

Disability Visibility Podcast

Episode 70: Black Deaf Filmmakers

Guest: Jade Bryan

Host: Alice Wong

Transcript by [Cheryl Green](#)

For more information: DisabilityVisibilityProject.com/podcast

Transcriber's note: Jade is the only guest in this episode. She and the ASL interpreter, Jacinda, take turns speaking or sometimes speak at the same time. When the speaker is named as Jade, Jade is speaking. When the speaker is named as Interpreter, Jacinda is voicing Jade's signs, but Jacinda is not giving her own answers to any questions.

Introduction

[radio static, voices singing with hip-hop beat]

LATEEF MCLEOD: This is the *Disability Visibility Podcast* with your host, Alice Wong.

ALICE WONG: Hello, my fine feathered friends! Welcome to the *Disability Visibility Podcast*, conversations on disability politics, culture, and media. I'm your host, Alice Wong. Today, I speak with Jade Bryan, a Black Deaf writer, producer and film director. Jade is also the founder of [Jade Films and Entertainment](#), a multimedia company. Jade will talk about growing up Deaf and how she became involved in filmmaking. You'll also learn about the Deaf Talent movement she formed in 2012 which originally centered on Black Deaf Talent and POC Deaf Talent (POC meaning people of color). And by the way, please keep in mind that Jade is the only guest in this episode. She and the ASL interpreter, Jacinda, take turns speaking or sometimes speak at the same time. Are you ready? [electronic beeping] Away we gooooo!

ELECTRONIC VOICE: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.

Jade's early life and education

ALICE: Jade, welcome to my podcast today. I am so excited to finally get to talk to you.

JADE: Thank you for having me!

ALICE: Yeah. So, Jade, why don't you tell me a little bit about yourself.

JADE: OK. I was born in Jamaica, 1965, and I came to America when I was five years old.

INTERPRETER: OK. I think I'm gonna go ahead and sign, and I'll have Jacinda voice for me.

ALICE: OK.

INTERPRETER: Really, my parents found out that something was wrong with me—maybe I was about four or five years old—because I wasn't responding. And they thought I was maybe delayed with language. So, my parents have three brothers and two sisters, so there's six of us in total.

JADE: Brady Bunch.

INTERPRETER: So, we're kinda like the Brady Bunch, you know, and I'm the second to last. My father, at the time in Jamaica, he worked as a butcher. And you know, he had some money, and so he was able to provide for the family. And then when Jamaica, just you know, ended things with Britain, that's when things started to go downhill for my father, so he started struggling. And he decided to bring the family to America.

ALICE: Mmhmm.

INTERPRETER: So, we ended up living in Mt. Vernon, New York, so it was difficult. And he would always tell me that the value of a dollar, back then maybe in the '70s and the '80s, you can stretch that value, that dollar and become productive. I remember when my father would give me a dollar, and I would be upset like, I don't have enough money for ice cream, you know! But that's when he would tell me well, you gotta figure out how to stretch that value out. So, I learned a lot from him in that way.

Coming to the school system, now in Jamaica, I was in pre-K. I don't really remember much. Once I moved to America, I went to a school with hearing people as a Deaf child. And I remember how I used to copy other people's work, and I thought that was learning, you know? And when the teacher told me, "That's not learning. That's cheating, Jade"...

JADE: [laughs]

INTERPRETER: ...I was like, oh. That threw me off. I had no idea 'cause I couldn't hear. And so, I would observe other students, and so I was just copying. I could write. I could read. And so, I think about around the ages seven or eight, I went ahead and let my dad know that I wasn't doing so well.

ALICE: Did you sign as a child?

JADE: Not at all. I learned that later, at eight.

INTERPRETER: Both my parents worked at Lawrence Hospital in Bronxville. My mother was a nurse aide, and my father was a custodian. So, my father was working in a store that was a retail store that wealthy people would go and donate their equipment and things like TVs, radios. So, what ended up happening was my dad ended up meeting a wealthy Caucasian man. Maybe he was retired, maybe a doctor or something. And he went ahead and told my dad about a school for the Deaf. It's Fanwood New York School for the Deaf, and my mother went ahead and enrolled me in that school for the Deaf at the age of eight.

So, from there, my world was turned upside-down. Well, and not in a bad way, of course. But it was a completely different environment, you know? People were signing, throwing their hands up, and I had no idea what that was. And I thought that was far out. I thought that was awesome! I didn't feel like I wanted to stay there, but my mother told me, "No, that's exactly where you belong." I don't know how, but what saved me was a book I was reading. I love to read, and the teacher noticed that and asked me to do a book report based on the book. So, I went ahead and did that, and my signing was improving. And so, I kind of moved up the ranks and went through different classes until I went to the right one fitting for me.

So, I love attention, you know, and I feel like I was deprived of this language, this communication. And I was lucky that I had language, and I wasn't born deaf. So, those two things helped a lot.

ALICE: Mmhmm. And I think for a lot of Deaf people, finding your community is such a powerful thing, to be around other Deaf people your age. So, what was the impact like that on you in terms of probably being alone for a long time without other Deaf people around you to communicate with?

INTERPRETER: Isolated. Yeah, definitely I felt isolated. I remember I would always have my eyes in a book, and I would feel connected with language, with comedy. I remember my first exposure to comedy was Snoopy, so I used to love the comics.

JADE: [laughs]

INTERPRETER: [chuckles] I would walk around with the books, you know, and I wouldn't let them leave my side.

JADE: [laughs]

INTERPRETER: So, I would notice someone, another student had that book, I would try my best to get my hands on it. And the students would be like, "Hey, that's mine!" But hey, I didn't care at that time. I wanted it.

[downtempo ambient music break]

Going to university and how Jade got into filmmaking

ALICE: You're also a filmmaker, and I wanted to ask you what drew you to filmmaking?

INTERPRETER: Well, so, really, I was an athlete in my life.

JADE: Basketball, volleyball, softball. That was my world.

INTERPRETER: I played many different sports.

JADE: And I was playing outside with the boys, a little tomboy, you know! [laughs]

INTERPRETER: [chuckles]

JADE: So, I was always competing with people and competing with myself, you know.

INTERPRETER: So, what drew me to filmmaking? I'd never had any interest in the arts, specifically drawing, except for playing with my father's camera. Growing up, I remember playing with his camera all the time and his computer at that time, but I never made that connection that I wanted to become a filmmaker until later on in my life. First, I went to Gallaudet University for two years, and I wanted to become a PE teacher. I ended up changing my mind 'cause I failed swimming, so.

JADE: [laughs] I mean, I can swim, but I can't tread. I can't tread in the water. I give up. Change careers. I took drawing at George Washington University. First, Gallaudet, then George Washington University. And I found that I had a hidden talent in drawing. And then, I decided to leave Gallaudet and apply at FIT, Fashion Institute of Technology, and student advertising design. Got my degree, my Associate's degree. Then I decided to apply for school at NYU.

Actually, it discovered me. I was just not satisfied with an Associate's degree. What am I gonna do with this? [laughs]

INTERPRETER: [chuckles]

JADE: So, I applied at NYU. But while I applied at NYU, I wanted to stick with advertising, but NYU didn't have a degree in advertising. But I was not accepted when I first applied because my GPA was not that satisfactory. So, what happened was my father decided to speak to NYU's Art director, and I guess he went to bat for me. He went to bat for me. And somehow, they decided to admit me in the program: academic probation. They told me I had one semester to improve my GPA, and I did it. I gave up all partying. [laughing] I gave up socializing, and I got As and a full ride.

ALICE: That's awesome. And you ended up getting a BFA at the NYU Tisch School for the Arts. And I was really curious about what your experience was like in film school as a Deaf person. And could you talk a little bit about that experience?

JADE: Challenging, exciting. 'Cause I was the only Deaf and Black in the program. I remember being put in front of the class where everybody to criticize my work. I gotta do better, you know? I've been watching you. You have to step up! And I remember there was one film that I did for a class where we had to film with sight and sound. And I was scared, right? Because I didn't wanna fuck with sound. They said, "You have to do it!" [laughs] "But I'm deaf!!! Aaaaah!" So, I thought OK, fine. So, I went ahead. I overcome my fear, play with sound, experiment with sound. I remember I added music, and I wanted to see if I'm able to create, you know? All of it is a place to experiment, make mistakes, learn together. We all have to take turns. I have to be like the director or the producer or the writer or the camera person or the lights. We all take turns. Even sound. [laughs]

[chill ambient music break, picks up a heavy beat toward the end]

ALICE: What do you love about filmmaking?

JADE: Directing. I love to take control. It gives me inspiration, and it's my most happy place, when I'm directing. But I also like producing. I like creating. I like seeing an idea become a reality.

ALICE: Mmhmm. People know what a director does. People know what a writer does. But what does a producer do? Because that's also very important.

JADE: The producer role that I tend to do is like finding the team, looking for places, scheduling, finding money, overseeing money. Making sure you're not overspending. I mean, I'm often executive producer of my content, my films, my documentaries, because I create them. I made it happen. But then I put the money out and raise the money myself.

I started as a PA. I worked on the film *Boomerang* with Eddie Murphy yeah, Robin Givens, and I got hired as a paid intern. I love working on the set so I can see everything, all the action. Seeing Eddie Murphy in action, Halle Berry in action, Robin Givens in action.

Sundance Film Festival and Jade's work

ALICE: And can you tell me a little bit about *The Two Essences*? I know this is a pilot that you've been trying to get made. So, tell me a little bit about *The Two Essences* and talking to people in the entertainment industry to get interest in it.

INTERPRETER: So, while I was working on another film, *The Shattered Mind*, back in 2013, Will Smith announced that he was doing a competition at that time.

JADE: For writers.

INTERPRETER: For all writers or content creators. We had to develop some content based on family, and it had to have a positive ending. And I went into the contest, so I ended up writing it. I went ahead and submitted the work, and of course, they didn't accept it. But I went ahead and finished the project that I was on, and I decided to go back to that script of *The Two Essences*. And I made some changes to it, and then I had decided to host a staged reading. And it was well done. I got some feedback from it. And then I ended up putting that project on hold.

JADE: *The Shattered Mind*, I was busy with *The Shattered Mind*.

INTERPRETER: *The Shattered Mind* came up, and that took a lot of my time. I ended up winning 16 awards at the film festivals. And I toured 47 film festivals. But I didn't go to them all, all 47. I went to some of them. And after that, I decided to go back to *The Two Essences*. I made some more changes, and I decided to raise some money of the amount of \$11,000. I tried to go for \$75,000, but I was unable to do that. I shot some scenes, and what I had was a proof of concept. I tried to search for an agent. I went to Sundance, and I tried to get my voice heard, you know? And I was loud, by the way.

JADE: [laughs]

ALICE: What was it like being at Sundance or talking to studios, various folks to make your case to sell *The Two Essences*? How hard is it for you as a Black Deaf filmmaker?

JADE: Yeah. After I submitted at Sundance, they rejected it. For the eighth time! But that didn't stop me. So, I decided to apply for press, press credentials. I had one goal: I would go there and act like I'm covering the Sundance events, but while I'm there, I'm promoting my film. I went to Sundance in 2014. I was promoting *The Shattered Mind*, but then I went again this year.

I remember the first day at the press conference, Sundance asked all the media people to write their questions before the press conference. So, I wrote two questions. First question: What would it take to increase POC and Black Deaf talent in front of and behind the camera? And the second question: What would it take for us to have our own TV show? So, I submitted online, and then on the day of the press conference, I had my interpreter. I flew her over. I used my iPhone so that I could see through a live video, so that the community can see. Because they helped me get me to Sundance, so they need to see what's going on, you know what I mean?

And I think near toward the end, Kim Yutani, she's a new programmer. She got to grab my question. They had a stack of questions, but they only picked out six questions. So, mine was picked. She answered the question in front of a media people, press conference. She said, "This is a good question" because it's unique, and it needs to be heard. They knew that I'd been trying to get my film out there. They're celebrating the 35, their 35th year anniversary, and I asked them if they ever financed a Deaf filmmaker at the festival. In their 35 years, they couldn't answer! So, then someone went on their website. They noted that they had the statistics for everything else but disability.

ALICE: And again, this is, I think, something you're familiar with, where in entertainment, they love to talk about diversity. But Deaf and disabled people are not considered part of this broader conversation. Does that piss you off?

JADE: You know, I stopped being angry. I got my voice heard. So, when Kim picked out my question, then she said, “We heard you.” And then Sharon, [unclear] she’d been in touch with me a long time. She said, “I know who that question’s from! Is Jade here?!” I said, “Yeah! Over here!” Kim said, “We’ve been watching you. We heard you. Someone will want to pick up your content. Someone will want to work with you.” I said, “OK, OK.” And then she said, “Keep on creating. Don’t ever stop creating.” But what’s good for me is that I got my voice heard.

ALICE: Mmhmm.

JADE: One week after Sundance, I flew to LA, and I pitched my content.

[electronica with heavy beat music break]

Black Deaf stories needed in the media

ALICE: You know, one thing that I just noticed through following you on Twitter is like how hard you’ve been advocating for yourself, but just also Black Deaf stories. What are some of the stories about Black Deaf people that haven’t been told yet that you wanna tell?

JADE: The stories that I wanted to tell that’s been underrepresented. I mean I wanna show that we can fall in love. We can have conflicts. They always show us on that story about us cochlear implant—

INTERPRETER: Cochlear implants.

JADE: I’m sick of that story. There’s so much other stories to tell, you know, that we can own a store, that we can own a business, we can be doctors, dentists. Some of us have been raped. Some of us are a part of the #MeToo movement. Some of us are part of the Black Lives Matter movement. Some of us have been killed by the police or been....

INTERPRETER: Suffered through police brutality.

JADE: Yeah! All of those stories need to be told. And some of us have extra sensory power because we can’t hear. So, our sight and feeling is compensating for our hearing loss. We can be superheroes, you know? We can!

ALICE: A Spidey sense!

JADE: Yes!

ALICE: You know, the typical Deaf representation in film and in TV has been overwhelmingly white. Most people who ever see a Deaf character, it’s usually a white person. So, within the Deaf community, whose voices and whose stories are really amplified, and why there’s such a, you know, just not enough of Deaf Black people and Deaf people of color who really get their stories out. Can you just give me your own kinda impressions on why that is?

JADE: It’s a gatekeeping thing. When I go to some of these panels or summits, workshops, what bothers me is that many of them, especially the white ones, they don’t see as a Black person. They say, oh! But we have *Switched At Birth*. We have *This Close*. I say, hello? Can you see what color’s my skin? We all share one thing in common: sign language. But you forget a whole other ethnicities, a whole other language. We speak Black and AAVE.

INTERPRETER: African American Vernacular, mmhmm.

JADE: And dance. They forget about that. It's because it's not on the screen! That's not on the screen. I'm tired of that shit!

ALICE: Mmhmm.

JADE: Tired of that shit. I see a lot of white Deaf actors. They're gatekeeping us. They think we're not good enough, but we are good enough. It's time to change that. Only someone like me can change that. And I'm able to write that in my sitcom, *The Two Essences*. And also, what *The Two Essences* is about, a hearing and Deaf family with two cultures: Black and Hispanic. Three languages: sign language, English, and Spanish. But I'm not able to write that. I just get the writer, the Deaf writer. She adds that flavor in from her perspective.

[downtempo ambient music break]

ALICE: So, is there anything else you'd like to share with me?

JADE: One of the people that's taken my voices, like my movements that I've started, or stories that's been overlooked, I'm coming back and taking it. Like for one example, when I started the movement in 2012 to try to raise awareness about the lack of representation of Black Deaf and, well, especially Black Deaf talent. I was going to all these studios: NBC, MTV, CNN. I was standing out in the street with my group, and we hold up the signs, you know. It was peaceful. We're just trying to spread awareness. It was part of a campaign movement to spread awareness and raise awareness about what we are trying to do in representation of Black Deaf talent and POC in film and television. That started in 2012.

Then, 2015 came, some white people took that and made it all about them! That pisses me off because we've been fighting for our place, and the white Deaf people, they were always onscreen: Marlee Matlin, Bernard Bragg, John Maucere, Sean Berdy, [unclear]. There are all these white people. They were all on film! And this deaf, white woman—I can't name her—but she took that. We were trying to do a hashtag #DeafTalentOfColor, #BlackDeafTalent. Then she erased us. She erased the "Black," she erased the Deaf POC, and she made it #DeafTalent. Deaf talent. That's why I have this hashtag, #DeafTalentSoWhite, to make a point, so all over social media we're finding who claimed what. Who started the movement for it? Everybody know I started that movement! And this white bitch, she took it. And they were all, aw, put the center on these white people. If you Google #DeafTalent, you see white people. I'm gonna take it back!

ALICE: Yup. And originally, the roots are from you, of #BlackDeafTalent. So, that's again, another story of appropriation.

JADE: It's funny because all these executives, they were all white women. I just walk in, I introduce myself, "Hi," and I start pitching my pilot. And they start asking me personal questions about who am I, if I'm gay, asking about my background, where I'm from. Three white women? I'm nervous about that. You know why I'm nervous? Because white people have been robbing me. [laughs]

ALICE: UGH!

INTERPRETER: She said, "I'm nervous because white people have been robbing me."

JADE: [still laughing]

ALICE: Yep, yep. I guess that's the story of America, right?

JADE: [laughs]

ALICE: Robbing from Black culture.

JADE: Yeah! And so, three other executives that I met with, they were all Black women except for one, she's biracial, a woman of color. But I told these white ladies, "OK, you gotta make sure that there are women of color on my team! On the writing team.

ALICE: Yep, yep.

JADE: I'm not playing!

ALICE: It cannot be by white storytellers.

JADE: [laughs] Yeah! And I have to make sure that I oversee it.

ALICE: Yep. Well, yeah, I think creative control is really important for every artist.

JADE: I mean, I'm excited, but at the same time, I'm nervous.

ALICE: Well, it's your life, that's why.

JADE: [laughs] Yeah, my life!

ALICE: Well, Jade, thank you so much for talking with me today.

JADE: Yeah, thank you. It was a good interview! [laughs]

Wrap-up

[hip hop]

ALICE: This podcast is a production of the *Disability Visibility Project*, an online community dedicated to creating, sharing, and amplifying disability media and culture. All episodes, including text transcripts, are available at DisabilityVisibilityProject.com/Podcast.

You can also find out more about Jade's work at my website.

The audio producer for this episode is Cheryl Green. Introduction by Lateef McLeod. Theme music by Wheelchair Sports Camp.

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Thanks for listening! And see you on the Internets! Byeeee!!

♪ Rock it to the blast off
Stop, drop dance off ♪