#### Say Anything

Wise 11 [Wise, T. (2011). *White like me: Reflections on race from a privileged son: The remix*. Soft Skull Press. //cohn]

Debate would become for me in high school what theatre had been in middle school: a place to put my energy and also an escape from the craziness that was my home life. The idea of throwing myself into an activity that allowed me to travel, to get away from home at least two weekends a month, was more than a little appealing. I was sure by now that my father was not going to kill my mother, so I didn’t fear leaving them alone, and mostly I just needed a break from the fighting and the drinking. There have always been debaters of color, and indeed, my high school’s top debater when I arrived was a black senior, James Bernard. James, who would attend Harvard Law with Barack Obama several years later—and would be one of the founders and first publishers of the hip-hop magazine The Source—taught me a lot about debate as well as activism, the latter in his capacity as one of the key players in the Nashville Youth Network: a loosely-knit coalition of teens energized around a number of issues of relevance to young people at the time. But despite James’s debate prowess, the activity was, and still is, extraordinarily white, not merely in terms of its demographic, but also in terms of its style, its form, and its content at the most competitive levels. **Debate literally exudes whiteness and privileges white participants in a number of ways.** On the one hand, there is the issue of money. Debaters, in order to be nationally competitive, require funding: either a school with a huge budget to pay for trips to national tournaments, or families that can swing the cost of sending their kids away for three days at a time, often by plane, for the purpose of competing. I had neither, but between what minor help my parents could offer and the money I made working twenty hours a week sacking groceries at a local market, we managed to make it work. Then there are the summer debate camps, which even in the 1980s cost about fifteen hundred dollars, and which run for three to four weeks. Those who can afford to go to these get a huge jump on the competition. In fact, I don’t know of any nationally competitive team whose members didn’t attend at least one camp during the previous summer. During the summer before my junior year, my family was unable to afford to send me to a debate institute, and being unable to go set me back considerably, in terms of my own skills, for several months at the beginning of the tournament season. It took me most of the first semester to catch up to the other national-circuit debaters who had been at the camps learning technique and the year’s topic backwards and forwards, all with the assistance of college coaches and top-notch research facilities. **Obviously, given the interplay of race and socioeconomic status in this country, blacks, Latinos, American Indians, and Southeast Asians (all of which groups have much higher poverty rates than whites) are woefully underrepresented in the activity, relative to their numbers in the student population. But the cost of debate is hardly the only thing that causes the activity to be so white.** The substance of the arguments made and the way in which the arguments are delivered also tend to appeal to whites far more readily than to people of color for whom the style and substance are often too removed from the real world to be of much practical value. Those who haven’t seen a competitive debate (particularly in the most dominant category, known as policy debate) may be inclined to think that such a thing is a deep discussion of some pressing issue. But if that is what you expected, and you then happened into a debate at one of the nation’s top tournaments and watched any of the elimination rounds (those involving the top sixteen or thirty-two teams, typically), you would think you had walked into a world of make-believe. Even if you could understand a single word being said, which is unlikely since the “best” debaters typically speak at lightning speed (and I was among the biggest offenders here, able to rattle off five hundred words a minute), you still wouldn’t really understand what was going on. The terminology is arcane and only of use in the activity itself—terms like topicality, counterplan, permutation, infinite regression, and kritik. The purpose of competitive debate is essentially to speak faster than your opponents so they will “drop” one of your arguments, which you will then insist to the judge is the most important issue in the round, warranting an immediate ballot in your favor. Just as critical, debaters are to make sure that whatever the topic, their arguments for or against a particular policy must be linked to nuclear war or ecological catastrophe, no matter how absurd the linkage. So, for example, you might claim that your opponent’s plan to extend the retirement age will contribute to global warming by keeping people in the workforce longer, thereby increasing consumption levels, thereby increasing energy expenditure, thereby speeding up climate change and the ultimate end of the world. **Though one can theoretically learn quite a bit from debate, especially during the research phase of the operation, the fact remains that superficiality, speed and mass extinction scenarios typically take the place of nuanced policy analysis, such that one has to wonder how much the debaters really come to know about the issues they debate at the end of the day.** Learning is always secondary to winning, and for the sake of winning, debaters will say virtually anything. My own debate experience serves as vulgar confirmation of this maxim. On the one hand, I ran cases (which in debate terms means the primary position taken by the affirmative team upholding the year’s formal resolution) calling for cutting off weapons sales to Venezuela, and also for the restoration of voting rights to ex-felons: positions with which I agreed. On the other hand, I also ran cases calling for a program that would employ all poor folks who were out of work to build a missile defense system (possibly the most ridiculous idea ever advocated in a debate round), and for reinforcing the nation’s water reservoirs against poisoning by terrorists. Although the idea of protecting soft targets from terrorism might make sense, the evidence we used to make our case was almost exclusively from the most disgusting of anti-Muslim, right- wing sources (and this was in 1985 and 1986 mind you, long before 9/11). I am still taking extra baths to wash off the ideological stench of having read evidence in debate rounds from people like Michael Ledeen or Daniel Pipes (the latter of whom would, several years later, post highly critical comments about me on his website, so I guess the feeling is mutual). When we were on the negative side, I would argue, among other things, that poverty should be allowed to continue because it would eventually trigger a glorious socialist revolution (which isn’t even good Marxist theory, let alone a morally acceptable position), or that civil liberties should be eradicated so the United States could transition to a society in which resource use was limited by force, family size was strictly controlled, and thus planetary destruction averted. **These kinds of arguments, it should be noted, were hardly mine alone: they were absolutely typical on the national debate circuit, and they still are.** The reason I call this process a white one is because whites (and especially affluent ones), much more so than folks of color, have the luxury of looking at life or death issues of war, peace, famine, unemployment, or criminal justice as a game, as a mere exercise in intellectual and rhetorical banter. For me to get up and debate, for example, whether or not full employment is a good idea presupposes that my folks are not likely out of work as I go about the task. To debate whether racial profiling is legitimate likewise presupposes that I, the debater, am not likely to be someone who was confronted by the practice as my team drove to the tournament that day, or as we passed through security at the airport. In this way, competitive debate reinforces whiteness and affluence as normative conditions, and makes the process more attractive to affluent white students. Kids of color and working-class youth of all colors are simply not as likely to gravitate to an activity where pretty much half the time they’ll be forced to take positions that, if implemented in the real world, might devastate their communities. **Because debaters are encouraged to think about life or death matters as if they had little consequence beyond a given debate round, the fact that those who have come through the activity go on to hold a disproportionate share of powerful political and legal positions—something about which the National Forensics League has long bragged—is a matter that should concern us all.** Being primed to think of serious issues as abstractions increases the risk that the person who has been so primed will reduce everything to a brutal cost-benefit analysis, which rarely prioritizes the needs and interests of society’s less powerful. Rather, it becomes easier at that point to support policies that benefit the haves at the expense of the have-nots, because others whom the ex-debaters never met and never had to take seriously will be the ones to feel the damage. Unless debate is fundamentally transformed**—and at this point the only forces for real change are the squads from Urban Debate Leagues and a few college squads of color who are clamoring for different styles of argumentation and different evidentiary standards—**it will continue to serve as a staging ground for those whose interests are mostly the interests of the powerful**.** **Until the voices of economically and racially marginalized persons are given equal weight in debate rounds with those of affluent white experts (whose expertise is only presumed because other whites published what they had to say in the first place), the ideas that shape our world will continue to be those of the elite, no matter how destructive these ideas have proven to be for the vast majority of the planet’s inhabitants.** Privilege makes its recipients oblivious to certain things, and debate, as an activity, is one of its many transmission belts—one that I was able to access, to great effect, in my life. Lucky for me that I went to a school that offered it, that I had parents who somehow managed to help me afford it, and that its game-playing format wasn’t yet a problem for me, ethically speaking. Lucky for me, in other words, that I was white.

#### Spectatorship

Reid-Brinkley 08 [Dr. Shanara Reid-Brinkley, 2008, "THE HARSH REALITIES OF “ACTING BLACK”: HOW AFRICAN-AMERICAN POLICY DEBATERS NEGOTIATE REPRESENTATION THROUGH RACIAL PERFORMANCE AND STYLE //cohn]

Genre Violation Four: Policymaker as Impersonal and the Rhetoric of Personal Experience. Debate is a competitive game.112 It requires that its participants take on the positions of state actors (at least when they are affirming the resolution). Debate resolutions normally call for federal action in some area of domestic or foreign policy. Affirmative teams must support the resolution, while the negative negates it. The debate then becomes a “laboratory” within which debaters may test policies.113 Argumentation scholar Gordon Mitchell notes that “Although they 117 may research and track public argument as it unfolds outside the confines of the laboratory for research purposes, in this approach students witness argumentation beyond the walls of the academy as spectators, with little or no apparent recourse to directly participate or alter the course of events.”114 Although debaters spend a great deal of time discussing and researching government action and articulating arguments relevant to such action, what happens in debate rounds has limited or no real impact on contemporary governmental policy making. And **participation does not result in the majority of the debate community engaging in activism around the issues they research.** Mitchell observes that the stance of the policymaker in debate comes with a “sense of detachment associated with the **spectator posture**.”115 In other words, its participants are able to engage in debates where they are able to distance themselves from the events that are the subjects of debates. Debaters can throw around terms like torture, terrorism, genocide and nuclear war without blinking. **Debate simulations can only serve to distance the debaters from real world participation in the political contexts they debate about.** As William Shanahan remarks: …the topic established a relationship through interpellation that inhered irrespective of what the particular political affinities of the debaters were. The relationship was both political and ethical, and needed to be debated as such. When we blithely call for United States Federal Government policymaking, we are not immune to the colonialist legacy that establishes our place on this continent. We cannot wish away the horrific atrocities perpetrated everyday in our name simply by refusing to acknowledge these implications” (emphasis in original).116 118 The “objective” stance of the policymaker is an impersonal or imperialist persona. The policymaker relies upon “acceptable” forms of evidence, engaging in logical discussion, producing rational thoughts. As Shanahan, and the Louisville debaters’ note, such a stance is integrally linked to the normative, historical and contemporary practices of power that produce and maintain varying networks of oppression. In other words, the discursive practices of policyoriented debate are developed within, through and from systems of power and privilege. Thus, these practices are critically implicated in the maintenance of hegemony. So, rather than seeing themselves as government or state actors, Jones and Green choose to perform themselves in debate, violating the more “objective” stance of the “policymaker” and **require** their opponents to do the same. Jones and Green argue that debaters should **ground** their **agency** in what they are able to do as “individuals.”