

- [OPINION](#)
- /
- [BLACK LIVES MATTER PROTESTS](#)

## [The problem of performative activism](#)

*I do not know what has suddenly caused this outpouring of white anger about racism, but I have to question it.*

17 hours ago



A yellow umbrella with a sign that reads 'Black Lives Matter' is seen on June 19, 2020 in Charlottesville, Virginia [Eze Amos/Getty Images/AFP]

MORE ON [UNITED STATES](#)

I have a friend who has recently found himself on the wrong side of discussions about equality and it illustrates a disturbing tendency I see repeated in

person and on social media.

My friend, let's call him Giles, is white. I mean really white. Giles is "grew up in Eastern Oregon wheat country" white. He is "listens to 1990s hip-hop" white. But Giles is also an exceptional person, the kind who will take a week to slowly consider something he said and realise that it represents a view of masculinity that is possibly toxic, then work to change his own behaviour. Giles is one of those rare human beings who actually does the hard work of learning how to be better, and that puts him at a tremendous disadvantage when it comes to talking about race.

"I want to explore all this and learn how to be a better person," he confided in me recently, while lamenting about his conversations with what he calls his "woke friends".

"But people keep telling me I should just shut up, that I don't even matter in the discussion because I'm a white guy."

This, sadly, is a common refrain.

## White anger, white support, white guilt

I have to admit that I find the current intensity of racial protests exhausting. It feels as though the streets are suddenly filled with white people who are yelling louder and angrier about the issues Black folks have been detailing for generations. Where, I wonder, is this coming from?

Police brutality has been a documented aspect of Black life for 100 years, since the Lexow Committee generated 10,000 pages of testimony in 1894. And it was just as present, if ignored by the white populace, for a full 300 years before that. I remember running around the corner when I saw a police car as a child. Police were scarier than the boogeyman. So much of Black art and music centres around our relationship with law enforcement that, like a tree growing through a fence, it would be hard to extricate the police and leave Black culture fully intact.

Why then, all of a sudden, are white people rioting about police brutality as if inequality is salt rubbed into still fresh wounds on their backs? I cannot believe that the unlawful death of a community activist has sparked this sudden outrage unless I believe that so many generations of leaders led lives that simply did not matter. I cannot believe that a woman falsely calling the police on a Black man sparked outrage from people who have never heard of Emmett Till.

I do not know what has caused this sudden outpouring of white support, but I have to question it. We have been here before - so many times before - and the result has always been that white guilt was publicly assuaged with little substantive change in lived equality. I can't help but worry this will happen yet again. I find it exhausting because it feels so performative.

## More like marketing than social action

Today, it is common to see businesses with Black Lives Matter signs in their windows, but so much of the current support coincides with public announcements that feel more like marketing than social action. It seems that every company is proclaiming how strong their involvement is, while so much of their action is limited to words.

One local business boldly announced they were "taking a knee to increase awareness of police brutality". Their action: Closing for the 4th of July so their staff could take the day off. Such a revolutionary action, closing on a national holiday. A step apparently worthy of our applause.

Another business erected a Black Lives Matter sign during a hoax about rioting, then immediately removed it following the scare. When pressed, the owner responded that, "Small businesses should not take a political stance." As if defending the lives of people is political. As if erecting the sign only to protect her storefront was not a stance.

The performative nature of these announcements is not limited to businesses but extends into the personal - and it goes far beyond the more childish displays of slacktivism, such as proudly announcing that your Facebook avatar is a black square. Those engaged in performative activism are damaging those causes partly because their actions are often unhelpful and meaningless. More to the point, however, their displays so often involve correcting, denouncing and shaming people who are behaving little differently than the performers themselves behaved only six months ago.

## Shaming - the most dangerous performance of all

Which brings us back to Giles and the "woke friends" who berate him for daring to talk about race. This is the most damaging performance of all. White people's shaming of white men for nothing more than being white men is the greatest tool white patriarchy has at its disposal.

Much has been written on shame's relation to equality, from the slave journal of Solomon Northrup to the academic work of Robin DiAngelo. The many manifestations of shame have been known for centuries to shut down dialogue and destroy discourse. Shaming a person for a good-faith effort sabotages their ability to attempt self-improvement. Rather, they will avoid the situation in the future, holding fast to their current beliefs and actions, supporting the status quo.

But more damaging than this is shame's ability to remove all blame from those who do the shaming. We can only shame from the high ground of righteousness. This is the stone Jesus dared us to throw. This is why so many white people have denounced [Amy Cooper](#) angrily. Painting Amy as evil and racist is easy, and it allows us to avoid painting ourselves in anything other than the prettiest of colours. We need do nothing about our own actions because they are not as bad as Amy's are.

I can think of no greater support to the structures of white patriarchy than for a white person to shame a white man for making a good faith effort at understanding the lives of others and his place in building an equitable world.

## A stone thrown

There is a common media trope of the Born-Again Christian, that person who, new to the religion, shows zealotry that borders on the comical. I see echos of that trope in this new "white woke-ness" and in the shaming of anyone who thinks differently or even questions how they, themselves, think.

I find exhausting this fanatical assurance that complex topics like race and gender can be reduced into childish dynamics of good and evil. I despise this will to immediately attack any perceived slight one might make while navigating such a socially complex and emotionally difficult topic as equality. It takes decades of practice to navigate these issues correctly, and even the greatest academics on a topic might make a misstep after a lifetime of such work.

Much of this new fanaticism seems both performative and self-serving. A stone thrown at those who stumble to avoid admitting our own sins. A social media post to market our own goodness and righteousness. Just another way to say "I'm not a racist," "I'm not a sexist," while doing nothing to dismantle white patriarchy, even unwittingly working to support it.

Do you want to know who is actively working to dismantle white patriarchy? People who feel no great need to shame the good faith efforts of others. People who feel no desire to post about their own goodness on social media but who instead simply do the substantive work within themselves to be a better person.

People, in other words, like Giles.

***The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera's editorial stance.***

---

