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RACIAL VIOLENCE, EMOTIONAL FRICTION, AND EPISTEMIC ACTIVISM

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racial violence and the multiple faces of racial oppression

What makes violence a face of oppression is less the particular acts themselves, though these are often utterly horrible, than the social context surrounding them, which makes them possible and even acceptable. What makes violence a phenomenon of social injustice, and not merely an individual moral wrong, is its systemic character, its existence as a social practice. (Young, *Justice* 61–62)

Racial violence is a very important dimension of racial oppression; but it typically does not work – and cannot be properly understood – independently of the other key dimensions or *faces* of racial oppression. As Iris Marion Young has explained in detail, people are oppressed in different ways. Young recognized *violence* as one among five different *faces* of oppression: oppressed people can suffer from violence, exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, and cultural imperialism. It is at least in principle possible for each one of these different kinds of oppression to appear separately and independently from the others – for example, a white male worker may be exploited without being marginalized, powerless, culturally subordinated, or particularly vulnerable to violence. But these different forms of oppression often appear intertwined, reinforcing and transforming each other in complex ways. In this essay, I will elucidate how racial violence, as a particular dimension that the oppression of a racial group can take, relates to other dimensions of the oppression of that group. I will argue that there are specific epistemic and affective obstacles that make the

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complex phenomenon of racial violence particularly insidious and hard to uproot. In particular, I will argue that there are epistemic distortions that render phenomena of racial violence relatively invisible or excusable as unavoidable aspects of social reality, and that there are forms of social insensitivity and social paralysis that are fostered by the distorted and precarious social visibility of racial violence. I will further argue that the resistance against these epistemic and affective obstacles – which I will subsume under the rubric of *epistemic activism* – requires that we pay attention to how racial violence relates to other faces of racial oppression – i.e., the exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, and cultural subordination of racial groups.

The five faces of oppression that Young identifies are dimensions of *structural* oppression, which, unlike the old-fashioned oppression of a people by a tyrant or ruling elite, is not perpetrated by an individual or group of individuals consciously and intentionally but rather by entire institutions, cultures, social arrangements, and the conditions of daily life. For this reason, as Young explains, structural forms of oppression – including here *structural violence* – cannot be eliminated simply by purging a discrete number of individuals or structural elements involved in its production (e.g., “by getting rid of the rulers or making some new laws”), “because [these] oppressions are systematically reproduced in major economic, political, and cultural institutions” (41). As Young points out, given the systemic character of structural oppression, a structurally oppressed group may not face a well-defined corresponding group of oppressors; and even when such a group stands out, there is a much more complicated story behind the production of structural oppression that is missed if we confine our analysis to the intentions and actions of a particular group. Thus, for example, the history of lynching in the United States contains a pattern of collective racial violence that goes deeper and beyond the criminal activities of the Ku Klux Klan. As Young puts it: “While structural oppression involves relations among groups, these relations do not always fit the paradigm of conscious and intentional oppression of one group by another” (ibid.). The key is not so much to identify a well-defined group of actors who keep the oppression in place (“the racists”) but rather to identify the entire system of actions, social arrangements, and institutional and structural conditions that is behind a structural form of oppression (such as American racism) and behind the vulnerabilities of oppressed subjects. As Young remarks, the “actions of many individuals daily contribute to maintaining and reproducing [structural] oppression, but those people are usually simply doing their jobs or living their lives, and do not understand themselves as agents of oppression” (41–42).

Social movements of liberation fighting against structural forms of oppression know this well: the problem goes much deeper than a bunch of evil-doers with nasty attitudes and no conscience. Anti-violence movements know well that their task is not simply to fight those who perpetrate violence and those who instigate it or tolerate it knowingly. They also need to address a silent majority that with their apathy and inaction become enablers. Anti-violence movements have to address and transform publics and institutions that are looking the other way or providing a cover for the continuation of patterns of violence. Promoting public awareness and creating a new kind of social sensibility with respect to structural racial violence involve much more than changing the minds of a bunch of “oppressors” and of those who “agree” with them and tolerate their evil-doing. These tasks require *thick* critical engagements with multiple publics and institutions and with society at large – engagements that are not only cognitive and argumentative but also affective, imaginal,¹ and action-oriented. And, as I will argue in the next section, this involves much more than simply “changing public opinion”; it requires the creation of new forms of social sensibility, new forms of cognitive and affective attitudes that trigger new patterns of community responses to violence.

The core of my argument in what follows will be that, in cases of structural racial violence, the activism needed is an *epistemic* activism that can wake people up from their epistemic slumbers, calling attention to how they are complicit with vulnerabilities to patterns of racial violence and how they can disrupt their complicity. After elucidating in the next two sections the kind of critical public engagement needed for social movements of liberation (such as anti-racist-violence movements), in the fourth section of this paper I will develop my case for *thick* forms of critical engagements and epistemic activism by looking at a case study of structural racial violence. I will pay special attention to how anti-racist-violence movements in the United States have worked effectively by promoting a particular kind of sensibility, and how this work remains unfinished and has to be continued through epistemic activism today.

political engagement, resistant affectivity, and *epistemic activism*

What kinds of political engagements are needed to stop structural patterns of racial violence? What do individuals, groups, and social movements need to do to resist structural racial violence?

A dominant view in liberal political philosophy – exemplified in different accounts of deliberative democracy – is that political engagement consists in giving reasons and responding to reasons in the public sphere. This dominant conception of political engagement often leads to an impoverished picture of our political lives by restricting what counts as political interaction to public deliberation in argumentative form. This view fails to acknowledge the unfair testimonial and hermeneutical obstacles that oppressed groups face and make them marginalized players in the game of “giving and asking for reasons.” Members of oppressed groups are typically rendered invisible and inaudible – or their visibility and audibility are precarious and constrained – and their epistemic agency is diminished in practices of public deliberation. They are often political subjects who cannot enter the political game of “giving and asking for reasons” on an equal footing (if they can participate in that game at all) because their voices are systematically distorted or they face important obstacles and disadvantages (such as credibility deficits or scarcity of accepted expressive resources²). But, fortunately, political engagement is much more than a game of public deliberation or “giving and asking for reasons” about public affairs. The work of political resistance – and of what I call epistemic activism – involves much more than argumentation: it can involve all kinds of things from shouting to painting walls, from stopping and disrupting public life to creating new narratives, new memorials, new spaces, and so on. Most of the struggles for visibility and audibility that movements of liberation engage in are prior to and relatively independent of practices of public deliberation; they involve forms of political engagement that happen outside the games of “giving and asking

for reasons.” These *thick* critical engagements certainly affect the cognitive dimension of our political lives, but they also engage our affective reactions, our imagination, and our propensity to act or to remain stuck in inaction. The goals of *thick* critical engagements that epistemic activism aims at include changing the cognitive attitudes and cognitive habits that mediate patterns of action and inaction; but these goals *also* include broadening our repertoire of affective responses, reconfiguring the imagination in such a way that we can understand, empathize, and act with others in new ways, and making available new forms of responsiveness that can adequately address (proactively and preventively) people’s vulnerabilities to being harmed with impunity.

Iris Marion Young has contributed to broadening our conception of public engagement with her arguments for a new paradigm of *communicative* democracy and against influential accounts of deliberative democracy. She emphasized that what the liberation of oppressed groups requires is not only that members of these groups be allowed to enter public deliberation and that their reasons be heard. Something deeper needs to happen in order to overcome oppression, for oppressed subjects continue to be excluded (or marginalized) as they are included if they are simply allowed to enter into the spaces of political engagement *as these spaces have been set up*, without there being any genuine transformation of these spaces and the communicative dynamics that they allow. What oppressed subjects demand, what their liberation requires, is that their voices be heard *in their own terms*, that their silences be *felt*, that their stories be *engaged with*. Young called attention to the expressive and political force of non-argumentative communicative styles such as storytelling; but her arguments and suggestions for expanding what counts as political engagement can be extended to other forms of expression, including non-verbal ones such as photography, film, and performance art, as well as mixed cases that contain verbal and non-verbal elements such as street protests, photo and video activism that combines images and words, and so on.

There have been two interrelated philosophical biases in the dominant liberal paradigm that have led to the problematic reduction of the wide range of heterogeneous forms of political engagement that exist to the formal game of giving arguments in public deliberation. A key bias behind this impoverishing distortion of our political life is *political cognitivism*, that is, the view that political engagement is first and foremost a form of *cognitive* engagement, that is, that it consists in engaging our minds intellectually with respect to our *opinions* concerning public affairs. A second key bias in the dominant liberal view of political engagement is *deliberationism* or *argumentationism*, that is, the view that the expressive form that political engagement must take is public deliberation or argumentation.³ In the final section of this paper, and through a case study concerning racial violence and movements of resistance against it, I will argue against these biases, showing that the impoverished view of political engagement promoted by these biases makes it impossible to understand, fully and properly, the rich and diverse forms of activism that the fight against racial oppression requires. Against political cognitivism, my case study will show that political resistance involves much more than *cognitive* engagement, for it requires political actions and interventions that engage the affective and embodied sensibilities of subjects, communities, and publics (and not just their “opinions”). And against *deliberationism* or *argumentationism* my case study will show that political resistance involves much more than *argumentation* or *deliberation*, for it requires changing communicative dynamics and communicative sensibilities at a deeper level and mobilizing ways of generating and sharing meanings through diverse forms of expression (engaging us not only cognitively and verbally but also affectively, visually, and spatially).

A key part of what I call *epistemic activism* consists in critically engaging with our political cognitive-affective attitudes and tapping into their transformative potential. On my view, the attitudes that make up our sensibility and mediate our actions are hybrid in character:

they are cognitive-affective attitudes. However, in what follows I will focus more on the affective side of our political lives and of the thick critical engagements that epistemic activism tries to produce. I will focus on the capacity to affectively connect to the suffering of victims of racial violence, and how certain forms of empathy can activate an entire repertoire of emotional reactions such as grief and anger (as well as elaborations of the latter in moral indignation or political outrage). My elucidations of epistemic activism will offer an analysis of empathy, grief, and anger as political affective reactions with tremendous critical and transformative potential. I will call attention to the different ways in which empathy, grief, and anger can function as affective reactions to social harms, stressing that although these affective reactions can be sometimes paralyzing and self-destructive, they can also be regenerative and transformative. Highlighting how empathy, grief, and anger figure in processes of communal mourning and social protest, I will try to bring to the fore how affective structures and sensibilities can facilitate social repair (reparative justice), community reconfiguration, and even institutional transformation. In short, the next two sections will try to make a case for empathy, grief, and anger as key political emotions with a tremendous (and often untapped) transformative and liberatory potential.⁴

changing public sensibilities and engaging the emotions in epistemic activism

The popular phrase “changing public opinion” that is often used to encapsulate what social change means reveals the cognitivist and deliberationist biases that have been dominant in liberal societies in the Western world. The goal of movements of liberation goes well beyond “changing the opinions” of the public; it includes changing public perceptions, public reactions, and ways of relating to each other that social groups and communities have or fail to have. The goal of social movements of liberation is to promote *social change*, and not

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simply to “change public opinion,” that is, to “convince” or “persuade” publics of certain opinions. I would argue (and have argued) that a society can “change its mind” about racism by purging certain beliefs about racial subordination and nonetheless remain racist in crucial ways by retaining a racist sensibility and by tolerating racist practices. Deep and genuine *social change* is something far more complex than simply a community changing “its mind” or its repertoire of “opinions.” It involves developing a new social sensibility: it involves uprooting and displacing a form of insensitivity, and replacing it with a new set of cognitive and affective attitudes that make new forms of social relationality possible. For this reason, emotions play a crucial role in social movements of liberation, such as those dedicated to fighting racial violence: emotions play a crucial role in waking people up from their racist slumbers, in teaching them to pay attention to special vulnerabilities to racial violence and to aspects of racial violence to which the general public is often desensitized, in mobilizing people and making them care enough, in bringing together communities of resistance against racial violence, and in sustaining networks of support that can do reparative and preventive work for the potential and actual victims of racial violence.

But note that emotions can also play a key role at the service of oppression and marginalization: a lot has been written about the deployment of particular emotions such as fear and hate for creating and maintaining practices of oppression; but less has been written about the role of emotional *failures*, such as the lack of empathy and the ways of desensitizing publics to the problems and struggles of certain groups. I will focus on these affective failures and resistances that support insensitivity and complicity with racial violence, but I will also focus on the liberatory *emotional friction* that needs to be mobilized to resist racism and patterns of racial violence. I will use the expression *emotional friction* both in a negative and a positive way. I will use the expression *negative emotional friction* to refer to the emotional obstacles that subjects face to overcome their complicity with oppression, such as antipathy

to oppressed groups or simply apathy for their problems and struggles; and I will use the expression *positive emotional friction* to refer to the emotional attitudes and responses that need to be mobilized to resist oppression, such as empathy, grief and anger for the suffering of oppressed subjects. In order to disrupt the complicity with oppression of complacent and apathetic publics, epistemic activism aims at eradicating negative emotional friction and promoting positive emotional friction. In the case of racial violence in the United States, which will be the focus of my analysis here, the epistemic activism that we can identify in anti-racist-violence movements has indeed worked in that twofold way, that is, trying to unmask and uproot the insensitivity of complicit publics, while at the same time fostering and promoting positive ways of relating affectively to victims of racial violence.

With my analysis of the case study of racial violence in the United States, I want to underscore the negative affective work done by racist ideologies, but also the positive affective work that needs to be accomplished by anti-racist-violence movements. I am interested in examining the role of racist ideology not only or primarily in motivating perpetrators of racial violence but in giving complicit publics an alibi and emotional support for their apathy and complacency, for not caring enough or at all about the brutal treatment of their fellow citizens. My reflections will aim at highlighting the negative emotional friction created by racist ideologies that prevented complicit publics from speaking up against racial violence, as well as highlighting the positive emotional friction that anti-racist movements have been trying to instill in publics so that they mobilize against racial violence.

Vulnerabilities to racial violence that can be perpetrated with impunity are created by racist ideologies in two ways: by stigmatizing and dehumanizing subjects of color, but also by desensitizing mainstream publics to the violence perpetrated against subjects of color. Racist ideologies perform this double task of stigmatization/dehumanization of people of color and desensitization of mainstream

publics both verbally and non-verbally, and both cognitively and affectively. Racist groups and racist leaders have understood this task very well. Think of the pro-lynching movement in the early decades of the twentieth century in the US Southern states. This pro-lynching movement mobilized an entire propagandistic apparatus that demeaned and dehumanized people of color in verbal ways – in pamphlets, journals, and public speeches – and in non-verbal ways – using photography and film 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 to white society. As Amy Louise Wood emphasizes in *Lynching and Spectacle*, lynching would not have become such a big cultural phenomenon in the post-reconstruction United States if it were not for a propagandistic apparatus that 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. Wood 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.

As Wood's analysis shows persuasively, 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 accepted 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” (30).

Lynching acquired this power of collective political intimidation by becoming a *spectacle*,⁵ 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 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 spectatorship.

As I have argued elsewhere (“Resisting Racist Propaganda”), the spectacle of lynching photography in the United States had 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 people to relive it. I will not reproduce here any of these images, but I will describe how one of them was turned against itself by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in a pamphlet that tried to undo some of the negative affective work performed by lynching photos on white subjects while at the same trying to promote a different kind of white sensibility, a white sensibility that was no longer desensitized to black suffering and was cognizant of the ethical importance of emotional attentiveness to the suffering of other racial groups. The prejudicial and stigmatizing views that associate blackness with

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criminality created an affective inability to properly understand and respond to the suffering and loss of black communities. This affective numbness is a crucial part of what the epistemic activism against racial violence needs to fight. It is not enough simply to convince publics to repudiate racist beliefs such as “all black males are criminals and rapists,” but something more than a cognitive intervention is needed. The anti-lynching movement understood this well.

Although the anti-lynching movement in the United States began in the nineteenth century, it became institutionalized with the constitution of the NAACP in 1909. Working with the NAACP, Ida B. Wells gave speeches and participated in the creation of pamphlets that tried to disarm the apathy of the general public and to disrupt their complicity with lynching as a weapon of racial terror. The tactics and activities that Ida B. Wells and the NAACP used to wake people up from their racist slumbers are paradigmatic of what I call *epistemic activism*. They involved denouncing the social invisibility of racial violence, promoting new forms of understanding of the conditions that make people vulnerable to racial violence and of the complicity of different publics and institutions with such violence. But they also involved tapping into emotions that can make people more empathetic and likely to engage in reparative and preventive actions that respond to the vulnerability to racial violence of minority groups. But it is important to note that empathetic reactions may or may not lead to an affective restructuring and may or may not result in a political sensibility that interrupts complicity with oppression and moves the agent to engage in liberatory social struggles. So, what kind of *empathy work* should epistemic activism aim at promoting?

Three important caveats from the literature on empathy can help us see three crucial points about the kind of *empathy work* that can be most politically productive and can be put at the service of struggles for social justice. In the first place, following Max Scheler, Sandra Bartky distinguishes different

forms of “fellow-feeling” or ways of “feeling-with,” and she underscores that not all of them bind us to others in morally and politically appropriate ways or facilitate our moral and political agency toward them. In particular, there are ways of “feeling-with” that are not particularly conducive to dignifying, caring for, or respecting the other: when we feel with the other because the same event causes our feelings, when we experience “emotional infection” (shared emotions through contagion – e.g., the mass panic of a crowd), or when we experience “emotional identification” (a psychic contagion in which we project ourselves in the other and imagine that we can see and feel through her). It is particularly important to avoid forms of empathy that are assimilative and appropriative, that is, predicated on what Iris Marion Young (*Intersecting Voices*) calls “symmetrical reciprocity,” which occurs when we project our perspective onto that of others and imagine our positions to be reversible. There is an epistemic violence that is done to the other when we empathize through perspectival projection and symmetrical reciprocity. By contrast with this kind of assimilative and appropriative empathy, Bartky underscores the importance of “genuine fellow-feeling” which does not involve identification or projection, but is a way of emotionally reacting to the feelings of others while remaining attuned to their differences and the distance between their positions and ours. Bartky’s “genuine fellow-feeling” can be understood as exhibiting what Young (*Intersecting Voices*) calls “asymmetrical reciprocity”: the kind of moral respect that is afforded to others on the basis of the recognition of their differences, respect that involves taking account of the other without assuming her perspective and is predicated in the lack of reversibility of perspectives that arises from different life histories and social positions.

In the second place, empathetic reactions can remain part of a fleeting affective reactivity and not amount to any deep or durable change in affective structure or sensibility. For this reason, it is important that we take seriously the temporal dimension of activism, the sustained cultivation of activist interventions over

time until they leave a mark. It is important that we think of activism as aiming not simply at provoking emotional reactions in a public but rather at triggering a complex process of emotional restructuring that needs to unfold over time. It is in this sense that I talk about *empathy work* rather than simply empathy or empathetic reaction. What I call *empathy work* aims at a self-transformation (what Bartky describes as a self-knowing that transforms the self who knows), at deep changes in our affective repertoires and the development of a new sensibility.⁶

In the third place, empathy can be exploitative in indirect and implicit ways. Empathetic reactions and even empathetic habits can be managed in such a way that, far from being conducive to the disruption of one's complicity with oppression, can in fact be at the service of an economy of exploitation. Criticizing the romanticizing of empathy in contemporary culture, Carolyn Pedwell offers a powerful analysis of the exploitative ways in which empathy is sought and deployed today as part of masculinized techniques for neoliberal subject-making and at the service of biopolitical governmentality focused around creating and spreading wealth. In *Affective Relations*, Pedwell argues that while empathy is typically assumed to be a stepping-stone to global social justice, it is in fact instrumentalized by global neoliberal agendas that deepen inequality and oppression around the world.⁷ Although this neoliberal kind of empathy can motivate people to give to charity, it does not motivate them to give up their privileges or to stop their participation in exploitative practices and policies. Despite this contemporary adverse climate and the corporate appropriation of the culture of empathy, Pedwell does not discard the political utility of all forms of empathy. In particular, she argues that what she calls "confrontational empathy" can help people see their complicity with oppression and motivate them to act and position themselves differently. Following post-colonial feminists and anti-racist scholars, Pedwell describes "confrontational empathy" as the kind of emotional connection that, instead of promoting emotional universality, is

attentive to social positionality and involves the recognition of the specific vulnerabilities of different positionalities and the unsettling awareness of power differentials.⁸ This is the kind of empathy that the anti-racist epistemic activism that I will elucidate aims at.

Particularly interesting epistemic interventions of the NAACP were those designed to connect with victims of racial violence at an emotional level from multiple situated perspectives, inviting publics (including white audiences) to participate in processes of mourning and to share the grief and anger that the families and communities of the victims felt. The anti-lynching activism of the NAACP raised the question of whose lives are grievable, a question that Judith Butler has put on the philosophical agenda in her recent work (*Precarious Life; Frames of War; Notes*). Butler's recent theorization of vulnerability, mourning, and grievable lives calls attention to how political affects constitute the demos. In *Frames of War*, Butler suggests that the question of who "we" are can be answered by examining whose lives are mourned and considered valuable, and whose lives are considered disposable and ungrievable. A deep interrogation of the affective constitution of a political community along these lines was done in action by the anti-lynching epistemic activism of the NAACP.

Activists of the NAACP tried to interrogate what it means for differently situated citizens not to be able to mourn the victims of lynching: what does it mean for white citizens to be affectively numbed or desensitized to the harms of lynching that disproportionately targeted people of color? *Into what kind of citizen does one grow up as a result of numbness or insensitivity to racial violence?* As we shall see, drawing from discourses of citizenship and issuing a powerful social commentary on how emotions figure in citizenship, this is one of the key questions that an anti-lynching pamphlet poignantly asked, trying to promote what Bartky calls "genuine fellow-feeling" or the kind of "confrontational empathy" critically aware of social positionality that Pedwell emphasizes. Pamphlets like the one I will examine in the next section invite publics to

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critically interrogate the ways in which their emotional reactions or lack thereof might result in an emotional disablement that handicaps their moral and political agency as citizens. The anti-lynching epistemic activism of the NAACP targeted this emotional disablement, stressing that one's moral and political character as a citizen becomes corrupted if one becomes desensitized and incapable of feeling certain emotions, such as non-identificatory empathy with others who are very different from us, grief, anger, outrage, and moral indignation at their unjustified suffering, and so on.

emotional friction in epistemic activism against racial violence

The anti-lynching movement knew well that the fight against lynching required resisting the rhetoric of the pro-lynching movement and the *visual spectacle* of lynching that pro-lynching publics had created. Ida B. Wells⁹ was the leader of the anti-lynching movement who most forcefully fought to undermine the visual spectacle of lynching. Under her leadership, the NAACP created pamphlets that turned lynching photographs and postcards against themselves, resisting and undoing the spectacle from the inside, prompting publics to cultivate *a critical and resistant way of viewing* this visual material. 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 in its own terms, but such spectacle could be turned against itself and redirected toward different affective responses and the constitution of a different kind of sensibility. The critical revisiting of lynch photographs and postcards in epistemic activism has, therefore, a twofold aim: (1) disarming the spectacular visibility of black suffering that instills spectatorial attitudes and negative emotional friction against empathy; and (2) promoting positive emotional friction (e.g., confrontational empathy and a set of

complex emotions and fellow-feelings such as grief or anger) that could motivate publics to stand up against racial violence. This epistemic activism is a paradigmatic example of what I have called *epistemic resistance* (Medina, *Epistemology*) since it consists in interrogating and mobilizing challenges against a sensibility so as to confront it with its limitations, blind-spots and affective numbness or insensitivity. Confronting a sensibility with its limitations and dysfunctions through *epistemic friction* (through the interrogation and challenges of alternative sensibilities) and prompting the expansion and cognitive-affective restructuring of that sensibility are complex tasks that are addressed in a sustained and organized way in activist practices, in epistemic activism.¹⁰

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 can be illustrated by 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 would 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 and should never be abandoned. Besides the critical tasks of mourning and remembering initiated by the anti-lynching activists and members of the NAACP, their fight against lynching included confronting white publics who participated in the visual spectacle of lynching.

A key component of anti-lynching activism was to resist what Saidiya Hartman has described, in *Scenes of Subjection*, as "the

spectacular character of black suffering” (3; emphasis added). Hartman argues that the casualness with which images of black suffering have been circulated in American culture has created a *spectacle* of black suffering that desensitizes publics: “Rather than inciting indignation, too often [images of black suffering] immure us to pain by virtue of their familiarity” (ibid.). The “routine display of the slave’s ravaged body” – Hartman stresses (ibid.) – and later on the exhibitions of lynch victims and the contemporary spectacle of police brutality – I would add – have fostered spectatorial attitudes, inhibiting rather than creating a social sensibility that can yield adequate moral attitudes and prompt subjects to take political action. As Hartman insists, we have to pay attention to “the ways we are called upon to participate” in spectacles of black suffering, for these spectacles lure publics to participate as “voyeurs fascinated with and repelled by exhibitions of terror and sufferance,” rather than as “witnesses who confirm the truth of what happened in the face of the world-destroying capacities of pain, the distortions of torture, the sheer unrepresentability of terror” (ibid.). As Hartman emphasizes, participation in spectacles of racial violence in American visual culture has carried with it an “uncertain line between witness and spectator,” and has contributed to “the precariousness of empathy,” for, indeed, “the consequence of the numbing spectacle” is “indifference to suffering” (ibid.). It is precisely against spectatorial attitudes and lack of (the right kind of) empathy that the anti-lynching epistemic activism of the NAACP was directed.

In line with the powerful analysis of the spectacular character of black suffering articulated by Hartman two decades ago, NAACP activists saw many decades earlier that spectacular visibility was one of the key aspects of the apparatus of racist terror that their activism had to fight. Activists of the NAACP confronted white audiences by urging them to stop the circulation of lynch photographs, but also by urging them to look at those terrorizing images of black suffering not as mere spectators but as moral witnesses and citizens capable of genuine

fellow-feelings and confrontational empathy. Activists of the NAACP invited white publics to see in those images what black publics saw, or rather to see those images *with them*, not in the privacy of their homes and among white people with a similar sensibility, but experiencing friction with the sensibility of people of color, taking account of non-white perspectives and positionalities. Turning the spectacle against itself and forcing viewers to inhabit it differently, critically, required devising ways in which people would feel forced to step out of the perspective of the mere spectator and encouraged not to remain content with and confined to what they saw with their own eyes, that is, ways of decentering their gaze and getting them to experience the viewing of the traumatic images with friction with other embodied perspectives or sensibilities – epistemic friction with those who have different sets of eyes and bring with them different sets of experiences. This way of confronting people’s insensitivity and creating epistemic friction between sensibilities is a prime example of epistemic resistance. It includes *emotional friction*, that is, combating the negative emotional friction (e.g., antipathy or apathy) underpinning the insensitivity of complicit publics while at the same time promoting positive emotional friction (e.g., empathy and a set of complex emotions and fellow-feelings such as grief or anger) that could motivate publics to speak up against lynching and to fight against it. This work of emotional friction can be seen in the anti-lynching activism of NAACP members. I will examine the kind of critical exposure and emotional 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 at Fort Lauderdale on 19 July 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. In the pictures taken at the lynching site we see Mr. Stacy’s brutalized and murdered inert body hanging from a tree surrounded by well-dressed middle-class white

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families with their children. For the white subjects participating in the creation and consumption of this gruesome visual spectacle, what was communicated was not a depiction of a brutal murder, but rather a representation of the acceptable punishment of an intrinsically criminal and threatening black body now neutralized and hanging inert. The neatly dressed white families posing around the desecrated body of Mr. Stacy signaled 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 the depicted witnessing of the white families tries to convey is the *acceptability* of the torture and killing of Mr. Stacy by respectable white society. The witnessing and condoning of respectable white publics, their tacit approbation, contributed tremendously to the normalization of racial violence through lynch photography. Resisting the visual propaganda exemplified by the photographs of Mr. Stacy's body and the white families requires redirecting the critical gaze of the viewer to the margins and background of the photo, so that they could interrogate the ideological role of the white families posing next to Mr. Stacy, all dressed in white and smiling, symbolizing purity restored and peace regained, justifying the acceptability of lynching and lending it respectability.

The intended racist message in lynch photographs was that lynching made it possible for the respectable white families to smile again, to come out and enjoy the restored "social peace" and leisure.¹¹ The irony in these images is that their representation of social peace contained an image of torture and brutal murder at its very center. This irony was poignantly unfelt by pro-lynching publics. That was the propagandistic trick that these images tried to perform:¹² they were predicated on the desensitization to human suffering; and that is the trick that the epistemic resistance against these images needs to undo: the process of desensitization that these images contribute to needs to be resisted. And note that this desensitization can still occur even if the visual spectacle does not recruit the viewer for condoning the lynching violence and does not

manage to prolong the positive witnessing of lynching through the viewers of lynch photography. The desensitization still occurs by recruiting viewers as mere spectators who do not have strong emotional reactions or can insulate such reactions without deeply affecting their overall sensibility. Hence the affective numbing of spectatorial audiences. The desensitization to racial terror has to be resisted and reversed for both condoning witnesses and detached spectators.

There are different ways in which the anti-lynching movement tried to mobilize the positive emotional friction of white publics against the visual spectacle of lynching: first, they tried to get them to see how this spectacle was making them insensitive to the suffering of people of color and the need to repair that affective relation so that they could feel grief and anger at the brutalization of black bodies; but secondly, they also tried to get them to see what this disturbing spectacle was doing to *themselves*, to their communities and especially to their children, vitiating their sensibilities and turning them into moral monsters. Anti-lynching activists insisted that even if lynching sympathizers did not care about what the gruesome spectacle of lynching was doing to their relation to their fellow citizens of color, they should at the very least care about what it was doing to *themselves*, to the moral sensibility of white communities that was not only being eroded but on the verge of being destroyed. There was a clash of sensibilities in what people saw in lynch photos. While the gaze of the pro-lynching subject saw moral monstrosity in the intrinsic criminality of the black body, the gaze of the anti-lynching subject saw moral monstrosity in the perpetration of brutal violence against the black subject and in the gleeful witnessing and condoning of such violence. This is what one of the anti-lynching NAACP pamphlets did by engaging critically with one of the photographs of Mr. Stacy and a white family. 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's corpse 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? (Wood 196)

Notice how this pamphlet invites subjects to consider how, by being forced to participate in the spectacle of lynching, the depicted children might be moral monsters in the making, they may be handicapped in their civic sensibility and in their developmental capacities to become virtuous citizens. The pamphlet underscores the moral harms that the spectacle of lynching inflicts on participating white subjects, and how this harmful moral insensitivity seems to go unnoticed by the sensibility of these subjects and their elders (*meta-insensitivity*),¹³ so that, if left unquestioned, unchallenged, it can lead to the development of moral monstrosity. The NAACP pamphlet offers a perfect example of epistemic resistance 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 different sensibilities, cultivating a critical *kaleidoscopic* consciousness¹⁴ in the communicative engagement with the image. In pamphlets of this sort used by the NAACP we can see forceful invitations to

become sensitive to cruelty and to develop affective capacities to feel empathy, grief, and anger, as well as the cognitive-affective capacities to understand the grief and anger of others. Pamphlets of this sort are a paradigmatic example of what I call epistemic activism in visual culture.

Although the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacist organizations in the United States do not have the power and influence they used to have, and although the ritual of lynching does not have the social currency it used to have, collective and institutional racial violence still exists today. In fact, hate crimes against racial minorities have increased in recent years in the United States, especially during and after the last presidential election; and police homicides of people of color have reached alarming numbers in the twenty-first century. The work of epistemic activism to address the vulnerability to racial violence of stigmatized racial minorities that Ida B. Wells and the NAACP initiated a century ago needs to be continued. The epistemic activism needed today includes giving visibility to the lines of continuity between patterns of collective and institutional racial violence in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, calling attention to the complicity of different publics and institutions, remembering and honoring those killed or harmed with impunity because of racial bias and stigmatization, and keeping the grief for those victims and the anger against racial violence alive and energizing communities and institutions that can and must prevent it and protect its victims. All this work has been opposed and undermined very successfully in the Southern states of the United States by the resistance of local institutions and local communities to repair the invisibility and oblivion of the history of lynching. Even today, most counties in the Southern states refuse to mark the places where lynching took place while at the same time often refusing to take down the plaques and statues that commemorate the confederate victories during the American civil war.

In the Southern states of the United States there are hundreds of markers commemorating the history of the confederacy, but there are

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almost no markers of the history of lynching. *Equal Justice Initiative* (EJI) is one of the social justice organizations that have been engaged in epistemic activism fighting to change this. One of EJI's most powerful initiatives and critical interventions has been the development of a lynching memorial in Montgomery, Alabama, which opened in 2018. This is part of *The National Memorial for Peace and Justice*, which EJI describes as "the nation's first memorial dedicated to the legacy of enslaved black people, people terrorized by lynching, African Americans humiliated by racial segregation and Jim Crow, and people of color burdened with contemporary presumptions of guilt and police violence" (The National Memorial). This memorial is cleverly designed to put pressure on the counties of the South to mark those places where lynching was committed. The memorial includes an interactive side in which plaques commemorating the victims of lynching are placed in a graveyard-like garden with the encouragement that the counties where those lynchings were committed reclaim those plaques and use them as markers of those atrocities, displaying each plaque where the lynching in question took place. Insofar as the memorial is successful in putting pressure on the counties to take these markers and own them, the outside area of the memorial will undergo transformation and will start looking less and less like a crowded cemetery. But insofar as the counties refuse to reclaim these plaques and remain actively complicit with the invisibility of the history of lynching, the plaques will be there to shame these counties and to remind us of their complicity. The pressure that the interactive memorial puts on regional institutions to disrupt their complicity and to make visible the history of racial violence has the potential, if successful, to reconfigure urban and rural spaces in the South so that they become spaces for resisting oblivion¹⁵ and for cultivating practices of mourning and remembering that can be reparative and transformative. Equal Justice Initiative's lynching memorial invites publics to participate in collective mourning and to channel their grief and anger in ways that remake public spaces and give visibility to the open wounds of the history

of lynching with an eye to regenerating communities, promoting new affective reactions to the collective harms suffered by African-Americans in the United States, and allowing for new forms of relationality among groups and new forms of institutional recognition and public visibility.

Through the case study of racial violence in the United States I hope to have shown that fighting collective and structural forms of oppression (such as widespread patterns of racial violence) requires more than changing public opinion; it requires disrupting and transforming communicative attitudes and dynamics, regenerating public sensibilities, reconfiguring public spaces, and garnering institutional recognition and support. The *thick* critical engagements needed involve the sustained cultivation of emotional friction and complex forms of epistemic activism that critically engage with the affective responses (or lack thereof) of individuals and groups, but also with the affectively charged relations between institutions and multiple publics. Besides transforming the sensibility of publics, grassroots epistemic activism also aims at disrupting and uprooting the complicity of institutions with structural racism by transforming institutional attitudes and the relations of institutions with vulnerable publics. Activist organizations such as the NAACP and EJI have put pressure on institutions such as state counties or the police to pay attention to the particular vulnerabilities to racial violence of people of color. Important sites of institutional transformation that anti-racist-violence epistemic activism aims at include the creation of public spaces for mourning and remembrance, and the development of community involvement and outreach programs by state institutions such as the local police and non-state institutions such as churches, political parties, unions, cultural centers, activist organizations, and so on. The fight against racial violence requires fighting the many faces of structural racism on many fronts, and I hope to have shown the crucial role of affective and epistemic resistance in that complex and multifaceted fight.



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notes

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1 I am using this term in the technical sense proposed by Chiara Bottici (*Imaginal Politics*). What I am alluding to here by saying that *thick* critical engagements have to include *the imaginal* is that they have to address the ways in which our political life is mediated by social imaginaries and the images they produce. Thick critical engagements have to include, for example, critical interventions in visual culture and ways of mobilizing resistant imaginations.

2 These refer to what today we call *testimonial* and *hermeneutical injustice*, following Miranda Fricker’s terminology in her *Epistemic Injustice*. See also Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance*.

3 In recent years there has been powerful scholarship that can be used to expand and enrich views of public deliberation/argumentation. I am thinking specifically of scholarship on political emotions (e.g., Nussbaum, *Political Emotions; Anger and Forgiveness*) and scholarship on rhetorical framing and “deep stories” in social psychology and sociology (e.g., Lakoff, *Moral Politics*; Hochschild, *Strangers*). Discussions of public deliberation/argumentation in liberal political philosophy still need to catch up to this scholarship.

4 My analysis and argument about the political productivity of these emotions (anger, in particular) draw from Audre Lorde’s ground-breaking 1981 essay “The Uses of Anger,” María Lugones’s

medina

influential 2003 essay “Hard-to-Handle Anger,” and recent discussions in feminist and queer social epistemology (see Bailey, “On Anger”; Medina, “Complex Communication”).

5 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” (32).

6 The concept of *sensibility* (unlike *sensitivity*) involves more than a merely passive affective reactivity; it involves embodied habits of perception, imagination, and feeling, readiness or preparation for action, and dispositions to perceive, feel, and judge with appropriate insight. Sensibility understood in this way includes also what Carolyn Pedwell (*Affective Relations*) calls “mediated habits.”

7 According to Pedwell (*Affective Relations*), empathy has been co-opted by neoliberalism in today’s global economy, and there are multinational corporate campaigns that regard empathy as a profit-growing tool: with widespread empathy, companies prosper, because such empathy does not prompt subjects to resist neoliberal agendas and demand redistribution of wealth; instead, empathy is put at the service of a neoliberal mindset in which subjects feel more invested in success and the creation of wealth.

8 As Pedwell puts it, confrontational empathy requires “giving up a quest for cultural mastery and giving into being affected by what is ‘other’” (146).

9 See Ida B. Wells, *The Light of Truth*.

10 See Medina, “Resisting Racist Propaganda,” from which parts of this section are drawn.

11 A foundational analysis of the formation of a sadistic white sensibility that was willing to take murder into their household in order to protect the security of their domesticity and safeguard their privilege can be found in Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*.

12 For a more detailed analysis of this propagandistic trick, see Medina, “Resisting Racist Propaganda.”

13 For an account of meta-insensitivity and meta-blindness, see my *The Epistemology of Resistance*.

14 For my account of a critical *kaleidoscopic* consciousness, to which I am alluding here, see my *The Epistemology of Resistance* 214. For the related

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notion of a *kaleidoscopic* social sensibility, see chapter 6.5 (297 ff.).

15 Epistemic activism against resisting the oblivion of lynching can also be developed through art and artistic practices. A prime example of epistemic, activist work of this sort to undo the visual spectacle of lynching and resist oblivion can be found in the series *Erased Lynching* by the visual artist Ken Gonzales-Day, which I have analyzed in my “Resisting Racist Propaganda.” Gonzales-Day’s manipulated lynch photographs erase the lynch victim from the photographic images and thus redirect the gaze of the viewer to the white publics posing at the lynching site, very much in the spirit of the critical intervention of the NAACP pamphlet that I examine in this essay. Also in the same spirit, Gonzales-Day’s erased lynch representations invite a sort of *affective hesitation* that opens up space for reflective contemplation, for affective self-interrogation and the possibility of affective reconfiguration (I am grateful to Millicent Churcher for helping me see this last point). A provocative phenomenological account of affective hesitation can be found in Alia Al-Saji, “A Phenomenology of Hesitation.”

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