

AFTERWORD

FEAR OF A BLACK PLANET: CAPTURING THE BENEFIT OF WHITE GUILT TO FORWARD BLACK EXCELLENCE

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African American (read: Black) motivation to participate in intercollegiate debate was discussed at length on both the quantitative and qualitative level by Dr. Shelton K. Hill in 1996. More than three decades later, the question has resurfaced. When the Louisville project hit its apex (arguably when 13 Black youth had full debate scholarships in the early 2000s), white and traditional competitors argued that their form of debate would destroy the activity. Now that race-based, kritik, and performance styles are more widely accepted as legitimate, it is crucial that we examine the larger system of success post-debate. What resources and barriers exist for Black debaters and coaches? How have opportunities continued to be foreclosed to even the most successful debaters and coaches? What responsibilities do scholars have within the community? This paper will briefly explore the questions above and present a solution for Black excellence within and beyond the debate space. There is value in white fear. If we understand white fear as a precursor to shifts in oppression, we can preempt things like the gentrification of Black spaces.

Keywords: Intercollegiate debate, black excellence, white guilt, Black planet, policy debate.

The Roses Who Grew from Concrete: An Abridged Primer

African American (read: Black) motivation to participate in intercollegiate debate was discussed at length on both the quantitative and qualitative level by Dr. Shelton K. Hill in 1997. He was one of the first academics to enlist a deep dive of trends related to racial disparities in the debate community. Since then, there have been monumental gains. Records breaking numbers of Black debaters have earned incredible accolades in the policy world. Since the first Black woman (Elizabeth Jones, University of Louisville) won top speaker at the Cross-Examination Debate Association Championship in 2005, dozens of others have gone on to do spectacular things. Dr. Shanara Reid-Brinkley and Dr. Tiffany Dillard-Knox are both seen as revered elders to masses of Black students across the country despite the disrespect both of these scholars are confronted with during tournaments. It is now common--especially in CEDA--for Black debaters to earn the activity's highest honors.

So why are Black debaters, coaches, and directors still complaining?

Simply put, white fear has always reorganized itself and given birth to more nuanced, less recognizable methods. This is the legacy of white debate.

Speaker points do not pay bills and even the most well written judge philosophy is not going to pay for your graduate degree. Brilliant, award-winning competitors are out here taking jobs that equate to less than minimum wage when broken down hourly. Behind closed doors, white folks are doing more than saying the N-word. They are making decisions that exclude Black professionals from reaping the rewards and benefits that a post-debate career has to offer. Affluent coaches are infamous for hiring their less qualified white friends over Black candidates who are better equipped to accomplish the tasks expressed in the job description. Black professionals are repeatedly told that their methods are too Black, too radical, and not academic enough. This Afterword is not here to romanticize the wins. Instead, this will be a critical analysis of the deficiencies and inequities that exist below the radar of awards. If the reader is interested in remaining stagnant, this is the wrong paper to read.

Where We Stand

First--the number of Black directors is embarrassingly low when you consider the number of Black college debaters who have come through the activity. This season (2019) alone, more than 5,000 urban debaters have competed in urban debate leagues across the country. While the number of Black debaters varies by league, it stands to reason that in the nearly four-decade tenure of urban debate, there would be an enormous pool of Black college graduates ready to step into leadership positions. Regardless of one's critique about the rigor, fairness, or motivation behind individual urban debate leagues' administration, thousands of Black youth are exposed to debate through these organizations. If mediocre white men can teach at the country's most elite camps, why can't high achieving Black scholars be afforded lucrative opportunities at the same pace? During the 2018-19 season 58 schools were listed as members of the National Debate Tournament (NDT). Of those 58 schools, only 5 had any Black directors. That is 8.6%. Compare that to 14% of all people in the United States [who] identified as Black (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). While there is a good deal of variation between the titles of director of debate and director of forensics, this paper focuses on whichever title is the higher-ranking position.

If the United States is a melting pot, then Black folks are the burning embers that perish for the sake of white supremacy. Similarly, the accomplishments of Black debaters largely benefit the institutions that sponsored their careers rather than the individual student. A university can parade around the trophies earned by Black debaters while simultaneously allowing the Klu Klux Klan to have a safe space on campus. When a Black debate coach is awarded critic of the year, but the university president is under fire for a history of discriminatory practices, there is a level of cognitive dissonance that needs to be addressed. Black debaters are least likely to be paid market rates for their coaching services. Many Black debaters do not earn a degree from the school they debated for. Others are denied employment due to the lack of professional development and career readiness. Black debaters also suffer from network deficits. Unlike many affluent and white competitors, they often do not benefit from interacting with colleagues with connections to prestigious firms, coaches whose names (and therefore recommendations) carry enough weight to get them hired, or directors who can propel their academic careers (via publications, fellowships, terminal degree pipelines, etc.).

When the Louisville project hit its apex, white and traditional competitors argued that this revolutionary form of debate would destroy the activity. Now that race-based, kritik, and performance styles are more widely accepted as legitimate, it is crucial that we examine the larger system of success post-debate. A number of opportunities continue to be foreclosed to even the most successful debaters and coaches. As much as it may hurt the feelings of some nonprofit leaders, there are urban debate leagues across the country that have never had Black executive directors. Outside of urban debate leagues there are also a number of university forensics programs that have never had Black directors.

How Can We Capitalize On White Guilt and White Fear?

White fear and white guilt are inextricably linked. Those white people that fear Black excellence will weaponize their guilt to soften up radical Blacks. The idea of allies often aids in this process. Friendly-presenting white folks (those who don't yell or wear MAGA hats, those who have Black Lives Matter signs on their lawn, those who likely own a dashiki or at least want to really badly) extinguish the righteous anger in many activists, leaving the door open to trust whiteness as a whole. That is dangerous.

It is important to note that there is no such thing as an ally. No, not even your best good white friend is an ally. Black in and beyond debate need accomplices. As Dr. Kaila Story teaches us, "ally implies adjunct to...it sounds great but it's not needed." Instead, white aspiring accomplices should be actively procuring resources from other whites to redistribute to Black folks. In the debate community, this can manifest itself as pressuring institutions to hire more Black experts. It can mean voting for topics that center the Black experience. This could also include forcing other whites to discuss race even when it is uncomfortable and even when no Black people are around to hear it.

According to Joe Leeson Schatz, one of the unstated reasons for trying to set up policy-only debates is that once-dominant debate teams from colleges like Harvard and Northwestern are no longer winning the national competitions. "It is now much easier for smaller programs to be successful," he said. "You don't have to be from a high budget program; all you need to win is just a couple of smart students." Schatz believes that the changes in college debate are widening the playing field and attracting more students from all backgrounds (Craft, 2014, para. 18).

The rebirth of oppression is strengthened by accepting the notion of allies--specifically white allies--as a necessary part of any liberation movement. While this paper does not make a specific argument against allies of color across racial and ethnic spectrums, there is a firm assertion that coalitions made with white allies will never be fruitful for Black debaters, coaches, judges, and other professionals. Befriending nice white people in the debate community will not save the livelihood of Black people in this activity. It can only serve to make the path to exclusion look nicer from the outside. Many of the white coaches who are offered metaphorical invitations to the cookout are sharing intel with the very racists they claim to help fight against.

Conclusion: Visions of a Black Planet

Let us imagine a world after we snatch all the resources and decolonize debate. Close your eyes and picture it. What viable solutions exist for Black excellence within and beyond the debate space? There is value in white fear. If white fear is understood as a precursor to shifts in oppression, we can preempt things like the gentrification of Black spaces and the sort of false narrative of white suffering caused by Black liberation. (i.e., newly freed Black Haitians paying reparations to their former French slave owners). There are a number of solutions for amplifying Black excellence within and beyond the debate space.

1. Strategically align with accomplices. Most low-income Black children are taught to procure a 'good white friend' for survival. It is time to activate those individuals for the purpose of accessing their privilege. Organizations like LHOME in Louisville, KY are run by white folks who understand the importance of bringing Black folks to the decision-making table. While this paper does not argue that there is a such thing as a "good white person," it is certainly true that some white folks are actively attempting to confront their privilege by giving up space for marginalized communities.

2. Take reparations by force, not request. While it is adorable that many whites have started to publicly agree that a debt is owed to the descendants of enslaved Africans, that does little for the reality of our condition. Show up and demand resources at every level.

3. Build coalitions with oppositional Black groups to increase buying power, voting blocks, or other scarce resources. Collaborations of this nature--though challenging to build and

sustain--can often mitigate the risks impacting individual activists and academics as they attempt to subvert the dominant culture's barriers.

Unfortunately, we have missed the opportunity for an objective, DEI-infused ballot alone to hold significant and sustainable power. Instead, it is only the cultivation of a Black Planet that can ensure our success.

References

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