The Non-Performativity of White Virtue-Signaling: Insights for Social Justice Pedagogy

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"But it is not permissible that the authors of devastation
should also be innocent.

It is the innocence which constitutes the crime."[1]

As I write this paper, protesters across the nation and social media feeds worldwide have been voicing their anguish over the death of George Floyd, a Black man whose neck was pinned under the knee of a white police officer for eight minutes and 46 seconds while Floyd, facedown and hand-cuffed, cried out that he couldn't breathe. Statements by university administrators expressing outrage and solidarity with the protestors began inundating my email inbox. In fact, as department chair, I was just about to write such a statement myself expressing indignation at the institutionalized racism that took the lives of Floyd and so many more Black Americans for just being Black.

As I began to compose the statement, I paused to read an email sent by a Black colleague pained by the events that stoked the protests but also angered by the endless statements of solidarity which he referred to as white pieties and displays of virtue-signaling. After the numerous student protests that occurred on our own campus demanding equal safety for all students and that were not adequately dealt with, my colleague explained, these statements expressing commitments to diversity and unity rang hollow. It was not only the hypocrisy of professing commitments to inclusion, but more about how these statements serve to parade the university's ostensibly anti-racist virtue without actually doing much.

Not long after, a white colleague sent out an email to the school's listserv proposing a reading group for white anti-racists. Faculty members of color, however, did not read this email as a benign invitation and were livid. They were experiencing the agony of the unrelenting murder of Black people, the fear of living in such a world, and were exhausted from participating in the protests. White faculty book clubs, they countered, were a comfortable way to appear to do something while avoiding the difficult work of contributing to social justice. Moreover, Black faculty felt they were being asked to validate what white faculty members were doing with absolution. Exasperated and enraged, they asked to be taken off the listserv, immediately!

Whether participating in protests, writing statements, or joining book clubs, these practices have been exposed as problematic ways that well-intentioned white people establish ally-status "from a place of imagined invulnerability, comfort, and safety."[2] What is problematic about white virtue-signaling and what can white people learn from being so accused? This paper aims to examine the meaning of white virtue-signaling as a practice and as an accusation in order to glean insights for social justice pedagogy.

I begin with a review of Justin Tosi and Brandon Warmke's recent work around the concept of moral grandstanding to elucidate some of the characteristic features of virtue-signaling.[3] Although related in practice, I conceptually distinguish the performance of virtue-signaling and the accusation. Then, attending to the positionality of the signaler, I introduce the concept of *white* virtue-signaling. Building on Sara Ahmed's analysis of the non-performativity of anti-racism, I demonstrate what the prevailing analyses of grandstanding and the research on virtue-signaling fail to capture.[4] Finally, I explain why it is important for social justice educators to pay attention to white virtue-signaling and I discuss some important questions that this concept may provoke.

FROM MORAL TALK AS A VANITY PROJECT TO VIRTUE-SIGNALING

At first glance, moral grandstanding and virtue-signaling seem to have

lots in common. Neil Levy claims that "'Moral grandstanding' seems to be identical to, or at any rate to overlap very considerably with, virtue-signaling."[5] Moral grandstanding, as Tosi and Warmke define it, is moral talk that aims to convince others that one is morally good or, more specifically, "To grandstand is to turn one's contribution to public discourse into a vanity project."[6] In a subsequent book, they articulate two main features of grandstanding (short for moral grandstanding): recognition desire and grandstanding expression.[7] While the former refers to the intention or motivation to impress upon others that one is a good or even a better person than others, the latter entails the statement or utterance aimed at satisfying that desire.

Tosi and Warmke describe, in more detail than needed for my argu-ment, five manifestations of grandstanding: piling on, ramping up, trumping up, excessive emotional displays or reports, and claims of self-evidence. These fall under two types of aims: prestige and dominance. Prestige goals attempt to show one belongs in a group or that one is fit for a prominent role in the group without doing what is required to deserve it. Aiming for dominance involves attempting to raise oneself up by putting another down. In both cases, the grandstander's primary concern is projecting an image of herself as someone who is "on the side of the angels."[8]

While refusing to offer a formula for determining when grandstand-ing occurs, Tosi and Warmke still provide a recommendation in regard to ac-cusing someone of grandstanding. Motivation can be complicated, they note. On the one hand, individuals rarely act only on recognition desire and, on the other hand, each of us cares to some degree about recognition. Recognition desire, therefore, might stand alongside other motivations that can be other-, rather than self-, oriented. According to Tosi and Warmke, for discourse to be a case of grandstanding, recognition desire must be strong enough so that if the grandstander were to discover that their moral talk received no uptake, then they would be "disappointed."

Moreover, grandstanding is something everyone can be guilty of. Democrats and Republicans are especially notorious for grandstanding. There-fore, Tosi and Warmke conclude that we should refrain from accusing people

of grandstanding because it is difficult to know another's intentions or motivations with certainty. Furthermore, accusations and shaming are not educative and likely will not improve behavior. Instead, we should try to limit our own grandstanding by reflecting before posting and questioning our motivations. One should ask oneself: am I genuinely morally concerned or is it all about the optics? As they explain, it is "far less important to identify grandstanding in others than it is to know how to avoid it ourselves."[9] In summation, grandstanding is about promoting oneself. Anyone can be a grandstander. Yet since grandstanding is about intentions, motivations and goals that are difficult to definitively determine, one should avoid charging another with grandstanding.

The concept of virtue-signaling rose in popularity as a pejorative term to denounce empty acts of public commitment to good causes. Like grandstanding, virtue-signaling involves attempts to show one's goodness by public expressions of disgust or favor. Both practices aim to reflect that one is a good person just from typing on a keyboard or uttering certain words. I refer to this as the Hypocrisy Feature—the words communicate virtue but lack further action. Both terms—grandstanding and virtue-signaling—have also been wielded as a derogatory tool to shame or critique a view one disagrees with. I refer to this as the Calling-Out Feature. Anyone can grandstand and virtue-signal. Anyone can accuse others of these practices.

In 2015, James Bartholomew, a British journalist used the term virtue-signaling to critique the American grocery chain, Whole Foods, whose brand consisted of selling organic options. When their advertising campaign began describing the corporation as "part of a growing consciousness that is bigger than food—one that champions what's good" and unrolled the marketing slogan, "Values Matter," Bartholomew reproached the corporation for "virtue-signaling" and discredited the advertisements as performative and duplicitous. The corporation, Bartholomew insisted, commercialized moral talk.[10]

Recently, the term has become popular on social media as a way to critique displays of anti-racism as insincere and hypocritical. When Congressional Democrats knelt in silence for eight minutes and 46 seconds to honor

George Floyd in the U.S. Capitol Visitors Center in Washington D.C., for instance, Republicans via Twitter were quick to denounce them as virtue-signaling.[11]

The academic scholarship around virtue-signaling has focused on the ethics of the practice rather than its meaning. Neil Levy, for example, acknowledges the negative effects that Tosi and Warmke articulate but maintains that these costs do not outweigh the positive aspects of the practice.[12] Significantly, Levy insists that virtue-signaling functions to provide higher-order evidence for moral norms by conveying collective confidence in a norm that is increased by its public extensiveness. Signaling, according to Levy, plays an important role in enabling cooperation among people and, therefore, is a useful practice.

The persuasiveness of Levy's defense of the practice is contingent on diminishing the Hypocrisy Feature and the Calling-Out Feature of virtue-signaling. Moreover, Levy ignores the problem that arises when the virtue-signal critic is charged with the same signaling that is being critiqued.[13] By appearing to be better than the virtue-signaler, the virtue-signal critic does not transcend the charge.

Tosi and Warmke maintain that the term grandstanding is more useful than virtue-signaling. First, they insist that virtue-signaling relies too much on what other people think. The term moral grandstanding, according to Tosi and Warmke, is preferred because it is always contingent upon the intention to impress rather than what others interpret our behavior to do. Second, similar to virtue-signaling, intention cannot be definitively established. Yet, unlike virtue-signaling they reject the moral value of the Calling-Out Feature.

Tosi and Warmke advocate that one should not call out the grandstander. Can there be moral value to the Calling-Out Feature, specifically under conditions of systemic oppression and privilege? This might depend on who is calling-out whom, the context within which calling out virtue-signaling is occurring, and whether calling out aims to expose how injustice is reproduced, perhaps without knowing. Accusations of virtue-signaling, I contend, can in certain situations, following George Yancy's work, be considered a gift.[14] This

becomes clearer when we examine white virtue-signaling and what the Calling-Out Feature has the potential to achieve. The critic of white virtue-signaling may not be virtue-signaling but rather exposing how power reproduces itself. And because white virtue-signaling is more focused on its effects than its intention, the critic can reveal *the pattern* of white habits that virtue-signaling is part of. Calling *this* out can be educative. While Levy emphasizes the merits of virtue-signaling, my aim is to address the possible merit of virtue-signaling critique.

WHITE VIRTUE-SIGNALING

On June 2, 2020, activist organizers declared Blackout Tuesday a day to stop and reflect on the message of the Black Lives Matter Movement. Social media was flooded with symbolic black squares, with white people participating extensively. Bloggers, like Mary Grace Garis, decried this as a form of white virtue-signaling or performative allyship not only because it blocked out messages about the protests on relevant hashtag pages but also because the practice was not accompanied by action that would further the movement.[15] White people often used the black squares to convey the message "I am a good white."

Although the media lauded white people who joined the protests in support for Black Lives Matter, bloggers critiqued white people who went to the protests only to post selfies the next day, for being condescending with suggestions, for trying to receive attention or for expecting affirmation of their participation. Journalist Jane Coaston notes that "To make it as if, for white Americans, if you post these things on the internet, then you're done—well, for me, and for my family, or for any nonwhite American, it's not done, it's never done."[16]

Sara Ahmed's essay, "Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism," is a type of white virtue-signaling critique. Ahmed critically analyzes six different ways that whiteness is declared in academic writing, conversation and institutional policy and demonstrates how "such declarations [of racism or privilege] are non-performative: they do not do what they say."[17]

For example, one of the declarations of whiteness she addresses is "I am/we are racist." Ahmed shows how this utterance does something other than what the literal words mean. She is not implying that the subject does not mean what is said. Her point is that the assertion does not do what it says but rather does something else. By admitting one is racist, the message conveyed is that one is not racist because racists do not recognize their racism. Such speech acts, Ahmed explains, entail a "fantasy of transcendence" in which what is transcended is the very thing confessed in the declaration. In acknowledging racism, therefore, white people actually refuse to acknowledge it.

Declarations of whiteness also exemplify the tendency of white people to "take back the center," often without realizing it. White people's feeling good is foregrounded rather than dismantling racism. Yet Ahmed goes one step further by emphasizing that when white people protect their innocence, they forego the possibility of considering their complicity in racism, reifying the very structures they allege to oppose.[18]

Ahmed's account is significant because her analysis demystifies how whiteness reproduces itself *through good intentions, alleged or genuine*. Although the declaration is literally true (the confession might be sincere), the veracity of the words does not reveal what more those words do. Ahmed demonstrates that the problem with these declarations is not only that they fail to do anti-racist work but, more significantly, that they can "actually extend rather than challenge racism" by reinforcing the white innocence that blocks recognition of complicity and keeps whiteness in place.[19]

Implicit in Ahmed's analysis is an understanding of language as not a passive instrument for the communication of ideas but rather as a means by which reality is constructed in the moment utterances are expressed. Focusing exclusively on intention allows one to ignore what else language does. Moreover, while the actual content of declarations of whiteness may be true, its truth is beyond the point because the public utterance does something else, too—it inscribes innocence.

When a white student obstructs a discussion of racism by declaring

"My best friend is Black," it may be true that her best friend is Black, yet, her declaration does more than tells us a fact about her choice of companions. Language, Ahmed acknowledges, does things but, more specifically, can do things *other than what we intend*. Ahmed explains that "the failure of the speech act to do what it says is *not a failure of intent or even circumstance*, but is actually what the *speech act is doing*."[20]

To see this, one must recognize that the declaration is not an isolated act but part of a pattern of practices that shields systemic injustice from challenge. What the declaration does is to provide a means for distancing oneself from considering one's complicity in the pattern of practices that maintain systems of oppression. Ahmed shows how power works through us and, more specifically, how power can be redone when one intends to undo it.

Applied to white virtue-signaling, we learn it is not whether the signaling is true or stems from good intentions. The point is how white virtue-signaling obstructs the need for considering one's complicity in racism. When one shifts the focus from individual intentions to the pattern of practices that the act participates in, white virtue-signaling can no longer be understood as an isolated act but part of a pattern of practices that protect white innocence.

The scholarship around grandstanding or virtue-signaling cannot capture this insight since it presumes an abstract individual that ignores how we are constituted in relation. In his attempt to problematize the reducing of police brutality to "a few bad apples," George Yancy underscores that such an *atomistic social ontology* with its strong focus on individual intentions obscures how police brutality is part of a system.[21] This social ontology disregards how being white has harmful implications for what it means to not be white. The scholarship on grandstanding and virtue-signaling takes the isolated case as the point of analysis and fails to consider whether these practices are iterations of larger patterns of practices that do things.

Studies of racial micro-aggressions support the claim that a focus on good intentions or isolated practices can conceal the harm that such practices produce. In isolation, microaggressions can seem innocuous to the perpetra-

tor, especially when attached to good intentions. It is the cumulative experience that impacts the lives of people of color. When a white person compliments a Black presidential contender for being articulate, no matter how sincere, this is not an isolated act but part of a larger pattern of practices that stereotypes Black men as not smart.

To sum-up, both grandstanding and virtue-signaling entail desires to appear good. While grandstanding is focused on the intention and motivation to appear good, virtue-signaling provides an occasion to value what other people think. The grandstander-critic is dissuaded. The virtue-signal critic, in contrast, is vulnerable to be accused of the very behavior under critique. Ahmed, however, helps us to understand the deeply harmful effects of white virtue-signaling that is not just about isolated acts carried out by individuals considered bereft of the wider structural context. Rather, the virtue-signal critic can expose the pattern of practices that protects white innocence and how power is reproduced through good intentions. This approach makes clearer why people of color might not only be frustrated and annoyed by white virtue-signaling but also enraged at white people protecting their innocence and expecting affirmation and absolution.

When positionality is taken seriously, the virtue-signal critic can be a gift to white people. People of color should not be expected to be virtue-signal critics and to insist they do this labor is not only exploitive but another iteration of privilege. However, when they do, white people should listen carefully as the message is something to be grateful for. Instead of feeling personally attacked, one might stay in the discomfort that provides opportunities to learn.

WHITE VIRTUE-SIGNALING AT THE EXPENSE OF STUDENTS OF COLOR

How might white virtue-signaling play out in classroom dynamics? What might be the toll on students of color? Is white virtue-signaling less an aberration and a more quotidian phenomenon occurring in the classroom? How might I, a white educator, lead white students (and myself) to challenge good white intentions without losing sight of our complicity? I can only briefly

address these questions here.

The experience of people of color, as Yancy contends, is one of having a knee on their necks every day.[22] His students of color, he adds, move within white spaces subjected to systemic violence. Many students of color do not characterize their experiences in the racially integrated classroom as safe or conducive to their learning. Leonardo and Porter point out that even when race dialogues aim to critique and undo racial privilege, students of color must endure white denials, tears, guilt, defensiveness, and anger.[23] Students of color live a catch-22 in which they must either uphold the safety of whites who spend their psychic energy trying to preserve their innocence or speak up and insist on a space of integrity. Both have consequences. White protections of innocence that hide behind good intentions can be understood as a form of white virtue-signaling that are particularly difficult to challenge. Such practices exemplify how "white supremacy breathes at the site of Black asphyxiation."[24]

Baldwin's powerful quote serving as an epigraph to this essay underscores that it is the very process of whites trying to protect their innocence that is a danger to people of color. Good white intentions do not escape the insidiousness of racism. Acknowledging the impossibility of stepping outside of the structures white people participate in can be the first step in anti-racist politics. White students, even those who participate in dialogue aiming for change, enter dialogue as white, inextricably bound to the subject positions they critique. Fiona Probyn-Rapsey proposes that complicity be a starting point for ethics and Yancy emboldens white people to stay in the discomfort of critique.[25] Ahmed argues that when whites "stay implicated in what they critique," conditions for new coalitions of anti-racist work become possible.[26] Inhabiting the critique will require the cultivation of critical white double consciousness. And in order to do that, educators must help whites pierce the walls of willful ignorance.

A possible move that can help whites unpack how good white intentions embody complicity would be to cultivate critical white double consciousness. Linda Alcoff borrows from W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of Black double consciousness that describes the psychic situation of oppressed groups who

need to see themselves through two sets of perspectives in order to survive: their own and their oppressors.[27] For Alcoff, white double consciousness involves white people coming to see themselves not only through the dominant lens but be willing to see themselves as they are perceived from non-dominant perspectives. Significant for the white double consciousness that Alcoff invokes is that it entails white people realizing that the latter is a crucial corrective truth. Of course, unlike the white gaze that oppresses Blacks, the split consciousness between the way whites see themselves and are perceived by marginalized groups is not oppressive. Moreover, while for Black double consciousness, it is the inner lens that is a more reliable indicator of truth than the external one, for white double consciousness, the internal lens is unreliable because it is exclusively dependent on dominant frameworks.[28] Only by being open to the external perspective can this unreliability be fractured.

For instance, bell hooks explains that in the Black imagination whiteness is represented as "a terrorizing imposition, a power that wounds, hurts, tortures," something difficult for white people to acknowledge because it would "disrupt the fantasy of whiteness as representing goodness."[29] On Alcoff's account of white double consciousness, the uncomfortable tension generated by taking seriously how whiteness is perceived in the Black imagination can be a valuable tool for the type of disorientation that opens a space for activism that is more about supporting others than gleaning rewards for oneself. Anti-racism work with a white lens, Didi Delgado reminds us, is inherently flawed.[30] The discomfort of double consciousness, however, may also lead to desires to escape. White people must wrestle with the power of willful ignorance that impedes the ability for whites to consider how others perceive them.

Philosophers have shown that the marginalized develop their own epistemic resources, concepts that make their experiences intelligible amongst themselves. Even when the marginalized possess these concepts to name their experiences, however, dominantly situated knowers *willfully refuse* to recognize any epistemic resource that challenges the dominant epistemic framework. Jose Medina, Gaile Pohlhaus, Jr. and Kristie Dotson have argued that dominantly situated knowers *pre-emptively* dismiss these resources because it benefits

them to do so.[31] The confidence dominantly situated knowers place in their own interpretations of the social world obstructs the ability to "hear" conflicting and revealing interpretations provided by the marginalized. In spite of this, an important step is for white people to be open to and pay attention to what people of color are saying about white complicity in racism. It requires listening to those who are on the receiving end of the effects of white good intentions.

At the end of her essay, Ahmed responds to white students who feel hopeless, asking her what can white people do to combat racism (a question that Ahmed elucidates is itself a manifestation of white privilege, re-centering white agency). But what she continues to expound is powerfully insightful. Ahmed acknowledges that the question is not totally misguided.

> The impulse towards action is understandable and complicated; it can be both a defense against the "shock" of hearing about racism (and the shock of the complicity revealed by the very "shock" that "this" was a "shock"); it can be an impulse to reconciliation as a "recovering" of the past (the desire to feel better); it can be about making public one's judgment ("what happened was wrong"); or it can be an expression of solidarity ("I am with you"); or it can simply (be) an orientation towards the openness of the future (rephrased as: "what can be done?"). But the question, in all of these modes of utterance, can work to block hearing; in moving on from the present towards the future, it can also move away from the object of critique, or place the white subject "outside" that critique in the present of the hearing. In other words, the desire to act, to move, or even to move on, can stop the message "getting through."[32]

In order to join with people of color in alliance to challenge systemic racism, the challenge whites must be willing to face involves not only examining their desire to do something but also be willing to stay in the discomfort of that exploration. "If we want to know how things can be different too quickly," as

Ahmed argues, "then we might not hear anything at all."[33] Similarly, George Yancy exhorts white people, "not to move too quickly when confronted by the muck and mire of their own whiteness."[34]

Whites cannot transcend their whiteness as long as white supremacy exists. Thus, whites never finish the work of being responsible. The issue is not only doing more, which, yes, might produce some meaningful outcomes. In order to work in coalitions that fundamentally make a difference in disrupting whiteness, doing more should not be in the register of "what I can do" but instead be framed as "what can be done."[35]

In his critique of white people who in response to the murder of Black bodies just join book clubs, Tre Johnson writes,

> The confusing, perhaps contradictory advice on what white
> people should do probably feels maddening. To be told to
> step up, no step back, read, no listen, protest, don't protest,
> check on black friends, leave us alone, ask for help or do the
> work—it probably feels contradictory at times. [36]

Cultivating white double consciousness and diminished willful ignorance helps one to navigate this confusion and learn from mistakes that will be made.

The challenge for white people is to shift the focus from intention to the effects of their doings and listen to what people of color say those effects are. Johnson relates a sign he encountered on a Black woman's bicycle when he went to vote on Election Day. In red, white, and blue letters it read, "No, YOU do better."[37] For white people, learning *to do better* involves a sensitivity ensuing from double consciousness that accepts that doing or not doing will not bring transcendence from complicity and that the virtue-signaling critic can help one recognize that.

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