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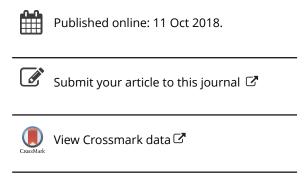
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White Norm, Black Deviation: Class, Race, and Resistance in America's "Postracial" Media Discourse

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ABSTRACT

The authors deploy Marxist theory—and Gramscian hegemonic theory in particular—to investigate the subtleties of racial "othering" in the media representations of African Americans in a putatively postracial America. The paper's objects of inquiry are an opinion article in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* and the reaction it instigated in the *Atlanta Black Star*. We argue that the contestations of signification between the dominant narrative about African Americans in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* and the rhetorical pushback it actuated in the alternative *Atlanta Black Star* both reproduce and legitimate dominant media framing by highlighting the alterity of subordinate ethnic groups and providing a site for contestation.

Although there has been a remarkable improvement in race relations and the invidious representations of African Americans in America's dominant media formations, the "othering" of African Americans hasn't waned. Whatever improvements have been witnessed over the last few decades have been undermined by "backlashes, unsettling patterns of benign neglect, and new, subtler forms of racial hostility" (Squires, 2009, p. 4). One of the subtler forms of racial hostility is located in "ethnic blame discourse" (Romer, Jamieson, & De Coteau, 1999; van Dijk, 1993a), which disproportionately associates the commission of crime with African Americans and other minorities and associates crime prevention and containment with White people. This sort of discourse also entrenches the kind of racialized social privilege that normalizes, individualizes, and renders invisible the social deviations of individuals with a visible White racial identity but exteriorizes the infractions of socially deviant Black people to the entire African American community.

However, although the scholarship on the representation of African Americans in the media is robust, there is scant disciplinary conversation between Marxist media theory and representations of race, particularly of African Americans, in the media. We fill this gap in this study by exploring Marxist media theory and showing how it might explain the intersections of race, class, and representation. We do this by reading an apparently benign but prototypic racialist portrayal of African Americans in an Op-Ed article in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, Metro Atlanta's only metropolitan

newspaper. The Op-Ed chronicles the experiences of a White Atlantan who rode the city's racially segregated public transport operator called the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority or MARTA. The article elicited an impassioned response from the *Atlanta Black Star* (*ABS*), one of Atlanta's alternative Black online newspapers that "reaches over 8 million unique visitors per month."[1] Without seeking to undermine capitalism as a whole, The *ABS* challenges hegemonic ideas regarding Black people. It openly questions this by providing new frames that challenge the general ideas about African Americans in particular and Black people in general. To be sure, this is not new. There is a long history of the Black press's sustained fight against racism in the United States (see, e.g., Pride & Wilson, 1997), but we argue that internet-enabled spaces for the articulation of dissent and Black subjectivities are creating new possibilities to engage with and challenge certain hegemonic ideologies of capitalism.

We deployed critical discourse analysis to lay bare the implicit but nonetheless potent racial power and hierarchies that inhere in the discourses of the two newspapers. As Norman Fairclough (1995) points out, social practice and language use not only embody the dominant value systems in the society but are often mutually self-reinforcing. Critical discourse analysis is useful to unpack unstated, unexamined assumptions and predispositions and to expose the unspoken cultural and discursive assumptions that legitimate power structures and marginalize the subaltern (Wodak, 2001). Systems of domination, such as racism, naturalize and reproduce themselves through what is written and said, and this fact justifies the choice of discourse analysis as the methodological apparatus of choice to make this visible. Foucault's (1977, 1980) enduring insight that power abides in quotidian social practices underscores the need for a method that makes explicit how individuals are inexorably embedded in hegemonic practices and how their speech acts, social conventions, and the lenses with which they appropriate social reality inflect and reflect this fact. Briscoe (1999, p. 6) extended this notion when he said, "Social actions and the power relations enacted through them are largely (re)produced and organized through discourse."

van Dijk (1993c) also asserted that, "For the new discipline of *discourse studies itself*, the study of the discursive reproduction of racism through text and talk provides not only a highly relevant field of application, but also more insight into the relations between various structures of text and talk on minorities on the one hand, and the mental, sociocultural, and political conditions, effects, or functions that is, various contexts of the reproduction of racism on the other hand" (p. 93; emphasis original). Because discourse analysis is, in the main, concerned with appropriating the signification of "text in context," it is particularly suited to understanding media portrayals of race, "and especially that of prejudice and ethnic stereotyping … the social cognitions, interpretations, and attribution processes of white dominant group members" (van Dijk, 1993c, p. 94).

Racism as a form of control in capitalism

A starting point for a Marxist media theoretical reflection on race and media is the recognition that the mainstream media serve as part of the ideological state apparatus that legitimize and reproduce the capitalist mode of production, a mode of production that

depends on the exploitation of the working class by the ruling class (Althusser, 1984). In the United States, slavery and racism, which lubricate the engine of the dominant mode of production, have played major roles in the exploitation of the African American population. However, two powerful frames are presented to the general public to suture the contradictions between the ideals the society professes to uphold and the reality of the systemic marginality of the African American population. The first is the idea that racism in the American society has ceased to exist and that any negative situations African Americans might find themselves in is purely the result of their personal choices (Hart, 2013). The second is the idea that African Americans evoke fear and are often portrayed as dangerous and criminal, which justifies their murder by police officers (Willet & Willet, 2013). The reproduction of these frames, through which African Americans are depicted in mainstream media, is carried out and explained by the general characteristics of the journalistic field (Bourdieu, 1994, 1997, 2005), which are linked to the hegemonic ideology (Gramsci, 2000) and the idea of media as a commodity, playing by the rules of profit (Murdoch & Golding, 1977). Furthermore, processes of culling information, like agenda-setting (McCombs, 1977) as well as processes of framing (Goffman, 1974; Entman, 2007), help set up the general ideological framework (van Dijk, 1987, 1989, 1991).

Slavery and its aftermath, racism, are foundational to capitalism, although slavery precedes capitalism. If racism is the byproduct of slavery (Williams, 1944), and not the other way around, and slavery was a fundamental characteristic of the emergent capitalist epoch (Marx, 1847), it is easy to see that racism inheres in capitalism as a form of control. Cedric Robinson (1983/2000), however, states that racism was a fundamental part of pre-capitalist society, which means both capitalism and racism evolved simultaneously to create what might be called a system of racial capitalism. Even though slavery as an economic system is found throughout human history, capitalism commodified and racialized it for profit. The cotton industry in the United States directly helped create world trade and large-scale industrial mode of production (Marx, 1847). At a point, the United States produced 80% of the world's cotton (Temperley, 1977). This cotton industry, which gave the United States its place in modern world trade, became the foundation of the economic system in other parts of the world (Marx, 1867).

One of the characteristics of this system, in addition to the cruel dehumanization of slaves, was the drastic diminution in the wages of paid laborers. White workers had to compete with slaves who provided forced and free labor, which had the effect of lowering their wages (Douglass, 1855). Slavery as a system, then, also oppressed workers as a group and vastly benefitted employers and slaveholders. It is fair to say that the wealth created in the eighteenth century by slavery, however, helped create the industrial capitalism that would bring the slavery-based economic system down after the Civil War (Williams, 1944). It is also important to mention that lofty universal ideals such as freedom, justice, and democracy that capitalism touted to legitimize itself were at odds with the institution of slavery upon which it was founded. The contradiction between the ideals capitalism professed to cherish and embody and the brutality and invidiousness of slavery soon proved combustible and became the basis for the fight against slavery in the United States (Temperley, 1977). The Reconstruction Era, after the Civil War, tried

to create a society in which recently freed men would have a place, for example, through political representation in state and federal legislatures (DuBois, 1935).

However, racist ideas, such as the notion of White superiority and Black inferiority, which were instilled after the institution of slavery to justify the system of oppression of Black people by the White power structure, endured even when the institutions they openly supported crumbled (Williams, 1944). These perceptions, too, have the capacity to affect institutional policies retroactively (Kendi, 2016). The relationship between White and Black workers remained troubled. Racism, created for the institution of slavery and rooted in the scarcity of resources that poor people had to fight for, engendered a deep distrust between White and Black workers (DuBois, 1935). As Douglass put it, "they divided both to conquer each" (Douglass, 1882, p. 337).

Racism, as van Dijk (1993b) pointed out, is a form of ethnic dominance. This dominance is, in Western societies, carried out by White people over other ethnic groups through asymmetries in social and symbolic power relations. Social power cannot be delivered without the implication of a dominant group controlling the cognitive conditions of a dominated group, thus creating an ideological framework that shapes social practices (van Dijk, 1989, 1991; Pettigrew, 2008). Nonetheless, one of the characteristics of our current society is that, generally speaking, blatant racial prejudices and vulgar, in-your-face slurs are not socially accepted, but subtle, insidious prejudice still persists (Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995; 1997).

The consignment of blatant racism to the fringes of polite society conduces to the perception that racism has evaporated or at least declined in modern-day America, and that the Civil War and the civil rights movement freed the United States from racism. Instances of racial discrimination tend to be individualized to the perpetrators, exculpating the institutional structures that enable and sanctify it (Anderson, Hoagland, & Leighton, 2013). However, almost 72% of the racially motivated hate crimes in the United States in 2012 were committed against Black people (Toporek, 2013). The number of African Americans locked up in penitentiary institutions is now greater than the number of slaves in 1850 (Anderson, Hoagland, & Leighton, 2013), and there are judicial mechanisms, such as the war on drugs, that extensively target African Americans (Alexander, 2010). These and many other facts belie the notions of postracial Nirvana that the American society putatively lives in. Nonetheless, the unwillingness to come to terms with the reality of systemic anti-Black racism encourages exculpatory discourses that grant the system immunity from guilt and instead shifts the blames to individual choices, which creates an irrational fear of Black people (Willet & Willet, 2013). In other words, the social circumstances Black people as a group find themselves in are ultimately the result of their choices. This fear, these perceptions of Black people, are the perceptions of the dominant race, which, by virtue of the dominant ideological framework, become the dominant perceptions (Hart, 2013).

The role of media as a form of control

As Marx and Engels (1932) pointed out, ideology is the direct result of the material conditions of a given society. Because of the relationship that the material conditions create between the elites and the subalterns in relations of production, the former have

control over the modes of production, which grants them the upper hand in the production and reproduction of ideas. As Mark and Engels (1932/1986) famously put it, "[t]he ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas" (p. 67). Ideologies, then, are forms of domination with real impacts in people's lives (Gramsci, 1971). However, Althusser (1984) argued that the representation of an ideology is not the perfect image of the modes of production, but an imaginary relation between the individuals and the relations with their environment, reshaping the idea that "material forces are the content and ideologies are the form" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 707).

The idea behind the concept of ideology is that society is not only ruled by force but by ideas too, linking public opinion to political hegemony (Bates, 1975). The social mechanisms that permit the reproduction of ideology, and hence the justification of capitalism and the social relations established within capitalism, are found in the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA: Althusser, 1984). The role of the ISA is to ensure the reproduction of the general consensus, the ideology and the submission of individuals to it, and this is done through several ideological institutions, along with physical/repressive ones, like schools, religion, the legal system, or the communications system. The ISAs show the dialectical relationship between the base and the superstructure and their mutually reinforcing reciprocity. Their ideology is, even within its contradictions and diversity, a unified ideology, in the sense that, ultimately, the basis of the system is never challenged. The prominent position of the ISAs and their role in the reproduction of the social relations was established, of course, as a result of the action of the repressive state apparatuses and the control of power by the elites, ensuring that all ISAs work towards the same goal: "the reproduction of the relations of production" (Althusser, 1984, p. 28).

The relationship between the base and the superstructure that the ISAs make clear is also seen through the process of mediation. Mediation is especially clear when it comes to the communications system, that is, the news media. It involves an active and substantial process in social mediation, in which the object is not merely an intermediary between the base and the superstructure but also a producer of meaning (Williams, 1977). Knowledge can and might be extrapolated from objects other than facts since facts themselves are mediated through society (Adorno, 1969), which means that the way things are perceived may change depending on the prevailing modes of production. The importance of mediation in the media is underscored by the fact that the media are often the collective receptacle of society's knowledge, which is often inflected by the self-interest and culture of bourgeois society (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944). Cultural commodities are ruled by their relationship with economic value and profit (Adorno, 1991).

Murdoch and Golding (1977) pointed out that the logic of profit and loss within the media system regulates media content more effectively than overt proprietorial control. Ideology is reproduced through the dissemination of ideas in the media, but the reward of profit and the torment of loss limit the number of outlets that might challenge capitalist ideology, which makes economic factors important instruments in the reproduction of capitalism. The number of available media outlets tends to decrease as market forces winnow out commercially unviable media and as concentration of media groups become more prevalent. This logic helps established groups to become even more

dominant since the voices of dissent tend to be excluded by the logic of capitalist market. This is largely understood as a valued form of property for political and economic power (McQuail, 1977), especially because of the symbolic value of the message (Hall, 1982). The media are valued as a form of power because they offer fast, flexible, and relatively easy ways to command society; their control over information allows the elites to have channels where legitimacy, status, persuasion, or attention to certain topics can be managed (McQuail, 1977). There is, then, an alignment between the interests of the media and the elites because of the status of the media as big business. The traditional media, consequently, are likely to be favorable towards the interests of private businesses while at the same time being dependent on the market for long-term sustenance. This shows a strong relationship between the advertising sector and the media, making the advertising prices for top-level media higher than those with audiences of low incomes, which ensures that top-level media can survive with smaller circulation whereas low-income media need large audiences and safe content to appease both advertisers and a diverse audience (Westergaard, 1977).

So the media sector, in essence, is controlled both in an ideological and a practical sense, and it is easy to understand it if we remember that ideology is not reproduced in an idealistic fashion but a materialist one, that is, because ideology is found in apparatuses and practices, it has a material existence (Althusser, 1984). Adorno (1991) reminded us that cultural products are the result of the ideological reproduction of capitalism but that their value is realized in the market, thus playing by the rules of profit and loss. The value of this approach is that it merges both culturalist and political economy approaches to media theory (Kperogi, 2015). Dissent within the dominant media system is either absent or pushed so far to the fringe as to be ineffective and considered antithetical to common sense or the norms of civilized society (CCCS Mugging Group, 1993).

Mechanisms of control in the media

Journalists practice journalism within a specific set of conditions, conditions that are set by the objective relations between the journalists, the actors around journalism, and the corporate and cultural elites. This set of conditions is what Bourdieu (1994) understood as the field of journalism, which, as any other field, is an ideological field of play with contending forces struggling to control it. In the case of the field of journalism, the two forces at stake are commercial imperatives and idealized notions of professional journalism (Bourdieu, 1994). Commercial journalism succumbs to market demands whereas news-driven professional journalism cherishes the notion of ideational independence. However, one of the main characteristics of the field of journalism is that the media reproduce the general cultural consensus by following each other's approach to content creation (Bourdieu, 1997), which decreases the amount of innovation and dissent within the field. One of the situations that clearly shows the field of journalism succumbing to market demands, or economic constraints, is audience research and ratings (Bourdieu, 2005). Audience research and ratings reveal the mechanism whereby media constantly look out for each other, that is, if the economic constraints demand high ratings, different outlets will tend to offer content that has been proven to deliver them.

The relationship between the field of journalism and the field of power and the subjection of the former to the latter (Benson, 2006) call attention to concerns about autonomy and the fight for maintaining control over journalistic rules (Benson, 2009) and the power to make sense of the social world as part of the cultural field (Champagne, 2005). A mechanism that the media utilize to increase ratings and hold their audiences captive is the deployment of mutually exclusive, binary categories to explain the world. Thus, adjectives like masculine/feminine, high/low, etc. (Bourdieu, 2002) are used to create notions of a world divided into simplistic, opposing categories. The dominant discourse of racial difference in the media, which helps reproduce racist ideas about minority groups, can be located in this schema.

This set of characteristics found in the field of journalism translates into concrete practices. One of the most important journalistic practices is the process of framing, a process through which some ideas are made dominant over others. Frames are basic elements that give sense to social life (Goffman, 1974). Framing in the media, then, is a process of choosing certain aspects and elements to create a specific narrative that leads to particular interpretations (Entman, 2007), interpretations that are important because of their power to turn into thoughts, conclusions, and possibly actions (Gross & D'Ambrosio, 2004). Two important situations need to be addressed here. The first is that the process of framing enhances the importance of certain ideas, making some issues more salient than others (Entman, 2010, Scheufele, 2000). The second, perhaps more important, point is that frames do not impose ideas that do not resonate with prior ideas or attitudes, and are strongly correlated with familiarity about news events and issues (Gang et al., 2009). The idea here is that collections of frames are established, which then become ideological devices that journalists select to introduce issues (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). The journalists, however, need to choose a frame out of a whole collection of possibilities (van Gorp, 2007) while being influenced by internal and external factors (de Vreese, 2005). It is easy to see a correlation between framing processes and the mechanisms of control and reproduction of capitalism. Clearly, capitalism will establish a set of frames, through the mechanisms already explained, favorable towards itself, and will label any dissent with frames that protect the current system (CCCS Mugging Group, 1993).

Another mechanism of control in the media is explained by the agenda-setting theory. The media emphasize certain elements or issues over others, giving visibility to what the media come to think of as relevant and important (McCombs, 2001). In other words, agenda-setting is the capacity of the media to influence the salience of certain subjects by telling the audience and readers what to think about (McCombs, 1977). By repeating certain elements and messages in the news every day, the audience gets influenced by the media, making these issues move from the media's agenda to the public's one. Agenda-setting details the process by which the media place importance over certain issues, which leads people to perceive those issues as more important than others (Coleman & McCombs, 2007). However, "if an issue does not resonate with the public, it will not appear on the public agenda regardless of its prominence on the media agenda" (McCombs, 1997, p. 437).

The agenda-setting influence finds its origins in news norms, the influence of other media, and the daily implementation of these news norms, that is, the journalistic

practices and intermedia effects as well as local influences from local communities in the case of local media (McCombs & Funk, 2011). Both framing and agenda-setting shape the way the audience reacts to an issue by portraying it in a certain way (McCombs & Valenzuela, 2007). Framing, however, is better understood in a symbolic way because it is through framing that social knowledge is constructed. From the framing point of view, the media are not neutral transmitters but structural agents that use predetermined frames to conceptualize reality and offer it to their audience (Sádaba, 2001). Along with agenda setting, framing makes some pieces of information readily available and more chronically accessible to our collective thought processes than others while dealing with the salience of the issues by the frequency of certain topics (Kim, Scheufele, & Shanahan, 2002).

The importance of these mechanisms is found in the way journalism reproduces ideas within capitalism by playing by the market rules and turning the ideological conditionings into actual journalistic practices with material consequences. "To construct *this* rather than *that* account required the specific choice of certain means (selection) and their articulation together through the practice of meaning production (combination)" (Hall, 1982, p. 64).

Racism in the media

Everything that has been explained up until this point shows a situation in which racism as a form of control is reproduced by the mechanisms of control within the media, which, in turn, is understood as an ideological state apparatus that reproduces capitalism ideologically. To sum up, the media reproduce racism as a form of control because they are an ideological state apparatus that reproduce capitalist ideology, thus producing ideologically charged content.

This ideologically charged news production is the consequence of a multiplicity of factors (van Dijk, 1991, 1993b): The majority of journalists in the United States are White, with only a token representation of minorities. Both White journalists and the numerically insignificant minorities who are nothing more than strategic tokens of inclusivity, were socialized into the dominant journalistic norms, which not only occlude the perspectives of subaltern groups but also refract the experiences of ethnic minorities from the lenses of the White power structure. In other words, they give disproportionate importance to White discourses and institutions, which affects and inflects the social cognition of the news and its models. For instance, a 2014 news census conducted by the American Society of News Editors (ASNE) "found that only 15% of daily newspapers surveyed in 2013 had a person of color in one of their top three newsroom leadership positions" (Stewart, 2015, para 3). And, as ASNE's diversity committee chair Karen Magnuson pointed out, "Unfortunately, the ASNE census shows the industry isn't making much progress. In fact, we're losing significant ground as minority populations continue to grow" (Stewart, 2015, para 3). The 2017 survey showed marginal gains over the 2013 figure. According to ASNE, "In 2017, minorities comprised 16.55% of employees reported by all newsrooms in our survey, compared to 16.94% in 2016. Among daily newspapers, about 16.31% of employees were racial minorities (compared to 16.65% in 2016), and 24.3% of employees at online-only news websites were

minorities (compared to 23.3% in 2016)" (ASNE, 2017, para 10). Although this represents a dramatic improvement, it is still disproportional to the population of minorities in the United States. But more than the numerical asymmetry between the representation of minorities in newsroom staffs and their percentage in the general population, the concerns, anxieties, and lived experiences of minorities are often distorted and presented from a White lens. In spite of the marginal spike in minority representation in newsrooms, a 2014 study by the American Press Institute and the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research showed that only 25% of African Americans and 33% of Hispanics said portrayals of their communities in mainline news organizations is accurate (American Press Institute, 2014).

The dominant White media selectively cover issues regarding minorities. Minorities become visible in the news only when they commit crimes or do things considered untoward and repugnant, thus linking minorities to problems and negative frames. Similarly, the news schemata deployed to cover stories about minorities, the way quotations are used, the semantics, style and rhetoric used, etc. all reproduce sets of frames that stereotype minorities and recent immigrants and link them to situations of vulnerability, marginality, or crime (Igartua et al., 2004; Román, García, & Álvarez, 2011; Wacquant, 2008).

It is clear that journalists are often interpellated into subject positions that predispose them to see and understand the events they cove from the professional, social, and cultural constraints of the societies they are a part of. The chronically accessed frameworks, stereotypes, and ways of seeing that they are socialized to internalize become the basis of a discourse production process (van Dijk, 1988). This journalistic ideology model is offset by the idea that the production of knowledge is always crafted on account of the interest of those in power or of those who want that power (Zelizer, 2004).

Two important points need to be made here. The first is that, although the media system and the field of journalism do not favor dissent, it is not impossible to find other approaches to journalistic practices. Local or regional journalism is one of the many examples of media outlets that approach media production through a different lens (Fabregat, 2016; Ferreira et al., 2011; Fontcuberta, 1997; Rouger, 2008). The other is the capacity of the internet to foster dissent (Coleman, 2015; Llamas, 2015). These two points show that there are platforms where dissenting, or nonmainstream, discourses can be heard, which may challenge the ideological discourses of capitalism. The next section instantiates one such example.

ABS

The *ABS* is an alternative online newspaper founded in 2012 in the city of Atlanta, Georgia. The paper defines itself as a "narrative company" that is set to "publish narratives intentionally and specifically to enlighten and transform the world."[2] It asserts that consciousness is developed through narratives and that its overriding goal is to "publish empowering narratives for all people of African descent and everyone who adheres to our culture." The manifesto lists the following seven principles:

1. We believe that all major social transformations in the history of the world have been linked to changes in the dominant narratives of the time.

2. We believe that the state of the world and the condition of our people, are functions of the dominant narratives of the day.

3. We believe that the condition of our people can be measurably improved by providing them with empowering narratives that will permanently alter their consciousness.

4. We believe that our own cultural values should serve as the dominant narrative in the minds of our people.

5. We seek to reverse the falsification of our people's consciousness by exposing and invalidating false and disempowering narratives.

6. We will create and distribute narratives to empower our people to be their best selves in all areas of civilized activity.

7. We will not publish content that will disempower our people.

The *ABS* makes explicit its intention to put forward narratives to empower Black people, which, taking into account the fact of the structural racism in the dominant media and the forms of ideological control they embody and reproduce, is a way to challenge racist narratives of the media and the society. The next section of this article analyzes the narratives and meanings of a concrete article published in the *ABS*. The selected article challenges the main ideas presented in a different article published by the mainline *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (*AJC*) in regards to race relations in Atlanta.

On the red line: A response to thinly veiled racism

On April 26, 2017, the *AJC* published an op-ed article by a White Atlanta suburbanite by the name of Melton Bennett titled, "On the Red Line: A daily racial transformation on MARTA,"[3] one of a series of articles the paper devoted "to covering both the tensions and the opportunities created by racial and ethnic change in Atlanta and Georgia." Because the article was an outside contribution, we don't make claims that it represents the opinions and reportorial temperaments of the *AJC*. The article depicted a train ride taken by a White suburban male to the airport and the interactions he encountered in the course of the ride. The writer described his train ride using a series of ideas that give a glimpse of his views on race relations in the city of Atlanta, ideas that perfectly match the frames that the hegemonic ideology disseminates about race in the United States.

Two days later, the *ABS* published a counter narrative[4] to the *AJC* article in ways that lay bare and challenge hegemonic discourses about Black people contained in Bennett's op-ed. The *ABS* response openly confronted the subtle, and not so subtle, racist ideas presented by the *AJC* article and made explicit some of the intentions that undergirded the article. This represents an illustration of the raison d'être of the article, outlined in the previous section of the article, that is, to actively encourage and promote narratives that empower Black people and that subvert invidious, stereotypical, and inaccurate narratives about Black people in the hegemonic, White-dominated media.

The *AJC* article started by highlighting the discomfort White passengers experienced on the train for sharing a common transportational space with Black people, and how Black and White people avoided each other. "I see the uncomfortable looks of white

people who think the black kid dressed like a gang member is going to sit next them, and then the sigh of relief as he passes by," he writes (Bennett, 2017). The article doesn't mention conflict, which would imply some kind of racial tension or racism, but division, which denies power relations and places equal responsibility on both sides.

The other idea that surfaces from the article is the irrational White fear of Black bodies and the reflexive pathologization of their culture, appearance, and expressive modes. The writer talked about encountering hip hop, poor grammar, and profanity-laden interpersonal communication on the train, and even judged the sartorial choices of the Black people he encountered on the train from the prism of dominant White society:

> It's not uncommon for me to watch an impromptu hip hop performance as the train treks south, a performance replete with phrases about violence, sex and race. The language changes, with poor grammar and offensive profanity being expelled by these groups of passengers, speaking loudly to be heard by everyone, almost as if they must exhibit some cultural difference to a captive audience to make sure they are seen and heard. (Bennett, 2017)

The writer also talked about how the hip-hop performances allowed him to hear the pain that Black people feel, wondering what Martin Luther King, Jr. would think if he were a rider on the MARTA train. At no point in the article did the writer reflect on the situatedness of his own view of the world, of the lenses with which he gazed at Black bodies, as captured in this sentence: "I absolutely feel like an outsider. There is nothing I can say. There is nothing I can do" (Bennett, 2017). He assumed his observations and points of view to be "normal." Levin-Rasky (2012, p. 93) called this sort of narcissistic discursive temperament "White solipsism," where "Whiteness works through processes of normalization by silently imposing itself as the standard by which social difference is known" and where "whiteness is assumed to arise from no particular social context and imply no bias in its knowledge about the world."

The *ABS* response to the *AJC* article echoes the notion of White solipsism. It challenges the notion of Whiteness as the center of society, Whiteness as the normal, and the use of Martin Luther King, Jr. as the standard to measure Black people. The first idea presented by the *AJC* op-ed centers around the question of whether Black people behave in a certain way to catch the attention of White people. The *ABS* challenges this narrative by expressing the subjacent idea behind that thought: That Whiteness is the core identity of the American society and other identities, in this case Black identity should appeal to the mainstream White identify. This allows the *AJC*'s op-ed writer to formulate opinions based on the way the behavior of Black people make him feel, that is, he expressed opinions and perceptions about other people while placing himself at the center of the analysis.

The *ABS*'s counter argument challenges the ideological framework and the social power taken and assumed by White people (van Dijk, 1989, 1991, 1993a), that is, the idea that racism does not exist in the United States (Anderson, Hoagland, & Leighton, 2013), which allows the writer, then, to make assumptions based on his personal experience without any awareness that he was engaging in a discourse of invidious othering, understood as the process of active differentiation between two subjects or groups in a

way that the "other" is oppositely defined in relation to the "self" (Fanon, 1952/2008). As the *ABS* editorial puts it,

> This is an example of the centering of whiteness—the positioning of white people's feelings, opinions, experiences and perceptions at the center of discussions and analyses on Black people. Rather than analyzing the Black passengers' reported behaviors using a culturally sensitive lens, the author instead places his whiteness at the center of this analysis and formulates hypotheses about Blacks based on how their actions make him, a white man, feel (Kenneey, 2017).

This clearly shows a situation of subtle prejudice in which dominant identities assume the capacity to judge other identities by defending their own views of the world (Pettigrew, 2008; Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995; 1997). In this case the writer assumes that he is entitled to have an opinion over other people's behavior, attitudes, looks, etc. simply because of his position in the social hierarchy. However, he is not aware of this fact, of the nature of his opinions, because of the same position that allows him to pose them. He is not conscious of his prejudiced opinions because of his position at the center of asymmetrical power relations by virtue of being a White male. This leads to the next main idea.

The writer institutes Whiteness as the standard through which all behaviors and appearances are judged. He assumes that there is a subjacent pain that he can hear in the actions and voices of the African Americans riding MARTA. The *ABS* argues that this narrative assumption is based on the fact that suburban Whiteness—and, we would argue, male suburban Whiteness—is the cultural norm, making all other identities deviant from the former. If the writer epitomizes normality it is easy to understand why White people were terrified, according to him, every time there was a possibility that a Black person might sit by their side on the train. This idea taps into certain White people's irrational fear of Black people. African Americans are regularly depicted as criminals and judged by structural situations that might drive certain actions, which are understood as invariably individual, conscious choices that lead to a blaming process and, ultimately, unreasoning fear because of the association of Black identity with crime (Willet & Willet, 2013). This is especially troubling because blaming processes and fear may help justify blatant racism, prejudice, or hate crimes (see Toporek, 2013). What the author does not consider, because of his view of Whiteness as the standard, is the structural situations that link certain Black people to crime (Alexander, 2010), and the historical reproduction of racist ideas that exteriorize the crimes of a few to the entire racial community (Kendi, 2016). A critical evaluation of the tone of the article makes obvious the fact that the writer thinks his opinions are correct because they are congruent with the dominant perception of Black people in mainstream White society, that is, the idea that the perceptions of the dominant race become the correct perceptions (Hart, 2013).

The third main idea deals with the sanitization and canonization of Martin Luther King by White society as a strategy to demonize Black countercultural practices. King is frequently put forward as the standard through which the behavior of African Americans should be measured. The *AJC* op-ed closes with the author wondering what Martin Luther King Jr. would think of all that he had seen on the train. "As the train crosses Auburn Avenue, I often wonder what MLK Jr would like to have experienced

on the MARTA train in 2017" (Bennett, 2017). The counter argument the *ABS* uses is that White society tends to use a sanitized version of who Martin Luther King Jr. was to guilt-trip Black people into acting in ways that would not upset White people, which is the opposite of what Dr. King did.

The sentiments expressed in the *AJC* article privileged the idea of personal responsibility (Anderson, Hoagland & Leighton, 2013), ignoring structural situations (Alexander, 2010; Toporek, 2013) and accepting the dominant perception as common sense (Hart, 2013) to extrapolate prejudiced thoughts (Pettigrew, 2008; Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995; 1997). The *ABS* clearly unpacked the racist and prejudiced ideas contained in the *AJC* op-ed, which emerged from the frames popularized by dominant media narratives about Black Americans. The *ABS* tried to counterbalance the distorted narrative about Black people that assumes and understands Whiteness as the standard to judge others' behaviors and attitudes, and it did so by pointing out the internal contradictions of the text itself. Nonetheless, in doing so, the *ABS* operated within the ground rules set by the article without transcending it. In other words, the rhetorical spat between the *AJC* op-ed and the *ABS* blurs a core structural component of capitalism: class. It is entirely plausible that the Black people the *AJC* op-ed writer described on MARTA were, or acted like, socio-economically marginal Black people. As Sanchez (1998) pointed out, the American transportational system can reflect social and economic class. In discussing America's transportational apartheid, Hess (2012) pointed out, "In Los Angeles, 92% of bus riders are people of color. Their annual median household income is $12,000" (para 2). He pointed out that 78% of MARTA's users are economically disaffiliated Black people and observed that, "As minority bus ridership rises, the racial stigma against the transportation form compounds. When Atlanta launched its Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA) system in the 1970s, some hissed that the acronym stood for 'Moving Africans Rapidly Through Atlanta'" (para 8; also see Baylor, 2000).

Although these facts are no conclusive proof that the MARTA riders the *AJC* op-ed writer describes are lower-class Black residents of Atlanta, it increases the chances that they are. Should that be the case, it means the writer racialized the idiosyncrasies of lower-class Black people. And the *ABS* took the bait. Not that *ABS* is a revolutionary, anticapitalist paper, to start with; its racialist, if warranted, raison d'etre, in fact, unwittingly helps keep capitalism alive by occluding class. Resisting racial hegemony without apprehending and laying bare its underlying structures fertilizes and reproduces it. American capitalism subsists on promoting narratives of racial hierarchies and differentiation, which makes trans-racial class unity difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. Capitalism can't be reformed or challenged if Black and White subalterns see themselves as irreconcilably different.

The op-ed promotes a fallacy of racial essentialism, that is, the idea that White and Black people inescapably behave in certain ways because of their race, irrespective of their social class. It fails to come to terms with the reality that lower-class White people exhibit characteristics that differentiate them from upper-class White people, just as upper or upper-middle-class Black people don't behave the way lower-class Black people behave. The *ABS* doesn't grapple with these nuances. Its racialist discourse, although justified and warranted, does no more than cement narratives of racial differentiation, which is a boon to the system that gave it birth.

Conclusions

The *ABS* clearly limits its role as a repository for counter-narratives about Black people in the media and in the society. One of the characteristic of the mainline media is the fact that they, in general, tend to have a White perspective (van Dijk, 1991, 1993b). The *ABS*, by having a newsroom of Black people who recognize and consciously resent the dominant professional norms of journalism, tries to offset the White perspective of the media. This White perspective translates into a set of frames that get reproduced and stereotype African Americans, linking them to crime (Wacquant, 2008), a set of frames that is already found within society, that is, a set of frames that resonate with prior ideas (Gang et al, 2009; van Gorp, 2007). In the case of Black people, the frames resonate, in a circular relationship, with the fear of African Americans and the idea of Black criminality (Hart, 2013). The *ABS* tries to fight these frames by putting forth empowering narratives and counter arguments against the frames that stereotype Black people. This was seen not only in the preamble and the manifesto but also in the way the article analyzed in this article challenged all the racist and prejudiced ideas that the *AJC* op-ed article used. Also, by focusing on topics that affect Black people, the *ABS* is bypassing the agenda-setting effect (see McCombs, 1977, 1997, 2001). In other words, the *ABS* is raising the salience of topics regarding Black people and not allowing the mainstream media to control this process. This fact is undermined, of course, by the comparatively limited reach of the paper and, by extension, most minority newspapers, although the horizontalizing effect search engines can have on online news complicates this.

The field of journalism tends to work toward maintaining the status quo of the field through the characteristics that were reviewed in previous sections of this paper. This field reproduction (Bourdieu, 1994, 1997, 2005) fosters the continuation of the frames that mainstream media use to depict African Americans. However, the *ABS* shows that the same characteristics that maintain the field can be used to disrupt it. By not placing more importance in one of the forces that define commercial journalism, and by not reproducing the established frames, the *ABS* is, to a certain degree, disrupting the field by providing alternative frames. We are not claiming that the *ABS* is completely disrupting the field of journalism, but it is clear that at least when it comes to the narratives about Black people, the *ABS* is actively constructing a counter argument that clashes with the characteristics of the field.

However, the *ABS* is also unwittingly helping to reproduce capitalism because it fails to focus on issues of class. The op-ed published by the *AJC* racialized behaviors that can also be explained by class, making the assumption that all Black people across the class divide have certain attitudes and behaviors that are inherently Black. What the author describes are behaviors that are more generally found among lower-class people. Different behaviors, of course, may be observed between Black people from different classes as well as between White people from different classes. The *ABS* fails to acknowledge these class differences in its response to the op-ed, racializing its article too. In this sense, resisting hegemonic racial discourses is perfectly legitimate, but the lack of acknowledgment of class situations might play a role in the reproduction of capitalism, which as we have seen, is based on racism (Marx, 1847; Temperley, 1977; Williams, 1944). That is, as DuBois (1935) and Douglass (1855, 1882) pointed out, capitalism uses

racial division and hatred between the Black and the White working class to maintain the same level of exploitation over the general working class. The social differences between Black and White workers are created and exacerbated to create this division, as capitalism cannot be successfully challenged if the working class as a whole see themselves as irreconcilably different because of race. By not identifying the social class dimension of the *AJC* op-ed, the *ABS* also reifies racial essentialism, thereby inadvertently falling prey of the same approach to race used by the mainstream media, hence acting as an ISA reproducing capitalism.

As mentioned earlier the ISAs provide the ideological basis to reproduce capitalism and hegemonic ideologies (Althusser, 1984; Gramsci, 1971). The *ABS*, by accepting the racialized discourses of the ISA as apparatuses that enable and help maintain a level of racism necessary in capitalism to reproduce itself is, to a certain extent, helping this reproduction.

Notes

1. https://www.linkedin.com/company-beta/9405049/
2. http://atlantablackstar.com/about-us/
3. https://www.ajc.com/news/local/the-red-line-daily-racial-transformation-marta/Uowu4tz4U1Qv2SLUFAIqQM/
4. http://atlantablackstar.com/2017/04/28/atlanta-psychiatrist-brilliantly-outlines-white-mans-thinly-veiled-racism-train-ride-black-people-wrong/

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