# Nullify Debate

The debate space is often compared to a courtroom: we have juries, and defend positions and evaluate evidence. People outside the community think we want to be lawyers. But the debate community puts more than arguments and evidence on trial. I am not the only woman who has been told her voice is too high, her outfit is wrong, or that she is a bitch. The debate community has an inexcusable history and tendency to reinforce gender norms and allow people to get away with microaggressions (and worse) towards multiple subsets of minority groups.

At TFA State my junior year a student got away with blatant sexual harassment of three women. I debated this student flight two of the last round of the night. I stood outside of a classroom in a deserted hallway and mentally noted that I should find some friends to walk back to the main building with me, as it was late and the LD building was far from where my team was planning to meet me. While waiting outside of the round, my opponent and his two friends, all three older males, began to make conversation with me. They gathered around, telling me about their achievements as policy debaters before switching to LD, and I got the distinct sense they were trying to intimidate me. They began making uncomfortably sexist comments, so I mentioned that they were making me feel uncomfortable- specifically, that the way they talked about women made me understand why more women do not do policy debate. My opponent laughed, and remarked “girls don’t do policy because they cannot debate from the kitchen”. I was horrified, but they kept going. The three students went on to explain to me how no moral theories condemn rape, meaning that there isn’t actually a reason to consider it bad. I felt exponentially more uncomfortable each time they talked, because while they hadn’t explicitly threatened me, they were older, bigger, and there was no one around to help me. When the first flight finally came out, I walked into the room on the verge of tears. My opponent not only did not react, he made a point to debate aggressively and walk over and laugh with his friends during my prep time. The biggest shock of this situation to me is that the judge, a teacher and well respected coach, did nothing about the escalating tension and sexism in the room. The coach of this student, who vehemently defended his student’s right to sexually harass me, was even later allowed to be present at a discussion surrounding women in debate. He then explained that his best friend had sexually assaulted a woman, but that it does not define his friend’s character- the action was not condemned.

It is time to change the roles of judges. The judge should not be a tabula rasa flow machine. You have an obligation to take care of the children you are supposed to be teaching in this academic activity. Thus, I advocate that in situations of microaggressions in the debate space the judges nullify the flow and vote down debaters who engage in problematic behavior.

Criticism linked to revolutionary praxis is key to shifting real world discourses- the aff creates a safe space to examine oppression and power structures that is unique to academic activities. Hooks:

[bell hooks, Yearning: Race, Gender and Culture, 2009, p 57-58, http://grr.aaaaarg.org/upload/bell-hooks-yearning-race-gender-and-cultural-politics-1.pdf, IADM]

¶ Trendy cultural cri- written about and the critics who write about them, a politic of domi-¶ ‘1 tique that is in no way linked to a concern with critical pedagogy or nation is easily reproduced wherein intellectual elites assume an old¶ liberation struggles hinders this process. When white critics write colonizing role, that of privileged interpreter-cultural overseers. En-¶ about black culture ’cause it’s the “in” subject Without interrogating tering the university as a writer concerned with acquiring credentials¶ their work to see whether or not it helps perpetuate and maintain rac- ’ that would help me get a job, I am constantly aware of the way our¶ ist domination, they participate in the commodification of “blackness” very location in an academic setting, where one’s work is periodically¶ that is so peculiar to postmodern strategies of colonization. Jhally and reviewed, judged, evaluated, etc., informs what we write about and¶ Angus define postmodern culture as a “society where social identity is how we write. On one hand, “cultural studies” has made writing about¶ formed through mass-mediated images and where culture and econ. non-white culture more acceptable, particularly in the humanities; yet,¶ omy have merged to form a single sphere.” There is too little work on the other hand, this work does not emerge within a context that¶ Which seeks to examine the impact of postmodernism on contempo- necessarily stresses the need to approach these subjects with a pro-¶ rary black culture. An oppositional cultural politic has always informed gressive politics or a liberatory pedagogy. Therein lies the danger. Cul-¶ tl‘anSfOI‘matiVC blaCk liberation Struggle. More than ever before, cul- tural studies could easily become the space for the informers: those¶ tural criticism that can illuminate and enrich our understanding of the folks who appear to be allied with the disadvantaged, the oppressed,¶ social formation of black identity, the commodification of “blackness,” who are either spies or there to mediate between the forces of domi-¶ iS needed It Will not emerge solely from black critics but from all cul- nation and its victims. Vigilant insistence that cultural studies be linked¶ tural critics who are concerned with the eradication of racism. to a progressive radical cultural politics will ensure that it is a location¶ Within the field of Cultural criticism there are very few African- that enables critical intervention. Ironically, though black writers¶ 1 American voices speaking out. There are more “black” voices, some and/Or SChOlafS haVe always been engaged in Wfifing “Rural criticism' from Europe and many from Third World countries. When these critics¶ write about black American culture, they offer a valuable perspective,¶ one that differs from that of African-Americans. Hence they do not “re~¶ place” absent or silenced African-American voices. Trendy notions of¶ “difference” that lump all people of color together without distinguish-¶ ing perspectives can serve to mask the absence of an African-American¶ presence in the field of cultural studies. Cultural critics, especially¶ those of us who are black, seeking to make a context for critical inter-¶ vention that is linked with strategies for liberation, cannot ignore the¶ issue of representation, as it determines who gets to speak to, with and¶ for us about culture and be heard (with legitimacy) as cultural studies¶ is more solidly institutionalized and commodifled.¶ As I have already stated, **cultural criticism is often the subject that**¶ **most engages students in the classroom.** There it is clear who the audi-¶ ence is and the impact on that audience. This is less the case with pub-¶ lished cultural criticism. To avoid participating in the production of¶ cultural criticism as a “hot” commodity to be exchanged in the aca-¶ demic marketplace, cultural critics can make an effort to publish work¶ in places (magazines, newspapers, etc.) where it will potentially reach¶ a different audience. Certainly, **it’s important for cultural critics to seize**¶ **all opportunities to engage in oral dialogues and conversations with**¶ **audiences outside the academy. If there is not a mutual exchange be-**¶ **tween the cultural subjects** (African-Americans, for example) that are¶ written about and the critics who write about them, **a politic of domination is easily reproduced wherein intellectual elites assume an old**¶ **colonizing role, that of privileged interpreter-cultural overseer**s. En-¶ tering the university as a writer concerned with acquiring credentials¶ that would help me get a job, I am constantly aware of the way our¶ very location in an academic setting, where one’s work is periodically¶ reviewed, judged, evaluated, etc., informs what we write about and¶ how we write. On one hand, **“cultural studies” has made writing about**¶ **non-white culture more acceptable, particularly in the humanities;** yet,¶ on the other hand, this work does not emerge within a context that¶ necessarily stresses the need to approach these subjects with a pro-¶ gressive politics or a liberatory pedagogy. Therein lies the danger. Cul-¶ tural studies could easily become the space for the informers: those¶ folks who appear to be allied with the disadvantaged, the oppressed,¶ who are either spies or there to mediate between the forces of domi-¶ nation and its victims. **Vigilant insistence that cultural studies be linked**¶ **to a progressive radical cultural politics will ensure that it is a location**¶ **that enables critical intervention**. Ironically, though black writers¶ and/or scholars have always been engaged in writing cultural criticism

And, the discussion of the oppression within the debate community specifically is a prior question to discussing oppression in the quote-unquote real world- we can’t pretend that we “solve oppression” in a traditionally post-fiat sense if we exclude voices within the activity.

The injection of alternative styles into a predominantly Eurocentric space is uniquely important. The aff has already begun to actualize its method by radically refusing the rules that comprise the institution of debate. **Polson:**

Dana Roe Polson, PhD in Language Literacy and Culture, UMBC, Baltimore city public and public charter schools high school teacher, “’Longing for Theory:’ Performance Debate in Action” Dissertain directed by Dr. Christine Mallinson, Assistant Professor, Language, Literacy, and Culture pp. 16-18

**Performance debate proponents** might say that they **are** directly **challenging traditional debate conventions that** have become mechanistic and **are** inherently racist, and that debate must find new ways of becoming less **exclusive** and more relevant**.** Specifically, many debate community members such as Preston (a coach and author) suggest that traditional debate practices and pedagogy result in difficulty recruiting minority debaters. He cites Hill as having “noted that learning and communication styles of African Americans may differ from the learning and communication norms of the policy debating community” (Preston, Jr., 2006, p. 162). A call to solve this problem becomes one of the foundations of performance debate practice. Through content and form, performance debaters call for and demonstrate a practice that is inclusive and challenges the norms of the community. Reid-Brinkley quotes a Louisville debater in-round: The university of Louisville enacts a full withdrawal from the traditional norms and procedures of this debate activity. Because this institution, like every other institution in society, has also grown from the roots of racism**. Seemingly neutral practices** and policies **have exclusionary effects on different groups for different reasons**. These practices have a long and perpetuating history. (Reid-Brinkley, 2008, p. 114) Reid-Brinkley argues that many **performance** debate **tactics are rhetorical strategies “designed to disrupt the normativity of traditional debate practices.... genre violation [is] a means of using** style and **performance to combat the** social **ideologies that result in unequal power relations across** race, gender, and class within **the national** policy **debate community”** (pp. 78-79). Reid-Brinkley identifies four types of genre violations in critical debate: sonic and spatial disruption, violations of strategic norms, violations of expectations regarding the resolution, and violations of the policymaker debate persona. We can see here the interplay of content, form and context in her argument. \*\*The disruptive aural presence of rap music in a debate round, for example, is not coincidental to a substantive message critiquing Eurocentric epistemology and white-normed debate practices, for example. I will discuss such genre violations much more in Chapter 5, as I explain performance debaters’ attempts to do debate rather than just talking about it [social change].

Thus the role of the judge is to be an inclusive educator- role models and leadership examples are a key part of preventing microaggressions. Samuels:

Workplace/ Employment: Overcoming Systemic Biases 227. Excerpt from Sue, Derald Wing. (2010). Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation. NJ: John Wiley & Sons

As indicated earlier, **superior—subordinate relationships**, **especially in** the delivery of **microaggressions, have a greater detrimental impact on marginalized groups than peer-to-peer relationships**. Likewise, **the elimination of microaggressive topics** **can** also **be** seen as **most effective if commitment comes from the very top levels**. Diversity implementation is most effective **when strong leadership is exerted on behalf of diversity and multiculturalism**. Employees are most likely to watch the actions (not just words) of those in leadership positions. Thus, **a** CEO, provost, presi­dent, or **director** of a department who understands models and **shows commitment to creating an open and bias-free** work **environment** is most likely to effect workers in the company. Unfortunately, as indicated throughout this book, no one, whether a custodial worker, line worker, middle manager, or corporate CEO, is immune from inheriting the racial biases of society and free from expressing these through microaggres­sions. A positive role model at the leadership level also needs training and self-exploration.

The role of the ballot then is to vote for the debater who provides the best praxis for breaking down systematic structures of inequality that exist in the debate space.

I am not the only one who has experienced these microaggressions. They do not just happen to women. It is sad that there are judges who have said, “there is no impact to safe spaces”. There are judges who will vote on arguments that mean there is no impact to oppression. My advocacy is not that you should vote me up for sharing my story or starting the discussion- I am reinterpreting what it means to grant the right to jury nullification. In round activism again oppressive and dominating structures allows the debate space to function as training ground for the real world. This allows debaters to go into the world and make productive change. Polson:

Dana Roe Polson, PhD in Language Literacy and Culture, UMBC, Baltimore city public and public charter schools high school teacher, “’Longing for Theory:’ Performance Debate in Action” Dissertain directed by Dr. Christine Mallinson, Assistant Professor, Language, Literacy, and Culture pp. 16-18

I think the Talented Tenth is actually the wrong metaphor for leadership in the performance debate community. Du Bois, later in his life, sharply criticized and disavowed a reliance on the Black elite to lead, believing that they were more preoccupied with individual gain than with group struggle, and willing to work within current structures rather than calling for radical change. They were becoming Americanized, Du Bois believed, and deradicalized. This deradicalization “occurs when more privileged African Americans (re) align themselves to function as a middle class interested in individual group gain rather than race leadership for mass development” (James, 1997, p. 24). Instead of his youthful belief in the Black elite, “Gradually, black working-class activists surpassed elites in Du Bois’s estimation of political integrity and progressive agency. He democratized his concept of race leaders through the inclusion of the radicalism of nonelites” (James, 1997, p. 21). **The young people who have emerged as leaders in the** performance **debate community** were definitely not those Du Bois would have identified as the Talented Tenth in 1903. Du Bois was talking to and about the Black elite, the educated middle class. Earlier in Du Bois’s life, he assumed that those people, college-educated, were the natural leaders. My participants who might be seen as potential leaders do not come from such backgrounds. Many do end up going to college and becoming potential leaders, but they are privileged through this process rather than prior to it. In addition, their focus is most definitely political as opposed to cultural. Nowhere in my research did I hear a Bill Cosby-esque injunction for Black people to shape up and work harder. Instead, the critique is **[are] focused on “uplift** as group struggle**” for** continued **liberation.** Finally,these young leaders are most definitely radicalizedas opposed to interested in incremental charge that rocks no boats. **From** CRT and **their** open critique of white supremacy to their **willingness to call for change** openly **in** debate **rounds, these** young **leaders are** contentious and **bold.** Two of my participants, and many of their **former debate[rs],** peers, **are involved with** a Baltimore group called Leaders of a Beautiful Struggle (LBS). The website of the LBS establishes their identity: We are a dedicated group of Baltimore citizens who want to **change** the city **through** governmental policy **action.** Our purpose is to provide tangible, concrete solutions to Baltimore’s problems **and** to analyze the ways that external forces have contributed to the overall decline of our city. (“Leaders of a Beautiful Struggle,” n.d.) As we see in this statement of identity, then, LBS as one model of leadership is focused on the political and on an analysis of external influences; this focus is very different from a racial uplift position, and their model of leadership very different from the Talented Tenth. LBS has **developed platforms** regarding jobs, education, incarceration, and many other issuesfacing Black people in the city. They hold monthly forums for discussion of these topics, inviting guests and discussing the topics themselves. Further, one of the LBS members ran for City Council this year. He lost, but plans to run again. The training my participants discuss, **[debate]** therefore, is not in the abstract: it **is training for the real world,** for their own empowerment and that of their communities. This work is extending into local high schools, as well, and Paul Robeson High School now has students

Because I care about the future of this activity and believe debate should be a safe space, I affirm.