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## **Yes, Mmmm, Snaps: The Influence of the Call and Response Tradition of the Black Church into Forensics**

*Tomeka M. Robinson, Sean Allen, & Goyland Williams*

### **Abstract**

*The forensics community has long been hailed as one of the most accepting, progressive, and open-minded segments of the academy. However, minority competitors and coaches continually face a myriad of challenges in terms of acceptance within the community. Many scholars have argued for more inclusiveness within the activity in terms of representation and acceptance of literature from diverse perspectives (Robinson & Allen, 2018; Rogers et al., 2003; Billings, 2000), however, very little attention has been placed on the issue of behavioral norms and expectations within rounds. More specifically, no article to date has explored the impact of culture on audience reactions and behaviors within forensics. Many students, especially students of color, have been conditioned to engage in what is commonly referred to as the call and response tradition of the church from a young age. Snaps, mmmms, and other verbal and nonverbal expressions are a part of this engagement. Therefore, this paper argues that similar expressions within forensic rounds flow from this tradition and thus warrant an evaluation. We will use a critical race theory (CRT) lens to argue that the failure to recognize these behavioral norms as being culturally bound, at best misses the point of audience feedback and at worst upholds the idea that the only way to properly engage in performance is to conform to whiteness.*

### **Introduction**

“I wasn’t at AFA. I don’t know how bad the “mmmms” and snaps were, but the conversation is everywhere. I often “mmm” and used to get my life when people “mmmm” at my performances. Also, a few years ago wasn’t the same circuit advocating for people to literally get up and walk out in the middle of a performance if you’re triggered? But “mmm-ing” is distracting. As a performer, I can’t help but to

feel that the audience is always a part of my performance. Part of communicating is the response. The audience is that response. Whether it's a laugh at a joke, a tear at my sad moment, or a "mmmm" at a line that moved you."

These are the words from a student following discussions immediately after AFA in 2017 where many coaches, competitors, and judges took to Facebook and various other social media outlets to complain about the excessive snaps and mmmm moments in final rounds at the tournament. This post received many responses, mostly from other students and coaches of color agreeing with the sentiment in the post. While there was some disagreement on whether all of the displays were genuine, the comment that warranted the most likes from those engaging in the discussion was:

"Ultimately the norms of how folks experience the activity and interact with it should be decided by students. It's their nationals, it's for them. If they've sort of decided in some unspoken way that this is how one responds to a performance at this level, okay. I hear their arguments about being distracting, but I'm also like 'go to a slam, go to a church, go to a really bomb ass play, go to a wrestling match---vocal and physical response is real."

As communication scholars we know that when creating a public discourse, understanding the rhetorical situation is a necessary condition in ensuring the success of the discourse (Bitzer, 1986). The situation controls the rhetorical activity that the rhetor can generate because a fitting response to the exigence is primarily determined by the audience's emotional, logical, and psychological needs. As a result, it is the audience to whom the speaker must tailor their discourse.

The forensics community has long been hailed as one of the most accepting, progressive, and open-minded segments of the academy. However, minority competitors and coaches continually face a myriad of challenges in terms of acceptance. Many scholars have argued for more inclusiveness within the activity in terms of representation and acceptance of literature from diverse perspectives (Robinson & Allen, 2018; Rogers et al., 2003; Billings, 2000), however, very little attention has been placed on the issue of behavioral norms and expectations within rounds. More specifically, no article to date has explored the impact of culture on audience reactions and behaviors within forensics. Many students, especially students of color, have been conditioned to engage in

what is commonly referred to as the call and response tradition of the church from a young age. Snaps, mmmms, and other verbal and nonverbal expressions are a part of this engagement. Therefore, this paper argues that similar expressions within forensic rounds flow from this tradition and thus warrant an evaluation. We will use a critical race theory (CRT) lens to argue that the failure to recognize these behavioral norms as being culturally bound, at best misses the point of audience feedback and at worst upholds the idea that the only way to properly engage in performance is to conform to whiteness.

### **Critical Race Theory**

Critical race theory (CRT) was developed in the mid-1970's as a number of scholars noticed that there was a need for new theories and strategies to combat the more covert forms of racism that were gaining ground in the era. The basic CRT model consists of five elements: (1) the centrality of race and racism and their intersectionality with other forms of subordination, (2) the challenge to dominant ideology, (3) the commitment to social justice, (4) the centrality of experiential knowledge, and (5) the transdisciplinary perspective (Solorzano, 1997; Solorzano & Yosso, 2000). The heart of CRT theory lies in the rejection of colorblind orientations of equality, expressed as "rules that insist only on treatment that is the same across the board, [as this] can thus remedy only the most blatant forms of discrimination" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 49) and instead, calls for "aggressive, color conscious efforts to change the way things are" (Duncan, 1995, p. 164).

CRT also uniquely relies on narratives to substantiate claims. According to DeCuir & Dixson (2004) "an essential tenant of Critical Race Theory is counter storytelling" (p. 27). Deconstructing and understanding narratives can be used "to reveal the circular, self-serving nature of particular legal doctrines or rules" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. xvii). While many scholars argue for universalism over individual narratives, CRT emphasizes the role of individual narratives to the sense-making process, as we understand context through narrative. The unique focus on narratives coupled with a call for race-conscious decision making provides a useful lens when addressing the complexities of behavioral norms within forensic rounds.

## **Forensic Audience Norms**

Given the degree to which forensics encourages and promotes various forms of original arguments and performances as a vehicle for social change, forensic competitors frequently employ different styles, epistemologies, and performance practices learned and used within their communities. Additionally, as a community, forensic competitors, audience members, and critic-judges are consistently tasked with listening, analyzing, and evaluating those performances as they compare to their counterparts. Forensic tournaments consist of three categories: limited preparation, public address, and oral interpretation. Each category has different expectations, rules, and norms for competitive success. Bartanen (1998) observes that oral interpretation competitors are called to reflect upon their “expressive and instrumental dimensions and how those messages can be best conveyed to new audiences” (p. 5-6). Public address competitors are more limited in their audience adaptation due to the memorized nature of speeches. However, they both share a commonality in that forensic competitors must consistently assess and engage “variable listener response to messages” (Bartanen, 1998, p. 6). Although Bartanen articulates the forensic competitor’s constant negotiation with tailoring one’s performance to fit audiences and feedback, her concerns fail to account for the influences that culture brings to bear on the nature of audience feedback.

As calls to diversify the forensic community continue to challenge the scarcity of racial, ethnic, and gendered minorities in certain events (public address and limited prep), over and against the representation in oral interpretation events, concerns of cultural methodologies and how ethnic minorities participate as both speaker and audience member have surfaced. Particularly, certain members of the community are frustrated with the ways in which competitors-as-audience provide immediate feedback by responding through sound in real time as a form of agreement with the message and/or performances choices. The negative reactions to this strategy suggest that some norm/expectation has been violated and should be relegated to some other space outside of the community.

## **Challenging Forensic Audience Norms**

Modeled after early Greek and western-centered approaches, speech communication and forensics in particular operates from a paradigm that eschews audience interaction and avoids or overlooks culture in the service of discursive rigidity (Jackson, 2004). The normative practices in oral interpretation, unlike the public address or limited preparation category, allows more space for the audience to respond to expressive and performative choices of the performer. However, the forensic community, like the larger American society, still operates as an environment where white dominated hegemonic rhetorical practices are the norm.

In individual events that primarily utilize pathos as a competitive rhetorical strategy (oral interpretation events and persuasion), audience responses and interactions often draw upon elicited responses that are steeped in African-American rhetorical practices, while events that are tailored to logical appeals (public address and limited preparation events) are guided by an ethos that limits audience interaction and participation. The contrast in individual event rounds at forensic tournaments is that the listeners' responses are rather evoked than rehearsed. Audience members seem to give genuine reactions to the speaker. Similar to Gospel music making, singers and audiences appear not to be fully in conscious control of their behavior; they are out of time and space. These outburst responses suggest that this style of praise and celebration is not understood by those outside of this experience (Banjo & Williams, 2011). Simply put, the "response" from audiences in forensic competitions are rather triggered from the "call" or "performance". These responses from audience members appear to signify an agreement with the speaker and their advocacy.

## **Call & Response in the African American Church**

Although inherently connected to historical African roots, call and response is pervasive in contemporary African American church services. A pastor may call out to his congregation "Can I get an Amen?" The audience then responds with "Amen". This is a form of interaction between a speaker and audience in which the speaker's statements ("calls") are punctuated by responses from the listeners (Foster, 2001). Call and response and audience performance can all be thought of as part

of the group or communicational nature of art. This theory of art is interactive, process-oriented and concerned with innovation. These patterns provide a basic model that depends and thrives upon audience performance and improvisation, which work together to ensure that the art will be meaningful or functional to the community (Sale, 1992, p. 41.) Pattillo-McCoy (1988) contends that these cultural practices such as call and response interaction, invigorate activism. She places focus on black churches, rituals and how they are utilized in social action. Specifically, the power of call and response interaction lies not only in the possibility of realizing concrete results from supplications, but also in the cultured familiarity of these tools among African Americans as media for interaction, conducting a meeting, holding a rally, or getting out to vote. This culture constituting a common language that motivates social action. Thus, the call and response format tend to become a diasporic tradition that is rooted in traditional African cultures but similarly helps to create a new, unique tradition in the United States (Epstein, 1977).

### **Call & Response in Forensics**

Similarly, within forensic rounds for students of color trained in this tradition, performances or even lines that are particularly deep often elicit the “response.” It is a natural expression to encourage, engage with, and respond to the performer and invigorates the activism response that Pattillo-McCoy (1988) describes. However, this in-round responsive style continues to be criticized by many forensics competitors and coaches. Many feel some responses are more over the top than genuine, with audience members overreacting to give certain competitors an edge to win over others. Gaer (2002) describes this manipulation of conventions in order to increase competitive success. He contends that one of the most often heard criticisms of forensics, and one that a modern Lysimachus would no doubt make, is that the emphasis it places on competition. As noted by Somers-Willett (2005) where she compares slam to forensics competition, Damon (1998) writes, “the criterion for slam success seems to be some kind of realness authenticity that effects a felt change of consciousness on the part of the listener” (p. 329). This leads some to question whether audiences and performers consciously or unconsciously rely on material that speaks to marginalized identities and thus elicits this “response.” Perhaps some audience members are overreacting to performances, even so, when competitors perform, racial

or not, they are performing an experience. Emotional experiences are not just limited to race, but every individual in society and the audience provides feedback based on how they experience the performance.

### **Implications for Forensic Community**

Calls for more diversity and inclusion within the community are hollow if they fail to take into account issues like how culture impacts audience feedback. Acceptance of difference forms of audience reactions are not only necessary but vital to the growth of our community. Suppressing or critiquing alternative forms of expression without considering the history and culture behind them upholds white supremacist ideologies. If as a community, we are serious about dismantling systems of oppression, then we have to also extend that ideology to behavioral norms.



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