

Strong but not silent: Black Deaf culture stakes its claim

Intersectional discrimination necessitated the birth of Black American Sign Language. But the vibrant culture that sprang forth from it continues to sustain a new generation of scholars, influencers and everyday people.

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Tawanna Jackson struggled with shyness as a teen. She found her place in Charlotte's Black Deaf community.
Photo credit *Tawanna Jackson*

Written By Emiene Wright

Joseph Hill did not always feel a sense of belonging to his community.

“Growing up, I never felt welcomed in my Black community because I was deaf,” Hill said. “I didn’t talk right or I couldn’t understand what they were saying. I felt I had to prove my worth through school and church. It was certainly praiseworthy, but it was never enough.” Hill was experiencing [audism](#), the systematic discrimination against deaf and hard of hearing people that’s enacted across hearing society. Much like racism, audism assumes the superiority of one group to another — in this case, hearing people over deaf. Raised in Dayton, Ohio, Hill was taught to communicate exclusively by speaking and was completely disconnected from a deaf community. Deaf accomplishments during the civil rights era were not taught in school, and inclusive or equitable social access was rare. In his own home, despite having three other deaf siblings, no one learned American Sign Language (ASL) until their teens.

“I switched between speaking, lip-reading and signing; that’s something I was expected to do for survival and social reasons as a deaf person,” Hill said.

It wasn’t until Hill’s older sister connected with a Black deaf community that Hill found a place he belonged. She brought him to social meetings in Dayton and Cleveland, and then

to a [National Black Deaf Advocates](#) conference, where for the first time he saw Black deaf professors, educators, authors, creatives and more. It was his first exposure to [Black American Sign Language](#) or Black ASL.

Developed by Black deaf people in the 1800s and 1900s during the era of legally segregated schools, Black ASL is more than simply a dialect of ASL. It's a culture that offers a profound sense of home for Black deaf people who are commonly subjected to both audism and racism.

“That gave me a positive lens on Black deaf culture,” Hill said.

For graduate school, he chose to study at Gallaudet University, the world's only fully bilingual higher education institution that designs all of its programs and services to accommodate deaf and hard of hearing students. Learning about Black ASL there, in the early 2000s, felt like “a calling,” Hill said.

Until recently, Black ASL was hardly known outside of insular Black deaf communities. Its use has become an important signifier of identity and pride. Now a socio-linguist at the Rochester Institute of Technology's National Technical Institute for the Deaf, Hill studies the relationship between culture and language.

“Black ASL was born out of necessity,” Hill said. The first permanent school for the deaf, which opened in 1817 in Hartford, Connecticut, did not accept Black students until 1925. In the South, schools for Black deaf people were not created until after the Civil War. The teachers followed some protocols of French sign language and the schools were strictly segregated, causing Black deaf schools to develop different vocabularies, signs and ways of communicating.

Regional anomalies also took hold. Similar to the way someone from the Northeast might say “soda” while someone from the Midwest would say “pop,” and someone from the South might say “Coke” to denote any carbonated beverage, different signs for the same word or concepts began developing, depending on the geography of the school.

These [variations](#) that distinguish Black ASL from mainstream ASL persist today. Black ASL signers use space differently, employing both hands to sign and signing more often on the forehead than the chest, like ASL users. Movements are more expansive and emotive, and facial expressions are generally more expressive, lending a richer tone and fuller attitude to exchanges. Additionally, instead of spelling out many words the way ASL does, Black ASL utilizes more gestures to embody concepts and phrases. And because Black deaf people are a part of the wider Black community, near-universal aspects of American Black culture appear in Black ASL as well, with references to familiar religious practices, hairstyles and humor.

As popular deaf TikToker Nakia Smith, who goes by Charmay on the platform, said in a [video](#), “BASL has seasoning.”

This allows for a dynamic visual communication that is living and growing today. Slang is easily incorporated, with different gestures for phrases such as “my bad,” “that’s tight” or “stop tripping.” BASL’s sign that a party was “lit” is an entirely different gesture than, say, communicating that a candle was lit, while ASL’s constructs are limited to a more literal spelling or signing of the word. This rich and nuanced language deepened bonds and cemented feelings of kinship between Black deaf folks.

But when Black deaf students began attending previously white schools, there was a communication gap that went beyond words.

“Race and language are entwined, and people use language to discriminate,” Hill said. “People often substitute language discrimination for racism, penalizing people for ‘broken English.’ Language is used to privilege some and put others to disadvantage.”

Some of the first successful anti-segregation lawsuits were leveled by the Black deaf community against segregated white schools. In 1952, [Louise B. Miller](#) and a group of Washington parents won a suit against the District of Columbia’s Board of Education for not permitting Black deaf children at the city’s only school for the deaf. It was two years before the landmark Supreme Court ruling *Brown v. Board of Education*.

ASL course materials had little diversity or mention of other races. It was framed as more advanced than Black ASL, which was often disparaged in a similar manner as African American Vernacular English, or Ebonics. Some Black deaf people internalized this negative messaging as well.

In a scene from a webinar Hill presented titled “[Black ASL: History, Culture, and Language](#)” an interviewee recalled her experiences [code-switching](#) between Black ASL and mainstream ASL in schools.

“White sign is more nice, polished, developed,” than Black sign, the woman signed. “Even so, white people should not smirk at our language.”

This is reminiscent of antiquated, racist ideas of anything Black being considered less-than, “street” or inferior.

Tawana Jackson did not grow up using Black ASL in Charlotte, North Carolina, or much sign language at all. The 35-year-old caregiver contracted meningitis as a baby, resulting in losing much of her hearing. Her parents had an interpreter come to their house every week to teach them ASL, and put her in a preschool with deaf and hearing-impaired children, but she attended public elementary and high schools for the remainder of her education.

It’s not uncommon for deaf students to attend public schools after initially learning in schools for the deaf. The prevailing educational philosophy for deaf students is oralism, which forces them to assimilate to hearing society by learning lip-reading, mimicking mouth shapes, and practicing vocal exercises. Sign language is de-emphasized because most hearing people don’t know it. This is detrimental to deaf students, for whom signing

is their first language, and often impacts not just their academic performance but also their self-esteem.

“They wanted what was best for me,” Jackson said of her parents. “But when I was young, I wasn’t happy (about) who I am.”

Jackson struggled with feelings of shyness and shame when kids would point out her hearing aids, and when she dated boyfriends who could hear but were unwilling to learn sign language. Eventually, through the support of her family, church, and a few deaf and hearing friends, she grew out of her shyness. She began asking people to write down a note when she couldn’t understand them and teaching her friends to sign so their communication could be more of a two-way street.

Now, she’s an advocate at the deaf group home where she works, often acting as a liaison for the residents. At a previous job, a daycare, she began teaching hearing toddlers how to sign. When their parents noticed and asked about it, she taught them too and encouraged them to continue learning at home. Jackson is no longer embarrassed about what she initially perceived to be a disability; instead, she’s proud of what she’s learned as a culture. “I have plenty of hearing and deaf friends in my life. Most of my hearing friends accepted me for who I am and are excited to learn sign language,” she said. Her significant other is also hearing impaired.

“I’m so grateful for him because of what we have in common. Our communication with each other (is) easier,” Jackson said.

Today, Black Deaf culture is becoming a more recognized part of Black American culture and American culture in general. Scholarly efforts such as the [Black ASL Project](#) and “[The Hidden Treasure of Black ASL](#),” as well as pop culture phenoms like Smith, the Tik Tok star, are introducing Black ASL to entirely new audiences of both deaf and hearing communities. The Joseph F. and Helen C. Dyer Arts Center’s 2020 [Black is Black](#) series at RIT’s National Technical Institute for the Deaf was hugely popular, and Marvel’s [Spider-Man: Miles Morales](#) video game, which features the Afro-Latinx hero incorporating some BASL signing, is a fan favorite. What was once denigrated, if considered at all, has grown into a wellspring of historical information, creativity and inspiration.

“It’s like this is my responsibility to treasure (Black ASL) with the talent and knowledge I have and help people to see it the same way,” Hill said. “We have to think hard on how to elevate all deaf people because deaf people are not just deaf. People are people.”

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