

The Theory and Politics of Racial Visibility: Response to José Medina

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The “return to ideology” that is the theme of this volume is driven by the—now, again—widely shared conviction that the concept “ideology” is decisive not only for explaining the persistence of insidious forms of structural injustice but also for shedding light on how to effectively agitate for greater justice. (See Mills in this volume for a brief twenty and twenty-first century history of the rise, fall and renewed rise of interest in ideology.) That is a specifically theoretical motive, and the thinkers contributing to this enterprise for the most part also count among their motives a political commitment to using their theoretical insights to combat specific injustices that they regard as particularly terrible, and hence as urgently in need of attention.

José Medina’s “Ideology and Racial Violence: The Paradox of the American *Spectacle* of Racial Violence” (hereafter IRV) is guided by just such a pair of complementary—theoretical and political—motives. On the political side, Medina is responding to the awful persistence of anti-black racism in the U.S. He rightly insists on understanding anti-black racism as a form of structural oppression. He observes—following Young (2009)—that violence is a common “face” of such oppression, and he focuses on the lynching of black men in the early to middle twentieth century, bringing this horror together with that of police and vigilante murders of black men today. On the theoretical side, Medina is setting out to identify “different forms of complicity that contribute to patterns of racist violence” and “the ideological obstacles that make these forms of complicity with racist violence invisible.” Along the way, he helps himself to a relatively classic account of ideologies as forms of consciousness that involve, among other things, claims that are false or distorting and that have a tendency to bolster oppressive systems. Medina distinguishes himself from other contemporary advocates of accounts of this sort in two related ways. First, with an eye to distinguishing himself from Tommie Shelby (Shelby 2003), Medina insists on the importance of avoiding a “too narrowly cognitive” conception of ideological consciousness, and he declares that, as he sees it, such consciousness involves not only a “collection of beliefs” but also material elements in the form of “embodied orientations in the world and affective attitudes.” He accents the role of affect in part because he thinks that—this is the second respect in which he wants us to see that his account of ideology is distinctive—visual material is often an ideological agent and because he believes that we need to emphasize the affective in order to make sense of the ideological power of images in general and of images of lynchings and police murders in particular. These images, together with the narratives that accompany them, are ideological in that they wrongly seem to justify violence and, further, in that they have the effect of “terrorizing people into submission” and of contributing to practices that amount to toleration of violence. Medina’s larger ambition is to show that the racist ideologies that are his main concern operate, visually as well as narratively, “by instilling a particular kind of embodied cognitive-affective sensibility that led to the acceptance or toleration of unspeakable forms of violence against black bodies.”

Medina thinks that there is a puzzling quality to how ideologies support these forms of racist violence and that we must address the puzzle if we are to effectively combat the violence. We need to grasp that, while rendering racist violence in some sense acceptable and so invisible, the ideological mechanisms he is describing also—paradoxically—render it “hypervisible.” Following up on the work of Amy Wood (Wood 2009), Medina argues that the “propagandistic apparatus mobilized...by the pro-lynching movement...which included the circulation and consumption of

visual materials, especially photographs of...victims and of people posing with them” served to give the violence intense social visibility. Yet these techniques of spectacularization have the effect of positioning the white public as mere spectators to a terrible drama that they are also being led to accept as normal and necessary for social order. At one juncture, Medina offers a further analysis of the relevant techniques—making use of resources from Jason Stanley’s work on propaganda (Stanley 2015)—by appealing to an idea of “not at issue content.” Throughout Medina’s suggestion is that, with regard to the racist violence in question, hypervisibility is in the service of social invisibility, and he speaks in this connection of “the *ideological erasure* of racial terrorism and of socially accepted racist violence.” His aim in thus examining ideological mechanisms that contribute to racist violence is to shed light on productive strategies for fighting it. He calls for activism centering on “epistemic resistance” that involves simultaneously challenging distorted beliefs and also the modes of sensitivity (or insensitivity) that contribute to the acceptance of these beliefs. As an example of the kind of activism he has in mind, he talks about anti-lynching campaigns led by Ida B. Wells and other public figures of the NAACP. What interests him is the fact that the focus of these campaigns was, not to eliminate the postcards and other photographic material associated with the terror, but rather to reclaim and re-signify the images, changing the way viewers responded to them. He takes as his main illustration an NAACP pamphlet that challenges racist interpretations of a 1935 lynching—a pamphlet he credits with cultivating “a critical mode of viewing [the image] that can unmask and counter communicative tricks that protect racist presuppositions in [it].” He closes with a description of analogous tactics that sympathizers of Black Lives Matters (hereafter: BLM) have used in responding to recent police killings of black men.

Medina’s intervention, in IRV, in debates about ideology and racist violence is timely and politically laudable. This response raises a series of critical questions about IRV, and it does so out of unqualified sympathy for his theoretical and political motives. The accent in what follows is on asking (1) whether more needs to be said about what’s at stake in Medina’s and other anti-racist activists’ choice of lynchings and police killings of black men as a primary face of anti-black racism, (2) whether, abstracting from our answer to this first question, we ought to delve more deeply into the long history of anti-racist, emancipatory social thought with an eye to enriching Medina’s story about the role of visual material in anti-black racist ideology and in the history of resistance to it, and, lastly, (3) whether, by thus providing more intellectual context, we can improve on his suggestions about the kind of critique capable of exposing and contesting anti-black racist ideology.

(1) In theorizing and fighting anti-black racism in the U.S., ought we to privilege lynchings and police killings? It is possible to ask this question while expressing an unqualified outrage at, as well as a commitment to resisting, this violence. A focus on these particular forms of violence is an instance of what Achille Mbembe calls “necropolitics” (Mbembe 2003), that is, an instance of attention, within political theory, on states’ generation of dead bodies. Violence is but one dimension of oppressive systems—Medina also mentions exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, and cultural imperialism—and, even if an understandable critical preoccupation with violence leads us to necropolitics, we should bear in mind that the dead bodies produced by anti-black racism include more than those who are slain. As Naa Oye A. Kwate and Shatema Threadcraft observe—in an article devoted to establishing that “stop and frisk” policies represent a public health problem that systematically, if slowly, contributes to death—structural forms of racism that hasten death, shortening black lives, include many “diffuse, environmental factors” (Kwate and Threadcraft 2017). Threadcraft has been particularly concerned to bring out the significance of this observation for understanding the experience of black women. She notes that, when white power gets exerted on black bodies, “far more rarely” does it produce “a dead female body” (Threadcraft 2017, 556); she

observes that only approximately two hundred of the more than four thousand blacks lynched between 1880 and 1930 were women and, moreover, that many of these women were targeted in the place of a brother, husband or father. Her thought is that too great a focus on these death practices can hinder efforts to render visible practices that target the black female body (see Threadcraft 2019), and in his connection she describes how black women confront systematic forms of racism that increase mortality. “Black women are subjected to disproportionate sexual assault, community violence, and public sexual aggression,” she writes, adding that they are also “disproportionately targeted for long-acting contraceptives and child removal policies.” (Threadcraft 2017, 555). The point, Threadcraft stresses, is not that murder is not an issue for black women. Black women are killed at higher rates than white men and are much more likely than white women to be murdered by a current or former male partner or spouse. But they are generally “killed in private, without witness or only witnessed by politically voiceless minors” (Threadcraft 2017, 573). While taking care to underline that the state is implicated in the higher rates of domestic and intimate partner violence that black women confront, Threadcraft impresses on us that here the state’s efforts are far more difficult to see and that anti-racist work dedicated to rendering this violence visible therefore confronts special obstacles (Threadcraft 2017 and 2019). So, we have good reason to fear that a focus on slain bodies will privilege “how cis men die, how young men die, how able-bodied blacks die, over all other black dead” (Threadcraft 2017, 554). By the same token, we have good reason to believe that the new necropolitical movement, “if it is not properly intersectional, may do little to change the problematic ways that state power intersects with the black female body as well as the production of the bodies of black female dead” (Threadcraft 2017, 554).

Medina’s larger body of published work exhibits a clear commitment to intersectional social inquiry that does justice to interplay among—inter alia—race-, gender-, sexuality- and class-based bias (see e.g. Medina 2012). But, within IRV, Medina says very little that would indicate an awareness of how his remarks might benefit from considering violence against black women. In a note, he mentions Kimberlé Crenshaw’s #SayHerName campaign, which focuses on black women and girls who are killed by police officers and aims to correct, in his words, “the disparity between the ways in which male and female victims are treated by the media and by society at large.” Here he rightly calls for greater recognition of cases in which police violence is visited upon black women. But as a political stratagem, this gesture is, Threadcraft shows us, importantly and desperately incomplete. Far fewer black women than black men are killed by police. At the same time, black women are killed at awful rates, and they are made to face many substantial social challenges. It follows from “the intersectional complexity” of the issues, Threadcraft writes, that “if those concerned with how power acts on the black female body want to keep the focus on the state and state violence in a way that is gender inclusive, they cannot focus exclusively on death and the production of dead bodies” (Threadcraft 2017, 569).

These reflections of Threadcraft’s demonstrate the need to think carefully about the implications of prioritizing—as Medina does in IRV—lynching and police violence against men in a discussion of anti-black racism. At the same time, they suggest the need to further develop Medina’s analysis of the ideological significance of the “hypervisibility” of this violence. While Medina is surely right that this hypervisibility results in a spectacularization that works as an ideological device of social acceptance, he might well have said more about how hypervisibility has also presented activists who are trying to re-signify violent acts with an opportunity in the form of prominent forum for their work. The recognition of this opportunity is no doubt what the activists associated with #SayHerName—including Crenshaw, the activist-theorist who introduced the term “intersectionality” into the critical lexicon, and whom it would be absurd to represent as failing to

appreciate the need for intersectional analyses of oppressive structures—have been willing to take police killings as a point of departure. But this recognition has got to be complemented by the further recognition that those who are trying to counter less visible forms of anti-black violence face distinctive and urgent challenges.

(2) Should we qualify or elaborate on things that Medina says about the role of visual images in anti-black racist ideology as well as in resistance to such ideology? One of Medina's main theoretical claims in IRV is that we should equip ourselves with a conception of ideological forms of consciousness broad enough to accommodate visual material. More specifically, in connection with his focus on violence against black men in the early to middle twentieth century, he emphasizes the ideological role of postcards and pamphlets with images of lynchings, and also the efforts of activists to reclaim these images, radically altering their meanings. Notice that, if we stick with Medina's focus on the first half of the twentieth century, while surveying a broader array of faces of anti-black racism, we can easily find not only further visual material that functions ideologically but also efforts to use visual material in the service of ideology critique. For instance, within the world of white-produced film, there is a whole racist tradition, led by D.W. Griffith's 1915 *The Birth of a Nation*, and there are also contemporaneous, black-led efforts at resisting, specifically through film, this ideological visual onslaught—efforts such as the work of the Lincoln Motion Picture Company and the productions of Oscar Micheaux (see Taylor 2015, esp. 50; see also 41 and 59-60 on the “whitely gaze” in film). Additionally, if we want to examine the ideological use of visual images for anti-black police violence today—this is a topic Medina touches on in passing but doesn't explore—we would need to acknowledge that we now inhabit an image-soaked world and that visual depictions of police killings and their victims can be found, not only in newspapers and on television but all over the web and on social media, where individuals interact with and share them in many different ways. At the same time, we would need to describe how the re-signifying strategies of anti-racist activists have grown correspondingly more sophisticated, and here we might mention, e.g., the tactically brilliant use of Twitter by activists connected with BLM (see, e.g., Threadcraft 2017, 557-559) or, alternately, the likewise strategically deft contributions to documentary and narrative film by BLM-associated artists such as Ava DuVernay and Barry Jenkins (thanks to Sophie Smith for this last point).

It is reasonable to assume that one of Medina's motives for including visual artefacts within his theory of ideology is to make room for the recognition that the ideological contestation surrounding anti-black racism has a visual dimension far beyond his primary case of lynching. Nevertheless, it's helpful to go beyond IRV and touch on some of the myriad ways in which anti-racist artists and activists have combatted visual ideologies with visual devices of their own. This is helpful in part because it positions us to recognize connections between black critics' anti-ideological use of visual resources and the pivotal role of ocular tropes within emancipatory black social thought. The idea that one of the insidious effects of white supremacy is to make black experience invisible, and, further, that a core liberating aim of anti-racist cultural commentary and expression should be to make this experience visible, is a leitmotif of the work of black social critics and artists at least as far back as the early writings of W. E. B. Du Bois with his notions of the “veil” and of “second sight” (Du Bois 2014 [1903]). This emancipatory, ocular-oriented tradition includes—to mention just a selection of notable works—Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (Ellison 1995 [1947]), Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (Morrison 1970), Michele Wallace's *Invisibility Blues* (Wallace 1990), Lewis Gordon's “Existential Dynamics of Theorizing Black Invisibility” (Gordon 1997) and Charles Mills' *Blackness Visible* (Mills 1998). Moreover, the idea of the simultaneously hypervisibility and invisibility of black lives—the paradox Medina takes as his central problematic—is a guiding theme of this literature. For instance, Paul Taylor sounds this theme when he describes a social phenomenon, familiar under

white supremacy, in which “whiteness becomes invisible, while blackness becomes hyper-visible, even as the complex personalities of individual black people disappear from view” (Taylor 2016, 34).

There may seem to be a misfit between the ocular tendency of this important anti-racist corpus and Medina’s concerns, since Medina is concerned with artefacts that are literally visual—and since, within the literature in question, the idea of visibility is in many cases metaphorical. It sometimes picks out forms of social salience and comprehensibility that aren’t in any straightforward sense matters of perception. The idea is sometimes that of arriving at an understanding of systematically unjust social arrangements so that the injustice is internal to the way those arrangements are grasped and their organization is understood. In other cases, the idea of visibility, while still metaphorical, refers to non-visual modes of perception such as hearing. The authors in question are open to the possibility of, e.g., hearing suffering in someone’s words that previously went unheard. But in yet other cases, the forms of visibility and invisibility addressed are quite literal. These anti-racist critics are sometimes concerned with literally seeing things—e.g., forms of violence, marginalization and exploitation—that previously went unseen. It matters that there is, in this respect, a clean fit between the concern with the ideological significance of invisibility and visibility in a venerable anti-racist literature because there is good reason to think that Medina might have improved on his view of what effective critique of racist ideology is like by attending to some central themes of this corpus.

(3) Consider, again, what Medina presents as IRV’s distinctive contribution to the theory of ideology. As already noted, he says he wants to persuade us that ideological consciousness involves not only a “collection of beliefs” but also “embodied orientations in the world and affective attitudes.” This move—with its stress on practical attitudes and modes of responsiveness—is supposed to enable us to do justice to the material aspect of ideologies. That is, it is supposed to capture the fact that, far from being merely intellectual affairs, ideological systems shape and are shaped by the world, with the result that the world they seem to reveal can strike us as all too real. A core theme of IRV is that, once we register the role that visual images play in the production of ideologies, we are in a better position to recognize this affective and practical aspect of ideologies—since visual material often works not (or not solely) by getting us to accept new beliefs but by leading us to place new importance on and respond differently to the world around us.

Within the ‘new’ discussions about ideology to which this volume is devoted, the idea that ideological forms have significant affective as well as cognitive components is in fact relatively widely accepted. This idea shows up, for instance, in the work of Stanley—one of the theorists from whom, as we saw, Medina takes his cue—leaving its imprint on Stanley’s conception of ideology critique. If we are to appreciate Stanley’s distinctive conception of ideology critique, we need to know not only that he holds that ideologies have material, attitudinal or affective, dimensions but also that he accepts a philosophical outlook on which attitudes have a necessary tendency to interfere with our perception of the world and on which they therefore cannot internally inform undistorted beliefs about the world. Because Stanley thinks that affect plays a role in the ideological distortion of belief, he holds that affectively charged methods are at times necessary for contesting ideologies and arriving at accurate and politically acceptable beliefs; because he has no room for the idea that the internal exploration of particular attitudes might be necessary for getting—entirely real—feature of the world into view, he maintains that these methods are essentially non-rational and hence at best transitional instruments for eliminating ideological obstacles to undistorted beliefs which, as he conceives them, are essentially neutral. Stanley sometimes makes this point by speaking of “propaganda.” He takes all propaganda to be non-neutral and therefore non-rational and politically problematic, yet he allows that some benign or, in his parlance, ‘non-demagogic’ kinds of

propaganda may be transitionally necessary for combating ideological formations that distort our beliefs (see, e.g., Stanley 2015, 57; for a discussion of this portion of Stanley's work, see Crary 2017). Should we read Medina as, in IRV, endorsing a Stanley-style view of ideology critique? It is difficult to answer this exegetical question because Medina never clearly lays out his own understanding of the relation between cognition and affect. However, given that he uses Stanley's work on ideology critique as a reference point—and, given that elsewhere (see, Medina 2012) he uses as a reference point relevant aspects of the work of a theorist, Miranda Fricker, with a fundamentally similar view of ideology critique (for critical discussion of Fricker, see Crary 2018 and Mills in this volume)—it is at least not unreasonable to read Medina as conceiving ideology critique roughly as Stanley does. If we incorporate Medina's very plausible understanding of the ideological power of the visual into a Stanley-style account of ideology critique, we arrive at an understanding of such critique on which affectively charged, materially weighty methods, including some visual materials (e.g., the NAACP anti-lynching pamphlets), may at times be necessary for dismantling ideological formations that distort our beliefs—and on which, because these methods cannot internally contribute to world-guided beliefs (which are here taken to be essentially neutral), the methods are at best transitional measures. The trouble is that there is good reason to think that ideology critique, thus conceived, is incapable of illuminating and informing resistance to racist and other oppressive ideologies.

A very different and politically more promising understanding of ideology critique gets articulated in different places in the body of emancipatory black social criticism, touched on above, that anticipates Medina's IRV in its use of tropes of visibility and invisibility to capture black experience under white supremacy. A good place to look for an articulation of this understanding of ideology critique is the work of Charles Mills. At the heart of Mills' view is an understanding of the relationship between cognition and affect very different from Stanley's. Mills starts from the idea—which he associates with Marxist and feminist as well as black epistemologies—that we may need to at least imaginatively enter into the evaluatively loaded, social and cultural perspectives that members of disfavored social groups are obliged to occupy in order to bring entirely real aspects of the social world into focus (Mills 1998, esp. Chapter 2). Mills agrees with Stanley and others that we need affectively charged resources (such as, say, visual ones) to combat the material weight of ideologies. But, helping himself to the idea that attitudes can internally inform cognition, he departs from these theorists in rejecting the view that evaluative perspectives invariably veer toward obstructing our access to reality—and, at the same time, in suggesting that this view is politically dangerous, specifically insofar as it serves to discredit social and historical perspectives that contribute internally to illuminating the lives of the oppressed. With regard to racist oppression in particular, Mills's point is that the patterns of conduct constitutive of many racist injustices (e.g., many forms of race-based marginalization, harassment, and exploitation) are only clearly recognizable as the injustices they are when considered in a manner informed by a sense of the awful significance of forms of social vulnerability that systematic racism produces. Mills appeals to this point in laying claim to an idea—one that he finds anticipated in, among other places, Du Bois's talk of "second sight"—about a sense in which those who are subjected to racist oppression, because they are forced to suffer the social exposure it creates, are better equipped to understand the unjust social world they inhabit and thus enjoy significant epistemic privilege (see Mills in this volume, esp. his discussion of Du Bois's reworking of Plato's Cave Allegory in *Dusk of Dawn*). Mills appeals to the same point in insisting that individuals socially identified as white encounter enormous obstacles in making sense of the systematically racist social arrangements from which they benefit and that they are overwhelmingly likely to be limited by what he calls "white ignorance" (Mills 2007 and 2015). These observations about the epistemic significance of racism in particular, and of oppression more generally, bring within reach an understanding, very different from Stanley's, of what effective ideology critique is

like. Now it seems clear that use of the materially effective, non-neutral (sometimes visual) resources that interest Medina should not be seen as a merely instrumental strategy for arriving at an ideologically less distorted view of society. It seems clear that effective critique must involve mobilizing cultural perspectives from the lives of individuals subject to racist oppression—because these perspectives are essential for bringing aspects of social life under white supremacy into view.

It is possible that Medina will simply want to accept all of this, though, in order to explain his ability to do so, he would have to clarify his view about the relation between affect and cognition. Additionally, he would have to account for his willingness to present himself as inheriting his understanding of ideology critique in large part from scholars like Stanley (elsewhere: Fricker) to whom the powerful Millsian understanding just outlined is quite foreign.

Notice that there is a straightforward connection between these theoretical reflections about the need to revise, or at least fundamentally clarify, Medina's understanding of ideology critique and the political point, made earlier in reference to Threadcraft's work, about the need for a more intersectional account of anti-black violence than Medina gives us. If—out of a theoretical commitment to developing a satisfactory understanding of ideology critique—we say that the effective exposure and critique of racist violence needs to involve evoking and marshaling cultural perspectives from the lives of people who are subject to such violence, we should hasten to add—out of a political commitment to fighting racism in a way that doesn't simply reinforce existing hierarchies—that the relevant perspectives need to include those of people whose experience of anti-black racist violence is inseparably bound up with the experience of other (e.g., race-, gender-, age-, sexuality-, ability-, class- and religion-based) structural forms of bias.*

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