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Moral Performativity in Eighteenth-Century Abolitionism and Black Lives Matter

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Abstract

The shallow phenomenon of moral performativity is consistently prevalent from the abolitionist movement of the eighteenth-century, to the Black Lives Matter movement of the twenty-first-century. Olaudah Equiano's extraordinary abolitionist text, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, investigates and utilizes this phenomenon as he offers readers across centuries the opportunity to recognize the tenacious inequality which Black people face, as well as the paradoxical value that moral performativity provides. Through a close reading of Equiano's religious argument, as well as his sentimental family scene, it may be recognized how egoism has the potential to unite with sentimentalism, and thus, may result in profound affective responses that lead to public displays of support among audiences. In the context of Equiano's narrative, this essay deconstructs and compares eighteenth-century and contemporary moral ideologies and egoism in relation to social injustice. Further, this essay contemplates the perpetual racist misconstructions concerning Black affect, and the selfish incentives that may function to obstruct social progress. Predominantly, in this essay, I ponder whether audience engagement in moral performativity may alter social norms surrounding racial inequality, and thereby, successfully advance pertinent anti-racism movements.

187 words.

Moral Performativity in Eighteenth-Century Abolitionism and Black Lives Matter

Olaudah Equiano's 1789 text, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, presents a compelling argument for mobilizing anti-racist discourse through humanizing Black people. Equiano's narrative is structured in a way that is intended to engage readers through exerting a variety of arguments while recollecting events from the perspective of a judicious ex-slave. This tactic is useful, as it functions to encourage readers to inhabit the position of the oppressed Black slave. Thus, readers are forced either to proceed empathetically, or negate his profusion of arguments and compromise their own morality. Consequently, in convincing non-Black people (predominantly white people who have no personal experience with racial oppression) of the importance of anti-racist behaviour, Black writers such as Equiano are forced to appeal to the inherently skeptical or selfish motivators behind anti-racist discourse. This forced abolitionist writers, like Equiano, to relay their stories in order to appeal to white European "men [who] would concentrate on rational and legal arguments...[and] women [who] would be left to dwell on "sentimental" scenes of family separation" (Costanzo 24). More recently, a common impulsion for non-Black involvement in the Black Lives Matter movement similarly depends on virtue signaling, in which "moral claims are driven by a desire for status rather than a desire for truth" (Westra 4), which is generally incentivized by specific incidents of racial injustice. Even so, through appealing to white readers' selfish values, the goal of accentuating racial injustice is to "engage the reader's pity and spur political action" (Ahern 2), despite the shallowness of audience motivations. Still, the support of anti-racist endeavours, by non-Black people, for selfishly performative reasons seems inherently harmful. As Stephen Ahern notes, shallow performativity may function to sustain white misunderstanding of Black affective responses to unfathomable instances of injustice by "ignoring the contexts of suffering,

and thereby opening no avenues for lasting relief... [and it] can be actively harmful, by reinforcing stereotypes” (2). Therefore, it may conceal the depth of racial inequality throughout history, effectively making people complacent with racist ideals. Nonetheless, in having readers inhabit the position of the racially-oppressed individual, eighteenth-century authors such as Equiano introduce white readers to several astute arguments surrounding undeniable racial injustice. Whether people genuinely empathize or whether they prioritize their own egoism, the subsequent moral performativity may redefine social norms by coercing generally unperturbed people into recognizing and normalizing Black affective agency and endorsing racial justice.

A common ground between eighteenth and twenty-first century readers is that individuals tend to prefer to think highly of their own rationality and morality, so that they may seem appealing to social groups. People tend to “conform to normative social practices because we are motivated by our beliefs about what other people do and think about those practices, not what we ourselves think about them” (Westra 6), which indicates the selfish incentives for maintaining a publicly high moral stance in response to racial injustices. For eighteenth-century readers, the morally-sound public persona would have likely revolved around affective piety, which is a form of piety linking religious virtue to empathetic connection. Contemporary morality, on the other hand, seemingly revolves around the appearance of adhering to notions regarding a variety of normalized social justice movements. While many contemporary readers are likely to be less religious than the typical eighteenth-century reader, Equiano’s focus on affective piety may appeal to readers across centuries. In compelling readers to accept rational arguments that are submerged in the emotional situation of a suffering individual, Equiano’s narrative can appeal to personal and communal values and therefore, “make real a problem that afflicted a whole population, by allowing the reader to visualize the scene of suffering and engage in imaginative

identification with the plight of the victim" (Ahern 6). Hence, affect may break through white resistance to rational arguments in favour of abolitionism. So, affective agency, or the ability to feel and exert emotions, as well as the ability to link affect to action (in which people may feel emotionally moved and therefore, compelled to physically do something), works together with egoism in motivating individuals to support normalized social justice movements. Further, virtue signaling is convenient in maintaining a moral public persona for audiences who need not put genuine effort forth, aside from a public display of discontent with injustices, as, "the primary intention of any act of virtue signaling is to convey information about the speaker" (Westra 9). So, disingenuous audiences across centuries may perform virtue signaling or a morally enhanced public persona through simply articulating discontent, which has the potential to alert a more genuine audience who may opt to "spur political action". Thus, through a need to engage in performative morality to fit into societal norms, affective agency may trigger some individuals into genuinely empathizing with racially oppressed people.

However, to achieve this, societal norms must initially be shifted into considering racial inequality as a worthy cause, which further indicates the inherently selfish nature of moral performativity. Notably, Equiano's eighteenth-century text functions to highlight the selfish nature of contemporary virtue signaling, through recognizing the necessity of appealing to white readers. As such, shifting social norms and mobilizing social justice movements seemingly depends on appealing to audiences' selfish hidden incentives to gain status, rather than genuine interests in racial injustice. Thus, at the selfish core of virtue signaling, it seems possible that some ignorant readers may mitigate or dismiss the depth of racial inequality, and therefore, obstruct social progress. But ethical issues aside, the growing normalization of virtue signaling may help to normalize social justice causes in the public eye, which may, in turn, inspire more

genuine affective responses among supporters. So, although appealing to selfish audience ideals might seem counterproductive, it nevertheless creates avenues for publicly broadcasting moral performativity. Consequently, social justice movements may acquire mass support, which will both preserve an individual sense of belonging among supporters and may also gain enough traction to acquire the genuine support of individuals who will act to advance social change. So, as previously stated, appealing to virtue signalers seems to be initially necessary. This indicates that anti-racist advocates have to configure their discussion in a way which appeals to primary social concerns regarding moral prosperity which derives from conformity to socially accepted ideologies. So, eighteenth-century abolitionist writers like Equiano needed to redefine socially accepted norms through initially appealing to the centrality of European morality: their egoistic desire to appear pious.

Through indulging European egoism, Equiano immediately avoids demonizing the slave owners, as he gently states that he, “will not suppose that the dealers in slaves are born worse than other men” (127), effectively disclaiming any possibility of attacking them. He further amplifies this point when he states that it is “mistaken avarice that corrupts the milk of human kindness” (127) indicating that greedy desires are to blame for corrupted morality. So, people need to re-examine their priorities and choose to prioritize the values which engross morality, rather than selfish greed. Thus, Equiano maintains an open-minded, yet firm position that holds individuals accountable for upkeeping their own moral appearance. To further argue the indisputable relevance of piety in eighteenth-century morality, he states that slave owners are “raise[d] to a state of far above man” (127), as this reminds readers that Christians should be humble servants of God, rather than enforcing their own perceived superiority over other people. Thus, Equiano’s rational stance and appeal to European morality functions to humanize slaves

and hold slave owners accountable for impious actions. While contemporary readers may not commonly base their morality in religious values, affective piety remains relevant, as its purpose is to use rational arguments to force readers into inhabiting the mental position of the oppressed being. This encourages audiences to consider racial injustice and incentivises the need to reject outward complacency with increasingly immoral notions surrounding racism, and instead, opt to prove one's moral superiority through supporting anti-racism.

In furthering this notion of inhabiting the position of the racially oppressed individual, Equiano also presents relatable familial love to appeal primarily to individuals' empathy, which functions to render his unimaginable position, somewhat fathomable to non-Black readers. His sublime recollection of love humanizes him through displaying a capacity for familial love, in that it forces readers to recognize the relatable human qualities that Black people possess, and therefore, encourages readers to acknowledge the immorality of racial discrimination.

Additionally, in *A Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), Scottish philosopher, Adam Smith describes empathy as a type of imaginative projection. As Smith astutely notes, "we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, [so] we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation" (1). Equiano establishes an affective connection with audiences by similarly encouraging the reader to imaginatively project themselves into the position of the brother, as he reunites with his sister. In the relatable notion of familial love within the sentimental reunion scene, audiences are further encouraged to inhabit the overall emotional position of the oppressed slave. This approach beneficially provides readers with the opportunity to personally engage with and imaginatively react to unpleasant scenarios regarding the dehumanization and suffering of slaves, particularly in this recollection of relatable familial love. This may subsequently trigger genuine

emotions in readers, as, “to be in pain or distress of any kind excites the most excessive sorrow, so to conceive or to imagine that we are in it, excites some degree of the same emotion” (Smith 2). So, in imaginatively experiencing the sufferings of oppressed individuals, audiences may recognize the immorality of racial oppression, and develop a newfound sense of sympathy or empathy. Either of which may advance audiences’ desire to engage in social justice movements for the sake of selflessly pursuing equality, or selfishly signaling their virtue publicly. Nevertheless, through imaginative projection, people may gain insight into the state of the oppressed individual, which might lead to substantial conversations surrounding topics of inequality. It is, therefore, worth considering whether imaginative projection can function to open avenues for redefining morality and social norms, whilst gaining support and acknowledgment from a vast variety of people.

However, while audiences may connect to oppressed individuals through acts of imaginative projection, white people’s imagination remains limited when it comes to inhabiting the emotional position of the racially oppressed individual, for (as Smith suggests) our senses “never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensation” (1). Additionally, as Tyrone Palmer argues, the inability to involve oneself in the interiority of Black affective agency derives from the inherently racist condition in which, “Black affective responses [which] are acknowledged...are done so in a distorted manner, which functions to further reinforce the purported abnormality of Black feeling” (14). So ultimately, the benefits of imaginative projection are limited, and Black affect is rendered a sublime matter to white audiences, as Black affect is inaccessible to such audiences who may misread and further appropriate Black affective agency by incessantly using shallow motivations to be seen as engaging with anti-racist discourse.

Thus, this lack of genuine understanding perpetuates complacency with structural racism as Black people are dehumanized through alienating their affective agency as unfathomable. Further, the “inability to conceive of Black emotion, to imagine the Black as a sentient being with interiority, is rooted in the history of racial chattel slavery” (Palmer 17). This coincides with the eighteenth-century abolitionist belief that Black people “possess[ed] inferior reasoning powers and...dwell[ed] mostly in the realm of uncontrolled emotion” (Costanzo 24). As this belief persistently contributes to the invalidation of Black accounts of injustice, the sublimity of Black affect perpetuates white people’s imaginations as limited, as they cannot fathom racial injustice on a personal level. Thus, they must be appealed to in relatable terms which can engage one’s personal experiences with morals and affective agency. So, Equiano attempts to combat the sublimity of Black affective agency as “he intends his testimonial to demonstrate the humanity of the slave by revealing an interior self, and thereby to counter the racist assumption that Africans lack the capacity for profound affective response” (Ahern 16). However, Equiano’s efforts to humanize Black affective interiority might not always produce empathy within his white readers. The sublimity of Black affect limits the white reader’s ability to imaginatively project. Consequently, Equiano paradoxically encourages his readers to empathize with Black familial affect, while simultaneously disconnecting affect from Blackness. To appeal to European readers’ personal values and imaginative abilities regarding familial love, rather than focusing on racial identity, Equiano simultaneously calls attention to Black affect, while removing race, to create an affective setting in which white readers may easily relate to the sentimental familial scene from a perspective of privilege. In this way, Equiano encourages the European reader to develop a sense of understanding or empathy, despite the imaginative limitations.

Initially, the sublimity of Black affective agency is evident in the sibling reunion scene when Equiano's sister, "ran into [his] arms – [he] was quite overpowered: neither of [them] could speak; but, for a considerable time, clung to each other in mutual embraces, unable to do any thing but weep" (66). Evidently, their affective response to the sentimental reunion sublimely results in an inability to articulate their emotions through speech, indicating the intensity and potentially unfathomability of the event. However, Equiano quickly follows up in stating that their "meeting affected all who saw [them]" (66), indicating the good nature and affective understanding of the African slave owners. This may constructively motivate readers to prove their own moral superiority by emulating the understanding actions of the slave owners and humanizing the slaves enough to reconcile the relatability and humanness of Black affective agency. Further, when Equiano recounts the subsequent separation from his sister, he balances his sentimental experience with his rational narrative voice, as he manages to sensibly proclaim the agony of being torn from his sister when he states, "happy should I have ever esteemed myself to encounter every misery for you, and to procure your freedom by the sacrifice of my own" (66). In this statement, he abstains from aggressively blaming slave owners or focusing heavily on interior emotions beyond an obvious and understandable personal anguish. So, despite the supposed sublimity of Black affect, Equiano balances his two narrative selves in order to make his unfathomable position, somewhat fathomable to European readers who can identify with being protective of their loved ones. Thus, by disconnecting affect from Blackness and by imbedding it in a representation of non-racialized familial love, Equiano's sentimental argument gently coerces white readers into recognizing their own moral accountability, as well as empathetically inhabiting the position of the unjustly shattered sibling relationship. This invites audiences to acknowledge Black affective agency as existent and reasonable, if not relatable, and

allows eighteenth-century and contemporary readers to indulge in the desire to exert public displays of moral superiority regarding relevant racial injustice movements.

Similar to how the public showcasing of morality influenced the abolitionist movement of the late eighteenth-century, contemporary social justice movements are emphasized by the publicity of social media. Thus, contemporary people may feel pressured to imitate the vast amount of anti-racist advocates on social media, and appeal to these normalized and prominent morals through engaging in shallow virtue signaling. Substantially, it is unlikely that many contemporary readers will view Equiano's text with the same skepticism that racially ignorant eighteenth-century readers initially would have. This is likely due to the current relevancy of social media, which has allowed contemporary people to grow accustomed to demands for racial justice, and to recognize the normalization of such morals. This indicates either that contemporary people have evolved into more empathetic beings, or perhaps that virtue signaling may be the successor of embellished morality surrounding eighteenth-century affective piety, in that people throughout history may appropriate instances of racial injustice to enhance societal representations of themselves. Thereby, virtue signaling may function to "incentivize moral hypocrisy" among shallow audiences who are only "motivated to take actions designed to maintain [an] impression" of moral goodness, which may consequently dismiss the depth of racial injustice (Westra 12).

Despite this disturbing notion, virtue signaling also acts to normalize anti-racist discourse, as people may "initially [commit] to a norm out of a desire for enhanced moral reputation, but then...live up to this norm because their public moral expression has made them publicly accountable" (Westra 14). So, audiences of abolitionism or modern social justice movements, such as Black Lives Matter, are encouraged to appropriate egregious accounts of racial injustice

as an opportunity to convince society that they are morally superior to those perpetuating racism, and therefore, maintain a sense of responsibility in sustaining anti-racist discourse. On the other hand, contemporary people may become complacent with the systemic nature of contemporary racism by claiming that because slavery is over, we are automatically morally superior as a society and, therefore, have nothing to prove. Crucially, as Palmer observes, such attitudes will likely further “the nullification and denial of Black interiority and Black sentience...[and] preclude the possibility of the Black as an affective agent” (18). Thus, as Equiano’s innovative narrative suggests, the use of virtue signaling is a double-edged sword. While it may succeed in redefining societal norms, it may also perpetuate shallowness, selfish posturing, and the dismissal of Black affective agency. Overall, though, virtue signaling may provide hope that, “the new social norm creates a psychological permission structure for...people to change their moral beliefs” (Westra 22), which creates opportunity for a more genuine understanding of racism and Black affective agency.

In conclusion, while racism in the eighteenth-century explicitly concerns the enslavement of Black people, some privileged white readers may still argue that anti-Black racism and racial inequality are no longer prevalent. However, the systemic nature of anti-Black racism continues to plague the twenty-first-century, over two hundred years after the abolition of slavery. As such, the feigned morality of eighteenth-century individuals finds its contemporary example in people who overlook the seriousness of racial inequality, in favour of shallow virtue signaling. Nonetheless, while some audiences may opt for shallow performances of morality (in which they only temporarily support anti-racist action in the aftermath of extensively broadcasted racist hate crimes), Equiano’s ability to construct arguments and combat negative biases surrounding Black affect is a timeless endeavour which is useful in challenging and redefining moral social norms.

While egoistic morality and virtue signaling may be performative in nature, such behaviour perpetuates a necessary dialogue regarding racial inequality and subsequently, may persuade generally unperturbed non-Black people to develop an interest in social justice as anti-racism becomes increasingly normalized. Thus, despite the negative side effect of needing to appeal to the egoistic goals of non-Black audiences to advance anti-racist discourse, “virtue signaling can also be an invaluable instrument for social change” (Westra 22). So, moral performativity should not simply be dismissed as inherently damaging to anti-racist causes, as these selfish incentives present an opportunity to demolish ignorance through putting audiences in positions that force us to develop a rational or empathetic understanding of Black affective agency and racial inequality.

3,171 words.

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