

Signing Black in America Transcript

[classical soul music]

*♪ I was born by the river, in a little tent,
and oh just like the river, I been running ever since.
It's been a long, long time comin', but I know,
a change gon come,
whoa, yes it will. ♪*

Michai Hanley: Our backgrounds are different, based upon how we were raised. Some of us have been exposed to the Black Deaf ASL community. Some of us have had less exposure to this community. We have a unique way of expressing ourselves. Our race, our culture, how we feel, is shown when we communicate.

Wade Green: People who use Black ASL typically show more facial expressions, I can see their, let's say, their attitude, their personality, their swag. I can also see their body language, and how they express what they're about to say.

[r n b music]

*♪ Baby I realize, you could take complete control of me.
I don't care, anywhere, anytime its fine, it's cool with me.
Maybe I'm crazy, and if so, it's all about you ♪*

Candas Barnes: I can't imagine life without Black ASL. When I see Black Deaf people in their element, with each other, there's just a...it's just a richness to it that is indescribable.

[light music]

Warren “Wawa” Snipe: I’ve heard people say, you know, I’d like to hear more about it, what is it? And it just shows that they’re not aware of what Black ASL is. I can’t be upset with them, because they don’t know, you know? Because in a world where you use sign language, there’s always something new to learn.

Ceil Lucas: The number one myth is that it’s universal, that a Deaf person in China, should be able to, for some magical reason, communicate with a Deaf person in Nebraska. In the same way that we have a manner of articulation, a place of articulation, and voicings or not, we have the same kind of things going on with signs. And so there’s handshape, location, palm orientation, facial expression and so forth. Black ASL is one variety in that system. And it has – it’s parts are used somewhat differently, which sets it apart from what white folks might do.

Andrea Sonnier: Growing up, I know we communicated using sign, but I didn’t know what we did naturally was considered a language, but when I first saw the term “Black ASL” I thought oh, it’s like Ebonics! We use Ebonics within the Black Deaf community! We have our own version of Ebonics!

Candas Barnes: Black ASL paints pictures and expresses messages in ways that just bring another layer and another flavour to the whole notion of what Black Language is.

Micah Fields: It’s more flexible, it really draws people in, and it includes us relating to each other, soul to soul. I don’t know how to explain it, but when people really want to connect with one another, when you leave a conversation where you’ve been “in” Black ASL, you have energy. You feel inspired.

Warren “Wawa” Snipe: Sometimes, you can’t even translate it into words. It’s just, you get it. It’s not saying you have to be Black to understand – maybe some areas, yeah – but, it’s you! Your background, your upbringing, some of the styles people use, what they say – the accent, sometimes the dialect. Incorporating that in sign, you actually see that!

[tonal music]

Joseph Hill: Before the Civil War, there were no Black Deaf schools in the south, for obvious reasons. There was no formal education for Black people in the South. And that included Black Deaf people. But after the Civil War, we started to see the emergence of schools for Black and Deaf people.

Ceil Lucas: The war ended in 1865, it still took until 1869 for a school for Black kids to be open. In Raleigh, as a matter of fact. Louisiana didn't have a school for Black Deaf kids until 1938, and then it took them until 1978 to desegregate.

Carolyn McCaskin: We had about 18 Black Deaf schools, even here in Washington, DC, where there was segregated education, due to segregation here in America, we saw the emergence of a different language.

Joseph Hill: The way the language developed in those schools was varied. They became very innovative with signs, creating vocabularies, creating ways of signing and expressing themselves.

Carolyn McCaskin: I went to the Alabama School for the Negro Deaf. And then I moved to the school for white Deaf students after integration, and I couldn't understand the teachers! The group of Black students together, we were lost in the classroom. And we didn't understand, why, why, why. And it took us time to pick up how white Deaf people signed.

Martreece Watson: There was a breakdown in communication. And that continued because it made the Black Deaf students feel less-than. And that the white Deaf students had better language, better books and resources and exposures.

Carolyn McCaskin: I started to pick up their signs because I thought white was right, white was better, white was smart; I felt embarrassed with my signs. So I put my signs aside, I picked up their signs from socializing with the white students. But later, my

Black friends said, “You sign differently”. I said, “What?”. They said “You sign like white people”. I said, “I don’t want to sign that way; I want to keep my Black signs. I didn’t realize what was happening. Later, I learned code-switching.

[beats-based music]

Evon Black: Black people seem to have character. I know that for me, I never sign in a box, like a picture frame. Our signing is a little bit bigger! So, we’re not the same. Our signing is colourful.

Micah Fields: It’s really a little bit about your stance, your presence, your way of being. For example, I feel like Black ASL can be very formal too. But, for other people who are really outsiders, like white people or non-Black people, I think they look at it as colloquial or more informal.

Ceil Lucas: there’s this myth that white ASL is better and Black ASL is you know, not so good, which is ironic, given that Black ASL is more traditional and more standard, in some ways, than white ASL. Older forms of ASL, you have lots of two handed signs, so, WANT, DON’T KNOW, TIRED, um, and so forth, that in every day discourse become one-handed. So, WANT, DON’T KNOW, TIRED, Black signers kept the two handed signs.

Joseph Hill: The signs that touch the forehead, like, KNOW, WHAT FOR, WHY, often times will move down from the forehead. We see the differences between the groups, with the Black signers signing higher on the head, and white signers lowering their signs.

Ceil Lucas: Older forms of ASL have very little mouthing of English. Even though a lot of people were educated orally so you get...with very little movement. Especially older Black signers, uh, show very little mouthing. Um, so there’s a way in which Black ASL preserves older forms.

Jocelyn Porter: Older people, if they grew up in residential schools for the Deaf, and they were segregated, and back then, the schools were all segregated, they have their ways of signing. And I would ask them, “why would you sign it that way?” and they would tell me they had been in a segregated school and that’s how they signed it in the South. Often, people would repeat the same sign over and over again. I know that was one of the characteristics. For example, if I was to say “what’s up?” we would say “what’s up” maybe three times, not just once. So you would say “what’s up” repeatedly as opposed to once.

Dean Perry: As I grew up, to the age of seven, I noticed that Black sign language was a little bit different. Like in the 1970s, I recognized there was a difference. Now I learn from white people. I don’t even learn Black signs anymore. No more. Because we socialize so much with the white Deaf community, sometimes Black people use some of the old signs, because Black students didn’t go to the white Deaf school. I’m not always interested in learning their signs, so I just go with what I know.

Joseph Hill: Young Black Deaf students, who are going to schools that are integrated, we don't see a lot of those segregated sign forms, so they are diminished in a sense. A lot of that older vocabulary starts to disappear.

Carolyn McCaskin: The younger generation, I would say that, most of them are from mainstream schools; many of them are hard of hearing, so their communication style is different. It’s a different presentation, a different variety of communication. The younger generation is more influenced by the Black community, from interaction with family, the community, church, public schools. So I think that has an impact on their language variation. Black ASL is evolving. Language evolves over time.

[tonal music]

Joseph Hill: With the younger generation, now, they still have something unique, with African American English expressions.

Tana Fletcher: So if you say, I'm going off campus to a restaurant, you wanna join me?
"Yeah, I'm down with that, it's the way that I wanna go, I'm down, sure".

Faith Saunders: Or, "you trippin'", that's another one, you are trippin'!

Tana Fletcher: Yes!

Jamel McCaskill: The Black Deaf culture is growing really fast with the Young Black Deaf, they're making up signs all the time. I see, like, that and that's like "swag" – and if you don't know what swag is, I have to come up with a word like "cool", or you have a kind of bravado about you, I have to know these words. So the interpreters vocabulary helps convey information too.

Voice offscreen: Perfect timing, secretary. Oooh, mmm, no, come on now, don't walk away, you can't use that church finger, can't do that.

Joseph Hill: And they also have gestural and behaviour tendencies that they adopt from the community, and they incorporate that into their signing style. Others will use signed phrases following the exact syntax and sentence structure, from Black English. For example, "I know that's right!" And in sign language you can just say, yeah, that's right, I agree, there's that sign that already exists. But you want to express a specific phrase, "I KNOW that's right".

Mary Perrodin: My favourite one is, anytime someone says something stupid, I'm like, "Boy, bye", or "Ain't nobody got time for that", that's another one. I really like using that one. "Ain't nobody got time for that!".

Emmanuel Perrodin-Njoku: And in the Black LGBT community, 'Bein' fierce!', Baby, you fierce, you know, I look at that – sometimes I see that!

Mary Perrodin: Well, I have to add the hand snaps too! You gotta add that! 'Ooh, you are fierce!' But then you gotta snap those fingers too. You have to throw that in. That's

what really makes Black ASL different from standard forms of ASL. It's like kicking it up a notch, but not only saying the word "fierce", but adding body language, hand snaps, pursed hands and the head tilt. It's not like we're even trying to do it; its just "in us" and the features are shown naturally.

John Lewis: I asked a Deaf woman where she was from, and she said "D.C.!" well normally, people would just say "D.C.", but she was kind of like, "D.C.!" with the snaps, but she just did "D.C." like this, and I knew immediately, if I was to interpret that, I would say, "I'm from D.C.!". There was an added – there was a certain – like I say, all the extralinguistic information that they put on the sign, that you don't normally see white signers put on it, you say, what is that? And again, I think it's the whole identity thing, "I'm from D.C., I'm from Chocolate City", all these things are encompassed in this one sign, "D.C.!"

Shentara Cobb: I think there's a whole lot that goes on with Black ASL in the lips, and in the face, and what goes on:

Micah Fields: That's right!

Shentara Cobb: What goes on the face with the non-manual expressions that would give a lot of communication, that aren't necessary signs.

Evon Black: Like we'd do this with our finger and say "Whaaat" like this – wouldn't you all agree?

Bernie Palmer: I agree, I think I see the sign BLACK, with four fingers, I think that's different from the one signed with a one-handshape. But when you see Black Deaf people really signing ASL, it's loud in a powerful way.

Joseph Hill: Black ASL, is not just one language, one group, one dialect, it has many different forms and it depends on the region where each one is located. And so far, we've studied Black signers in the Southern part of the United States, and their

language development, but then, that's just the South. People often forget about geographical differences, and there are social factors that inform that variety.

Michai Henley: Some people sign at a slower pace, others sign faster. I love the way people from New York City sign, they use a larger signing space when expressing themselves, when looking at them signing, you can clearly understand and visualize what they are trying to say, it's amazing.

Tempest Stokes: I'm from the South. And so, some of my signs are different from people in the North. But some Deaf people really try to criticize me and I tell them "No, you can't, I'm from the South, this is how I sign. I accept your signs, but I'm not gonna change my sign for you, I'mma be me, and I'm from the South". But it's the same concept for people who can hear, you know, they have, when hearing people have an accent.

[tonal music]

Warren "Wawa" Snipe: Sometimes, in a fully white environment, I'm like, okay, my posture, I have to make sure I pronounce things right, what I'm signing is clear enough to make sure, okay, but in Black culture it's like, fine. You know, I can tone down. Just relax, not always have to be on guard all the time.

Evon Black: Yes, Black ASL gets looked down upon.

Christine Grymes: And too, what they'll say is that Black ASL isn't nice, or clear, or it isn't as explicit as Mainstream American Sign Language. Black ASL has a history. It has a culture.

Franklin Jones Jr.: You can see the difference of my signing style and theirs. I'll be signing, and they'll be like, "Whoa! Calm down! You don't need to get an attitude with me!" and I'll say, "No, that's how I express myself, I'm just saying, maybe you express

yourself differently, but there's nothing wrong with that, you know". So I have to kind of bring it down sometimes.

Andrea Sonnier: If a student is from a Black Deaf family, they can communicate freely at home. But when they go to a school for the Deaf, where most of the people around them are white, they know they have to code switch to have success in that environment.

Faith Sanders: Many people think the reason why there's something called academic ASL in school, that you can't use Black ASL because it's not formal. That's what people say. But I think that's a mainstream way of thinking and a mainstream way of viewing things, but internally, I know that is not true!

Tana Fletcher: Yeah, I agree with that.

Faith Sanders: But if you want to code switch, to try and fit in with what they're saying in society, we have to do that.

Franklin Jones Jr.: With my Black students I had to explain how academic ASL was signed. I didn't want to criticize their signing, which is appropriate in a social setting, that's my dilemma. I told them that their signing was fine, but in an academic situation they had to adhere to a more formal way. Their Black ASL signing was beautiful to watch, but to criticize it for the academic purpose? It just felt wrong.

[music]

Folami Ford: As people of colour in America, we have grown up in a society where, to survive, you have to learn how to thrive in your home culture and your home community and you also need to learn how to thrive in broader American society. And so, what that means in terms of the ability to code switch, the ability to still show your allegiance to your home community, but also to be able to navigate larger American society.

John Lewis: The notion that somehow, Black ASL should be looked down upon as 'less than', or that interpreters that come from that milieu, and come out into the larger, you know, profession, to work, uh, they have, they actually have more that they're bringing, because they're bringing a bicultural communication level that many white interpreters cant scratch the surface on.

[music]

Candas Barnes: Part of why we call it interpreting is that we don't translate. We are not watching a sign and putting a word to it. We are watching, uh, an expression that consists of quote, a sign, or, you know, if you want to get a little linguistic, there's this lexical item which would, in English, be a word, and then I see a sign. Well there's not necessarily going to be equivalence between this sign and this word, because the facial expressions change it, the tilt of the head, all kinds of other things can have an effect on what that sign will mean in spoken English.

Ernest Hairston: One time, my wife is hearing, she said, "hey, this interpreter is really skilled, she caught your tone, expressed through your facial expressions, and matched very well." I was pleasantly surprised, so I complimented her. That's what my wife said. Not all interpreters are skilled, though.

Yeah, that's right.

Bernie Palmer: I'm sitting, watching the interpreter – it was a white interpreter – the speaker was Black. The audience was laughing at the speakers jokes, I looked around, and felt like I was missing something. I realized there was a mismatch. I recognized that that interpreter was not understanding how Black people tend to talk. I think its important to match the interpreter with who is speaking, the speakers culture and so forth, I think that's really important.

Folami Ford: I think of a Cornel West, or a Michael Eric Dyson, um, where you're like, very academic language one minute, and then its like homeboy from around the corner

and on the block. And so, if you don't know how to, um, be able to interpret that effectively, and interpret the cultural nuances that are there, then you're not going to be effective as an interpreter.

Michael Eric Dyson: The independent autonomous reach of Black Female identity was regnant in her rhetoric, she was Black girl magic before they was Black girl magic.

Folami Ford: And also, not to assume, right? So you look at me and maybe people on the surface or very superficially, will assume that I'm a Black interpreter and so I can interpret for hip hop, and really, I love Bob Marley! And, so, like, I know who to call, I know I have to call Pam Collins or Tiffany Hill, if its like hip hop, I'm calling my cousins, like, "Fetty Wap, Fetty who??" But if you want to do Bob Marlie or India Arie, I'm your girl!

John Lewis: I wouldn't say it's a matter of how Black, or white, its "what is your experience?". What is your experience with that community? If you don't really know the culture, particularly in, for example, in a church, church is, as what was brought up earlier, one of the most segregated places that, you know, we as Americans operate, and so there's a – Black culture is expressed very strongly within the church.

Reverend Omari Hughes: Here's what I need you to understand-huh. There are times in your life-huh, when you doubt whether or not you're going to make it-huh, because you're going through a storm-hah, and you're up against the wind-hah, and you're up against the waves-hah, and you're wondering why-huh, you don't hear the voice of God speaking-huh, can I tell you that every now and then-huh...

Nicole Shambourger: Interpreting in that environment, you have to understand all of those nuances. You can't just listen to the words that they say, it's a lot of meaning packed into those words.

Jamel McCaskill: MMHMM, you know, or just, its like...just the energy from the pastor, from the congregation, back and forth, and the congregation is watching you, and they're just picking up on the whole vibe, like you said.

Evon Black: I always look forward to going to church, because it allows me to be me!
We can sing...

♪ Our God is in our liberty, yeahhhh, in our love ♪

Bernie Palmer: And dancing, too! I get into it! You're going to get that Holy Ghost dance!
It's like a party! I'm really happy, full of emotion!

Evon Black: Yes, yes yes!

Christine Grymes: It's different!

Bernie Palmer: In other churches, they're just sitting there.

Evon Black: For example, with the song Hallelujah. At another church, a different church, this is the, okay, Hallelujah,

Bernie Palmer: Halleluuuuujaaah!

Evon Black: But what Black folks do, YES! Yes! Black people be throwing tissues...

Christine Grymes: Preach! Preach!

Bernie Palmer: Amen!

Christine Grymes: Amen, yes!

[tonal music]

Carolyn McCaskin: Black ASL is beautiful. And, its rich in terms of our culture, our history behind the reasons it developed, and it's something that we hold to be very precious to us.

Mary Perrodin: I would say that I have a sense of pride with Black ASL. We have our own language. Of course other cultures have their own language, Black people who can hear have their culture and language. I feel a sense of pride that we have our own culture and language with Black ASL.

Felicia Williams: I want people to recognize this, that this is what we live for. To share our story and to show that our experience is valid, we can't keep denying it. What my parents had to go through, I go through it as well, but in a different way.

Shentara Cobb: It's soul, its unity, there's history, there's culture, all of that is encapsulated into this thing that we call Black ASL, and that's the power of it, and I believe we need to teach it and convey it every day. It's like we, somehow are able to make it through everything that goes on. The language is an expression of being able to make it through all of that. And understanding our values, our culture. Black ASL incorporates all of that. When you understand Black ASL, you see us.

[tonal music]