oftentimes, as farmers, they prioritize the farm's labor over schooling. They cannot afford to have their child attend school all day because the family needs support.

So, how do we provide education for these children in rural areas rather than focusing on those who have access because of where they live?

And these farmers' parents are thinking about the potential financial resources and how we can make education equitable for all social classes.

**Lindsay:** That reminds me, when I was growing up, early in the morning at 6:00, as soon as we heard the rooster cry, we got up. We would sit outside the hut for a few minutes to get the natural vitamin D. All the boys would have to get up and start bringing in the wood and water, feeding the chickens, herding the sheep and goat, and letting the cows out. We had to run to get to school when all that was done. That is a fond remembrance of mine growing up. We have come a long way.

And keep in mind that this was during African American slavery. When the Civil War was over, that was their life experience, too. They were brought here as slaves. Then they would have to help their families before going to school.

Now, before we end this program, Dr. Cecil Lucas has something she wants to say. A

really special person to us, trust me. Ceil, you have the floor.

**Dr. Lucas:** All right. I have two announcements for you. Beginning in the fall of 2019, we began the African Sign Languages Resource Center (ASLRC). We have collaborators and friends based out of Addis Ababa University. That person's first name is Eyasu Tamene.

So, the center is established and has this data. And if you pull up his name, you will see about 54 countries associated with this initiative, and the various sign language systems. So, it's pretty cool. And every day, they are adding new information to it.

Secondly, we have a sign language conference that we have been attending since 1986. This sign language conference started in 1986 and was called TISLR: Theoretical Issues in Sign Language Research. The first conference was held in New York. It has been held for the past 36 years in various places in America, once in Brazil, and several times in Europe. And in January of 2025, that conference will be held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in collaboration with Addis Ababa University. Finally!

So finally, we are having it there. The person who is coordinating is Eyasu. I believe this will be TISLR 15, and you can Google the conference information. But it's in Ethiopia. It's time!

**Lindsay:** Thank you so much. And that also reminds us that the World Federation for the Deaf always has one of their African conferences. And I believe the last one was in 2011-- I think that was the first time ever that we saw that take place on that continent. And now they will be returning.

So, if you want to take a look and see how domination and colonialism occurred from Europe and the United States, not only in that respect to people, but also to their bodies and even languages. And this, what we have done here, is to create tension and create fissures. Next, we can shake them up, and then we can finally break down all of these systems of oppression and start anew so that we see new baobab trees sprouting that

can never be uprooted. With that, I thank you and love you from the bottom of my heart, and all of you, panelists. And don't make me cry again, please.

**Lydia:** Can I add one short comment? Just a little thing.

In coming here and seeing people talk about Africa and what they can do to help the Africans, we have to break the mindset that we will help Africa. You are going to learn something too.

**Dr. Lutalo-Kiingi:** That's right. Exactly.

**Lindsay:** Well said. With that, we'll close the program. Thank you all.

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