

## Signals Crossed: White Double Consciousness and the Role of the Critic

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In “The Non-Performativity of White Virtue-Signaling: Insights for Social Justice Pedagogy,” Barbara Applebaum seeks to criticize attempts at projecting innocence through the process of virtue-signaling. In particular, Applebaum is successful in revealing the usefulness of the Calling-Out Feature—the act of shaming or critiquing a disagreeable view—when enabled by the “virtue-signal critic.” This feature is able to indicate patterns of white habits and reproductions of power, while also serving as an educative gift for whites. This is possible because the act of criticizing *white* virtue-signaling allows for the development of a critical white double consciousness so long as whites stay implicated in the critique. However, I argue that this process of creating a potentiated double consciousness for whites is complicated by the entrenchment of “first sight.” Moreover, I argue that when *white* virtue-signaling is criticized by people of color it is not done so as a gift but rather is an act of “racial banding”—an identification process that allows for the tracking of whiteness. Criticizing whites that seek to appear good allows dominated groups the ability to identify threats while having the secondary effect of letting whites know that their self-perception is flawed. In this way, criticism acts as a warning sign, a designation of *cave canem*. Utilizing the works of Paget Henry, Jane Anna Gordon, and Tressie McMillan Cottom, this response paper will argue for the recentering of dominated people and their epistemes in challenging whiteness.

The act of virtue-signaling itself is rightly criticized by Applebaum. In particular, white virtue-signaling or performative allyship is condemned for its shielding effects insofar as “white virtue-signaling obstructs the need for considering one’s complicity in racism.”<sup>21</sup> However, white virtue-signaling cannot be isolated as a singular event, but instead must be seen as part of a wider set of practices that shields whiteness from challenge. However, if this type of signaling is challenged, does this mean that the virtue-signal critic can also be ironically charged with signaling? Is the critic susceptible to being called out by detractors or even being subjected to the Hypocrisy Feature—wherein virtuous words fail to match up with actions? For Applebaum, this worry is short-lived. In unjust situations, virtue-signaling critique can be educative insofar as this process reveals the negative effects produced through whiteness. In fact, Applebaum argues that the white virtue-signal critic is possibly immune from charges of signaling and hypocrisy: “The white virtue-signal critic may not be virtue-signaling but rather exposing how power reproduces itself.”<sup>22</sup> The critic reveals how white supremacy is reproduced through good intentions and the projecting of innocence.

On these points, I agree with Applebaum. However, I also want to more intently focus on the *positionality* of the white virtue-signal critic and the meaning of their criticism. Applebaum argues: “The virtue-signal critic is 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.”<sup>23</sup> Under this view, white virtue-signal critiques, particularly when they are done by a person of color, are educative

insofar as it allows for critical white double consciousness to be cultivated. Yet is such cultivation the meaning, intention, or side-effect of these positioned criticisms?

In analyzing whether potentiated white double consciousness is a gift of white virtue-signal criticism one has to deal with the entrenchment of “first sight.” To begin, Applebaum relies on Linda Martín Alcoff’s formulation of white double consciousness: “For whites, or any dominant group, double consciousness involves coming to see themselves through both the dominant and the nondominant lens, and recognizing the latter as a critical corrective truth.”<sup>4</sup> In order for whites to inhabit the critique, they must actively combat willful ignorance. Whites must be less confident that their own interpretations of the social world are accurate and acknowledge that less-dominantly situated knowers are in possession of critical corrective truths. Yet, white double consciousness is also distinct from “double consciousness.” Namely, for whites, a split consciousness develops from the non-oppressive perception of marginalized groups and secondly, it is more dependent upon external indicators, since internal lenses are “exclusively dependent” on dominant frameworks.<sup>5</sup> That being said, these distinctions do not prevent white virtue-signal criticisms from being effective.

However, the works of Paget Henry and Jane Anna Gordon reveal that “double consciousness” is a much more complicated phenomenon. It can be un-potentiated or potentiated and its perceptual parameters can involve first sight, second sight, and third sight. These insights are not recognized in white double consciousness. To begin, “double consciousness” or “second sight” is the capability of seeing oneself as through “the eyes of the white other.” This external view can not only contradict with one’s internal valuations, but it

can also lead to duplicity, resentment, and resignation. Double consciousness becomes “potentiated second sight” when one realizes that the formulation of the “Negro” is a construct of the European and Euro-American life-world: “When potentiated and capable of seeing through this caricature of ‘the negro,’ second sight becomes a powerful critical capability that gives the Africana subject special subjective access and insight into the dehumanizing capabilities of the white imperial subject by which the latter was able to create and impose this de-humanizing caricature of the African.”<sup>6</sup> This self-consciousness, although latent, can be developed through acquiring an independent standard (“third sight”) or through “the recovery of a significant measure of first sight” where one can see oneself through their own eyes.<sup>7</sup>

However, Gordon argues that double consciousness functions differently for whites. She writes that, “For the basis of whiteness is a subordinated black life-world, the denial of its reality as a legitimate alternative point of view for consciousness. In other words, the recreation of Africans and Africana people as black Negroes does not appear as a problem for white first sight, which would appear to be intact and to suggest no need to look at the self through eyes of a black other.”<sup>8</sup> White first sight relies on the denial of an Africana or Black gaze. For criticism, such as that done by the white virtue-signal critic, to be effective it would have to develop a split consciousness. Yet, “double consciousness” is the product of an immobilizing oppression for blacks, which is absent for whites. For white double consciousness to be potentiated or critical it first has to be present. Yet, white virtue-signaling critiques are indicating the presence and entrenchment of white first sight, not a split consciousness. Whites who are already conflicted or who already value less-dominantly situated knowers

might benefit, but the white virtue-signal critic can also be valued for providing a warning sign.

For instance, in “The Problem with Obama’s Faith in White America,” Tressie McMillan Cottom argues that part of existing as a Black American is in needing to “know our whites” for survival. She writes: “To know our whites is to understand the psychology of white people and the elasticity of whiteness. It is to be intimate with some white persons but to critically withhold faith in white people categorically.”<sup>9</sup> Knowing one’s whites can take many forms. I would argue that criticizing *white* virtue-signaling is done primarily by people of color to self-identify the empty commitments of whites towards antiracism and their remaining commitments towards whiteness. The act of criticizing is thus an act of observation and designation. The act of marking and tagging that is accomplished through acts of virtue-signaling criticism not only then have a Calling-Out Feature, rather they also have a Racial Banding Feature.

Racial Banding, much like the bird banding done by ornithologists, allows for individual identification and the tracking of whiteness. The white virtue-signal critical in levying a critique also lets dominated groups identify the complicit. Although bandings can be used to identify ideological distinctions, I refrain from using alternative terminology, such as racist banding, because white virtue-signaling is focused on racial innocence. Thus, while a banding might indicate racism, I think it is proper to focus on the maintenance of whiteness in the act of virtue-signaling. This type of identification functions in much the same way that *cave canem* (beware the dog) signs do or how “double consciousness” originally functions in the work of W.E.B. Du Bois: “Of them I am singularly clairvoyant. I see in and through them. I view them from unusual

points of vantage. Not as a foreigner do I come, for I am native, not foreign, bone of their thought and flesh of their language.”<sup>10</sup> White innocence seeks to preserve the attendant benefits, privileges, and licenses associated with whiteness, no matter the signals involved. The benefit of criticizing *white* virtue-signaling is then primarily directed towards other dominated groups or people of color. If criticism allows whites to know that their self-perception is still trapped in a racial fantasy land of “consensual hallucination,” such transparency would only be secondary.<sup>11</sup> Racial banding as practiced by the white virtue-signal critic functions to identify those dynamics of first sight masquerading as potentiated second sight.

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1 Barbara Applebaum, “The Non-Performativity of White Virtue-Signaling: Insights for Social Justice Pedagogy,” *Philosophy of Education* 76 (same issue).

2 Applebaum, “The Non-Performativity of White Virtue-Signaling.”

3 Applebaum, “The Non-Performativity of White Virtue-Signaling.”

4 Linda Martín Alcoff, *The Future of Whiteness* (Malden MA: Polity Press, 2015), 89

5 Applebaum, “The Non-Performativity of White Virtue-Signaling.”

6 Paget Henry, “Gender and Africana Phenomenology,” *The C.L.R. James Journal* 17, no. 1 (2011): 157.

7 Jane Anna Gordon, “Legitimacy from Modernity’s Underside: Potentiated Double Consciousness,” *Worlds & Knowledges Otherwise* 1, no. 3 (2006): 5.

8 Gordon, “Legitimacy from Modernity’s Underside,” 4.

9 Tressie McMillan Cottom, “The Problem with Obama’s Faith in White America,” *The Atlantic* (December 2016), <https://www.theatlantic.com/poli->

tics/archive/2016/12/obamas-faith-in-white-america/510503/.

10 W.E.B Du Bois, "The Souls of White Folks," *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1999), 17.

11 Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 18.