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To Be or Not to Be on the Right Side of History

A conceptual analysis of
performative wokeness in its relation
to antiracism for White people



E. A. VOOGT

1457845

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SUPERVISOR: DR. J. RIJNDERS

Second reader: Dr. F.L.B.

Meijboom

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Abstract

Although we are constantly reminded that we live in a world where ‘performative wokeness’ is ubiquitous, the concept of performative wokeness remains unclear and contested. Within academic literature, the topic is relatively unexplored. Performative wokeness generally denotes support for or solidarity with a minority or marginalized group, which is superficial at best and harmful at worst, in order to gain certain social benefits primarily related to being perceived as a good person. With this thesis, I have aimed to fill this literature gap by providing a conceptual analysis of performative wokeness in its relation to antiracism for White people, to provide a deeper understanding of what performative wokeness essentially is, why people engage in it, and whether it can potentially have a negative effect.¹ I argue that performative wokeness is a role that one takes on for self-gain, which can come in the form of a) achieving a higher social status relative to other individuals or another relevant group, and/or b) morally cleansing oneself from one’s own ‘White guilt’. Subsequently, I argue that performative wokeness may have a negative impact on the valid participants because it hinders the expressive order of the social situation when people act in a way that is not in harmony with the definition of the situation.

¹ I will be using capital letters for Black and White. Hopefully, this will signal that it’s a generic term for a particular human-made entity and not for some feature of humanity.

Introduction

“We have a moral obligation to *stay woke*,” take a stand and be active; challenging injustices and racism in our communities and fighting hatred and discrimination wherever it rises.”, American politician, Barbara Lee (2017).

“The woke left is the new Ministry of Truth... Good people are silenced in an Orwellian nightmare where a tyrannical minority decide what we’re allowed to say.”, British journalist and feature writer for The Times, Janice Turner (2020).

“The march of wokeism is an all-pervasive new oppression.”, British writer and former politician, Mark Trevor Phillips (2020).

“This idea of purity and you're never compromised and you're politically woke, and all that stuff – you should get over that quickly. The world is messy. There are ambiguities. People who do really good stuff have flaws.”, Former president of the United States, Barack Obama (Rueb & Taylor, 2019).

These are just a few quotes from leading journalists and politicians in recent years to show that there are prejudices about and different interpretations of wokeness. The first quote states that we have a moral obligation to stay woke. In the second and third quotes, woke is described as a danger. The last quote tries to bring some nuance to the debate. Wokeness has become a highly polarizing topic about which there is general societal disagreement. Although we are constantly reminded that we live in a world where performative wokeness is ubiquitous, the concept of performative wokeness remains unclear and contested. Within academic literature, the topic is relatively unexplored. The literature that does cover it, usually deals with the normative question about whether it is morally right or wrong. However, when dealing with a relatively unknown and obscure phenomenon, before making any value judgments, it is important to first understand *what* it is that we are talking about, so: what performative wokeness essentially is, why people engage in it, whether it can potentially have a negative effect. These are questions I aim to answer in this thesis, all from a conceptual lens. In this thesis, I provide a ‘conceptual analysis’ of performative wokeness in its relation to

‘antiracism’ for White people. I aim to answer the following question: How does performative wokeness relate to antiracism for White people?

First, I will give a general idea of the meaning of ‘wokeness’ and ‘performativity’. Wokeness generally means being aware of and actively attentive to important social issues (Merriam-Webster, 2017). Wokeness can be practiced in relation to various social issues, such as the environment, animal rights, women's rights, queer rights, etc. To delineate the topic, I will go into its relation to antiracism.² I am aware that the axes on which someone deviates from the norm may overlap (‘intersectionality’). However, this falls out of the scope of this thesis. Performativity generally means that something is made or done for show as to bolster one’s own image or make a positive impression on others (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). In this thesis, I will focus on how individuals performatively engage in wokeness. However, performative wokeness is also done by organizations. My analysis of performative wokeness may provide insight in how it works within organizations as well, but this is beyond the scope of this thesis.

In the following, I will address what antiracism is and what method I use in this thesis. As Stern, Barbarin & Cassidy note (2021), “antiracism is the active process of (a) affirming the idea that racial groups are equal (i.e. no racial group is inherently superior or inferior to any other racial group) and (b) acting to oppose racism and promote equity by changing attitudes, practices, policies, organizational structures, and systems (Bonnett, 2005; Kendi, 2019)”. Being a racist or an antiracist is not a fixed category, but manifests itself in consistent and deliberate decisions. The method I will employ is that of conceptual analysis because it can clarify the meaning of ambiguous concepts. The technique of conceptual analysis involves “precisely defining the meaning of a given concept by identifying and specifying the conditions under which any entity or phenomenon is (or could be) classified under the concept in question” (Furner, 2004, p. 233-234). In other words, I will analyze the concept of performative wokeness in its constituent parts in order to gain a better understanding of the concept and the discourse around it. Which is necessary to understand, before discussing the normative question whether it is morally right or wrong. A potential pitfall for using a conceptual analysis as method is that it is a rigorous process that requires long time reading and rereading. In addition, analyzing a concept may result in an unintended value attachment (Rasoal, 2018).

² From now on, I will not mention each time that I am talking about performative wokeness *in its relation to antiracism*, but will simply use the term performative wokeness.

Now, the layout of this thesis. This thesis has four chapters. In chapter 1, I sketch out the linguistic context of performative wokeness to provide some background information about the context in which this discourse is taking place. I show how the meaning of wokeness has changed and how wokeness, nowadays, generally carries negative connotations. Furthermore, I discuss two other terms that relate to performative wokeness: performative allyship and virtue signaling. I turn to the work of Erving Goffman (1959) and Henri Tajfel & John Turner (1986) to provide a theoretical framing of my conceptual analysis of performative wokeness. The theoretical part, in which I present my conceptual analysis, is divided in three parts: a) what is performative wokeness, b) why do people engage in it, and c) how can it have a possible negative consequence. In chapter 2, I use Goffman's dramaturgical perspective (1959) to explain how performative wokeness is essentially about playing a role for self-gain. In addition, I elaborate on the comparison of social media as a performance space (de Kosnik, 2019). In chapter 3, I provide two explanations of why someone would engage with performative wokeness, which I label as 'social status' and 'moral cleansing'. I have divided the part about social status in two different sections: a) being seen as having a desirable quality and, b) being seen as a member of a social group with a relatively higher status. I explain this through the lens of Tajfel and Turner's (1986) 'social identity theory'. In chapter 4, I explore what kind of effect performative wokeness can have and examine the extent to which a particular motivation for performative wokeness is linked to a particular effect. I argue that performative wokeness may have a negative impact (on the valid participants) because it hinders the expressive order. For this argument I use Goffman's essay 'On Face-Work: An Analysis of Ritual Elements in Social Interaction' (1967).

Before I move on to the first chapter, I want to clarify some choices I made. First, I want to clarify why I will be using the term "race"³, instead of ethnicity. "Races" are biologically arbitrary categories. However, they are generally considered to be based on ancestral origin and common physical characteristics. The concept of "race" laid the groundwork on which racism is built. The resulting racial hierarchy was used as a justification for European colonization and subsequent enslavement of people from Africa (Smithsonian, n.d.). Ethnicity, on the other hand, generally refers to a person's cultural identity, which may or may not include a common language, customs, religious expression, or common nationality. Therefore, in the context of (anti)racism, I will be using the term "race". Second, I want to clarify why I will be using the context of Black Lives Matter a number of

³ I will be using quotation marks for "race" to signal that it is a social construct; a social category with a particular history, and not a natural one.

times. The Black Lives Matter movement has been very prominent in recent years and it has created mass mobilization around and renewed interest in antiracism. This thesis is about performative wokeness in its relation to antiracism, and therefore Black Lives Matter is a relevant movement to cite at times. As a result, I will sometimes focus on racism experienced by Black people. However, I want to make it clear that I am aware that other groups also face racism. In addition, I am aware that there is also Latinx, Middle Eastern, and Asian activism. Third, I want to premise that I am aware that, as a White person, I am lacking knowledge of racism. I acknowledge that I am not an expert about others' lived experiences and never can be. However, I have lived experience with antiracism and can therefore engage with that side more fully. Finally, I want to state that the aim of this thesis is not to gatekeep. I have by no means the authority to decide who does or does not have access or rights to a community or identity. Neither will I evaluate the concept of performative wokeness. It is not my intention to attach a value judgment to performative wokeness. Thus, I am not claiming that performative wokeness is morally right or wrong. Instead, in this thesis, I will provide a conceptual analysis of performative wokeness in its relation to antiracism for White people.

Chapter 1: The linguistic context

Before going into my conceptual analysis, I will provide some background on the context in which this discourse takes place. In this chapter, I sketch out the linguistic context of performative wokeness. First, I give an overview of the history of the term wokeness to show that the meaning of wokeness has changed over the years and that the term wokeness now typically carries negative connotations. Second, I introduce two related concepts to performative wokeness: ‘performative allyship’ and ‘virtue signaling’, and point out their possible relations to give a little more clarity to the concept of performative wokeness.

§1.1 A brief history of the term wokeness

Most people know the term ‘woke’ since the Black Lives Matter movement, which began in July 2013 and grew to international attention in 2020 following the murder of George Floyd. However, the term woke and the phrase “stay woke” had already been a part of Black communities for years before. Woke is an American word, related to the English word ‘awake’. The earliest known usage of woke was as a watchword, referring to being on the lookout for systemic injustice and/or being aware of racial injustice. In 1938, the protest song *Scottsboro Boys* by Lead Belly was released, describing a group of nine Black teenagers in Scottsboro, Arkansas, who were accused of raping two White women. The phrase “stay woke” was included in the spoken afterword of the song. Lead Belly used the phrase “stay woke” to refer to Black Americans’ need to be aware of racially motivated threats. In 1962, writer William Kelly published an Op-Ed, with the headline ‘If You’re Woke, You Dig It’, in the *New York Times*. In this Op-Ed, he pointed out that much of the beatnik culture and slang – words like ‘cool’ and ‘dig’ – originated with African-Americans. During the 20th century the term woke was used as slang for being awake and/or for being suspicious of a cheating romantic partner (Romano, 2020).

From February 26, 2012 to April 19, 2015 a sequence of incidents drew attention to police brutality towards young Black Americans. This led to an outpouring of activism for social justice. In the summer of 2013, after George Zimmerman was found innocent of killing teenager Trayvan Martin, the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter was created. The hashtag was (and still is) used to urge people to ‘stay woke’ and conscious of “race” struggles. In 2014, following the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, stay woke referred to keeping watch for police brutality and unjust police tactics (Mirzaei, 2019). By September 2016, Black Lives Matter had been tweeted more than 30 million times (Anderson et al., 2018).

After the usage of the term woke became widespread and mainstream due to the Black Lives Matter movement, the term woke was appropriated by other activist groups – “taking it from awareness and blackness to a colorless and timeless phenomenon” (Mirzaei, 2019). Furthermore, the framing of wokeness became bipartisan. In some occasions it is seen as advocating social justice and being aware of social problems. In other occasions it is associated with extreme ‘political correctness’ and the cancel culture. New York Times writer Amanda Hess (2016) notes that Black cultural critics have retooled woke yet again, “adding a third layer that claps back at the appropriators”. According to Hess (2016), woke works as an indictment of those “who claim to be culturally aware and yet are, sadly lacking in self-awareness”. In any case, there is little doubt that wokeness now typically carries negative connotations (Pilkington, 2021).

§1.2 Possible relations with two related terms: performative allyship and virtue signaling

In this paragraph, I provide Lizzie Bowes’ (2017) definition of performative wokeness and discuss two related terms to performative wokeness: performative allyship and virtue signaling. In addition, I point out similarities and differences between the definitions of these terms. According to Bowes (2017), performative wokeness is “a superficial show of solidarity with minority and oppressed bodies of people that enable (usually white and privileged people) to reap the social benefits of wokeness without actually undertaking any of the necessary legwork to combat injustice and inequality”.

A related term to performative wokeness is performative allyship. Before I go into the meaning of performative allyship, I will first mention what allyship is. Allyship refers to the state or condition of being an ally, which is “someone who makes the commitment and effort to recognize their privilege and work in solidarity with oppressed groups in the struggle for justice” (Harvard University, n.d.). Performative allyship, however, according to Peter Kalina (2020, p. 478), refers to “someone from a nonmarginalized group professing support and solidarity with a marginalized group, but in a way that is not helpful. Worse yet, the allyship is done in a way that may actually be harmful to “the cause”. The “ally” is motivated by some type of reward. On social media, that reward is a virtual pat on the back for being a “good person” or for being “on the right side” of a cause, or “on the right side of history”.”⁴ There are a couple of ambiguities within this definition of performative allyship. It is unclear whether the behavior related to the term is always unhelpful and at times harmful, or whether

⁴ By using terms such as “worse yet”, a value judgment is immediately attached to the definition, which is something I aim not to do in my thesis.

they are both conditions of performative allyship. In addition, it is unclear whether, according to this definition, an ally is always motivated by some type of reward or whether that only applies to a performative ally.

Another related term to performative wokeness is virtue signaling. According to Kenneth Saltman (2018), virtue signaling refers to “the act of expressing online outrage about injustice by a privileged person to other privileged people in order to elevate symbolic standing”. In this definition there are some ambiguities as well. It is unclear what is meant with symbolic standing. In addition, it is unclear if virtue signaling can only take place online, or also offline. Furthermore, I find it questionable that wanting to elevate one’s own symbolic standing is the only reason for people to take part in virtue signaling. Since it is not exactly clear what is meant by symbolic standing it is difficult to judge whether that is really the only motivation, but this seems unlikely. The Cambridge Dictionary defines virtue signaling as “an attempt to show other people that you are a good person, for example by expressing opinions that will be acceptable to them, especially on social media”. This definition of virtue signaling is a little more concise and limited but as a result there are also fewer ambiguities.

In the following, I discuss similarities and differences between the definitions of the terms performative wokeness, performative allyship and virtue signaling. Those who enact the related behavior are described quite similarly, as: White and privileged people; people from a nonmarginalized group. There is a difference however. According to Bowes’ definition, performative wokeness is *usually* done by White and privileged people. Whereas performative allyship and virtue signaling, according to the definitions I mentioned (Kalina, 2020; Saltman, 2018), is only done by nonmarginalized and/or privileged people. In performative allyship, this has to do with the meaning of an ally, which refers to a privileged person. In virtue signaling, it is less clear why it could only be done by privileged people.

In terms of the related behaviors described, there seems to be more similarity between performative wokeness and performative allyship, than in comparison to virtue signaling. Performative wokeness and performative allyship both seem to describe some kind of support for or solidarity with a minority or marginalized group that is superficial at best and harmful at worst. Virtue signaling seems to be more about (online) expressions and not so much about giving support. Finally, the reason why people enact the related behavior is all described in fairly similar ways. In all cases, it seems to be done for certain social benefits that primarily have to do with being seen as a good person.

§1.3 Recap: The linguistic context

In this chapter, I have outlined the linguistics context surrounding performative wokeness. The meaning of wokeness has changed over the years. It has gone from a concept used primarily within Black communities to a mainstream concept referring to being aware and actively attentive to social issues. The discourse around wokeness has become heated. It is associated with extreme political correctness and the cancel culture. Although the definition of wokeness is essentially positive, the meaning of wokeness typically carries negative connotations. I have introduced two related concepts to performative wokeness: performative allyship and virtue signaling, and pointed out their possible relations. In this way, I arrived at a general description of the concept of performative wokeness, which I used in the abstract to give a first idea of its meaning. Performative wokeness denotes support for or solidarity with a minority or marginalized group, which is superficial at best and harmful at worst, in order to gain certain social benefits primarily related to being perceived as a good person. While this gives a general idea of the concept, I hope to provide a clearer understanding of performative wokeness in the following chapters, where I outline my conceptual analysis.

Chapter 2: A performance

In this chapter, I address what performative wokeness essentially is. First, I describe the tension between performative wokeness and wokeness. Second, I analyze the concept of performative wokeness and argue for understanding of it as a role that people take on for self-gain. I will be using Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical perspective to justify this position. Third, as social media is a clear framework in which performative wokeness takes place, I elaborate on the comparison of social media as a performance space. In this chapter, I will go over the following concepts: 'performance', 'front region', 'back region' and 'impression management'.

§2.1 Tension between the two concepts

To make the difference between wokeness and performative wokeness clear, I will again use the concepts of allyship and performative allyship but this time as part my conceptual analysis. I argue that the meaning of performative allyship can be most easily understood through the analogy of an "ally badge", in which a badge refers to something that is worn in order to show who you are; that you are a member of a group. The idea of an ally-badge has three implications. First, that being an ally is something that should be publicly displayed. Second, that being an ally is something you can achieve at some point and then be for the rest of your life. Third, that being an ally is something you should be rewarded for.

This is in a clear contradiction with the meaning of allyship. First, being an ally is a personal, private and constant work, according to writer Jay Dodd (2016). Second, being an ally is not a fixed category, but manifests itself in consistent and deliberate decisions. Third, Dodd (2016) argues that no work of true allies should require the public acceptance of praise or acclaim. He goes on explaining that allyship is not about showing the world how good you are, but showing the world how backwards it is, and constantly producing counter-narratives that promote equality.

Thus, there is a real contradiction between a performative ally and an ally. Or in other words, more generally speaking, between performative wokeness and wokeness. Being woke takes a lot of time and effort, it is not a fixed category and should not require praise. Performative wokeness, on the other hand, is about getting the praise without doing the actual and constant work. Thus, performative wokeness undermines the constant and private work it takes to be woke. Moreover, performative wokeness is the display of qualities and beliefs that

one does not necessarily have. This insincerity undermines the integrity and authenticity of wokeness. In the next section, I elaborate on what performative wokeness essentially is.

§2.2 What performative wokeness essentially is

‘All the world’s a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts...’

This is the beginning of the monologue ‘All the world’s a stage’ (1623) by William Shakespeare. The monologue goes on describing all the roles people play during their life. This idea of the world as a stage has been developed to a dramaturgical account of human interaction, by Erving Goffman. Goffman (1922-1982) was born in Canada and is arguably the most influential Western sociologist of the twentieth century (Fine & Manning, 2003, p. 457). ‘The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life’ (1959) is Goffman’s best known book, for which he has won the American Sociological Association’s 1961 Maclver Award (Smith, 2002). In this book, Goffman uses the metaphor of the theater to shed light on small-scale social processes (Manning, 1991). He relates theatrical performances to the kinds of “acts” we all put on in our day-to-day (inter)actions (Ritzer, 2010, p. 218). Goffman’s usage of the theater as a metaphor can make the social behavior feel “fake”, but this cynicism is not necessarily present in Goffman’s work (Squirrell, 2018).

Looking at performative wokeness through the lens of Goffman’s dramaturgical perspective, I argue that performative wokeness is essentially a role one may take on in a social situation in which one wants to appear woke. In this section, I will elaborate on this analysis further. According to Goffman, in every social situation we are engaged in a performance in which we control and stage how we appear. A performance may be defined ‘as all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants’ (Goffman, 1959, p. 27). We are constantly trying to seek validation and trying to decide how to be, how to act, what to say. We play different roles determined by the social situations we take ourselves to be in. The role of being a parent, a child, a co-worker, a lover, a friend and so on. When we take on a certain role, it affects how we are in that given moment. Just like in theatrical performances there is a frontstage (‘front region’) and there is a backstage (‘back region’). The front region is where the performance is

given. This is where the performers know they are being watched and act accordingly. The back region is where the performance of a routine is prepared and ‘the performer can relax; he can drop his front, forgo speaking his lines, and step out of character’ (Goffman, 1959, p. 115). Performative wokeness takes place in the ‘front region’; in a social situation with an audience where one wants to present oneself.

When we are in a context of presenting ourselves, we hope to be seen as credible in the role that we casted ourselves in. The aim is that the audience believes and accepts our performance. The problem arises when we make a mistake and unintentionally give off cues that are nonetheless read as significant. We may lose control of our muscles, we may pay too much or too little attention to an interaction, we may lack dramatic direction (Squirrell, 2018). This can lead to the audience not believing or accepting our performance. When the performance is seen as invalid by the audience, the performance fails, and ‘the expressive order’ is hindered. The expressive order is the set of meanings that are sustained in a given interaction. Again, looking at performative wokeness through this lens, I argue that performative wokeness may have a negative impact on the valid participants of the movement because it hinders the expressive order. In chapter 4, I will elaborate on this position.

Goffman outlines a number of ways in which we attempt to have the performance believed and accepted by the audience. These are mechanisms by which we engage in ‘impression management’. Goffman argues that, in social situations, we are constantly engaged in the process of impression management. He assumed ‘that when an individual appears before others he will have many motives for trying to control the impression they receive of the situation’. Impression management refers to the idea that through our behaviors, actions and appearance, we are able to convince our audience of our sincerity, authority – or whatever other attributes that role is supposed to have (Squirrell, 2018). A common technique to sustain impressions, is to accentuate certain matters and conceal others during a performance. A performer tends to conceal those activities, facts, and motives which are incompatible with an idealized version of himself and his audience. When people performatively engage in wokeness, they will present themselves to others and perhaps even to themselves as a more ideal version than may be the case in reality. In addition, “a performer often engenders in his audience the belief that he is related to them in a more ideal way than is always the case” (Goffman, 1959, p. 56). People performatively engaging in wokeness will present themselves to be more similar to the other valid participants of a movement than may be the case in reality for certain benefits. In chapter 3, I go into what kind of benefits. This can be compared to when people are in a situation with healthy and

athletic people to whom they want to impress, and, as a result, portray themselves to the others and perhaps to themselves as healthier and more athletic than may be the case in reality, simply because they want to be and/or come across that way.

§2.3 Social media as a performance space

In ‘Is Twitter a Stage? Theories of Social Media Platforms as Performance Spaces’ (2019) Abigail de Kosnik identifies two major strands of thinking of internet platforms as a performance space, and of online participation as a performance. The first strand of thinking of social media as a performance space was initiated by Goffman. The second strand was initiated by Marshall McLuhan and his idea that new telecommunications media created a “global theater”. Goffman’s approach to conceptualizing digital networks as performance more so emphasizes the individual’s experience of those networks. Whereas a McLuhanesque approach to digital networks as performance spaces calls for greater attention to performances by collectives (de Kosnik, 2019, p. 22). I will not elaborate on the second strand initiated by McLuhan further, because in this thesis I focus on individuals performatively engaging in wokeness instead of collectives. In this section, I elaborate on this comparison of social media as a performance space. Furthermore, I argue that, in a way, social media encourages performativity.

De Kosnik (2019, p. 21) argues that all of Goffman’s key arguments, that everyday life is filled with and defined by performance, also apply to social media. Indeed, social media is pre-eminently a place where people participate in impression management. You can plan and create the posts that you want to share that are consistent with the persona you want to portray, and you can choose the timing and impact of the posts strategically to receive the greatest possible response, all in effort to bend the impression others have of you to your will. Annette Markham (2012), argues that Goffman’s concept of impression management gains complexity in the age of social media because different temporalities of selfhood on digital platforms can clash. For not only do people have to make an effort to present different selves in different settings, people also have to reckon with the fact that their social media-accounts may preserve past selves, and those may not merge with present selves in the desirable way (de Kosnik, 2019, p. 30).

The question is to what extent social media can be categorized as either front or back stage, as most social media users do not maintain a sharp distinction between the realm of private and public behavior. According to Erika Pearson, social media functions like a “glass bedroom”, in which there is no clear separation between back region and front region.

Pearson argues that social media takes Goffman's idea of identity as performance to a "another level". Pearson writes: "Inside the [glass] bedroom, private conversations and intimate exchanges occur, each with varying awareness of distant friends and strangers moving past transparent walls... The glass bedroom itself is not an entirely private space, nor a true backstage space as Goffman articulated, though it takes on elements of both over the course of its use. It is a bridge that is partially private and public, constructed online through signs and language" (de Kosnik, 2019, p. 31).

In a way, the advent of social media has encouraged performativity. As I have mentioned before, performativity generally means that something is made or done for show as to bolster one's own image or make a positive impression on others (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). On social media, one creates a persona that may be a more ideal version of oneself; a version that may be far from who one really is, in order to bolster one's own image. Social media is relatively quick and easy way to present oneself in the role one likes to be seen in, and therefore a widely used "tool" within performative wokeness.⁵ Richard Lachman, associate professor at Ryerson University's RTA School of Media, is critical towards the use of social media for activism. "There is an aspect of social media which is performance", said Lachman in an interview with Global News, "which is, I'm posting something to signify that, oh yes, I'm paying attention, but have I made any change in my life? Have I done anything to sort of interrogate my own biases? Have I led to any functional change?" (Ibrahim, 2020). Indeed, social media is a way to signify that you are aware and actively attentive of social issues; that you are woke. I will not go into whether this is a good thing or not, since this thesis is only descriptive.

§2.4 Recap: A performance

In this chapter, I first have described the tension between performative wokeness and wokeness. And explained how, in essence, performative wokeness undermines the constant and private work it takes to be woke. Second, I have argued for an understanding of performative wokeness as a role that people take on for self-gain, using Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical perspective. This role is used as means to another end. Namely, what they consider to be their own good. The performance of this role takes place in a social situation. This role can be played well or badly; the performance can succeed and fail, which each has a

⁵ Performatively engaging in wokeness through social media is referred to as slacktivism, a portmanteau of slacker and activism. Slacktivism is the activity that uses the internet to support political or social causes in a way that does not need much effort (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022).

different effect on everyone involved in the situation (in chapter 4, I will go into this further). When the performance succeeds and the role is conceived by the audience as credible, it can lead to self-gain. Third, I have elaborated on the comparison of social media as a performance space. In addition, I have argued that in a way social media encourages performativity. Social media is a relatively easy and fast tool to show a more ideal version of yourself to others, or in the context of performative wokeness; to portray yourself as woke. In the next chapter, I will describe two forms of self-gain in this context.

Chapter 3: Self-gain

In this chapter, I provide two explanations of why someone would engage with performative wokeness, which I have labeled as ‘social status’ and ‘moral cleansing’. First, I argue that performative wokeness is often done by people in order to achieve a higher social status. This is both relative to other individuals and relative to another group; a ‘relevant out-group’. To explain the latter, I will be using Tajfel & Turner’s ‘Social Identity Theory’ (1986). I have divided this position into two sections: §3.1 being seen as having a desirable quality (in general); a moral person (in particular), and §3.2 being seen as a member of a social group with a relatively higher social status than another relevant group. Second, I argue that performative wokeness is sometimes done by White people to morally cleanse themselves from their own White guilt (§3.3). I am aware that there may be other possible motivations for performatively engaging in wokeness. For example, because of ‘peer pressure’ or ‘Fear Of Missing Out’. However, I have chosen to focus on social status and moral cleansing because these they are more morally significant factors.

§3.1 Being seen as having a desirable quality; a moral person

One possible reason why people may performatively engage in wokeness, is the hope to be seen as a moral person, in order to achieve a higher social status relative to other individuals. In this section, I will elaborate on this analysis further. As I have mentioned before, wokeness as such conveys a desirable quality. Part of taking on a role is that you hope that people will perceive the role you take on as credible. Thus, in the case of performative wokeness one hopes to be viewed as possessing this desirable quality of being aware of and attentive to important social issues. This is a moral quality, about one’s moral character, about what kind of person one is deep down. People are highly motivated to protect their self-views of being a moral person (Pagliaro et al., 2016). Attempts to protect moral self-views are not only driven by the external image people wish to portray toward others but also by internalized conceptions of the moral self (Aquino & Reed, 2002). In general, people have a strong desire to think of and portray oneself as a moral person (Ellemers, 2018). In the following, I focus on the external image people wish to portray toward others of being a moral person.

Where one portrays oneself as a moral person has changed over the years. New York Times journalist, Amanda Hess (2016) notes: “In the ‘70’s, Americans who styled themselves as radical chic’ communicated their social commitments by going to cocktail parties with

Black Panthers. Now they photograph themselves reading the right books and tweet well-tuned platitudes in an effort to cultivate an image of themselves as politically engaged”. Radical chic is a term for people who want to be seen as supporting a radical political movement because it is fashionable at a point in time, based on a desire for social status (Spacey, n.d.). In others words, those who are radical chic are ideologically invested in their cause of choice only so far as it advances their social status.

Hess (2016) seems to suggest that the public sphere where one presents oneself as a moral person has shifted from cocktail parties to Twitter. Or in other words, from offline to online. It is not surprising that this shift has taken place. The public sphere has extended from how philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas once defined the public sphere: as a space for people within a nation-state to exchange ideas outside the control of the state, to beyond nation-states. With the advent of technological innovations and the increased accessibility of the Internet, most people can hook into discourse on social media almost anywhere and anytime (Carney, 2016). Relating it back to §2.2, with just one “click” on social media one can portray oneself as aware and attentive to social issues in particular; as a moral person in general.

The degree to which an individual possess a desirable quality is often used as a signal for one’s status (Sauder et al, 2012). Therefore, people performatively engaging in wokeness see themselves as possessing this moral quality of wokeness, which they in turn see as a reason for having a higher social status compared to those who do not possess this quality. This happens on an individual level, but also on a group-level, which I will elaborate on in the next section.

§3.2 Being seen as a member of a social group with a relatively high status

Another possible reason why people may performatively engage in wokeness is the hope to being seen as a member of a social group, with a higher social status relative to another relevant group. In this section, I elaborate on this analysis further using Tajfel & Turner’s social identity theory.

Every person belongs to different social groups, according to Tajfel & Turner (1986). A social group can be conceptualized as “a collection of individuals who perceive themselves to be members of the same social category, share some emotional involvement in this common definition of themselves, and achieve some degree of social consensus about the evaluation of their group and of their membership in it” (Tajfel & Turner, 1986, p. 283). Examples of social groups to which someone may belong, are; a certain religion, family

and/or sport team. For this person, these are the 'in-groups'. To every group, there are opposing groups: another religion, another family and another sport team. These are perceived as the "others"; the 'out-groups'. Through different experiments, Tajfel and his colleagues found that people have the tendency to favor the in-group over the out-group in evaluations and behavior. This results in 'ethnocentrism'. Ethnocentrism "combines a positive attitude towards one's own ethnic/cultural group (the in-group) with a negative attitude toward the other ethnic/cultural group (the out-group)" (Adorno, 1950).

Looking at wokeness through the lens of the social identity theory, I argue that we can discern three social groups: those who perceive themselves (and the other members of the group) as woke, those who perceive themselves (and the other members of the group) as anti-woke and those who perceive themselves (and the other members of the group) as non-woke.⁶ Those who performatively engage in wokeness fall under the category of those who perceive themselves as woke. The last group are those who perceive themselves as neither woke or anti-woke and are, for example, actively non-political.

The process of making in-group/out-group classifications happens in three stages: social categorization, social identification and social comparison. 1). Social categorization is the process by which people categorize themselves and others into different social groups. 2). Social identification is the process by which people identify with a group and attain a 'sense of belonging': the feeling of being part of a greater whole. Consequently, they feel validated and their self-esteem is impacted by the status of their groups. 3). Social comparison is the process by which people compare their group with other groups. Through this process, the 'Us vs. Them' mentality arises. In order to maintain self-esteem, one must perceive their in-group (us) as having a higher social standing than an out-group (them) (Vinney, 2019).

Again, looking at wokeness through the lens of the social identity theory, I argue that being member of one of these three social groups can lead to having a 'social identity'. A social identity is that part of one's self-concept which derives from one's knowledge of one's membership of a social group (or groups) together with the emotional significance attached to that membership. Consequently, one may have a 'sense of belonging', which is a social need and refers to "a sense of safety and security that arises from the perception that one is part of a community, organization or an institution" (Asher & Weeks, 2013). According to Tajfel & Turner (1986), all individuals strive to achieve or to maintain 'positive social identity'. A

⁶ This distinction may not be so tightly drawn. In addition, there will also be those who hover between two groups or none of them. However, I believe that these people do not form a social group together.

positive social identity arises from a positive evaluation of one's in-group in comparison to relevant out-groups. With 'relevant' out-groups is meant that the out-group must be perceived as a relevant comparison group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986, p. 284). Another way of describing a positive social identity is achieving or maintaining a higher social status relative to relevant out-groups. As a result, there has grown a strong Us vs. Them mentality between these social groups. They all identify with the in-group ("us") and think negatively of (and/or feel endangered by) the out-group ("them").

Thus, the aim of in group-out group differentiation is to achieve or maintain a positive social identity (or in other words, a higher social status relative to relevant out-groups). In order to achieve or maintain a positive social identity, the in-group tries to protect their social identity. The out-group may pose a threat to the social identity of the in-group. As a reaction to negative or threatened social identity, members of the in-group may use different techniques to protect their own social identity. According to Tajfel and Turner (1986, p. 281), the mere awareness of the presence of an out-group is sufficient to provoke intergroup competitive or discriminatory responses on the part of the in-group.

In the case of wokeness, it is clear that the groups are perceiving each other as a threat and publicly communicating (both on- as offline) the danger of the out-group, especially those who are woke and anti-woke.⁷ Those who are woke seem to perceive those who are anti-woke and non-woke as a threat to social justice. Therefore, they may call out or 'cancel' those who they perceive to be anti-woke or non-woke. To cancel someone refers to withdrawing one's support for someone or something publicly (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). For example, some people canceled actor and choreographer Columbus Short because he issued statements for "All Lives Matter", a proclamation that is widely seen as a counteractive to the Black Lives Matter movement. Furthermore, those who are anti-woke seem to perceive those who are woke as a threat to the nation, to civil society.⁸ Therefore, they weaponize woke to portray the left as a threat and any social change as a matter of vandalism against the status quo. For example, in an interview with Fox News, President Donald Trump said the Biden administration is "destroying" the country "with woke" (Smith & Kapur, 2021). In the end, each group is trying to protect the social identity of their in-group, in order to maintain or

⁷ Since those who are non-woke are actively non-political, they also do not seem to publicly voice the threat of the other groups as much as those who are woke and anti-woke.

⁸ Those who are anti-woke primarily perceive those who are woke as a threat, not so much those who are non-woke. While those who are woke certainly also perceive those who are non-woke as a threat (because they are capable of doing the "right" thing but seem to consciously choose not to).

achieve positive social identity, which, in turn, means a maintain or achieving a relative higher social status than the relevant out-group.

§3.3 Moral cleansing

Another possible reason why people may performatively engage in wokeness, is to morally cleanse themselves from their own White guilt. In §3.1, I mentioned that people generally have a strong desire to see themselves and show themselves as a moral person. In this section I will focus more on the internalized conceptions of the moral self. In general, people have a strong desire to think of oneself as a moral person (Ellemers, 2018). This desire has been shown to push people to engage in actions that morally cleanses them of their group's past beliefs and reaffirm their moral self (Tetlock et al., 2000). Moral cleansing describes “behaviors aimed at restoring moral self-worth in response to past transgressions. People are motivated to maintain a moral self-image and to eliminate apparent gaps between their perceived self-image and their desired moral self” (West & Zhong, 2015). Research on moral cleansing suggests that past bad actions trigger negative feelings that make people more likely to engage in future moral behavior to offset them. A deviation from a “normal state of being” is balanced with a subsequent action that compensates the prior behavior, according to Brañas-Garza et al. (2013).

Guilt is, as clinical professor of psychiatry Willard Gaylin writes, “the emotion that shapes so much of our goodness and generosity. It signals us when we have transgressed from codes of behavior that we personally want to sustain. Feeling guilty informs us that we have failed our own ideals” (Unitarian Universalist Association, n.d.). White guilt is the remorse or shame felt by a White person with respect to racial inequality and injustice (Oxford Languages, n.d.). There are different ways in which people experience White guilt. For some, guilt is a response to actually doing racist things. Others may feel guilty because they have not acted (e.g. for not speaking out or not doing more work for racial justice). Another form of White guilt is in response to participating in and benefiting from an immoral system (Unitarian Universalist Association, n.d.). This last form of White guilt is most often referred to. According to Shelby Steele (1990), White guilt springs from a knowledge of ill-gotten advantage. More precisely, according to Steele, it comes from the coexistence of this knowledge with the inevitable gratitude one feels for being White, rather than Black in America. Steele argues that, given the moral instincts of human beings, it is virtually impossible to enjoy an ill-gotten advantage, let alone feel at least covertly grateful for it without consciously or unconsciously feeling guilt. In the following, I will describe how

performative wokeness sometimes is done by White people to morally cleanse themselves of their own White guilt.

Looking at performative wokeness through the lens of the concepts moral cleansing and White guilt, I argue that performative wokeness in its relation to antiracism may stem from the sense of White guilt and the subsequent desire to be seen as good and moral. The feeling of White guilt can get in the way of one's desire to see oneself as a moral self. Therefore, White people may wish to morally cleanse themselves of their own or group's racist (past) beliefs and reaffirm their moral selves. This may lead to people participating in antiracism to morally cleanse themselves rather than to change or address the racial injustice. Thus, then, engaging in antiracism becomes performative as it is done for self-gain.

In the following, I will quote two excerpts that describe different elements of this form of self-gain, both written from the perspective of someone of color. Mwendé Katwiwa is a Kenyan Queer Womyn speaker and writer. On the blog FreeQuency, Katwiwa wrote an essay called 'On White People, Solidarity and (Not) Marching for Mike Brown' (n.d.). In this essay, Katwiwa (n.d.) writes about White people's participation in the National Moment of Silence to pay respect to fatal victims of police shootings and brutality in New Orleans. "When I see white people smiling for pictures at protests, carrying the biggest sign that takes up the most space, bringing in unnecessary violence, and talking about how 'we are all victims and all just need to get along' during demonstrations about the targeting of black people... I can't help but think that maybe they're just here to make themselves feel better about their own prejudice... I'm not saying don't support and/or participate, I'm saying make sure how you do so makes sense for you as a white person and doesn't harm the cause you claim to support" (Katwiwa, n.d.). I quote this mainly because of the part where Katwiwa mentions that she got the idea that White people were participating in the National Moment of Silence "to make themselves feel better about their own prejudice", instead of paying respect to fatal victim of police shooting and brutality. I will analyze this sentence in its constituent parts. People may feel guilty about their own prejudices when they lead to them doing racist things or not acting (enough) to counter racism. This guilt can stand in the way of one's perception of a moral self. As people have a strong desire to see themselves a moral person, this may lead people to performatively engage in antiracism in order to morally cleanse themselves of this guilt. This would lead to them feeling better about their own prejudice.

I will quote another excerpt of an article written by Haji Mohammed Dawjee (2018), who is writer born to a Muslim family in the apartheid township of Laudium, Pretoria. In her book 'Sorry, Not Sorry: Experiences of a brown woman in a white South Africa' (2018),

Dawjee offers observations in a provocative voice. I have taken some quotes from the chapter: A resignation letter to performative whites. It starts with “Dear performative whites, [...] I will no longer stand for the fact that you will speak on behalf of me, and take such great measures to separate yourself from your own kind because you think you are better. [...] You are asking us to believe in your goodness. Doing so makes you feel like a better person too. [...] Yes, you want to ‘stand out’ with us, but really, your virtue signaling is designed to present yourself as ‘woke’ among other white people. It’s ammo. It is a shallow, lazy way to rebut arguments and prove that you are better than the rest without actually educating yourself on how not to act like an authority on the issues of race relations and inequality” (Dawjee, 2018). With the sentence “you are asking us to believe in your goodness. Doing so makes you feel like a better person too”, Dawjee (2018) touches upon another element of this form of self-gain. Namely, that in order to morally cleanse oneself of White guilt one may seek for forgiveness and reward from the group to which one feels guilty, which are those affected by racism. As if those who performatively engage in antiracism should receive a sticker or a badge as means of approval.

During an explorative research I did during my internship, on the role of moral learning processes in antiracism programs commissioned by Governance & Integrity (Voogt, 2022), I spoke to Molly Cohen. Cohen is the director of strategic partnerships at Diversity Talk, which is an organization based in the United States that provides antiracism programs. In this interview Cohen mentioned the idea of an ally-badge that I cited in §2.1. “You know we have a bit of joke – I think I can say as a White person – the idea of being an ally, or I have made it and now I have got my ally-badge. There is often the temptation like... oh I got my antiracist badge, I am woke, I am doing good. [...] I think there is a trap that people can fall in with antiracism, where we want to feel like we are doing a good thing, we do not want to recognize the ways we do bad things. A lot of people are like, there is a bit of savior complex there, like... oh I am an ally with the Black community and I am going to challenge these things, but I do not want to think about the fact that there are these opportunities around my peers that I am not taking, or I do not want to think about that at my company all of the employees of color are junior staff members and that is not something I ever speak up about” (M. Cohen, personal communication, March 9 2022). I quote this mainly for the sentence: “I think there is a trap that people can fall in with antiracism, where we want to feel like we are doing a good thing, we do not want to recognize the ways we do bad things”. Here Cohen refers to this strong desire people have to feel like a good, moral person. This may cause them

to performatively engage in antiracism and try to ignore or forget all that they have not done or done badly.

A critical reader could say: surely White guilt can also lead to positive change. Why then cannot someone with White guilt participate in antiracism without doing so performatively? To clarify, I do not argue that the feeling of White guilt necessarily entails performative wokeness. But this may be the case. Furthermore, I do not suggest that people of color cannot also performatively engage in antiracism. However, in this context, I am specifically talking about those White people that engage in antiracism to make themselves feel better about their own White guilt.

§3.4 Recap: Self-gain

In this chapter, I have described two forms of self-gain in the context of performative wokeness. First, I have argued that performative wokeness may be done in order to achieve a higher social status relative to other individuals. To achieve this, people have the hope to be seen as possessing the desirable quality of being woke (in particular); as a moral person (in general). Social media is an easy and fast way to portray oneself possessing this desirable quality; being a moral person. Second, I have argued that performative wokeness may be done in order to achieve a higher social status relative to a relevant out-group. Looking at wokeness through the lens of the social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), I have discerned three social groups: woke, anti-woke and non-woke. Each group is trying to protect the social identity of their in-group, in order to maintain or achieve positive social identity, which, in turn, means a maintaining or achieving a relative higher social status than the relevant out-group. Third, I have argued that performative wokeness may be done in order to morally cleanse oneself of one's own White guilt. The feeling of White guilt can get in the way of one's desire to see oneself as a moral person. To morally cleanse oneself, one may performatively engaging in antiracism as it – as a White person – requires little to no risk or effort for the large reward of feeling good about oneself.

Chapter 4: Hindering the expressive order

In this chapter, I explain what kind of possible effect performative wokeness can have. I argue that performative wokeness may have a negative impact on the valid participants because it hinders the expressive order. By the valid participants, I mean everyone that is directly involved in the situation and that is trying to keep the expressive order intact. For this position I use Goffman's essay 'On Face-Work: An analysis of Ritual Elements in Social Interaction' (1967). While I argue that performative wokeness can possibly lead to harm because it hinders the expressive order, I do not argue that performative wokeness or hindering the expressive order is therefore wrong. Indeed, this thesis is descriptive and not normative.

§4.1 The possible effect of performative wokeness

First, I explain the concept of expressive order. Second, I make clear by means of an analogy what is meant by hindering the expressive order. Third, I argue that someone hindering the expressive order of a protest in any case can hinder the state of 'collective effervescence'. The expressive order is "...an order that regulates the flow of events, large or small, so that anything that appears to be expressed by them will be consistent with face" (Goffman, 1967, p.9). The expressive order is the entire set of meanings that are sustained in a given interaction. It is the equilibrium or harmony of interaction. When one comes into an interaction, one has a moral obligation to the other people in the interaction to maintain the set of meanings that they are projecting in the interaction. If someone does something that is not in harmony with the definition of the situation, the expressive order is hindered.

An example of someone hindering the expressive order might be someone not standing in the back of the line at the bakery, but walking straight to the front and grabbing a loaf of bread without paying for it. The expressive order of this situation; a bakery where all the customers are patiently standing in line and paying, is hindered. The valid participants are everyone that is directly involved in the situation and is trying to keep the expressive order intact. In this case, these are the baker and the customers. In case the valid participants notice the expressive order being hindered, it has a negative impact on them. Thus, in the case they notice this person walking straight to the front of the desk, grabbing a loaf of bread and walking out of the bakery without paying, it may lead to them feeling disappointment, embarrassment, anger and/or humiliation. The meaning that they were trying to sustain, and to which they all obediently adhered, temporarily falls apart. In §4.2, I will provide examples of the different ways in which the expressive order can be hindered in the context of

performative wokeness and the different forms of the negative impact it can have on the valid participants.

The cases in the next section take place at an imaginary Black Lives Matter protest.⁹ I argue that someone hindering the expressive order of a protest in any case can hinder the state of collective effervescence. To explain what I mean by this, I will first discuss address the sociological concept, collective effervescence. A protest can be viewed as a collective ceremony which produces a state of collective effervescence among those who take part in them. Collective effervescence is coined by the French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1915) and describes how the affective arousal of an assembled crowd creates the potential for both social conformity and group-based agency (Swann et al., 2012). It is the contagious euphoria one can feel when being part of a group or crowd in which everyone simultaneously communicates the same thought and participates in the same action. One's sense of self slackens, yielding a connection with one's fellow synchronized humans. It causes bursts of group ecstatic excitement and serves to unify the group. Returning to the beginning of this conceptual analysis – where I talked about the tension between performative wokeness and wokeness – performative wokeness undermines the constant and private work it takes to be woke. Therefore, someone who performatively engages in a protest can undermine the mood of the protest, as it can make the protest feel less alive, “real” and/or engaged. Moreover, a person who performatively engages in a protest may convey a different thought and participate in a different action than everyone else. This, in turn, hinders the state of collective effervescence.

§4.2 Four cases in which the expressive order is hindered

In the following cases, an imaginary White person called Jessie performatively engages in a Black Lives Matter protest.¹⁰ Since I have described self-gain as a condition of performative wokeness, Jessie is there for self-gain. However, I do not mention what motivated Jessie to be there; what kind of self-gain. I describe the different ways in which the expressive order can be hindered and the different forms of the negative impact it can have on the valid participants. The valid participants are the protestors who are directly involved in the social situation and are trying to keep the expressive order of the interaction intact. Jessie joins the

⁹ As I have mentioned before, the Black Lives Matter movement has been very prominent in recent years and it has created mass mobilization around and renewed interest in antiracism. This thesis is about performative wokeness in its relation to antiracism, and therefore Black Lives Matter is a relevant movement to cite.

¹⁰ I use non-binary (they/them) pronouns for Jessie.

protest and thus enters the social interaction of the protest. As a result, Jessie becomes one of the participants of the interaction. The expressive order in these cases can generally be described as walking together peacefully or giving a speech etc. in order to raise awareness of racism and inequality experienced by Black people and to eradicate White supremacy.¹¹ In all these cases, Jessie does something which is not in harmony with the definition of the situation, thus hindering the expressive order.¹² This is noticed by the rest making it a negative impact on them. The forms of negative impact will be illustrated below. With the following cases, I aim to show how performative wokeness can have a negative impact on the valid participants because it hinders the expressive order.

Case 1: Taking up too much space

Jessie is the first to grab the microphone when someone on stage asks for volunteers to speak on racial issues. The protestors feel like Jessie is taking up too much space and taking away the attention from the Black voices.

In this case, Jessie does not try to learn from or amplify the Black voices in the first place but grabs the microphone instead. Hereby, Jessie takes away space from Black voices. This can ensure that the knowledge and experience of the people around whom it revolves is not conveyed to the attendees.

Case 2: Scoring pictures

Jessie is only present to score some pictures for Instagram which creates a disingenuous atmosphere. The protestors felt damaged in their integrity.

¹¹ This is a concise description of the overarching mission of the Black Lives Matter movement. A more precise wording is: 'to eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes. By combating and countering acts of violence, creating space for Black imagination and innovation, and centering Black joy, we are winning immediate improvements in our lives' (Black Lives Matter, n.d.).

¹² It may be important to note that the protest itself also disrupts the expressive order of society on that particular day. However, this hindering is the aim to attain change in the broader expressive order.

In this case, Jessie is only present to score some pictures for Instagram. With this Jessie does not show any intent to fight for racial equity, only the intent of being seen as fighting for racial equity. As a result, those who do make a continuous and genuine commitment to racial equality may have their integrity and authenticity compromised. It creates a disingenuous atmosphere, which affects the integrity of those present and the purpose of the protest.

Case 3: Undermining the message

Jessie suggests to the other protesters to all hold hands. The protesters do not feel like it is Jessie's place – as a White person – to lead or define what the protest should look like.

In this case, Jessie suggests to the other protesters to all hold hands even though this may not align with the protest's mission. This could end up inadvertently changing the message without the organizers' consent. Black voices are not given the political space to enjoy shaping the protests that they are crucially a part of.

Case 4: Offending people

When someone chants 'Hand's Up, Don't Shoot', Jessie decided to chant along and hold their hands up.¹³ The protesters feel offended by Jessie chanting this slogan because Jessie never would be criminalized and targeted by police because of the color of their skin.

In this case, Jessie chants 'Hand's Up, Don't Shoot' and hold their hands up in the same position Michael Brown. The slogan 'Hands Up, Don't Shoot' refers to being criminalized and targeted by police because of being Black. However, Jessie is protected by White privilege because of their skin color. Peggy McIntosh (1988) describes White privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that are associated with dominant skin color. McIntosh (1988) listed 26 conditions of daily experience which she 'once took for granted'. Number 19

¹³ On August 9, 2014, the 18-year-old Michael Brown was shot by Darren Wilson, a White police officer. Witnesses to the shooting claimed that Brown had his hands up in surrender and said 'don't shoot' just before he was shot. This is what led to the slogan 'Hand's Up, Don't Shoot'. I am aware that this is a rather American point of view. In the other cases, I use a more universal point of view.

being; If a traffic cop pulls me over or if the IRS audits my tax return, I can be sure I haven't been singled out because of my race. In other words, it is the set of social and economic advantages that White people have by virtue of their "race" in a culture characterized by racial inequality. So, Jessie shows themselves as a victim of something they cannot be a victim of because Jessie is protected by White privilege. This can be offensive to people who do suffer from police violence against Black people.

We are constantly in a performance where we want to impress the people we are surrounded with. During a performance, we may inadvertently hint that the role we are playing is not entirely sincere, but a means to another end. In all these cases, Jessie did something which was not in harmony with the definition of the situation: taking up too much space, scoring pictures, undermining the message, offending/hurting people. It hindered the expressive order of the protest, which I described earlier as: walking together peacefully or giving a speech etc. in order to raise awareness of racism and inequality experienced by Black people and to eradicate White supremacy.¹¹ This was noticed by the other protesters and had a negative impact on them: they felt like Jessie was taking away the attention from the Black voices, they felt damaged in their integrity, they felt it was not Jessie place to define what the protest looks like and they felt offended by Jessie chanting 'Hand's Up, Don't Shoot'. This may have led to feelings of frustration, disappointment, anger and/or embarrassment. The state of collective effervescence was also hindered, because Jessie did not communicate the same thought and/or participate in the same action. In addition, the negative feelings may get in the way of the sense of being part of a greater whole.

These are all slips and minor cues of Jessie that may be unintentional, but nonetheless read as significant by the valid participants. I am, therefore, not claiming that people who performatively engage in antiracism are necessarily deliberately hindering the expressive order. People are not always fully aware of their motivations, actions and what they might result in. In some cases, it does not appear that Jessie is intentionally not acting in harmony with the definition of the situation. On the contrary, in some cases Jessie was probably trying to participate and fit in as best they could. That being said, it could be the case that people who performatively engage in antiracism *are* hindering the expressive order intentionally. Someone can know how their performance will have a negative impact on the cause or the other participants, but just care more about one's own benefits (for example, coming across as a moral person).

Someone might object that it is only heartening of Jessie, that they feel addressed and participate. And that no matter what skin color someone has, as long as this person is participating in a protest they are supporting the greater good. To clarify, I am not trying to argue that this is not the case. As I have said before, I do not evaluate performative wokeness. However, I do argue that, conceptually speaking, a failed performance has a negative impact on the valid participants because it hinders the expressive order.

Another critical reader could object that it is very nitpicky of me to claim that Jessie in case 3 is taking up too much space during the protest and that Jessie in the case 4 is not involved enough. Is it never right then? I want to clarify, again, that I am not researching whether performative wokeness is morally right or wrong. In these cases, I describe how the valid participants may perceive the performance and which effect this may have. I am not accusing Jessie of being a bad person. It is important to display how despite good intentions someone can still hinder the expressive order, and thus have a negative impact on the valid participants.

§4.3 Recap: Hindering the expressive order

In this chapter, I have argued that performative wokeness may have a negative impact on the valid participants because it hinders the expressive order. To justify this position, I have used the concept expressive order (Goffman, 1967) and the concept collective effervescence (Durkheim, 1915). I have provided four cases in which an imaginary person called Jessie performatively engages in a Black Lives Matter protest. In all these cases Jessie does something that is not in harmony with the definition of the situation. This leads to negative feelings and a disingenuous atmosphere, which hinders the state of collective effervescence. With these cases, I hope to have shown how performative wokeness can hinder the expressive order and therefore have a negative impact on the valid participants.

Conclusion

Performative wokeness is a relatively unexplored topic within academic literature. Although we are constantly reminded that we live in a world where wokeness is ubiquitous, the concept of performative wokeness remains unclear and contested. This thesis aimed to fill this literature gap by providing a conceptual analysis of performative wokeness in its relation to antiracism for White people. The research question of this thesis was: how does performative wokeness relate to antiracism for White people?

First, I outlined the linguistic context around the concept of performative wokeness. In this, it became apparent that wokeness has become a very polarizing topic and that the discourse around wokeness has become heated. Additionally, the tension between the concepts of performative wokeness and wokeness was discussed. Essentially, the concept of performativity undermines the ongoing and personal work required to be wokeness. Which, in turn, can affect the integrity and authenticity of wokeness.

Second, I argued for an understanding of the concept of performative wokeness as a role that one takes on for self-gain, using Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical perspective. The role is used as means to another end. Namely, what they consider to be their own good. I elaborated on the comparison of social media as a performance space (de Kosnik, 2019). In addition, I argued that in a way social media encourages performativity. Social media is an easy tool to show a more ideal version of yourself to others, or in the context of performative wokeness; an easy way to show to portray yourself as woke.

Third, I described two forms of self-gain in the context of performative wokeness: social status and moral cleansing. Performative wokeness may be done a) to be viewed as possessing the desirable quality of wokeness, in order to achieve a higher social status relative to other individuals and/or b) to be perceived as a member of the social group in the hope to have a relative higher social status than the relevant out-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In addition, I have explained that performative wokeness may be done to morally cleanse oneself from one's own White guilt because the feeling of White guilt can get in the way of one's desire to see oneself as a moral person.

Fourth, I described what kind of possible effect performative wokeness can have, using Goffman's (1967) concept expressive order and Durkheim's (1915) concept collective effervescence. I provided four cases in which an imaginary person performatively engages in a Black Lives Matter protest. I argued that this is not in harmony with the definition of the situation and, thus, hinders the expressive order. Furthermore, I argued that if this is noticed

by the valid participants it will have a negative impact on them. It can lead to negative feelings, which in turn hinders the state of collective effervescence.

To conclude, in this thesis, I argued for an understanding of performative wokeness in its relation to antiracism for White people, as a role that one takes on for self-gain, which can come in the form of a) achieving a higher social status relative to other individuals or another relevant group, and/or b) morally cleansing oneself from one's own White guilt.

Subsequently, I have argued that performative wokeness may have a negative impact on the other valid participants in the movement because it hinders the expressive order of the social situation when people act in a way that is not in harmony with the definition of the situation.

In this last section, I evaluate the limits of this thesis and provide suggestions for further research. Adopting conceptual analysis as a method for this thesis presented some difficulties. I sometimes found it difficult to argue for a particular understanding of a concept without attaching a value judgment to that same concept. In addition, because the debate on this topic is so heated, writing about it sometimes felt like a minefield. However, this did ensure that I tried to be as precise as possible in my wording. I am aware that after the conceptual analysis I provided in this thesis, performative wokeness is still difficult to recognize and establish. This is partly due to the role that motivations play and partly because there are just no clear dividing lines or boundaries to the phenomenon – at least I think so. However, the aim was primarily to contribute to a better understanding of performative wokeness and I think that a first important step has certainly been taken in that regard.

There are sides to performative wokeness that were beyond the scope of this thesis. Therefore, further research is certainly needed. First, it would be relevant to provide a conceptual analysis of performative wokeness from an intersectional perspective in the future. Here, for example, the research question could be: how does performative wokeness relate to antiracism from an intersectional point of view? In addition, one could do a research on other motivations for performative wokeness than I have described. For example, with this topic, the research question could be: to what extent does peer pressure play a role in performative wokeness? Since social media is an easy tool to signify you are woke, a focus on the use of social media for performative wokeness could also be interesting. Here, the research question could be: what are the moral implications of the use of social media by people who performatively engage in wokeness?

I am aware that this conceptual analysis is far from highlighting all elements of performative wokeness. In addition, the understanding of the concept that I suggest may need to be adjusted. However, I do argue that the understanding of the concept of performative

wokeness that I propose captures most of the essence, as I have provided a conceptual analysis of what performative wokeness essentially is, why people do it, and how it can possibly have a negative effect. It is my sincere hope that this thesis will contribute to the debate and gap in literature surrounding performative wokeness in its relation to antiracism for White people.

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