

“I’M GONE BE ‘BLACK ON BOTH SIDES’”: EXAMINING THE LITERACY PRACTICES  
AND LEGACY LEARNING WITHIN A SUSTAINING URBAN DEBATE COMMUNITY

By

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **“I’M GONE BE ‘BLACK ON BOTH SIDES’”: EXAMINING THE LITERACY PRACTICES AND LEGACY LEARNING WITHIN A SUSTAINING URBAN DEBATE COMMUNITY**

By

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The narratives of Black student-debaters are comprised of stories that demonstrate strength, struggle, and success. However, at times, the depictions and portrayals of Black or urban student-debaters are ones that highlight them only as struggling students. Related to this, achievement and literacy gaps continue to widen between whites and students of color (Edwards, 2009, 2011, 2012). One reason for this is the failed efforts to create and sustain literacy programs for marginalized individuals, especially Black youth. When this occurs, in the context of debate, Black student-debaters find it necessary to draw from multiple literacies in an effort to construct counternarratives that speak to their varied realities within urban debate communities.

This study explored the lived experiences of Black student-debaters and debate supporters in ACTION Debate (AD), an afterschool debate program dedicated to offering and providing debate opportunities and instruction to high school students in a major Midwestern city. AD believes that regular participation in policy debate can improve study habits and academic success, increase self-confidence, graduation rates, and college scholarship opportunities, and prepare students to succeed in college and in life (National Association for Urban Debate Leagues, 2016). As an individual who has learned in the AD community as a former debater, coach, and supporter for the past 20 years, I argue that the AD space is one that enacts what Paris (2012) defines as culturally sustaining. Additionally, this study examined the ways in which AD serves as a space that promotes the high school to college pipeline. To achieve all of the aforementioned, this project investigated the following questions:

- 1) How and in what ways is Action Debate (AD) a culturally sustaining space?*
- 2) How do students perceive and understand their participation in Action Debate as relating to debate, school, their communities, and college?*
- 3) Are there specific literacy and culturally sustaining practices that are employed by students, coaches, and debate supporters in the Action Debate program to prepare Black students to debate in racially welcoming or racially hostile environments?*

The participants featured in this study included eight student-debaters and debate supporters who reside in a major Midwestern city. Data for this study included observations, field notes, video recordings, collected artifacts, and interviews with AD participants and supporters. Data was analyzed by describing and interpreting the participants' literacy practices and legacy learning, as explained in the various academic and social contexts they occupy. This work exists to illuminate the ways in which they engaged with the AD program while resisting deficit-framed perspectives associated with them. This study also sought to understand the relationship between debate participation and legacy learning. Hoping to inform research-based and practice-based spaces about how Black debaters and debate supporters employ multiple literacies for the advancement of their debate goals, this work finally explored the high school to college debate pipeline. The findings from this study reinforce the importance of literacy and debate within school settings and in out-of-school spaces for Black student-debaters and debate supporters within a sustaining urban debate community.

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Dedicated to my cool, confident, and creative daughter, *Zuri Hudson* –  
Because no doctor's prognosis or bout with cancer was going to interfere with you being born  
and us loving one another. Let's continue to tell our stories. I choose you. I choose me. I choose  
us. Forevermore.

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## PREFACE

I am a storyteller. More specifically, I am a Black storyteller. I did not ask to be granted such a title; it was passed down to me from my ancestors – some of whom I have met and some I have only read about and smiled at their torn black and white photos from the days of old. These same photos adorn various spaces in my home due to their cultural richness and longstanding memories. When I was a young girl, in the 1980s, my maternal grandmother, Amelia Brown, sat me down and explained to me the importance of being an expression of Black pride, not only as her granddaughter, but as my mother's daughter, as a woman, a student, and other titles that would be bestowed upon me later in life. As long as I could remember, I wanted to be like Amelia Brown. Her oral stories and traditions exceeded anything that I learned in school. As a result, I was always a successful student when it came to "*Amelia's School of Black Thought*." She (re)told stories with boldness - a Black bad-ass fervor and ardor – envied by others. Listening to her and watching her at home, in church, at school, and in the community led to me knowing that I could be and do anything that I desired, despite the snares of my oppressors.

While pursuing doctoral studies, my grandmother and countless – and I do mean countless – other loved ones passed away. For the past five years, it seemed as if with each death, an emptiness met me when I awakened every morning and covered me at night like the heavy and overpriced comforters found in most department stores. This abrasive and aggressive void has led me to want to quit graduate school. Many times. When such thoughts crept into my cerebellum, the voices of my grandmother, loved ones, and the debate community I belong to nourished and sustained me and interrupted my thoughts of giving up. The participants in this dissertation stem from the debate community that I have been affiliated with for the past 20 years. Their thinking, being, and doing not only helped me to understand the importance of voice, but Black voice.

In the pages that follow, my goals are to tell the varied stories of the participants while highlighting their struggles and successes with debate. Such insights contribute to the field of education and offer glaring examples of how literacy moves beyond the notion of reading and writing and that Black youth are competent, courageous, and creative when it comes to constructing their own literacies (Kirkland, 2013). I contend that none of this would be possible without me becoming aware of the importance of storytelling and how it speaks to schooling and educational pipelines. In a world where racism, sexism, classism, and other -ism's work to silence and kill Black folks, I present these 12-font-Times-New-Roman words as a lens to understand how Black student-debaters and supporters push back against mainstream thinking and positioning while also countering and maintaining an approach to debate that supports their identities, literacies, teaching, and legacy learning.

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## CHAPTER 1: GROWING UP FLOWING: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ACTION DEBATE COMMUNITY

*“...One day I’m gonna do what you did. I’m gonna start a debate team!” (Raven L. Jones,  
high school debate student, 1998)*

**Coach T:** Raven, come to my debate class after school and observe. I think you’ll like it. I want you to consider joining our debate team.

**Raven:** I don’t know. I have Academic Games practice, but I’ll check y’all out later this week. (I never went).

**Coach T:** (The following week, after seeing me in the hallway). Raven, we missed you the other day. Come by today. I know you’ll be good at it. You’re already a good writer and speaker. Just come by. We’ll be in my classroom, after school.

**Raven:** Ok. I’ll see you there, but I have to call my mama first.



Figure 1: Raven at an afterschool debate practice in 1995.

With the encouragement and support of Coach T, a young and energetic English teacher at my high school, in the city of Aurora, I joined my school’s debate team in 1995. Desiring to do more than teach her English courses during the normal school day, Coach T received approval from the school’s principal to start an afterschool debate team and reached out to students she thought would enjoy and benefit from the activity. This included me. Although I was initially hesitant to observe the team, I decided to do so based on her expressing to me that she was

confident I would perform well, considering she knew my work ethic since I was a student in her Advanced Placement (AP) English course the semester before. As a result of Coach T's persuasive articulations and expressions, I not only relished in the activity, but began to see the academic and personal benefits of being involved with debate.

During afterschool practices, I researched the speeches of notable Blacks, read poetry, discussed various topics related to Black culture with my teammates and Coach T, and viewed tapes of debates and debaters. I became better at arguing both sides of an argument, whether I was the "affirmative" (for the resolution) speaker or the "negative" (against the resolution) speaker. As a result of what I was experiencing afterschool in debate, my academic performance in school also improved. I was a part of a community of learners who did not silence my thinking: my grades and self-confidence improved; I was able to critically think about research and texts, while inserting my own ideas; and I met new people due to traveling to different schools and debate institutes. On weekends, Coach T would pile me and my teammates into her small, 2-door, white Ford Probe and drive us to tournaments within Action Debate (AD). I was now different. I was now a debater. Knowing I could never repay her for her continued belief in me, after I walked across the stage at my high school graduation, I hugged Coach T and with tears in my eyes whispered to her, "Thank you. One day I'm gonna do what you did. I'm gonna start a debate team!"

### **Preliminary Findings: My Involvement as a Debate Coach**

***"I'm Gone Be 'Black on Both Sides.'" (Sam, high school debate student, 2008)***

Nine years after emotionally suggesting to Coach T that I would model for other students what she did for me, my colleague and Social Studies teacher, Kingfisher, and I created a debate team at Jefferson High School (JHS), an alternative high school for students who were considered "at-risk" and had been expelled from the district's public school system. Several of these students

also had several emotional, physical, learning and health challenges. The purpose of creating the team was to teach and promote the academic and cultural benefits of debate education, develop literacy skills through public speaking, reading, writing, critical thinking and researching, and introduce students to college opportunities and access. In an effort not to only expose our students to the nationally mandated required research they needed to use to argue for or against the resolution, we also instructed and encouraged them to use texts and literatures that spoke to their various experiences to support their thinking and ideas. An example of this included Kingfisher and me bringing in some of our favorite hip hop music and artists to play during our afterschool practices to motivate them and model for them how they can infuse music, poetry, and other mediums in their speeches and debates.

Liking this suggestion, our debaters also began to bring in their favorite musical selections. On a Thursday, before preparing for a weekend tournament, Kingfisher played “Umi Says,” by Mos Def, a.k.a. Yasiin Bey, from his 1999 debut solo album, *Black on Both Sides*. After hearing this song several times, I would often walk into practice and hear our students echoing the words to the chorus of the song:

My Umi said shine your light on the world  
Shine your light for the world to see  
My Abi said shine your light on the world  
Shine your light for the world to see  
(I want Black people to be free, to be free, to be free).

Sam, a 16 year old sassy and serious young woman and one of our top debaters, said she loved the song and thought it was motivational, and that whatever challenges she faced, she should still try to give her best. That was the message she took away from the song. Next, she exclaimed that since she was not very familiar with Mos Def’s work that she desired to listen to more of his music,

starting with his debut album. Specifically, she stated, “Whether I’m debating affirmative or negative, ‘I’m gone be Black on both sides’” (S.W., 2007). I nodded in agreement. When asking her more about what she meant, she stated, “It would be cool to for us to do more of this type debating in the ADL. Use stuff we like. We should be able to build on AD research and talk about our experiences as Black teenagers” (S.W., 2007). As Dagbovie (2006) asserts, engaging younger generations with comprehensive knowledge of black history and hip hop could lead to Blacks becoming more racially conscious.

Listening to Sam and our other debaters, Kingfisher and I continued to support their cultural and literature choices when preparing them to debate, whether we were competing within AD or at other local and regional competitions. As a result of their success, our students attended various debate lectures and summer institutes at local colleges and universities within and outside of AD. Similarly, they competed at nationally competitive tournaments at Grand Valley State University, University of Michigan, and Harvard University. Equivalent to my high school debate experiences, our students were beginning to see and achieve academic success in school, also. Despite the negative literacy and academic statistics associated with inner city youth, our students were thriving. Several of their attendance scores increased drastically and their reading and writing improved significantly (Edperformance, 2008, 2009, and 2010). Our students successfully won rounds against some of the top ranked schools in the country. However, Kingfisher and I immediately noticed that some of these regional and national spaces were predominately White and were present with racial tension and were unwelcoming of our Black bodies and presence. One such instance included the words, “*Go Home Niggers*” being written in big, black, and bold letters on the bathroom walls at a suburban high school. Even while reporting this, we never received an apology from the staff or administration.

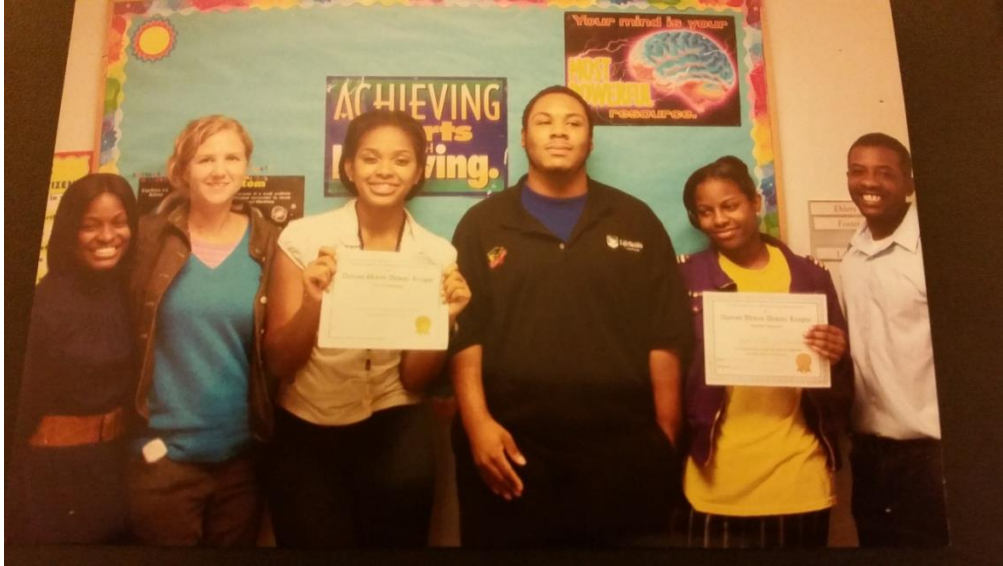


Figure 2: Jefferson High School debate students and coaches, after winning the City Championship Tournament in 2009. (Pictured above from left to right: Me, Coach Lisa, Erin, Malcolm, Sam, and Coach Kingfisher).

Other AD coaches, like me, also noticed these types of racial tensions and shared with me that other coaches and their students faced many challenges when competing on the debate circuit, especially at suburban schools. For these reasons, I desired to explore this study and illuminate the voices of the AD community.

### **From the Past to the Present: Learning From the Action Debate Community.**

Lorikeet, a Black coach and teacher within the AD community was encouraging of her debaters to use poetry and speeches by Black authors when practicing and debating at competitions. At AD tournaments, some of her debaters could be seen and heard rapping and singing their constructive speeches with or without music to accompany their voices. In this regard, Lorikeet was demonstrating a commitment to her students that supported their cultural, literature, and literacy choices. To better situate her practices, she was engaging in asset-based teaching, including culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) (Paris, 2012). In order to glean more from Lorikeet's

thinking, teaching, and pedagogical moves, one element this study examined was her experiences and practices within AD, as well as her students, and other AD supporters. Such examinations of their thinking and acting within the context of AD will offer opportunities to understand their literacy choices and how they respond to these offerings. Lorikeet's goals can then be understood with a sociocultural literacy framework, as Moll states, the ways "human beings and their social and cultural worlds are inseparable; they are embedded in each other (2000, p. 265). From such a perspective, the use of literacy skills does not exist in a vacuum and cannot be contained by the act of words and sentences on a page. Instead, context, community, and purpose shape the choices made by literacy users.

### **Statement of the Problem**

For many decades, the talents, teachings, thoughts, and triumphs of Black people have been paramount when defining and redefining the importance and telling of the Black experience. It is no secret that the efforts and innovations of Blacks have led to advancements of and in this society (Care Moore, 2016; Dyson, 1993; Woodson, 1933). Examples can be witnessed and felt when gazing at various architecture, reciting poetry, singing songs, organizing peaceful protests and rallies, writing culturally responsive and sustaining curricula, dancing to the rhythmic and soul-stirring beating of African drums, and performing on stages – both locally and globally. To speak to the genius of the artistic expressions of cultural pride and prowess, the late and legendary Nina Simone co-wrote and performed, "To Be Young, Gifted, and Black" in 1958. When asked why she desired to put forth such a song, Simone stated that she wanted to offer lyrics "that will make Black children all over the world feel good about themselves" (Simone, 1958). The culmination of such feel-good renderings are evoked in her storytelling and delivery, which suggest, "To be young, gifted, and black/In the whole world you know/There are a billion boys and girls/Who are



young, gifted and Black/And that's a fact" (Simone, 1958). Even with the promotion and success of the song being recited and performed by individuals of all ages – whether in schools, at churches, at town hall and community meetings, or in other spaces of collective gathering, Simone's goal of encouraging and empowering Black children at times has been stymied by systemic injustices, which include educational inequities for Black children and students of color.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2014), students of color are now the majority in public schools across the United States. Additionally, with each passing year, more and more non-White students will continue to occupy classrooms nationally. However, even with the current racially demographic change, Black students and other students of color are still being taught and educated with limited or nonexistent resources. Further, the practices and pedagogies used to teach Black and Brown students tend to devalue and silence their experiences and voices. To push against this deficit-framed positioning, Paris (2016) proposes these questions for educators and other concerned allies to think of ways in which we might value the lives of Black and Brown young people: (1) How can we prepare teachers to enact pedagogies that meet the needs of the new mainstream – students of color characterized by multilingualism, multiculturalism, and the desire to strive toward equality in an unequal and shifting racially and ethnically diverse society? and (2) Who are the teachers already meeting those needs, how are they doing so and, crucially for the field of teacher education, how are they learning to do so? With such imperative and necessary thinking, Paris' inquiries call for the teaching field to be constantly thinking and doing, as it relates to equitable options that affirm the young, gifted, and Black child.

One way that Black students and teachers have sought to utilize their voices and pedagogies to counter racial, educational, social, and other discriminatory narratives is through creating and establishing debate programs (Reid-Brinkley, 2008). In 2007, the film *The Great Debaters*, based

on a true story, brought national attention to how impactful the academic and creative sport of debate is and can be. Set in the Jim Crow South in the 1930s, the members of Wiley College's debate team, a historically Black college, endured racial tension and made history by defeating their white counterparts, which enabled them to change the face of debate for Blacks. Considering it was dangerous and deadly for Blacks to be caught reading or learning to read during the antebellum era, *The Great Debaters* offers an example of strength and tenacity through the lens of Black struggle and pride. The teacher and debate coach, Melvin Tolson, was a blueprint of who and what Paris' (2016) question aimed to identify, when he asked, "Who are the teachers already meeting those needs, how are they doing so and, crucially for the field of teacher education, how are they learning to do so?" Just as American classrooms and schools are racially and ethnically shifting to represent more students of color – so is the activity of debate. However, challenges and struggles are sometimes still an unfortunate premise of Black student-debaters' lived experiences with schooling, power dynamics, debate, language, literacy, and other ways in which they identify.

Research continues to document the ways adolescents seek out and use literacy as critical components of their lives outside of school (Blackburn, 2003; Fisher, 2005a, 2007; Jocson, 2005, Morrell, 2002). This research describes active participation by adolescents in spoken word venues, debate, teen clubs, poetry programs, and other activities that occur outside of traditional schooling. Likewise, scholars have examined how youth use literacy to resist injustices, writing plays while incarcerated and using literacy to make sense of gentrification (Fisher, 2008, 2009; Kinloch, 2009).

Nontraditional educational contexts illustrate literacy sites where participation demands the use of literacy skills, such as, reading, writing, speaking and listening to make their voices heard in profound ways. McCarty (2005) argues that positioning literacy within existing power dynamics becomes especially important for understanding the literacy practices of communities

previously considered marginalized. She argues for a perspective that includes “language,” literacy and schooling as interrelated axes of power in struggles over access to key intellectual, social, economic and political resources and rights (p. 7). Within this context, teachers must be able to prepare students for literacy and other academic successes, even with limited resources and various testing and national, state, and district demands.

To fight against the deficit thinking and approaches that are associated with dominant U.S. schooling, teaching, and learning, Paris (2012) offers the term Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP), which he suggests has the goal of supporting multilingualism and multiculturalism for students and teachers in practice and perspective. Specifically, he states, “CSP seeks to perpetuate and foster-to sustain-the linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling and as a needed response to demographic and social change. CSP, then, links a focus on sustaining pluralism through education to challenges of social justice and change in ways that previous iterations of asset pedagogies did not” (2012, p. 95). It is such a culturally sustaining approach that frames my study of participants in Action Debate and forwards their thinking and (counter)narratives to provide insights and ideas that offer examples of how the struggles and successes of Black student-debaters and supporters can foster and contribute to notions of Blackness, literacy, storytelling, teacher education, and out-of-school learning.

### **Statement of Purpose & Research Questions**

This study seeks to examine the literacy practices, legacy learning, and the high school to college debate pipeline of Black student-debaters and debate supporters in a sustaining urban debate community. In order to maintain confidentiality, I have assigned the program the pseudonym Action Debate (AD). Similarly, I have also assigned the debate teacher and coach the pseudonym, Lorikeet. The other participants in this study will be outlined in Chapter 3 and other

chapters. Currently, Lorikeet is a 10<sup>th</sup> grade Social Studies teacher and a debate coach in a major Midwestern city. She has been coaching since 2009 and is known within AD for encouraging her students to enact performance debate strategies, such as rapping, using poetry, and playing music while giving their speeches. Such strategies have allowed her and her students to achieve success within the AD community and on the national debate circuit. Three years ago, two of her Black debaters qualified to participate in the Tournament of Champions (TOC), which is known as the “Super Bowl of debate tournaments” for high school students. The TOC is highly competitive and held at the University of Kentucky every year. It is considered the most prestigious debate tournament and to attend, debaters must receive bids or nominations at respected regional and national tournaments throughout the regular debate season. The TOC is a predominately White space and can be very stressful, given how competitive it is. Lorikeet’s debaters were the first Black debaters in the city and state to qualify for the TOC. These two debaters received debate scholarships and are currently debating at two of the best universities known for debate. Having had her debaters participate in the AD helped prepare them for the TOC and college.

Being a part of AD, a debate literacy community, outside of school allowed them to exercise agency over literacy content and process (Fisher, 2002). AD is a voluntary community for youth, adults, and debate instructors. AD offers opportunities for different levels of engagement, from attendance, competition (at novice, junior varsity, and varsity levels), and judging debate rounds. A part of this study explored why and how each participant chooses to engage with AD and how they view their participation. Next, this study investigated how they define, internalize, reject, and resist some of the deficit-framed narratives that are constructed about them as Black debaters and debate supporters. In the process, this study spoke to how and

why the debaters draw from various forms of literacy, whether debating against their Black or non-Black peers. This research sought to answer the following questions:

- 1) How and in what ways is Action Debate (AD) a culturally sustaining space?*
- 2) How do students perceive and understand their participation in Action Debate as relating to debate, school, their communities, and college?*
- 3) Are there specific literacy and culturally sustaining practices that are employed by students, coaches, and debate supporters in the Action Debate program to prepare Black students to debate in racially welcoming or racially hostile environments?*

AD offered a unique setting in which to observe students grapple with ideas, debate about current events and issues of power, struggle, and resistance, and encourage one another along the way. Additionally, this space allowed for the coaches of these debaters to provide them ongoing constructive criticism, emotional and psychological support, and to see their teaching strategies and practices come to life in a debate round. Historically, AD has served predominately Black student-debaters. Although there is more diversity currently, the program focuses on helping youth marginalized by race, gender, and class trust and value their individual and collective voices. This study expanded the current body of debate research by offering new and thoughtful insights on the culturally sustaining and literacy practices of a debate coach, her students, and other AD supporters and how their teaching, coaching, and learning assist with growth of Black debaters. Furthermore, this study contributes to the existing scholarship by examining an urban debate community that promotes literacy and the performance skills explicitly understood to “empower” students politically (Warner & Bruscke, 2011). The use of the term “empower” reflects the belief that debate offers a space for youth to practice informed dialogue and to formulate critical perspectives.

## Definition of Terms

The following terms will be used in this study:

*Antiblackness* is the intentional hostility and rage committed against Black identities and bodies. This can be done through stereotypical narratives and images. It also refers to how injustices and apparent prejudice and racism towards Blacks and student-debaters can lead to educational, emotional, spiritual, and physical harm, trauma, or death. Dumas (2016) suggests that more work and theorizing needs to occur when speaking to antiblackness for educational research with attention to how the specificity of antiblackness presents challenges for analyses of race, racial equity, and school reform.

*Blackness* in the context of this study refers to the countering of antiblackness and how Black student-debaters, supporters, and others consciously or subconsciously forward their ethnic and cultural capital as evidence to demonstrate their heritage and pride in the midst of racial and civil unrest and in racially welcoming or unwelcoming spaces. Examples of this will be demonstrated through poetry, song lyrics, storytelling as truth, photos, language, literacy and literature choices, and other ways to counter Black suffering.

*Counterstories* (a.k.a. counternarratives, storytelling) stems from Critical Race Theory (CRT) and serves as a framework to enhance and empower the stories and experiences of students of color (Solorzano & Yosso, 2009). Counterstories also work to affirm and deconstruct dominant and White narratives that surround or center the daily interactions and situations with people of color. According to Delgado and Stefaniec (2012), “stories can aid in dismantling a system of oppression by highlighting the voice of those who are often marginalized. Moreover, stories that provide insight into the racialized, gendered, and classed experiences of people of color are a powerful

asset in critiquing the dominant story of education that often claims objectivity, meritocracy, colorblindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity” (p. 134).

*Debate Literacy Community* describes a community framed around literacy and literacy-building activities. These activities can extend from reading and writing to making music, performing spoken word, and creating visual representations (Cowan, 2005; Fisher, 2003; Weinstein, 2002). Wegner defines community as a “way of talking about the social configurations in which our enterprises are defined as worth participating and our participation is recognizable as competence” (1998, p. 5). Communities are not static and membership and roles are constantly being negotiated. Using Wegner’s definition of community involves members who participate in literacy activities collaboratively and communally. A literacy community is a group in which the existence of the group revolves around text and communication in a variety of ways, including reading and writing, as well as speaking, performing, and debating.

*Debate Supporters* includes current and past student-debaters, coaches, teachers, debate judges, parents, family members, principals, administrators, and other individuals who offer academic, educational, emotional, financial, organizational, and physical assistance for student-debaters.

*Legacy Learning* is the sharing of knowledge that occurs within the AD community. This also includes spaces where individuals, such as debate coaches, peer student-debaters, debate supporters, and others who have had experience with debate, can offer resources for debate success, which most times leads to academic success for Black student-debaters. Oftentimes, in addition to high schools, these communities and spaces are evidenced on the campuses of colleges and universities.

*Literacy* as defined in the context of this study connects to the sociocultural ideas of a “literacy event.” Heath defines a literacy event as “any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to

the nature of participants' interactions and their interpretive process" but also including "speech events that may describe, repeat, reinforce, expand, frame, or contradict written materials, and participants must learn whether oral or written mode takes precedence" (Heath, 1982). In this way, Heath contends that literacy events are not limited to writing and reading, but include speaking and performing around texts as well.

*Out-of-school settings* are spaces of learning that take place outside of the traditional classroom school setting. Such settings include "homes, after-school programs, and community-based organizations" to name a few of the possible spaces of literacy participation (Hull & Schultz, 2002, p. 2). Out-of-school settings also include nontraditional ways of teaching and using literacy, such as including the community of learning within English or Social Studies classrooms. Although these literacy spaces may occur within a classroom or school, the designation of being an out-of-school setting includes using sources of knowledge beyond standard curricula choices.

*Policy debate* refers to a specific format of debate participation. This particular form of debate serves as a structured conversation between two opposing teams of two participants each. The conversation, known as a "debate round," revolves around a topic, called a resolution, chosen prior to the beginning of the academic year, which remains the same throughout the year. Over the past 20 years or so, resolutions within Action Debate have ranged from establishing education policy to increasing academic achievement, to creating programs to reduce juvenile crime in the United States. Participants prepare research-driven arguments related to the resolution and speak for specific lengths of time as they prepare for ten speeches in a debate round. In some cases, the speeches are prepared in advance, while others, called "rebuttals," are created within the debate round. As debaters present their arguments, each team and the judge of the debate round creates a written record of the arguments stated in a debate round. This written record is called "the flow."



Within the structure of policy debate, space exists for oral and written forms of literacy practices to take place and be present throughout a debate round. The context of the speech determines the choice of which form would be more useful. Coaches spend countless hours preparing debaters for choosing and selecting supportive texts to advance their arguments. Debaters read information ranging from academic articles, newspaper reports, poems, essays, and other mediums. Next, they use the information to present an oral case, while preparing to respond to questions from the other team and the evidence provided in the debate round. The response time to such questions is called a “cross examination.” Although the premise of the conversation is the written text, the speaking that correlates to the text from “the flow” (also known as “flowing”) guides the conversation.

*Struggling Students* refers to the intentional ways that media outlets and other entities frame their reporting of Black student-debaters around deficit-filled narratives, which sometimes include negative interpretations of their socioeconomic status, educational backgrounds, class, gender, and sexual identities.

*Successful Students* describe the intentional ways that media outlets fail to frontload or include the explanations of Black student-debaters’ achievements and engagements with school (and school-related accomplishments) and academic excellence. To counter this, Black student-debaters (re)define their own experiences to include their school-related and out-of-school setting feats and victories.

### **Frameworks for Understanding**

To address my research questions, I propose to engage in an ethnographic case study of the AD community to examine the culturally sustaining and literacy practices that supporters and students engage in when participating in policy debate in a Midwestern city. Specifically, exploring why and how this teacher and coach participates in an urban debate community, how

she views her participation, and investigating the languages, literacies, literatures, and cultural practices she uses to engage and support her African American debaters inside and outside of the classroom will guide this study. Exploration of these questions and work will require analyses of the teacher and coach, the community of debaters and the Action Debate Program as a whole.

While addressing any form of support and validation that urban debaters receive in preparation for debate, it is necessary to consider the ways in which coaches choose to become participants in urban debate communities and the ways in which they teach and coach, drawing from culturally sustaining pedagogies and practices. Within this context, it is also important to recognize that such culturally sustaining work can stem from multiple places, including out-of-school settings, home, community, peers, and organizations. Considering a major focus of my research foci seeks to understand how and why Black teachers, coaches, students, and other debate supporters participate in an urban debate community and utilize cultural and literacy practices when teaching and learning, it is imperative for me to draw from frameworks and thinkers to assist with analyzing such practices and spaces. To do this, I have chosen to draw from elements of *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy*, *New Literacy Studies*, and *Third Space Theory*.

### **Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy**

While desiring to examine how Black student-debaters and supporters participate in a debate community and employ teaching and literacy practices that are culturally engaging and sustaining to instruct and inform their debate choices, deciding to focus on asset-based pedagogies, such as Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP), is necessary for this study. Asset-based pedagogies have widely developed as a way to resist and challenge deficit approaches that have tried to offer suggestions for the academic achievements among students of color (Paris, 2012). In his underlining of deficit approaches, Paris (2012) states that “the goal of deficit approaches was to

eradicate the linguistic, literate, and cultural practices many students of color brought from their homes and communities and replace them with what were viewed as superior practices” (p. 93). Deficit approaches, as described by Paris, suggest that students’ of color ways of being, living, and knowing should be overshadowed by dominant ways of thinking. Given this, then, the goal of CSP is to “perpetuate and foster - to sustain - linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling” (Paris, 2012, p. 95). Desiring to nuance CSP further, Paris & Alim (2014) offer a loving critique to problematize and push their thinking of CSP. While seeking to shift the term, stance, and practice of asset based pedagogies, Paris & Alim suggest that deficit approaches and ways of teaching have spanned for many decades in the United States. When this happens, they denote that students of color and their cultural ways of being and literacy practices are seen as deficient. These same ideals were apparent in the AD community when Black student-debaters sometimes debated their white peers. Participants reported feelings of exclusion and isolation. To combat such feelings, they purposely engaged with hip hop and other cultural practices to forward their arguments, cross examinations, and rebuttals in debate rounds. In their own work and communities, Paris & Alim deemed it necessary to delineate a reflective stance to encompass the importance of being inclusive when teaching and learning with students of color. To draw this out more, they state:

Here, we are primarily interested in creating generative spaces for asset pedagogies to support the practices of youth and communities of color while maintaining a critical lens vis-à-vis these practices. Providing the example of Hip Hop as a form of the cultural and community practice that pedagogies should sustain, we argue that, rather than avoiding problematic practices of keeping them hidden beyond White gaze, CSP must work with students to critique regressive practices (e.g., homophobia misogyny, racism) and raise critical awareness. (2014, p. 92)

Disrupting discriminatory acts within and outside of debate spaces is what the AD participants in this study revealed with which they had experiences with. Prior to the development

of CSP, Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) proposed Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP). She defines CRP as a pedagogy “that would propose to do three things - produce students who can achieve academically, produce students who demonstrate cultural competence, and develop students who can both understand and critique the existing social order” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 474). In this vein, CRP requires that all “teachers attend to the students’ academic needs, not merely make them “feel good” in order to provide students the opportunity to choose academic excellence and success” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 160). In keeping with this frame of thinking, but seeking to sustain these practices, Paris (2012) challenges us to consider whether practicing CRP is sustaining the languages and cultures of communities of color. Ultimately, in his view, Paris (2012) conceptualizes CSP as a pedagogy that extends and moves beyond being relevant or responsive to multiethnic and multilingual communities to “support young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence” (p. 95). Similarly, Ladson-Billings (2014) revisits her development and thinking of CRP to suggest that the concept of CRP needed to be pushed further. She acknowledges Paris & Alim’s (2014) work as an example of such a push.

In developing this theory, culturally *sustaining* pedagogy (Paris, 2012), these authors use culturally relevant pedagogy as the place where “the beat drops” and then layer the multiple ways that this notion of pedagogy shifts, changes, adapts, recycles, and recreates instructional spaces to ensure that consistently marginalized students are repositioned into a place of normativity – that is, that they become subjects in the instructional process, not mere objects. (2014, p.76)

In this regard, Ladson-Billings understands and works to honor the need for a “remix” of thinking, learning, and teaching through the lens of CSP. This is important to note, considering that today’s educators and youth, like the ones in the AD community, deem it necessary to learn from various teaching approaches and not just a singular idea.

## **New Literacy Studies**

New Literacy Studies (NLS) offers a lens for examining the relationship between literacy and power. NLS emerged from the question of the relationship between written and oral cultures. Although literacy and orality operate as two fundamental forms of communication, understandings of the relationship between the two have shifted over time. The definition of literacy as the process of writing and reading resulted in concerns associated with ranking societies based on outsiders' perspectives of how literacy functioned (Besnier, 2000). The introduction of New Literacy Studies (NLS) and sociocultural studies of literacy demonstrated a significant departure from the autonomous model of literacy, part of "a larger 'social turn' away from a focus on individuals and their private minds and towards interaction and social practice" (Gee, 1999). Literacy research as practiced prior to NLS primarily concerned itself with the physical operations of literacy on an individual basis – the acts of reading and writing. However, with the emergence of newly culturally sensitive theories, the perception of literacy has evolved to include "the everyday meanings and uses of literacy in specific cultural contexts and link directly to how we understand the work of literacy in educational contexts" (Street, 2005, p. 417).

In some research, oral communication has been seen as the source of all written discourse, whereas in other cases, the oral is seen as the imperfect form of the written that comes later (Dyson, 2005; Rumsey, 2000). Recently, the discussion of choices regarding communicative acts are again situated within the community, and "the spoken and written word are dialectically related in literacy interactions" (Cook-Gumperz & Keller-Cohen, 1993, p. 283). With that in mind, the relationship between orality and literacy becomes paramount to any discussion of debate, an activity in which written and oral forms of communication operate within the same space simultaneously. As a result, becoming fluent in both contributes to achieving success in the debate

community. NLS provides a space to understand literacy in connection to larger dynamics of power and resistance. NLS also challenges the separation between orality and literacy as an exclusionary framework incapable of and unwilling to support the idea of literacy as multiple. Exploring intersections of literacy and power also includes examining literacy as “identity work” (Gee, 2000). According to Gee, the definition of literacy included the construction of “social languages,” languages used to “enact, recognize, and negotiate different socially situated identities and to carry out different situated activities” (2000). He continues to make the argument that language must be supported and validated by ways of thinking and acting that would be useful for that specific situation. Connected to this, I offer my investigation and analysis of debate, legacy learning, and literacy within the AD community. In this way, I am forwarding NLS to understand how Black student-debaters and supporters of debate work to disrupt unequal power, within the debate context.

### **Third Space**

Stating that there are certain elements that assist with the ways Third Space operates, Gutierrez (2008) suggests that the spaces can include curricula that give the space for students to engage in dialogue and discussions pertaining to their identities as African American youth who reside and learn in urban settings. She argues that the idea of Third Space also builds on sociocritical literacy, which speaks to everyday literacy practices and curricular choices that help to reframe them as powerful tools leading to critical social thought. This is imperative to draw upon, considering Third Space attempts to contest the normative and traditional conceptions of academic literacy for students from nondominant communities. In this way, Black students and supporters in the AD community are a part of a Third Space that seeks to affirm and honor their critical consciousness and social awareness coupled with engaging their multiple literacies.

According to Piazza (2009), “working toward a third space that helps all children negotiate new understandings of themselves and others is the goal” (p. 19). These understandings should take place in schools for students to be able to participate in and take advantage of. However, when this is not represented in schools, out-of-school spaces, including Urban Debate Leagues (UDLs) and debate communities, provide spaces for youth to explore, learn, and be a part of their academic success. Likewise, when seeking to comprehend the tenets of Third Space, it is important to acknowledge the multiple ways that theories of Third Space have been conceptualized (Moje et al., 2004). Specifically, one of the ideas of Third Space refers to the ways that school spaces connect and merge traditional ways of knowing and being with the experiences of students who are marginalized to form a hybrid or third space. Moreover, another lens focuses on how third spaces are navigational spaces that assist with students’ ability to boundary cross multiple settings and spaces. Still another view speaks to the spaces that challenge and seek to change and transform dominant school practices and discourses. I am mainly focused on this final iteration.

For the purpose of this study, I considered it necessary to use all three frameworks: Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy, New Literacy Studies, and Third Space to examine the culturally sustaining and literacy practices of AD supporters in an urban debate community. Exploring each allowed me to critically analyze and develop a rich understanding of the teaching and learning that Lorikeet, her students, and other AD supporters engage in within the AD community. Further, examining these paradigms acknowledged the cultural, identity, sociocultural, and historical impacts and worlds that the AD students and supporters are a part of and navigated through.

### **Organization of Dissertation**

Infused in my research questions are themes and ideas related to culturally sustaining pedagogies and practices connected to a debate out-of-school program and community

participation. Chapter 1, *Growing up Flowing: An Introduction to the Significance of the Action Debate Community*, of this dissertation introduces debate, debate-related terms and literacies, and explores the purpose of this study and my research questions. Additionally, I draw on my own initial experiences as a debate student and coach to inform and extend the notion of literacy within the debate community. In this regard, I position myself and other Black student-debaters in AD as legacy learners. Next, I define my frameworks for understanding and presenting this study through the lenses of Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy, New Literacy Studies, and Third Space. These three schematic ideals offer insights and understandings which help to extend a more cultural basis for comprehending how Black student-debaters engage with debate and literacy in their communities. Chapter 2, *From Frameworks to Understanding What Works Inside and Outside of School Spaces: A Review of Literature*, reviews relevant literature on debate, literacy and language practices, and the significance of out-of-school spaces. I also present findings from a preliminary study I conducted on debate with urban youth. In the study, I examined the ways that debate and literacy were defined and characterized with regard to race and gender. Additionally, I investigated how the urban youth, some of whom had no prior debate experience, viewed debate as a medium for enriching their communication and research skills. Another poignant finding from the study resulted in the student participants reporting that they deemed debate as important and necessary for matriculating to college.

While Chapters 1 and 2 seek to define and forward the idea of debate-related literacies in the AD community, Chapter 3, *Learning from Black Student-Debaters and Supporters: Research Approach and Methods*, presents a methodology for exploring facets of debate and literacy for AD participants as they debate, teach, and learn. This chapter extends Heath's (1983) sociocultural framework (i.e. the ethnography of literacy events) by providing commentary on the need to



understand and value debate and literacy in the lives of Black youth. At the end of this chapter, I describe the study's design and its methods for data collection and analysis, which included participant observations, interviews, audio and video recordings, and collected artifacts.

Next, Chapter 4, *"I Just Wanna Be Represented Right:" Black Student-Debaters Use of (Counter)Stories to Reflect Upon, Respond to, and Resist to Negative Perceptions and Portrayals*, examines the negative perceptions and portrayals of Black student-debaters and how they resisted these framings by offering counter stories or narratives that spoke to their experiences as Black student-debaters. I attempt to document this by sharing the views of the cultural complexities and richness of the student-debaters and how they navigated through such phenomenon. In addition, this chapter highlights how they sought to push back against stereotypical images and depictions. For the student-debaters in the AD community, to counter the negative representations of them, they relied on their cultural capital and wherewithal to redefine themselves through positive postings and positioning. Their practice of debate was an intentional process of forwarding Black pride, despite opposition and oppressive thwarting.

In Chapter 5, *From Evidence-Using to Lived Expressions and Expressions: Exploring the Roles of Reading, Writing, Speaking, and Thinking in Debate*, I offer how the participants specifically engage with reading, writing, and speaking when at debate practices and while competing at tournaments. This includes using speaking drills and certain ways of "flowing" (writing) to capture their opponents' arguments.

Chapter 6, *"We Still Make Things Happen": Examining Legacy Learning and the High School to College Debate Pipeline*, investigates the ways in which Black student-debaters, both in high school and college, have experienced racial bias or discrimination when debating. Similar to this, this chapter also defines how legacy learning does not only exist or operate for high school

debaters but also for Black college debaters who have matriculated through the AD community. I document the ways that storying and counterstorying serves as a debate strategy for AD student-debaters to combat struggle and opposition beyond debate settings, in an effort to sustain their cultural pride and identities. In their storytelling and counterstorytelling, their perspectives and experiences with debate as high schoolers led to some of them graduating high school and receiving debate scholarships to debate in college. In this way, this chapter largely concerns itself with the high school to college debate pipeline.

Lastly, Chapter 7, *Black Debaters Soaring Against Caged Odds: Some Concluding Thoughts*, offers a discussion that connects the thinking, teaching, and learning that took place within this study. Stepping away from traditional reporting and writing, I evoke the late Maya Angelou's poem, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, as the genesis for delineating how certain parts of a bird correlate to the field of education and what this means for future teaching and learning from and with youth. Additionally, this chapter provides implications, limitations, and a conclusion that speaks to the context of debate, school, and out-of-school spaces. Moreover, this chapter also ties together the metaphoric analysis of a caged bird to the names of the participants in connection to the possibilities that can occur when caged or free birds become allies for the betterment of educational opportunities for Black youth.

## **CHAPTER 2: FROM FRAMEWORKS TO UNDERSTANDING WHAT WORKS**

### **INSIDE AND OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL SPACES: A REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

There are few conceptual and empirical studies that highlight and speak to how Black-student debaters and supporters employ their chosen debate literacies to forward their Black (counter)narratives, identities, and understandings. Additionally, little to no information exists that explains and analyzes why urban debate programs, such as ACTION Debate (AD), serve as safe spaces and cultural centers for Black and Brown youth. I argue that is the case because the activity of debate has been laden with the experiences and successes that center White normative thinking, doing, and performing. For these reasons, this study is important to give voice to marginalized Black student-debaters and debate supporters in an effort to learn from their struggles and successes and how exploring their stories can possibly shift the nature of how debate literacy outcomes are viewed and practiced for urban youth.

#### **Urban Debate Leagues**

In 1985, Emory University's debate instructor, Melissa Maxcy Wade, created an urban outreach program in Atlanta, Georgia, through a grant from the National Forensic League and Phillips Petroleum. The grant increased the participation of inner-city, minority youths in high school over a three-year period. Starting with D.M. Therrell, a public high school in Atlanta, the Emory outreach program grew to serve and include numerous Atlanta inner city schools (Reid-Brinkley, 2008). With a focus of bringing competitive policy debate to minority youth, the program's goals were to improve reading, research skills, speaking, and writing. To assist with this, Wade sent college students from her nationally ranked debate team to volunteer and coach in schools in Atlanta. Facilitating this allowed participating high school students and teachers to be connected to a local college and debate team. This is also a very critical and salient tenet of the

AD program. The Atlanta model of the Urban Debate League (UDL) has since garnered a nationwide presence with programs in over twenty cities, including Chicago, Detroit, Kansas City, New York, San Francisco, and Washington D.C., to name a few (National Association for Urban Debate Leagues, 2016).

Currently, UDLs are largely funded through grant funding from the Open Society Institute (OSI), which is run by the Soros Foundation. Soros believes in the educational outcomes connected to debate, especially for disenfranchised populations. In 2002, the OSI formed a new national organization to take over the UDL. The organization, the National Urban Debate Initiative, was renamed the National Association for Urban Debate Leagues (NAUDL) in 2005. To date, Reid-Brinkley exclaims that the NAUDL “provides a number of critical services in the maintenance and support of UDLs around the country. It promotes and advocates on behalf of all UDLs. It serves as a vital hub for all the UDLs providing an Urban Debate Network” (2008, p. 27).

With the growth and expansion of UDLs, the AD community has been able to forward its goals and mission of offering debate programs and participation to high school debaters. Through storytelling and countering of specific negative portrayals, the Black student-debaters in this study echo that AD allowed them a space to be themselves because their lives and experiences were and are centered in the debate spaces they occupy. For them, being centered, valued, and affirmed was more important sometimes than their growth with reading, writing, thinking critically, and researching. I argue that when Black student-debaters’ stories and narratives are respected and valued, their academic and educational ways of being will follow. Speaking to this, UDLs and the AD program have received success through the improvement of grades, grade point averages, increased attendance and participation in other extra-curricular activities, and increased matriculation to college (National Association for Urban Debate Leagues 2016). Similarly, UDL

and AD supporters have argued that UDLs serve as hubs for empowerment for educationally disenfranchised students and provide them with opportunities to develop communication and academic success (Lee, 1999).

### **Debate and Education**

Additional debate research examines both the use of debate in formal and informal education, as well as the resulting culture of debate for those involved. Few empirical studies exist that specifically relate to urban debate communities as places and spaces for urban student outreach, such as Action Debate. Huber and Plantageonette (1993) make a case for supporting the expansion of debate in urban cities not for competitive purposes but for the sake and potential of individual and community transformation. They argue, “The debaters I’ve met care more about than just winning, they carry questions of ‘should’ beyond debate rounds, into homes, and hearts, and back to people who once believed they could make a difference in the world” (p. 35). Similarly, Edward Lee (1998) published a memoir examining the growth of debate access in urban public schools. He reflected on the importance of debate for developing his voice and a sense of his own power.

Fine’s book, *Gifted Tongues* (2001), offers a comprehensive examination of debate as a community in which the worlds of education, adolescence, and talk intersect. Using ethnographic methods of participant observation and in-depth interviewing, Fine followed two national-level high school debate teams in Minnesota for the 1989-1990 academic year as they prepared for and attended tournaments. As described in his work, Fine discussed the world in which students from elite backgrounds, predominately White and affluent, prepared to debate with specific rules and structures. Student participants learned argumentation skills, presentation skills, and “the ability to understand multiple perspectives” (p. 226). Fine specifically notes the experiences of the elite

high school debaters, but limits his descriptions of inner-city debaters and debate programs, such as Action Debate. However, Wolf (2008) analyzed a middle school urban debate program as a community of practice. Participants stemmed from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and the participants involved were mostly Black. Wolf's work enhances Fine's study in that it explores the debate participation of African American students, a group largely ignored by Fine.

In Wolf's research, he gleaned that students and program volunteers communicated through three languages: the language of popular culture, the language of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), and the language of debate. Wolf describes urban debate as an access point rather than a means for students to be competitively successful in the larger debate community. These ideas are contradictory to the ones Fine notes, in which his attention to Black debaters is limited. However, over the past 20 years, inner city Black communities have reclaimed a history of debate and activism. Policy debate as a space of dialogue has historically been perceived as an affluent, white, and predominately male activity (Cridland-Hughes, 2011). However, with UDLs emerging in 1985 in the Atlanta Public School District, Black students and other students of color have been afforded opportunities to provide a facelift to the former world of debate through the establishment of UDLs.

Historic overviews of literacy trends in the United States tell a story of systemic denial of literacy to the Black community during enslavement. For much of the history of the United States, African Americans were not allowed to read or write. In the history of literacy in the United States, Graff (2001) noted that 36.1% of free black men and 28.4% of free black women were described as illiterate in 1870. By 1900, that number had dropped to 44%. The percentages document the increasing numbers of Blacks acquiring literacy after emancipation and highlight the value placed on education and literacy as "literacy and schooling represented great promises of progress as well

as symbols of liberation” (p. 226). A common theme of Black literacy acquisition has been the enduring role of nontraditional spaces. Out-of-school learning has occupied an important role in the acquisition of literacy for Blacks (Cridland-Hughes, 2011). Connected to this history, urban debate and UDLs seek to push a relationship between reading and current events even farther, asking youth to consider how to incorporate new knowledge into the decisions they make about how to live their lives. Even with these goals in mind, there are not studies in existence that connect how Black coaches can engage in and utilize culturally sustaining and literacy practices when instructing and coaching Black debaters in both supportive and sometimes hostile out-of-school spaces, such as AD and UDLs.

### **Language & Literacy Practices**

It has been widely noted that the most studied and demonized dialect of American English is African American Language, (AAL) (Smitherman, 2000c). Research has documented the West African roots of this dialect, including features of its syntax, phonology, vocabulary, and prosody (Lee, 2007). In the history of U.S. education, debates have abounded as to whether AAE is a resource or a detractor affecting the academic achievement of African American students (Delpit, 1986; Perry & Delpit, 1998). In the 1960s and 1970s, AAL was viewed as interfering with young Black children’s ability to learn to read and write (Lee, 2007).

Similarly, there have been equally counter arguments, namely that AAE is a structured language variety and not a version of incorrect English (Labov, 1972). In 1979, 11 students from the Martin Luther King Elementary School sued the Ann Arbor School District for discrimination in *Martin Luther King Junior Elementary School Children v. Ann Arbor School District*, which came to be known as the *Black English Case*. African American students at the school were routinely receiving unwarranted learning and speech pathology placements, seriously limiting

their chances to learn (Lee, 2005). The case tested the applicability of the 1703(f) language provision of the 1974 Equal Education Opportunity Act to speakers of Black English (Smitherman, 1981). While the case set an important legal precedent, the practical strategy approved by the courts for remediation was inadequate and underconceptualized. However, the fundamental argument made by the linguist who served as expert witnesses for the case consistently held that AAL is a legitimate and systematic language variety of English. This is the position adopted by most linguists and formally claimed in a public position by the Linguistics Society of America in 1997 as a response to the decision by the Oakland School Board to focus attention on AAL as a resource and a stand taken by the College Composition and Communication Conference of the National Council of Teachers of English regarding the right of students of indigenous languages in 1974 (Smitherman, 1995, 1999, 2000; Smitherman & Dijk, 1988). The Linguists Society of America (1997) resolution states:

1. The variety known as “Ebonics,” “African American Vernacular English” (AAVE), and “Vernacular Black English” and by other names is systematic and rule-governed like all natural speech varieties...
3. As affirmed by the LSA Statement of Language Rights (June 1996), there are individual and group benefits to maintaining vernacular speech varieties and there are scientific and human advantages to linguistic diversity.

Linguists have documented the rhetorical features and speech genres of African American English (Baugh, 1983; Dillard, 1972; Morgan, 1998; Mufwene et al., 1998; Smitherman, 1977). Others have documented how its rhetorical features improve the quality of student writing and African American Language awareness (Baker-Bell, 2013; Ball, 1992; Lee, Rosenfeld et al., 2003; Smitherman, 1994, 2000). Due to this, students within UDLs could benefit from employing these same AAL rhetorical features and other critical literacies features when debating. I would argue that considering most of the evidence currently used for urban debaters is very dense and sometimes difficult for them to conceptualize, AAL would serve as beneficial language usage to



advance their arguments and ideas. Several programs in the 1970s documented how the incorporation of AAL features in texts – specifically using authentic texts that use AAL – resulted in improvements in reading comprehension (Lee, 2007). Knowing this and implementing such texts could continue to improve the reading, writing, speaking, critical thinking and the overall engagement in social justice issues for urban coaches and debaters.

Among the most recent controversies over the incorporation of AAL in instruction is the highly debated decision by the Oakland (California) Board of Education in 1996. The Oakland School Board passed the following resolution:

RESOLVED that the Board of Education officially recognizes the existence, and the cultural and historic bases of West and Niger-Congo African Language Systems, and each language as the predominately primary language of African-American students...

BE IT FUTHER RESOLVED that the Superintendent in conjunction with her staff shall immediately devise and implement the best possible academic program for imparting instruction to African-American students in their primary language for the combined purposes of maintaining the legitimacy and richness of such language...and to facilitate their acquisition and mastery of English language skills. (quoted in Smitherman, 2000, p.150)

Ironically, critics of the Oakland decision included African American political leaders, some of whom have developed a strong following precisely because of their creative uses of AAL rhetorical features in their public address (Lee, 2007). The Ebonics resolution of the Oakland School Board resulted in anti-Ebonics legislation being proposed and passed in five states, as well as a critical public statement by then-Secretary of Education, Richard Riley (Smitherman, 2000b).

With all of the richness and legitimacy that AAL evokes and offers, students need to continue to be taught strategies for implementing its value in classrooms and outside of classrooms. Doing so exposes learners (and teachers or coaches) to how to nuance the tenets of Critical English Education. In his article, *Critical English Education*, Ernest Morrell (2005) explains and describes

what Critical English entails and how students can begin to change systems when they critically engage ways of doing so.

A Critical English Education is explicit about the role of language and literacy in conveying meaning and in promoting or disrupting existing power relations. It also seeks to develop in young women and men skills to deconstruct dominant texts carefully (i.e. canonical literature, media texts) while also instructing them in skills that allow them to create their own critical texts that can be used in the struggle for social justice. Further, critical English education encourages practitioners to draw upon the everyday language and literacy practices of adolescents to make connections with academic literacies and to work toward empowered identity development and social transformation. (2005, p. 319)

His offering supports the very tenets of debate and what it could resemble if AAL features were used to present and defend various arguments. Within this framework are also neighboring frameworks, such as Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, Hip Hop Based Education, and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy. When these pedagogies are made evident, there will be what Samy Alim (2012) calls “Occupying Language.”

In the face of such widespread language-based discrimination, Occupying Language can be a critical, progressive linguistic movement that exposes how language is used as a means of social, political and economic control. By occupying language, we can expose how educational, political, and social institutions use language to further marginalize oppressed groups; resist colonizing language practices that elevate certain languages over others; resist attempts to define people with terms rooted in negative stereotypes; and begin to reshape the public discourse about our communities, and about the central of language in racism and discrimination. (2012, p. 4)

I would argue that the AD participants need to occupy their languages when they debate. In her work, McHenry (2002) examines Black literary societies, one of the non-traditional resources for Black literacy and political training that also functioned “as vehicles of empowerment for their African American members” (98). Similarly, in *Black Literate Lives*, (2010) Fisher documents the historical connection between literacy and action through her study of independent black institutions and the Black Power and Black Arts movements. As she reveals in her examination of articles from a contemporary Black newspaper and its influence on the social

activism of a local community, black institutions and organizations continue to have a significant influence on political decisions and activism in the greater black community. Learning from this enabled me to draw connections with the activism I see taking place with Black students in debate.

To that end, Black students-debaters, coaches, and supporters should have the option of employing various literacy practices, such as AAL, to inform their debate performances and pedagogies. African American Language will persevere and flourish in the face of negative perceptions from dominant society and a lack of use in education (Paris & Ball, 2009). Educational spaces can join this perseverance toward educational equity. Aligned with this research on AAL, the inclusion of hip hop texts proved to be advantageous in support of African American youth culture and reading literacy practices. Some teachers began using hip hop to educate younger children in mathematics, memorizing times tables to popular beats, while gym teachers capitalized on the "pop" of hip-hop, which motivated kids to enjoy physical education classes (Kirkland, 2006). Similar to this, through ethnographically informed observations and interviews, Love (2013) examines how young women use and navigate hip hop music to advance their thinking and learning regarding race, class, privilege, and inequality. In her study, which took place in Atlanta, Georgia, a part of the country known for its robust and proud southern artists, she found that the origin of the work allowed the participants to develop their ideas and understandings connected to politics, education, race, and other societal issues. Ultimately, Love's gleanings and insertions of her own love and admiration for hip hop as a Black queer educator helped inform hip hop pedagogy and how teachers, students, and others might reimagine how they view hip hop.

The idea of using hip hop to teach and engage students moves beyond K-16 curricular choices. Petchauer's (2012) work highlights the ways in which college campuses also serve as rich and important sites for students to embody hip hop culture. Noting how higher education has often

misunderstood how hip hop operates in the lives of college students, he conducts in-depth interviews, observations, and other methods to capture how students – male and female – created hip hop and utilized it as a medium to form their living, teaching, and learning. For many years, hip hop and music has provided a third source of Black Semantics. Its cultural import and impact on Black life were of great magnitude because black music was more heavily African than any other single aspect of the Black American existence (Smitherman, 1977). This proves the validity of hip hop and how its usage needs to be connected to not only normative school curriculum, but also in out-of-school contexts, including debate.

### **Literacy & Learning in Out-of-School Spaces**

Literacy and learning in out-of-school settings explores how members of literacy groups use literacy in their everyday lives and community. Literacy-related activities in such spaces include poetry and nonfiction writing, as well as communicating through and creating graffiti art. In an edited volume, Mahiri (2004) examined varying forms of literacy teaching and learning in out-of-school spaces. Positing that literacy takes place in many ways and spaces, Mahiri's research focuses on what literacy is in a central role. Some examples of this include how literacy can range from how gender roles and norms are reflected in books (Godley, 2004) to engaging in dialogue about how homeschooled youth used online writing and journaling to form their own discourse community (Samuelson, 2004). In this collection of studies, literacy is defined as communication and authors offer evidence that literacy is more than reading and writing. Instead, they look at how various forms of literacy operate in connection to communicating.

In some literacy communities, ideas that lead to social action are actualized. Through participant observation, interviews, and document analysis, Heller (1997) described the literacy practices of adult women, most of whom were homeless or working poor and all of whom actively

participated in a women's writing workshop. Specifically, Heller examined how the culture of the workshop and the literacy skills practiced there helped to create and facilitate a space for activism. Some of what Heller observed occurred on personal levels, as women addressed and grappled with their physical struggles with cancer and other diseases. In this literacy and learning out-of-school space, members shared their personal thoughts and writing that stemmed from poetry, journal writing, and plays. The ideas and themes that were surfaced through individual writing led to an increase in action in the greater community. While some studies and findings note personal uses of literacy learning in separation from those practiced in school, other studies describe literacy practices outside of school that augment the knowledge available in schools. Dyson (1997, 1999, 2003) documented the connections between the literacy practices and popular culture of elementary school students in an urban public school. Utilizing participant observations, interviews, fieldnotes, and popular culture resources, Dyson looked at the connections between the types of popular culture students were exposed to and their literacy choices. Her findings describe how the students of color used popular culture to foster relationships and create ideas for in-class writing assignments, which connected their out-of-school activities with their in-school literacy learning.

Additionally, Soep & Chavez (2010) describe the stories of youth and how they are the producers of their own voices. With the program *Youth Radio* being an out-of-school space where their experiences, stories, and voices are not only encouraged, but validated, young people are challenged to change their worlds and the worlds around them. The title of the text, *Drop that Knowledge*, illustrates what such representations could entail when witnessed in places where young people reside. "Despite never-ending cycles of innovation in teaching methodology, traditional education tends not to foster collegiality between students and teachers. The expression

*drop that knowledge* urges adults to work on changing hierarchical relationships and establish a setting that fosters open and free exchange of ideas” (p. 6). Within current classrooms and spaces that young people occupy, they are often silenced and not asked to share their ideas. This is a sad reality and limits the possible growth that teachers and other educators can gain from when they decide not have knowledge dropped on them. With emerging programs like Youth Radio and UDLs, youth all across the world are becoming catalysts and agents of change for their communities by using their voices and experiences.

Still, in other studies, literacy in out-of-school spaces and settings is viewed as supplemental to the knowledge learned in traditional schooling. Fisher (2006) observed literacy practices exemplified within two black bookstores in northern California to explore how the bookstores supported literacy activities of their participants and provided “alternative and supplementary knowledge spaces” (p. 83). Through observations and interviews, Fisher shares how participants viewed the space as providing opportunities to access “ways of being and valuing found in black contexts that were not present or available in institutionalized curriculum” (p. 97). In this example, the value of a literacy community outside of school served as a source of information that could not be acquired elsewhere.

While schools represent spaces where literacy learning occurs, “out of school spaces can contribute substantively to learning, literacy practices, and the accumulation of literacy experience and expertise, including reading” (Kirkland & Hull, 2011, p. 711). It is important that researchers have expanded ideas and definitions of what literacy consists of, especially as related to African American learners. Many scholars denote that it is essential that we also focus on the meaningful literacy practices that African American youth engage in and the spaces in which youth engage in

these practices which are often found outside of school (Haddix & Sealey-Ruiz, 2012; Jocson, 2006; Kirkland, 2009; Mahiri, 2004, McMcillon & Edwards, 2000).

Although these studies speak to the importance of literacy to the specific groups, there is more to be said and evidenced about the use of culturally sustaining and literacy practices for African American youth. A study of the ways in which an African American teacher and debate coach views her participation in an urban debate community and instructs and coaches her African American debaters using CSP within AD will offer the opportunity to examine CSP in an out-of-school setting. In this regard, culturally sustaining and literacy work will become a means to a larger goal of education and schooling receiving a facelift for the betterment of students of color and their academic needs being met.

### **The Preliminary Study**

In an effort to understand how students developed literacy skills through debate, used African American Language (AAL), and viewed college access, I conducted a pilot study in the summer of 2013 with students in an eight-week summer debate program, Determined Debaters (DD, a pseudonym). I examined their definitions and interactions with conducting research, engaging in literacy, using AAL, and deciding to attend college. The summer debate program served 24 high school students from different local area schools and took place in a major Southeastern city located in the Midwest. The participants were in grades 9 – 11 at the time of the study and had varying levels of debate experience. The research questions for this study were:

- 1) How and why do urban debate participants use literacies and languages, such as African American Language, during debate preparation and performances?*
- 2) In what ways do summer debate participants view debate as a means to attending college?*

Using these questions to guide my study, I conducted ethnographic case study research with two students, one young man and one young woman. They were selected based on a mutual choosing and interest and given their different experiences with exposure to debate. The data collected included: field notes, participant observations, individual interviews, artifact collections, and audio and video recordings. Emerson, et al. (1995) state that ethnographic field research consists of two characteristics: participant-observation and writing ethnographic fieldnotes that capture what one observes as a participant-observer.

Ethnographic fieldnotes were taken from my role as a participant observer throughout the program's duration. I attempted to capture "thick description" of observations, debate practices, in classrooms, on field trips, and at other program activities "to draw large conclusions from the small, but very densely textured facts; to support broad assertions about the role of culture in the construction of collective life by engaging them exactly with complex specifics" (Geertz, 1973, p. 28). Three one-hour interviews were conducted throughout the entirety of the program and a fourth interview was done on a university field trip. Interviews granted me the opportunity to engage in dialogue and inquire about previous observations. In this realm, I was able to glean from the participants and their understandings of literacy and language practices, such as using AAL and capture their ideas and thoughts about possibly attending college.

**Findings.** The findings of the study offered insight and ideas for how teachers can learn from the understandings and knowledge that students bring to out-of-school spaces as it relates to their engagement with literacy, language, and thoughts about college access. Specifically, these thoughts and ideas stem from the interviews and observations with Ricky and Jessica, the case study participants.



***Enrichment of Communication, Literacy & Research Skills.*** One of the themes that resonated throughout Ricky and Jessica’s participation in the summer debate program was their thoughts and feelings of their literacy skills being strengthened. Before this could be proclaimed and declared, they had to be provided with expanded opportunities to develop such skills and practices. To that end, the program engaged students in debating several educational policies currently impacting urban schools, and other issues that were of importance to them. In order to achieve this, the participants developed their academic literacies through conducting research on these policies, issues, and topics - developing claims, finding supporting and opposing evidence, and anticipating and rebutting counter-claims through both writing and speaking.

By doing this, Mezuk (2009) suggests that “there are skills at the core of policy debate, which focuses on gathering and evaluating evidence from research, comparing authors’ claims, and distilling key arguments from evidence” (p. 291). When students are able to understand the importance of how these skills can lead to them articulating their thoughts better – they gain confidence and a better self-concept. She goes on to state that, “participation in debate may be a means to improving literacy, and, thus, overall educational outcomes for students, particularly for those who are not well served by academic programs, including African American students in urban school districts” (p.291).

Seeking to address this in the summer program, although the curriculum was developed prior to the start of the program, the program deemed it necessary to present opportunities for the students – with the majority of them being from urban school districts – to be able to give suggestions for improving and amending it to fit their needs and interests. Sometimes such a freedom and liberty is missing for students while they are in school. Considering Ricky did not have any debate experience and Jessica had a few years under her belt, it was important to

incorporate activities that would allow for both of them to enhance and enrich their debate and literacy skills. Drawing from a pre-survey I administered on the second week of class, both of their responses indicated they wanted various opportunities to speak (7/22/2013).

- **What do you plan to learn this summer and how can this class help with that?**

*“What I plan to learn this summer is to become a better debater and a better person. I also want to learn more words by reading more. I hope this class allows us to have fun and talk about stuff that teenagers like to talk about, like relationships, music, and school.” (Ricky, 7/22/2013)*

*“I know a lot about debating, but I hope to learn even more. I hope to increase my reading skills and ability to take it and use it for my arguments. This class can help me by allowing me to speak more.” (Jessica, 7/22/2013)*

In gleaning from their responses, both Ricky and Jessica wanted the summer debate program to be a space where they could learn more debate strategies, speak often to improve their public speaking, have fun, and take up issues that would allow them to grow alongside their peers – whom they viewed as important members of their communities. On the very first day of class, they were given sheets of paper and asked to write down topics they wanted to discuss and debate for the summer. Although Ricky and Jessica’s responses were more general in the above question, when they completed the activity, they were able to be more specific, which for me was an indicator of their thinking and desire to enhance their literacy skills. Having this was essential for all of our processes and understandings. In this moment, I was able to see that by having them enact their voices – they also had agency, which supported a culture of literacy learning through peer and community interaction.

*Notions of AAL & Other Literacies.* According to Baker-Bell (2013), research shows that the predominant view of African American Language (AAL) speaking students is generally negative. In a study she conducted in a high school classroom, when referring to AAL, she heard students use terms, such as, “improper,” “grammatically incorrect,” “broken English,” and “language of the ignorant and/or uneducated,” to characterize features of AAL” (p. 363). Similar to the students Baker-Bell encountered, Jessica held some of these same thoughts. Some scholars have argued that negative attitudes toward AAL are fostered in classrooms (Smitherman, 1981; Zudima, 2005). Evidence from Kirkland and Jackson’s (2008) study demonstrates that students’ negative perceptions of their own language are increased when they receive uncritical language instruction.

Along these same lines, classrooms are not the places for shaping language attitudes. When discussing Activity 2, Jessica thought the students in the video should not use AAL or “Ebonics” when debating in front of people. When I asked her about this, she revealed to me that she had not been in a situation or space where AAL was viewed as something positive and meaningful. Her first encounters that she remembers were from school. She has had more positive dealings with Dominant American English (DAE); thus, her thoughts of AAL were more negative, although she spoke (as observed and discussed in Activity 2, reading and watching debate articles) and wrote (as demonstrated in Activity 1, creating topics to discuss and debate for the summer) in AAL at times. With Activity 1, her writing was primarily in DAE, but when we verbally discussed it and Activity 2, her oral language about her written work was stated using AAL. The positive attitudes toward DAE and the negative attitudes toward AAL spilled over into other times I observed her speaking aloud, when she was in front of the class debating, and when other adults were in the room.

After watching the debate videos with students expressing why AAL and hip hop was important to them, Jessica began to recognize that she engaged in AAL; but overall, she maintained her thoughts that DAE, in her opinion, needed to be used more than AAL, especially when seeking to acquire a job or being in professional settings. From further observations of her and from reading her written work, she rarely wrote in AAL. Her main engagements with it and being influenced positively by hip hop culture stemmed from her conversations with her peers and community. Below, is her response when I asked her more about AAL.

- **Is AAL ever spoken in your home? If so, in what ways? How do you feel about this?**

*"I do find myself shorting words and phrases when I'm with my friends. Instead of saying "going" or "trying," I'll say, "goin" or "gonna" and "tryin" or "tryin ta." I hear this a lot with rap music and on the T.V. shows I watch. When I ask my momma for something or talk to her, I don't normally use AAL or Ebonics. I think it's important to speak clearly. (Jessica, 7/31/13)*

Jessica and others like her will continue to hold these views without introduction to awareness and understanding of comprehensive knowledge. "Students will retain and reinforce negative attitudes about AAL if they continue to receive a language education that fails to address the social, cultural, and political complexities of language" (Baker-Bell, 2013). Although I think Jessica was open to hearing about how AAL can be beneficial, I also think that with more time and historical references, she could come to appreciate AAL more. In a one on one conversation after class one day, she asked me questions, like, "Why is DAE being taught in schools so much and not AAL?" and "If AAL is a part of my culture – how come I can't use my native language in my classes at school" (8/05/2013)? While answering her question, I explained that some teachers may not even realize that they were limiting her and her peers or maybe they were not informed enough about AAL to desire to illustrate its relevance and importance – whether they (the teachers)

were African American or not African American. I encouraged her to read more about it and told her I would email her some literature on it.

Her questions to me revealed that she was in the process of developing a curiosity about AAL and language inequality and how language can be used to “maintain, reinforce, and perpetuate existing power relations” (Alim, 2007). Jessica told me that she would read whatever I sent her at the end of the summer program.

### ***Increased Desire for College Admittance.***

*“Yes, I plan on going to college. I’ve been raised knowing that I would go. My mom is an educator so it’s important.” (Jessica, 7/22/2013)*

*“I wanna to go to college because I want make something out of myself when I get older. I wanna study mechanical engineering.” (Ricky, 7/22/2013)*

In their pre-survey responses, when asked if they planned to attend college, both Ricky and Jessica stated that they desired to study at institutions of higher learning. Additionally, prior to participating in an overnight field trip to Michigan State University, students in the summer debate program indicated that they wanted to attend and complete college. Jessica, who had visited other colleges and universities, based on her mother being an educator, always knew it was an expectation that she would graduate from high school and go straight to college. Jessica and I often had these conversations during breaks and after class. Her mother, a middle-aged Black woman, worked in the office at the organization and was a member of the Board of Directors.

Oftentimes, when I would be leaving the site for the day, I would see and hear Jessica and her mother having conversations about matriculating through college. Although Jessica’s mother attended and graduated from college, she divulged to me that working to care for Jessica was sometimes a struggle, considering she was a single-parent. Relating to her due to my mother raising three children and being a single-parent, I expressed that she was a good role-model for Jessica.

Speaking to Jessica's mother periodically allowed me to draw conclusions about Jessica's interactions and engagement with debate, literacy, and other topics. On one occasion, her mother expressed to me that she thought that the debate class was "awesome" and "important." She told me this after reading the syllabus and observing the class three different times. In many ways, Jessica's mother was an integral part of her literacy practices and her increased desire for college admittance.

Revealing to me that her hankering was to become a lawyer, Jessica also saw debating as a means of preparation for law. Earlier in this study, I note that while Jessica no longer wished to be a part of her high school forensics team, she understood that participating in it and in the summer debate program allowed her to be more prepared for college and law school. Mezuk's (2009) study revealed that even if urban students only engage in debate at their schools for one year, they would be more prepared for college entrance exams and admittance over those who had no previous debate experience (p. 298). Mezuk goes on to analyze and address how students involved with the Chicago Urban Debate League (CUDL) increased their ACT scores and were accepted to college based on their involvement with debate. Next, the National Association for Urban Debate Leagues (NAUDL) study (2011) illustrated that "after graduating from high school, 86% of urban debaters enroll in college" (p.26). Among similar students who do not debate, only seventy-eight percent attend college. Urban debaters are 89% more likely than non-debaters to choose a four-year college or university. This is significant because a student who enrolls at a four-year college or university is much more likely to graduate than one who attends a two-year college (NAUDL, 2011).

Conducting the preliminary study was essential for me to understand and nuance the aspects of debate, language, and literacy within the lives of high school urban youth. These initial insights suggested that the student participants viewed debate as a vehicle for drawing on the

richness of AAL, hip hop, and music to help strengthen their debate performances. Similar to this, findings also revealed that many students who did not have debate experience prior to engaging in the study felt a heightened sense of self-awareness and confidence due to their weekly interactions with peers, conducting research, giving speeches, and communicating with adults and other individuals on field trips.

Lastly, considering one of the field trips took place on a college campus, several of the participants reported their appreciation for how debate served as the catalyst for the opportunity to visit a college campus outside of their urban city. Such articulations revealed to me that the ideas explored in this study helped to inform my dissertation. In this way, this dissertation seeks to answer questions about the ways in which Black student-debaters and supporters in the AD community engage with debate. Specifically,

- 1) How and in what ways is Action Debate (AD) a culturally sustaining space?*
- 2) How do students perceive and understand their participation in Action Debate (AD) as relating to debate, school, their communities, and college?*
- 3) Are there specific literacy and culturally sustaining practices that are employed by students, coaches, and debate supporters in the Action Debate (AD) program to prepare Black students to debate in racially welcoming or racially hostile environments?*

By answering these questions, I aim to positively shift and advance our current thinking about Black youth, debate, and literacy. I also seek to raise vital questions about what counts as debate and successful debate performances, whether in classrooms or in communities.

In the next chapter, I describe the methodology I used to complete this project. I list and define ideas and terms like ethnographic case study and humanizing research to provide analytic

understandings for this work. Additionally, I describe the context of this study and the participants. Finally, I present the study's findings and describe the methods used to collect and analyze data.



### **CHAPTER 3: LEARNING FROM BLACK STUDENT-DEBATERS AND SUPPORTERS: RESEARCH APPROACH AND METHODS**

This purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of Black student-debaters and debate supporters in ACTION Debate (AD), an afterschool debate program dedicated to offering and providing debate opportunities and instruction to high school students in a major Midwestern city. AD believes that regular participation in policy debate can improve study habits and academic success, increase self-confidence, graduation rates, college scholarship opportunities, and prepare students to succeed in college and in life (National Association for Urban Debate Leagues, 2016). As an individual who has learned in the AD community as a former debater, coach, and supporter for the past 20 years, I argue that the AD space is one that enacts what Paris (2012) defines as culturally sustaining. Additionally, this study examined the ways in which Black student-debaters sought to use debate, literacies, and literatures to address and counter the sometimes negative and stereotypical stories and narratives highlighted and written about them that often depicted them as struggling students, failing to highlight their successes and cultural ways of being as what Simone (1968) calls “Young, Gifted and Black.” Lastly, this study builds on previous debate studies that were conducted to examine the significance of Urban Debate Leagues in the lives of urban youth (Cridland-Hughes, 2011; Fine, 2001; Reid-Brinkley, 2008). These studies were useful when inquiring about debate in the lives of the participants and the role they deemed debate to have played in their abilities to forward Blackness, literacy and literature choices, and how AD served as a culturally sustaining space that promotes the high school to college pipeline.

Utilizing an ethnographic case study methodology, this study explored the following questions:

- 1) *How and in what ways is Action Debate (AD) a culturally sustaining space?*
- 2) *How do students perceive and understand their participation in Action Debate as relating to debate, school, their communities, and college?*
- 3) *Are there specific literacy and culturally sustaining practices that are employed by students, coaches, and debate supporters in the Action Debate program to prepare Black students to debate in racially sustaining or racially hostile environments?*

## **Ethnographic Case Study**

When selecting the research methods for any study within and across disciplines, it is essential that researchers choose methods carefully and implement these methods in the study in order to appropriately explore the guiding questions (Mallette & Duke, 2004; National Research Council (U.S.); Shavelson, & Towne, 2002). In an effort to explore my research questions, I designed a single, qualitative case study. Employing a case study design was appropriate for this particular study since a key element of case study research involves studying a bounded system (Stake, 2000). In my particular study, I examined the culturally sustaining and literacy practices of Black student-debaters and supporters within AD, an urban debate community, in which coaches and students participate in local, regional, and national debate competitions and tournaments. By examining students and coaches, I gleaned from the pedagogical moves Black students and supporters utilized in an effort to prepare Black student-debaters for both debate and non-debate spaces, such as college. I relied on data collected from interviews, field notes, observations, artifacts, and audio and video recordings.

Conducting an ethnographic case study of my participants within the AD program allowed me to foreground the importance of culturally situated and sustaining experiences and literacies as practiced by the participants. Overall, my in-depth case study provided insights and knowledge about the Black student-debaters, supporters, the AD program, and the communities that the participants occupied.

Findings illustrate how the teaching, learning, being, and doing can contribute to both in school and out-of-school educational spaces that educators should work to sustain for Black student-debaters. Additionally, the findings from this study strengthen the existing body of urban debate studies by centering the counternarratives, experiences, stories, and voices of Black student-debaters and supporters. Connected to this, Kinloch and San Pedro (2014) state that recognizing the act of embodying performances around listening is a “literacy-rich practice that can foster what we refer to as Projects of Humanization” (p. 22). They further suggest that projects of humanization are related to theoretical contributions that highlight telling, retelling, and re-representing stories in non-linear ways. This is important to note here because the complicated and rich narratives, stories, and counternarratives of participants in this study will serve as data and evidence. In this way, I will forward the notion that “nonlinearity leads us to present stories in ways that appear messy, complicated, complex, and multivoiced, which is why we rely on storying” (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014, p. 22). As I have mentioned in both chapters 1 and 2, the act of providing counternarratives or stories is a practice that affirms and values the voices of the marginalized and disenfranchised. To that end, chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7 will also provide further context and counternarratives that are specific to the lived debate experiences of the Black student-debaters and supporters, which speak to the importance of why and how they deem(ed) AD as a culturally sustaining space that encouraged their literacy and literature practices, supported them in racially welcoming and unwelcoming spaces, and exposed them to college life.

### **Context of Study**

**Action Debate (AD).** With its mission being to improve public education, academic achievement, and the lives of urban youth by developing sustainable and rigorous debate programs, Action Debate (AD) is a not-for-profit organization, which began in the mid-90s and was

spearheaded by Dr. George Ziegmueller. AD is under the umbrella of the National Association for Urban Debate Leagues (NAUDL) and launches and supports policy debate teams in local area schools. AD believes that regular participation in policy debate can “improve study habits, academic success, increase self-confidence, improve graduation rates, increase scholarship opportunities, and prepare students to succeed in college and in life” (National Association for Urban Debate Leagues, 2012). With recent past urban debaters, like Keith, who spent countless hours after school for practice, debate has helped make him more aware of the world around him. “I’ve been to so many summer debate institutes, outside of my hometown and in other states; I feel so fortunate to have had those experiences. If I hadn’t debated, I wouldn’t have received a full college scholarship to Dartmouth College!” AD also hosts summer debate institutes at Rouge State in the city of Aurora, ranging from one week to several weeks, where urban debaters learn about the upcoming resolution, cases, theories, and critiques that are related to the resolution. Additionally, AD has weekly after-school and weekend student tournaments, professional development training and curriculum materials. Within each school year, there are six full weekend tournaments, regional and national competitions, as well as public debates. Students like Keith are not alone in expressing their appreciation for what they gained as a result of being a part of the league. The Black student-debaters in this study also share the same sentiments, as outlined in the following chapters.

To conduct this study, I explored the answers to my research questions by conversing and learning from eight student-debaters and debate supporters. Supporters include voices and experiences from debate coaches and a debate administrator. In addition to being supported by local area high schools, local colleges and universities, their staff and college debaters support the AD by volunteering and judging debate rounds at competitions and tournaments. AD also hosts

summer debate institutes, ranging from one week to several weeks, where urban debaters learn about the upcoming resolution, cases, theories, and critiques that are related to the resolution.

My connection to AD stems from being a high school student-debater in the '90s and a high school debate coach in the 2000s. My involvement and participation in AD has led to my interest in exploring how such an out-of-school space can thrive for Black debaters and debate supporters, as a result of the debate and literacy practices enacted and the legacy learning that takes place in the AD community.

## **Study Design**

The study took place from March to December of 2015, which was during the time that three of the most significant programs offered by Action Debate occur. They included (1) After-School Practices, (2) Weekend Debate Tournaments & Competitions, and (3) Summer Debate Institutes. I have included below a brief description of each program and the time that I spent in each setting.

**After-School Debate Practices.** Lorikeet, the Black teacher and debate coach in AD, held after-school debate practices at her school, Alter Academy, two days a week, from 3:30 p.m. – 5:30 p.m. By attending and observing these practices for two hours during each visit at Alter Academy (March – June; September – December), I was able to capture how she instructed and coached her Black debaters, in preparation for debate tournaments and competitions, and how she operated from various literacy practices. Additionally, I gained understanding of how and why she chose to participate in the AD community and how she viewed her participation in relation to preparing her students for possible racially hostile spaces and spaces beyond debate.

**Weekend Debate Tournaments & Competitions.** My second area of study materialized at weekend tournaments and competitions. The AD hosted six weekend tournaments (September

– May) during the school year at Rogue State, a local university in the city of Aurora, where most student-debaters, coaches, staff, and debate supporters reside. The tournaments began on Fridays from 3:00 p.m. – 8:00 p.m. and concluded on Saturdays, which began at 8:00 a.m. and ended at 7:00 p.m. Debate coaches were expected to be in attendance to coach and prepare their students for their debate rounds, which were approximately 45 minutes to an hour in length. On these weekends, over 200 debaters in the AD community - representing novice, junior varsity, and varsity levels – engaged in two debate rounds on Fridays and two debate rounds on Saturdays. However, if debaters qualified and competed well, they advanced and competed in additional rounds, known as the quarter-finals, semi-finals, and finals. I attended four of these AD tournaments to gather and generate more of Lorikeet’s interactions and practices with her debaters and to witness how the student-debaters debated and performed. Other tournaments and competitions outside of the AD also followed this format. These tournaments were open to the public and were usually attended by parents, family members, teachers, board members of organizations, and other community members.

**Summer Debate Institutes.** The final level of study took place from July-August of 2015 at the annual Summer Debate Institutes, held at Rogue State and Evergreen College. The Summer Debate Institutes served approximately 300-1500 students, from two weeks to six weeks. The students were racially diverse and lived in both urban and suburban communities. Students participated in debate workshops, labs, and classes led by debate coaches and college and university debaters, in preparation for the upcoming resolution (debate topic) for the year. The institute began at 8:00 a.m. and ended at 5:00 p.m. daily. During the last week of the institutes, a tournament was held for its participants, to which parents, teachers, community members, and other individuals were invited and attended to support the debaters. Below, Table 1 shows the

frequency with which I observed the participants in this study at after-school practices, weekend debate tournaments, and at summer debate institutes.

Type	Setting	Duration	Focus	Number of Students
After-school Debate Practices	Alter Academy	March - December	Prepares students for debate knowledge, skills, and preparation for performance and competitions	~17
Weekend Debate Tournaments	Rouge State	March - December	Engages student-debaters and supporters in weekend competitions for debate understanding success	~250
Summer Debate Institutes	Rouge State & Evergreen College	July - August	Increases student-debaters' schema of debate topics and resolution	~2000

Table 1: Debate Study Observation Chart

**Gaining Access.** Although I worked and previously participated with the AD program and community as a former high school student-debater and coach, I still deemed it necessary to continue building and nurturing relationships with the program's students, coaches, and staff. After I decided to pursue doctoral studies, I stopped coaching, but maintained a supportive presence within the program by attending debate tournaments, speaking at events when called upon, and judging at various debate events. After conducting my pilot study about debate, I shared some of my initial findings with the executive director and other staff and students at seminars. From this, I learned that in-person interactions and conversations can assist researchers with creating, establishing, and maintaining mutual respect with research participants and provide the opportunity to discuss and review details of the study (Siedman, 2006). With each tournament I attended and supported, after sharing my preliminary findings, I began the process of meeting with

the executive director and board members of AD to discuss my research interests and foci from my 2013 study.

Additionally, this same dialogue presented me with the opportunity to share thoughts and ideas I had for getting more students and coaches involved with debate. In a similar fashion, I mentioned my excitement regarding the shift I was noticing with students taking more debate risks within the AD program and community. Some of these risks included using music, poetry, and personal narratives to advance their thinking and researching. Upon hearing this, I gained access and approval from the staff of the program at Alter Academy, Rouge State, and Evergreen College. Considering, new student-debaters join their school's teams on a rolling basis, I did not know all of the high school students and coaches in AD. Due to this, I always arrived early and stayed late at weekend tournaments in an effort to establish relationships and connections with the individuals with whom I had not yet become acquainted. During this time, I also gained approval and access for other phases of my research that took place at other sites.

While gaining access, I remained sensitive and as transparent as possible to the students in this study, specifically. I recognize and understand that gaining students' trust is sometimes not the same as receiving permission to work with coaches, teachers, and adults. Given this, throughout the study, I always encouraged the Black student-debaters to ask me questions about the study and what I was seeking to investigate and learn from them. Each student-participant had a different personality. For example, although Hawk and Macaw were sometimes quiet, their reticent and taciturn nature did not suggest that they did not want to participate in the study or reveal their thinking to me. Instead, after asking me questions, learning more about me and my demographic and educational background, Hawk, Macaw, and the remaining student-participants saw me as an ally and often told me, "Ms. Raven, we like when you come and chill with us." I



provide this context as a way of humanizing their voices and discussing with them whatever reservations they had in the beginning.

Multiple times throughout observing and working with them, they would ask my opinion about certain debate drills, texts, pictures, and other artifacts they considered important for their speeches. Likewise, at times, we would individually and collectively spend time discussing our career goals, family relationships, societal pressures, and other relevant issues that sometimes excited or plagued them. Noticing all of this, debate supporters – Lorikeet, Kingfisher, and Goldfinch – saw me as someone who had an “authentic interest in the debaters and their experiences.”

Collectively, the debate supporters encouraged my position as a debate researcher who was welcome to work with the students (Winn & Ubiles, 2011). For Lorikeet and Kingfisher, their confidence and trust in me resulted in our working relationship as debate colleagues. Having worked with Kingfisher in the past when we coached our debaters together, he saw my interest develop over time. In addition, when Lorikeet first began coaching, I was completing my last year as a coach, in preparation for starting my graduate studies. Similarly, for Goldfinch, the AD administrator – she noticed my commitment early on when she first moved to Aurora from being the Executive Director of another UDL. In turn, she always welcomed me and solicited me several times to travel with her to speak at various high schools to recruit student-debaters, teachers, and coaches to become a part of the AD community. In this vein, she saw value in my interests and work and engaged me in conversations about attending graduate school to obtain a Ph.D. For all of these reasons, I sought to be authentic, open, and honest as possible with all participants.

**Participants.** I engaged in ethnographic fieldwork centered on “dialogic consciousness-raising and relationships of dignity and care for both researchers and participants” (Paris, 2011).

My humanizing fieldwork focused on both Black student-debaters and coaches in the AD community. I focused on the culturally sustaining and literacy instruction of Lorikeet as she prepared her students for debate tournaments and competitions. Considering some of the debate spaces that Lorikeet and her debaters have traveled to were racially hostile and unwelcoming of them, I also seek to explore Lorikeet's pedagogical strategies and moves when instructing her students in such out-of-school spaces. Given the fact that Lorikeet and her students are members of a marginalized group, as considered by systems of discrimination and inequality, according to race, ethnicity, language, gender, and other categories of difference, her stories and insights contributed to me engaging in humanizing research and practices (Paris & Winn, 2014). Likewise, according to Freeman (1997), research participants help to inform researchers and policymakers about their experiences; however, participants' voices are infrequently valued in the process of developing solutions that meet their needs. Due to this, I was very interested in not only understanding Lorikeet's experiences as a participant, teacher, and debate coach, but I also desired to comprehend her and her students' experiences as members in the AD community and the debate community at large, in an effort to learn and offer their collective stories and experiences to educators, policymakers, students, parents, community members, and others for the betterment of education, schooling, and out-of-school spaces.

*Crane* was a very confident and serious debater at Alter Academy. She was a junior and an A student who enjoyed school. In a conversation with me, she revealed that she did not initially plan to join her school's debate team, but one of the staff members at her school told her she should meet the debate coach, Lorikeet. She also reported that she thought she improved her debate skills over time, since joining the team. One other important way in which debate operated in her life, she stated, was at home when she communicated with her family. I selected Crane to be a

participant because I noticed her engagements and interactions with Black literature and poetry when I saw her at debate tournaments. She has even given me books by Zora Neal Hurston and Ntozake Shange.

**Hawk** was a former Jefferson High School debate student in the AD community. Hawk was very mild-mannered and a kind soul. He was known among his peers for keeping the peace. He had strong interests in comic books, all things WiFi, and other technology-related things. In a similar fashion, he also loved to write short stories and poetry. He debated for two and a half years in high school before receiving a scholarship to debate at a Black college. I selected him to be a participant in this study because he had a deep appreciation for AD and, during his summer and winter breaks from college, he traveled back home to Aurora to assist and coach high school students in AD.

**Macaw** was Crane's junior debate partner and together, they were a force to be reckoned with. He was very honest and spoke at an extremely fast pace and could be seen walking the halls at an even faster pace at Alter Academy. Everything about him seemed to be quick, including his wit and response to call out foolishness. This was something that his coach, Lorikeet, also appreciated about him. Macaw's father was a strong presence in his life and attended a lot of the debate tournaments. While Macaw expressed to me that he loved debate, he was critical of AD and was not always happy with how some things operated in AD. For example, he advocated for AD to create a division for interested debaters who did not have any debate experience. I selected Macaw to be a focal participant because although he liked debate, some of his perspectives about debate and AD differed from his peers.

**Robin**, a very mature senior at Jefferson High, was a breath of fresh air. Given her past challenges with school, behavior, and truancy, she was not one who liked to waste time. To evidence this, she would call or text me anytime we were supposed to meet-up to make sure that I was going to be

where I said I would be. Although she had initial struggles at her former schools, as a D and F student, she thrived as a student at Jefferson High, resulting in becoming an A and B student. Linked to this, she also revealed to me that she liked coming to school, despite the fact that she sometimes had to catch two and three buses to get there. She decided to join her school's debate team because she liked to argue. During many of our conversations, she told me she thoroughly enjoyed using her newfound debate skills against her parents and siblings. To this end, she also told me that because of her excitement with debate, her brother, a middle-schooler, was also interested in joining a debate team when he got to high school. I selected Robin to be a focal participant because she was not a traditional high school student and held attitudes about education and school that were critical. In particular, she suggested, "The education system is full of shit sometimes and is failing students, left and right. There are not enough people who care to make a difference. That's why I'm going to continue to debate to put these issues out there."

***Toucan*** was quiet, curious, and an analytical person. I remembered him as a high school debater at Woodward High School, where he debated all four years. He was a leader on his high school's team and served as the captain for two years. His mother could be seen sitting and smiling in his debate rounds, as he flexed his debate skills. Toucan's coach, a college graduate of Evergreen College, sent him to debate camp at Rouge State during his summer breaks. I selected Toucan to be a participant because he is now a college debater at Evergreen State, but is still very much connected to the AD community, like Hawk. They both coach and support high school students in AD. Another area of interest that Toucan contributes to is his awareness of the lack of Black college debaters at predominately White institutions.

***Lorikeet***, in my mind, is a living legend in the AD community. She has been committed to her students and the program for eight years now and shows no signs of stopping, despite some of the

challenges she encounters. She is a Social Studies teacher at Alter Academy and is responsible for the local and national attention Alter Academy has received as a result of her coaching and the successes of her debaters. Lorikeet was important for this study because of her years of engagement with debate and her prominence with equipping all types of students with varying personalities to compete at all levels in debate. Another factor that stood out about Lorikeet is that she is one of the few Black coaches in AD who encourages her debaters to participate in debate tournaments outside of the AD community. To offer context about this, she stated, “I want my students to have all kinds of experiences. In order for them to grow as debaters, they have to step outside of their comfort zones and that sometimes means, leaving the city of Aurora.”

***Kingfisher*** was one of the first debate coaches in the AD community when it was reinstated by the National Association for Urban Debate Leagues (NAUDL) in 2008. From 2008 until now, Kingfisher was one of the only Black man coaches in AD. Kingfisher’s style of coaching and encouragement was well-received by his students. He was very serious in nature and could often be heard lecturing and preaching to his student-debaters and other student-debaters at practices and at tournaments about the importance of taking debate seriously because of the opportunities it provides. Because he believed in the goals and missions of AD and saw how his student-debaters were improving as debaters, he could be found offering rides to tournaments and other debate events – not only to his students, but other AD student-debaters. I selected Kingfisher as a participant because of his knowledge about the city of Aurora and how he thought officials in the city should do more to support students in Aurora. Similarly, his honesty about not having any prior debate or coaching experiences offered an additional perspective from the other participants, considering his initial debate coaching experiences occurred at a non-traditional high school.

*Goldfinch* was hired by the NAUDL to come to Aurora to serve as the Executive Director (ED). She had previously served as the ED in other urban cities and had a great track record for revitalizing debate for young people. Upon Goldfinch's role as the ED in Aurora, the number of high school debate-student participation tripled and hundreds of students could be seen on the campus of Rogue State on the weekends of tournaments. She was also responsible for hosting events and raising money to fund efforts to support AD, which included demonstration debates, where members of the public could come to learn more about debate. After two years as the ED, she expanded the opportunities for the summer debate institute at Rogue State to include middle school students' participation, coaches' workshops, and judges training. At the end of each season in AD, a tournament was held that announced the winning team who would qualify for the NAUDL national competition. Two students, their coach, and Goldfinch would travel to the competition to represent Aurora and the AD community. While Goldfinch was respected by many students and coaches, she also experienced her share of struggles as the ED. I selected her to be a participant in this study because of her varied experiences in urban cities with debate programs. Additionally, I desired to learn more about her commitment to fund-raising and sustaining debate programs in trying times. The table below also outlines the participants in this study and their longevity and role within AD.

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Years in AD</b>	<b>Grade</b>
<b>Crane</b>	2	11 <sup>th</sup>
<b>Macaw</b>	2	11 <sup>th</sup>
<b>Hawk</b>	4	College sophomore
<b>Robin</b>	2	12 <sup>th</sup>
<b>Toucan</b>	4	College sophomore
<b>Lorikeet</b>	6	9 <sup>th</sup> -12 <sup>th</sup> Grade Debate Coach
<b>Kingfisher</b>	8	Former 9 <sup>th</sup> -12 <sup>th</sup> Grade Debate Coach
<b>Goldfinch</b>	8	Executive Director

Table 2: Action Debate Participant Chart

### **Data Collection**

When engaging in qualitative case-study research it is important to gather data from multiple sources in an effort to build an accurate and rich case for what is being explored (Yin, 2003). In order to exhibit this, I collected data that effectively allowed me to explore my research questions. I relied on several data collection methods. The data collection methods included interviewing my participants, observing after-school debate practices and weekend tournaments

and competitions, and collecting artifacts from the participant, such as writing samples and other curricula choices.

**Participant Observations.** An important source of data are observations, which range from engaged observation to complete participation (Dewalt & Dewalt, 2002). Participant observations allowed me to gather valuable information pertaining to the daily and weekly engagements with the teaching and coaching of the participants and how they enact literacy and culturally sustaining ideas to affirm their own voices. Observing these occurrences enabled me to witness how they comprehend their pedagogical choices in connection to debate. Secondly, it also allowed me to witness how the student-debaters and supporters responded to the coaching, teaching, and learning of their debate performances in both racially welcoming and hostile spaces.

**Fieldnotes.** According to Emerson, Fretz & Shaw (1995), through taking fieldnotes researchers can gain a better understanding of the lives and experiences of the people who they are observing or studying. Starting out as “jots” (and later expanding to fieldnotes) allowed me to remain a participant-observer and to participate as a community member. Since one of the primary interests of the study was to better understand the experiences of Black student-debaters, coaches, and supporters in the AD community, fieldnotes were necessary for capturing the details of their experiences during my observations. As a matter of procedure, I took detailed notes on what I deemed important to comprehending the practice of debate in the lives of the participants. I strategically speculated about how their debate activities constituted literacy as social, cultural, and political identity work. In an effort to ensure the accuracy of my notes from my observations, I organized my notes and wrote additional reflections immediately after I left the research sites.

**Interviews.** In a semi-structured format, I conducted approximately 10 interviews with the participants, in correspondence with their engagements with debate, following after-school



debate practices, weekend tournaments and competitions, and summer debate institutes. Since interviewing can assist researchers “in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (Seidman, 2006, p. 9), I engaged in interviews with participants. The interviews helped me gain a sense of their experiences and better understand the various components of their teaching and learning. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted approximately 45 minutes to an hour. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Additional fieldnotes were also written during interviews. Although I originally developed preliminary questions, I anticipated that other important points of discussion and topics might arise. As a result, I remained flexible in adding additional questions, as they were relevant to the study. The process of member-checking (Stake, 1995) is considered an important technique for validating data that is collected and gathered through interviewing and observing. This method was employed during the data collection process with participants, since it aided in the triangulation process and further ensures accuracy and trustworthiness.

**Artifact & Document Collection.** Bogdan & Biklen (2003) discuss the need for categorizing documents to describe an audience and context for the creation of each document and act as an initial descriptor. Using artifact and document collection as a research method offered and extended my understandings of how participants made meaning from their experiences with debate. Artifacts included poems, song lyrics, written speeches, photos, and college evidence and materials. In order to aid with this process, I asked staff at Rouge State, Evergreen College, and Alter Academy to assist when needed. Information and gleanings procured from these artifacts were arranged and entered into a database. These collections also provided an additional source of data to include during triangulation of all data sources. I also collected data from the student-debaters as a group. In talking with the student-debaters as a group, I addressed specific questions

and comments about themes and ideas that emerged from our conversations and from their (counter)stories. For example, if the student-debaters commented on “being successful debaters,” I probed them to understand what it meant to them to be successful debaters. I asked what do successful debaters read and write. Additionally, such probing also allowed me to ask them what opportunities, challenges and motivations were in place for Black successful student-debaters. From these questions, I attained more knowledge regarding how being Black student-debaters influenced their ideas of debate and success. Table 3 illustrates the data collection phase that took place before moving forward with data analysis.

<b>Length of Phase</b>	<b>Phase</b>	<b>Data Collected</b>
March – June	After-school debate practices & 3 weekend debate tournaments	Observations Interviews Artifacts
July – August 2015	2-week Summer Debate Institute	Observations Interviews Artifacts
September – October 2015	After-school debate practices & 1 weekend debate tournament	Observations Interviews Artifacts

Table 3: Data Collection Procedures

### **Data Analysis & Interpretation**

I organized data by themes (i.e., ideas that emerged from particular debate-related literacies and practices, definitions of debate related to cultural awareness and practices, and the functions of debate-related literacies and by site (e.g., school, classroom, lounge, hallway, community center, home, work) to capture “theoretically rich” debate practices and performances, where differences occurred between academic literacy and non-academic literacy practices (Dyson &

Genishi, 2005, p. 88). Once I established my initial codes, I engaged in more focused coding, which concerned “breaking down fieldnotes even more finely into subcodes” to uncover nuances, “new themes and topics and new relationships” that existed within the discussion and conversation with the participants that might reveal definitive things about their engagements with literacy (Emerson et al., 1995, p. 161).

**Coding.** I coded data resulting from document collection, observation, and the transcription of interviews and analyzed for themes throughout the study. Merriam (1998) describes coding as occurring “at two levels – identifying information about the data and interpretive constructs related to analysis” (p. 164). After conducting each interview, I transcribed the audiotaped (and videotaped) recordings. Once they were transcribed, I reviewed each transcription and later began the process of coding. The process of coding interviews progressed and advanced as themes emerged during the analysis phase. I anticipated that the codes would be in accordance with the teaching and coaching, debate-related activities, after-school and tournament sessions, and overall experiences. Moreover, the coding process was beneficial and applicable throughout my analysis of interviews and observations as I attempted to make connections to the analytical frameworks of *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy*, *New Literacy Studies*, and *Third Space*. I remained open to any new themes that surfaced. Table 4 provides a description of the analytical frameworks I used to answer each research question. This is followed by my procedures for data analysis.

Research Question	Data Collection	Data Analysis
1	Transcripts Field Notes Artifacts Interviews Observations Student Work	Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy
2	Transcripts Field Notes Artifacts Interviews Observations Student Work	Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy New Literacy Studies Third Space
3	Transcripts Field Notes Artifacts Interviews Observations Student Work	Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy New Literacy Studies Third Space

Table 4: Description of Analytical Frameworks

Based on the emergent themes, I generated as many ideas as possible about the nature of debate-related literacies in their lives as Black student-debaters, coaches, and supporters. During data analysis, I sought to answer my guiding research questions:

- 1) *How and in what ways is Action Debate (AD) a culturally sustaining space?*
- 2) *How do students perceive and understand their participation in Action Debate as relating to debate, school, their communities, and college?*
- 3) *Are there specific literacy and culturally sustaining practices that are employed by students, coaches, and debate supporters in the Action Debate program to prepare Black students to debate in racially welcoming or racially hostile environments?*

I organized data based on certain characteristics and perceptions. As an example, if data emerged around the sentiment of “enacting Blackness through debate,” I arranged the data that way. Subcategories would include *black thought in white spaces*, *black texts to combat privilege and power*, etc. When a participant debated or asked questions of their peers, I investigated what it meant to rely on peer teaching and learning, identified what the individual participant and the group thought of the explanations, and explored if these ideas served as motivations for debating in racially welcoming and racially hostile spaces.

Finally, after arranging data by subcodes, I generated ideas regarding the relationships among debate, literacy, legacy learning, media portrayals, college-going, and Black youth. From these hypotheses, I rearranged data into two categories – confirming and disconfirming (Erickson, 1985). Hypotheses based on satisfactory data were kept and hypotheses that were not supported were denied or used to categorize other sets of assertions. After developing a set of claims that could be supported through data and grounded in evidence and testimonies, I used these claims, as illustrated in Table 5, to answer my research questions. The goal of data interpretation for this study was to develop scholarship that is related to and advances the understandings of debate and literacy in the lives of Black student-debaters, coaches, and other debate supporters within a sustaining debate community.

<b>Categories</b>	Confirming Debate Identities	Disconfirming Debate Identities
<b>Codes</b>	Enacting Blackness through Debate Counterstories for Media Correction	Media Mistrust
<b>Subcodes</b>	Successful Students Positive Postings	Struggling Students

Table 5: Coding Categories

## **Researcher Positionality**

It is important when conducting research that researchers remain conscious, thoughtful, and considerate of their positioning when engaging with research participants. My role as a former student-debater and coach within the AD program and community enriched me with loving and sustaining relationships that allowed me to return to the space as a researcher to better understand the experiences of the Black student-debaters, coaches, and other supporters. While at tournaments at Rouge State or Evergreen College or in Lorikeet's classroom at Alter Academy, and other places, I could be found assisting with registration, coffee and food preparation, debate drills, flowing debates, and other related tasks. In other words, I hardly ever sat still or idle and solely observed what was taking place in each setting. In this way, I was thoroughly connected to the work and ideas I was seeking to understand. During weekend tournaments, afterschool practices, and at summer debate institutes, I often spoke about my own experiences with novice, junior varsity, and varsity debaters. Similarly, I offered support to coaches and students by sharing debate sites and resources, putting them into contact with former students and coaches, and providing books and donations for books and debate materials desired to be purchased.

Working with the AD program and community contributed to the teaching and learning of Black student-debaters, coaches, and other debate supporters. This has been something I have been committed to for the past 20 years. Having grown up in Aurora, where many of the participants in this study grew up and still reside; I was able to make historical, cultural, and other connections with them. When I met parents within the AD community, my conversations with them centered on their students' growth and development with debate and how their parental involvement was crucial for continued awareness and success. I shared that my parents, family members, and community supporters encouraged and nurtured my participation in debate and that because of

their support, I was given opportunities that led to me being able to travel to places, outside of Aurora. They drove me to countless debate practices and tournaments, raised money and funded some of my travels, and attended events to physically support me. Ultimately, such support also led to being successful in school and in the community (e.g. achieving better grades, taking leadership roles in various student groups and organizations, attending college, creating programs and facilitating events for student achievement and identity, and coordinating programs and teaching classes at church). Moreover, my own lived experiences as a Black student-debater, coach, and lifelong supporter are connected to my research. On the contrary, there were struggles and issues that surfaced when I interacted with participants in the study. Ongoing family obligations, deaths of loved ones, and some overall Black suffering – experienced by me and the participants – led to moments of fatigue and despair. However, after pushing through and understanding the need for this work, I desire to remain connected to communities, like AD, in an effort to work to provide opportunities to serve the Black community; specifically, Black student-debaters, coaches, and supporters committed to sustaining debate education and excellence.

### **Limitations of Study**

In an effort to increase my knowledge and understanding of the significance of AD in the lives of Black student-debaters and debate supporters, I utilized a case-study design. Using the case-study design was the most appropriate for this study, given the data I sought to obtain was qualitative data about the AD program, debaters, and debate supporters. One of the limitations is that the findings will not be generalizable for all debate programs for Black high school debaters. It is also important to note that the data collected was subjective in nature, considering it was specific to individual study participants and may not be generalizable to other student-debaters,

coaches, and debate supporters in other UDLs or debate programs. While similarities may exist across programs, programs can also have varying experiences due to students, staff, location, and program goals and resources.

An additional limitation of the study is the time that was spent during data collection. While I sought to be intentional regarding optimal times to collect data that were in direct relation to when AD was hosting tournaments and other events, the time spent gathering data poses as a limitation.

A third limitation or point of concern could be that the data I collected addresses the ways that the participants engaged with AD and what their experiences were related to debate and their struggles and successes. These results are not able to be reported quantitatively. Researchers have discussed how funding opportunities for programs like AD are sometimes difficult to be considered for due to the inability to address how such programs have an impact quantitatively. While knowing that quantitative data is helpful, it is important to examine the benefits of both qualitative and quantitative data. Using qualitative data provides ways and opportunities for students' accounts and realities to be shared through learning from their lived debate experiences. By not operating from a qualitative lens, ADers in this study would only be numbers and not individuals who need to be humanized through their work and words.



## **CHAPTER 4: “I JUST WANNA BE REPRESENTED RIGHT”: BLACK STUDENT-DEBATERS USE OF (COUNTER)STORIES TO REFLECT, RESPOND TO, AND RESIST NEGATIVE PERCEPTIONS AND PORTRAYALS**

*I remember the local news came to our school to interview some of my teammates and me, after they heard about how well we did at a weekend tournament. I was so excited to be interviewed because I knew my family would see me on the news and be proud. I got a haircut and everything because I had never been on TV before so I wanted to look good.*

*When the interviewer, who was a White woman started asking me all these questions that had nothing to do with debate, I was so confused. She asked me how many fights I'd been in before joining the debate team and about what kinds of other struggles I had. She caught me off guard so I know my face looked crazy. I told her that I wanted to talk about debate stuff. So we did. She asked me why I joined the team and if I planned to return next year.*

*Then, she went back to them other questions, like, “Do you live with both of your parents?” “How do you normally get to school?” and “Do you have to catch the bus?” By then, I saw what she was trying to do. She was trying to tell the story the way that would benefit her and the news and not my teammates and me. When I asked her about it, she started stumbling over her words. I told her, ‘I just wanna be represented right’ and that she should ask me more questions about debate. She figured that shit out. She turned red. But she figured that shit out.*

(Written artifact, 8/2016, Hawk)

The examination of representations and reporting of UDLs and its debaters necessitates an analysis of negative and stereotypical portrayals. Whether such depictions are local, national or international – exploring how television stations, print news, and prime-time news showcase and tell the stories of UDLs and its participants has and continues to be filled with deficit-framed thinking and dissemination. This chapter will highlight Hawk and Crane as cases for how they resisted such inadequacies and misrepresentations in AD. From them, we learn more about how negative depictions are damaging to the rich histories and experiences of Black debaters and the sustaining efforts that UDLs contribute to support its participants that are infused with drawing from multiple literacies and ways of being. These analyses will be done through the reflections, responses, and resistances that emerged from my observations and interviews with the participants in AD. Additionally, I will illustrate their counterstories through artifacts I collected from them. It

is worth noting that throughout this chapter and in the subsequent ones, my 20 year voice and experiences with debate will be unmistakably evident, not only to provide further context in some areas, but to also serve as an archetype to advance my claims that as a former Black student-debater and coach within the UDL. In this way, I serve as an example of what debate can offer and sustain for Black debate participants and supporters - even when unsurmountable odds are stacked against them. Stacked as high as the missing Black literature and books at your local *Barnes & Noble* store.

Existing to strengthen the voice of Black America, ColorofChange noted in their report, *Not to be Trusted: Dangerous Levels of Inaccuracy in TV Crime Reporting in NYC* (2015), that an unjust pattern is apparent among New York network affiliates – WCBS, WNYW/FOX 5, and WABC. The patterns include how the stations disproportionately focus their reporting to cover Black suspects. Additionally, these media outlets are known to fabricate and falsify the proportion of Blacks connected to or involved in crime. This continued outlandish coverage places Black communities at unnecessary risks, given the already current negative stereotypes associated with Blacks. Recognizing this, one of ColorofChange’s goals is “to empower our members – Black Americans and our allies – to make government more responsive to the concerns of Black Americans and to bring about positive political and social change for everyone.”

In a world that is invariably growing and changing, one constant seems to remain and that is – the ways in which Black youth are depicted (Perception Institute, 2014). As a reliable and trusted (supposedly) resource, people all across America look to the news to inform them of daily happenings and events. Viewing what is shown in mainstream media influences and shapes not only how we understand critical issues but how we perceive and receive people. Unfortunately, for Black Americans, namely Black youth, the normative perception is one wrought with sagging

pants, guns, tattoos, and unwed mothers arguing with baby daddies – among many other stereotypical features, as if Whites do not embody or experience the same physical entanglements. According to Rashad Robinson (2015), Executive Director of ColorofChange.org, “repeated exposure to unbalanced and distorted portrayals of Black people in media leads to the development of implicit biases against them.” When these images and perceptions are forwarded, whether in conversation, in the media, in classrooms or schools, and in other places, an inherent antiblackness, the binding of Blackness and death together that still exists to enslave Blacks and permeates the racist souls of those seeking to criminalize and kill Black bodies. Dumas (2016) argues that antiblackness presents challenges in many spaces, including schools and public discourse. Specifically, Dumas connects antiblackness with black suffering to suggest that if individuals who are concerned with the dismantling of white supremacist thinking and positioning that is apparent within educational institutions – then a “program of complete disorder is necessary within education research” (p. 15). I note the importance of Dumas’s position here, considering the ways in which Black student-debaters are sometimes written about in newsprint or scholarship, shown in media, and presented are tied to antiblackness and Black suffering. Therefore, this study of their countering of Black struggle and suffering through debating in a culturally sustaining space is again an example what Kinloch and San Pedro (2014) offered through their examples of “Projects of Humanization.” When curriculum, spaces, and programs that are expected to positively serve Black and Brown bodies fail to do so, we find that Paris’ (2016) thoughts on “curricularization of racism” remains intact. Paris states “the curricularization of racism names the systemic racialized discrimination a central part of the explicit and implicit curriculum and teaching of pre-K through university education in the United States” (p. 6). Such curricularization can be witnessed when listening to the narratives and stories of Black student-debaters and supporters.

Consequently, when this takes place, a culture of discrimination and prejudice is associated with Blacks. These anti-Black power relations cast negative shadows on and for Blacks and interfere with housing, employment, and education opportunities. The partial articulation and terminology coupled with the overused grotesque images intensifies the never-ending stereotypes that Blacks work hard to fight against, including student-debaters. Ultimately, mainstream media has a choice in what it reports; yet, it chooses to single Black people out, stripping us of freedoms, such as language choices and other ways we express ourselves. An example of this is illustrated in the photos below.

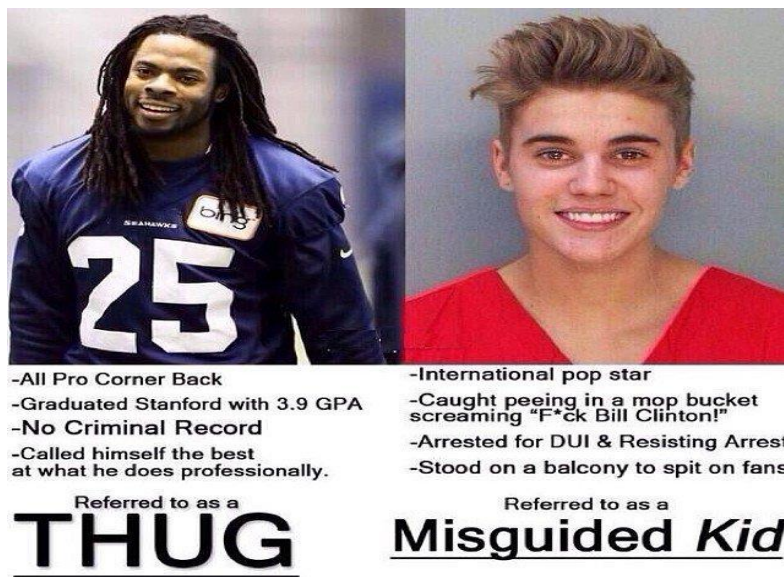


Figure 3: Image of NFL Player, Richard Sherman, and Pop Singer, Justin Bieber

**WHITE SUSPECT**

## Bank robbery suspect was outstanding Blue Hills student

Kerri Ann Heffernan was charged in 2012 in a string of bank robberies and stores. This headline at *Wicked Local* wonders how she'd come so far from her days as a smart high school student.

**BLACK VICTIM**

## Police: Warren shooting victim was gang member

Of 22-year-old black man Denn Sanders' killing in Ohio earlier this year, *WKBN's* headline said "gang member," and that apparently was enough.

Figure 4: Image of Reporting of a White Suspect vs. a Black Victim

Both figures 3 and 4 speak to what Johnson (2015) highlights in *Everyday Feminism*. Honing in on patterns of media injustice(s), she suggests that images, such as these, reinforce and reinscribe white supremacy. For example, although National Football League (NFL) player Richard Sherman is clearly a story of success, considering his education, self-concept, and accomplishments within the NFL, because he is a Black man, despite his accomplishments, media outlets still see him and call him a “thug.” On the contrary, singers like Justin Bieber are seen as “misguided kids” although he has an actual criminal past and history. While describing each pattern, Johnson explains how each of them serves to continue to cast Black people and people of color in disavowing and unfavorable ways. Baker-Bell, Jones Stanbrough and Everett’s (2016) work also argues against these patterns. Below, I operate from two of the patterns.

### **Patterns of Media Injustice.**

- *Mainstream Media Focuses on White People’s Accomplishments – and Black People’s Alleged Crimes*

Mainstream media rarely posits Black people in positive or brilliant ways. Even when Black people are victims of violence, it is rare that their accomplishments are named in the media. Conversely, the media is careful about what they reveal about White people, usually portraying them in humanizing ways. This was evident in the case of Adam Lanza and James Holmes, both young White males who were responsible for mass shootings. Many of the headlines in the media described the killers as “quiet,” “smart,” “nice,” and “typical American Boy[s].”

- *Mainstream Media uses Charming Photos of White Victims – and ‘Incriminating’ Photos of Black People*

Mainstream media is biased when it comes to the kinds of photos they use to portray Black victims in comparison to White victims and criminals. When the victim or criminal is White, the media uses photos that tell a positive story of the victim’s life. In the case of Black victims, however, media outlets seem to go out of their way to locate and use compromising and damaging photos. This inconsistency prompted Twitter user @CJLawrenceEsq to create the hashtag #iftheygunnedmedown “to make a statement about how the media draws a biased narrative when it comes to telling the stories of Black men and women” (Callahan, 2014).

## **Racializing Blacks and People of Color**

Scholars, such as Gilliam and Iyengar (2000), note that within the varying genres of news and media portrayals, there are ongoing issues that racialize Blacks and other individuals of color. Recognizing that local broadcasting is usually how America views the world, they further explicate that considering there is a known competitive edge against various stations, local news favor an action news configuration that foregrounds race. Similarly, they also exclaim that news stories that are situated around crime garner the most prevalence by suggesting, “Of the type of crime, African

Americans comprised the largest group of minorities” (p. 45). Still, in her research concerning stereotypical Black criminality, Martindale (1990) offers insights into how Black depictions, as seen in the *New York Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Atlanta Constitution*, and the *Boston Globe*, impact racial difference and public perception. Furthermore, she notes how the content within media outlets affect the importance viewers associate with making decisions about political affiliations, understandings and beliefs regarding their rubric for making political decisions, national and international problems, and their perceptions regarding the aforementioned.

Gitlin (2003) argues that “Media frames are persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion by which symbol-handlers routinely organize racial discourse, whether verbal or visual” (p. 7). The idea of framing is a cogent tool of investigating all news media outlets. Doing so provides a bridge to identify (in)consistencies in representation across both print and visual images. As an individual concerned with how Blacks are portrayed, I understand that viewers seek to make sense from the verbal and visual cues shown to them. Sometimes, these cues suggest a certain kind of perspective or angle from which the media event should be comprehended.

In news coverage of UDLs, reporters and journalists use racialized code words that are sometimes hidden within the discourse of poverty (Reid-Brinkley, 2008). For example, reporters often comment on or refer to certain characterizations to implicate poverty as an indicator of Blackness. In a 2004 article, written by the *Christian Science Monitor*, the reporter wrote, “Urban high school debate teams are defying the odds.” The referencing of “urban” student-debaters was used to signify both class and race. Usually, urban or inner cities are depicted as places that are dirty, laden with drugs and crime and other negative descriptions. Secondly, the construction of “defying the odds” suggests that poor children are likely to understand the negative expectations

associated with urban students of color. Next, the “odds” signal a statistical representation of the ills usually connected to poverty in urban spaces. When this occurs, news and other media outlets suggest that these urban children will likely fail in educational systems, have low paying jobs or be participants in the welfare system. Likewise, this population of youths are likely to be a part of the drug and criminal culture.

Another article that highlighted a UDL stated that it “instructs kids in poor areas in the traditionally upscale art of debate” (Associated Press, 2005). Like the *Christian Science Monitor* article, this one also defines the student-debaters in terms of their class. As the image of poverty and other race and class markers are represented by Blacks and people of color, the use of the word “poor” signifies ethnic minority and racial status. If poverty signifies ethnicity or race, then so does the use of the phrase “upscale art,” which functions to signify whiteness. These examples speak to how the depictions and portrayals of Blacks and Black student-debaters have been continuous and ongoing. This chapter will continue to illustrate how participants in this study were “woke,” and “lit” (aware of the construction of antiblackness and other narratives to describe, define, and denounce their brilliance and genius as Black student-debaters) and found ways to push back against these negative framings through their engagements with literacies, literatures, and legacy learning, whether in AD or other spaces that may or may not have been racially welcoming.

### **Resisting Media Mistrust**

A range of scholars have used the term resistance to explain the varying literacy practices and to reveal societal contradictions and the contrasting locations of groups within society (Giroux, 1983; MacLeod, 1996; Smitherman, 1999; Willis, 1977). Stemming from this body of work, resistance is revealed in social struggles, displayed by a rejection of social values and meanings within literacy practices that are commonplace within dominant society. For AD participants,



*Hawk, Toucan, Robin, Crane, Macaw, Lorikeet, and Kingfisher* - their engagement with debate sometimes was met with interfacing with news outlets, social media, and other broadcasting mediums. When their engagements were presented with individuals and organizations seeking to stereotype their stories - they resisted, reflected, and responded to the contrasting and discordant ideas. This was done in moving and powerful ways, while inserting and drawing from the multiple ways they enacted literacies and identified with their own Blackness. When responding to challenges and mainstream bias(es), literacy practices are germane and likely to have a significance on mainstream culture and education (Morrell, 2004). Rejecting and resisting dominant notions served as a way for ADers to push back against how society reports them. Similarly, resistance can be deemed as an opposing action or line of thinking by their careful articulations and uses of certain literacies. At other moments, pause and silence acted as a unified front against disapprovals.

Let me return to Hawk's renderings that opened this chapter, when he stated, "I just wanna be represented right." An August 2015 interview with Hawk begins to explain his thoughts. As a Black debater - who was a part of the AD community as a high school student for almost three years and is now a college debater who attends a Black college - Hawk has had both positive and negative experiences with the media, as it relates to his life and time with debate. While taking a break from teaching over 30 high school debaters, in a sweltering dormitory lounge area, Hawk and I sat on an uncomfortable multi-colored couch near an open window. He explained his views about mainstream media portrayals of Blacks.

*Hawk:*

I'm not a big fan of the news. There have been times that I stopped watching the News because most of the stories were always so negative and they still are, especially about Black people. As a Black man, I always see stories about White people being scared of Black men and Black men being from poverty, being horrible fathers,

getting put out of their homes, not going to school, and even being killed. It's like the news loves to report about our hurt. It makes me so mad. Since I debate in college now, I'm super cautious about doing interviews because I know I'm here [college] and I'm representing more than just me. Since this is a Black college, the media always around here trying to get a story and not just with our debate team. I see them at other buildings too. I just think that whether I come from poverty or not shouldn't mean I can't be successful.

Hawk's commentary spoke directly to how his frustrations with what he sees on the news caused him to not engage in it visually for a period of time. Hearing him voice his concerns and give specific iterations of his frustrations suggests that he has had experiences with multiple ways in which negatively framed reporting of Blacks has affected him. One of his noticings of negative media portrayals is the idea of Blacks stemming from and sometimes remaining in poverty. This particular frame is very evident within the stories that are told about UDL and AD participants. I argue that poverty is a larger frame that encompasses race, gender, and sexuality. The poverty frame operates to build a redemption narrative that advances the work of media outlets. This means that for Black debaters like Hawk and the others, the idea of them stemming from poverty provides a way for the media to sensationalize their struggles to fit a struggle-to-success narrative. This is very plaguing and disconcerting, considering Black debaters can and do lead lives of success that are both connected and separate from struggle and poverty. Hawk gets at this idea when he stated, "I just think that whether I come from poverty or not shouldn't mean I can't be successful."

During my time with ADers, I often heard them utter such statements. This troubled me greatly. Although they thrived in debate, school, the community and other spaces, they still felt that their efforts and excellence were not depicted accurately, at times, when they were written about in newspapers, shown on television, or broadcasted on social media. I argue that the media

desired to see them as what I am calling *struggling students* and not *successful students*. Table 6 illustrates the cases and my definitions of struggling students and successful students.

### Cases of Media Student Situations

<i>Case</i>	<i>Example</i>
<b>Struggling Students</b>	The intentional ways that media outlets frame their reporting of Black students around deficit-filled narratives, which sometimes include negative interpretations of their socio-economic status, educational backgrounds, class, gender, and sexual identities.
<b>Successful Students</b>	The intentional ways that media outlets fail to frontload or include the explanations of Black students' achievements and engagements with school (and school-related accomplishments) and academic excellence. To counter this, Black student-debaters (re)define their own experiences to include their school-related and out-of-school setting feats and victories.

Table 6: Cases of Media Student Situations

In the same interview with Hawk, I noticed that he had a notebook of writings and pictures that he was carrying with him, some of which he was using to teach his lab of high school debaters. When I asked him about the photo that was taped to his notebook, he shared that the picture served as a way to remind him that he is angry for many reasons.

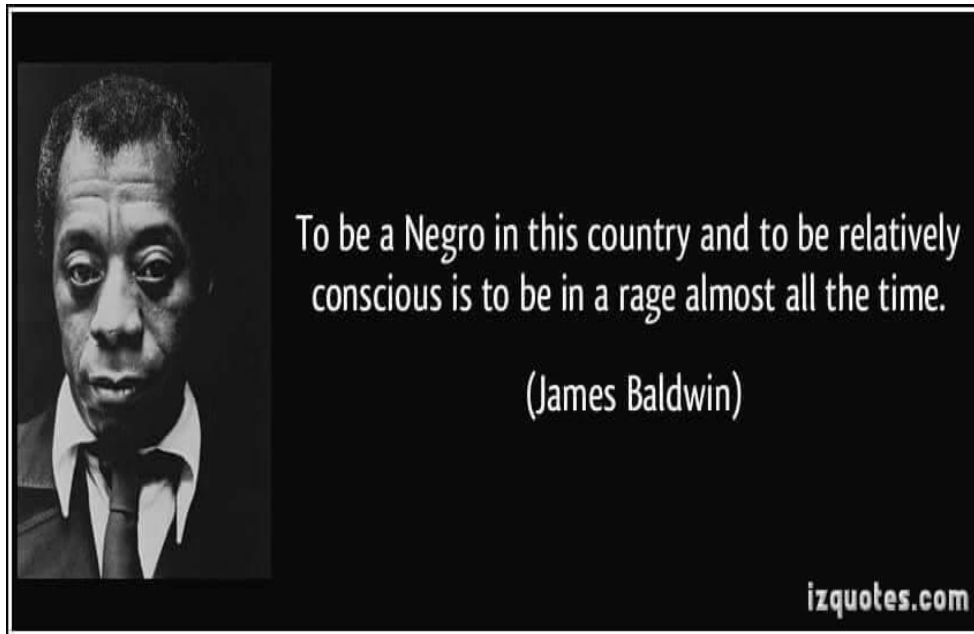


Figure 5: Hawk's Photo

Secondly, his anger was also wrapped up in his mistrust of people and media and he referred to the photo as a way of resisting that he has the right to be angry about what he and other Black students and individuals have to deal with, whether in debate or other spaces. I was reminded of this when he uttered, “I’m not a big fan of the news. There have been times that I stopped watching the news because most of the stories were always so negative and they still are, especially about Black people.” More of his articulations are reported in our exchange below.

**Raven:** What does this photo represent for you?

**Hawk:** Brother Baldwin was a serious thinker. This quote reminds me that I have also be a serious thinker.

**Raven:** What do you mean by that?

**Hawk:** One of the words in the picture is conscious. For me that means I have to be aware of things. My awareness isn’t just for me, but for my people to. I told you earlier that I don’t like the way my teammates and me and other Black

people are sometimes referred to as thugs or not seen as smart because we attend or attended urban schools.

**Raven:** How do you address these issues?

**Hawk:** Sometimes, I get into it with people. White people and Black people.

**Raven:** Is there a difference in how you address Whites versus Blacks? And if so, how?

**Hawk:** Yup. I think I have more compassion when I have conversations with Black people because I want us to do well and grow together. I know I don't have that same compassion for people who are always trying to play me or make us look bad.

Looking across Hawk's written artifact, the photo of James Baldwin, and his interview, he certainly recognized that his mistrust of individuals and the media was and is merited. Considering that, Hawk also revealed that he felt that he had a duty to share his experiences with other ADers. The frustrations Hawk orally embodied during our dialogue also spoke to the issue of Black men being feared. This is not a new phenomenon. In fact, bell hooks (2003) writes that Black males are often feared. When the media focus negatively on Black males and crime, mass media tells a story that characterize them as "lazy, "dumb" and "violent." The rhetorical rapings as witnessed on social media, billboard signs, in textbooks, and in the news reveal that, compared to Whites, a Black defendant's mug shot is likely to appear in a local TV news report and his name is also likely to be flashed across the screen.

Furthermore, this same victim of circumstance nine times out of ten will be shown being physically restrained. Why is this problematic? According to Davis (2011), "The black community has recognized these negative images in the media have been going on for decades. More than four

in five blacks say that representation of blacks in television and movies has a negative impact on society's views of African Americans." Considering this, attention must be paid to the lexical lacerations that seek to prevent Black youth rising above severe adversity and triumphing over challenge. As someone seeking to be conscious and a serious thinker, Hawk noted that he remains aware of such biases and that because he has compassion for his people, he is intentional about how he addresses them. However, he also comprehends that he is intentional about not serving such compassion to individuals who he suggests are advancing the negative portrayals of Blacks. In this same vein, Hawk understands that his social location is not contingent upon him being a student of success.

### **Counterstories for Negative Depictions**

All too often, dominant narratives determine what is said and heard in public discourses (Scott, 1990). However, the controlling of what happens to subordinate groups, like Blacks, and how our identities and realities are projected (Freire, 1970) are met with damaging depictions. Offering an opposing narrative or counter-story serves as a way for AD participants to continue to resist and respond to negative and damaging descriptions about them, seen throughout various genres of media. Stemming from Critical Race Theory (CRT), counter storytelling began in the 1970s. Solorzano & Yosso (2002) define counter-storytelling as "a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told" (p. 26). As such, counter-stories can be utilized to challenge, analyze, or expose particular types of privilege, like race, gender, and sex.

In the context of Black student-debaters, their counterstories can assist with creating, supporting, and sustaining debate through the lens of social justice efforts. I argue that when this takes place, ADers humanize their experiences as marginalized youth. The benefits to this strengthen their sense of self, cultural, social, and political awareness. In response to suggesting

that counter-stories do not always have to directly address a dominant viewpoint, Delgado (1989) recognizes that the sharing of ideas and experiences of someone not belonging to the dominant culture can be sufficient to offer a new narrative.

Similarly, Strauss and Corbin (1990) state how imperative it is to preserve theoretical and cultural sensitivity. Theoretical sensitivity explains the insights and capacities of a researcher to interpret and give meaning to data. Cultural sensitivity explains the capacities of individuals as members of socio-historical communities to accurately read and interpret the meaning of informants. Presented in this chapter so far has been the ways in which negative perceptions and portrayals against Blacks and Black student-debaters remain an ongoing issue. Whether in conversations, newspapers, online, on social media, or on television, each outlet, in some way, has intentionally failed to accurately report and highlight Black individuals. Providing context mainly from Hawk's experiences has served as the premise leading up to the counterstories of other AD participants and how their narratives support my argument that they are students of success within debate.

### **(Auto)biographical Sketches of Blackness**

*Crane:*

I've learned over the years that it's important for me to tell my own story. As sad as it is, I know I can't rely on anyone to do a better job than me. It's like the saying goes, 'if you want something done right, you have to do it yourself.' I know that to be true. I used to get mad when I'd see my friends and people I don't really know tag me in pictures on Facebook. It's so violating and annoying. It's basically the same as the news reporting you wrong and you don't have a say in the matter. Now, I don't get as mad as I used to because I post what I want to post for myself. That way, I can decide how I want to look out here. (Crane's interview, September 2015)

Through her words, a junior in high school, Crane expressed to me how important it is for her to advocate for herself. Referring to the often quoted phrase, ‘if you want something done right, do have to do it yourself,’ she believes that she is the best person to tell her story. What is interesting to me is her construction and analysis of when others attempt to illustrate her in certain ways or tell her story, she feels violated. This was an aspect of our conversation that was very important. At one level, Crane revealed that when she felt violated, it angered her. This anger was compared to her stating how the news reports stories incorrectly. When this happens, the damage is already done and Crane’s thought of “you don’t have a say in the matter,” speaks to multiple injustices.

To counter what other people post or say about her, Crane constructs her own autobiographical sketches by what I am naming *positive posting*. By posting what she desires, she is resisting the dominant narratives often told about Blacks and Black student-debaters while creating a counterstory to represent her. When I asked her more about this in the context of debate, our conversation continued:

**Raven:** How would you say you’ve been represented in the media or online related to debate? Would you say they’ve been “positive postings?”

**Crane:** My coach and teammates are always posting pictures of me and us at practice and at tournaments. Sometimes, I don’t know that I’m tagged until I check my phone and see that I have notifications from Facebook.

**Raven:** Do you post pictures or status(es) as much as they do?

**Crane:** Not as much as them, but I have started to do it more because it’s so cool to see and it gives my family and friends outside of debate a chance to see my successes.

At this point in our conversation, Crane was personalizing her experiences as a young Black woman debater with social media in positive ways. Having the support of her coach and teammates suggest that they can also contribute to Crane’s (auto)biographical sketch(es) of success. Adding



to my understanding of examples of Crane's positive posting(s), are two photos below that I collected from her. When we discussed the images, she smiled widely as she shared that she posted the photos and tagged her teammates in them.



Figure 6: Crane's *Positive Posting*



Figure 7: Crane's *Positive Posting*

In Figure 4, Crane and three of her teammates are standing together in a unified fashion, as a way of offering one another sustained support as ADers. With Black hoodies and raised Black fists, Crane and her teammates are giving us life through their counter-stories as students of success. Also in the photo is her debate partner, Macaw. This photo was taken by their coach, Lorikeet, after winning a debate tournament. Desiring to hear from the three of them to provide me with further context of the photo, we engage in the following dialogue.

**Raven:** Tell me about what's happening here.

**Macaw:** We were super hype and wanted to show that. We had just won a debate tournament and wanted to take a picture together because we all did really well individually and collectively.

**Raven:** Talk about what you're wearing and the way you're posing in the photo.

**Crane:** At the end of the debate season last year, we told our coach we wanted to get some debate hoodies. When she asked us what color

- we wanted them to be, almost everyone said loudly, “Black!”
- Macaw:** I suggested we raise our fists to show that we’re not afraid to show our Blackness.
- Lorikeet:** I took the photo of them. I heard it was circulating on social media and I was happy about that because there are so many times when all we see or hear about on the news is so horrible and depressing.
- Raven:** As their coach, what does all this mean to you?
- Lorikeet:** I love them so much and we go hard for each other. I always tell them to make sure they hold their heads high, if they win or lose. I don’t get mad when they lose. We debrief about what happened in the round and go from there. We learn together. That’s what important to me. Even though I’m the coach, I still learn so much from them.

In this part of the conversation, Crane, Macaw, and Lorikeet displayed a complex understanding of (auto)biographical sketches of struggles and successes. That is, (auto)biographing was an idea that was both positive or negative at times and comprehending both served as way for them to advance their counterstories of debate. The agency in which they were able to do so mediated their desires to proclaim and reclaim their personal identities. While explaining Figure 4, Crane reported that the team desired to wear Black hoodies for the forthcoming debate season. The coupling of clothing with Macaw’s explanation of raising Black fists offers both oral and written counterstorying. The point here is that (auto)biographical sketching was not separated from the “landscapes of voices” that Dyson (2003) discusses in her study of “the Brothers and Sisters.”

Akin to “the Brothers and Sisters,” the ADers in this study (counter)storied and voiced symbolic, social, and ideological options from their (auto)biographical sketches of struggles and success and “landscapes of possibilities” (Dyson, 2003). In this way, the ADers are also infusing literacy as a part of (auto)biographing and countering. The acts of evoking debate itself is literacy-related and is wedded well to counter-storying. Crane’s second photo, as seen in Figure 7, also

tells a certain kind of story. The gold and blue polished trophies continue to tell a story of success for Crane, her teammates, and their coach. Lorikeet also took this photo, after her debaters secured these prizes for their debate wins at another AD tournament. These instances and situations exemplify how AD was a place that centered how they could celebrate their cultural pride as Black student-debaters in a setting that encouraged and celebrated their teaching and learning through debate. Lorikeet demonstrated her use of being a culturally sustaining advocate by engaging her debate-learners in conversations about race and privilege, while offering to support for them to dismantle what they see and deem as antiblackness and negative perceptions and portrayals of them. Considering most of this was done within the context of AD, these counterstories serve as continued evidence to demonstrate how AD presented itself as a culturally sustaining space that embodied both culturally sustaining teaching, learning, and doing through the medium of literacies, literatures, and legacy learning.

### **Coaching through Struggle**

Essential to Lorikeet's sense of self as a coach was her thinking and experiences with being one of the only Black women coaches who seeks to expose her debaters to tournaments not just within the AD community. Finding this troubling at times, she reveals to me that there have been moments where she became weary from asserting her role of coach in these non-AD spaces, considering she is a Black woman. Given this, then, she is adding to the idea of what I have called students of struggle. However, considering she is a Black woman coach who supports and sustains her debaters through her ethic of care – her explanations of struggle differ from how the media accomplishes this.

In a separate October 2015 interview, Lorikeet alluded to how she deems herself to be perceived by her white colleagues in debate when she raises an issue regarding her debaters. For

example, at a non-AD tournament that her debaters participated in, she was called a Bitch because she brought forth a concern when one of her debater's opponents grew hostile in the round. While it is normally accepted and routine for debaters arguing affirmative and negative to raise their voices, one of her team's opposing members were "doin' too much," as she stated. I probe her more about this in the remarks below.

**Raven:** Let's go back to the tournament where you said you had to address debaters from another school.

**Lorikeet:** Usually, I'm real cool at the tournaments. I give my students advice and suggestions for debate strategy and all of that. But with that, I'm always telling them they don't have to be rude when they debate.

**Raven:** What do you mean by that?

**Lorikeet:** My students have had evidence snatched from them. They've had opposing teams refuse to debate them, based on my team doing things different and based on debate tradition.

**Raven:** Why do you think those instances occurred?

**Lorikeet:** Sometimes, I think people expect me to be the "angry Black woman" at both urban and suburban tournaments, which like I said is why I try to be cool. But you know what, sometimes, I'm angry because I don't go for anybody messing with my babies.

In attempting to understand her role as a coach and the occasional complexities that exist therein, Lorikeet shares how her race is automatically linked to anger. Here, it is helpful to incorporate Bakhtin's idea of "carnival." Race, similar to carnival, offers a sense of the world, which counters how the world is often a spectacle seen by people. For her, race poses limitations.

Lorikeet recognizes that her race and Black woman physicality automatically links her to being an ‘angry Black woman.’ This is done within media, regardless if one is angry or not. Political commentator and author of *Black Woman Redefined: Dispelling Myths and Discovering Fulfillment in the Age of Michelle Obama* (2011), Sophia Nelson outlines the ways in which Black women are underrepresented in leadership roles, most likely to be recruited but not retained in professional careers, and are most likely to file discrimination lawsuits. In an interview with National Public Radio (NPR), Nelson states that it seems as if successful Black women are “under attack” in America. To further illustrate her point, she highlights how the First Lady, Michelle Obama, was under scrutiny for exhibiting pride in her fellow Americans. She exclaims, “[Michelle Obama] was under attack for her statements that she was proud of her country for the first time. Then they looked at her senior thesis at Princeton and said that perhaps she had racial issues.”

Citing how problematic this issue is, Nelson wrote her text to speak to the experiences of Black women. Having worked in corporate America as an attorney, she discusses firsthand how her unpleasant observations led to her wanting to invite individuals to engage in dialogue about such topics. Many of us ladies have heard it. “You’re an ‘angry Black woman’.” Whether we were called this for passionately voicing how we feel about an issue or because our facial countenance suggested that an individual might want to ‘pump their brakes’ before responding or uttering something crazy in our presence – being labeled an ‘angry Black woman’ is another example of a verbal attack against Black women. In *Driving While Black, Female and Fearless* (2015) Hutchinson argues that the recently slain Sandra Bland had three strikes against her while getting behind the wheel. “She was black, female, and fearless, a combination that is antithetical to all the vaunted white-centered narratives of driving and freedom in the U.S. She was perceived as

criminal and unruly, a loud black “bitch” not worthy of female privileges and niceties conferred to respectable white women.”

Instead of being seen as a heroine for rightfully questioning the Texas state trooper, Brian Encinia, who pulled her over, the world was instead introduced to Sandra Bland – the angry Black woman. Mainstream and local media outlets played and replayed Bland becoming increasingly upset with how she was being treated by Encinia. Where was the outrage from these same outlets when Encinia can be heard yelling, “I will light you up!”? Sigh! We argue that in order for the antagonistic and unfavorable public discourse against Black bodies to be corrected, these same oppressive and mainstream avenues must recognize the error of their ways and work to collectively change the narrative.

I offer these examples and stories as a way of providing further description and analysis of how Lorikeet, although successful and proud to be a coach within the AD community, is often faced with struggles that cause her to be viewed in negative ways, considering she is a Black woman. Implied in the aforementioned interview exchange was a struggle, which stemmed from negative external media messages concerning Blacks and Black women. Using race to discuss personal and professional situations, Lorikeet deemed that her insertion of “trying to be cool,” served as her method for dealing with discrimination in debate settings without being angry. When asked about coolness and how she defines that, Lorikeet’s personal views of race and anger were situated in struggle as a coach.

In a similar fashion, I related to Lorikeet as a Black woman and former AD student and coach who has also been faced with using voice and silence as “cool” to refrain from being viewed as angry. My role as such reminded me that my coaching through struggle was necessary in order for my former students to have counter-stories of create and sustain. As a Black woman who has

been called “Bitch,” and “angry,” I understood Lorikeet’s reflections all too well. I, too, defended my students at length against bullshit and white norms, whether within or outside of debate settings. Additionally, I also appropriated Blackness to create and construct self as a coach who personally and professionally valued the debate experiences of my students and me.

## **Conclusion**

What I have put forth in this chapter is a delineation of the deficit-framed thinking, imagery, and narratives that are present when describing or defining Blacks, Black student-debaters, and supporters, and other individuals of color. By illustrating examples through artifacts, observations, and interviews, I maintain that the voices and experiences of ADers intentionally provide counterstories to reflect upon, respond to, and resist the dominant White norms that seek to dehumanize them through antiblack rhetoric and posturing. Sometimes existing as struggling students, debaters within the AD community understand that the negative portrayals of their peers and others can be met through the countering as successful students who forward their Blackness through their performances and practices with literacies, literatures, and legacy learning, while in both racially welcoming and unwelcoming spaces.

Hearing and seeing the various counterstories of the participants through images and self-reporting spoke to how positive posting operates as a means to see oneself and others through an absolute and affirming lens, which I have defined as (Auto)biographical Sketches of Blackness. In this way, the ADers were constantly striving to identify and utilize their critical Blackness – again, which calls for them to be aware of how they are depicted, to resist the ways that they are narrativized, while celebrating who they are as debaters with cultural or Black capital as a way of moving from struggle to success, specifically within debate spaces. This could not be done without acknowledging that the notion of anger or angry Black woman served as a fragmentation, but not



a stumbling block to achieve correcting and countering media bias(es). Drawing from knowledges and experiences, the voices of each AD participant in this chapter forwarded Blackness by speaking truth to their power by not internalizing the detrimental and prejudicial descriptions of racial, educational, media, and other injustice(s).

In the next chapter, I explore how AD participants speak to and utilize multiple literacies to advance their Blackness and cultural practices, in both debate spaces and beyond. It is in this same chapter that I will also sustain my method of counterstorying to resist societal ideas and pressures placed upon Black struggling and successful students. Additionally, the use of counternarratives and stories of the participants in this study reifies how AD for them was a space that affirmed and valued their ideas, challenges, and legacy learning. In this way, AD provided the Black student-debaters and supporters a culturally sustaining experience.

**CHAPTER 5: FROM EVIDENCE-USING TO LIVED EXPERIENCES AND  
EXPRESSIONS: EXPLORING THE ROLES OF READING, WRITING, SPEAKING,  
AND THINKING IN DEBATE**

*“I remember the first time I put the evidence down and just used my own experiences as evidence in the round. No one was expecting that. I won that debate. And ever since then, I’ve been all about using Black experiences and expressions to get my points across.” (Crane, junior high school debater)*

*“While I was debating, my opponent started singing some song she wrote for her 2AC and I was like, ‘Man, I want to do something like that too.’” (Macaw, junior high school debater)*

*“I’m just tryin’ ta do and be me out here in these debate streets.” (Robin, a senior high school debater)*

One prevalent theme that echoed throughout the experiences of the Black debaters in AD was not only the importance of their participation in the activity, but also their freedom and autonomy to draw upon multiple forms of literacy experiences and expressions. For debaters like Crane, Macaw, and Robin, this reigns true considering that prior to each summer debate institute they attended, they were given evidence packets and files to utilize for the debate season. These files included already written affirmative and negative speeches, rebuttals, counterplans, critiques, and other strategies to defeat their opponents. Additionally, they included academic articles, books, and popular media. The evidence packets provided novice and varsity debaters with initial interactions to the resolution (debate topic) for the debate season. Yearly, such files would equate to over 300 pages in text compiled by college debaters and coaches. In many instances, the debaters considered this both helpful and problematic. Although the student debaters in AD could read, interpret, and argue for or against the evidence, others deemed this to be a forced curricular choice. Again, this an example of what Paris (2016) refers to as the “curricularization of racism.” He suggests that, “the curricularization of racism names the ways systemic racialized discrimination remains a central part of the explicit curriculum and teaching of pre-K through University in the

United States” (p. 6). Although the previous chapters have demonstrated many of the positive happenings that take place within AD, one challenge and complaint that ADers echo is the lack of cultural authoring and connections that are available in the already prepared evidence given to them. As a former AD participant, this was also a struggle for me. Additionally, as a former coach within the AD community, I saw myself recreating and conditioning the student-debaters from the team I coached with Kingfisher to “read the evidence.” In those moments, I did not realize that I had internalized a behavior that supported antiblackness and the silencing of Black bodies. I was responsible for teaching and coaching the very population of Black students who were easily deemed and targeted as “drop outs,” “illiterate,” and “at-risk.” How could I, as a Black woman teacher and debate coach, forward the same white normative thinking and ideologies that silenced my people? When thinking back on my own struggles with reading, interpreting, and successfully presenting and defending the “evidence,” my 15 year old self stood before me when I saw the faces of my former student-debaters. It was then that I realized that I had to do something differently and move away from the very nature of the curricularization of racism.

### **Toward Black Debate Participation**

While the activity of debate has been known to be inundated with the participation and coaching of white males (Mezuk, 2009), the establishment of UDLs, like AD, has created debate opportunities for Black students and coaches to participate and thrive during tournament competitions, in schools, and in their homes and communities (Jones, 2008, 2009, 2010). During my analysis of the experiences of the participants in AD, I was reminded of the above testaments of Crane, Macaw, and Robin – all of whom (re)presented very moving and powerful examples of Black sustaining debate literacies. Although both Crane and Macaw were junior debate partners at Alter Academy and often competed against Robin, a senior at Jefferson High, the culture of care

that was created and maintained by staff and students in AD allowed all of their differing personalities to exemplify respectful sportsmanship and develop a friendship beyond the AD space. Each of them utilized and operated from debate literacies in akin and contrasting ways.

Crane, a very emphatic and unapologetic speaker, was known for drawing from cultural references when giving her affirmative or negative verbalizations. Oftentimes, she inserted lyrics and poems from her favorite artists to advance her points in the debate round. Her partner, Macaw, a 5 foot 2 small-in-stature brother, used his BIC mechanical pencils to stand tall when he wrote his speeches. Whether during practice or at competitions, his written stances for or against the status quo complimented Crane's artistic verbal insertions of Blackness like Darius Lovehall trying to get Nina Mosley in the 1997 classic Black film, *Love Jones*. For Robin, she always let it be known that "the struggle was and is real." Her unique style of debating expressions and ways of being led her to draw from her own personal narrative and experiences when she approached the wooden podiums to slay her opponents. As one of many siblings who stemmed from a family unit that was always in transition – moving from place to place and facing many challenges – she was tactful in how she allowed her personal struggles and actualities to debunk whatever evidence her challengers read against her.

Similar to Crane, Macaw and Robin utilized multiple forms and expressions of literacy as a medium to share their personal, cultural, and community narratives. These renderings illuminated their elations, struggles, and pain. Throughout this chapter, I present findings that were represented and illuminated from the following question: How and in what ways does AD sustain the literacies and lived experiences of Black debaters? While student-debaters in AD engaged with and in a variety of debate activities, events, and practices, their operative literacies were always central to such activities, events, and practices.

In many ways, the participants in this study remind(ed) me of myself when I was in high school and in college. They, too, were and are passionate about the activity. They questioned themselves, their ideas, and others. When they won debate rounds and tournaments, they rejoiced, but remained humble. And when they lost, they got emotional, cried, cursed, and shut down, sometimes. Even still, each time, they brought their A-game. For me, it is imperative to do them justice in all the pages to follow. My 20 years of self-awareness and engagement with debate depends on it. Acknowledging that, it is also of equal importance for me to have situated myself within this study, considering I view myself as a walking example of someone who was culturally sustained in AD. My desire is to forever be sustained and tell the stories of young people who have similar or differing debate experiences.

While understanding the literacy experiences and practices that students engage in is important and necessary (Kirkland, 2011, 2013), this is especially true for the Black participants in this study. Intentionally reminding us of why literacy is essential through their research, Mahiri and Sablo (1996) examined the writing of two of their students. They claimed, “Engaging in literacy practices helped them make sense of both their lives and social worlds, and provided them with a partial refuge from the harsh realities of their everyday experiences” (p. 174). Similarly, in his scholarship, Paris (2010) highlighted and celebrated the literacies of youth of color. Referring to them as “identity texts,” he suggested that his participants created “youth-space texts inscribing ethnic, linguistic, local, and transnational affiliations on clothing, binders, backpacks, public spaces, rap lyrics, and electronic media” (p. 279). In his study, Paris acknowledged and affirmed the multiple ways in which young people of color engage and employ literacy across numerous forms for numerous reasons and purposes. In the context of my study, I sought to acknowledge and analyze how students-debaters in AD engaged in debate by utilizing literacy and their lived

experiences and how these literacies and experiences were sustained. Such literacies included reading, writing, speaking, and being. Over time, the ways in which scholars have conceptualized and theorized about the connections between oral and written literacies have assisted with my understanding of how students and staff in AD used debate and themselves as “identity texts” and to “just be.”

### **Redefining Literacy in Debate**

Despite my fundamental analysis targeting what I learned about the debaters, their sustaining literacies, and lived experiences, I deem it vital to recognize and delineate the spaces and mediums that enabled the participants to debate and draw from their own lives. For this study, I examined the literacy activities, events, and practices in AD. In particular, I conducted observations and interviews, wrote memos and fieldnotes, and collected artifact samples from after-school debate practices, tournaments, and at summer debate institutes. While I described these settings in Chapter 3, I have offered further information regarding the literacy activities, events, and practices that the AD participated in throughout my time with them.

In my orientation to and consideration of literacy activities, events, and practices, I drew from Heath’s (1982) and Street’s (1993) work. Heath defines literacy events as any event in which a piece of text is central to the activities that take place. For my study, I utilize Heath’s definition and expand it to also include activities, events and practices where students are engaged with debate by using their own reflective reading, writing, and speaking texts, allowing them to not rely on the already written evidence that is given to them. Some of these reflective reading, writing, and speaking texts include poems, personal and journal narratives, and rap lyrics. In addition to these type of inclusions, literacy activities, events, and practices were also comprised of discussions regarding the texts of their own and other individual’s writings. Street’s work assists

us with a comprehensive view of how these literacy events showcase the importance of understanding how they are enclosed in broader literacy practices.

### **In School & Out-of-School Debate Participation**

**Learning from Speaking and Doing.** At the center of arguments made about the benefits of UDL participation is the enhancement and improvement afforded by way of public speaking. Persuasion studies (Ziegelmueller, 1975; Keefe, Harte, & Norton, 1982) have concluded that debate contributes to learning verbal communication skills. In this chapter, each of the participants stated that participating in AD assisted with improving their public speaking skills and providing a space for them to feel safe to want to better themselves, even if they made mistakes. While attending and participating in tournaments, they also noted that this was a central part in bettering their public speaking, considering they had to speak in front of other students, teachers, coaches, parents, and attendees. In an October 2015 interview with Crane, she says more about this and how she and Macaw's debate coach, Lorikeet, supports this.

**Raven:** So tell me about your experiences with public speaking and debate? How have you engaged with it?

**Crane:** It has definitely been a positive experience. While I've never really been a shy person, speaking in front of people at practice, in school, and at the tournaments has gotten better. Being Macaw's partner has also impacted me. I've seen his growth too, as a result of us working together.

**Raven:** Tell me how.

**Crane:** Well, for example, in all of those places, we can't be silent. We have to speak so by nature of having to do that, I guess it was inevitable that we would get better. Like, at practice, we start by doing speaking drills. Everyone on the team stands up and speaks non-stop at the same time as fast as they can for like 5 minutes straight. Lorikeet makes us do this at each practice and even at the tournaments, before the rounds begin.

**Raven:** Ok. How has that been useful for you?

**Crane:** I think it forces me to do multiple things at once. Although, I'm speaking at practices and at tournaments, I also have to make connections with what I read and write. They all go hand in hand. Now, I'm able to appreciate talking in front of people more because I see the importance of it. I even

created and designed a tee shirt (see Figure 9) that is now being worn in various debate communities. That idea first started from my speaking and writing about debate.

**Raven:** Do you think these connections are important beyond the debate space?

**Crane:** Oh, for sure. Outside of being with the debate team, I'm with my family mostly and I can definitely see how I'm taking home what I learn from debate.

**Raven:** Cool. Say a bit more about that.

**Crane:** When I get home, my mama is always asking me about what I learned at practice. She sees how excited I get and even when I'm irritated about stuff, we have conversations about it more. Before, we didn't really do that. I'm starting to see how what I'm doing in debate is rubbing off on my family.

Crane's assertions of how having Macaw as a debate partner has positively influenced her by being better at the activity. She suggested that debate served as a medium for her to use her voice and not be silenced, allowed her to use of multiple literacies, and that the AD space provided her with opportunities to have better connections with her family. These ideas speak to and address my research questions. Crane's perception and understanding of debate are situated in varying contexts, which are inclusive of school, home, and community. In this way, her teaching and learning, alongside other Black student-debaters and supporters, fosters a space for her grappling with ideas, struggles, and successes to continue to be supported as a young Black woman debater. These elements were and are important to her, considering she desires to continue to be influenced by debate. This is echoed by her exclaiming that, "When I get home, my mama is always asking me about what I learned at practice. She sees how excited I get...I'm starting to see how what I'm doing in debate is rubbing off on my family."

Additionally, Figure 8 illustrates Crane's verbal and written conceptualization that caught the attention of an organization in the debate community. Her acknowledgement that the link between speaking and writing led to the creation of this tee shirt (and sweatshirt) exemplifies the ways that she and other student-debaters utilize their engagements and interactions with debate



beyond normative school spaces. Further, considering Crane is a young Black woman in debate, her verbal and written etchings speak to the varied ways that both men and women experience debate differently. Likewise, because Crane considers her family to be an important connection to her debate learning, her tee shirts and sweatshirts have allowed for them to offer continued support of her debate prowess.



Figure 8: Crane's Verbal and Written Creation

Connected to this, Macaw, revealed his thoughts on public speaking. Initially, he expressed how he struggled with it at first, but once he started going to practice more and looking at videos of people speaking, he saw incremental changes in his progress.

**Raven:** Did public speaking come naturally to you?

**Macaw:** No. I struggled a lot in the beginning and I still do from time to time, but I know I'm better than what I was.

**Raven:** What led to you knowing that you're better at it now?

**Macaw:** Attending practices regularly was super helpful. Lorikeet is so cool, but no-nonsense. She sets a tone of 'you will improve, if you do the work.' I needed that when I first started with debate and I still need it now. Although we get to laugh and enjoy what we do in practice, it's still a serious time for us to do the work and learn.

- Raven:** What work have you done to improve from when you first started?
- Macaw:** I actually like looking at videos on YouTube people speaking.
- Raven:** That's a good idea. Who you do look at?
- Macaw:** I've looked at President Obama, Lil Wayne, Al Sharpton, the reporters on Fox 2 News, and a couple of other people.
- Raven:** Have you seen differences in how they speak and present themselves?
- Macaw:** Yes. And it has been great to learn from. I like how President Obama takes a lot pauses when he talks. It's almost like you can see him thinking about his next thought before he says it. We have to do that a lot in debate. Since, I like Lil Wayne, I use him as inspiration to write down my ideas and the say them out loud. He's so good with metaphors and making sense out of simple and hard concepts. I want to do that too.
- Raven:** I can definitely respect that. So what about Al Sharpton and the reporters on the news? What do you take away from them?
- Macaw:** You know, Rev. Sharpton is an Old G. He's been in the game for so long. I like his straightforward approach with things and just life in general. Especially about racial stuff. Things have gotten real in some debate rounds so Crane and I have had to go in and draw from our inner Sharpton.

In the context of Action Debate, Macaw – who was originally quiet in nature before joining his school's debate team – saw his attitude and debate skills shift in a positive direction as a result of his attending practices regularly. Although Lorikeet, his debate coach, held practices at their school, Alter Academy, Macaw began to see a correlation with AD and school; whereas his storying to me suggested that he would not be as excited about school if it were not for debate, Crane, and Lorikeet. He considered them family and individuals in his life who affirm and support his identities as a young Black man. Further, he also considered his debate skills had improved because he drew upon the literacy practices of listening and viewing to advance his thinking. Specifically, he commented on how viewing videos on YouTube assisted with his desire to study the verbal stylings of certain individuals. When I asked him who he studied, he responded, "I've looked at President Obama, Lil Wayne, Al Sharpton, the reporters on Fox 2 News, and a couple

of other people.” Macaw’s interest in orators ranged from the President of the United States to a hip hop artist. In this vein, he viewed them as people and examples of who he could learn from, in an effort to be a better debater in the AD space.

To nuance this further, I also want to note that Macaw’s viewing of reporters on Fox News, a network that is often unkind to Black people – still stood and served as an example of where he could see and learn from people who looked like him. For example, because he shared he watched Fox 2 News, specifically – he was aware of Black men and women reporters who he could turn to at certain times of the day or go to YouTube to see certain ways in which he could emulate their speaking and listening skills to better his own oralities as a debater. Connected to this, he shared that he purposely looked to Al Sharpton as an exemplar when dealing with issues of race. He notes, “I like his straightforward approach with things and just life in general. Especially about racial stuff. Things have gotten real in some debate rounds so Crane and I have had to go in and draw

from our inner Sharpton.” Upon further questioning and analysis, Crane recognized that his “double-consciousness” (Woodson, 1933) as a Black man who is present in both the school and debate communities afforded him the wherewithal to use AD as a space and medium to advance his ideas with literacy and race, despite how difficult this could be in the face of negative perceptions and portrayals of others. He still knew he had cultural capital to be a free-thinking young Black student-debater. Crane’s narrative with literacies serves as an example of what Yosso (2005) refers to as resist capital. Resist capital can be seen in spaces and through messaging and imagery, as analyzed in Chapter 4. Additionally, it can be seen in the ways Black student-debaters position themselves to resist and thrive in spite of discriminatory and negative imagery and narrations. In Macaw’s case, he used speaking, listening, and writing as a medium to advance from a quiet person to a critically thinking debater.

Illustrating more of this, Figure 9 shows Macaw speaking at a debate tournament. Although he was initially a shy person and struggled as a debater, his confidence grew from attending debate practice and participating at tournaments with his partner and teammates.



Figure 9: Macaw Speaking at a Debate Tournament

Both Crane and Macaw shared that they noticed an increase in confidence due to their participation in debate. Related to speaking skills and confidence gaining, they perceived that their literacy entanglements with Lorikeet and giving presentations outside of debate spaces (i.e. home and school) were also positively affected. This is an example of the type of sustaining (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014) calls for that teachers need to operate from when teaching and engaging with students of color. Crane was convinced that her participation and space occupying in AD had an impact on her public speaking abilities. Her testament to how she and Macaw's speaking skills had advanced since joining their school's debate team was evidence of this.

Similar to public speaking, supporters of the UDL establishment also agree that the educational values from the academic sport is repurposed, since students are the focal speakers. Due to this, coaches, judges, teachers, and other adults become the listeners and debaters are allowed to take on the responsibility of fostering their own learning and engaging in research for the speaking presentations they will deliver at tournaments (Lee, 1998; Wade, 1999). During a conversation with Lorikeet, I gained a better understanding of this.

**Raven:** Why did you choose to become a coach? And how have you seen your debaters develop over time with their speaking?

**Lorikeet:** I remember when I took my babies to their first UDL tournament at Walker University and they didn't do well. Some of them even cried. They were mad. I was mad because they were mad, but I knew I had to encourage them, despite that. That's what coaches do. I was so new and had just started as a coach so I knew I had a lot to learn, but something that always kept me going was seeing them get better with speaking and in other ways as we stayed with it.

**Raven:** Say more about how you chose to encourage them, whether in class or at the tournaments?

**Lorikeet:** I'm big on getting them to say something and then say something more about that something.

**Raven:** Ohhhh, okay. I like that. I'll have to use that. How did you get them to do that?

**Lorikeet:** Our practices, after-school are less than two hours so I know that within that time, I have to be very organized about what we do for that day. Structure is important in debate, but I also understand that we can break away from structure?

**Raven:** What do you mean by that?

**Lorikeet:** During our first year, I relied heavily on speaking drills and getting them to get in the habit of speaking out loud daily. I did that so they could hear themselves and each other and feel comfortable with me and others critiquing them. One of our speaking drills included reading different posters and writings on my walls in the classroom. Sometimes, we debate, some debaters at the tournaments speak really fast in the rounds. It's a strategy that coaches teach to get their students to be able to make a lot of arguments within the eight minutes. At first my students didn't speak fast, but now they do it helps.

**Raven:** Ok. So how do you facilitate the critiques that they give each other? And why was it important for you to want them to speak faster?

**Lorikeet:** After we do our drills, each person has to stand at the front of the room and give a one minute speech about a topic that their peers choose. It could be anything from what they did the day before to why school uniforms interfere with individual creativity. I like to allow them to select those topics. That helps me see where they are. After their finished, we take another minute to have a conversation about what the speaker did well or what they can do to improve. This process is very instrumental with my coaching choices. I also like that they like do this and see the benefits of it. As far as, them speaking faster, I see it as an asset to help them flush out more arguments against their opponents.

Hearing Lorikeet's thoughts on participating and speaking in debate fostered an understanding about how she coaches and supports her students. Allowing her students to select topics for discussions and providing an ongoing platform for them to critique one another was prevalent during my visits at her practices and at the debate tournaments. This is a debate curricular choice that she has sustained over time and looks forward to when she listens to her debaters speak. To expand this idea, and to continue to welcome the ideas of her students, during each practice session, a handful of students use the computer to show clips, articles, videos, and other literacy texts from which they also speak and critique. This is something that Macaw said that he developed from specifically.

While Crane and Macaw stated that they appreciated how their speaking practices helped them advance during debate rounds, in an October 2015 interview, Robin was the only one to note how this connects to the speaking regulations that take place in school classrooms, where teachers tend to be the ones to talk more, which does not offer a sort of speaking and learning equality in the current school system.

**Raven:** What do you think about how you and your peers engage in speaking during debate rounds?

**Robin:** I see people do it in many ways. The one thing that is fair and consistent is the speaking time that we all get during our constructive, cross examination, and rebuttal speeches. However, what people do within that time is different.

**Raven:** Ok. I see. Is that something that you think is helpful for you and them?

- Robin:** For me, I really like how AD gives us so much time to talk and get our points out. We get to succeed, fail, and try again - all through our speaking. We do the majority of the talking. Young people. And I learn so much this way. At the end of the round, the judge gives an overview of who they voted for and why.
- Raven:** Why is that significant to you?
- Robin:** Because we (young people) are the main speakers, not like at school, when the majority or all of the talking is coming from the teacher, which is so wack.
- Raven:** Say more about why hearing from your peers is beneficial and how that alters your school experiences?
- Robin:** Young folks are smart and we have ideas. In debate, we get to see how our ideas play out. Sometimes, in school, this doesn't happen. I got involved with debate because I like to argue and see how I can prove people wrong. Now, I'm seeing how school and debate are similar and different. At my school, debate or speech isn't required to graduate, but I think it should be. Me learning how to speak up for myself and what I deserve is important to me. I think I should be able to do that at school too and not just hear the teacher's point of view all the time.

Because of Robin's positive associations with debate, she was very supportive of how UDLs and AD offer sustaining spaces to speak against this debate-school mismatch. Robin's viewpoint recalled the necessities of having students involved more with their learning process. By expressing that she appreciated debate and found it to be significant in her life because "we (young people) are the main speakers, not like at school, when the majority of all the talking is coming from the teacher, which is wack." Robin considered this to be problematic because she felt that she and her peers are smart important. Therefore, their voices should be salient to the teaching and learning that is supposed to take place in schools and provide support for their thinking. Due to the damaging pedagogies that some teachers enact, students are left feeling hopeless and disconnected from the curriculum choices and schooling practices. To feel honored and revered, Robin enjoyed AD because it allowed her to grow and learn with her peers and other teachers and coaches, like Lorikeet - who enacted asset-based pedagogies. Discussing more of her experiences and thoughts about school in connection to debate, Robin shared that although debate was not a required course

at her school, she thought it should be due to the educative earnings it afforded her. She says, “At my school, debate or speech isn’t required to graduate, but I think it should be. Me learning how to speak up for myself and what I deserve is important to me. I think I should be able to do that at school too and not just hear the teacher’s point of view all the time.”

Public speaking was regarded as a literacy medium that can and has led to growth by Crane, Macaw, Robin, and Lorikeet. On the contrary, the possible limits that stem from this are that the coaches who encourage this type of learning and developing are not involved with UDLs and tournaments, which connects to my questions and arguments for Black debaters. In essence, sometimes, the participants in this study felt well supported during debate spaces, rather than at school. Due to that, this study provides valuable insights of how Black student-debaters can connect with schooling practices when they see themselves represented in the choices made by administrators, teachers, policymakers, and others. I contend that AD is a space that can be emulated to better serve and support Black students and other students of color.

Another aspect of public speaking that supports in-class participation is the interdisciplinary connection to subject areas. For example, research findings by VanSickle (1990) have reported that some students thought there was not a major connection to their own lives and English or Social Studies. However, Crane, Macaw, and Robin disagree. They asserted that AD and some of their other friends in other participating UDLs became more aware of the world around them, the ways that their literacy engagements will not leave them, and of current events - all of which they sometimes grapple with in English and Social Studies classes. Macaw, as someone who loved his Social Studies class, noticed that he was more participatory in class because some of what was discussed, he had already debated about with his peers in debate



practice. As a result, there was a shared belief among participants that ACTION Debate was a place and space, in which oral literacies were supported and affirmed.

**Reading for Purpose and Debate Prosperity.** Complementary to public speaking, aspects of UDLs have suggested that participation in the activity drastically improves reading comprehension and fluency. Studies (Ghezzi, 2000; Mueller, 2000) have ascertained that students in debate noticed improvements in reading skills and vocabulary development, as well as attaining better grades in school. As with public speaking, my analysis notes a shared perception in how participating in debate led to a sustaining value with oral literacies. When asked about reading, all participants equally agreed that debate made a difference in their reading, especially in connection to speaking out loud. Mezuk's (2009) findings also indicated that debate with relation to reading and language arts competencies showcase a direct relation between debate and academic achievement in some areas. Crane shared her thoughts on this.

**Raven:** What did you think of your reading abilities before you joined the debate team? And what do you think of them now?

**Crane:** I'd say my reading was actually already good. I read and understand what I read. I haven't really struggled with it in the past. What debate did for my reading though is make me want to read more and to read more about Black people.

**Raven:** Ok. Bet. So who do you like to read and how does that help you with debating?

**Crane:** Prior to debate, I used to read all them books and stories like, *Princess Diaries*, *The Hunger Games*, *Harry Potter*, and stuff like that. I still like those because I read through them quickly. They're page turners. Lately tho, I've been reading a lot of poetry by writers like, Lucille Clifton, Langston Hughes of course, and Nikki Giovanni.

**Raven:** That's super dope. I love all of them.

**Crane:** Really?

**Raven:** Yeah.

**Crane:** Ok. Den. What you do like by them?

**Raven:** Ummmmm. I especially like the line in Nikki Giovanni's *Ego Tripping*, when she says, "I am so hip even my errors are correct." I like the whole poem, but that line gets me every time.

- Crane:** Ahhh. Yes. I first read that one last year. Now that you brought it up, I'm gone have to read it again.
- Raven:** Ok, so, what do you think these authors offer you, in terms of reading and debating?
- Crane:** Everything.
- Raven:** (Laughs). Ok. That's what's up. Say more.
- Crane:** Reading their work is what I sometimes use for debate drills. This gets me geeked up when I'm speaking at practice and in rounds. I try to be creative. Lorikeet now even has some of their books in our class for debate practice so I can just pick up one of their books and just go.
- Raven:** Why is that important for you?
- Crane:** Because I like to be able to incorporate what I read with my ideas and arguments. If I didn't read poetry, I don't see how I could be doing better in school. Getting to read what I want to read about for debate helps me in English class, especially when we read about Black people. I be all in.

The above exchange is one that really resonates with me. Not only because I, too, like poetry, like Crane, but because I appreciated her honesty. During the interview, she went in her bag and pulled out a book of poetry by famous Blacks. That moment was indeed telling. It was telling because it exemplified the significance of her maintaining a direct relationship with reading and debating. Secondly, in that moment, I noticed, it prefaced her hankering to read about Blacks. She did not pull out a *Hunger Games* book – a series that was also turned into movies, with which I was not impressed, after they killed the only Black girl, Rue. Anyway, Crane straight up pulled out a green, crumbled up paperback book of authors from our dear and necessary past. What! She came to READ! And I do not mean for leisure (more on that in the next chapter).

Since she asked me something that was a favorite of mine, I thought it would only be fair for me to do the same. Again, as I mentioned in Chapter 3, I desired to remain authentic and transparent throughout this study and my time with the participants in this work. Because of that, they saw me as an insider and an ally. I argue that it is possible Crane would not have asked me these types of questions if I did not look like her, or just remained an observer or researcher – who

sat in the back of her classroom taking notes about her and her peers, but not offering up myself when she and others asked me specific questions.

When I inquired about who and what one of her favorite poems was, she revealed that it was some of the very poignant words of Lucille Clifton's, *won't you celebrate with me*. They are as follows:

**won't you celebrate with me**

won't you celebrate with me  
what i have shaped into  
a kind of life? i had no model.  
born in babylon  
both nonwhite and woman  
what did i see to be except myself?  
i made it up  
here on this bridge between  
starshine and clay,  
my one hand holding tight  
my other hand; come celebrate  
with me that everyday  
something has tried to kill me  
and has failed

When Crane said that, all I could say was "I get it."

Next, this dialogue sits with me because it was the first time in the study that a participant asked me a question. Due to that, I was able to recall why Giovanni's line stuck with me. Most times, the idea of having an ego is something viewed as haughty or negative (e.g. Kanye West's random ego tripping rants). However, for me, having and operating from an egotistical stance is sometimes necessary. Sometimes, folks just need to be checked and READ. For example, there was this one time when I was on an anthropological excursion with other "educators" in a city

primarily occupied by Blacks. While there, a white attendee on the trip thought it would be a good idea to ask me to rap in front of all the other white folks. I was the only Black participant on the trip. In the words of my cousin (in my head), R&B slayer and TV personality, Tamar Braxton, ‘She tried it,’ meaning she actually went there, asking something that she should not have. So. I. READ. her. So much so that “even my errors” were correct that day. In summary, although I was asking Crane about her reading comprehension skills and practices with debate, I certainly respected the glimpse of connecting the past with the present in knowing that both Crane’s and my READing had been sustained. Being able to operate from such Black richness would not commence, if one did not have an ego. Right?!?

Referring to other ways that UDLs like AD affirm and value students, Collier (2004) seeks to actuate how UDLs benefit students academically. His study categorically deals with how increases in reading comprehension could lead to higher test scores and grades. While each of the participants in my study deemed debate to aid with their reading literacies, deliberations regarding standardized test scores were not asked or shared. In an educational sphere that is very unkind to Black students’ experiences with standards and standardizing, this study intentionally illuminates what and how their understandings of debate has led to their sustaining literacies and lived experiences. I did not enter and learn from their spaces to highlight test scores. Related to reading, they offered explanations of how their reading drills in practice and the repetition thereof better prepared them for the tournaments. From her perspective as a coach and teacher, Lorikeet felt that reading comprehension is increased due to not only just reading a text, but allowing students to choose what they want to read.

**Raven:** Let’s talk a bit about reading. How would you say the reading comprehensions of your debaters has or has not been enriched due to debate?

**Lorikeet:** So, I know I’m slightly different from some of my coaching colleagues.

- Raven:** In what ways?
- Lorikeet:** For starters, I'm cool with some white coaches and I know they do the same things and in the same ways when they hold their practices. I try to switch things up though.
- Raven:** Why is switching things up something you strive to do?
- Lorikeet:** As a teacher and coach, I know that students learn differently so I can't just teach and coach in one way. I try to make sure I'm connecting with students who learn orally, visually, and by looking at words on paper. So we read a lot, but I don't just use the evidence they get from summer camp.
- Raven:** What else do they read and use?
- Lorikeet:** I have a growing library with all sorts of books, magazines, Black History cards, newspaper clippings and articles, CDs, videos, and other things I think would be helpful for their reading.
- Raven:** Ok. So, why are those types of choices important for you and them?
- Lorikeet:** If I only had one mode or medium to teach from and to use, I'd be placing them at a disadvantage. They need options. I know Macaw likes to use videos to help him debate so I make sure that I listen to him, Crane, and my other students when they want to try something out. I've seen how Crane and Macaw's reading abilities have strengthened over time. They read a lot more than what they did before joining debate. Macaw is also in my Social Studies class so I notice he volunteers to participate more. I still ask students to read out loud in my Social Studies class so he often does that.

Cognizant of the fact that reading and reading choices should not be selected by just her, Lorikeet expounded upon the improvements she thinks debate has with reading and her students' comprehension skills. Opting to do something different from her white colleagues, she prided herself on (re)presenting reading choices for her debaters that resembled them racially and ethnically. Enacting these intentional choices and decisions allowed for Lorikeet to be someone who provided her students with culturally relevant and sustaining options. In her seminal work with successful teachers of Black students, Ladson-Billings (1995) provides a framework for the type of teaching that acknowledges and values students' culture and their cultural capital. She advocates for the type of instruction that intentionally seeks to meet the needs of students of color. She encourages educators to effectively understand and adopt *culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP)*. Ladson-Billings' culturally relevant pedagogy rests on three tenets: "(a) students must experience

academic success; (b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and (c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order" (p. 160). Related to this – in her 2014 work, where she suggests CRP is in need of a remix – Ladson-Billings expressed how many teachers who deemed themselves to be operating from a culturally relevant pedagogical stance were not and she grew dissatisfied with their failed efforts. “Many practitioners, and those who claim to translate research to practice, seem stuck in very limited and superficial notions of culture. Thus, the fluidity and variety within cultural groups has regularly been lost in discussions and implementations of culturally relevant pedagogy” (p. 77). Desiring to always be ready to learn as much as she teaches, Lorikeet draws from culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies and practices in ways that allow her to remain open and to continually draw from her Black student-debaters’ experiences and learning styles when offering cultural and curricular materials to aid with their debate practices and tournament performances. Specifically, she pointed that Macaw, as her debater and student in Social Studies, learns a certain type of way and because of that it is her responsibility to foster his reading, learning, and growing.

**Critical Thinking & Researching for Academic and Debate Growth.** Moving beyond public speaking and reading, supporters of UDLs declare that debaters experience improvements in critical thinking and researching, due to their involvement with debate. In fusing debate with critical thinking, prior studies have suggested that it is indeed an exercise that motivates debaters and leaves room for academic success (Colbert, 1995; Freely, 1986; Hill, 1993). In arguing for debate across the curriculum, Bellon (2000) states that debate plays a role in developing a number of meaningful academic skills, especially those related to critical thinking and research. However, these findings exemplify areas of achievement, as illustrated with more traditional high school debate teams in suburban schools (Colbert, 1993; Fine, 1999; Littlefield, 2001).

Desiring to address and tell the debate stories of Black students, this study exists to illuminate the experiences of such Black student-debaters and reveal how their participation and engagement with certain literacies led to them being and feeling sustained and supported, whether at practice, tournaments, or other places and in other spaces. In addressing these literacy areas, Macaw stated that his critical thinking and researching practices had gotten better, considering he spent more time actually thinking about things and ideas, even when he was not at practice. Crane was more specific, regarding her enhancements and discussed how her online (re)searching helped her to look for information and evidence to use in her speeches, cross examinations, and rebuttals. A drawback of these areas surfaced when Robin talked about how AD and UDLs should perhaps ask UDL debaters' opinions about how to go about researching for the evidence packets that they are given at summer debate institutes.

**Raven:** How do you go about getting and obtaining research for your debates?

**Robin:** Some of it comes from when we attend summer debate camps. By the end of the school year, college students who are also peer debaters compile evidence packets for the UDL and online files are created that we can access.

**Raven:** Ok, so is that helpful for you and your teammates?

**Robin:** It has its perks, but most times, I have to ask my coach or other debaters what some of it means. I mean because sometimes I haven't heard of the authors, I'm curious about the evidence cards and who I'm going to be reading from, but other times, I look them up for myself.

**Raven:** Why do you look them up for yourself? What does that do for you?

**Robin:** I guess it helps me paint a better picture about who the author is and when they said what they said that's written on the evidence card. Like, if someone I'm debating is reading a card from like 10 or 20 years ago, I can easily call them out on that and tell the judge that their evidence is outdated and that they should not vote for them, based on that. And other things too. I wouldn't know to do that, if I didn't look up things for myself.

Figure 10 shows Robin's manifestation of thinking and booking by visiting a bookstore in her community. She shared with me that although she sometimes heavily relies on Google and technology, she still liked to visit bookstores and touch physical books.



Figure 10: Robin's Photo of Thinking and Booking

During my after-school and tournament observations of Robin, I saw her researching firsthand. Most times, she did not even need a computer, which is a common technological choice individuals use when conducting research on a particular subject or topic. Instead, it was routine for Robin to have books handy or to use her phone and do Google searches to look up information she wanted to know immediately. Robin did not have a computer at home so she would wait until she got to school or at tournaments to utilize the computers at Rogue State. She did not allow the absence of a computer in her home to negate her from seeking information. In this way, she was demonstrating how critical thinking and researching can be interrelated with visiting bookstores



and searching for various authors and texts at bookstores. She knew she had to strategically think and search for what she needed to be successful for her debates.

More questions were asked specifically about critical thinking and researching to the participants. However, Robin's experiences noted her developments with connecting ideas and arguments by way of searching for data online. Related to this, she also stated how her curiosity with not knowing who an author is from the evidence that is given to her and her teammates leads her to reading more. Considering a great deal of time in practice is spent using computers to research, Robin and the others are provided with opportunities to do the work to help them conduct independent research, aside from the files they accumulate over the summer. Like Robin, when asked how critical thinking and researching has or has not aided with his debate development, Macaw responds, "Yes, it has. I got a tablet a few years ago and I use Wifi to look up information."

**Writing and Flowing for Debate Delivery.** While reviewing my data and investigating the existing debate literature, it becomes quite evident that there is a gap in this area. And I mean a gap as wide as that Victoria Lake, British Nigerian singer, Sade Adu mentioned in her hit song, *Is It a Crime*, track number 6, from her *Greatest Hits* album. Although some studies indicate advancements with speaking, reading, critical thinking, and researching, little is known about how students experience writing as a medium to augment their debate challenges and successes. When asked precisely about writing as a literacy practice in debate, Macaw seemed excited to share his thoughts.

**Raven:** So tell me about how you use writing in debate?

**Macaw:** Ok. This might sound crazy, but it's all good.

**Raven:** (Laughs). What?

**Macaw:** Sometimes, when Crane and I are at practice and she's speaking out loud, I write down what she says and turn it into a flow.

**Raven:** That ain't crazy. That's dope. Tell me more.

- Macaw:** One time, she was reciting a poem by Maya Angelou and I took some of the words and rewrote them. I like to do stuff like that.
- Raven:** When you say flow? You mean a debate flow or a rap flow?
- Macaw:** A rap one.
- Raven:** Ok. That's what I thought. I wanted to make sure. What do you think of the other flow?
- Macaw:** It's sooooo necessary. That's how we're able to track what our opponents are saying and respond to them.

In the above exchange, Macaw shared how the coupling of both flows – rap and debate – aided with his writing for debate. For flowing in debate, all debaters are expected to take notes and write down what their opponents say in the debate round. Again, each constructive speech is eight minutes, each cross examination is three minutes and each rebuttal speech is five minutes. A single debate round lasts approximately one hour. For that entire time, students in AD are expected to flow their opponent's speeches. Crane also stated how flowing has helped her. She stated, "I enjoy writing more than I did before. I even color-code my flows when in the debate rounds. And when I'm in class, I even start my research papers ahead of time." When asking Lorikeet what her thoughts were about his, she exclaimed the following:

Flowing can be tricky. Debaters have to make sure they're paying attention in the rounds. If you choose not to write things down, chances are you'll definitely lose the round because you didn't keep track of what was said. I'm really hard on my students when it comes to this. There's no reason for them to drop (lose an argument in a round) arguments because they didn't flow the debate. Some of my students have specifically expressed to me how their flowing has gotten better because they know what to listen for and can divide the flow up into parts to help organize their thoughts.

Figures 11 and 12 are examples of a blank and completed paper debate flows. Figure 12 shows a sheet of paper separated into columns, based on the different speeches recited in a debate round. Slightly different, Figure 13 illustrates a paper flow that is filled in. Flowing is essential for debaters to track their opponent's arguments so that they can counter them during cross-examination and rebuttal rounds, and while giving constructive speeches. Figure 13 shows that the

flow is written in different colors. Debaters do this to correspond the various speeches (i.e. constructive, cross examination, and rebuttal to a chosen color). Doing so helps them do a better job at tracking multiple arguments.



Figure 11: A Blank Debate Flow

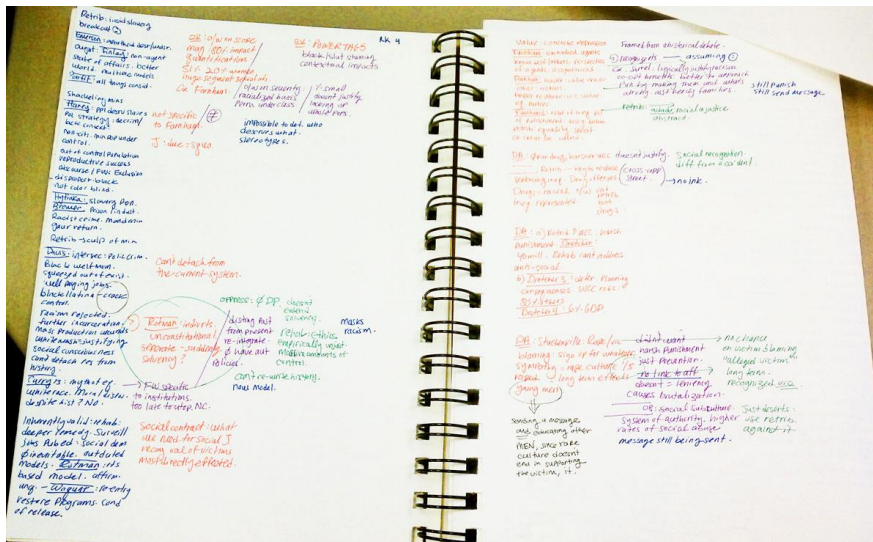


Figure 12: A Written Debate Flow

In observing her practice sessions, Lorikeet was adamant about making sure her debaters flowed each other's speeches. Flowing can be done using paper or laptops. At times, on the SmartBoard projector, she would even display examples of different flows to demonstrate that there was not one way to flow. When asked about giving this option, she concluded, "Usually, there's always

more than one way to do something. I want them to have options so they can see what works best for them.” In a follow-up question when asked if writing and note-taking served any other purposes that she noticed for her students, Lorikeet shared:

A few of my debaters are also in my Social Studies class. There are times in class when they have to take notes and read their notes aloud or share them with a peer. We need to actually do this more because I see that they benefit from it. Most times, when they turn these notes in at the end of the class session, I can already tell which sheet of paper belongs to a debater before looking at the name of the student because of the way it’s organized. And because there’s more than one color to highlight certain distinctions. I always chuckle to myself when I have moments like this during the regular school day because it shows me that they’re getting it. They’re listening to me.

Aware that writing and notetaking is connected to schooling, Lorikeet recognized that the literacy form of writing has a place in her debate practices and in her Social Studies classes. The connection with the two and the witnessing of her students’ note-taking abilities becoming better allowed her to ‘take note’ (pun intended) that she needs to allow that to be done more. Although she did not explicitly say that she was depriving them of a benefit by not opting to have her debaters and students engage with writing and sharing their notes with a peer - such a need was implied. Further, Lorikeet found joy in recognizing the work of her debaters, based on their writing and organizational skills with their notetaking. Such a distinction led her to believe that her curricular choice with engaging her debaters and students in writing was becoming more apparent, given organization and the various colors they used to write and flow.

## **Conclusion**

Couched within debate literature, participant and researcher voice, literacy activities, events, and practices represented an inclusive perspective on sustained literacies, which included multiple mediums of communication through reading, writing, speaking, and thinking. Black debaters spoke, read, wrote, and engaged in critical thinking in myriad meaningful ways. In doing

so, they disrupted the normative ways of thinking about literacy as just reading and writing. Instead, they saw value in operating from Black literature and artists to advance their thinking, and literate lives. Such an integration was especially true for them during debate practices, where they were able to prepare for tournaments. Within each literacy medium, Crane, Macaw, and Robin stated how they learned from each and how their interactions with Lorikeet and AD led to them becoming more critical in their awareness of popular culture and other literacy activities, events, and practices that were significant, which also included being able to openly communicate with other peers and family members.

In certain ways, literacies became critical, given my line of questioning allowed them to reflect and think more about what they revealed about their lived experiences with debate. In this regard, they were getting at Shor's (1992) definition of critical literacy, which suggests critical literacy as "habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking that go beneath the surface meaning to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology and personal consequences of any action." In this chapter, I noted aspects of Shor's rationale and how the participants viewed some of these aspects and inserted their own stories and narratives as evidence, which continues to be an important feature and element that guides the necessity of this study. Additionally this chapter also provided more context to operationalize how AD is a culturally sustaining space for its participants, how their Black lives and literacies matter in school and in out-of-school contexts, and how their perceptions and understandings within debate connect to their continued engagements with their schools, families, and communities.

Chapter 6 will provide a comprehensive examination of how the student-debaters in this study continue to grapple with race, (re)presentation, and resistance in both oppressive and non-oppressive debate spaces. The following chapter also examines the legacy learning and learners

within the context of debate. Lastly, it speaks to the high school-to-college debate pipeline, a thread that the National Association for Urban Debate Leagues continues to provide ongoing support for Urban Debate Leagues, like Action Debate through their programming, funding, and volunteerism in urban cities and schools.

## CHAPTER 6: “WE STILL MAKE THINGS HAPPEN”: EXAMINING *LEGACY*

### *LEARNING AND THE HIGH SCHOOL TO COLLEGE DEBATE PIPELINE*

*Debating in college is similar and different from when I debated in high school. I still have to practice a lot now, like I did then, but it’s on an elevated level now. One aspect that’s different from high school is that my college team is larger and we have more resources to use when we practice and when we travel to tournaments.*

(Interview with Hawk, 10/2015)

*In a lot of ways, sometimes I feel like my experiences as a college debater are an extension from when I was in high school. Since I attend and debate at a Black college, I’m always feeling supported. My coach has my back and so do my teammates. And in return, I have theirs. Similar to UDLs, our team doesn’t have a lot of resources, but we still make things happen.*

(Interview with Toucan, 10/2015)

With the growth and expansion of UDLs across the country, there have been exponential efforts to increase high school debate participation. Due to this, the actions and resources to forge high school debate participation with college access and being coached and mentored by college debaters has also grown. During my debate tenure, as both a student and coach, the frequency with which I practiced, debated, coached, and learned on college campuses was regular and recurring. In many ways, my connection to debate is and will always be linked to my exposure to college students, colleges, and universities. In these same settings, I was also coached and mentored by Black students, coaches, parents of debaters, and other community members. The lessons learned in these spaces allowed me to appreciate the historical and contemporary meanings within the Black debate community.

When seeking to understand that it is indeed possible for Blacks, namely Black youth, to learn from and within authentic and affirming communities, Gibbs (2015) suggests that *communities of possibility* exist to embrace students learning from teachers, parents, and community members. She argues, “Examples abound throughout every era of American history. For example, many African Americans risked their lives to become literate for the possibility of

freedom and access to education” (Anderson, 1998; Perry, Steele & Hilliard, 2003, p. 51). Billings (2006) notes that the issues with inequitable schooling and the marginalization of African American youth are connected to an educational debt that is owed to African American students. Considering this, I argue that Black student-debaters, coaches, and others in the debate community need to be provided with spaces that assist them in becoming better debaters, feeling supported in all debate spaces, which sometimes include racially hostile ones. I became a debate coach because I felt affirmed and supported as a debate student. I was afforded opportunities that granted me admission to high school and pre-college extra-curricular and debate programs, including attending a seven-week debate institute, prior to graduating high school. In these contexts, I embraced endless possibilities, which was an important factor in me being admitted to college.

Given all of this, I am, have been, and continue to be sustained in these spaces as what I am characterizing and defining as a *legacy learner*, the sharing of knowledge that occurs within the AD community from debate coaches, peer student-debaters, debate supporters (i.e. family members, judges, school officials, policymakers, administrators) and others who have had experience with debate. Within the context of debate and this chapter, I will highlight the voices and experiences of ADers – both in high school and college. Additionally, I will illuminate the explicit and strategic ways in which debate supporters, like Lorikeet and the Executive Director, Goldfinch, of AD created and supported learning and professional development opportunities for students and coaches.

## **Legacy Learning**

In order to draw from legacy learning, it is imperative that Black student-debaters are situated in communities or spaces where individuals, such as debate coaches, peer student-debaters, debate supporters, and others who have had experience with debate can offer them



resources for debate success, which most times leads to academic success. Oftentimes, in addition to high schools, these communities and spaces are evidenced on the campuses of colleges and universities. Debate coach and activist Rose-Reid (2008) asserts that the college and university policy debate community has become increasingly interested in diversifying the racial representations at the collegiate level. Given that Black representation in postsecondary spaces has been low, debate organizations, such as the NAUDL, have worked to address this gap. In doing so, the NAUDL – though largely concerned with increasing the participation and awareness of urban high school debaters – it also supports the relationship from high school to college debate access. Considering that the NAUDL, AD, and other debate entities have been in existence for many years, the student-debaters, like me, have been sustained in these debate communities and spaces. Features of their sustaining were revealed through their cultural, social, and academic developments, from their positive racial identities and from their belief in debate serving as a vehicle for high school to college with matriculation. Specific examples of this included AD participants debating on college campuses across the country, forwarding their positive racial identities as Black student-debaters in trying times where antiblackness was prevalent – as discussed in Chapters 3 and 4 – and enacting multiple literacies that led to their sustaining teaching and learning, allowing them to advance their thinking and debating as students and coaches – as evidenced in Chapter 5.

Additionally, as a legacy learner, having learned from individuals within the debate community since the 90s, I am positioning myself as a sustained legacy learner, alongside the participants in this study. Rogoff (2003) explains the importance of students, specifically students of color in community contexts, learning culturally in communities through active participation. My enthusiasm and motivation for creating and employing such a term as legacy learner stemmed

from the multiple communities and spaces I learned with and from debate supporters that was an important factor in my being a successful debater and student in school. Likewise, it was crucial to position my thinking and learning in all debate spaces, but especially in ones that were racially hostile. Being associated with such communities and spaces posits what Yosso (2005) defines as *community cultural wealth*, “Providing youth of color with stories and resources meant to inspire their academic success and create cultures of possibility” (p. 78). While analyzing the varied debate experiences of Robin, Crane, Macaw, Toucan, Hawk, and Lorikeet apart from and in connection to my own, I comprehended that for them as AD supporters, the ways in which they were legacy learners and engaging in legacy learning were also connected to their families being involved with their debate identities, who regularly supported them in their debate communities and spaces by attending tournaments, driving them (and sometimes their teammates) to and from debate practices and tournaments, serving as judges at tournaments, purchasing food for tournaments, and attending professional development workshops.

Similarly, when thinking of the word legacy, I am reminded of the African Proverb, “It takes a village to raise a child!” As a Black woman who believes in these words and its robust and powerful meaning, my village is filled with loved ones from all walks of life, narratives, and counternarratives. Still, in this same village are members of the debate community who have taught me, cried with me, laughed with me, and driven me across the state of Michigan to attend debate tournaments. Further, the word legacy is used in diversified ways in Black communities. For example, when an individual is interested in pledging or joining a sorority or fraternity and they have family members who already belong to sororities and fraternities, they are considered legacy in the Black Greek-letter community. As family members of legacy Greek-lettered organizations, they are able to listen, learn, dialogue, and then decide if they, too, want to become a part of such

a legacy. Although this example is in the context of sororities and fraternities, the type of legacy learning is also visible in debate communities and spaces.

In essence, for me, and from the forthcoming reflections and understandings from the AD community is linked to being supported and sustained by a village via legacy learning. As I investigated how the ADers and the AD program embodied validating practices of its student-debaters and coaches, I was able to understand why these oral, written, and performative practices in debate were important for them. In the previous chapters, I have explained how the features of the *Debate Star of Legacy Learning*, as listed below in Figure 14, operate in the lives of Black student-debaters, coaches, and debate supporters. I will continue to do so in this chapter.

## DEBATE STAR OF LEGACY LEARNING

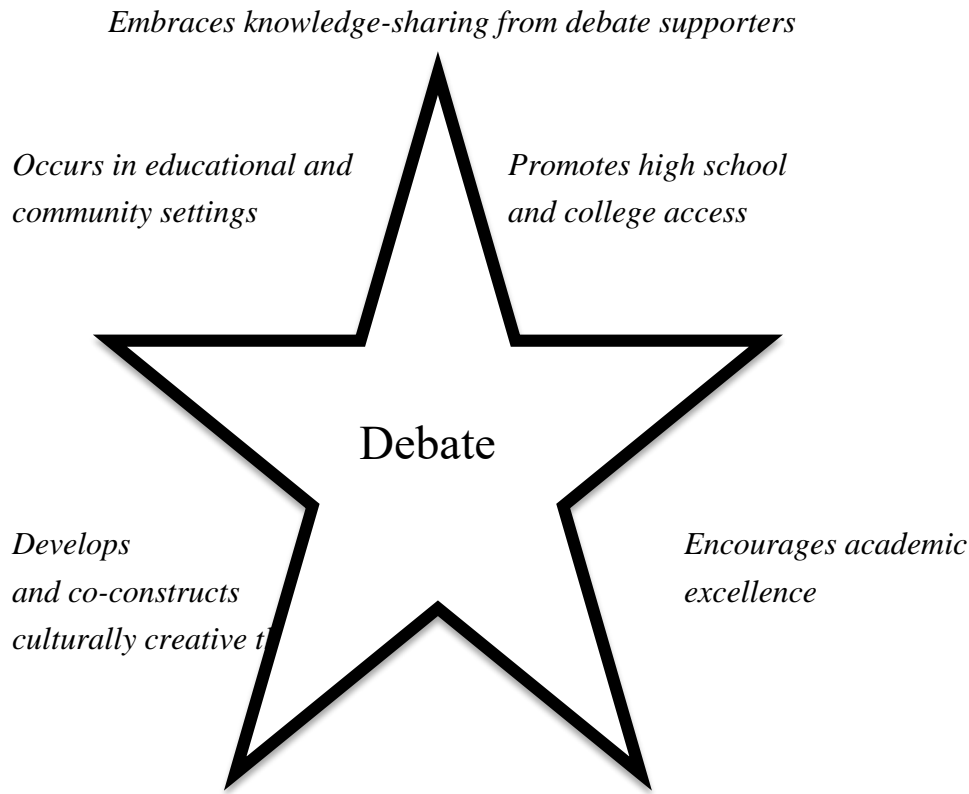


Figure 13: Debate Star of Legacy Learning

Figure 13 illustrates the *Debate Star of Legacy Learning*. Naming the five descriptions of legacy learning provides a more in-depth portrait of its meaning and significance and echoes how each point occurred within the chapters of this dissertation. It is paramount and relevant to note that during my time as a debate coach, I did not work alone in my role. My friend, colleague, and now partner, Kingfisher, and I created the team together. Engaging in daily and weekly dialogue allowed us to co-construct with our students, in an effort to provide our students with learning opportunities within school and outside of school. Similar to this, we also welcomed their culturally creative thinking and knowledge-sharing. Faced with stories of struggle and success, we sought to centralize the activity of debate within the lives of our students. With each practice and

debate delivery at tournaments, our debaters grew in extraordinary ways. Their oral and written literacies led to them competing locally, regionally, and nationally.

Prior to such successes, they were often characterized from deficit-framed perspectives and viewpoints. While willingly being coached and mentored by Kingfisher and me - they learned how to navigate such lexical lesions. In this way, Kingfisher and I embraced them as stars, which served as the impetus and inspiration leading to the “Debate Star of Legacy Learning.” Our individual and collective stories are still being actualized as we continue to support AD and other debate communities and spaces. I would not be able to engage in a study as this, if I had not joined the debate team in 1995 and co-created a team with Kingfisher in 2008. My choice to include Kingfisher’s experiences in this chapter honors and celebrates our individual and collective journey of legacy learning in debate coupled with the main participants in this study. In doing so, I am disrupting the implicit and explicit notions that Blacks are often incapable of being associated with academic success.

### **The Presence and Absence of Legacy Learning in Multiple Contexts**

**Legacy Learning in High School.** In reflecting about the differing nature of communities and spaces that evoke legacy learning for Black debaters and debate supporters, it is necessary to examine how high schools achieve or do not achieve this. Throughout this chapter, I will continue to forge the idea of legacy learning when it is both absent and present in the AD community. Specifically, the voices and experiences of the participants in this chapter will highlight how they perceived their engagement with debate across high school, college, and other debate space contexts. Hearing from Robin, Crane, Macaw, Toucan, Hawk, Lorikeet, Kingfisher, and Goldfinch through their interviews will provide further analysis from their views as high school debaters, college debaters, coaches and Executive Director.

Across each interview, I asked the AD participants to discuss their experiences with learning while in multiple debate settings and how their involvements with learning impacted their debate maturation. For Robin, a senior high school debater at Jefferson High, she saw her school as a place of learning that supported her growth in debate. As such, this forwards the debate star point of *promotes high school and college access*.

I originally did not want to attend this school. It has a reputation of being filled with bad students. So every time I tell someone where I got to school, they make mad assumptions about me. After being a student here for a while, I discovered that it wasn't that bad. Being a part of the debate team and practicing a few times a week after school gave me the room to grow and learn. I even studied the evidence when I went home and began to think that I could even be a college student.  
(Robin's Interview, October 2015).

As Robin shared, her uncertainties with being a student at Jefferson High stemmed from the school having a negative reputation. As someone who previously had behavior and academic issues at her previous schools, she was hesitant to attend Jefferson High. Instead of internalizing what she heard and already knew about Jefferson High, she decided to remain there to try to see it as a place and space in which she could possibly thrive as a student. Her decision to not leave Jefferson High led to her joining the debate team and learning from her peers and coaches. If Robin would have enrolled in another high school, she would not have been able to report positive involvements with legacy learning at Jefferson High.

Another component of Robin's interview that stood out to me were her expressions of how her learning continued beyond the school context. Specifically, she exclaimed, "I even studied the evidence when I went home." This is essential to evaluate, considering home for Robin also was representative of her community, which speaks to how the debate star of legacy learning *occurs in educational and community settings*. In a time where the narratives of Black students and debaters are comprised of inadequate and insufficient information, Robin's pride with connecting her

school to home life offered a counternarrative that enriches the positive experiences of Black debaters. This idea was not specific to Robin, but was also present in other student-debater participant responses. For Macaw, a junior at Alter Academy, he saw learning and debate as being synonymous. Since he and his partner often experienced success at local and regional tournaments, I asked him more about this in an October 2015 interview.

- Raven:** What makes you and your partner successful when debating?  
**Macaw:** It definitely starts with what we learn from Lorikeet and use while we're at school and at practice.  
**Raven:** Ok. Say more about that.  
**Macaw:** Because we practice more after school than we did when we first started, I think that plays a part what information we get and how often we get it.  
**Raven:** Is that important to you? If so, why?  
**Macaw:** If we didn't practice, we wouldn't be able to get better. I want to go to college and I think I may want to debate in college so what we're doing now in high school can impact what colleges we get into and what other kinds of opportunities.

After asking Macaw if he had an example of something he used in practice that was important to him, he shared the image below.

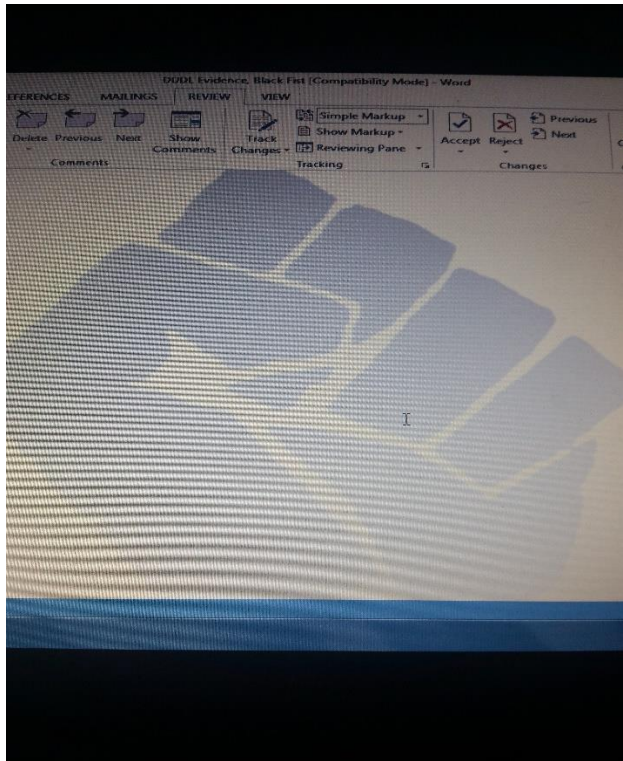


Figure 14: Macaw's Black Fist Artifact

Figure 14 is a raised Black fist. Another example of Macaw and his teammates demonstrating their fervor with a raised Black fist was shown in Chapter 4 (see Figure 6). However, the difference between the figures is that one is a photo of him and his teammates and Figure 14 is a photo of what he and Crane use as flow paper when debating. They would write on this in debate rounds and have the template saved on their computers for debating and flowing purposes. Again, flowing is necessary in a debate round. When attempting to counter an opponent's arguments, debaters must take notes or flow what they say. As Black debaters, Macaw and Crane acquired the Black fist template from a Black college debater who coaches and mentors them at tournaments. In this way, Crane and Macaw were operating from what the debate star suggests as *embraces knowledge-sharing from debate supporters*. When asked how he first engaged with it, Macaw stated:



I use that fist for all of my speeches. I write them down and type them. I got it from our college-student coach who comes to our high school to assist Lorikeet. He's mad cool. I definitely plan to use it in college too.

An additional artifact that Macaw shared was a photo of him on the news, after being interviewed for his positive experiences and engagements with debate. He received this opportunity due to learning he was undergoing as a high school debater.



Figure 15: Macaw's News Artifact

Both artifacts expressed his appreciation for debate in general and his college-student debate coach. Similar to this, Figure 15 further supports my argument in Chapter 4 that analyzed how and why Macaw suggested he turned to Fox 2 News to assist with him desiring to become a better debater. To reiterate, he shared that he watched Fox 2 News and YouTube videos to identify certain

Black orators he sought to emulate, as it related to their speaking and listening prowess. Doing so was imperative for him, since he embodied a shy and quiet nature, before joining his school's debate team at Alter Academy. However, he also stated that in addition to viewing and listening to various YouTube videos, he also sees his growth from the lens of being supported by his debate partner, Macaw, his debate coach, Lorikeet, and others within the AD community. These notions support my previous arguments that suggest Black debaters have the chance to provide counternarratives of the stories that are often told about them, which highlight them as struggling students who cannot attain excellence, whether within debate or academic settings. Moreover, Macaw's insertion of himself and how he learned from and with his peers and coach supports my offering of the importance of legacy learning and how it occurs in multiple contexts.

Another perspective that is important to highlight here is that of Goldfinch. As the person who is the Executive Director (ED) of AD, facilitates several of the aspects within AD, secures funding sources, and runs the tournaments, the absence of Goldfinch's role would mean that AD debaters would not have many of the opportunities that they do. Weekly, she sends correspondences to the students, coaches, board members, to invite them to professional development opportunities, to inform and remind them of upcoming tournaments, and to relay and respond to many other inquiries she receives. She expounds upon all of this more in a June 2015 interview.

Serving in my role provides me with so much joy. I came here after over 10 years of running another UDL. I've seen some of the most shy debaters get involved with debate at the beginning of the season and go on to win national tournaments by the end of the season. It's so amazing to witness. I love what I do and how it provides our debaters with all sorts of opportunities, while they're in high school.

Figure 16 shows an example of the debate season for first three months for high school students. Goldfinch, the ED sends out this calendar to students, coaches, and others within the AD community.

August						
M	T	W	T	F	S	
						15 <sup>th</sup> -20 <sup>th</sup> Summer Debate Institute
1	2	3	4	5	6	19 <sup>th</sup> Coaches Cookout
8	9	10	11	12	13	31 <sup>st</sup> Board Fundraiser Breakfast
15	16	17	18	19	20	and Legal Connection Reception
22	23	24	25	26	27	
29	30	31				
September						
M	T	W	T	F	S	
			1	2	3	15 <sup>th</sup> - DICKENSON WRIGHT TRNY
5	6	7	8	9	10	21 <sup>st</sup> Principal's Reception
12	13	14	15	16	17	23 <sup>RD</sup> Student Recruitment Day
19	20	21	22	23	24	23 <sup>rd</sup> -24 <sup>th</sup> Educator's Institute (PD)
26	27	28	29	30		28 <sup>th</sup> Student Ambassadors
October						
M	T	W	T	F	S	
					1	4 <sup>th</sup> ON YOUR FEET Workshop
3	4	5	6	7	8	7 <sup>th</sup> -8 <sup>th</sup> MASTER TRNY 1
10	11	12	13	14	15	7 <sup>th</sup> -8 <sup>th</sup> Yom Kippur
17	18	19	20	21	22	12 <sup>th</sup> Educator PD
24	25	26	27	28	29	14 <sup>th</sup> and 15 <sup>th</sup> WSU Tournament
31						19 <sup>th</sup> Student Ambassadors
						21-23 <sup>rd</sup> New Trier Tournament

Figure 16: 3-Month Action Debate Calendar

Including an example of the AD calendar illuminates the many opportunities, occasions, and occurrences that students in AD have to debate, their coaches have to attend professional development, and other individuals within the AD have to support its efforts. Highlighted in purple are the tournaments and/or debate workshops that are held at both high schools, colleges, and universities. Figure 17 shows a correspondence that was sent to Goldfinch by a coach outside of the AD community. Whether an individual is a part of AD or not, Goldfinch is intentional about disseminating information that promotes the activity and understanding of debate.

----- Begin forwarded message -----  
**Subject: Future of MI debate meeting at MSU**

**Dear Debate Colleagues,**

**Jay, former debater and current communications consultant, has graciously agreed to facilitate a meeting of coaches at the Evergreen College debate tournament at 2 p.m. on Saturday, Dec. 10, to discuss the "future of debate in Michigan." This meeting will continue the discussion that started among coaches at the MSU tournament last year. Many coaches have expressed an interest in discussing the future direction of debate in Michigan. The purpose of the meeting is to discuss how we can increase participation in the activity and meet the needs of existing teams. We welcome the participation of all coaches and interested parties in this discussion. The time of the meeting was based on Jay's availability and will take place immediately following awards at the MSU tournament. If you are unable to join us in person we will have electronic access through "go to meeting." Rudy will be sending details on electronic access to the meeting in the coming days. We hope that all of you will be able to participate so that we can get all parties input. Please feel free to forward this email to other coaches or interested parties we may have missed on our email list.**

**Sincerely,**

**A.B.  
Director of Debate**

Figure 17: Goldfinch's Debate Correspondence

Again, prior to the start of each season, Goldfinch shows her commitment to the AD program and community through her presence and ongoing actions to secure funding and opportunities for student-debaters and coaches. At the start of each debate season, she provides hard and electronic copies of the calendar for those in AD. Additionally, she sent an email of Figure 17 to the AD community. Although student-debaters and their coaches are expected to remember the dates of events that they plan to attend or participate in, Goldfinch still sends reminder emails to them.

Aside from the tournaments and workshops, the calendar also highlights other important dates for high school debaters. As an example, at the conclusion of every debate season, AD has an awards ceremony for its debaters, coaches, parents, and other supporters. Usually held in May, the awards ceremony is at a theatre or in a conference room that can seat more than 100 people. I argue that stating this gives life and reason as to why the AD space is for more than just the student-debaters. Specifically, having supporters in the form of family members, community members, policymakers, school officials, and others reaffirm the lives and debating of the Black student-participants in Action Debate. As a former high school debater, stemming from AD – I do not recall my coach and peers being cognizant and communicating with daily messages or correspondences to notify us of more debate opportunities, whether inside or outside of the AD setting. I note this here because Goldfinch, although not a student-debater, was still a necessary individual and her role allowed student-debaters to grow, grapple with ideas and information, and insert their Black counternarratives in debate rounds and competitions. In this way, AD is a culturally sustaining space that has existed for many years and has grown to include the voices and experiences of debate supporters – whether they originated from debate backgrounds or not – it was evident through my observations, field notes, and interviews that they felt affirmed and valued in the space. This framing speaks to how the five points of the *Debate Star of Legacy Learning* is operationalized in Action Debate. Within this locale, legacy learning can be seen occurring among students, coaches, parents, judges, and others. This space celebrates the culminating achievements and accomplishments of all of the aforementioned.

**Legacy Learning in College.** While the previous section espoused the legacy learning in high school settings, the following section will feature and highlight the realities of college debaters, Hawk and Toucan. Similarly, it will also reveal deliberations shared with me from

Kingfisher and Goldfinch. Both Hawk and Toucan were high school debaters in AD before being accepted to college. Their trajectories have been akin and dissimilar. Given that they both expressed to me that within the college debate circuit they travel more, more traveling also posed more challenges, which led to instances of legacy learning not being present in certain spaces.

The opening of this chapter led with Hawk's words stating that he attends a university that has a lot of resources. While this is usually viewed as something positive, Hawk comprehended that money certainly is not everything. In the words of the talking rapper, P. Diddy, "More money, more problems." As one of the only Black college debaters on his team. Hawk attends the nationally-ranked Evergreen College. Having won the National Debate Tournament in 2004, 2005, and 2010, the college policy debaters at Evergreen College have certainly earned their bragging rights. However, Hawk's stories of being a Black debater at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) is one that we have heard before. As I listened to him during our interview discussing his realities, I found myself reminiscing on my own Black experiences as a former debater and coach. We explore some of his accounts in an October 2015 interview.

**Raven:** So, how do you like debating at Evergreen State? And how is it different or similar to debating with AD?

**Hawk:** I travel more. When I was in AD, my school and team didn't have a lot of money or a large budget so we pretty much only participated in local and regional tournaments.

**Raven:** Is that something you enjoy?

**Hawk:** I like traveling and being able to be a coach for high school students in the summer. It also helps that I get free room and board when I coach at Rouge State.

**Raven:** Ok. Cool. Basically, it's a good tradeoff for you. I noticed that you're one of the only Black debaters here. Tell me why you think that is the case.

**Hawk:** Well, to begin, there just aren't a lot of Black college policy debaters or debaters period. It's really sad too. So not only do I not see many Blacks on my team, but even when I'm coaching high schoolers at Woodward University. Woodward is different from Rouge State in that way. I'm used to being around majority Black debaters at Rouge, but at Evergreen and Woodward, that's not the case. So I pretty much have to get creative with

how I debate and sometimes interact with my peers. I have even had to call some of my fellow Black debate peers in debate to help me think through arguments and other ideas.

As Hawk shared, there were times we both shook our heads in despair, reflecting on the absence of Black bodies in collegiate debate spaces. He felt as if more efforts needed to be made to attract Black debaters beyond just engaging with debate in high school. Considering the funding sources are larger at colleges, Hawk was able to appreciate his exposure to being able to walk across other college and university campuses. However, he expressed his disdain for not being able to connect with other Black debaters, both at Evergreen College and at Woodward University. Hawk revealed that each summer he looked forward to traveling back home to Aurora to work with high school debaters in AD so that he could be surrounded by other Black debaters and to engage in conversations with them that would assist with him being able to strategically debate at Evergreen College and coach at Woodward University. This notion supports the *develops and co-constructs culturally creative thinking* point on the Debate Star of Legacy Learning. Given he is a product of AD, he felt compelled and a responsibility to help sustain the positive nature of AD. Later in his interview, Hawk revealed the idea of legacy learning by stating, “It always feels good to go home and see my people. I’m not the only one who is in college, but returns to Aurora to give back. There are a lot of us and we learn from each other.” In this way, Hawk preferred to be around other debaters who looked like him, despite receiving free room and board at Woodward University in the summer. In this way, he cited considered legacy learning as the support that carried him through some of his experiences as one of the only Black college debaters at a PWI.

Figure 18 shows Hawk teaching high school debaters at the summer institute that Evergreen College hosts every year. The institute lasts from two weeks to seven weeks. Interested high schoolers can choose which weeklong workshops they desire to attend.





Figure 18: Hawk Teaching at Evergreen College

Although Hawk shared that some of concerns with the lack of Black presence on college campuses, looking back, I would have liked to inquire further about his thoughts on how he proposed something be done to rectify the absence of Black debate bodies. Without knowing this, Hawk still demonstrated a critical awareness of the differences between his upbringing with debating in Aurora at Rouge State in comparison to his newer debate spaces at Evergreen College and Woodward University. Despite being one of the only Black debaters on his team, Hawk's love and adoration for debate kept him from desiring to quit. Tuck (2011) proclaims the reasons necessary to acknowledge what contributes to "pushing" students of color out of school spaces. She suggests that individuals name and acknowledge how school spaces can sometimes be unwelcoming for students of color.

Although Hawk noticed and defined what a lack of Black debate bodies means, it is still important to complicate his points. I argue that Hawk was still participating in legacy learning, although he was not necessarily learning from other Black debaters and debate supporters when he was in some spaces at Evergreen College and Woodward University. His comments, "So not only do I not see many Blacks on my team, but even when I'm coaching high schoolers at

Woodward University.” As witnessed in Figure 19, the high school students in the photo were listening and learning from Hawk. In essence, they were participating as high schoolers in legacy learning, considering Hawk is an alumni of a debate space. Knowing all of this now, I think further studies will propel me to analyze what it means when legacy learning is not being reciprocated and what that means to the learner.

**Legacy Learning at a Historically Black College.** Toucan, a college debater at a private historically Black college, South College, introduced to us at the start of this chapter how he feels supported at his institution. Recalling his words, he stated, “Similar to UDLs, our team doesn’t have a lot of resources, but we still make things happen.” When Toucan uttered this, there was so much pride in his voice. He exerted a happiness that was void from the words that Hawk spoke. Although Hawk and Toucan both originated from the AD community, their college worlds are very different. However, even in such differences, both of their voices and experiences provide narratives and counternarratives of Black debate embodiment. In my October 2015 interview with Toucan, I asked him whether or not he wishes he attended another institution of learning.

I can’t see myself being anywhere else right now. Although it’s hot as heck at South College, the camaraderie that I share with my teammates and coach make everything great and worth the challenges we do face. Since we don’t have a lot of money, we don’t travel as much as I did in AD. I’m cool with that though because being on campus here encourages me to do my best. I see my peers and debate teammates all the time. We’re all pretty much getting good grades. We study together, grocery shop together, hang out. We do our work first though. I like it here. I can be myself here.

Listening to Toucan, I immediately notice a few things. In addition to the pride that he wore on his face, I also took note of the bond he explained having with his teammates and coach. Next, I heard him quickly state that South College does not have a large debate budget. I ascertain that considering this was a phenomenon that was not new to Toucan, given the AD community did not have a lot of money, he stated that he did not and does not worry about money. Lastly, he

highlighted his academics and how his schoolwork takes precedence over shopping and other non-academic-related events. Learning from him through all of this made me want to understand more from his Black college experience. As someone who originally desired to attend Spelman College, I am often smitten by the stories and experiences I hear people have at HBCUs.

For Toucan, he happily revealed that he enjoyed being a student-debater at South College. Unlike Hawk, Toucan expressed how his college community affirmed him in ways that made him feel like he belonged there. It was not something he had to question. Unfortunately, this was not Hawk's reality. The main reason was that he was one of few Blacks on the debate team at Evergreen College. Although he did not explicitly say it, I think the ways in which he felt good when he returned to Aurora and to teach at Rouge State were feelings that he was interested in feeling more often. For Toucan, his mere presence on his campus was a validating one. He did not reveal to me that he questioned his peers or wonder where people are that look like him.

Toucan's sharing assisted me with understanding and learning from him. Still, I had a hankering to learn more. When I engaged him in dialogue about debate and his team, he said the following:

- Raven:** Tell me more about what you mean when you say you can be yourself at South College.
- Toucan:** I can dress how I want to. I can talk like I want to and essentially just do me. I don't have to feel like I have to impress anyone.
- Raven:** Ok. That makes sense, but what do you mean by you can dress and talk like you want to.
- Toucan:** I don't wear a lot of name brand clothes. I never have. I don't need to money on that kinda stuff. I'm at a Black college so I don't feel like I have to act White or be something I'm not.
- Raven:** When have you ever felt like you had to be someone else?
- Toucan:** Mainly in high school. Even though I had a great coach and teammates, Sometimes things just got ugly. Don't get me wrong, there are crazy people here too, but generally it's a community that shows love.

In his response, Toucan brought up a few significant points. Similar to Hawk, Toucan reiterated the importance of his being able to learn and be successful in college as a student-debater. When characterizing his stance on materialism, Toucan's dismissal of name brand clothing was connected to being self-aware and comfortable in his own skin. However, when he stated, "I'm at a Black college so I don't feel like I have to act White," this suggested that he is aware that in other spaces, he may feel like he has to try to assimilate to dominant White normed practices in debate and other settings. The norms of policy debate are linked to social performance and identity. This means that white, straight, economically advantaged males are the norm for successful debaters. In these same spaces, Blacks and other people of color and ethnically diverse individuals sometimes feel pressured to perform according to the White centered norms of the debate community. For Toucan, he was resisting this idea because he stated that he could dress and talk the way he wanted to.

## **Conclusion**

For Macaw, Hawk and Toucan, their awareness of their Blackness and how others perceive them calls into question DuBois' (1903) idea of double consciousness. This means that an internal conflict exists within Blacks and other marginalized groups of people. Considering this, one is "always looking at one's self through the eyes" of a racist society. This taxing and tiring practice leads to racialized individuals having low self-esteem and low self-concepts of themselves, which lends itself to self-hate, at times.

It would be easy for me to deduce that Hawk would be quicker to be the Black debater to question his worth and skills because he is surrounded by White people at a PWI and that Macaw and Toucan are in better situations because one is still in high school and is surrounded by Blacks and the other one attends an HBCU. This chapter did not seek to exclaim who was in a better

situation, but to highlight that regardless of where they attend(ed) school, they were still actively engaged in and representing all five points on the *Debate Star of Legacy Learning*, considering that in all contexts, each debater always had access to a peer who either debated with them in high school or college, or other debate supporters. These working definitions and examples of legacy learning suggest why it is necessary within debate contexts. Each and every participant developed as a debater from their interactions with legacy debaters. In this way, they all were encouraged to be academically excellent, which is also a point of the debate star. Chapter 7 will offer a discussion with implications, limitations, and forward thinking for this study.

## CHAPTER 7: BLACK DEBATERS SOARING AGAINST CAGED ODDS: SOME CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

### Caged Bird

A free bird leaps  
on the back of the wind  
and floats downstream  
till the current ends  
and dips his wing  
in the orange sun rays  
and dares to claim the sky.

But a bird that stalks  
down his narrow cage  
can seldom see through  
his bars of rage  
his wings are clipped and  
his feet are tied  
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings  
with a fearful trill  
of things unknown  
but longed for still  
and his tune is heard  
on the distant hill  
for the caged bird  
sings of freedom.

The free bird thinks of another breeze  
and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees  
and the fat worms waiting on a dawn bright lawn  
and he names the sky his own

But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams  
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream  
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied  
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings  
with a fearful trill  
of things unknown  
but longed for still  
and his tune is heard  
on the distant hill  
for the caged bird  
sings of freedom.

(Maya Angelou)

## Discussion

In the compelling words above from our Black literary ancestral giant, Maya Angelou, she invites readers to reflect upon the life of a caged bird. While first appearing in the 1983 collection, *Shaker, Why Don't You Sing*, Angelou brings to bear the struggles of a bird seeking to rise and soar above direct and indirect limitations. Parallel to this bird, we are also introduced to another bird who is free. The contrasting views of the bird who is caged and the bird who is free is representative to the ongoing struggles and experiences of Blacks and Black debaters - sometimes we are caged, desiring to get out, and sometimes, we are free to explore, create, and grow. Some of the struggles include the negative portrayals and depictions of Black youth and student-debaters, the tournament competitions that sometimes take place in racially unwelcoming spaces and debate settings, and the idea that Black youth usually do not graduate high school and attend college, if that is their desire. To combat these educational and societal ills, the Black-student debaters and supporters in this study worked together as a community to spark change in the AD program and in their occupied spaces. They became champions for social justice and Black freedom. They became free birds.

The first two stanzas characterize both the caged and free bird. She states that “A free bird leaps...and dares to claim the sky.” However, in the second stanza, when denoting the experiences of a caged bird, she exclaims, “his wings are clipped, his hands are tied so he opens his throat to sing.” In this way, although the second bird is in a caged state, it still uses its voice to utter harmonious melodies, despite whether or not it has a choir to sing in front of. The caged bird exists to sing for freedom and liberty. Angelou’s remaining letters, words, and phrases compose and create a story of majestic reckoning and retribution. Throughout her entire classical work of art,

Angelou ends with a repeated stanza - one that privileges the bird who is caged. I argue that she does this to illustrate that she envisions a world that embraces and possibly joins others to sing songs of freedom.

I open this chapter with this poem intentionally because my very name is indicative of a bird. Not just any bird - a beautiful Black bird with keen features that are distinctive and original. My mother named me Raven - not because she read the work of White poet Edgar Allan Poe, but because one day in the late 70s, while at home watching her beloved Channel 7 soap operas, one of her favorite characters was named Raven.

Additionally, I begin this chapter with beautiful poetry because of what the last stanza evokes: “The caged bird sings/with fearful trill/of things unknown/but longed for still/and his tune is heard/on distant hill/for the caged bird/sings of freedom.” Particularly, the last few lines, “for the caged bird sings of freedom” illustrates a salient point in connection to the participants in this body of work. In this study, we have learned from and with Black debaters and supporters. Their names in this study are reflective of various strong-willed birds. Birds that soar, despite the odds and circumstances. Seeking to illuminate their free and caged narratives within debate, I write this chapter, as I have all previous chapters, with their stories in mind. By sharing their narratives, often shared as counternarratives with me, they served as demonstrations of the positive ways in which they created and recreated their own agendas (Tatum, 2009) for debate through struggle and success, whether caged or free.

In 1995, when my debate career began, I was certainly a caged bird. Clothed in fear and trepidation, I was not always successful at debate tournaments. In fact, I lost a lot of rounds my first few months of debating. Still, eventually, I decided to change clothes, removing fear and trepidation and adorning myself in new garments, ones that smelled of pride and peace. Seeking



to soar in debate, looking back, I now realize that being a Raven has always been something that was supposed to be just for me. Before I or the participants in this study could soar, before they could name media injustices, before they could draw from their own Blackness and literacies, before they could be legacy learners - we all had to learn that there is a process that must take place before soaring can begin. Before songs of freedom can be bellowed.

For this study, I decided to name each participant the names of birds that reflected their stories, personalities, and meanings I found in their sharing with me. In addition, my name, Raven, again is a beautiful Black bird that is confident and inquisitive. In many ways, I shared the narratives and counternarratives of these beautiful birds in this dissertation to counter a tradition of research that sometimes omits the voices of marginalized individuals.

The metaphoric image (see Figure 19) of the Black debater as a bird will serve as my framework to approach this concluding chapter, as I offer a discussion of findings, implications, and a conclusion. I have organized this chapter to first discuss **the seeds**. In this section, I will revisit the need for this study and why my research questions were worth exploring. Next, I will discuss **the crown**. As the name suggests, in this section, I connect their thinking within the study to debate. After this, I will discuss **the wings**. The wings of a bird have important purposes. It determines the flight capabilities of a bird and whether or not the rate or speed in which they soar will be fast or slow. Its structural purpose raises the bird when preparing to soar. The wings also assist with birds obtaining nourishment. In this section, I revisit the historical debate framings discussed in chapter two and how these framings are presented in the study. Next, I discuss **the feathers**, or the participants in the study. The feathers of a bird are varied in color and noticeable from far distances. In this section, I delineate what I learned from the participants and their experiences with debate. Next, I discuss **the water**. Here, I insert more of my own understandings

and what I learned about myself as a former debater, coach, and debate advocate. I do not believe that my sharing led the participants to change their language based on my experiences. Instead, in some ways, I helped or *watered* what they already knew. Next, I will address **the field**. Here, I offer knowledge-sharing into how this study speaks to other research and how it extends it. Lastly, I discuss **the eyes**. In this section, I discuss what I see and foresee as implications this study provides for research and practice. This creative approach and lens was inspired by Muhammad's (2013) dissertation work. I also explain limitations that I saw within this work. It is my hope that debaters, students, coaches, researchers, teachers, educators, and others will see this as a story that needs to be read, in order to understand the experiences of Black debaters and how they were caged and free birds who were sustained in an urban debate community.



Figure 19: A Soaring Black Raven

### **The Seeds: Reexamining the Need for This Work**

This body of work served as a lens through which to view and understand the experiences of Black debaters and debate supporters within a sustaining urban debate community. Seeking to learn and comprehend how they viewed themselves, their participation, and how others perceived

them in connection to their Blackness and sustaining debate practices also guided this study. Specifically, I sought to answer the following questions:

- 1) *How and in what ways is Action Debate (AD) a culturally sustaining space?*
- 2) *How do students perceive and understand their participation in Action Debate as relating to debate, school, their communities, and college?*
- 3) *Are there specific literacy and culturally sustaining practices that are employed by students and coaches in the Action Debate program to prepare Black students to debate in racially sustaining or racially hostile environments?*

These questions were examined based on the need for more research within a broader historical and contemporary debate perspective. Given that the narratives of Black students and debaters are often framed from racially deficit-framed viewpoints, this study provided a counternarrative to such negative portrayals and provided a space for Black debaters and debate supporters to tell their own stories in ways that honored them. Exploring these questions was invaluable and beneficial because the participants in the study understood that they were sometimes seen as students of struggle and not students of success. I also uncovered that they are sometimes affected by these framings. To counter this, their participation and achieved successes within the debate community served as a form of resisting mainstream ideologies. Although I approached this study seeking to explore and make sense of the three preliminary questions, over time I began to understand why Black student-debaters choose to participate in Urban Debate Leagues, specifically, Action Debate. Moreover, this study allowed me to understand the varied experiences of Black student-debaters and debate supporters.

## **The Crown: Thinking and Understanding Why Debate Matters for Black Students**

Absent from some research is a chronicled account of how Black students have developed and practice literacy (Tatum & Muhammad, 2012). This absence is omitted from research, curriculum and instructional planning and policy. For this study, including literacy in connection to how students engaged with debate contributed to expanded notions of what literacy can look like beyond school spaces. Debating for the participants was important. Without it, some of them reported they would not have been able to improve their reading, writing, and speaking practices. Not limiting literacy to just these three categories, Robin, Macaw, Crane, Hawk, and Toucan also positioned how they inserted their Blackness at debate practice and at tournaments, which served as another form of literacy for them. Considering they all were a part of AD and debated together and against each other at times, they were always learning from one another. In this way, I argue that they were legacy learners who were participating in legacy learning.

**Self-Reflection.** Reflection is defined and sometimes redefined within sociocultural scholarship as multilayered, fluid, and relational. It is also shaped by cultural and social environments as well as literacy practices (Sutherland, 2005). This understanding is connected to Gee's (2001) idea that identity is akin to representation and reflection. Both identity and self-reflection are situated and linked to sociocultural, institutional, and historical forces. The Black-student debaters in this study wrote, storied, and reflected about their debate experiences to me individually and collectively. Demonstrating this, they enacted multiple ways of allowing their self-reflections to help with their meaning-making when facing situations that led to them struggling or being successful in debate. Giving evidence to this suggests that Henderson's (1992) ideological view of "voice" in the lives of Black students is multi-vocal.

Similar to this, the self-reflections of the Black student-debaters and supporters were not only personal or individual, but they were socially constructed and centered through their experiences and placing in environments and discourse communities (Gee, 2000; Street, 2003). Many of the student-debaters commented that their literacy and literature use in debate resulted from their desire to move away from the boring and dense evidence that did not resemble their Black lives and identities. Because they saw their individual and collective stories and narratives as important enough to be entered and voiced in debate rounds, they were able to continue this type of performance debating in Action Debate and in other spaces. Hawk, for example, felt he went from one culturally sustaining space in AD to another one as a college student who decided to attend a Black college, where he was offered a debate scholarship. Still, in a different college context, Toucan – who attended and debated at a predominately white institution – still felt supported in some ways, although he was the only young Black man student-debater on his team. His level of respect and value, for him, was mainly evidenced and felt when he interacted with his AD peers throughout the debate season and in the summers. These situations suggest that Black students and other students of color can be culturally sustained across different academic, educational, institutional, and social contexts. In this way, this study posits how and why AD was significant in the lives of the Black student-debaters and supporters.

### **The Wings: The Context of the Study**

From the photo artifacts to the Black fist flow paper used when debating, I found that some of the debaters drew from varied forms of inspiration, many of them rooted in the Black community, when preparing to debate at tournaments. In many ways, the multiple forms of literacy added to their wingspan, which is needed when preparing to soar. Writing out their speeches, repeating speaking drills, listening to hip hop and other music, reciting poetry at practice and

tournaments, and inserting themselves in other debate spaces, including college and university campuses, all led to the historical and contemporary framings of debate literacy development and culturally sustaining practices. Later in this chapter, I will further discuss my idea of legacy learning and how it was birthed due to my own debate engagements.

### **The Feathers: Flocking Together Across Similarities and Differences**

Robin, Crane, Macaw, Hawk, Toucan, Lorikeet, Goldfinch, and Kingfisher shared similar and different experiences with their participation in debate. During my time and learning with and from them, I analyzed the data from interviews, observations, fieldnotes, and collected artifacts. By collecting and engaging these methods, I learned more through their understandings, resistances, narratives, and counternarratives. Some of these lessons were centered around race, discrimination, support, cultural awareness, identity, academic excellence, and other connections to debate. There is a common phrase which states, “Birds of a feather flock together.” The notion of this statement was evidenced in the AD community. In this way, as a teacher-educator and researcher, it was important for me to illuminate the voices of all of the participants. Through their sharing of debate, I sought to hone in on how their identities with debate were critical for all of them. However, criticality did not always equate to them being successful at tournaments. I also found that even when they experienced loss at tournaments, overall, they did not internalize such losses to mean that they were not capable of achieving success in another round or at future tournaments. They inspired each other in the winning and losing process. In this way, they continued to flock together.

### **The Water: My Involvement with Debate**

When an individual waters something, he or she is concerned about its growth. Considering this, I view the roles of coaches, educators, debate supporters, and other persons in debate

communities as individuals who water the minds of debaters. I came to this study desiring to learn more from participants in the AD community, since I felt and feel like I represent an example of someone who was culturally sustained. Entering the AD community in 1995 and still being able to reflect on both positive and negative experiences has led to my caged and free thinking. As someone still involved with the community 21 years later, I always look forward to being in the AD space. Although I am no longer a coach to an active team of students, I am often still called upon to speak to students and coaches, offer mentoring to novice coaches and high schoolers, facilitate debate tournaments, and other assisting roles. I always look forward to these encounters. I stopped coaching when I entered my doctoral program. The fulfillment that I received in AD almost caused me to return as a coach. However, I knew that would be very difficult to navigate as a graduate student. In one way or another, I will continue to water the minds and experiences of debaters and debate supporters. At times while interviewing the participants in this work, they often asked me questions and desired to know my views about some of the questions and phenomena that I was probing them about. I appreciated when this occurred. It gave me a chance to think deeply and address their inquiries. These exchanges also served as examples of legacy learning.

### **The Field: Outlining How This Study Aligns With and Extends Research**

Already in existence is a body of work that highlights the practices and opportunities for African American youth to make meaning through reading and discussion (Winn, 2010). This study extends the research of Winn (2010) and Wissman (2008) because it occurs in a different setting and connects literacy to other spaces. It also extends the work of Tatum's (2009) study with African American males and their writing collaborations. The collaborations and text selections are important aspects and function at the heart of literacy instruction (Moje, 2000). Situating

literature and literacy options in the lives of the AD participants allowed for opportunities for them to insert their own literate practices while navigating debate spaces. This type of functioning will help student-debaters be successful across settings and in different fields.

### **The Eyes: Implications of the Study**

**Implications for Practice.** The analysis from the findings of the study shared by AD participants tell stories that speak to how their debate experiences illustrate a need for more opportunities for students to engage in multiple forms of culturally sustaining debate literacies within school. For the AD participants, debate literacy practices, such as resisting negative media portrayals of them through oral and written forms of resistance, led to them seeing themselves as students of success as opposed to the ways in which the mainstream media outlets often construct their narratives as students of struggle. The data and my analysis showed that ADers were cognizant of the deficit-filled perspectives and addressed these by countering their narratives through positive postings – the authoring and sharing of positive posts online to resist and reject the negative ways in which they have been spotlighted as Blacks. To understand the damage that mainstream media inflicts upon Blacks, namely Black youth, I read literature written by Blacks to comprehend the internalizing effects this can have on Black bodies. Some AD participants were clear about how the AD community provided a space for them to interrogate these nuances and be affirmed in the process, while some of their schools did not. In this way, schools and the AD community should consider more efforts to work together to share the benefits of debate and the sustaining values it can have for students in school. Some collaborative efforts could include a better effort to reach more urban youth – beginning with introducing elementary and middle school students to the activity of debate. Specifically, offering debate teams and programs for younger



students to participate in can create and forge a generation of more youth committed to social justice issues and legacy learning.

The findings from this study also have implications for teachers and teacher education. Currently, there is a gap between the students and teachers of color. According to The Center for American Progress (2011), students of color represent over 50% of school-aged children while teachers of color make up 17% of teachers. This is troubling for the field of education. This statistic suggests that there is a need for teachers of color. Teacher education programs exist to prepare pre-service and in-service teachers to teach students. However, given the many ways that we know this is not taking place, there must be a push for teacher education programs to be more culturally relevant and sustaining by drawing from what Paris & Alim (2014) define as asset-based pedagogies.

It is imperative that teachers are not only aware that more affirming and validating teaching needs to occur in their classrooms, but that they intentionally work to teach in these ways. Adding to CSP, this study offers how important it is for more Black teachers and coaches to teach within the AD community. Although only Crane and Macaw were Lorikeet's students, Robin, Hawk, and Toucan also appreciated her coaching and encouragement. In addition, these student-debaters reported why the presence of a Black man and coach, Kingfisher, was necessary for their development and learning. Both Lorikeet and Kingfisher are Black teachers and coaches to Black students and other students of color. Their presence, thinking, and doing attracted more students and coaches to the AD program and community. This was a much needed change since the reinstatement of AD in 2008.

Upon my early encounters with AD in the late 90s, there were hundreds of high school debaters and majority Black and Brown coaches. However, when AD dismantled, after being in

operation for more than 20 years, the absence of the program and Black and Brown staff left a void in the Aurora community. These misfortunes were answered when committed faculty and staff at Rogue State and the NAUDL worked hard to bring Goldfinch to Aurora to revitalize the AD program and community. Members in the AD program and community have also worked to collaborate with Goldfinch to expand debate opportunities for Aurora youth. During the years when I did not serve as a debate coach because of pursuing doctoral studies, I deemed it important to maintain a presence within AD for the betterment of sustaining the debate and literate lives of the urban debaters and supporters, working to grow the program. I am still doing this work. At times, it is challenging and downright ugly, especially considering funding has become an issue. However, I contend that some of the most beautiful things occur from unattractive situations. I am here to serve as the eyes to see AD remain an option for Black and Brown individuals.

**Forward Thinking.** Throughout my efforts to tell the rich stories of the participants in this study, it is my hope that my written engagements will have implications on multiple levels and in many contexts. On the individual programmatic level of AD, this research study is the first to exist. Findings from the study and the ways in which the participants felt sustained in the AD community and how such sustaining led to their successful experiences with debate can serve as a guide or reason to engage in more research. Moving forward, the offering of additional research can highlight the varied testimonies of debate supporters, such as AD staff, parents, and other individuals who attend participating AD schools. Learning from them can assist with the AD program strengthening any areas of improvement while sustaining the ones that are working well.

Next, given the need to increase Black voices in all debate spaces, this body of work can contribute to local, regional, and national conversations and actions around Black debate participation. This is essential, considering the lack of Black debate representation in collegiate

communities and spaces. Ultimately, the time is now for thinking and moving toward legacy learning to continue to occur in settings that support marginalized debaters – specifically Black debaters. Let me boldly state that while I encourage more research to be done by others that speaks to the importance of UDLs and urban debate communities for Black debaters, I am not waiting for it to happen. As a legacy learner and co-creator of the Stanbrough Star, I will always do this work and share my counternarrative as a former Black debater and coach and gladly proclaim how serving in both roles over a span of 20 years has led to my sustained voice and participation in debate communities. The real stories of the birds as debate participants that I learned from and with led to the metaphoric image of a bird that I intentionally crafted throughout this chapter. It is my sincere desire to continue to learn from and with caged and free birds to fly and sing with them. Individually, our sound is mighty, but collectively the lyrics to our songs powerfully tell of the Black experience, soaring together. I invite you to learn the words and sing along. And if you cannot sing - I implore you to hum, rap, freestyle, or make some kind of noise. For there is room for you in this quest for collaborative constructions of freedom. Are you ready to soar?

## **APPENDICES**

## **APPENDIX A: Dissertation Study Timeline and Schedule of Action Debate Practices & Tournaments**

### **March 2015 - May 2016**

March 2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conduct observations of after-school debate practices</li> <li>• Collect samples of teaching and coaching work and artifacts</li> <li>• Interview teacher/coach/student participants</li> <li>• Transcribe interview</li> <li>• Attend weekend debate tournament</li> </ul>
April 2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue observations &amp; interviews</li> <li>• Transcribe interviews</li> </ul>
May 2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transcribe interviews</li> <li>• Attend end-of-the-year debate awards ceremony and reception</li> </ul>
June 2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conduct observations</li> <li>• Collect samples of teaching and coaching work and artifacts</li> <li>• Attend weekend debate tournament</li> </ul>
July 2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attend summer debate institute</li> <li>• Conduct observations and interviews</li> <li>• Transcribe interviews</li> <li>• Check-in with committee members</li> </ul>

Table 7: Dissertation Study Timeline

Table 7 (cont'd)

August 2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Attend summer debate institute</li><li>• Conduct observations and interviews</li><li>• Transcribe interviews</li><li>• Analyze data</li></ul>
September 2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Attend weekend debate tournament</li><li>• Conduct observations</li><li>• Conduct follow-up interviews</li><li>• Continue analyzing and coding data</li></ul>
October 2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Conduct observations</li><li>• Conduct follow-up interviews</li></ul>
November & December 2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Finish transcriptions</li><li>• Check-in with committee members</li></ul>
January 2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Continue writing study findings</li><li>• Submit a draft of the first chapter of my findings</li><li>• Check in at least two times with committee members</li></ul>
February 2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Continue writing study findings</li><li>• Submit a draft of second chapter on findings.</li><li>• Check in at least two times with committee members</li></ul>
March 2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Continue writing study findings</li><li>• Submit a draft of third chapter on findings</li><li>• Check in at least two times with committee members.</li></ul>

Table 7 (cont'd)

April 2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Synthesize all feedback from chapter draft.</li> </ul>
May 2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Write final draft and submit to committee in preparation for defense.</li> <li>• Defend Dissertation</li> </ul>

### **Schedule of Action Debate Practices & Tournaments**

March – June 2015	After-school debate practices & 3 weekend debate tournaments	2 times per week, 2 hours; (Fridays, 3:00 p.m. – 8:00 p.m.; Saturdays, 8:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.)
July – August 2015	2-week Summer Debate Institute	Monday – Friday (8:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.)
September – October 2015	After-school debate practices & 1 weekend debate tournament	2 times per week, 2 hours; (Fridays, 3:00 p.m. – 8:00 p.m.; Saturdays; 8:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.)

Table 8: Schedule of Action Debate Practices & Tournaments

## **APPENDIX B: Teacher & Debate Coach Participant Interview Protocol (1)**

- 1) Tell me about how you became a teacher? How long have you been teaching?
- 2) Tell me about how you became a debate coach? How long have you been coaching? How did you learn to coach?
- 3) Talk to me about how you became involved with debate? Action Debate?
- 4) How do you go about selecting students to be a part of your debate team?
- 5) Describe the students you've coached in the past? Were they students of color? Were they mostly freshman, sophomores, juniors, or seniors? What are they doing now?
- 6) Talk to me about one or two former (and current) students who stand out to you?
- 7) Do you have a specific teaching or coaching moment that you are most proud of?
- 8) Are there specific ways, materials, or activities you are committed to or use when teaching and coaching your debaters that relate to their ethnic identities?
- 9) Are there particular materials or texts that your debaters like to use when debating? How do they introduce their ideas to you?
- 10) In what ways do you prepare your students in after-school practices that might be different when you coach them at weekend tournaments and competitions?
- 11) What have been some contributing factors that have led to remain active in Action Debate?
- 12) Do you travel and encourage your debaters to compete outside of Action Debate? Why? What have those experiences been like?
- 13) If there was something you could change about Action Debate and at outside debate tournaments – what would it be?
- 14) What are your thoughts on debate, in relation to education and schooling? African American students/debaters? How does your teaching pedagogies fit into this? How does it not?



### **APPENDIX C: Student Debater Participant Interview Protocol (1)**

- 1) Tell me about your experience(s) with debating.
- 2) How did you get involved with Action Debate? Why are you still involved?
- 3) Talk about if whether or not Action Debate has been helpful with you improving your reading, writing, speaking, or other areas.
- 4) What do you plan to learn this school year and summer, as a result of being a part of Action Debate?
- 5) What does literacy mean to you?
- 6) Have you noticed any changes (i.e. academic, personal, etc.) in yourself, since debating?  
If so, what are they?
- 7) Tell me about how Coach Morgan prepares you and your teammates with debating? Are there specific ways, curriculum, or teaching materials that she uses when teaching you and your peers? If so, what are they? Are they beneficial to you? How so?
- 8) Do you plan to attend college? If so, why?
- 9) Would you debate in college?
- 10) Have you ever tried to use music, poetry, or other cultural references when debating?  
Why did you do this?
- 11) Tell me your views of the current evidence usage within Action Debate.
- 12) Do you or your peers ever have a hard time understanding the evidence? If so, what do you do to make it make sense to you?
- 13) If you could change the evidence, how would you do it and what would you use?
- 14) How do you and your peers prepare for debate at practice and at tournaments?

#### **APPENDIX D: Debate Staff Participant Interview Protocol (1)**

- 1) Tell me about your experience(s) with debating. Why are you still involved?
- 2) Why did you want to be a part of the debate community?
- 3) How did you get involved with Action Debate?
- 4) Did you debate in high school or college? If so, why did you decide to do it?
- 5) Talk about if whether or not debate was or has been helpful with you improving your reading, writing, speaking, or other areas.
- 6) What do you plan to teach or introduce to the debate participants this summer?
- 7) Have you ever tried to use music, poetry, or other cultural references when debating or teaching debaters about something? Why did you do this?
- 8) Have you seen students use such practices when they debate? Why do you think they did this? What did you think when you witnessed this?
- 9) Tell me your views of the current evidence usage within Action Debate?
- 10) When you debated in high school or when you teach, do you ever have a hard time understanding the evidence? If so, what do you do to make it make sense to you? To the debaters?
- 11) Have you noticed any differences in the ways African American coaches and debaters engage with debate vs. White coaches and debaters? If so, why do you think this is the case?
- 12) If you could change anything about debate, the Action Debate community or other debate communities - what would those changes be?

## APPENDIX E: Matrix of Study Questions, Data Sources & Data Analysis

<b>Research Questions What Do I Need To Know?</b>	<b>Why Do I Need To Know This?</b>	<b>Data Sources</b>	<b>Data Analysis</b>	<b>Level of Analysis: Participant or Program</b>
How and in what ways is Action Debate a culturally sustaining space?	The experiences of the participants are integral to understanding why they choose to participate in debate and how they view the Action Debate community as culturally sustaining.	Participant interviews  Observations of teacher and students at after-school practices, weekend debate tournaments, and a summer debate institute	Writing fieldnotes after observations and organizing and typing up fieldnotes  Transcribing interviews	Participant, Program, & Community Level
How do students perceive and understand their participation in Action Debate as relating to debate, school, their communities, and college?	Learning from this question will provide insights and understandings that can contribute to other out-of-school spaces, education and schooling, as it relates to marginalized populations.	Participant interviews  Observations of teacher and students at after-school practices, weekend debate tournaments and competitions, and a summer debate institute	Writing fieldnotes after observations and organizing and typing up fieldnotes  Transcribing interviews	Participant, Program, & Community Level
Are there specific literacy and culturally sustaining practices that are employed by students, coaches, and debate supporters in the Action Debate program to prepare Black students to debate in racially welcoming or racially hostile environments?	The type of teaching and coaching and pedagogical strategies that are being utilized can provide information about why and how it is important to navigate in such spaces.	Participant interviews  Observations of teacher and students at after-school practices, weekend debate tournaments and competitions, and a summer debate institute	Create categories and codes that relate to culturally sustaining teaching and coaching	Participant, Program, & Community Level

Table 9: Matrix of Study Questions, Data Sources & Data Analysis

## **APPENDIX F: Sample Thematic Charts taken from Bloomberg & Volpe (2012)**

**Theme:**

**Overview: Explanation of Theme:**

**Findings/Outcomes:**

**Voices of Participants/Examples That Connect To The Them**

Table 10: Sample Thematic Charts

## **APPENDIX G: Research Participant Information & Consent Form**

Dear Research Participant:

You are being asked to participate in a research study. I am required to provide a consent form to inform you about the research study, to convey that participation is voluntary, to explain risks and benefits of participation, and to empower you to make an informed decision. You should feel free to ask me any questions you may have.

**Study Title:** “I’m Gone Be ‘Black on Both Sides’”: Examining the Literacy Practices and Legacy Learning within an Urban Debate Community

**Researcher and Title:** Raven Jones Stanbrough, Doctoral Candidate of Curriculum, Instruction & Teacher Education

**Department and Institution:** Michigan State University, Department of Teacher Education

**Address and Contact Information:** Department of Teacher Education, Michigan State University Erickson Hall, 620 Farm Lane, Room 301G, East Lansing, MI 48824

### **1. PURPOSE OF RESEARCH**

You are being asked to participate in a research study of an accomplished teacher and debate coach of African American students. You have been selected as a participant in this study because of your excellent record in teaching, coaching, and working with students across communities, including African American debaters. From this study, I hope to learn about your successful teaching and coaching practices, as you draw upon language, literacy, literature, and history with your African American debaters. This understanding may help other teachers, coaches, and teacher educators in providing quality teaching to all students. Your participation in this study will take place from March – November 2015.

### **2. WHAT YOU WILL DO**

Your participation will not change your teaching, coaching practices or routine in any way. I will simply be observing and video recording your already planned lessons and debate practices so there is no need for any additional preparation or work for your teaching and coaching. My research will include observing and recording your teaching and coaching for one or two periods for twice a week (March – November). I will also conduct interviews with you during our work together. Interviews will focus on your teaching and coaching practices and on what I have observed. I am, of course, happy to provide you with any findings from my research and hope they can be of use to your teaching and coaching.

### **3. POTENTIAL BENEFITS**

The potential benefits to you for taking part in this study are that you will have the opportunity to reflect on and watch video of your teaching and coaching and to discuss your teaching and

coaching with me. In addition, your participation in this study may contribute to understanding how teachers and debate coaches engage in successful language, literacy, literature, and history work with students across racial and ethnic communities.

#### **4. POTENTIAL RISKS**

There are no foreseeable risks associated with participation in this study, as you will only be doing what you normally do in your teaching and coaching and reflecting on what you normally do in your teaching and coaching.

#### **5. PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY**

Only my dissertation co-chairs and I and our MSU Institutional Review Board will have access to the data and we will not share it with others with your name or work site attached. Information about you will be kept confidential to the maximum extent allowable by law. We will store data for this project in password-protected computers and in a locked office. The results of this study may be published or presented at professional meetings, but the identities of all research participants will remain anonymous.

With your permission, I will videotape select sessions of your teaching and coaching. All video gathered from the study will be stored on a password-protected computer in a locked office. Being videotaped is not a requirement to participate in this study. We will also video or audiotape our interviews.

- I agree to allow audiotaping/videotaping of the interviews.  
☐ Yes                      ☐ No                      Initials\_\_\_\_\_
  
- I agree to allow audiotaping/videotaping of my teaching and coaching.  
☐ Yes                      ☐ No                      Initials\_\_\_\_\_

#### **6. YOUR RIGHTS TO PARTICIPATE, SAY NO, OR WITHDRAW**

Your participation is voluntary. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You have the right to say no and you may change your mind at any time and withdraw. You also may choose not to answer specific questions or to stop participating at any time.

#### **7. COSTS AND COMPENSATION FOR BEING IN THE STUDY**

There is no cost to you associated with this study. As a small token of appreciation, I will buy \$150.00 worth of books for you or your class at the completion of our work together.

## **11. CONTACT INFORMATION**

If you have concerns or questions about this study, such as scientific issues, how to do any part of it, or to report an injury, please contact me at: (517) 410-5551 or [jonesrav@msu.edu](mailto:jonesrav@msu.edu)

If you have questions or concerns about your role and rights as a research participant, would like to obtain information or offer input, or would like to register a complaint about this study, you may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Michigan State University's Human Research Protection Program at 517-355-2180, Fax 517-432-4503, or e-mail [irb@msu.edu](mailto:irb@msu.edu) or regular mail at Olds Hall, 408 West Circle Drive #207, MSU, East Lansing, MI 48824.

## **12. DOCUMENTATION OF INFORMED CONSENT**

Your signature below means that you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

---

Signature

---

Date

You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

## APPENDIX H: Parental Consent to Student Participation

Dear Parents of Debate Research Participants:

I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Teacher Education at Michigan State University. I was a classroom English teacher and Director of Debate before beginning work in teacher education. I am conducting a study of Coach Lorikeet's teaching and coaching. I have chosen to study her teaching and coaching because she is an accomplished and successful teacher and coach in working with students of different backgrounds. I hope that what I learn from this study will help other teachers to better serve all students. As part of this study, I will be videotaping Lorikeet's teaching and coaching during the months of March – December, 2015. I will be visiting classrooms and videotaping. Your child is being asked to participate in this study and I am asking for your permission to audiotape/videotape his/her classroom learning so that I can learn from Lorikeet's teaching and coaching. Lorikeet has agreed to be part of this study and the school/site has also given me permission. There are no foreseeable risks to your child, as I will only be videotaping the learning already happening in the classroom and at some debate tournaments. I may use video from this study in presentations or publications, but your child's name and the name of the school/site will be kept confidential to protect privacy.

Giving permission to videotape is totally voluntary and you can say no. If you decide not to give permission there will be no penalty to your child at all. You can withdraw this permission at any time for any reason.

- I agree to allow my child to participate in this study and for them to be audiotaped/videotaped in Lorikeet's classroom

☐ Yes

☐ No

---

Signature

---

Date

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or concerns:



Sincerely,

Raven Jones Stanbrough

(517) 410-5551 or [jonesrav@msu.edu](mailto:jonesrav@msu.edu)

Michigan State University, Department of Teacher Education

Address and Contact Information: Department of Teacher Education, Michigan State University  
Erickson Hall, 620 Farm Lane, Room 301G, East Lansing, MI 48824

## APPENDIX I: Student Assent Form

Dear Students in Lorikeet's Debate Class/Club:

I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Teacher Education at Michigan State University. I was a classroom English teacher and Director of Debate before beginning work in teacher education. I am conducting a study of Lorikeet's teaching and coaching. I have chosen to study her teaching and coaching because she is an accomplished and successful teacher and coach in working with students of different backgrounds. I hope that what I learn from this study will help other teachers to better serve all students. As part of this study, I will be videotaping Lorikeet's teaching and coaching during the months of March – December, 2015. I will be visiting classrooms and videotaping. I am asking for your permission to participate in this study and to audiotape/ videotape your learning so that I can learn from Lorikeet's teaching and coaching. Lorikeet has agreed to be part of this study and the school/site has also given me permission. There are no foreseeable risks to you, as I will only be videotaping the learning already happening in the classroom and at some debate tournaments. I may use video from this study in presentations or publications, but your name and the name of the school/site will be kept confidential to protect privacy.

Giving permission to videotape is totally voluntary and you can say no. If you decide not to give permission there will be no penalty to you at all. You can withdraw this permission at any time for any reason.

- I agree to participate in this study and allow audiotaping/videotaping of me in Lorikeet's classroom

☐ Yes

☐ No

---

Signature of Assenting Child (13-17)

---

Date

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or concerns:

Sincerely,

Raven Jones Stanbrough

(517) 410-5551 or [jonesrav@msu.edu](mailto:jonesrav@msu.edu)

Michigan State University, Department of Teacher Education

Address and Contact Information: Department of Teacher Education, Michigan State University  
Erickson Hall, 620 Farm Lane, Room 301G, East Lansing, MI 48824

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