Performative Activism and the Murder of George Floyd

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This piece was written in the direct aftermath of George Floyd's murder on 25 May 2020. Since then, having also been selected as an article for CJLPA, it has been carefully reflected on in response to the dynamic events that have unfolded since and, indeed, continue to unfold. Since its original editorial process in March 2021, crucial events have followed that undoubtedly provide critical inflections on the article but could not have been included in its consideration. As this article shall propose, works of such current and pressing subject matter must always be considered as 'a continuous project that does not seek to assume an authoritative final word on the matter', and to this end, I hope you enjoy reading it.

The brutal and despicable murder of George Floyd on 25 May 2020 has sparked global outrage and mass protests. His senseless death has raised the fundamental question: what has changed? An edit of *Time*'s front cover from 2015, taking the Baltimore Riots as its point of departure has challenged: 'What has changed. What hasn't.' The image, with 2015 crossed out and '2020' hurriedly scribbled in, widely shared across social media, epitomises this stasis. George Floyd's death has also provoked a range of protest and activism, particularly performative activism, which this article seeks to explore. This piece will attempt to navigate the forms of online awareness and activism that have proliferated social media in the aftermath of Floyd's death and the subsequent protests.

As someone who is trained, or training, in visual culture—studying the history of art at university—my perspective comes exactly from what I am trained and taught: observation. Thus, without the cliché of claiming a virtuous empiricism to my understanding, this work is based on what I have seen and therefore is a result of a certain bubble I inhabit. It is empirically relative to that view, and eagerly encourages discussion from those views that I have perhaps not considered or not even been capable of considering.

Performative activism

In the wake of a prejudiced killing, the internet and social media took to the task of not only raising awareness, but also seeking to educate about forms of racial prejudice and privilege that may be overlooked in society today—a popular infographic outlining the covert and overt forms of white supremacy, comes to mind foremost .

It is encouraging to see that, in the wake of a primitive and perhaps impulsive display of authority and power, education and knowledge are being mobilised as a way to combat this. However, alongside these sources of information, another form of education was being promoted, perhaps more of a chastisement than an education. Countless pages, shared documents, and posts have circulated that are largely written by 'white people', exploring the ways in which one can educate and rid oneself of these covert and overt privileges—almost like self-help pages. I have seen these posts being shared and subsequently reposted by said 'white people'. I cannot help but think of the white person who is appalled by the rampant racism and injustice highlighted by Floyd's murder but is left feeling a sense of shame and even hatred for themselves by virtue of being 'white people'. One might argue the self-helping prognoses are at risk of falling into a melancholic apologia that incidentally reinforces those racial differences and oppositions that cause tensions and ultimately, unrest.

Sigmund Freud offers an interesting threshold which these pages and guides ought to be aware of straddling. The complex character of the melancholic is one who 'represents his ego to us as worthless, incapable of any achievement and morally despicable; he reproaches himself, vilifies himself and expect[s] to be cast out and punished.'[1] In this sense, one might understand acts of racial prejudice as truly despicable. However, the melancholic 'extends his self-criticism back over the past; he declares that he was never any better.'[2] It is here that we might see the dangers of such scathing self-criticism. If one declares they were never any better ('What has changed?') then how can one progress and change? The potential danger of these 'educational' articles, unfortunately, is that the phenomena risks 'white people' falling into a self-indulgent and masochistic melancholia and thus never really changing. Instead, they are,

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1   Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia' (first published 1918) in James Strachey (ed), *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (standard edn, Hogarth Press 1964) 246.

2   ibid.

Fig 1. An instance of the #blacklivesmatter challenge. Screenshot by author 2020.

perhaps subconsciously, happy to continue repeating this cycle of self-hatred and performative activism and change.

Furthermore, one might question these polemics to ask: which 'white people' are they addressing? In the strive for racial justice and equality, it is worrying that people often regress to such essentialist and normative concepts. A nuanced and more subtle approach is needed. There is no doubt that any fundamental change needs to be educated and informed, but it is the way we go about this.

Following the unravelling thread of performative activism, there has emerged a more worrying trend on social media. As part of a spate of 'quarantine challenges' initiated by the Instagram and TikTok communities during the COVID-19 pandemic, a new '#blacklivesmatter' challenge has taken to the stories of performative activists. Originating from a single user, the post constituted a black background with the 'challenge' to tag '10 people who won't break the chain'. This post is shared publicly, featuring the tags of those 10 people who are implored to show their support, who then repost the story tagging another ten people and so on—creating a chain of awareness for the Black Lives Matter movement (fig 1). Whilst perhaps noble in its intentions, the chain evolves into what can only be described as a mess. Countless tags and graphics clutter the story until the black is crowded out by each story competing to draw attention to itself above the layers.

Seeing these Instagram stories, I could not help but think of the work *Untitled (I am an invisible man)* by Glenn Ligon, 1991. Ligon is a pivotal figure in the exploration of black identity, working from a position he describes as his 'permanent dislocation' as a black

gay male painter working after Modernism.[3] His very practice, painting, is a role defined by its history of entrenched privilege. Darby English describes the profession as 'largely filled by white heterosexual men who enjoyed a kind of cultural neutrality as a matter of social entitlement'.[4] Negotiating this charged and sensitive culture, Ligon's work often critiques the socially constructed nature of black identities. The 1991 painting appropriates the opening lines of Ralph Ellison's novel Invisible Man (1952) and is painted with stencils in oil paint. In this work, Ligon meticulously brushes paint through the stencil, using the methods of applied handiwork rather than more industrially efficient processes such as using spray-paint or a paint roller, purposefully complicating the manual nature of his process. Ligon desecrates the privileged tradition of oil paint by perverting its application. The frivolous act of painting, indulging in the sumptuous material quality (and cost) of oil paint, is subverted by Ligon's obsessive and arduous process. Much of Ligon's other work exploits and manipulates text: as one begins to look at (or read) the painting, viewers are able to discern the initial parts of the opening before it descends into illegibility. Ligon frustrates our urge to read the work, actively provoking it.

One might understand the cluster of indecipherable layers of each #blacklivesmatter story to be a stencil, akin to the 1991 work, slowly drowning the real meaning and intention of that original post, amounting to the facilitation of the neoliberal bubble that often carries such performance activists. Additionally, one worries that, unless anything is to change, the edited *Time* front cover may become an iterative ritual for performative activists, scrawling in yet another year of social injustice until it too becomes indecipherable.

These posts have since been denounced, being called out and identified as acts of virtue signalling and performance. Performative activists have been urged instead to take real action. Both of these forms of activism and awareness, as well as so much online activity, operate with the same outdated underlying principle. They operate under the strong belief that politics are a means to change—real action.

The death of politics

As sensationalist a statement as this may sound, the frustration and failure to comprehend how nothing has changed could not be a starker indication of the tragic demise of politics. What, though, does this actually mean?

Politics has become a system of managing what is understood as a risk society, as proposed by Ulrich Beck.[5] In his theory, the telos of power is not necessarily to create change, but instead to keep a steady and stable course. Power has been redistributed to forces such as financiers and technologists whose job it is to manage and evade such risk, while the purpose of politics is changed and its influence eroded. These new structures not only manage risk but build networks that guide and manipulate the risk. To take an example, the 'quality-adjusted life year' (QALY) is a measurement used to determine a perfect year in health, assessing the value of medical intervention against disease burden. One QALY, one perfect year. In the UK, that cost is £60,000.[6] This is but one of many sinister

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3 Darby English, *How to See A Work of Art in Total Darkness* (The MIT Press 2007) 205.

4 ibid.

5 Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (Sage Publications 1992).

6 David Glover and John Henderson, 'Quantifying health impacts of

calculations devised by the systems of economics to evade and manage such risk.

Thus, instead of generating change and progress, this system assesses the potential risks and manages the outcome for a safer option. The result of this redistribution of power, is that power is now divested amongst several Foucauldian microcosms of power that orchestrate this outcome management, the risk. Therefore, for true change and real action within the political system one must exploit the gaps in these imbricated institutions of power.

Here we return to the protests ravaging the USA in the worst race riots seen since the 1960s. Much of the criticism directed toward the rioting points to the fact that shops are being needlessly looted—what does looting have to do with racial inequality?

If we are to understand economic power as the mesh that binds these imbricated structures, then it comes as no surprise to see rioters looting shops and burning down institutions of economic exploitation in order to gain economic participation, of which looting is the most concentrated expression. Why should rioters have political goals, when politics do not work, and change does not happen? As many posts circulating social media have accurately emphasised – to the ignorance of those criticising riots and belittling the protests – riots and looting are legitimate and profound forms of protest against a system that values goods and services over human life—think back to the QALY.

Furthermore, there is the added complexity of the internet's entrenchment by these same economic systems of control, precariously marshalling and guiding users through a series of algorithms and personal data collection, into echo-chambers in order to see what one wants to see. Social media platforms such as Facebook, commercially harvesting and mining users' data and cookie preferences for advertising revenue and a supposedly seamless user experience, facilitate and funnel users into these echo chambers for commercial gain. In turn, they neutralise both the effective and affective power of politics. The protests and riots that take place in the real world, however, rather than the cyber-world—regardless of whether one agrees with them or not—are stark indications of the failure of politics to create change.

Continued occurrences of performative activism, which fundamentally believe in the earnest power of politics to create change, ensure the perpetual stasis remains. For as long as those Instagram chains are sent to friends and like-minded people, and self-help guides for 'white people' are offered as the sole means to cleansing oneself of covert or overt racism, the structures of power that facilitate this injustice will still exist. The liberals are placed in one bubble, and the radicals placed in another, bouncing off one another's cry for change and wondering why nothing is any different—imbuing them with a false sense of political mobilisation.

It is not all hopeless. There has been a slowly growing self-awareness of these instances of performative activism. Counter-posts have emerged, asking how people will 'take it further' beyond the veneer of performance to an audience of followers. These have been what I understand to be the braver and more progressive forms of activism. We unfortunately live in an era of verbal paralysis, where views that might even appear to softly critique the liberal bubble are often denounced and shot down. Those in paralysis are often the ones

who, with nowhere to discuss and vary their views, get funnelled into a strong yet silent individualism and take this to polls. For the voices that shout in disbelief at how ridiculous and preposterous the Trump administration is, just as many might be silently responding.

Real change can only happen by identifying instances of performative activism, realising those acts and taking them further. Differences of opinion ought to be resolved not by self-hatred and chastisement and neither should they be vehemently denounced. Instead, we must look to understanding through constructive discussion and critically interrogate those layers and structures of power rather than resort to essentialist discourse.

This might be too idealistic and naïve a conclusion to have, but it is the best I can think, and I invite further discussion and opinion on this.

I must stress the nuanced approach I have attempted to negotiate. My focus is on the responses to the murder of George Floyd, and some of the ways in which people are trying to raise awareness and enact change. My conclusions are not by any means a simple way to tackle the entrenched institutional racism that is evidently rife. Of course, some of my concluding remarks and solutions can be applied to how we might deal with such issues, but this is not my intention. I have in essence taken Floyd's murder as a point of departure to discuss wider issues relating to methods of social change and protest, just as one might argue the public have taken Floyd's murder as a point of departure to protest against the continuing racial inequality and institutional discrimination that is rampant. I also hope to have raised interesting perspectives, particularly a cynical insight as to why change may not have occurred—yet.

The above section was to be my conclusion, yet it may seem disparaging at this point to conclude the piece on such an unresolved note. Instead, I would like to present a final concluding point that focuses on the actual process of writing and formalising my understandings on such sensitive issues and in turn, offer a resolved direction.

This piece was first written on 1 June 2020, exactly a week after George Floyd was murdered amidst the exponential rise of protests and rioting in the USA, the impetus of which was to rapidly spread on a global scale. Reflecting on this piece: whilst its message is as imperative as it was originally, I believe it is also important to consider it within that taut sociopolitical context. In the editorial process for its publication in this journal, it came to light that there was an anxiety embedded within the original argument of the piece, most palpable in its conclusion. I have chosen to include that section within the body of the article and not revise it because I understand this entire work to be a continuous project that does not seek to assume an authoritative final word on the matter. I understand it to be a project of continuous 'interruption' to keep the dialogue going.[7] Therefore, that very tentativeness forms not only an integral part of my own understanding of performative activism and how to respond to it, but I believe it also expresses a tentativeness more widely within society.

At the time of writing, such an understanding of what I perceived as performative activism was not yet fully, to use the language of social media, trending. Balancing my personal views against the justified tension of the resurging Black Lives Matter movement, I did not want to further problematise this tension, but nonetheless it was

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government policies: A how-to guide to quantifying the health impacts' (Department of Health 2010) paras 5.21 and 5.24.

7 Kobena Mercer, 'Black art and the burden of representation' (1990) 4(10) Third Text 74.

an opinion I felt needed to be shared out of personal frustration. Now, revising this piece in March 2021, as the initial tensions slowly settle, I have come to understand my own journey as one that can be reflexive of the wider attitude toward performative activism.

The movement and its forms of activism have come a long way, and at the same time have not. Performative activism still pervades Western political mobilisation and awareness. In the UK, the most prevalent display can be seen in professional football players taking the knee before kick-off, a metamorphosis, or even perversion, of NFL player Colin Kaepernick's display of protest in the USA, 2016. However, awareness and action against such acts are becoming less controversial as more people tackle displays of performative activism directly, with Wilfried Zaha being the most recent and high-profile footballer to speak out against the performativity of such acts, refusing to take the knee any longer.[8] This is an encouraging step in the right direction and is evident of a dynamic and ongoing development—it is still a trending matter ten months on.

Understanding this work within its own context, one that is still constantly developing, provides a valuable point of retrospect, reminding one of the importance to constantly reflect on the immediacy of our times and providing a constructive marker of progress in negotiating such complex and sensitive issues.

In this self-reflexive approach, I look to promote a more holistic direction toward the issue of performative activism. As the farce of performative activism is slowly becoming more exposed, it becomes clear that such acts operate on the premise of difference and othering. Explored originally, performative activism operates on a framework of virtue signalling, distinguishing one from the immoral and bad Other by displaying acts of superficial activism. Thus, short of perpetuating this binary and constantly questioning, 'What has changed, what hasn't?', political mobilisation must be directed towards looking beyond this binary. It must stop preoccupying itself with this fictitious Other, upholding the system of difference and division. Rather than focusing on individuals, mobilisation ought to be directed to the overarching frameworks and structures that cause the illusionary difference in the first place. In a sense, therefore, the frameworks that perpetuate division are also those which should unite us.

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8 Wilfried Zaha, 'Why must I kneel to show you that black people matter!' (10 February 2021) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mzYz5yzXCIo> accessed 20 February 2021.