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Citation for final published version:

Sobande, Francesca 2022. The celebrity whitewashing of Black Lives Matter and social injustices. *Celebrity Studies* 13 (1) , pp. 130-135. 10.1080/19392397.2022.2026147

Publishers page: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2022.2026147>

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The celebrity whitewashing of Black Lives Matter and social injustices

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*Published in *Celebrity Studies**

Abstract

This work examines aspects of the relationship between whiteness, celebrity culture, and contemporary media content and conversations concerning Black Lives Matter (BLM). Focusing on two key examples, it explores how the perspectives of white celebrities receive visibility, praise, and critique amid mediated discourse on BLM and social injustices. This piece considers the ‘novelty’ of white celebrities alluding to and articulating their whiteness. In addition to this, it reflects on the notion of celebrities showing solidarity, speaking for the so-called ‘voiceless’, and (de)centring whiteness. The work includes discussion of dancer and comedian Casey Frey’s ‘I Take Responsibility’ spoof video, as well as the 2020 Oscars speech of actor Joaquin Phoenix. Such writing draws on prior work on racism, the internet, and the power dynamics implicated in celebrity culture. Specifically, this commentary is shaped by studies of stardom, the politics of digital culture and communication, and the way that whiteness operates and is observed in celebrity culture. Thus, this work urges the field of celebrity studies to continue to consider how white celebrities’ efforts to call out and critique whiteness and social injustices can in fact have the effect of reinscribing the dominant and marketable status of whiteness.

Keywords

Activism, Black Lives Matter, Screen actors, Stars, Whiteness

Introduction

The vibrant field of celebrity studies includes a wide range of research that deals with how celebrities and celebrity cultures are shaped by matters regarding race, racism, and the hegemony of whiteness. However, relatively scant attention has been paid to how the relationship between whiteness and celebrity appears to function as part of contemporary media and public conversations concerning the Black Lives Matter (BLM) social justice movement, which advocates for an end to antiblack violence and police brutality. Thus, this article considers what the visibility of white celebrities’ comments and digital content amid discourse on BLM and related injustices in 2020 suggests about how the dominance of whiteness and celebrity culture contributes to the potential whitewashing of Black activist and social justice movements. In other

words, this piece examines some of the ways that white celebrities seem to take centre stage in media and pop culture commentaries on BLM and social injustices, and analyses what this suggests about the market logic that underlies celebrity and pop culture, and how white celebrities attempt to manage and market their self-brands.

The novelty of white celebrities alluding to and articulating their whiteness

Scholars such as Dyer (1997) have analysed the ways in which whiteness operates and is operationalised in media and pop culture contexts. More specifically, such scholarship has scrutinised the politics and power relations that propel forms of white cultural production. When commenting on the potential impact of referring to white people as white, as opposed to referring to them in ways that create an artificial distance between them and notions of race, Dyer (1997, p. 2) asserts that '[t]he point of seeing the racing of whites is to dislodge them/us from the position of power, with all the inequalities, oppression, privileges and sufferings in its train, dislodging them/us by undercutting the authority with which they/we speak and act in and on the world'. In the years since Dyer first wrote these words in 1997 there has been a rise in mainstream media and pop culture discussions of terms, such as 'white privilege', 'white fragility', and 'whiteness', including when uttered as part of statements about and by celebrities. In fact, the business of speaking about whiteness as a white person can be a lucrative one for some. Moreover, in the words of Prins (2020, p. 2) 'Dyer's observations are complicated by the current moment, wherein white identity politics have gained momentum'.

Although there are still many white celebrities whose careers move along in ways that seldom involve them being referred to with the use of racial descriptors such as 'white', there are also clear examples of celebrities who have attempted to publicly acknowledge or allude to their whiteness, in implicit and/or explicit ways. However, some of the praise and public relations opportunities that white celebrities are afforded as a result of their reflections on their whiteness, privilege, and power, are, arguably, at odds with what Dyer (1997) identifies as being the potential for white people's naming of whiteness to disrupt the racial hierarchies that they benefit from. Accounting for the work of Dyer (1997, p. 2) which advocates for a critical consideration of why white people 'don't mention the whiteness of the white people we know', the following sections survey the complex potential for white celebrities to simultaneously benefit from and denounce white supremacy and social injustices as part of how they attempt to contribute to conversations and the creation of digital content in response to BLM and inequalities in 2020.

Put briefly, the writing that follows wrestles with what it means to witness white celebrities accruing social capital, clout, or at least, media attention and praise, when they are claiming to push against white supremacy and decentre whiteness and inequalities through their words and work. Consequently, this article urges the field of celebrity studies to continue to consider how white celebrities' efforts to call out and critique whiteness and social injustices can in fact have the effect of reinscribing the dominant and marketable status of whiteness.

Showing solidarity, speaking for the so-called 'voiceless', and (de)centring whiteness

Joaquin Phoenix's Oscars speech

BLM activity has received mounting media attention since 2013, most recently in 2020 due to galvanising BLM organising in the weeks that followed fatal police violence being inflicted on Black people in the US, such as George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Tony McDade. The impact of BLM and broader Black grassroots organising work in the US and around the world includes, but is not limited to, more of a focus on issues related to Black and racial injustice in various media and pop culture domains. Furthermore, the effectiveness of different forms of hashtag activism (Jackson et al. 2020) has also contributed to productive pressure placed on individuals and institutions, which in some cases has led to changes that are aligned with racial justice and liberationist goals.

Among the many hashtags that have been part of twenty-first-century conversations and efforts to address racial inequalities is #OscarsSoWhite which was created by April Reign in 2015 in response to the overwhelming whiteness of the Oscar nominations. Since then, the Oscars have been the site of many verbal, visual, and symbolic statements that specifically speak to issues of racism and inequality. Joaquin Phoenix's Oscars speech in 2020, when he won a Best Actor award for his role in the film *Joker* (2019) exemplifies how such industry award ceremonies have provided a stage for gestures that are intended to address inequality.

Phoenix's Oscars speech has undoubtedly divided opinions, but the different responses to it include many that praise the actor and even refer to the power of his speech as having 'broke the internet'. While the speech does not explicitly address BLM, it does address racism. Therefore, the speech is situated within a wider landscape of highly publicised white celebrity comments on racism and social injustices. Phoenix's speech featured statements such as 'the opportunity to use our voice for the voiceless', 'whether we're talking about gender inequality or racism or queer rights or Indigenous rights or animal rights, we're talking about the fight against injustice', and ' . . . I think that's when we're at our best. When we support each other, not when we cancel each other out for past mistakes'.

Although Phoenix did not name his whiteness, he did, however, reflect on the fact that he has been 'a scoundrel all my life', 'hard to work with', at times, and yet, has been given 'a second chance'. Phoenix stops short of referring to 'white privilege' or 'whiteness', but possibly alludes to it in his framing of the slack that he has been cut throughout his career. The degree of praise and media attention that Phoenix received for speaking about inequalities at the Oscars is symptomatic of how due to the dominance of whiteness, which bolsters the market logic that underlies celebrity culture, white celebrities and their self-brands can stand to gain something from attempting to denounce the type of social hierarchies that to some extent make their celebrity status possible.

While the potential white saviour sentiments of Phoenix's speech have been critiqued, the hegemony of whiteness in celebrity and pop culture shields him from the possibility of such criticism significantly hampering his career and public image. In his own words, he has been given 'a second chance', and the same often cannot be said of famous Black and racialised people. Although the reference to people being 'cancelled' is fleeting in Phoenix's speech it is still worthy of critical consideration as part of an account of how white celebrities have attempted to contribute to conversations and create digital content concerning BLM and social injustices in 2020.

Clark's (2020, p. 1) vital research on the etymology of so-called 'cancel culture' highlights how '[t]he term "cancel culture" has significant implications for defining discourses of digital and social media activism'. Clark (2020, p. 1) examines 'the evolution of digital

accountability praxis as performed by Black Twitter, a meta-network of culturally linked communities online'. In the poignant words of Clark (2020, p. 1), such research traces:

. . .the practice of the social media callout from its roots in Black vernacular tradition to its misappropriation in the digital age by social elites, arguing that the application of useful anger by minoritized people and groups has been effectively harnessed in social media spaces as a strategy for networked framing of extant social problems. This strategy is challenged, however, by the dominant culture's ability to narrativize the process of being 'canceled' as a moral panic with the potential to upset the concept of a limited public sphere.

When taking into account the insightful work of Clark (2020), Phoenix's dismissive reference to what he terms 'when people cancel each other' can be interpreted as being part of dominant media narratives that attempt to reframe callouts and critiques of people as cancelling, and which commonly conveniently obscure racist power relations that are part of these processes. In the same breath as speaking about the need to collectively tackle social injustices, Phoenix seamlessly moves on to speak in ways that may be regarded as scorning the callout and accountability processes that many marginalised racialised people participate in as part of efforts to hold individuals and powerful institutions to account. Unsurprisingly, the part of Phoenix's speech that expresses disdain for such processes of often bottom-up critique voiced by structurally oppressed people has not received much criticism in mainstream media.

The fact that Phoenix's speech was uncritically peppered with a call to resist allegedly cancelling each other demonstrates how some white celebrities speak out about social injustices while seeking to squash the potential for people to pursue justice processes that destabilise the power of institutions, including the social-cultural institution of celebrity, which some celebrities may be scared will eventually be so-called 'cancelled'. Relatedly, the following section focuses on viral comedian Casey Frey's spoof video that mocks the 'I Take Responsibility' PSA video which was based on a partnership between the NAACP and many Hollywood stars, including white celebrities, who 'pledged to act against racism'.

Casey Frey's 'I take responsibility' spoof

Discourse on BLM and racial injustice in 2020 cuts across many different geo-cultural contexts as well as industries and sectors. Hence, marketing professionals and celebrities have been grappling with how to ensure that (self)brands respond to racial injustice in ways that seem sincere and more substantial than advertising perceived as 'woke-washing' because it buttresses brands' pursuit of profit rather than their support of liberationist work (Sobande 2019, 2020). Famous people have been attempting to strike a balance between using their platforms to amplify messages about structural antiblackness and using their platforms in ways intended to preserve their own public image. The reality is that many celebrities may be more concerned about brand reputational risk than the racial injustices that they choose or do not choose to speak up about.

In 2020, many videos and pieces of digital content created by or foregrounding white celebrities have been ridiculed for their tactless tone, their centring of whiteness, and their ineffectiveness in terms of tackling white supremacy. The fun poked at such content ranges from sarcastic comments on social media to the creation of satirical spoof videos, such as the one

made by comedian Casey Frey, whose content often goes viral. Frey makes direct reference to the original 'I Take Responsibility' PSA video by quote retweeting a post that features it when sharing his mocking video in response on Twitter on 14 June 2020. Frey's video starts with footage of him in character as a celebrity who is about to make an 'I Take Responsibility' style video, speaking to people off-screen who are prepping him on what the purpose of the video is. Frey's non-descript celebrity character comes across as brash, impatient, and disinterested, which may be regarded as the comedian commenting on the disingenuous involvement of some celebrities in such videos.

Speaking to an implied off-screen fictional crew member, Frey's on-screen character flippantly clarifies that this video he is about to shoot is 'kind of just like a . . . sort of showing my solidarity, sort of improv-ing in that space?' type of video. When referring to the performance he is about to make, Frey's on-screen character says that he 'loves this character', before taking a minute to 'sit into empathy' and get into the zone. This is a clear nod to the perceived performativity of much of such content featuring white celebrities claiming to take ownership and denounce racism in ways, which seem to involve them playing parts and performing rather than coming across 'authentically'. Frey's 1:04 minute long video directly mocks the 'I Take Responsibility' PSA in ways that allude to contradictions and crassness inherent to many of such videos, and which connects to the irony of wealthy white celebrities centring themselves in some conversations and digital content about antiblackness and racial injustice.

Frey's video may be interpreted in a variety of ways, but one of such interpretations is that the video is a reminder of the level of posturing and performance that can play a part in how celebrities voice their concern regarding racism in video PSAs. Through a brief humorous video with low-budget aesthetics, Frey scoffed at the charade and egoistic moments that can sometimes surround celebrities' involvement in contemporary discourse on BLM and racial injustices. Though whiteness is not named in either the original PSA or Frey's response, it is always present and depicted in ways that may appeal to/appease profitable celebrity and pop cultures that prioritise demand for images and the perspectives of white people.

Conclusion

In different ways, both the examples of Phoenix's Oscar Speech in 2020 and Frey's video taunting celebrities in the same year illustrate aspects of the relationship between the hegemony of whiteness and pop culture. The words of Phoenix and the work of Frey are far from being the only examples of celebrity and pop culture moments that can be read as conveying and/or critiquing the ways in which the perspectives of white celebrities receive visibility and praise amid contemporary discourse on BLM and social injustices. There is a need for further research regarding how white celebrities treat and tap into discussions about BLM and social injustices including in ways that challenge earlier scholarly ideas about the potential for white people's articulations about whiteness to push against oppressive relations and result in them relinquishing forms of power and authority, as opposed to flexing them.

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