RESISTING RACIST PROPAGANDA: DISTORTED VISUAL COMMUNICATION AND EPISTEMIC ACTIVISM

José Medina

ABSTRACT: This article explores how racist propaganda works in visual communication and how such propaganda can be resisted. The article analyzes how photography has created new possibilities for the insidious dissemination of racist messages and discusses ways of resisting these visually transmitted propagandistic messages. The two sections of the article focus on examples of racist propaganda in visual culture: in section 1, the focus is on the propagandistic use of photography in the early twentieth century by the pro-lynching movement; and in section 2, the focus is on racist subtexts in communication that is both visual and verbal in mass media in recent decades. In both sections, the paper discusses how to neutralize and counter propaganda in visual culture by means of what the author terms "epistemic activism," which consists in practices of interrogation and resistance that unmask, disrupt, and uproot biases and insensitivity. The article discusses different instances of epistemic activism that make explicit and effectively criticize racist subtexts in visual communication. The instances of epistemic activism discussed include the pamphlets of the anti-lynching movement, critiques of visual artists and scholars, and the critical responses of online activists. The article argues that epistemic activism can produce critical viewership by disrupting the passive reception of visual messages and triggering more active and critical modes of viewing images. The author concludes by emphasizing the urgent need for epistemic activism that promotes critical awareness of the subtexts embedded in visual

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communication and a sense of critical responsibility in the production, consumption, and recirculation of images.

Much of mass communication in our world happens through images or through words and images (as in audio-visual media). Much of the propagandistic messages that demean, marginalize, and make particular groups vulnerable are spread through visual communication or through hybrid media that are both verbal and visual; and yet philosophical analyses of propaganda tend to focus, almost exclusively, on discursive propaganda. Think, for example, of the recently published and much discussed book by Jason Stanley, *How Propaganda Works* (2015). Drawing from linguistics and philosophy of language, this book offers an impressive study of the mechanisms of propaganda in the contemporary world. And the book acknowledges that any account of propaganda "focused specifically on language is too narrow" since propaganda can "take both linguistic and nonlinguistic form," and "nonlinguistic images or movies clearly do exploit existing false ideological beliefs demagogically in just the way I have described" (2015, 127). Nonetheless, although Stanley's characterization of propaganda is, as he puts it, "perfectly general," he goes on to focus exclusively on linguistic propaganda because "there is a science of language and communication in place that enables us to gain some precision of the mechanisms underlying linguistic propaganda" (127); and he is doubtful that the same precision can be achieved in the analysis of nonlinguistic propaganda. In the case of visual communication, Stanley confesses himself "unable to give an account of the *mechanisms* by which [propaganda] occurs" (127) But in recent years, visual culture studies has produced powerful analysis of how propagandistic visual communication occurs. Also, some of the very theoretical resources from linguistics and communication theory on which Stanley draws can be expanded and adapted to cover visual communication, or so I will argue.

In this essay, I will try to extend some aspects Stanley's account of propaganda beyond the discursive and into the visual. Visual culture and new technologies have offered new possibilities for the insidious dissemination of racist messages, but fortunately, it also offers new possibilities for countering these visually transmitted propagandistic messages. In the next two sections I will focus on examples of racist propaganda in visual culture: in section 1, the focus will be on the use of photography in the early twentieth century, and in section 2, the focus will be on communication that is both visual and verbal in mass media in recent years. In both sections, I will discuss how to

neutralize and counter propaganda in visual culture, arguing for what I call *epistemic activism*.

RESISTING LYNCHING PHOTOGRAPHY

Propaganda is often defined as the kind of communication that aims at instilling false ideological beliefs and conveying biased or distorted messages in a way that bypasses rational scrutiny. Sometimes propagandistic communication operates in subliminal ways, forging implicit associations and biases. But oftentimes propagandistic communication operates quite explicitly, forging explicit prejudicial associations and biases. But no matter how explicit the communicative content of propaganda happens to be, it is never openly presented as a claim that calls for rational deliberation; rather, propagandistic communication is designed in such a way so as to protect its content from rational scrutiny and to create obstacles for critique. A key part of resisting propaganda is to unmask its self-hiding and self-protective mechanisms and to remove obstacles for the critical examination of the propagandistic message. In this section, I will focus on the explicitly racist propaganda of the pro-lynching movement in the U.S. in the first half of the twentieth century. The pro-lynching movement mobilized an entire propagandistic apparatus that demeaned and targeted people of color in discursive ways (in pamphlets, journals, and public speeches) and in nondiscursive ways (in photography and film).

The Visual Spectacle of Lynching

Racist propaganda fits Stanley's characterization of "paradigm cases of propaganda" that take as "part of their communicative content that *a group in society is not worthy of our respect*" (2015, 127). As Stanley points out, "one characteristic way to convey that a target is not worthy of respect is to cause one's audience to lose empathy for them" (127). And indeed images are particularly powerful to bring people to empathize and to lose their empathy for others. The pro-lynching movement knew this well, and its members used not only printed materials and speeches, but also photographs and movies to demonize black males as criminals so that white publics would lose all empathy for them and would accept the normalization of racial violence against the imaginary black threats toward white society. As Amy Louise Wood emphasizes in *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America 1890–1940* (2009), lynching would not have become such a big cultural phenomenon in post-Reconstruction U.S. if it were not for the propagandistic apparatus mobilized around it by the pro-lynching movement and its sympathizers, which included

the circulation and consumption of visual materials, especially photographs of lynch victims and of people posing with them, that were later shared, sold, and used as postcards.[1]

As Wood's analysis persuasively shows, lynching became a *visual spectacle*; and it is the *spectacularization* of lynching, more than the numerical increase of instances of lynching or any other factor, that can explain how lynching operated as a weapon of racial terror and social division, that is, as a way of terrorizing people of color while positioning *respectable* white audiences in juxtaposition to the black criminal and pressuring these white publics into becoming *spectators* who accept the normalization of violence against criminalized black bodies. As Joy James puts it, lynching in the first half of the twentieth century cannot be understood simply as a form of punishment against particular individuals perceived as threats; rather, we need to understand "lynching as a terrorist campaign to control an ethnic people subjugated as an inferior race" (1996, 30). Lynching acquired this power of collective political intimidation by becoming a *spectacle*,[2] a spectacle that could communicate to local and distant audiences, very often through mechanisms of visual communication, the criminalization and dehumanization of people of color in juxtaposition to the respectability of white publics. As Wood (2009) explains in detail, the communicative practices surrounding lynching photography developed in the early decades of the twentieth century trained white audiences to watch the spectacle of lynching, to pose with the lynch victim, to share those photographs in the intimacy of their homes without mixed audiences, and to circulate them as postcards. In this way, through the propagandistic apparatus of lynching photography, numerous white audiences became spectators who would actively participate as witnesses in the spectacle of lynching and who would tacitly accept and spread the presuppositions of this spectacle through their witnessing.

As Wood (2009) analyzes in detail, there were different kinds of photographic styles that were reconfigured in lynching photography. But in this reconfiguration, three photographic styles and their propagandistic uses stand out. In the first place, *hunting photography* was reconfigured so that the photographic depictions of hunters posing proudly with the animals they had caught gave way in lynching photography to depictions of killers who had taken human lives as "hunters" posing with their animalized human prey.

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[1] Wood (2009) also shows how films played a role in the spectacularization of lynching—iconic feature films such as *The Birth of a Nation*, but also a myriad of short films of lynching that were made available in booths on the streets or well-attended spaces such as train stations.

[2] James suggests a continuity between the spectacle of lynching and "the deadly spectacles of racist police beatings" (such as the heavily publicized spectacle of the Rodney King beating) and "spectacular displays of deadly state force" (1996, 32).

Adopting the kind of visual communication that had become standardized by hunting photography, the photographic genre of "the manhunt" was developed in lynching photography as a way of communicating visually the need and justification for lynching without having to make fully explicit the narrative of the dangerous animal, but only invoking it. In the second place, another highly developed photographic style that lynching photography drew from was the *criminal mug shot*. The genre of "the criminal mug shot" was developed at the turn of the century by putting photography at the service of police departments and the new science of criminology, which popularized the belief that photographic images could literally capture the facial and bodily features of criminality. That is, criminal mug shots were believed to reveal the physiognomy of the criminal, enabling spectators to see the very *face of criminality*. Features of "the criminal mug shot" figured prominently in the construction of nonwhite depravity and criminality in lynching photography. In the third place, another highly developed photographic style in early twentieth century was the *bourgeois portrait*, conveying the composure and respectability of a small or large group: the bourgeois family portrait or the group portrait (e.g., townspeople posing to memorialize a particular event in the life of the town). Because a standard criticism of lynching was that it was perpetrated by unruly mobs and rowdy and disorderly crowds, it was very important for the pro-lynching movement to show a different face of white publics participating in or condoning lynching. The genre of the family or group portrait was the perfect mechanism in visual communication for manufacturing the appearance of a well-composed and respectable public: the practice of posing for the camera as well as some technological requirements of the photography of the time—in particular, the long exposure times of cameras requiring people to be still for minutes—created the perfect illusion of discipline and composure.[3]

There are hundreds of examples of these three styles in lynching photography with many interesting variations. My analysis here cannot possibly do justice to the diversity of communicative styles in lynching photography and the heterogeneity of their particular instances. I will simply restrict my analysis to two representative examples of lynching photography (knowing fully well that analyses of other examples will take a very different form): the first example I will examine is an example of "the manhunt"; the second example (discussed in the next subsection, 1.2) will combine features of "the criminal mug shot" and "the bourgeois family portrait." But first, before going into the

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[3] "I never saw a more orderly crowd of hunters in my life," said Little Rock's sheriff after the lynching of John Carter in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1929. Wood discusses this comment that appeared in print and how lynching photography contributed to creating the presentation of a lynching mob as "an orderly crowd of hunters" (2009, 98).

analysis of these two examples, let me briefly lay out the theoretical apparatus I will use and the specific communicative mechanism of visual propaganda I will focus on.

The most central communicative mechanisms that Stanley's (2015) analysis of propaganda focuses on is the distinction between *at-issue* versus *not-at-issue* communicative contents. Stanley himself acknowledges that mechanisms of this sort could be used for the analysis of visual communication.[4] Drawing on Robert Stalnaker's account of how communicative contents are added to "the common ground" of a conversation,[5] Stanley describes at-issue contents as those contents that are *asserted* and explicitly *proposed* to be added to the common ground of the conversation (2015, 134). By contrast, a not-at-issue content is *not proposed* to be added to the common ground; it "is *directly* added to the common ground." (135) And as Stanley goes on to explain, quoting Murray (2014), not-at-issue contents become "not negotiable, not directly challengeable, and added [to the common ground] even if the at-issue-proposition is rejected." (2015, 135) An example of how this is done linguistically is by putting the not-at-issue content in a relative clause, thus relegating it to the periphery of the message, to the background or presupposition of what is asserted. Stanley offers the following example:

> I spent part of every summer until I was 10 with my grandmother, who lived in a working-class suburb of Boston. (134)

In this example Stanley is asserting that he spent part of every summer until he was 10 with his grandmother. That is what is being proposed for discussion; it is a claim up for debate, offered for critical scrutiny. By contrast, the claim that Stanley's grandmother lived in a working-class suburb of Boston "is additional material that comments on what is asserted" (135). We can think of this message being communicated visually and with an analogous communicative structure that visually centers Stanley's spending summers with his grandmother until he was 10 while relegating to the periphery of the message where his grandmother lived: think, for example, of a series of photographs or a film depicting Stanley and his grandmother in summertime year after year until he was 10, with visual references to a working-class Boston suburb in the background of those still or moving images. In

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[4] Stanley states: "perhaps there are analogous mechanisms in the case of images." (2015, 128) And, in fact, he goes on to acknowledge that communicative mechanisms drawn from linguistics *have been used* in discussions of pornography in feminist philosophy of language to give an account of how pornographic material can contribute to the subordination of women through visual communication.

[5] See Stalnaker 1999.

linguistic communication, at-issue and not-at-issue contents are propositions; by contrast, in visual communication, at-issue and not-at-issue contents are component parts or dimensions of an image. Visual contents may or may not be fully captured in propositions—we can certainly describe them linguistically and we can find linguistic correlates for them, but aren't some key aspects of the sensuous contents of visual communication lost in linguistic translation? My analysis will remain neutral as to whether a visual message can and should be fully captured in propositions, but I am committed to the claim that communicative mechanisms such as the at-issue/not-at-issue distinction operates *both* in linguistic and in visual communication in *analogous but distinctive ways*.

As we shall see in the two examples of visual propaganda I am now going to discuss, in a photograph the distinctions between center and margins and between foreground and background can be used to position and transmit communicative contents differently: visual contents can be explicitly proposed for discussion when centered and foregrounded, but they can also be simply taken for granted, advanced as mere presuppositions, when relegated to the margins or to the background of the photograph. Lynching photography certainly deployed carefully this selective way of positioning contents in their photo compositions when trying to convey multiple messages and to protect particular parts of those messages from critical scrutiny. In particular, I am going to focus on two communicative contents in pro-lynching visual propaganda that were often simultaneously conveyed: on the one hand, the violence against people of color whose killed and tortured bodies are presented as depictions of animality, depravity, and criminality; and, on the other hand, the dominance, purity and respectability of white publics juxtaposed to the neutralized threat of the black criminal. The spectacle of lynching photography indeed had those two communicative functions: it was intended to stigmatize and terrorize people of color while at the same time mobilizing a "respectable" white public in juxtaposition to the image of the black criminal, the black menace to decent society. These photographs have been and remain traumatizing images for people of color, and revisiting this horrific spectacle is always problematic, even when done for critical purposes, because it recirculates the trauma, forcing us to relive it. I will only revisit two examples in the most careful and considerate way I can in order to then focus on how to resist the visual propaganda that we find in this spectacle.

The first example is a photograph of the lynching of Mr. Charlie Hale in Lawrenceville, Georgia, in 1911 (Wood 2009, 95). This is a paradigmatic example of "hunting photography" reconfigured as "the manhunt" (Fig. 1):

Figure 1. The lynching of Mr. Charlie Hale in Lawrenceville, Georgia (1911)

In this example, it is the photographic representation of the dominance and respectability of white publics that takes center-stage and is offered for contemplation, whereas the depiction of the savagely punished black body is relegated to the left margin of the photograph.[6] By relying on the pre-suppositions in visual communication already standardized by hunting photography, the photographic genre of "the manhunt" could easily convey things about the respectability of the man-hunters and the depravity, criminality, and threatening nature of the hunted human prey in

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[6] I have cut the upper part of the photo which shows Mr. Hale's complete body and disfigured face.

instantaneous and implicit ways. On the one hand, positive values about the *hunters* (as courageous providers and protectors of the community), their praiseworthy pride, and their dominance over animality and depravity, are explicitly communicated as at-issue contents. The solidarity of the white public, with the town in the background coming together to celebrate the event and praise the achievement of the *hunters*, is communicated as backing up the at-issue content offered for contemplation. But a key part of the full racist message is left as something to be presupposed for the whole scene to make sense: the terrorized body of the victim is marginally depicted in the photo composition on the left. In the left margin, we see the hanging body of Mr. Hale with torn clothes and a demeaning sign. In this photographic depiction of a body left for public derision, the body of the victim is presented without any human dignity and as worthy of no respect and no dignified treatment. The not-at-issue communicative content of the lack of dignity of the victim and its availability for torture and public derision is positioned in the image in such a way that it is presupposed by the entire message of proud "hunters" posing with their "trophy," positively sanctioned by the supporting crowd behind them. Within the structure of the propagandistic visual artifact of this photograph, viewers are invited to take for granted the not-at-issue content, which can only be brought to critical scrutiny and disputed by interrogating and impugning first the at-issue content of the proud and respectable "hunters" and the respectability of the town supporting it. In this way, a key part of the insidious racist message of this photograph is protected and resistance against it is made more difficult.

Resisting a propagandistic photograph of this sort requires opening up possibilities for critique that have been foreclosed, or at least obscured, by the composition of the image and its deployment. In resisting photographic propaganda, what I have called *epistemic resistance* (Medina 2012) takes the form of turning the photographic image against itself, unmasking the propagandistic trick, the communicative trap, that the image sets for us, and pointing to possibilities for critical engagement with the image that might be missed otherwise. In the case of the "hunting" photograph of the lynching of Mr. Hale, the way in which the not-at-issue visual content of the lack of dignity of the victim and its availability for torture and public derision is presupposed and protected might have been missed by white audiences sharing a particular sensibility in which the presupposition made sense and could operate smoothly in the background. What is needed here is the kind of epistemic resistance in which one sensibility challenges and interrogates another by creating *epistemic*

friction[7] with its presuppositions and modes of operation. Sustained efforts to create epistemic friction and cultivate epistemic resistance is what I have termed *epistemic activism* (see Medina and Whitt, forthcoming).[8]

Epistemic activism involves practices of interrogation and resistance that unmask, disrupt, and uproot forms of epistemic insensitivity, that is, ways in which our epistemic capacities and activities (perception, memory, understanding, interpretation, imagination, etc.) have become uncritical and numbed to challenge and interrogation. Note that resisting the photograph of the lynching of Mr. Hale (and others like it) requires cultivating a critical mode of viewing this image that can unmask and counter communicative tricks that protect racist presuppositions, but it also requires engaging critically with and resisting the broader communicative practices surrounding this image, including the critique of the script of "the manhunt" and the critique of the photographic practices being developed at the time around lynching. Wood (2006) points out how, against the background of the newly developed practices of photographing "the manhunt" in the South, the national Kodak marketing campaign "Go hunting! Go Kodaking!" in the early twentieth century acquired a double meaning in Southern communities, signaling to white "hunters" that they could buy their cameras to memorialize their killing of animals or of human beings. This kind of racist subtext and subliminal messaging that was also part of the propagandistic campaign of the pro-lynching movement had to be resisted with epistemic activism capable of unmasking and effectively criticizing the implicit racist messages in both linguistic and visual communication. In what follows, I will examine some of the critical engagements with visual communication of the antilynching movement and the NAACP as examples of epistemic activism. I will use a second example of lynching photography in the next subsection to illustrate more fully how the visual spectacle of lynching—and one lynching photograph in particular—was resisted by the epistemic activism of the anti-lynching movement.

Epistemic Resistance Against Lynching Photography and Its Legacy

The anti-lynching movement knew well that the fight against lynching required resisting the rhetoric of the pro-lynching movement and, even more importantly, the *visual spectacle* of lynching that pro-lynching publics had created. Initially, anti-lynching activists would focus their efforts in acquiring and

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[7] For a full account of "epistemic resistance" and "epistemic friction," see Medina 2012, esp. chap. 1.

[8] "This is what we call *epistemic activism*: transgressive forms of epistemic interaction that can wake people up from their epistemic slumbers, invite them to attend to certain social locations and to the voices that come from them, and stimulate the formation of new and improved epistemic habits" (Medina and Whitt, forthcoming, 22)

destroying as many lynching photographs as possible. But Ida B. Wells[9] was one of the leaders of the anti-lynching movement who thought of another way of resisting the visual spectacle of lynching: not just by destroying lynching photographs and postcards, but by *taking control* of these stigmatizing and traumatic images and *cultivating a critical and resistant way of viewing* them. Since this spectacle had already been created and these stigmatizing and traumatic images had already been in circulation, the visual spectacle and its images could and should be stopped without being completely erased as if it had never happened. As scholars (such as James 1996) have suggested, the erasure of the spectacle of racial violence is another ideological obstacle for fighting against it, since its invisibilization further deepens the vulnerability and lack of protection of those who have been harmed. Anti-lynching activists such as Ida B. Wells saw that the spectacle of lynching had to be not only interrupted but also *disrupted*, that is, uprooted, disarmed and neutralized in such a way that the mechanisms of the spectacle could no longer get a hold of people's sensibilities and be effective. This is a paradigmatic example of what I have called *epistemic resistance* (Medina 2012) since it consists in interrogating and mobilizing challenges against a sensibility so as to confront it with its limitations, blind spots, and forms of numbness or insensitivity. Disarming a sensibility through *epistemic friction* (through the interrogation and challenges of alternative sensibilities) is something that can be cultivated in a sustained and organized way in activist practices, in *epistemic activism*.

Epistemic activism in communicative practices consists in creating epistemic friction that can unmask, displace, and uproot forms of insensitivity that limit our capacity to hear, understand, interpret, and critically engage. Concerted efforts at epistemic resistance of this sort, epistemic activism, can be well illustrated by many of the critical interventions of the anti- lynching movement and the NAACP. Let's look more closely at what it means to *take control of the visual spectacle and to cultivate a critical and resistant way of viewing* its stigmatizing and traumatic images. Part of what it meant to take control of this visual material was to take possession of these images, to take them out of circulation, and to create an archive that could make it possible to articulate and sustain a critical collective memory around the spectacle of lynching. This is of course a labor of epistemic resistance that continues today and hopefully will be continued in the future, since the task of sustaining a critical collective memory can always be perfected but never abandoned. Besides the critical tasks of mourning and remembering initiated by the anti-lynching activists and members of the NAACP, their critical engagement with lynching photography also involved exposing these images for what they are—for

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[9] See Wells 2014.

the kind of propaganda they embody—and confronting white publics who participated in the visual spectacle of lynching. The anti-lynching movement focused their efforts not only on resisting linguistic propaganda in print form (in the pro-lynching pamphlets and journals), but also on resisting the visual propaganda of the spectacle of lynching created through lynching photography. Ida B. Wells did this in some of her own speeches in which she would confront white audiences by asking them to see in those images what she saw. She knew that those images had not been created for her, but she wanted white audiences to see those images through her eyes, through her sensibility, and not in the privacy of their homes and with people with a similar sensibility. This way of confronting people's insensitivity and creating epistemic friction between sensibilities is a prime example of epistemic resistance. This kind of epistemic resistance was cultivated by the epistemic activism of NAACP members not only in public speeches but also in articles in their magazine, *Crisis*, and in pamphlets. I will examine the kind of critical exposure and confrontation that we can see in the epistemic activism of the NAACP through the analysis of one of its pamphlets, which critically engages with a photograph of the lynching of Mr. Rubin Stacy in Fort Lauderdale on July 19, 1935.

At the site of the lynching of Mr. Rubin Stacy outside Fort Lauderdale, white middle- class families in their best clothes came to pose with the corpse of Mr. Stacy. These pictures combine two of the photographic styles I discussed in the previous section: the *criminal mug shots* and the *bourgeois family portrait*. In these pictures, the depiction of the brutalized black body takes center-stage and is the focus of the visual message. The at-issue content communicated in the photographs of Mr. Stacy's inert body hanging from a tree is that of the criminal or menace of color who had been brutally and unjustly murdered. But of course for those white families posing with Mr. Stacy and for other white publics buying and sharing these photographs, there was nothing brutal or unjust. For the white subjects participating in the creation and consumption of this gruesome visual spectacle, what was communicated in the at-issue content was not a depiction of a brutal murder, but rather a representation of the acceptable punishment of an intrinsically criminal and threatening body now neutralized and hanging inert. This at-issue content is crucially supported and reinforced by the *not-at-issue content* communicated visually by these photos as well: the neatly dressed white families posing off-center, in the background and the margins of the photograph, flanking the desecrated body of Mr. Stacy, signaling that the killing of Mr. Stacy had restored the social order so that families could now come out, celebrate the event and enjoy social peace. What this not-at-issue content conveys is the *acceptability* of the killing and torture of Mr. Stacy by respectable white

society. This is *presupposed*, simply added to the background of the scene as a tacit presupposition of it. The witnessing and condoning of respectable white publics, their tacit approbation, constitute "additional material that comments on what is asserted" or what is visually communicated as an at-issue content for contemplation, to adopt Stanley's phrasing in the linguistic case (2015, 135). The propagandistic use of this not-at-issue content contributed tremendously to the normalization of racist violence through lynching photography.

Resisting the visual propaganda exemplified by the photographs of Mr. Stacy's body and the white families requires identifying and neutralizing the communicative mechanisms operating in lynching photography. More specifically, it requires redirecting the critical gaze of the viewer to the margins and background of the photo, to how the white families posing next to Mr. Stacy, all dressed in white and smiling, symbolized purity restored, a happiness and peace regained, justifying the acceptability of lynching and lending it respectability. This is what one of the anti-lynching pamphlets of NAACP did by engaging critically with one of the photographs of Mr. Stacy and a white family. This is pamphlet as reprinted by Wood (2006, 196) (Figs. 2 and 3):

This is what the front of the pamphlet says underneath the photo, redirecting the viewer's attention in a critical way away from Mr. Stacy and toward the white subjects on each side:

> Do not look at the Negro. His earthly problems are ended. Instead, look at the seven WHITE children who gaze at this gruesome spectacle.

> Is it horror or gloating on the face of the neatly dressed seven-year old girl on the right? Is the tiny four-year-old on the left old enough, one wonders, to comprehend the barbarism her elders have perpetrated?

> Rubin Stacy, the Negro lynched at Fort Lauderdale on July 19, 1935, for "threatening and frightening a white woman," suffered physical torture. But what psychological havoc is being wrought in the minds of the white children? Into what kinds of citizens will they grow up?

The NAACP pamphlet offers a perfect example of epistemic resistance of racist propaganda that creates friction with an uncritical attitude and a form of insensitivity that does not interrogate itself and its presuppositions. This pamphlet exemplifies an epistemic intervention that disrupts the uncritical consumption of images of this kind and invites publics to cultivate a critical mode of viewing this image and others like it so that they can unmask and counter the racist presuppositions operating tacitly in the composition of the image and how its visual contents are arranged and transmitted. This involves inhabiting the image critically, from different perspectives and through
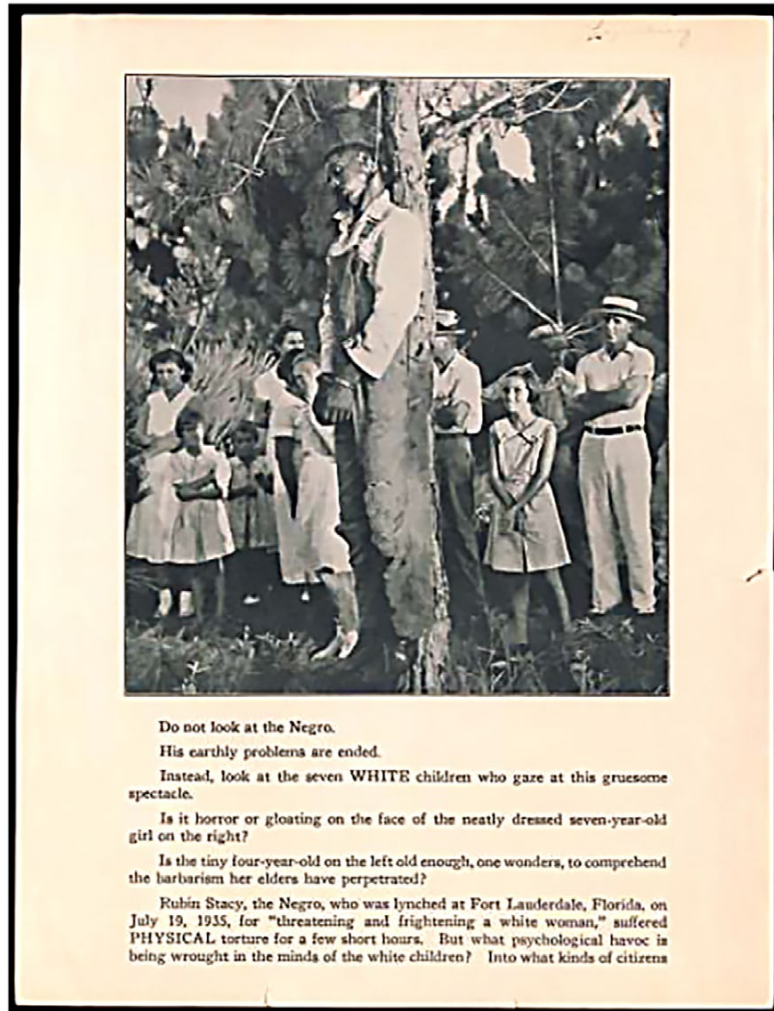
Do not look at the Negro.

His earthly problems are ended.

Instead, look at the seven WHITE children who gaze at this gruesome spectacle.

Is it horror or gloating on the face of the neatly dressed seven-year-old girl on the right?

Is the tiny four-year-old on the left old enough, one wonders, to comprehend the barbarism her elders have perpetrated?

Rubin Stacy, the Negro, who was lynched at Fort Lauderdale, Florida, on July 19, 1935, for "threatening and frightening a white woman," suffered PHYSICAL torture for a few short hours. But what psychological havoc is being wrought in the minds of the white children? Into what kinds of citizens

Figure 2. NAACP anti-lynching pamphlet, page 1 [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

different sensibilities, cultivating a critical *kaleidoscopic* consciousness[10] in the communicative engagement with the image. This is a paradigmatic example of what I call epistemic activism in visual culture.

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[10] For my account of a critical *kaleidoscopic* consciousness, to which I am alluding here, see Medina 2012, 214. For the related notion of a *kaleidoscopic* social sensibility, see 6.5 (297ff.).
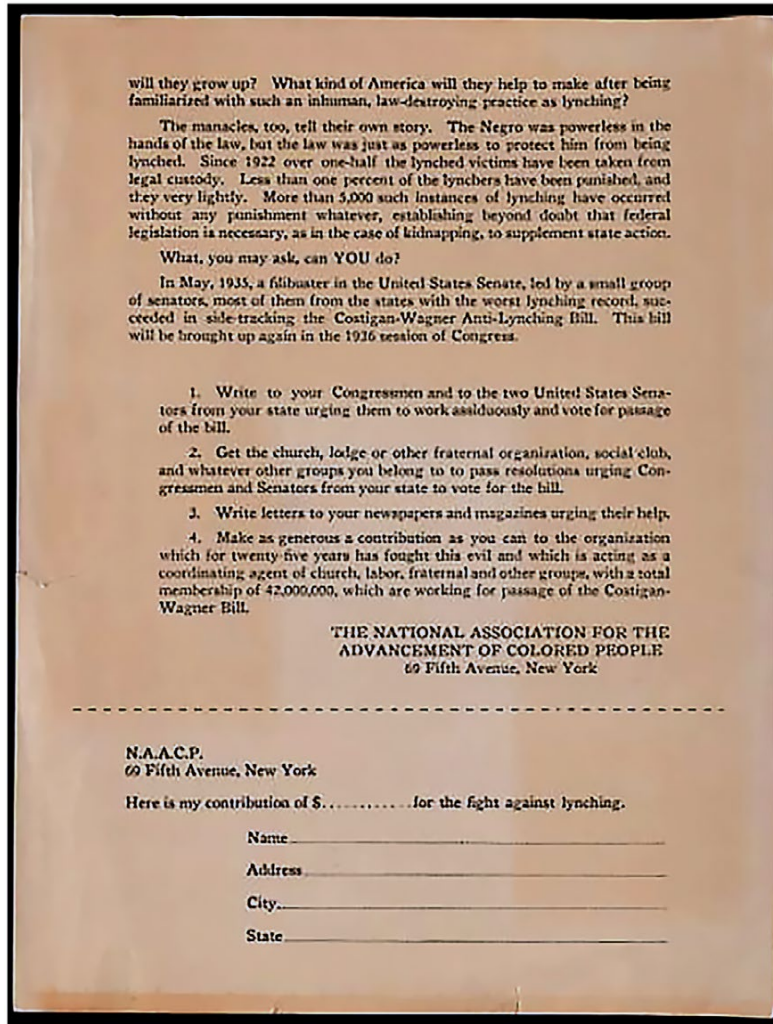
will they grow up?   What kind of America will they help to make after being familiarized with such an inhuman, law-destroying practice as lynching?

The manacles, too, tell their own story.   The Negro was powerless in the hands of the law, but the law was just as powerless to protect him from being lynched.   Since 1922 over one-half the lynched victims have been taken from legal custody.   Less than one percent of the lynchers have been punished, and they very lightly.   More than 5,000 such instances of lynching have occurred without any punishment whatever, establishing beyond doubt that federal legislation is necessary, as in the case of kidnapping, to supplement state action.

What, you may ask, can YOU do?

In May, 1935, a filibuster in the United States Senate, led by a small group of senators, most of them from the states with the worst lynching record, succeeded in side-tracking the Costigan-Wagner Anti-Lynching Bill.   This bill will be brought up again in the 1936 session of Congress.

1. Write to your Congressmen and to the two United States Senators from your state urging them to work assiduously and vote for passage of the bill.

2. Get the church, lodge or other fraternal organization, social club, and whatever other groups you belong to to pass resolutions urging Congressmen and Senators from your state to vote for the bill.

3. Write letters to your newspapers and magazines urging their help.

4. Make as generous a contribution as you can to the organization which for twenty-five years has fought this evil and which is acting as a coordinating agent of church, labor, fraternal and other groups, with a total membership of 42,000,000, which are working for passage of the Costigan-Wagner Bill.

THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE
ADVANCEMENT OF COLORED PEOPLE
69 Fifth Avenue, New York

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N.A.A.C.P.
69 Fifth Avenue, New York

Here is my contribution of $. . . . . .for the fight against lynching.

Name

Address

City

State

Figure 3. NAACP anti-lynching pamphlet, page 2 [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

I want to turn now to an example of epistemic activism that continues the work of Ida B. Wells and the NAACP in resisting the legacy of the visual spectacle of lynching. My example of contemporary epistemic activism in this area is the series *Erased Lynching* (2002–2015) by the visual artist Ken Gonzales-Day.

With the title *Erased Lynching*, Gonzales-Day is calling attention to two things: first, the relative invisibility of the spectacle of lynching in American culture, that is, the fact that lynching has been significantly erased from our collective memory and social imaginary despite having been a hypervisible spectacle that terrorized people of color and divided the social fabric, and, second, the employment of digital erasing as a visual technique that the artist uses to remove the lynch victim from the image. Through the digital manipulation, by erasing the victim, the artist redirects the viewer's attention to the white spectators in a critical gesture that is very similar to the NAACP pamphlet, and he similarly invites viewers to critically revisit how white respectable publics and their solidarity are articulated and presented in these photos, with their poses, gestures, and facial expressions, etc. This is how the artist explains the motivation and critical goals of the series *Erased Lynching*:

> The Erased Lynching series (2002–2015) initially began as an artistic response to the fact that racially motivated lynching and vigilantism had been under-represented, and even mis-represented, in a number of historical texts when I began the project in 2000. My specific interest in this particular topic grew out of concern over the increased tensions that began to emerge along Mexico's border after 9/11. A new breed of vigilantes had begun to take up arms. Today, issues like the Michael Brown shooting, have raised a whole series of new questions about racialized violence and its representation.[11]

Gonzales-Day reflects on the kind of critical viewing that the series tries to get the viewers to cultivate. This is how he describes the way the series promotes an increased critical sensitivity in its critical engagement with lynching photography:

> I removed the lynch victim and the rope from the image. This conceptual gesture was intended to redirect the viewer's attention away from the lifeless body of the lynch victim and towards the mechanisms of lynching and lynching photography, to allow viewers to see the crowd, the mechanisms of the spectacle, the role of the photographer, and even the impact of flash photography, and their various influences on our understanding of this dismal past. The perpetrators, when present, remain fully visible, jeering, laughing, or pulling at the air in a deadly pantomime. As such, this series strives to make the invisible -visible. (Ibid.)

Many images of the series *Erased Lynching* are available online.[12] They were displayed in galleries and museum where the series was exhibited, but some were also displayed in billboards that the artist rented close to the lynching site in question so that he could invite the community to think critically about

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[11] See Ken Gonzales-Day's website: https://kengonzalesday.com/erased-lynchings/
[12] See https://kengonzalesday.com/erased-lynchings/

their past and about the participation of previous generations in the visual spectacle of lynching. This is how the artist describes the critical intervention of his series on the grounds and outside galleries and museums:

> As an artistic gesture, these absences or empty spaces become emblematic of a forgotten history . . . . In the billboard images, I strive to place this forgotten history back in the landscape, and as way of *resisting* the historical invisibility of so many of these events, at times literally re-grounding this history in a historical, social, and physical landscape. (Ibid., emphasis added)

As we have seen in this section, epistemic activism against the visual propaganda of lynching can be cultivated within a social movement such as the anti-lynching movement or within an organization such as the NAACP; but it can also be cultivated in artistic practices in galleries and museums, as well as in public spaces and through ordinary practices of interrogation. All these forms of epistemic activism can contribute to disrupt uncritical attitudes toward images that distort and stigmatize the visibility of a group and to promote critical engagement with visual culture and with dysfunctional patterns of visual communication within it. In the next section, I will expand my analysis of propaganda in visual culture not only to include a broader range of cases of visual propaganda as they reach us in the present, but also to gesture toward ways of resisting propagandistic visual messages and of cultivating epistemic activist practices that can make us more critical producers and consumers of images. Today more than ever it is important to promote critical engagement with visual material and a sense of critical responsibility in the production, consumption, and recirculation of images.

RESISTING BEING DEPRIVED OF AGENCY: AGAINST THE PROPAGANDISTIC DEPLOYMENT OF THE NARRATIVE FRAME OF "RIOTING AND LOOTING"

It is very often the case that linguistic communication and visual communication go together. Images are very often deployed within a discursive frame: photographs in magazines and newspapers are introduced by headlines or clarified by captions; video images on TV are introduced and elucidated through the speech of newscasters. There are many narrative frames that deploy images in propagandistic ways in print or audiovisual image. In this section, I will focus only on one such frame: looking at images of the actions of groups and individuals through the lenses of the "rioting and looting" narrative frame. I will briefly examine three examples or vignettes of how this frame was deployed to distort the visibility of a group in three social and historical contexts: the reporting of the 1961 Algerian demonstration and

massacre in Paris in print media, the reporting of the 1992 Rodney King demonstrations in L.A. in print and audiovisual media, and the newspapers coverage of Katrina survivors in New Orleans in 2005. The central goal of this section is to expand the analysis of visual propaganda offered in the previous section and to show how visual and linguistic propaganda can work in tandem, suggesting that rather than to develop independent analyses of these different kinds of propaganda, we should connect them and be attentive to how communicative mechanisms of propaganda work differently in different media, supplementing, reinforcing, and complicating each other.

In October 1961, shortly after Algeria achieved its independence, propaganda in the French media was used to intimidate the Algerian population both before and after they took to the streets to demonstrate, and this propaganda was also used to justify to the general public unspeakable police violence against Algerian demonstrators. On October 17, 1961, in Paris, a massive peaceful demonstration attended by more than 20,000 French Algerians was met with tremendous repressive police violence: estimates range between 100 and 300 people shot by the police and thrown into the river (although, after 37 years of denial, in 1998 the French government only acknowledged 40 deaths); thousands of demonstrators who survived the police shootings were put in buses and taken to detention centers. A striking feature of this traumatic event of political repression that happened in one of the most visible spaces in the world (the *boulevards des théatres* in Paris) is its invisibility and its distorted visibility, which underscores the importance of critically engaging with visual communication. We need to interrogate the precarious and distorted visual perception and visual memory around this event through the epistemic interventions of photo activists and visual culture critics. As one of these critics, Hannah Feldman, put it in her brilliant study of the media coverage of this event, we need to bring critical attention to "the *disappearance* from public discourse of a massacre that *occurred* in plain sight," to the "insufficient and sanitizing memorialization" of this event, and to "the unseen, drowned bodies of the massacred demonstrators" (2014, 161). And this dysfunctional pattern of visibility and visual communication, far from being something of the past, is continued into the present. What epistemic activism needs to resist here is the persistent "whitewashing vision that needs (still) to keep the Algerians out of the public view" (Feldman 2014, 197).

How can a massacre that takes place in plain view in a downtown area remain so invisible? As Feldman points out, "many newspapers, including *Le Monde and France-Soir*, 'were not talking' about the events in the days following" the massacre (2014, 185). Other publications did cover the demonstration and the casualties and documented "the story" photographically, but they manipulated the photographic evidence to correspond with the police

narrative, according to which the police only fired after being attacked and there were a very limited number of fatalities. The distortion of the photographic material included the selective use of this material (excluding images that depicted the demonstrators as marching orderly or standing still in a nonthreatening way), the arrangement of sequences of photos that suggested the possibility of violence (such as rioting or looting), and of course the use of headlines and captions that steer the reader/viewer in a particular direction. Propaganda in the media coverage visually distorted how the general public would perceive the demonstration and the use of police force against it, hiding the excessiveness of that force and presenting it as a justified response to criminal activity and the growing threat of chaos and destruction. Visual propaganda created the optical illusion of the Algerian demonstration as a threat to public order.

In her visual analysis, Feldman (2014) focuses on the images published in a single publication: the October 28, 1961, edition of *Paris Match*. The image on the cover of the magazine that was chosen to introduce to story, to open the eyes of the public to that disastrous night, was a close-up of one of the RAPT buses confiscated by the police taking demonstrators to detention centers, the image of an improvised moving detention cell with suspected criminals gazing through the window. This is the cover (printed in Feldman 2014, 187) (Fig. 4):

The headline in yellow block letters stating "Nuit de Troubles a Paris" [Night of Troubles in Paris] is ambiguous: What kind of trouble? And who are the creators of trouble? The specter of criminality invoked by the image of those detained ("the agitated, angry countenances of ten or more arrested Algerians peering out form their containment" [Feldman 2014, 186]) already suggests that these subjects got into trouble by their own doing. And of course the story the magazine goes on to tell leaves no doubt that the Algerian demonstrators were the troublemakers. But the reader of the time did not even need to open the magazine and read the story to feel what the cover was intimating. The ambiguity of the cover was easily undone by the informational background that the readership was likely to have at the time, for this publication did not reach its readers in a vacuum. The narrative frame of rioting and looting had been activated in the French media even before any demonstration or incident took place as a way of justifying the curfew that curtailed the freedom of assembly of Arab-French citizens; and it was also a way of preemptively framing demonstrations and assemblies, if they were to occur, as disturbances of the peace, violations of law and order, and an occasion for criminal activity, destruction of property, and looting. This narrative frame of rioting and looting was actively deployed in the *Paris Match* coverage of the incident, in the captions of the images published, and in the
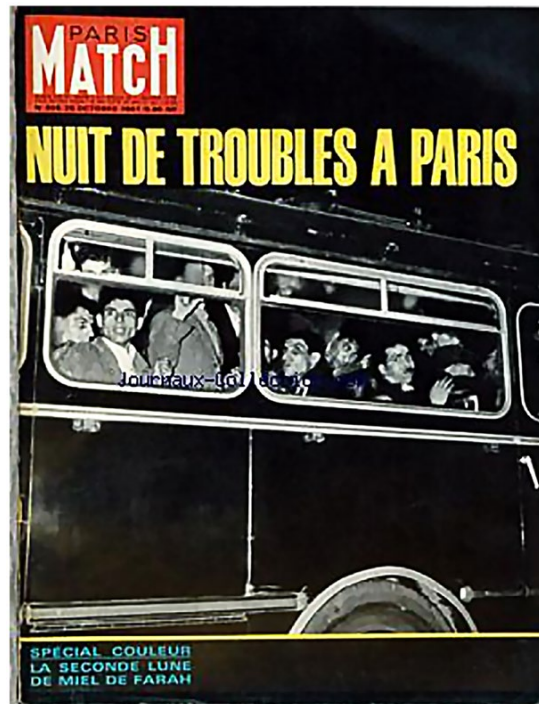
Figure 4. October 28, 1961, *Paris Match* cover [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

spinning of the story itself. As Feldman's analysis clearly shows, the sequence of images published in *Paris Match* consisted of "shots of agitated cheering, people swarming in and out of traffic, and what looks like looting (one would have to piece together ten different reports to know that the figures in the images are scattering in response to gun shots)" (189). Demonstrators running in and out of stores were taking shelter from the police gunfire, but nonetheless there is an insistent insinuation that they are creating chaos, destroying property, and possibly looting.

The narrative spin in the *Paris Match* story constantly invoked the threat of criminality or lawlessness and the fear of rioting and looting in implicit ways: "Fear and violence empty the terraces of the cafes. The Muslims chant slogans orchestrated by the FLN leaders. To keep them from gathering in the center of Paris, the police try to disperse them. Tensions mount, windows shatter, drivers find themselves blocked by a sea of menacing faces" (quoted

in Feldman 2014, 190). As Feldman notes, "with these words, the otherwise ambivalent images are positioned in an interpretive frame that all but *elides the agency of the depicted demonstrators*" (190, emphasis added). And this is exactly what the narrative frame of rioting and looting does: it distorts the visibility of a group and its *agency*: it robs demonstrators of their political agency, confining their agency to the criminal agency of rioters and looters. (We will revisit this key point with the next two examples or vignettes.)

Epistemic activism is needed here to unmask and disrupt the distorted visibility produced through the discursive and visual propaganda. But note that epistemic activism in visual culture should aim not only at undoing distorted forms of visibility, but also at articulating alternative kinds of visibility that can vindicate the political agency of a group, in this case French Algerians. We need *counterimages*; we need to fight visual propaganda by correcting distortions but also by mobilizing a photo activism that can reinstate the dignity of a group and enable them to reclaim their agency. Feldman emphasizes this point also when she talks about "the potency of the counter-image" and notes that many other photographs of the demonstration exist even though they were never publicized (159). Deploying these counter-images in critical ways can vindicate the "possibility of subaltern agency" of French Algerians (159), revisiting their "intention to 'inhabit' the city" (175) and to reclaim their political agency within it; these counter-images are images "of intervention and of claiming a 'right to a city'" (179).

Epistemic activism that can disarm visual racist propaganda and produce alternative forms of visibility for people of color is also badly needed in the U.S. context at the end of twentieth century and in the twenty-first century as my cursory analysis of the next two examples will show. The narrative frame of rioting and looting has also been widely used in the U.S. media as a lens through which to look at images of collective actions of minority groups, stigmatizing them and depriving them of political agency. An iconic example can be seen in the media coverage of the 1992 Rodney King uprising in L.A., in print and in TV. Independently of the degree to which the uprising resulted in the destruction of property, the deployment of the narrative frame of rioting and looting as a totalizing lens in the mainstream media guaranteed that (a substantial portion of) the American public could only see lawlessness and criminality in the images of people of color taking the streets. Robert Gooding-Williams (2006) points out that there were two dominant views of the media coverage of the L.A. uprising after the exoneration of the police officers caught on tape beating up Rodney King. According to what Gooding-Williams calls "the conservative view," demonstrators were depicted as *opportunist rioters*: "the people on the streets were taken to embody an uncivilized chaos that needed to be stamped out in order to restore law

and order. On this account, the 'rioting' had nothing to do with the King verdict but expressed a repressed opportunism just waiting for an excuse to flout the law" (2006, 14). On the other hand, what Gooding-Williams calls "the liberal view" in the media coverage of the King uprising depicted demonstrators as *out-of-need rioters*: "the liberal view emphasized the social causes of the 'riots,' such as joblessness, poverty, and, more generally, socio-economic need" (14) As Gooding-Williams's analysis emphasizes, by placing the images shown within these narrative frames, both views in the media dissociated the uprising from the King verdict and made it difficult for publics to see the uprising as a protest, as an exercise of *political agency*: "both liberals and conservatives were refusing to see in it an expression of moral indignation" (14). Whether the "rioters" were depicted as "bearers of chaos" or as "looters," they were not seen as protesting a repressive political order and legal system, as acting out of moral indignation and the belief that the harm suffered with impunity by King symbolized a larger social injustice that they could not tolerate any longer. As Gooding-Williams puts it, "it strains incredulity to deny, as did conservative and liberal pundits alike, that the L.A. uprising was not for many an act of political protest" (14). What this media coverage reflects is "a failure to regard the speech or actions of black people as manifesting thoughtful judgments about issues that concern all members of the political community" (14). This failure was achieved by putting images in a distorting narrative frame. This damaging use of visual racist propaganda that deprives a group of political agency requires critical exposure: the critical exposure of how images are deployed and what the narrative frames accompanying them obscure and project onto those images, as exemplified in Gooding-Williams's analysis.

Finally, I want to call attention to another example of visual racist propaganda in the context of contemporary American culture: the media depictions of Hurricane Katrina survivors in New Orleans in 2005. In Sommers, Apfelbaum, Dukes, Toosi, and Wang's analysis of the media coverage, they found "a disproportionate media tendency to associate Blacks with crime and violence, a propensity consistent with exaggerated and inaccurate reports regarding criminal activity in Katrina's aftermath" (2006, 1). I want to call attention to what became the most prominent example of the deployment of the looting narrative frame in the aftermath of Katrina: the widely circulated photo caption that described a black man leaving a grocery store as "looting" whereas a comparable photo of a white couple was described as the couple "finding" groceries. The first caption read: "A young man walks through chest-deep flood water after looting a grocery store." The second caption read: "Two residents wade through chest- deep water after finding bread and soda from a local grocery store." The only salient difference between

the subjects depicted in these photographs is race, which led critical viewers, activists, and scholars to conclude that the black survivor was depicted as "a looter" just because he was black. As Sommers et al. observe, the claim that the "looting" caption activated a racist bias in this particular reporting is "certainly consistent with the [general] conclusion that race played some role in language use during coverage of Katrina" (4). Sommers et al. put this use of the looting frame in a broader context, connecting it with other uses of racist language in the reporting on Katrina's aftermath, especially the use of the term "refugee" to refer to displaced survivors who were mostly people of color. As activists such as Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton pointed out at the time, the use of the term "refugee" was racially biased because it depicted the victims of color as less than full citizens. As Sommers et al. point out, "refugee" is an outgroup term with stigmatizing associations, unlike more neutral and ingroup terms such as "evacuees," "survivors," or "victims."

As Casey Faucon (2010) points out in her legal analysis, "Hurricane Katrina Looting," "Media reports of people vandalizing and looting stores portrayed the image that the city had disintegrated into a state of anarchy. . . . Such reports depicted the looters as heartless criminals who wrongfully took advantage of the disaster-stricken city" (1303). But what these reports failed to mention is that the so-called "looters" "left no wake of destruction in their paths and took only what was needed to survive" (1304). In the coverage of Katrina, the narrative frame of looting provided an interpretative lens that automatically transformed the survival acts of Black subjects into acts of looting, thus depriving these subjects of dignified agency. This is what the narrative frame of looting did to the Katrina images that were publicized of people of color looking for food and water and trying to survive. The epistemic friction needed to counter the damaged visibility produced by that frame, the epistemic activism needed to neutralize the frame and open the public's eye to the images in a different way, can come in different forms. Such epistemic resistance can come in the form of a visual-studies analysis or a social-scientific analysis (such as Sommers et al. 2006) that unmasks the unwarranted and selectively deployed frame of looting and shows how it works, what it obscures, and what it projects onto the image in question. But it can also come in more informal ways, as it did at the time, in the aftermath of Katrina, when survivors of color were stigmatized and criminalized, and many people online called attention to the sharp contrast of the language and narrative frames used to describe images of white and black survivors. This kind of web activism has become an increasingly important form of epistemic activism, and this is a paradigmatic example of it (Fig. 5):

Figure 5. Contrasting narratives during Hurricane Katrina (2005) [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

CONCLUSION

In this essay I hope to have shown that visual propaganda is susceptible to an analysis that is at least in some ways analogous to that of discursive propaganda. I have argued that some communicative mechanisms, such as the distinction between at-issue and not-at-issue contents, can be used to elucidate both discursive and visual propagandistic communication. As I have tried to show through my analysis of examples of racist propaganda, images have been used to communicate racist messages in direct and explicit ways, but also in indirect and implicit ways, protecting at least part of the racist message from critical scrutiny. I have also argued that we need to confront visual propaganda with *epistemic resistance*. In my view, we exert epistemic resistance when we confront propagandistic communication with *epistemic friction*, a friction with passive and uncritical modes of viewership. What I call *epistemic activism* is the practice of producing epistemic friction for critical purposes. In the case of visual communication, the critical goals of epistemic

activism are twofold: disrupting the passive reception of the visual message and triggering more active and critical modes of viewing. Resisting racist propaganda in visual communication involves opening up possibilities for critique that are foreclosed or obscured by the image (by its composition and deployment) and in some cases also by a narrative frame situating the image for the viewer in a biased and distorting way. Epistemic friction can be produced in different ways by epistemic activists: by cultivating a critical way of viewing the image used for propagandistic purposes, as Ida B. Wells's speeches, the NAACP pamphlet, or the Ken Gonzales-Day's series *Erased Lynching* discussed above illustrate; by contesting images with counter-images; or by interrogating the narrative frames that bias viewers to see certain things and not to see others in the images they are exposed to. Although the scope of my analysis of racist propaganda in this paper has been very limited, it gestures toward a vast field of research in philosophy of language, communication theory, and visual studies that should cover both discursive and visual propaganda, and it also underscores the urgent need for epistemic activism against different kinds of racist propaganda both inside and outside academia.[13]

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