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Virtue Signaling and the Linguistic Repertoire of Anti-Blackness: or, “I Would Have Voted for Obama for a Third Term”

Increasing commodification of progressive language in public discourse over the past four decades has resulted in users’ indexical alignment with anti-racist politics becoming unmoored from expectations of legitimate action toward dismantling white supremacy. In this essay, we describe how this process is enacted through virtue signaling—highlighting one’s morality through the use of language and other signs that invoke progressive sociopolitical values—and the ways it mobilizes the linguistic repertoire of anti-Blackness. Theorizing this behavior provides a framework to locate and confront the mechanisms that maintain white supremacy and the actors who align themselves with it. [anti-Blackness, linguistic repertoire, political discourse, raciolinguistics, virtue signaling]

“You want me to make an act of faith. . . on some idealism, which you assure me exists in America, which I have never seen.”

- James Baldwin (1969)

Jordan Peele’s acclaimed 2017 film *Get Out* features a scene where the Black protagonist Chris is led on a tour of his girlfriend’s childhood home by her father, a whiteman named Dean. Dean pauses in front of a picture of his father to talk about how he had raced Black sprinter Jesse Owens at the 1936 Berlin Olympics where the Nazi Party suggested Black people and Jewish people should be barred from competition. The tour ends with Dean, standing with Chris in the family’s backyard, declaring, à propos of nothing, “By the way, I would have voted for Obama for a third term if I could.” Dean’s anti-racist opining is juxtaposed with the reveal that he is a racist cult leader who implants the minds of wealthy white people into the bodies of kidnapped Black people. The contradiction between Dean’s words and actions hyperbolizes how anti-Blackness is often belied by perfunctory attempts to, borrowing from filmmaker Spike Lee, “do [or rather say] the right thing.” It illustrates a clear mobilization of what we call the linguistic repertoire of anti-Blackness.

The linguistic repertoire of anti-Blackness is a permeable set of communicative forms that buttress the structural oppression of Black people. It is wielded by users

toward ends ranging from blatant antagonism to historical revisionism, “provid[ing] the weapons of everyday communication” (Gumperz 1964, 138). While the prominent elements of this repertoire are racist epithets, it also includes a panoply of forms that obstruct discussions of race, including such fan favorites as “I don’t see color,” and “Not all white people. . .” (Bonilla-Silva 2003, Hill 2008). These hackneyed uses of language have been widely discussed, but many features in the linguistic repertoire of anti-Blackness remain under-described. In order to highlight how language is implicated in what Hartman (2007) names “the afterlife of slavery,” we will examine one such feature: anti-Black *virtue signaling*.

We define virtue signaling as the action or practice of highlighting one’s morality through the use of language and other signs that index superficial alignment with progressive sociopolitical values. Anti-racist posturing—virtue signaling par excellence—comprises a genre that recruits the performativity of language to fashion speakers’ intersubjectivity in staunch opposition to white supremacy (Austin 1962; Bakhtin 1986). The pragmatic utility of such pronouncements as “I donate to the NAACP,” “I did missionary work in Gambia,” “I looove rap/jazz/Beyoncé,” “My son-in-law is Black,” “I once saw Dr. King speak,” and so on, is to ostensibly demonstrate how one is “down” for Black people and would sooner sell their first-born child into slavery than allow anyone to besmirch their good name. This type of virtue signaling is especially virulent in two marked ways: (1) It is self-validating, ostensibly rendering verbal or written statements as themselves evidence of anti-racism, as if to say “I’m not racist because I say I’m not.” (2) It is obfuscating, enabling individuals and institutions to avow support for anti-racist efforts in a way that has no demonstrable effect on anti-Black structures, thereby allowing white supremacy to persist, in fact undermining moves toward Black liberation in the process. Theorizing this behavior within a linguistic repertoire of anti-Blackness provides a framework to confront the maintenance of white innocence (Gutiérrez 2006; Bucholtz 2019) and the non-Black actors who align themselves with it.

In a 1995 Def Comedy Jam stand-up routine, comic Cedric the Entertainer parodied the virtue signaling genre (cf. Calhoun 2019) by caricaturing a whiteman “trying to make [him] feel comfortable” by relaying, with a heavy Southern drawl, “I like Black people. Hell, I got a pair of black boots. I got a black pickup truck. I even got a colored tv!” Using the entextualized phrase, “I like Black people,” Cedric metapragmatically disavows the construction (Bauman and Briggs 1992) by exposing the absurd presupposition that any Black person might be comforted by such a declaration. The statement, perhaps counterintuitively, functions as a phrasal contronym, conjuring a spectral figment of Black personhood only extant in the white imaginary (Morrison 1993). In dialoguing with that fabrication, persons impromptu signaling their anti-racist virtue reveal both an inverted double-consciousness (Du Bois 1903) and underlying perlocution of personal satisfaction.

Virtue signaling can be found beyond face-to-face discourse—social media is replete with it. For example, #BlackLivesMatter is commonly included in the biographical sections of individuals’ profiles to evidence support for the aims of the decentralized sociopolitical movement. However, we assert that if someone visiting a social media profile is not already convinced that Black lives matter, a Twitter bio is unlikely to sway them. Then what is it for? The function of this type of presentation is ultimately self-serving. Racialized appropriation can also be embodied through the use of non-linguistic signs, such as raised fists in photographs, black squares for profile pictures, and other media (Garza 2021).

Anti-Black virtue signaling can also be enacted by institutions. Recently, many scholars have critiqued the neoliberal turn in higher education, highlighting the advent of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives, and their resultant sensitivity workshops, guest lectures, race statements, and so on (Ahmed 2012; Calhoun 2021; Hundle et al. 2019; Urcioui 2010, 2018). These may also be understood as virtue signaling. If an institution has a public mission, and Black students, say, are routinely “microaggressed,” neglected, over-policed, etc. (as is the case in many predominantly

white institutions), then an anti-racism statement on behalf of said institution might be virtue signaling.

In the wake of the summer 2020 surge in U.S. anti-Black police violence resulting in the murders of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and George Floyd, many universities, departments, associations, and other academic organizations across the country released “race statements.” These declarations typically cite institutional values (e.g., diversity, inclusivity, celebrating difference), announce commitment to Black lives, and mourn the loss of Black life. What such statements are typically devoid of, however, are policy-inscribed actions for dismantling anti-Blackness. They thereby frame Black subjectivity and Black liberatory rhetoric as fungible (Hartman 1997) by appropriating, redirecting, and undermining realities of Black subjugation. Institutions often construct race statements to sidestep addressing their participation in reproducing myriad forms of anti-Blackness within the academy. Through a performance of word magic (Tambiah 1968), the statements themselves are apparently transmuted into a satisfactory intervention in lieu of adopting meaningful and measurable reparative policies. Without race-conscious strategic visions, race statements amount to little more than the “thoughts and prayers” often offered by National Rifle Association-supported politicians to victims of school shootings. Virtue signaling provides a means by which institutions can veil themselves in “saying the right thing” while duplicitously suggesting to hearers that they are “doing the right thing.”

We have argued that virtue signaling within the linguistic repertoire of anti-Blackness allows individuals and institutions to tacitly uphold structural racism. To be clear, we are not suggesting that individuals avoid using language to amplify sociopolitical causes of import or that institutions forego statements on race (or other gestures of solidarity altogether). These practices are necessary, but not sufficient in isolation to dismantle the exclusionary structures that persist in society. We suggest that more concrete actions, such as voting for anti-racist policies, educating oneself on histories of race and racism, or contributing resources to Black institutions (e.g., Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Black-owned businesses) should take precedence over linguistic opining in anti-racist efforts. On account of the linguistic issues implicated in virtue signaling, we call on scholars of language, especially, to be “agents of social change” (Charity Hudley 2008) in combating the pernicious linguistic practices and discourses that uphold white supremacy both inside and outside the academy (e.g., Alim & Smitherman 2012, Baugh 2003, Bucholtz 2010, Charity Hudley et al. 2018, Lanehart 2009, Rickford & King 2016, Rosa & Flores 2017). Let us make impermissible and ineffective the discursive strategies that avoid and deflect responsibility for anti-Black behavior and practices. Rather than, as James Baldwin decries in our introductory epigraph, “mak[ing] an act of faith” in the hopes that substance follows statements, let us resolve to have action be the evidence of intervention. In other words:

Don’t talk about it, be about it.

(African American proverb).

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