

'Double Whammy'?! Historical Glimpses of Black Deaf Americans

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ABSTRACT: Discrimination on account of both one's hearing status and skin color can be disabling—but it can also be enabling, as I will show in this historical overview on Black deaf Americans. I examine Black deaf Americans as a minority group within a minority past and present, their changing relationship with signed language, and their activism especially with regard to desegregating education. I argue that Black deaf persons have significantly contributed to American culture, although their contributions have gone largely unacknowledged.

KEYWORDS: Black Deaf History; Black Deaf Education; Desegregation; Black Deaf Power; Black Deaf Advocates; Deaf Pride

"Being both Black and deaf is in many ways a 'double whammy' because of society's abrogation of each of these two minorities.

When the conditions of Blackness and deafness are combined in one person, the individual effects of prejudice, discrimination, and negative self-image are compounded exponentially."

McCay Vernon, 1983

"Many deaf people have high expectations of themselves. Many Black deaf people are the only persons in their family to attend and graduate from college"

Ernest Hairston and Linwood Smith, 1983

Introduction

Leafing through boxes with materials about the 1963 International Congress on the Education of the Deaf in Washington, D.C., at the Gallaudet University Archives, I found two newspaper images depicting a few white deaf¹ girls engaged in a rhythmic demonstration

¹ Deafness is a very diverse phenomenon. In this article, I discuss Black deaf persons in general—not only those who use signed language and consider themselves to be a part of Deaf culture. For this reason I spell deaf with a small "d." It would merit a separate paper to discuss terminology sensitively with regard to different types of hearing status as well as to explore whether—or in what instances—to spell the term 'deaf' with a capital D. See National Association of the Deaf (NAD).

with a teacher giving the beat. Across the lower left-hand corner of the first picture, a Black arm contrasts the white girls' happy faces. The Black girl is seen only from behind; a second photograph more clearly shows that in this 1963 newspaper image of deaf achievements the white girls are at the center with the Black girl on the side (Celand, "These Pupils" D-8). The pictures raise the question in which ways racism has affected black deaf Americans.

Disability rights activist Frank G. Bowe² observed in 1971 that Black deaf Americans constitute a "minority within a minority" (Bowe Educational, "Psychological"), which means that discrimination based on one's racial identity has also permeated the deaf community. Indeed, back in 1950, the bylaws of the American National Association of the Deaf (NAD) stated that "[a]ny *white* deaf citizen of the United States may become a member" (Emerson, "The Race Question," my emphasis). Deaf American history is apparently as segregated as is hearing American history. As Aya Kremp put it, Black deaf persons have been discriminated against on three different levels: by white hearing Americans, by white deaf Americans, and by Black hearing Americans (Kremp, "Konferenz" 418), which raises the question of what exactly it meant and still means to be both Black and deaf. Which strategies did Black deaf persons devise to deal with the different layers of discrimination they faced, and could this actually provide for positive means of identification especially for Black deaf children today?

Black deaf Americans are a heterogeneous group on various levels. Black deaf academics Ernest Hairston and Linwood Smith noted in the first book-length study on Black deaf persons published in 1983 that the term "Black deaf" assumed "a collective whole [of] all the people who share the basic similarities of (a) being Black and (b) being deaf," which they found problematic as it might invite "laymen [. . .] to formulate a set of rules or laws that are believed to describe or predict the behavior of all or most members of this population." By contrast, "[w]hile certain similarities are shared by the majority of this group, it is not an entirely homogenous group. Individual differences exist with regard to intelligence, social sophistication, etc." (Hairston and Smith, *Black and Deaf* 2). As is the case with hearing people, (Black) deaf people constitute a heterogeneous group as regards abilities, which may be reflected in each individual's social status. As I will discuss at a later point, they thereby also refute the cliché of all Black deaf persons being generally uneducated.

² For more information on Bowe, see Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

In fact, not just with regard to social status or intellectual capabilities are Black deaf persons heterogeneous. The hearing status as well ranges from hard-of-hearing to profoundly deaf, which has an impact on how a deaf person identifies and communicates. The medically determined hearing status does not necessarily overlap with a deaf person's sense of either belonging to a sign-language using deaf community or to the hearing mainstream; their identity is shaped by their communicative experiences in growing up as well as their personal choices once they reach adulthood. In fact, some deaf persons actively take part in both the deaf and the hearing worlds (Werner, "Lautsprache").

Of course, Black deaf Americans constitute but one of numerous distinctive ethnic deaf groups besides, for instance, Hispanic or Native American deaf persons (Myers et al., "Black Deaf," 449; Goff and Wood, *Step into the Circle*). Transnational deaf communities also exist, such as the one of Jewish deaf persons, whose dual identities were and still are shaped by the legacies of both the Holocaust and the forced sterilizations of hereditarily deaf persons during National Socialism in Germany (Zaurov, *Gehörlose Juden*; Schuchman, "Hungarian Deaf Jews"). The fact that some people experience multifold levels of discrimination is furthermore not limited to the combination of ethnicity and a hearing loss. For example, the deaf gay and lesbian community has faced particular challenges such as in connection with HIV/AIDS education, which reached them much later on account of the language barrier (Klinger, *The Social Development*). Deaf persons are heterogeneous with regard to their ethnicity, beliefs, and sexual orientation, to name just a few characteristics of "vulnerable groups" (the term is used in medicine for patients with minority status).

To be Black and deaf is a multi-faceted phenomenon. However, it is not simply an "unfortunate disadvantage" but it may, at times, have accorded Black deaf individuals more favorable chances of upward social mobility than their Black hearing peers. For instance, in 1983, Hairston and Smith took offence with the clichéd oversimplification that Black deaf people were generally undereducated, underemployed, and consequently stricken with "poor communication skills, low socioeconomic status, and an unfavorable self-image" (Hairston and Smith, *Black and Deaf* 1). By contrast, so they pointed out, being Black and deaf could also provide means for positive identification: "Many deaf people have high expectations of themselves. Many Black deaf people are the only persons in their family to attend and graduate from college" (Hairston and Smith, *Black and Deaf* 7).

Black deaf persons as a group and individually have significantly contributed to breaking down color lines. However, comparatively little research on Black deaf persons is available, and historical studies are particularly scarce. In this article, I therefore provide an overview of defining developments in Black deaf history, whereby I focus on how Black deaf persons have interacted with Black hearing as well as with white hearing and deaf peers. I start out discussing available written historical sources, after which I reflect on deafness as race matters in the past and present. This leads me to discussing changes in the significance of signed language³ for Black deaf persons. I close by analyzing important instances of Black deaf activism and its impact on desegregating education generally.⁴

A Note on Sources

Written sources on deafness present a particular challenge; after all, vocal language is a second language for many deaf persons—especially for those who are genuinely deaf or who lost their hearing before the acquisition of speech (pre-lingual deafness). Written language follows the same grammatical rules as spoken language. Especially for pre-lingually deaf persons, learning to read and write means learning an abstract foreign language—some Black deaf persons nonetheless acquire excellent writing skills. Signed languages like American Sign Language (ASL) follow different grammatical rules. A three-dimensional visual form of communication, ASL cannot easily be transcribed into two-dimensional writing without losing some of the possible nuances of the combination of hand positioning and movements with facial expressions, lip movements, and the positioning of the upper body. Comparatively few sources on deafness written from deaf perspectives are therefore available, especially when we go further back in history such as before schools for deaf persons existed—the first American school for the deaf was founded in Hartford, CT, in 1817 (Lane, *When the Mind Hears*).

³ In this article, I use both the terms “sign language” and “signed language”; I use the latter as a more general term to emphasize the fact that, especially in the past, we cannot be sure to what extent signs correlated with the standards of today’s American Sign Language (ASL)—they could also have been dialects, Black Sign Language, or might have followed the structure of the English language.

⁴ As a hearing historian without any direct ties to deaf communities, I am conscious of deaf sensibilities with regard to outsiders like myself writing “their history.” I respect those sensibilities, and it is certainly not my intention to tell Black deaf people who they are. What I am interested in—also in this article—is to explore borderlines between deaf and hearing cultures in an attempt to reevaluate hearing historiography by adding deaf perspectives.

On account of racial segregation, Black deaf persons are even more elusive than white deaf persons when it comes to writing and written records. They are fewer in number than their white peers and have faced (and continue to face) additional challenges in terms of accessing education and thus acquiring literacy. Among the available written sources on Black deaf persons are archival documents and printed memoirs as well as scholarly articles.

Archival documents can be found in educational institutions for deaf persons such as Gallaudet University, and especially at formerly segregated schools for the “colored deaf” in the American South. A search at the archives of Black civil rights agencies and institutions might yield results, but my research at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) was not particularly fruitful. For instance, even though Howard University in the early 1980s hosted an important event for the Black deaf community, hardly any archival traces of it can be found at Howard University’s Moorland-Spingarn Research Center and the Howard University School of Social Work. At the same time, it is telling that as late as in the early 1980s, Black deaf activists turned to an HBCU rather than to Gallaudet University to get organized: ethnicity mattered more than hearing status. At HBCUs Black deaf students were, in the past, not a top priority. For instance, Shaw University in Raleigh, NC, in the mid-twentieth century could have been an option for a higher education for Black deaf students. However, a probably insurmountable challenge then was the cost of full-time sign language interpreters (Wright, *Sounds Like Home* 248).

With regard to academic research on Black deaf Americans, early publications may be traced back to the 1930s and 1940s (Jowers-Barber, “The Struggle”). The available handful of articles provide three different foci in discussing Black deaf persons: their otherness as disabled persons, the question of how to advance particularly gifted Black deaf individuals, and the question of how to recruit and train teachers for Black deaf children. Three of these articles appeared in the *Journal of Negro Education* in the context of discussions on “handicapped” Black persons (Honesty, “The Handicapped Child”; Scott, “Educational Facilities”; Long, “The Availability”). Another two came from the context of studying deafness, one of which focused on “exceptional children” (Baker, *Introduction*; Best, *Deafness*). Concerns about the “Normal Training for Colored Teachers” were discussed in the *American Annals of the Deaf* (Settles, “Normal Training”).

By the early 1970s, a generation of young Black deaf academics had come of age during the hot phases of the American civil rights movements. Among those who initiated new research on Black deaf Americans were Glenn Anderson (Anderson and Bowe, "Racism Within"), "the first American-born black deaf person to receive a Ph.D. degree" (Rittenhouse et al., "The Black" 398-99), as well as Linwood Smith and Ernest Hairston, who in 1983 co-authored the groundbreaking study *Black and Deaf in America: Are We that Different*. These Black deaf scholars began raising awareness with publications that had powerful titles such as Smith's "The Hard Core Negro Deaf Adult in the Watts Area of Los Angeles, California" (Smith, "The Hard Core"; also Smith, "Work-Study Programs"). Anderson, in turn, together with the aforementioned disability rights activist Bowe, discussed "Racism within the Deaf Community." Shortly thereafter, the UCLA School of Social Welfare published studies on education, psycho-social development, social isolation, and unmet needs of Black deaf children and adults in Los Angeles (e.g., Jackson, *An Assessment*; Wolfe, *Education*). Los Angeles was an early hub of Black deaf activism. The rather aggressive language with which Black deaf activists addressed their issues is well in tune with L.A.'s racial climate, which in 1965 had erupted into race riots in the Watts neighborhood (Horne, *Fire This Time*).

More than 80 articles, monographs, dissertations, memoirs, and studies concerning Black deaf Americans have been published since the 1970s; in more recent years, films, social media, and other internet forums have increased in their importance for deaf persons generally.⁵ The printed scholarly literature peaked in the 1990s and has since declined notably. Does that mean that the subject has lost its urgency or rather that different venues of engaging in debates about Black deaf issues have been used? As literacy provides particular challenges for deaf persons, they prefer signed forms of communication transmitted through film and internet, which might explain why printed matter on Black deaf Americans began to decline with the advent of the internet. However, more research, especially on the role of the internet, needs to be conducted to answer this question.

With regard to subject matters in the publications on Black deaf issues since the 1970s, among the persisting themes are education and social life. Many articles deal with current problems of Black deaf people. Historical overviews are scarce. Moreover, an ongoing

⁵ A fairly comprehensive—though not complete—overview of publications on Black deaf Americans is provided by Gallaudet University, "African-American/Black. Bibliography."

interest in Black American Sign Language may be observed since the 1970s (e.g., Woodward, "Black Southern Signing"; Maxwell and Smith-Todd, "Black Sign Language"; Lucas et al., "Lexical Variation"; Mauk, "Identity and ASL"). As I will show below, a Black American Sign Language has evolved that may clearly be distinguished from ASL.

Last but not least, three book-length personal memoirs are available that describe Black deaf lives in the mid-twentieth century (Brown, *On the Beat of Truth*; Wright, *Sounds Like Home*; Miller-Hall, *Deaf, Dumb, and Black*). These personal accounts shed light on the intersections of disability, race, and gender from the perspective of Black deaf families—not just in the segregated U.S. South. Two of them were written by daughters of Black deaf couples. The third was written by a Black deaf woman who lost her hearing between the ages of eight and ten. All three books are set in the U.S.-South before the end of segregation. They put the limelight on two schools for Black deaf persons: the North Carolina State School for the Deaf & Blind (Schools 1941) and the Maryland School for Colored Deaf-Mutes in Overlea (Legg, "The Maryland School"). In *On the Beat of Truth* (2013), Maxine Childress Brown remembers her deaf parents. Her account provides glimpses of Black deaf social life in Washington, D.C., in the 1950s (126-140). Above all, her youth was shaped by her realizing and reconciling the different challenges of hearing and deaf cultures (87-94). In 1994, Mary [Robinson] Miller-Hall published *Deaf, Dumb, and Black*, a memoir of her deaf parents. The tone of this book is very different from Brown's. Already the title suggests that the author was much farther removed than Brown from a vibrant deaf culture. While it contains intriguing vignettes of Black deaf lives, most of the book oozes resentments on account of inner-familial conflicts, which were also rooted in the parents' personal Black deaf experiences (3, 4). By contrast, in *Sounds Like Home* (1999), Mary Herring Wright remembers her own youth as a post-lingually deaf person during the 1930s and early 1940s. Wright was comfortable writing as she had spent her early years immersed in hearing culture.

Deaf Matters as Race Matters

In 1884, Alexander Graham Bell⁶ voiced concerns regarding the *Formation of a Deaf Variety of the Human Race* (Bell, *Memoir*). Being a child of his time, Bell approached the

⁶ For Bell's significance in deaf history, see Brian Greenwald's "Revisiting Memoir upon the Formation" as well as the classic *When the Mind Hears* by Harlan Lane.

construction of race from a genetic perspective, worrying about the effects of deaf-deaf marriages with regard to passing on deafness to future generations. However, using a cultural approach instead, more recent scholars have asked in which ways the deaf community at large has formed a distinctive minority, considering that deaf cultures have produced complex signed languages as unique contributions to human communication (e.g., Lane et al., *The People of the Eye*). In this section, I first describe 'the deaf' as a cultural minority also providing comparisons with other minority groups, and, second, I ask what being a cultural minority means for the diverse groups within the deaf community.

Deaf persons as a cultural and linguistic minority may be compared to Native Americans—both groups have a history of resisting assimilation into mainstream U.S. culture. Education played a crucial part in that. At boarding schools for Native Americans, students were not allowed to speak their own native tongues, and they were educated in western values that could be at odds with their own cultural heritage (Trafzer, *Boarding School Blues*). The same can be said about deaf persons. Oralists pushed for assimilation into the hearing mainstream. Especially after 1880, at schools for the deaf, deaf children were forced to communicate only by spoken speech. They were punished for using signs, kept isolated from deaf adults, and therefore did not have any deaf adult role models (Burch, *Signs of Resistance*; Baynton, *Forbidden Signs*). In order to hold on to their language and culture, minority groups need children or newcomers. Deaf persons who use a signed language depend on newcomers from outside their group to keep their culture alive, for only a very small percentage of deaf persons actually have deaf children (Mitchell and Karchmer, "Chasing"). According to Jan-Kåre Breivik the same holds true for the homosexual community (*Deaf Identities* 186-87). Moreover, Lori Askeland argues that Native Americans also have a history of adopting outsiders into their communities (*Children* 4-7).

Such similarities highlight the idea that deaf persons may be regarded as a cultural and linguistic minority that has been subject to discrimination. African Americans and deaf persons also share a few similarities. In 1996, Christopher Krentz published "Historical Parallels between the African American and Deaf American Communities," in which he discussed, among other things, Black and deaf education as a means of community-building, such as the creation of options of higher education for both groups since the Civil War. He also mentioned dreams of finding a promised land, which in the case of the deaf was sought

in the American West—as compared to 'Back to Africa' movements among African Americans. Krentz furthermore compared nineteenth-century leaders such as abolitionist Frederick Douglass and deaf activist-educator Laurent Clerc. Once schools had been established for both Black and deaf persons, self-awareness arose and group consciousness spread, which resulted in the search for an equal place in society. For Black persons, it meant fighting against slavery and segregation. For deaf persons, it meant fighting for their right to use and be taught in sign language. Both Black and deaf activism were halted in the late nineteenth century with what Krentz called "regression," i.e., a white hearing establishment taking over with Jim Crow laws and an international community of hearing experts declaring the superiority of oral communication (Krentz, "Historical Parallels" 70-72).

Racism has been a defining issue of American culture (Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*; Singh, *Black is a Country*). Black deaf persons have faced discrimination on two levels, i.e., on account of their skin color and their hearing status. Historically, Black deaf persons were often forced to identify more strongly with only one of their two defining traits—either their skin color or their hearing status; the other was downplayed. To provide an example: in 1989, "a sample of 60 African American deaf students who attended Gallaudet University and the Model Secondary School for the Deaf (MSSD) at Gallaudet" were, among other things, asked "[w]hich do you identify with first, your Black culture or your Deaf culture?" Nearly 90 per cent replied that they first identified with their African American culture, stating "that people notice their color first, not their deafness." Their contacts to the deaf community were limited and they identified with "issues involving racial discrimination." By contrast, "[t]hose who identified with Deaf culture first typically were educated in predominantly White residential schools at a young age and had deaf parents who were active in the Deaf community. They were more knowledgeable about issues involving deafness than those pertaining to being African American" (Aramburo, "Sociolinguistic Aspects" qtd. in Hall, "The Association" 56, 57).

Race does influence the perception of one's hearing status, as a comparison of the USA and South America with Germany suggests. In the 1990s, Aya Kremp, a deaf German, observed with regard to South African schools for the deaf⁷ that a categorization of students by race

⁷ For a more recent description of deaf education in South Africa, see Storbeck and Martin, "Special Section: South African Deaf Education."

('white,' 'colored,' 'black') was more important there than a categorization by hearing-status, which is the historically grown approach in Germany. She wrote: "It was impossible to know which student was really deaf or hard of hearing. Both grow up with sign language. [. . .] It is only the audiogram which shows if the child is deaf or hard of hearing"; by contrast, in Germany, "[h]ard of hearing children do not learn sign language at school though most of them really need it [. . .]. Deaf and hard of hearing Germans do not get along very well with each other" (Kremp, "A Visit" 67). In Germany, it was—and to some extent still is—more important to make the disability 'invisible' and 'return' the hearing-impaired person to society, a type of one-way-integration that mainly focuses on the interests of the hearing mainstream. In the USA and South Africa, by contrast, the focus was on keeping those with a darker skin color separate, which for non-white deaf persons meant that they were freer to resort to their natural sign language, for they were not desired as a part of white society, hearing or not.

The main challenge for Black deaf persons has historically been that in a hearing environment, little attention was given to deafness, whereas even in the supposedly integrated North, schools for the deaf had little regard for the specific challenges that Black deaf students faced. As Anderson and Bowe observed in 1972:

In schools for the deaf, the black students learn very little about themselves, the problems of their people, or the contributions of their ancestors. They are exposed to texts oriented toward a belief in white supremacy. They learn that their ancestors were savages brought in from Africa for use as slaves in America. (619)

Put differently, Black deaf students at 'white' schools for the deaf were exposed to the same negative racial stereotypes as Black hearing students. A correlation exists between the lack of a means of positive identification and low academic achievement (Hall, "The Association" 55). That is, as late as in 1998, being Black and deaf increased the risk of a low academic performance independently of the child's actual intellectual capabilities.

Explicit racism within the American deaf community persisted at least into the 1990s, at which time the deaf community in Washington, D.C. continued to be divided along color lines: "the Black Deaf Club and the White Deaf Club are 12 blocks apart" (Rittenhouse et al., "The Black" 398). Back in the early 1970s, "deaf clubs specifically [. . . denied] membership to

black deaf persons, or at least its members act[ed] in such manner as to make a potential black member unwilling to join. In other situations deaf clubs request[ed] athletic services of black deaf persons while refusing to grant them full membership privileges” (Anderson and Bowe, “Racism Within” 618). Athletics was one of the few areas in which a Black deaf person was “permitted, even encouraged, by his background and environment to excel” (Anderson and Bowe, “Racism Within” 619). In the early 1980s, “Black deaf individuals seldom socialize[d] freely and on an equal basis with the white deaf population” (Hairston and Smith, *Black and Deaf* 2).

Having had to choose between two defining identities illustrates the exponentially increased challenges for Black deaf persons in the not so distant past. Among their hearing peers, they were disabled; among their white deaf peers, they were exposed to the same mechanisms of racism that hearing Black persons experienced among white persons. Black deaf students in particular needed teachers who were sensitive to the multi-layered challenges that they faced. As activist scholars realized in the early 1990s, both deaf and Black students deserved more “teachers from their cultures, who know the special needs and problems of children from these two minority groups, and they must work to encourage young people to go into teaching” (Rittenhouse et al., “The Black” 396). In order to recruit such dedicated teachers, so it was concluded back then, the hearing public had to learn more about deaf culture(s) in general: “multicultural curricula [should be] designed for hearing students [to] include units on deaf culture” (Reagan qtd. in Rittenhouse et al., “The Black” 398; “Cultural Considerations”). The new curricula had to be sensitive also to the less well-known multiple layers of discrimination in education. This raises the question of the perception of signed language and deaf culture in the Black community past and present, for the acceptance of signed language is a prerequisite for Black deaf persons to go into deaf education.

Signs of Wit

Signed language holds a peculiar status when the matter of race comes into play. In fact, as is the case with Black hearing persons, who created a distinctive Black English, Black deaf persons also developed specific Black signs (e.g., Maxwell and Smith, “Black Sign Language”). Among hearing people, signed language has often been perceived as a stigma, and, as I will show, Black hearing Americans are no exception.

In deaf education, the international standard until about the mid-twentieth century was to teach pure oralism, prohibiting any use of signs at schools for the deaf (Burch, *Signs of Resistance*; Baynton, *Forbidden Signs*). This standard had been agreed upon during an international gathering of mainly hearing teachers of the deaf at Milan (Italy) in 1880 (Brill, *International Congresses*). However, the oral method is time-consuming and therefore also more costly as the students have to be taught articulation and speech-reading (i.e., lip-reading) in small groups or even individually, and additional equipment like hearing aids becomes necessary. More teachers are needed with a thorough training in the oral method.

In recent years, educators have begun to explore bilingual approaches to deaf education, meaning that vocal/written and sign languages are taught (Marschark et al., *Bilingualism*). However, this approach is not supported by the medical profession, which continues to steer parents of deaf infants toward pure oralism and technical solutions such as cochlea-implants (CIs). Doctors tend to be the first persons to diagnose deafness, especially in infants. As Laura Mauldin recently showed, as soon as a hearing loss is detected in a newborn, a medicalized script is set into motion that steers hearing parents of deaf infants towards hearing aids and CIs and even actively discourages them from exploring the possibilities of sign language culture (Mauldin, *Made to Hear*). But learning to hear with a CI requires years of strenuous training. The result of hearing with a CI does not match the way hearing persons perceive sound; challenges to follow oral communication remain for the deaf or hard of hearing person (Milani, *Raising Kids*). The medical approach reinforces the image of hearing-impaired persons as, above all, deficient hearing persons; it disregards the by now vast body of research on sign languages and deaf cultures. As a result, despite the increasing popularity of sign language classes in America today (Goldberg, Looney, and Lusin, *Enrollments*; Brueggemann, *Deaf Subjects* 25-37), a hearing mainstream apparently continues to subscribe to the medical interpretation of deafness rather than to a cultural interpretation.

Deaf persons who use a sign language do not consider themselves as disabled but rather as members of a linguistic and cultural minority with a history of being denied use of their own language (cultural interpretation of deafness). For deaf persons, their hearing status has a fundamental impact on their communication, which, historically, was defined by hearing rather than by deaf experts:

most Deaf students taught by this [oral] method spend much of their educational careers learning to speak, rather than learning content material. Many educators believe that these students need oral communication to gain access to the opportunities of the hearing world. But ASL, which is a visual/gestural language, allows Deaf children full access to language, enabling them to develop a complex lexicon and visual grammar system [. . .]. (Myers et al., "Black Deaf" 450).

Different forms of visual communication exist, some of which are based on vocal language. For example, fingerspelling means to spell each word; it is a visual way of communicating in vocal language and not to be confused with sign language. Sign languages such as ASL differ in their grammar and inner logic from vocal languages (Lane et al., *A Journey*). The idea of mainstreaming deaf children by exclusively teaching them vocal language keeps them from mastering their native sign language. As a result, pre-lingually deaf children grow up without an actual mother-tongue; they are raised in a second language. A hearing environment will never quite allow them to communicate naturally ("Cochlea-Implantat (CI) und Gebärdensprache"; Szagun, *Wie Sprache entsteht*).

Looking at the history of Black deaf children's exposure to language and education, a curious shift may be detected. As I will show, in the 1930s and 1940s, southern Black deaf children had much more contact with signs at schools for the "colored deaf" in the South than had deaf students at integrated but oralist northern schools. By contrast, today, a tendency may be observed to push Black deaf children into hearing mainstream education rather than to send them to bilingual schools for the deaf. Oralism was long considered elite, state-of-the-art deaf education that 'returned' a deaf child to the hearing society. Black hearing parents who saw that their deaf children were taught signs rather than vocal speech realized that their children were denied access to the more prestigious oral method that allegedly would help them integrate into the hearing mainstream. While desegregation from a racial standpoint served to improve educational opportunities for Black hearing children, it also meant that Black deaf persons lost signed language as they were increasingly mainstreamed into hearing culture.

It was an expression of racism that southern Black deaf students in the 1930s and 1940s were not taught vocal language to the same degree as were white deaf children. They had more exposure to signed language at schools for the 'colored deaf'; their teachers knew how to sign (or at least were open to learning it). In fact, by the 1930s, graduates of schools for

the 'colored deaf' would join the staff of their alma maters as teachers after graduation. Back then, Mary Herring Wright attended what was then called the North Carolina State School for the Colored Deaf and Blind (NCSSCDB), established in Raleigh in 1869. Only one school for the 'colored deaf' existed in the entire state (Wright, *Sounds Like Home* 184, 208, 205). For Wright, entering this deaf world was a process with which she had to grapple during her entire stay there—this process is illustrated by her increasing references to signing rather than speaking as she describes her growing older. Her eventual fluent signing meant acceptance into a (Black) deaf world (246). In fact, the students “had to teach all of the new teachers how to sign” (211, 250). When deaf students are viewed as merely deficient hearing persons, their impressive achievements are downplayed, such as their acquiring speech and speech-reading despite all. It is also noteworthy that the students taught the hearing teachers their unique visual language, with which they showed them that—in contrast to the hearing teaching paradigm of deaf education at that time—it was, indeed, a valid means of communication.

It was (and is) difficult to find comfort zones of belonging especially for persons with both strong ties to the hearing world (such as a mainly hearing family) who also had or have access to the sign-language using deaf world (as was, for example, the case with Black deaf southerners, who could use signed language more freely at their segregated schools). With her excellent knowledge of spoken and written English that was due to her losing her hearing after the acquisition of speech, Wright at least initially did not quite fit into the deaf world—she had to accept it but also depended on being accepted by that deaf world before she could become a part of it:

Deaf people are very distrustful of hearing people. They're always suspicious that they're being talked about or made fun of for not being able to hear and talk. They sometimes resented me too because Nurse Stewart had told my teachers not to let me sign but to keep me talking to keep my voice strong. Therefore, when I talked or recited and they didn't know what I was saying, they told me my mouth was just flapping and they didn't believe I could talk. (Wright, *Sounds Like Home* 118)

The passage also implies that the Black students were not taught to speech-read, an important though particularly challenging part of oral education, for “even the best speechreader, in the best of situations, can only see about 30% of speech” (E-Michigan Deaf and Hard of Hearing People). Wright was able to read lips (Wright, *Sounds Like Home* 196).

Moreover, at home in rural North Carolina, some of Wright's hearing family and friends were willing to communicate with her via fingerspelling, others made fun of it (109-10).

Maxine Childress Brown's memoirs provide an idea of the curriculum at the North Carolina School for the Colored Deaf and Blind during the 1920s, when her mother Thomasina was a student there. Brown writes that her mother

was taught the alphabet, numbers, fingerspelling, and sign language. Some of the signs she already knew like *sheep* and *eat*, but she was secretly delighted to learn useful new signs, such as *toilet*, *toothbrush*, *toothpowder*. [. . .] Little by little, she began to understand how some signs for words can form a sentence, and once she learned how to spell, she was able to put the letters together to form words in fingerspelling. All her teachers were white, and they were amazed at her intellect and her eagerness to show them how much she understood and memorized. (Brown, *On the Beat of Truth* 47, 49).

Eventually, Thomasina became a teacher at the North Carolina School, a position which she held until it became known that she had secretly gotten married (59-61, 67-69). That the Black deaf world is rather small may be derived from the fact that Wright remembered Thomasina as a teacher (Wright, *Sounds Like Home* 174).

As Wright was a very good student, upon graduation, her teachers discussed options for her to continue with her education. Such options were even more limited than they would have been for Black hearing persons at that time. Wright remembered that her mother conveyed to her what various teachers and the superintendent had said. The options included Shaw University, "but you'd need an interpreter for classroom work. They said the state didn't provide for that and it would be too costly." Gallaudet University was not an option as "it's only for Whites." The solution was that she would obtain further education by coming "back next year and be a student teacher working under some of the older teachers" (248). The superintendent, Gustavus Ernest Lineberry (Taylor, "Lineberry, Gustavus") repeated the offer to her directly. He "started signing as best he could" and offered her a job as student teacher after the summer following her graduation (Wright, *Sounds Like Home* 250).

Both memoirs suggest that by the time of the 1930s, the North Carolina school had begun hiring former students as teachers—during the 1920s the teachers had all been white. This would correlate with the aforementioned academic articles on "colored" teachers for the

(Black) deaf. Hiring Black deaf teachers was an important step to be highlighted in Black deaf history.

However, today, Black hearing mothers—in contrast to white hearing mothers—steer their children toward oralism (Myers et al., “Black Deaf” 453-54). For them, as was observed in 1983, being marked as ‘deaf’ becomes yet another disabling trait (Luetke-Stahlman, “Recruiting” 852). Black mothers simply do not wish to add to the stigmatizing challenges that their children face in a white and hearing mainstream. According to Myers et al. (“Black Deaf” 454), significantly more white mothers now encourage their children to learn ASL. Some Black mothers go so far as to actively discourage their children from learning ASL, white mothers do not. The picture is similar with hearing fathers, except that fathers, “regardless of race” do not actively discourage their children from learning ASL.

As a result of the historically grown racism in U.S.-society, Black mothers today respond to the expectations of a hearing mainstream, which, however, is not necessarily what is best for the deaf child from a deaf perspective. Myers et al. (“Black Deaf”) also found that Black and white deaf persons acquire ASL at significantly different mean ages, “with Black Deaf individuals learning ASL at about 9 years of age and White Deaf individuals learning ASL at about age 3 years.” As a result, “Black Deaf individuals demonstrate significantly lower ASL scores than White Deaf individuals” (Myers et al., “Black Deaf” 454-55). This is unfortunate, for “although complex English syntax skills and ASL skills are not significantly related, they independently predict reading skills” (450). Hence, if deaf students have a thorough command of a sign language, it will be easier for them to develop their English reading skills. Not the oral skills but generally proficiency in any language is needed to acquire reading proficiency.

Negative stereotyping based on language skills is the starting point of social downward-mobility. For instance,

Black Deaf students are often negatively stereotyped by their teachers and placed in special education programs [. . .]. These low expectations for Black Deaf students parallel those experienced in the historical struggle of Black hearing students, who have overwhelmingly been steered into vocational programs and away from academic skills throughout the course of their education [. . .]. Such low expectations engender low levels of academic and reading achievement. (Myers et al., “Black Deaf” 450).

As far as academic and vocational training is concerned, Anderson and Cynthia Grace observed in 1991 that “compared to their White peers, a majority of Black deaf students were receiving all or most of their training in vocational rather than academic areas.” The vocational training for Black deaf students as well differed from that of white deaf students: for the Black students, it was “food service occupations”; for the white students it was “computer-related training.” Last but not least, “three times as many Black deaf students compared to their White peers were graduating with certificates rather than high school diplomas [. . .].” As a result, Anderson and Grace concluded, “it can be hypothesized that large numbers of Black deaf adolescence are not being provided with a broad range of opportunities for upward educational and occupational mobility” (Anderson and Grace, “Black Deaf” 83). Racism was still manifest in deaf education in the early 1990s.

Black deaf students excel, however, in adjusting registers—they use white signs with white people and Black signs with Black people. Despite the fact that “[t]hese Black Deaf students have developed their own dialects of ASL as a means of communication with and understanding one another” it appears that “like teachers of Black hearing students, teachers of Black Deaf students often misinterpret this cultural attribute as a manifestation of academic failure” (Myers et al., “Black Deaf” 450). Being able to switch back and forth between different dialects of sign language is turned against Black deaf students, while, in fact, one might argue that they are linguistically more diverse than their white deaf peers.

Black Power + Deaf Pride = Black Deaf Advocates

Black deaf activism in the context of U.S. civil rights movements provides an explanation for the shift with regard to Black deaf students’ exposure to sign language. In fact, a closer look at such activism reveals that Black deaf persons have contributed significantly to desegregating education. In this final section, let me first illustrate how, due to their isolation, some Black deaf persons were able to circumvent racism on an individual level. I will subsequently discuss examples of Black deaf activism with regard to desegregating education, a subject in which Black deaf contributions have not yet been adequately acknowledged.

In some respects, Black deaf persons benefitted from their hearing status when their hearing peers did not, as Miller-Hall put it writing about her deaf father in the mid-twentieth

century: "Being deaf was an asset of sorts, because no one told him he couldn't do it" (*Dumb, and Black* 8). In her 1994 memoir *Deaf, Dumb, and Black* about her deaf parents, Willie Joe ("Nellie") and Robert E. Robinson (3, 4), Miller-Hall mentioned a number of advantages of being both Black and deaf. One aspect included housing:

Robert went completely out of the Negro area where he lived, to seek the lot for the home he would build to house his many children. [. . .] The lot was in a white neighborhood for the same reason—no one told him he couldn't live there. To do so would have required writing it down in very simple English. 'Whitey' was not willing to do that. Certainly that overt act was discussed, but no one actually committed that atrocity. Not in writing at least. No, that would have been traceable and perhaps punishable under the law. (8-9)

According to his daughter, it was because of his deafness and therefore restricted communication that Robinson also ventured into other white public spheres in the early 1950s: "It got him into the all-white bricklayers union. It got him into all-white jobs, halls and clubs, where he soon won the white co-workers over with his congeniality" (9). Noteworthy is the prejudice with which Miller-Hall herself describes her father, for she assumed that Robinson did all this "without his knowing it," and concluded that "[t]his same premise followed Robert over the years and got him into places where he would not have been allowed as a black speaking man" (8-9). From the perspective of his hearing daughter, the Black deaf man was completely unaware of the racism surrounding him, and his apparently limited oral communication skills were interpreted as a protective wall. The question that cannot be answered from the source is whether indeed he was color-blind on account of the limited information he received from the hearing world, or whether he consciously used his hearing-impairment to circumvent racial segregation.

Evidence of well-organized Black deaf activism may be found especially with regard to education. As the initially-mentioned 1963 newspaper clipping of a Philadelphia school class performing in Washington, D.C., suggests, no matter if they attended a school in the North or South, Black deaf students encountered discrimination. In the 1940s and 1950s, Black parents of deaf children began using legal channels to improve educational opportunities for their children, which, in fact, paved the road for the landmark 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* (Topeka, Kansas) Supreme Court decision.

Already a district court decision in 1952, which involved Black deaf children, desegregated District of Columbia schools and thus served as an important basis for the *Brown* decision (Federal Records). In the 1952 case *Kenneth Miller, et al. vs. D.C. Board of Education*, or short, *Miller vs. Board of Education*, Kenneth Alan Miller's mother fought for her son's right to attend the Kendall School for deaf children—a lower school that belonged to Gallaudet University—rather than be bused to Baltimore, Maryland (Jowers-Barber, "The Struggle"; Columbia Institution for the Deaf and Dumb 11). The *Miller*-case was one of four relevant District of Columbia court cases prior to the 1954 *Brown*-decision. Of these four, it was the only one involving deaf students, and the only one that was actually successful—two other cases were dismissed, and in another case the plaintiffs were denied admission. Another relevant five cases were decided at district courts in various states prior to 1954 (Federal Records). One can conclude from the *Miller* case that—to borrow from Toni Morrison—a Black *deaf* presence may be traced in America, which has left its imprint on American culture at large ([Werner], "Deaf Presence"; Morrison, "Unspeakable Things," *Playing in the Dark*).⁸

In 1990, Gallaudet University prepared a documentary called "Class of 1952" ("Class of 1952") about the desegregation of its campus, which revealed that in the nineteenth century, integrated classes had been taught there (Typed Document). Located in Washington, D.C., and thus in the U.S. South, Gallaudet University's on-campus Kendall School was segregated before the African American civil rights movement. However, back in 1898, fourteen Black deaf students had been enrolled there. Following the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court Decision that established the "separate but equal" doctrine, white parents began complaining about the presence of Black deaf kids. They were successful. By 1905, the Kendall School was segregated. Black deaf children from the Washington, D.C. area were transferred to the Maryland School for Deaf-Mutes in Overlea, Maryland. The problem of providing Black deaf children with an adequate education was openly discussed in the early 1930s (Brill, *The Training* 91-92). It took a few years until training workshops for Black teachers of the Black deaf were introduced. Around 1950, officials began debating whether a "department for the deaf, Negro or white, at Howard University" might not be instituted, but officials concluded that it "would be impractical" (Guire, Jr., "Higher

⁸ When, in 2007, I published my article on the "Deaf Presence in American Literature" referring to Toni Morrison, Christopher Krentz simultaneously made the same point (Krentz, *Writing Deafness* 13).

Education” 1) for financial reasons. The *Miller* and *Brown* cases ended the discussion by ordering desegregation.

Of course, the order to desegregate schools was only a beginning. Black deaf activism during the 1970s and 1980s was strong in Washington, D.C.; it was fueled by Black Power. Its key advocates had studied at Gallaudet University since the 1960s. Anderson observed in 1972 that “[i]n the wake of a rising trend toward ‘Black Pride,’ a growing impatience with second-class citizenship, and a burgeoning militancy toward obtaining legal and social rights among black people, the black deaf have been overlooked” (Anderson and Bowe, “Racism Within” 617). Within only ten years, however, Black deaf individuals began expressing their concerns in an organized national grassroots movement.

The Gallaudet University archives hold materials on “Deafpride” and the “Black Deaf Advocates.” Records for Deafpride Inc. are available for the period 1969 until 1996. Deafpride Inc. was a “nonprofit group dedicated for the deaf in the District of Columbia, especially poor and minority deaf” (Deafpride, Inc. Records 1969-1996), which provided a peer group of parents with a forum for both exchanging personal experiences but also engaging in activism on behalf of deaf children. Apparently, such Deafpride organizations did not only exist in Washington, D.C. but also in other metropolitan areas (Hairston and Smith, *Black and Deaf* 7). In 1971, Bowe had observed that “[a] black deaf man or woman in today’s society is likely to be grossly under-educated, severely under employed and largely isolated from the world around him” (Bowe, “Some Observations” 204). He had concluded that “cut off from the hearing community by deafness, from the deaf community by race, and from help from service agencies by indirect discrimination, black deaf persons often appear to live quite lonely lives” (208). By the late 1970s, “Deafpride, Inc.” was active to tackle these challenges (“BLACK DEAF ADVOCATES”).

Black deaf activism meant to “address the needs of the Black deaf population” (“BLACK DEAF ADVOCATES”); but even within the Black hearing community, such activism was perceived as foreign. One of the highlights of Black deaf activism was the formation of Black Deaf Advocates, whose First Eastern Regional Conference, “The Black Deaf Experience,” took place at the Howard University School of Social Work, Washington, D.C., June 25-27, 1981 (National Black Deaf Advocates Collection, 1975-2002; Taft, “Employability” 453). The 1981-

1982 Annual Report of the Howard University School of Social Work included a section on "International Affairs-Pan African Program," which was directed by Alvis V. Adair. Among the "Significant Affiliate Events in 1982," two events were listed that included an interaction with deaf persons. One was "[a]ttendance at the First Regional Black Deaf Conference at Howard where participants observed how the deaf conduct a major conference," the other a "Reception at Gallaudet College for the Deaf where they discussed their countries and their backgrounds and toured a model institution for the deaf" (Chunn, *Annual Report*). This was the only archival source found at Howard University libraries and special collections with regard to Black deaf activism. The historic conference of the founding of the Black Deaf Advocates was not even mentioned in the student newspaper, because it had occurred during semester break.

In the course of the 1980s, Black deaf activism might have inspired deaf pride among other deaf persons. For instance, a crucial point for Deaf activism was the year 1988 and the Deaf President Now movement, when Gallaudet University students and staff demanded a deaf president with knowledge of ASL and deaf culture (Christiansen and Barnatt, *Deaf President Now!*). Today, numerous references to Deaf Pride may be found on the internet, for example as merchandizing images on t-shirts, buttons, and even wallpaper ("Deaf Pride button"; "Deaf Pride wallpaper"). Some of these references include images of the raised fist. While the raised fist has certainly been used by other movements, the connection between Black power and (Black) Deaf Pride can hardly be denied considering the activism of Black parents of deaf children and their links to the African American civil rights movement. For instance, one symbol of Deaf Pride is fingerspelling ASL, short for American Sign Language. It benefits from the fact that in the finger alphabet, the letters A, S, and L are formed with different versions of a closed fist: The closed fist with the thumb up means A, the closed fist with the thumb across the other fingers means S, and the closed fist with the index finger pointing up and the thumb pointing left at the same time (thus forming the shape of the letter L) indeed means L. The picture therefore expresses pride in ASL ("ASL Pride"). This certainly brings to mind the raised closed fist of Black power (Black Power button).

In the end, Black deaf activists of the early 1980s needed the Howard University School of Social Work to get started, but they hardly left any traces there.⁹ The National Black Deaf Advocates (NBDA) continue to be active today. Records of their achievements may be found online, such as when Benro Ogunyipe, a former NBDA President (2011-2013), recently summarized “Black Deaf Culture through the Lens of Black Deaf History.”

Conclusion

In 2010, a documentary about four deaf American artists was released entitled *See What I'm Saying* (Scarl et al., *See*). One of the artists was CJ Jones, a Black deaf stand-up comedian, actor, and entertainer who uses both ASL and speech in his routines (Jones). The film illustrates his failure to reach a Black hearing audience during a Black Theater festival—virtually no one came to see Jones' shows. Jones is well-known in the deaf community at home and abroad. In the documentary, Jones, with obvious frustration, laments the “double whammy” of being both Black and deaf (Scarl et al., *See*).

However, as I have shown in this historical overview of Black deaf history, being Black and deaf in America historically has also opened paths. When examining historical vignettes from Black deaf history, an altogether intriguing picture emerges. I would like to summarize five important points:

First, Black deaf persons as a group and individually have significantly contributed to breaking down color lines. They at times reached higher levels of education than their hearing family members because of a willingness to achieve and the support of hearing allies. Because of their different forms of communication, they sometimes were able to undermine the racism of white hearing people more or less unwittingly.

Second, activism to improve educational opportunities on behalf of Black deaf children might be viewed as an important driving force for the African American civil rights movement. With the 1952 *Miller* case, parents of Black deaf children successfully pushed for

⁹ Kremp referred to the historic event of the founding of Black Deaf Advocates in a 1996 article on a conference of the National Black Deaf Advocates (NBDA) in Los Angeles, which she published for a German-speaking audience in the deaf studies journal *Das Zeichen*. She pointed out that the National Deaf Association (NDA), founded in 1880, did not accept Black members until 1965 (Kremp, “Konferenz,” 418).

the desegregation of deaf schools with the result that they helped pave the way for *Brown v. Board of Education*.

Third, however, before desegregation even fewer schools existed for Black deaf children in the South than for Black hearing children. Black families with deaf children consequently had to endure greater hardships to ensure that their deaf children received an education. Such hardships included longer distances to schools that had lower educational standards than northern schools for the deaf.

Fourth, Black deaf children in the early to mid-twentieth century appear to have been educated using signs rather than the prestigious, time-consuming oral method. By the 1930s, it was thus possible for Black deaf women to work as teachers in schools for the 'colored deaf.' While this actually illustrated the potential of signs in educating deaf persons and generally the potential of deaf persons, it also led to Black hearing parents protesting the different teaching methods and the desegregated schools. From a deaf perspective, racism thus backfired. For it is not oral language that matters but comprehensive language skills, which can be significantly improved when teaching a deaf child sign language at the earliest possible age. As Black deaf students appear to have less and later access to ASL today, it means that their academic performance on the whole is lower.

Fifth, since the early 1970s, Black deaf persons have actively organized themselves to voice their concerns as a minority group within a minority group. That they were able to do so is particularly remarkable as in comparison with their hearing Black peers they faced additional discrimination on account of their hearing status and communication even within the Black community.

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