

Value-Based Protest Slogans: An Argument for Reorientation

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I. Introduction

When bringing philosophical attention to bear on social movement slogans in general, philosophers have often focused on their communicative nature—particularly the hermeneutical failures that arise in discourse. Some of the most popular of these failures are illustrated in ‘all lives matter’ retorts to ‘black lives matter’ pronouncements. Although highlighting and criticizing these failures provides much needed insight into social movement slogans as a communicative practice, I claim that in doing so, philosophers and slogans’ users risk placing too much importance on outgroup understandings. This emphasis is misguided because gaining such uptake is not required of particular slogans to perform their functions; indeed it is an inherent risk of them. I show how such an emphasis can also be distracting to users. Since social movement slogans that express values are first and foremost for *users*, I argue for a shift in focus in what these slogans (such as ‘Black Is Beautiful’ and the more recent ‘Black Lives Matter’) do for users, as well as what they demand from users and enable them to express. When slogans have done these things, regardless of uptake, we can say they have performed one of their key functions.

I begin, in section 2, by exploring what users of ‘Black Lives Matter’ mean by the slogan and what the slogan is often taken to mean by non-users. I also highlight the epistemic and moral sources that are believed to account for breakdowns in understanding. These range from lack of knowledge to a refusal to disrupt the racial status quo. In section 3, I describe characteristics of social movement slogans—specifically what I refer to as *value-based protest slogans* (VPS). I do this not only to provide a basic account of our subject of inquiry, but to also show that misunderstandings and even attempts to analyze and remedy them (of which many occur in section 2) are not required of slogans. In section 4, I claim that although uptake is not required for slogans to perform their function, an overemphasis on nonusers’ understanding of them can be distracting to users—making users’ overemphasis an obstacle to slogans performing their main function.

2. Understandings and Misunderstandings

If you create a social movement slogan that you believe is precise and clear, you may expect some disagreement (particularly if it’s provocative) but may be surprised and intrigued when others misunderstand your message. The surprise may be heightened when slogans ascribe value to marginalized groups like ‘Black Lives Matter’ (BLM) as opposed to making demands like ‘Freedom Now.’ One might contest the

demand slogan over disagreements about timing. And we can imagine how issues like the ‘right timing’ can be up for debate. Martin Luther King Jr.’s ‘Letter from a Birmingham Jail’ engages such a debate. King wrote the letter in response to white clergymen’s worry that the civil rights movement was moving too fast. King disagreed. He argued that not only had the movement taken timing into consideration in each non-violent campaign, but also that the time for justice is always now. By contrast, we might not expect the value of human lives to be up for debate. Philosophers have helped us make sense of misunderstandings of value slogans. In analyzing ‘Black Lives Matter’—a slogan that speaks to the value of lives—philosophers have provided preliminary accounts of the BLM slogan, as well as the nature and reasons for its misunderstandings—particularly those found in ‘All Lives Matter’ (ALM) retorts.

Luvell Anderson (2017) interprets BLM as *a demand* that black people be respected and treated as equals in society. However, he points out that when someone responds with All Lives Matter, they are taking BLM to mean that *only* black lives matter, and not others. Although BLM users explain that they do not intend the slogan in that way, ALM users continue to hold this interpretation. Anderson highlights a gap in understanding here brought about by interpretive challenges—obstacles “that leave us without understanding,” which he calls *hermeneutical impasses*. These are “instances in which agents engaged in communicative exchange are unable to achieve understanding due to a gap in shared hermeneutical resources” (2017: 3).

One example of a hermeneutical impasse that occurs in ALM responses is, according to Anderson, due to a lack of knowledge. We probably have experienced such an impasse when watching a comedy performance. We may fail to get a comedian’s joke because we do not have knowledge of a group’s beliefs, experiences, or dialect—all of which an understanding is needed in order to get the joke. Understanding what the comedian’s words mean will prove insufficient. To get the joke we must share certain beliefs and experiences. ALM responses, for Anderson, fail in the same way. Responders cannot understand BLM users because responders lack the necessary knowledge of the experiences of African-Americans (e.g., a history of police brutality), experiences that lead African-Americans to have to publicly declare that Black Lives Matter.

But lack of knowledge is not the only source of misunderstanding. Hermeneutical impasses are also caused by prejudice. ALM responders may claim to understand what is meant by the BLM slogan, but their understanding is distorted by prejudices toward those who express the statement or about the racial climate in general. Prejudice can short-circuit understanding by “creat[ing] a particular bias that causes the interpreter to privilege uncharitable interpretations over more charitable ones” (2017: 5). Impasses that arise from prejudice often occur in high-stakes contexts and when performance has major influence on uptake. That is to say, people tend to misinterpret in life-or-death scenarios and when the communication is performed in a particular place or with a particular tone that one has come to associate with danger. In these instances, ALM responders may fail to interpret BLM slogans because they are under racial stress and are resorting to what Robin DiAngelo (2018) describes as “white fragility.” Or they may fail to interpret the slogan because it is being uttered by many people of color and they have come to associate large groups of racial minorities with danger. Anderson points out that these impasses are most resistant to linguistic remedies like clarity and

precision. As a result, they are in need of extra-linguistic remedies—the least among them being racial knowledge.

Havercroft and Owen (2016) describe Black Lives Matter in the following way:

[BLM] critiques an order of continuous racial perception enacted in and through everyday practices of racecraft. An exclamation, a complex avowal, that may be, at once, an expression of pain, of anger, of indignation, of resilience and, even perhaps, of hope. It is also a reminder that within the police orders that compose the history of the United States of America, black lives have not, or have only exceptionally, been seen as mattering, as of account, in the same way as white lives and that this condition is a product not of the black community but rather of those who see themselves as white and, more specifically, of their becoming white. (2016: 13).

On their account, BLM is more than a demand. It is an expression and avowal of a range of emotions and experiences. It is also a reminder and a criticism of the racial reality for many blacks in the US. The failure to understand these multiple meanings is to be struck by what Havercroft and Owen describe as *racial soulblindness*. Racial soulblindness occurs by refusing to see blacks as human—not just as a biological kind but as an ethical kind. Those who have racial soulblindness do not recognize their connection to blacks nor do they see blacks’ suffering as being of the same kind as theirs. It “evidences [their] inability to understand how a demand to acknowledge the value of Black lives and the end of their legalized killing by the police is, in a fundamental way, a demand by the Black community to have equal standing to speak and act in American political life” (2016: 14). To remedy this gap in understanding, an ALM responder must overcome soulblindness. This requires them to be struck by the world in a particular way and this can occur by coming to stand in the right relationship with blacks (i.e., by not seeing one’s whiteness as superior).

For Ashley Atkins, “Black lives matter is a critical affirmation of what is known by black Americans, the referent of ‘Our lives matter,’ in response to threats, among other things, to that group-understanding” (2019: 3) Atkins points out that ALM responders may agree with the claim that black lives matter, but still respond with ALM since they might think that ‘black lives mattering is a trivial consequence of all lives matter.’ Such an interpretation, some might argue, arises out of colorblindness—a phenomenon Michelle Alexander describes as “the widespread belief that race no longer matters ... [a belief that] has [made us ignore] the realities of race in our society and facilitated the emergence of a new caste system” (2010:11-12). However, Atkins disagrees that color-blindness is behind BLM misunderstandings. Atkins’ analysis of historical receptions to “Black Power” reveal similarities across time regarding misunderstandings of black political speech.

That atmosphere of fear gave rise to repeated requests for the definition of ‘Black Power’ on the part of the white intelligentsia of Stokely Carmichael’s time, though one has to wonder why that is; its meaning was clear enough to the poor, uneducated, and disenfranchised blacks to whom it was, in the first instance,

addressed. I would venture that its meaning was clear to them, though not to white Americans, because it spoke to their exclusion from the field of power and articulated this exclusion in a way that wasn't calibrated to white racial sensibilities. (2019: 5)

She concludes by claiming that misunderstandings and thus criticisms of BLM, like those regarding 'Black Power,' are actually due to understanding too well white life and white power. Although this may appear to fly against the claims of race theorists and feminist philosophers who argue that the disadvantaged are sometimes better poised to know and understand the life and power of the advantaged than the advantaged, here, Atkins is pointing to the inability of whites to achieve a critical distance from white conceptions of power and value. According to Atkins, "they were terms within which whites had historically realized their collective power (of course, with legal, political, economic, and police force that made possible the enforcement of separation or segregation). The failure to see that 'Black Power' was not a call to perpetrate these wrongs was a failure to understand how power might be claimed by blacks in ways other than whites had claimed it" (2019: 8). For Atkins, BLM marks a feature of domination not exclusion. That is, it illuminates the reality of racial inequality—a reality in which blacks are at the bottom of a socially constructed hierarchy—rather than proclaiming superiority over all non-black others. BLM challenges a racialized system of value and this explains the presence of recalcitrant defenses. BLM is not interpretive speech but resistance speech that "appear[s] to be saying what they[blacks] already know in the way that they know it and demanding that those who don't take responsibility for that" (2019: 17). BLM reflects for Atkins "the need to affirm the worth of black, not white lives because the lives that are shown to have worth are white" (2019: 8-9).

In summary, according to Anderson, Atkins, and others, users of the BLM slogan intend to affirm black life; criticize black disrespect; demand that blacks be respected; and challenge a racialized system of value. These philosophers help us make sense of the misunderstandings around these meanings. Such clarity is important for two distinct but related reasons.

First, moral agents seek to understand others; not just their words but also their struggles and needs. And if we as moral agents cannot understand, we might want to know what mistakes we are making and resolve them. Second, in terms of being contributors to collective political acts, we want our fellows to understand our political claims and demands and to take them seriously. Such understanding is important for political agreement, protest, collaboration, and solidarity. Making sense of hermeneutical failures are epistemically, morally, and politically important for these reasons.

I will argue, however, that the power of the BLM slogan for users is radically underappreciated in most discussions of the slogan, where the focus is disproportionately on the reactions and interpretations of *nonusers*. Although slogans can have an impact on both users and nonusers, discussion has exclusively focused on the latter. However, the overall value of the slogan cannot be appreciated without considering both. I will also show that nonuser misunderstandings of the slogan are less worrisome, as long as the slogan advances various user-directed goals and values.

3. Value-Based Slogans and their Characteristics

In this section I will lay out the characteristics of a distinct kind of social movement slogan in order to provide a more detailed account of it, as well as show how misunderstanding does not affect its function for users.

I refer to social movement slogans like ‘Black Lives Matter’ as well as ‘Black Is Beautiful’ and ‘Black Power’ as *value-based protest slogans* (henceforth VPS) because they express the value (i.e., respect, dignity, and moral worth) of a particular group *and* they are created in response to oppressive systems such as white supremacy—a system that aims to refute certain groups’ claims to value. By ‘protest’ I mean a challenge to and refusal of oppressive values and norms. Protest does not require that a perpetrator of that norm be the audience for a particular utterance of the slogan. While a slogan can be said to affirm a life, it can also be simultaneously protesting and pushing back against values that say that such a life does not matter. Just as saying that one loves oneself expresses a value (of the self), it also can protest against certain norms that say ‘certain people are too inferior to warrant love,’ particularly groups like immigrants or the working poor. When I refer to slogans in this essay, I am referring to value-based protest slogans.

While VPS share characteristics found in mottos, other slogans, mission statements, song choruses, or persuasive speeches, VPS also have unique features.¹ They are very brief and usually contain fewer words than a short sentence. Both ‘Black Lives Matter’ and ‘Black Is Beautiful’ are three words. ‘Black Power’ is two words. They are short so that they can be easily recalled, enjoyed, and repeated by a large group as a chant. A slogan might rely on alliteration or shock to appeal to users’ ears and imaginations. ‘Black Power,’ for example, is shocking and appeals to the political power it believes black people have and can obtain more of. ‘Black Lives Matter’ appeals to the imagination; it announces value in a world that does not always see or acknowledge it as such.

VPS also specify the people to whom the slogans will apply. ‘I Am a Man’ applied to black male sanitation workers in Memphis who were being economically exploited by the city in the late 1960s. ‘Black Is Beautiful’ applied to black people who lived in a culture in which anti-black modes of judging beauty were pervasive, creating what Paul C. Taylor refers to as a *beauty gap*—which encompasses the ways in which “people who are socialized by hegemonic aesthetic norms, norms of bodily aesthetics in places like the US, have decided to act as if people of color are less attractive than white people” (Taylor and Cherry 2019).² Likewise, ‘Black Lives Matter’ applies to those who identify as black and exist in a world in which there is what Eddie Glaude (2016) refers to as the *value gap*—the hegemonic idea that says that some lives (whites) are more valuable than others (non-whites).

Slogans also have users. A slogan needs people who will adopt and employ it. These will be people who ‘get the message’ of the slogan. That is to say, in the case of

¹ I am indebted to Mike W. Martin’s “Of Mottos and Morals” (2010) for providing the blueprint for how I think generally about slogans in this paper.

² For more on the beauty gap, see Taylor’s (2016) monograph on the topic.

BLM, users will have the necessary knowledge to understand the message; lack significant amounts of prejudice; see blacks as humans; and be unafraid to challenge a racialized system of value. Users will consist of people to whom the slogan applies, like blacks. But it will also consist of people to whom the slogan does not apply, like whites and Asians.

Nonusers of VPS are those who either lack the necessary knowledge; have significant amounts of prejudice; deny that certain groups are human; or are unwilling to challenge a racialized, gendered, or classist system of values. Those who respond to BLM with ALM are examples of nonusers. Nonusers will consist not only of those to whom the slogan does not apply, but also those to whom it does apply. VPS that apply to women will have nonusers who are also women. Slogans like ‘Equal Women, Equal Pay’ may be rejected by some women who believe that men—as heads of households—should be paid more, or that women should not work. VPS that apply to the working class will have nonusers who are poor. For example, slogans like ‘Workers Are People Too’ may be rejected by low-skilled workers who believe that employers should not be coerced or that workers should accept their subordinate fates. Likewise, VPS that apply to black people will also have nonusers who are black.³ For example, Roy Wilkins, former executive director of the NAACP was a nonuser of ‘Black Power.’⁴ He rejected the slogan because for him, “no matter how endlessly they try to explain it, the term black power means anti-white power” (1966). Likewise, Martin Luther King, Jr. was a nonuser of Black Power. He thought that “it’s absolutely necessary for the Negro to gain power, but the term ‘black power’ is unfortunate because it tends to give the impression of black nationalism” (Ibid.).⁵ (It may be argued that both men were nonusers for pragmatic reasons related to their position as black leaders and not for reasons cited above.)

VPS will also connect to users’ needs, aspirations, vulnerabilities, or pride. ‘Black Is Beautiful’ speaks to pride in one’s natural appearance. ‘Black Lives Matter’ speaks to the vulnerabilities in response to what seems like the disposability of black people. It also speaks to the pride in one’s own value and need to be reminded of that value in the face of oppression. VPS in particular will not aim merely to demand or make requests, but to state the moral, political, or aesthetic value of a particular group.

Who is the audience of VPS? One might assume that because these slogans are protest slogans, they are directed to those to whom one is protesting. On this view, VPS users create and chant their slogans with hopes that outside groups like white nationalists, biased police departments, and indifferent citizens will understand their message. However, those to whom the slogan does not apply are not the only audience of VPS. The origin story of Black Lives Matter is instructive here.

³ African-American rapper A\$AP Rocky and actors KeKe Palmer and Columbus Short, to name a few, publicly responded to BLM with ALM retorts on social media platform, Twitter. See Bragg (2016).

⁴ In their 1970 study, Aberbach and Walker provide a detailed study on the different meanings as well as users and nonusers of ‘Black Power.’

⁵ For more information on King’s views on Black Power (a mix of criticism and charity) see his statement on Black Power (1966).

While one might assume that #BlackLivesMatter was originally created as a response to racists, Alicia Garza, co-founder of Black Lives Matter, says that her original audience were fellow blacks. After the acquittal of George Zimmerman in 2013, Garza wrote on Facebook: “Black people. I love you. I love us. Our lives matter, Black Lives Matter.” She notes that BLM was directed at blacks whose response to the verdict was “why are you surprised?” and “this was terrible, but that’s why we need to make sure our kids get an education...pull their pants up” (Garza and Hayes 2019). These were black people! Note that these were not ALM responses. They were responses from people who had lost hope or perhaps thought that blacks could minimize threats directed at them through educational and aesthetic efforts. Nonetheless, the slogan was directed at those to whom the slogan applied—the subjects of the slogan. They too are the audience of VPS.

Another feature of value-based protest slogans is their one-sidedness. One-sidedness is partly due to slogans’ brevity (Martin 2010). When a slogan is 2-3 words, it is bound to omit other perspectives. Furthermore, slogans’ function is to remind us of something important, so it is likely to leave out other things in the process—important things, but not so important to the context in which the slogan arises. Because the slogan indicates certain priorities, some things will be left out. Black Lives Matter, a slogan that arises in a context of racial oppression, will focus on black identities over other racial identities and racial oppression as opposed to other kinds of injustices. It does not have this focus because other racial identities or types of injustice are unimportant. Rather, they focus on black identities because they are the disproportionate victims of this particular injustice. Importantly, this highlighting of one theme or one group over others makes misunderstanding or interpretive failures inherent to slogans. This risk is also connected to their brevity. When there are only three words in a slogan to interpret, it is highly likely that the slogan will be misunderstood. As a result, the brevity may facilitate ambiguity. As Mike W. Martin claims, “conciseness and compression carry a price” (2010: 52). But this risk is also connected to the unique political moment from which the slogan arises. Slogans will speak to and out of a particular moment in time. The exclusion of concerns that arise in other moments is bound to cause criticism.

Slogans function to “encapsulate attitudes, emotions, or habits and thereby to motivate and guide our actions and reflections” (2010: 51). VPS like ‘Black Lives Matter’ can express an attitude of respect, an emotion of love and anger, and anti-racist habits. It can also motivate users to defend black lives, value them, challenge racist systems and racists, and think about the ways in which users themselves can resist anti-black racism. Value-based protest slogans also serve to guide, inspire, affirm, comfort, and unify. Garza talks openly about the origins of the slogan and how it performs this function.

And part of what I was trying to communicate is that I love black people, and I don't think that we are dysfunctional. I don't think there's anything wrong with us. I think that we are incredibly resilient under the worst kinds of circumstances. And that's really what Black Lives Matter was for me. And that's why I said black people, I love you. I love us. And that our lives matter. And

that we matter. And that black lives matter.... In order for us to be powerful, we have to believe that we are powerful. And after that verdict was announced, I don't think that people felt powerful. I didn't feel powerful. And from what I was seeing on social media, a lot of people didn't feel powerful. And I posted that and I woke up in the morning and there were some legs. (2019)

BLM expressed Garza's attitudes and emotions and is what motivated her to share the message online to other blacks. Garza hoped that BLM would affirm, comfort, and inspire black folks. 'Black Lives Matter' affirms the inherent worth of people of African descent. It provides comfort from a world that doesn't value them. It inspires people to continue to fight for rights and equal treatment under the law. It guides and motivates antiracist actions. Similarly, a VPS like 'Black Is Beautiful' affirms the internal and external beauty of blacks. It provides comfort from assaults of white supremacy that says that only white Western standards of beauty are acceptable. It inspires blacks to embrace themselves. It also guides action that might include wearing a natural hairstyle or being inclusive of such hairstyles as an employer.

We can see how affirmation and comfort function for black users—for they can employ the slogan as a self-affirming and comforting tool. But how about other users? When a white person adopts and employs 'Black Lives Matter,' it is not to affirm their own anti-racist attitudes or comfort their racial anxiety. Affirmation and conformation should go in the direction of the group to whom the slogan applies and not be directed at users to show that they are 'good white people,' for example. But the function of the slogan, when employed by users to whom it does not apply, is not necessarily to affirm and comfort black people either. If it were, it could promote 'white saviorism'—the view that black people are in need of saving, and only white people can save (or affirm) them—as well as other forms of saviorisms. Instead, adopting and employing the slogan can—in addition to publicly protest—serve as an *Amen Affirmation*.

An amen affirmation communicates 'I agree' with what you say about your life. It is a humble response. It admits that while one's confirmation is not needed to make the value-based protest slogan so, what a user (to whom the slogan applies) says about themselves is so true and powerful, that the most appropriate response to such a slogan is to agree with it by adopting and employing the slogan. When uttered by non-blacks, the slogan might still affirm and comfort some users to whom the slogan applies. But it needn't do so in order to perform its function in this case. It does perform its function in other ways. The slogan can still inspire the user. It can also express his attitudes and habits and guide his anti-racist actions. It can also function as a way for him to challenge racialized value systems. It can also unify him with others.

Value-based protest slogans will also function by alluding to certain virtues and values and providing an implicit imperative for the group. 'Black Is Beautiful' alludes to respect and self-respect. 'Black Power' alludes to racial pride. 'Black Lives Matter' alludes to dignity. These slogans will not only allude to values but give imperatives, given such values. The imperative for the group who adopts 'Black Is Beautiful' may be to resist normalizing white Western standards of beauty. The imperative for users who adopt "Black Power" might be to participate in political action, given their belief in their power as political citizens. An imperative for 'Black Lives Matter' is for users to

view black victims brutalized by the police as significant and as having value. Or an imperative could be to push towards policy changes that embrace the humane treatment of blacks.

Again, the function of value-based protest slogans is to express attitudes and habits; motivate and guide actions of users through the imperatives they provide; and inspire, affirm, or comfort users. And the slogan will recur—for users will often use it often to motivate conduct or influence their thinking. It performs its function when it has done these things. The slogan need not perform every function all at once for the user. A VPS might affirm a user at T_1 . It might motivate her actions at T_2 . It might provide her comfort at T_3 . What's important to note here is that no matter what point on the timeline a user finds herself, the function of VPS will always be directed at the user and not nonusers. That is to say, VPS performs its function exclusively for the user. While we can admit that slogans are also able to *impact* nonusers by challenging, criticizing, and making demands of them, we should be careful not to confuse impact with function.

VPS do not require accurate interpretation by nonusers in order to perform their function. A VPS does not require nonusers to understand its meaning in order for the slogan to inspire or affirm users. A VPS that defends black life and stimulates political action does not require that people who issue ALM retorts change their minds. As I argued above, slogans carry the inherent risk of misunderstanding by both users and nonusers. Value-based protest slogans accommodate this misunderstanding—even misunderstandings that go beyond reasons of brevity and priority-setting. VPS are not destroyed nor is their function blocked when a person is unable or unwilling to understand the values and virtues expressed through the slogan. Whether a nonuser adopts, misinterprets, or accuses the slogan of making no sense whatsoever, has no bearing on the slogan advancing various user-directed goals and values.

The function I have alluded to above, is slogans' *primary* function. This is not to say that it is VPS only function. VPS can also have a *secondary function* and it might include, for example, making nonusers *aware* of certain attitudes and habits or even making some kind of *impact* on nonusers. But this secondary function will not be the primary function, and need not occur in order to advance user-directed goals and values.

4. The Interpretive Distraction

My claim is not that interpretation is trivial. The less misunderstanding in the world, some might argue, the better—at least epistemically speaking. Instead, my claim is that even if there is misunderstanding, slogans can still perform vital functions. And if they can, we should draw our attention to their other functions, targets, and obstacles. Even if responders continue to provide ALM retorts, BLM could still express attitudes and habits. Even if other blacks are confused by its meaning, BLM can still inspire, comfort, and unify users. Although some might interpret BLM as racist speech, the slogan will still allude to certain values and place imperatives on its users. Since this is possible, I see no payoff in focusing on interpretive failures exclusively, *as if* they were deal breakers or major blockages to value-based slogans' function. This is not to say that interpretive failures are not important. This is only to say that functioning is possible even where hermeneutical failures exist.

One might object by pointing to the link between users and interpretation. It seems that you can only have users to the extent that they can, at least minimally, interpret the slogan. Without such user interpretation and thus adoption, for whom could the slogan function? I am not downplaying the need for interpretation; users are users because they are able to understand and employ the slogan. However, slogans cannot be said to appeal to everyone. Some will misinterpret the slogan. Others will reject it for other reasons. This is the price that slogans must pay. But this price will not cause VPS to fail to function for users. This is not to say that misunderstanding has no impact on slogans. They do. But not in the ways we might assume. Let me explain.

While nonusers' uptake is not required for slogans to perform their function, users can allow retorts and outside misunderstandings to distract them from focusing on the slogan's function for them. I will now describe how this is done and what happens as a result. I do this with the aim of not just engaging in a descriptive project, but to offer up a cautionary tale to VPS users.

First, an overemphasis on misunderstanding rather than the function of the slogan hits the wrong target. In the case of VPS, the right target is users. The wrong target is nonusers. Since VPS are for users, we should give greater significance to slogans performing their function. Recall, the function of VPS is to express attitudes and habits. This is not to say that users will not hope that hearers be persuaded by their expressions. It is only to say that VPS' function is expression and not persuasion.

But VPS also function to guide the political and social action of users—actions that aim to bring about a world in which black lives will matter. This is not to say that in order for change to happen, everyone including nonusers must accept the value claim of the slogan. Nonusers can give into demands by VPS users or engage in policy reform (with users) without becoming users themselves or interpreting the slogan correctly. VPS would have performed their function by guiding the action of users to bring about structural changes so that our institutions *treat* black lives with as much respect, dignity, and value as nonblack lives. These institutions needn't *understand* 'Black Lives Matter' for these things to occur, and for VPS to perform their function.

Secondly, focusing on the wrong target can also do the opposite of what the slogans aim to do. For example, one of the functions of BLM is to affirm black life. However, when users focus on certain targets' misunderstanding of that slogan (e.g., white people) at the expense of users, they can unintentionally privilege white people's understandings of black value. This puts whites at the center. It also may communicate that black lives cannot have value until white folks think that they do. This is the opposite of what VPS aims to achieve, making the focus on misunderstanding both counterproductive and counterintuitive.

Thirdly, the function of value-based protest slogans is to affirm. But focusing on misunderstandings and trying to remedy them with arguments for why the slogan expresses a particular value can be dehumanizing—particularly for users to whom the slogan applies. Reminding myself, as a black person, that black lives matter is quite different from convincing a non-black person or nonuser that black lives matter. The reminder in the first instance is an affirming and comforting act. The reminder in the second case can be read and even feel like a humanity plea—an effort to convince another person of one's humanity. To do so in the latter case can be dehumanizing.

It can also be dehumanizing in another way. Audre Lorde talks about the expectation certain socially positioned groups have in respect to teaching others about their humanity when she writes:

Black and Third World people are expected to educate white people as to our humanity. Women are expected to educate men. Lesbians and gay men are expected to educate the heterosexual world. The oppressors maintain their position and evade their responsibility for their own actions. (2007: 115)

What can be dehumanizing here is not just the fact that a person must teach others that they are human and that there is an expectation that she does so. It can be dehumanizing when the target of that education does not change himself, transform his world, or take responsibility given this new knowledge. We find this in ALM users who continue to use ALM after BLM has been fully clarified. We can also see this in cases in which a VPS like ‘Black Is Beautiful’ is explained to nonusers but then refuted while the person continues—through their actions—to widen the beauty gap.

Lastly, an overemphasis of nonusers’ understanding can distract users from taking full advantage of the slogan’s function. Users adopt and employ slogans. Users employ the slogan by expressing values and virtues and by allowing the slogan to guide their actions. However, when users spend all their time attempting to get people to understand what BLM means or why their interpretation is mistaken, slogans are being debated rather than expressed. If I spend all my time telling you what something means, I lose the time I can spend on living out what that slogan means and benefitting from what it can do for me. Lorde helps make sense of this claim in the passage above. She continues: “This [teaching] is a constant drain of energy which might be better used in redefining ourselves and devising realistic scenarios for altering the present and constructing the future” (Ibid.). Trying to get uptake from nonusers for slogans that are first and foremost for users—as if it was necessary—is a drain of energy that is better used for expressing attitudes and habits, and performing more fruitful imperatives of BLM like saying the names of cis- and trans women victims of police violence or working for criminal justice reforms. These are of utmost importance as well as part of the primary function of VPS.

5. Conclusion

Many questions about slogans’ function and uptake remain. Is there a thin line between addressing nonusers’ concerns and emphasizing them? How does one know the difference? Is there a group I have left out that treads the line between user and nonuser, and do we have different obligations to them? What other ways might users block the function of VPS—irrespective of tending to interpretive failures? These are worthy of further research. What I have hoped to do here is to give an account of VPS and show how their function does not depend on nonusers. I hope that my argument will show the limited power that outsiders have over what marginalized people and their allies express and perform through value-based protest slogans and the range of agency that users have with respect to them.

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