

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: "LONGING FOR THEORY:"
PERFORMANCE DEBATE IN ACTION.

Dana Polson, Ph.D., 2012

Directed By: Dr. Christine Mallinson, Assistant Professor,
Language, Literacy, and Culture

This study richly describes the practice of performance debate, a largely race-based style of policy debate, a competitive forensics event for high school and college students. I examine participants' interpretations and experiences of performance debate practice in order to explore the interplay of agency and structure within this particular social context.

To do so, I explore the following questions:

- What structures of economic, social, and cultural capital relate to the reproduction of the debate community as white and privileged?
- How do performance debate participants, including coaches and debaters, interact with concepts and practices that:
 - bring issues of oppression and power, especially regarding race, to the surface of the debate world, as being always already there,
 - reveal student social location as pertinent, given that race and class are always already there, and
 - explore structural explanations for racial disparities?
- How do performance debaters creatively enact a radical practice that performs difference within the policy debate world, rejecting assimilation but insisting on participation and agency?

In this dissertation, I discuss the role of various forms of capital in the reproduction of the policy debate community. This reproduction continues to reproduce whiteness and other forms of privilege in the community, the creation of UDLs notwithstanding. Structures, then, restrict access to debate in ways that disproportionately affect students of color. While acknowledging these structures, however, I also describe the ways the practice of performance debate directly challenges whiteness in debate in order to create a counterhegemonic community that works toward liberation. This community uses performance debate as a creative, agentic, racialized response to white dominance that has a different social action: the creation of space for leadership training and critical voices. This response focuses on positive racial identity development and the development of the sociological imagination, specifically around racialized structures. Further, the performance debate community's collaborative nature is necessary not just for emotional support but because this is a Black nationalist practice as opposed to an individualistic, color-blind practice. Finally, the practice sees debate as doing: performing the Black body, performing the cultural styles of people of color, and in general attempting to do within the social space rather than playing games or just talking.