

IDA B. WELLS, "LYNCH LAW IN ALL ITS PHASES" (13 February 1893)

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Abstract: In her 1893 speech, "Lynch Law in All Its Phases," Ida B. Wells addressed a Boston audience on mob violence against African Americans. Wells adopted a rhetoric of objectivity, associated with male speakers, that allowed her to present a well-researched narrative supported with publications in the Southern white press. Appealing to patriotism rather than to sympathy, Wells stressed that the violation of the civil rights of any group threatened the rights of all citizens.

Key Words: Ida B. Wells, Mob Violence, Lynching, Rhetoric of Objectivity, Female Rhetoric, Civil Rights

There are few violations of civil rights more invasive than physical violence at the hands of a mob. It was this flouting of the African American's right to due process of law during the last decade of the nineteenth century that Ida B. Wells spent her life speaking out against. Although the 1893 speech, "Lynch Law in All Its Phases," is Wells's only complete extant address, over a period of nearly forty years, she delivered a succession of speeches on this topic to audiences in the United States, England, and Scotland. In discussing the act of lynching as a denial of civil rights, Wells drew on her experience as a journalist and assumed the persona of investigative reporter rehearsing these atrocities before an uninformed but sympathetic audience. She supported her claims with statistics and concrete details, most often recorded by eyewitnesses and published in the white press. As a result, these features, along with the indelicate content of rape and mob violence, created what many considered to be a masculine rhetorical style. I refer to it here as a rhetoric of objectivity that in its very starkness produced a strong emotional appeal and the call to action that Wells desired.

The Princess of the Press

Ida Wells's life, started in adversity and fueled by controversy, surely had a strong influence on her approach to rhetoric. Ida Bell Wells was born on July 16, 1862, in Holly Springs, Mississippi, the first child of Jim Wells and Lizzie Warrenton Wells. The Emancipation Proclamation, abolishing slavery in all states in rebellion, including Mississippi, was issued some two months later and took effect on January 1, 1863. The Wells family became politically active members of the Holly Springs community and sent all of their children to the local Freedman's Aid school, later named Rust University. In 1878, Ida Wells's parents and one infant brother died of yellow fever, and she found herself at sixteen parenting her five surviving siblings, a responsibility she chose over separating the family. She worked as a schoolteacher, first in her home county, then, in two Memphis area school systems, starting in 1883. Soon after the fifty-

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mile move to Memphis from Holly Springs, she sued the Chesapeake, Ohio and Southwestern Railroad for forcibly removing her from the ladies' train car, a process during which she bit the conductor's hand. Although she won the 1884 suit at the Circuit court level, the decision was reversed by the State Supreme Court.¹ She expressed her disappointment and her protective racial instinct in an April 11, 1887, diary entry: "I have firmly believed all along that the law was on our side and would, when we appealed to it, give us justice. I feel shorn of that belief and utterly discouraged, and just now if it were possible would gather my race in my arms and fly far away with them."²

During this same period Wells began to refine her rhetorical skills through elocution lessons with a private teacher and affiliation with a lyceum attached to the LeMoyné Institute-- a Memphis teacher preparatory school. She began to edit the lyceum newspaper, the *Evening Star*, and write for the Beale Street Baptist church weekly, *The Living Way*. Under the pen name "Iola," she wrote an article describing the lawsuit experience, which helped launch her career in journalism, using a combination of words and action to promote change. During the late 1880s, reprints of articles she wrote under the name "Iola" began to appear in other periodicals, including *The New York Age*, the *Indianapolis Freeman*, and the *Chicago Conservator*. At one point she edited the Home Department of *Our Women and Children*, a paper established by Baptist minister William J. Simmons. In June 1889, Wells acquired a one-third interest in the *Memphis Free Speech and Headlight*, along with the Reverend Nightingale of Beale Street Baptist and J. L. Fleming, who had brought the paper to Memphis from Arkansas.³ In 1891, Wells wrote an editorial criticizing the poor quality of the black Memphis school system where she was still a teacher, and as a result the school board did not renew her contract the following school year. This loss of employment actually gave Wells the time to pursue her deeper interest in journalism more fully. With the resignation of Reverend Nightingale, the *Free Speech* was no longer identified as a church paper and began to concentrate on political issues.⁴

In March of 1892, three of her friends, black Memphis entrepreneurs, were lynched. They had opened People's Grocery in direct competition with a white-owned store that had held a monopoly on the trade of the black population. After a series of racial incidents, the three were arrested for defending their store against the white citizens who wanted to put them out of business. Before the three had a chance to be tried in court, they were removed from their jail cells and murdered. Wells subsequently published a series of scathing editorials on the incident in the *Free Speech*, encouraging black citizens to move out of Memphis. Wells herself made several scouting excursions to various western locations. The paper was also filled with detailed news of the lynching and its aftermath, news reprinted in black newspapers across the country. In May of 1872, she published an editorial openly addressing the question of rape, in which she observed: "Nobody in this section of the country believes the old threadbare lie that Negro men rape white women. If Southern white men are not careful, they will over-reach themselves and public sentiment will have a reaction; a conclusion will then be reached which will be very damaging to the moral reputation of their women."⁵

Some white citizens in Memphis were angered by the editorial's claim that black men were being lynched on the pretense of rape, when in fact, the killings were racially motivated and perpetrated to prevent "Negro domination." Eventually that anger erupted in a mob attack that destroyed the newspaper office. Wells was fortuitously out of town at the time, attending

a church conference and visiting *New York Age* editor, T. Thomas Fortune. Fortune and the situation in Memphis persuaded her to relocate to New York and write for the *Age*.⁶

It was several years before Wells returned to Memphis. As a result of this sequence of events, Wells began to focus in earnest on lecturing and publishing articles on the consequences of mob violence. In October of 1892, a group of women from New York and Brooklyn held a fundraiser in her honor at Lyric Hall in New York City, where Wells was called on, as she recalls in her autobiography, "to deliver an honest-to-goodness address" and to relate the details of that "horrible lynching affair."⁷ As a result of the testimonial, Wells received close to \$500 towards reestablishing her career and it led to numerous other speaking occasions in such cities as Washington, D. C., Providence, Rhode Island, Wilmington, Delaware and, of course, Boston, Massachusetts, where she delivered the speech, "Lynch Law in All Its Phases," on February 13, 1893, at Tremont Temple.⁸

In the meanwhile, the news about the growing practice of mob violence had spread abroad and caught the attention of social reformers Catherine Impey and Isabelle Mayo. Impey, who met Ida Wells while attending the National Press Association meeting in Philadelphia, proposed to Mayo that they invite Wells to England to promote the antilynching campaign there. Wells immediately recognized the potential such a trip had for furthering her cause. Her pamphlet, *Southern Horrors*, had already been published in London in 1892 under the name *U.S. Atrocities*. Thus, on April 5, 1893, just six weeks after her Boston address, Wells left for Europe. She began her lecture tour in England and Scotland, returning again in March of 1894. Shortly after her first public lecture in Aberdeen, Scotland, the Society for the Recognition of the Brotherhood of Man (SRBM) was established. During her second tour of five months, she spoke on more than a hundred occasions and received considerable press coverage in the British papers. She sent reports of her experiences back to the United States through open letters to the *Chicago Conservator* and the *New York Age* and served as a paid foreign correspondent to the *Chicago Inter-Ocean*. When she returned to the States in July of 1894, she received a distinguished welcome from the black and white communities and interest in her antilynching campaign grew. She traveled across the country during the rest of 1894 working to keep the movement in the public consciousness. She also published several investigative reports between 1892 and 1900: *Southern Horrors* (1892), *A Red Record* (1895), and *Mob Rule in New Orleans* (1900).

In June of 1893, upon returning from England after the first tour, Wells moved to Chicago. It became the home base for her antilynching activities even though she remained a correspondent for the *New York Age*. Chicago was busy with preparations for the World's Columbian Exposition and Wells found herself again at the center of controversy regarding the sparse participation of African Americans. One response designed to influence world opinion was *The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition* (1893), a publication she authored collaboratively with Frederick Douglass, I. Garland Penn, and attorney Ferdinand L. Barnett, whom Wells married in June of 1895. Wells developed the publication at the suggestion of fellow journalist and jurist Albion Tourgée, who represented Homer Plessy in the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court case and with whom Wells had joined forces over the years in a variety of political projects.⁹ After her marriage and the birth of her four children, Wells spent less time on the road, though she remained active in political affairs, and centered more of her activities in Chicago.

From 1898 to 1902 Wells served as secretary of the Afro-American Council (originally the Afro-American League) and subsequently as chairman of its Anti-Lynching Bureau. The Council predated the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) as an organization with the specific purpose of fighting racial discrimination.¹⁰ Wells also participated in 1909 meeting of the Niagara Movement, leading to the organization of the NAACP. In 1910, Wells founded and became first president of the Chicago Negro Fellowship League, which aided newly arrived migrants from the South. From 1913 to 1916 she served as a probation officer of the Chicago municipal court. Wells's reformist activities led to her involvement in the suffragist movement. She organized the Ida B. Wells Club in 1893, later founded the Alpha Suffrage Club, and co-founded the Cook County League of Women's Clubs.¹¹

Wells continued to crusade against the denial of civil rights for the rest of her life. In 1918 she covered the race riot in East St. Louis, Illinois, and wrote a series of articles on the riot for the *Chicago Defender*. Four years later she returned to the south to investigate the indictment for murder of twelve innocent Arkansas farmers. She then wrote *The Arkansas Race Riot* (1920) and raised money to publish and distribute one thousand copies of her report. Throughout her final years, she continued to write. In 1928 Wells-Barnett began an autobiography, which was edited and published posthumously by her daughter, Alfreda Duster,¹² and she kept a diary in 1930 that depicts an active and vital woman attending meetings and lectures while campaigning for election to the Illinois State Senate. After a sudden illness, she died in Chicago on March 25, 1931.

The Context: "Baptized in Ice Water"

Wells says in her autobiography, *Crusade for Justice*, that the Tremont Temple speech of 1893 was her first to a white audience, an address, then, from the early period of her career as a public speaker.¹³ The speech was given at the Boston Monday Lectureship on February 13, 1893. The Monday lectureship was established as the result of the success of a series of lectures begun in 1875, by the Presbyterian orator, Reverend Falvius Joseph Cook and developed from popular Monday noon prayer meetings at Tremont Temple. Under the influence of its founder, the lectureship became a center of Boston intellectual life for over twenty years. The Reverend Cook delivered lectures, frequently to Tremont Temple audiences of over 2,500 people, on such topics as "Heredity," "Biology," and "Transcendentalism." Lectures were often preceded by a short address called a "Prelude on Current Events," covering subjects of "urgent political or religious importance," such as temperance, election fraud, Chinese emigration, Indian removal, and the exodus of blacks from certain areas. Cook likely invited Wells to speak for one of these preludes. He also accompanied her when she spoke at Boston's Charles Street A. M. E. Church and other venues thereafter.¹⁴

Just two weeks before Wells spoke at Tremont Temple, a spectacle lynching of Henry Smith, young black man, occurred in Paris, Texas, before a crowd of ten thousand. The gruesome details provided one of several examples she invoked in this address concerning the difficulty of putting a stop to the denial of civil rights. Wells's entire oratorical career developed in this climate of national racial hostility, manifested clearly in 1883, when the Supreme Court declared the Civil Rights Act of 1875 unconstitutional. The 1875 legislation was designed to protect the civil rights of African Americans, particularly in public facilities. This protection was

necessary after Emancipation in large part because of what became known as the black codes. Black code legislation was passed in all the former Confederate states in an effort to revert back to the conditions under slavery. Those who enforced them were driven by the belief that without the "civilizing" influence of close association with whites, blacks needed this legislation to keep them under control, to prevent them from robbing whites of what was left of their wealth, from raping their wives, and from generally seeking revenge for nearly three hundred years of oppression. Blacks were subjected to all sorts of brutalities and denied practically all freedom of choice. Codes in some states prohibited blacks from marrying whites, holding office, and voting. Blacks were required to work without pay if they were suspected of being truant from their jobs. In interactions with whites, they could not make insulting noises, speak disrespectfully or out of turn, dispute the word of a white person or decline to follow a command. In Louisiana, a black on the streets after ten in the evening had to pay a five dollar fine. Blacks were not allowed to preach or exhort to congregations of blacks without special permission. In South Carolina, the law decreed that no black man could pursue a profession other than common labor without a license, renewable annually. Blacks were not allowed to own any kind of weapons. In some states, blacks had to stand at attention when whites passed, step aside when white women were on the sidewalk, and remove their hats in the presence of whites. In *Black Reconstruction in America*, W. E. B. Du Bois described this tumultuous period in a chapter aptly titled "Back toward Slavery." He makes the point that much of black labor was reduced to unlimited exploitation. Wages were reduced by taxation, peonage, and caste.¹⁵ To further complicate matters, white laborers joined white landholders and capitalists against black laborers, beating the black laborers into subjection through various forms of intensified race hatred, including secret organizations like the Ku Klux Klan, the White League, and the Knights of the White Camellia. This period also produced an uneasy alliance between the former slaveholder and the poor white laborer. The white laborer might logically have united with the black laborer to push for better wages and working conditions, but this union never occurred, for while they shared a common economic need, the white laborer possessed the racial prerogatives associated with being white.

The aftermath of the Civil War was especially challenging since the contending parties now had to exist in close proximity. As a result, the post-Civil War went on secretly for many years. On the one hand, Emancipation freed Southerners from the burden of slavery, but it left the planters poor and with no method of earning a living except by exploiting black labor on the only remaining capital they had--their land. In their determination to restore white supremacy, Southern whites even used brute force to retain blacks found wandering on back, country roads. Not all of this violence involved lynching; there were crushed skulls and slashed and missing body parts. In some states bands of post-war Confederate soldiers roamed, helping to create a reign of terror in expression of their frustration over poverty and debt. Shooting a black man on a mule was as likely as shooting a rabbit scurrying across a field. Of course, black women as well as black men were subject to these abuses. Now that blacks could no longer be enslaved and put to work for profit, they were treated as if their lives meant little.¹⁶

Following on the heels of the Fourteenth Amendment, granting citizenship and civil rights to the formerly enslaved, and the Fifteenth Amendment, granting black males the right to vote, the Civil Rights Act of 1875 added the provision that citizens were "entitled to the full and equal enjoyment of the accommodations, advantages, facilities, and privileges of inns, public

conveyances on land or water, theaters, and other places of public amusement; subject only to the conditions and limitations established by law, and applicable alike to citizens of every race and color, regardless of any previous condition of servitude."¹⁷ In the civil rights cases of 1883, the Supreme Court ruled that the Fourteenth Amendment prohibited only government violations of civil rights, not the denial of civil rights by individuals unaided by the state. This ruling thus overturned the 1875 Civil Rights Act and formally ended any attempts by those in power to ensure the civil rights of blacks. It ushered in and, in fact, legitimized the mass denial of civil rights to blacks. The repeal signaled the restoration of white political control. Rayford Logan quotes journalist T. Thomas Fortune's comment that this court action made blacks feel as if they had been "baptized in ice water." Logan pointed out that "[p]ractically all relevant decisions of the United States Supreme Court during Reconstruction and to the end of the century nullified or curtailed rights of Negroes" and labeled this period the "nadir" or lowest point in the history of African American struggle.¹⁸

During this post-Reconstruction period, blacks could be arrested and imprisoned for almost nothing. Many of those imprisoned were then subjected to the convict lease system, whereby they were sold to the highest bidder, inhumanly treated by the guards, shackled together in box cars, and tracked by bloodhounds. Treatment within this penal system was tantamount to re-enslavement. The Southern states relapsed into barbarism. Whites were determined to deny blacks their most basic political, social, economic and constitutional rights. An epidemic of Jim Crow laws was another outcome of this post-Reconstruction era. Some southern states, for example, moved to legally impose segregation on public transportation, especially on trains. Black passengers were required to sit in specially designated cars known as "Jim Crow cars" or in some instances in the smoking car, even if they had first-class tickets. Ida Wells's 1884 lawsuit against the Chesapeake, Ohio and Southwestern Railroad, discussed above, grew out of this very restriction. In the 1890s, starting in Wells's own Mississippi, most southern states began more systematically to disfranchise black males by imposing voter registration restrictions requiring absurd literacy tests and poll taxes, ranging from one dollar per head in Georgia to three dollars in Florida. Blacks also tended to pay a higher proportion of taxes generally. Practically every former Confederate state adopted laws that segregated all aspects of life. For example, in 1910, Baltimore, Atlanta, Richmond, Dallas, Greensboro, Louisville and other cities passed laws designating certain blocks or districts by race and barring members of one race from living in an area assigned to the other.¹⁹

In addition to overt discrimination, lynching and murders reached staggering heights. It should be understood that although the term lynching was often associated with a variety of lawless punishments inflicted upon suspected persons, by the end of the nineteenth century, as James Cutler points out, it had come to mean "summary and illegal capital punishment at the hands of a mob" supported by community or public approval. It was this popular approval which distinguished it from murder, assassination, or insurrection.²⁰ Between 1890 and 1920, more persons were lynched than were legally executed. In 1892 alone, the year Ida Wells began her antilynching campaign, some 161 blacks were reported lynched, more than for any other single year.²¹ Rayford Logan estimates that the number of persons--mostly Southern blacks--lynched in the United States between 1882 and 1891 totaled 1,544.²² But of course the number was certainly much higher since many lynchings went unrecorded. Blacks could be found floating face down in the river, burned in their homes, hanging from trees, all resulting from

white rage. Southerners who took part in these abuses and those who supported them erected a series of untenable defenses of this brutal practice. For example, the prevailing argument that lynching was a crime perpetrated against black men suspected of raping or attempting to rape white women was clearly false. Less than 25 percent of those reportedly lynched between 1882 and 1946 had been so accused. Further, many of those lynched were women. From 1884 to 1903, some forty black women were lynched, charged with such crimes as murder, "well poisoning," "race prejudice," arson, and theft.²³ Moreover, the invisible victims of rape, particularly during Reconstruction, were black, not white, women. Testimony before a House of Representative committee investigating the Memphis riot of 1865, as well as testimony in 1871 related to activities of the Ku Klux Klan, document sustained violence against black women.²⁴ The climate of lawlessness affected the lives of Southern whites as well. An article in the December 30, 1891, *New York Times* describes a feud in Choctaw County, Alabama, between two white families resulting in several acts of violence. According to the article, the lynching of a black man involved in the lawless was barely noticed in all the violence taking place in a region where "human life has no more sacredness . . . where anybody who, for any cause, incurs the dislike of anybody else is liable to be deprived of his life without due process of law."²⁵ Thus, it was in this climate of general lawlessness and acute racial tension that Ida Wells spent her life fighting against lynching.

"Out of Their Own Mouths": A Rhetoric of Objectivity

In her speeches, Ida Wells argued that the absence of a general outcry against mob violence was due to ignorance on the part of some and disinterest on the part of others. She did not, however, suggest that most whites condoned the practice. Consequently, the rhetorical stance she aimed to project was one of objectivity. She understood her role as that of information gatherer, investigative reporter, and one who presented the facts in ways that were compelling enough to invoke various kinds of action-oriented responses. Accounting for her lack of nervousness while she and Frederick Douglass were waiting to speak at a November 1894 event in Providence, Rhode Island, she explained, "I am only a mouthpiece through which to tell the story of lynching and I have told it so often that I know it by heart. I do not have to embellish; it makes its own way."²⁶ Ellen Richardson, the Quaker activist who had helped Douglass legally acquire his freedom during an 1846 visit to England, wrote to him in 1894, with strong praise for Wells's rhetorical style. She observed that "[p]eople like her simple earnest way of stating her case." The "people," in this instance, were those who heard Wells speak during her second tour of England in the spring of 1894. Richardson called Wells "an efficient pleader" and Douglass "an orator," which tells us that Wells achieved the effect she desired; she was perceived as the objective source of information rather than the performer.²⁷ But, of course, Wells engaged rhetoric even as she created the impression of its absence.

The rhetorical style that Richardson described as efficient and direct others understood as masculine. In his 1893 biographical sketch of Wells, T. Thomas Fortune writes, "She is so much in earnest that there is almost an entire absence of the witty and humorous in what she writes. She handles her subjects more as a man than as a woman."²⁸ Rhetorical critic Karlyn Kohrs Campbell characterizes Wells's persona of objectivity as the product of a traditionally "masculine" style of speaking. Referring to her 1892 testimonial speech, "Southern Horrors,"

Campbell cites Wells's use of the irrefutable evidence of over fifteen examples, the statements of Southern whites, and the results of other newspaper investigations and observes that she invoked emotional response through argument rather than "exhortation." Campbell defines a feminine rhetoric as "inductive, even circuitous, moving from example to example, and . . . grounded in personal experience," a rhetoric frequently employing figurative analogies and an appeal to the Bible's authority. She adds that a "'feminine' speaker tends to plead, to appeal to the sentiments of the audience, to 'court' the audience by being 'seductive.'" Campbell points out that speakers who employ this style effectively can be male or female but that for women, especially during the nineteenth century, this style offered them a way to present their arguments in ostensibly unobtrusive ways. Campbell concludes that Wells 1892 speech, "Southern Horrors," with the exception of her use of examples, is missing these "feminine" traits. She points instead to Wells's "blunt" language, deductive structure, and authoritative, impersonal tone.²⁹

Wells's 1893 address, "Lynch Law in All Its Phases," delivered several months after the Memphis murders to a different audience, seemed to transgress gender boundaries as well. She established with the opening sentence that her interest in the subject was driven not by personal motive but by a concern for the state of the country at large; mob rule represented the nation's problem and not just one linked to the African American community only:

Repeated attacks on the life, liberty and happiness of any citizen or class of citizens are attacks on distinctive American institutions; such attacks imperiling as they do the foundation of government, law and order, merit the thoughtful consideration of far-sighted Americans; not from a standpoint of sentiment, not even so much from a standpoint of justice to a weak race, as from a desire to preserve our institutions. (1)³⁰

Although this opening was designed to have the audience understand lynching as a national crime, in the third paragraph, she did, in fact, shift to the personal narrative, generally associated with the feminine style, a narrative which occupied over half of the speech. It is the story of her Memphis experience, and began with her initial assumption that mob rule was driven in part by the poor conditions under which most blacks lived. If the conditions improved, however, she argued that such "humiliations" (3) would cease.

Wells then recounted the event that was her "rude awakening," (5) the murder of three black men, a story she had told many times by February of 1893. In this instance, addressing a white Boston audience less familiar with the incident than her previous audiences, she supplied many more details. She included snatches of paraphrased conversations, dates and times, physical descriptions of the key characters, information about the situations of their families following the murders, and excerpts from her own paper, the *Free Speech*, and from two other white Memphis papers, *The Daily Commercial* and *The Evening Scimitar*. Wells wanted it to be understood, however, that this extended example, while based on her personal experience, was typical of the kinds of violence being perpetrated against blacks across the South. In the paragraph following the narrative, she added, "The lawlessness here described is not confined to one locality. In the past ten years over a thousand colored men, women and children have been butchered, murdered and burnt in all parts of the South" (20). To support this claim, the speech moved from her example to a series of other cases--the Italian lynching of 1891, the

Texarkana lynching of Ed Coy in 1892, and the Paris, Texas lynching of Henry Smith in 1893. Wells followed these examples with statistics supporting their typicality. After a series of sustained arguments, Wells closed by offering the audience a course of action--a strong public outcry against the offenses. Thus, although Wells made use of her personal experience to support the claim, she buttressed it with other examples of violated civil rights to establish a larger, well-documented trend. This made her speech less stylistically feminine, as defined above, and more objective.

Other aspects of the speech likewise demonstrated its performed objectivity. The speech began with Wells announcing her intention to reiterate the details of specific instances of mob violence, insinuating her assumption that her auditors have failed to act due to ignorance:

I am before the American people to-day through no inclination of my own, but because of a deep-seated conviction that the country at large does not know the extent to which lynch law prevails in parts of the Republic, nor the conditions which force into exile those who speak the truth. I cannot believe that the apathy and indifference which so largely obtains regarding mob rule is other than the result of ignorance of the true situation. (1)

Speaking here to the Boston Monday Lectureship on February 13, 1893, almost a year after her three friends were lynched in Memphis and she herself was forced into exile, Wells described in even greater detail the particulars surrounding those events. In this speech, as in all her antilynching speeches, she drew extensively from accounts of mob violence printed in Southern white newspapers, believing that their own language would help convict them. Like most nineteenth-century Bostonians, the members of her audience no doubt relied heavily on the press for accurate information on national and world events.

Casting herself in the role of informer, Wells employed full use of what ancient rhetoricians called "ocular demonstration." A classical treatise on rhetoric, *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, defines ocular demonstration as the practice wherein "an event is so described in words that the business seems to be enacted and the subject to pass vividly before our eyes." This rhetorical device is also referred to more generally as *enargeia*, which according to the rhetorician Quintilian involves descriptions that "make us seem not so much to narrate as to exhibit the actual scene, while our emotions will be no less actively stirred than if we were present at the actual occurrence."³¹

Wells's use of "ocular demonstration" reinforced her role as the objective informant. This address chronicled Wells's own evolving understanding of the race problem in America at the turn of the century. She began with the assertion, quoted above, that those who had done little to reduce mob violence in the South failed to act out of ignorance rather than apathy. She identified with their lack of knowledge, comparing it to her own misunderstanding of the possibility for black progress. Wells had believed, along with other prominent blacks, that, by practicing self-help, education, and good manners, the race problem would be solved and black people would finally be welcomed as acceptable and equal members into mainstream American society. "But there was a rude awakening," Wells declared, resulting from the 1892 Memphis lynchings of her friends (5). This awakening led her to probe the naive assumptions of

black Memphis that if they simply cooperated, the law would protect them. It propelled her into a lifelong rhetorical campaign against mob violence and reduced her certainty in self-improvement as a means of survival. Instead, self-help took the form of a Winchester rifle, economic boycotts, and emigration to other areas, tactics delineated in "Southern Horrors," the speech she delivered at the New York Lyric Hall Testimonial.³²

To evoke the presence of the 1892 Memphis lynchings, fully half of the 1893 speech was given over to relating its details. In the 1892 "Southern Horrors" address, she told of this event for the first time, but then included fewer specific details. For those women gathered in Lyric Hall, she chose instead to present evidence from less publicized cases occurring in places like Anniston, Alabama; Chestertown, Maryland; Carrolton, Mississippi; and Waycross, Georgia. The second speech, "Lynch Law," addressed to an audience of Northern white women less aware of the horrors, incorporated more specific, focused details--dates, times, numbers of people involved, smells, sounds, type of clothing worn by the attackers, and direct quotations from spectators. For this audience, Wells engaged *enargeia* to create descriptively vivid images.

In the midst of retelling, Wells claimed, "I have no power to describe the feeling of horror that possessed every member of the race in Memphis when the truth dawned upon us that the protection of the law which we had so long enjoyed was no longer ours" (12). Having declared "the feeling of horror" beyond description, Wells devoted her attention to recreating for her audiences the atrocities that provoked those feelings. This re-creation relied heavily on lengthy quotations from the Southern press, giving truth to her claim that "out of their own mouths shall the murderers be condemned," since Wells herself was not present at these events.³³ The reports were written by those who were there. In many instances, the details were gleaned from cooperative spectators rather than the reporters themselves. Although the thought of a "reporter" standing on the sidelines witnessing and "objectively" recording such horrid acts is disturbing, the difficulty of calming a mob bent on violence cannot be exaggerated. In *A Red Record*, Wells told of a black minister who had witnessed the Paris, Texas lynching and barely escaped the town alive when he tried to stop it.³⁴

To remove the impression that her Memphis experience was a rare occurrence, Wells argued for its typicality, contrasting, at the same time, the government's response to mob violence committed against Italian Americans and the response to more than a thousand black lynchings over a ten year period. She referred here to the 1891 lynching of eleven Italians, three of whom were Italian citizens rather than Italian Americans. The lynchings were in retribution for the October 15, 1890, killing of the New Orleans' chief of police, who was known for his police work against what was believed to be an organized crime ring of Italian Americans. Several Italian suspects were rounded up and put on trial. Shortly after they were all acquitted, an angry mob surged into the prison, chased them down, and killed them all. No charges were brought against the lynchers, and local papers actually endorsed the action. There was talk of restricting Italian immigration and a growing anti-Italian sentiment. This trend diminished as additional facts cast doubt on the guilt of the lynch victims. Further, attempts to disparage the characters of Italians, especially Sicilians, were not as successful as those directed towards blacks. For the first time, the U. S. House of Representatives considered enacting laws against lynching, not as a result of violence against blacks but against whites.³⁵ As Wells added, the federal government had little authority over the actions of the citizens of Louisiana, yet the U. S. paid \$25,000 to Italy as reparation for the lost lives (21). In this instance, Wells employed a

contrasting example without the level of detail that she employed in her description of the lynchings of Ed Coy and Henry Smith.

Wells prefaced her descriptions of these two more recent examples of the "lynching mania" (23), with a request for patience while she directed their attention again to atrocities in America against American citizens. In the first example of Ed Coy, from Texarkana, Texas, charged with assault on a white woman, she returned to extended details, as in the Memphis narrative:

A mob pronounced him guilty, strapped him to a tree, chipped the flesh from his body, poured coal oil over him and the woman in the case set fire to him. The country looked on and in many cases applauded, because it was published that this man had violated the honor of the white woman, although he protested his innocence to the last. (22)

Second, she described the Paris, Texas burning of Henry Smith, which had taken place just two weeks before she delivered this address. Smith had been accused of assaulting a four year old girl, the daughter of a white man with whom he had had a disagreement. Wells's ocular demonstration in this instance is graphic:

The man was drawn through the streets on a float, as the Roman generals used to parade their trophies of war, while the scaffold ten feet high, was being built, and irons were heated in the fire. He was bound on it, and red-hot irons began at his feet and slowly branded his body, while the mob howled with delight at his shrieks. Red hot irons were run down his throat and cooked his tongue; his eyes were burned out, and when he was at last unconscious, cotton seed hulls were placed under him, coal oil poured all over him, and a torch applied to the mass. When the flames burned away the ropes which bound Smith and scorched his flesh, he was brought back to sensibility and burned and maimed and sightless as he was, he rolled off the platform and away from the fire. His half-cooked body was seized and trampled and thrown back into the flames while a mob of twenty thousand persons who came from all over the country howled with delight, and gathered up some buttons and ashes after all was over to preserve for relics. (23)³⁶

In this passage, Wells paired the gruesome details of the lynching syncretically with the carnivalesque delight of the twenty thousand people from "all over the country" gathering relics of "buttons and ashes" and howling "with delight" at his shrieks." I use the term "syncretically" here to suggest a manner of placing side by side apparently contradictory practices to make a point. Correspondingly, we have a gruesome murder being witnessed by persons of all ages who have come to witness the spectacle as they would a carnival act. Simone Davis points out that by quoting such revealing passages from the Southern press and weaving in her own commentary, Wells was also giving lessons in rhetorical criticism: "Collaging a great patch work of quotations from both the white and the African-American press, she allows the dialogic dynamics of the resulting text to teach the reader how context can modify meaning."³⁷ In addition to the ostensibly objective, reportorial stance she adopted, Wells was

also teaching her audiences how to read and read through the newspaper accounts from which she drew her examples.

In the remaining sections of the speech, Wells moved from graphic description of these incidents to a general cataloging of statistics to demonstrate their typicality. These statistics document the lynching of men and women for such crimes as being "drunk and saucy to white folks" (25). Only after an extended critique of several other incidents did Wells propose corrective action. Thus, in roughly a twenty-page speech, Wells, choosing to let her well-crafted facts speak for themselves, devoted only three pages explicitly to proposing a specific course of action. She began this brief section with the question, "Do you ask the remedy?" (30) and appealed for strong public sentiment against such crimes to provoke change. Ending with lines from a patriotic anthem, the speech returned to its opening call for national pride.

Wells's rhetoric of objectivity allowed her to use a personal experience but to use it primarily as one extended example of a larger problem. It allowed her to let the texts from which she drew much of the information about mob violence expose their own contradictions. She also constituted journalists as agents of objectivity and change, during this post-Reconstruction period when governmental authorities were ineffectual against the forces of mob violence, and elevated her own credibility in the process. Wells understood that the most effective way to reach her white American and English audiences was to deemphasize the ethos of the messenger and to allow concrete presentation of the "facts" to invoke emotion and inspire action. This persuasive strategy suggests that often the most personal, subjective, emotional response derives from the performance of objectivity.

The Legacy

Immediately following her Tremont Temple address the audience passed a resolution to support Wells's antilynching campaign, and issued a declaration of general admiration for her forthright advocacy of civil rights.³⁸ But some might argue that Ida Wells's call for a strong public outcry against lynching went generally unheeded. An article on the U. S. Senate's 2005 apology for failing to enact antilynching legislation notes that between 1882 and 1968, over 4,500 lynchings, primarily of blacks, were reported, and during that time, almost 200 antilynching bills were introduced unsuccessfully in Congress.³⁹ Still the legacy of Wells's antilynching campaign should not be measured solely by the legislation it prompted. Her British campaigns in 1893 and 1894 sparked new debates on lynching in the English press and gave life to the Society for the Recognition of the Brotherhood of Man, discussed above. These activities in turn led some British organizations to petition American authorities to exert their best efforts against the "atrocities practiced in the Southern States."⁴⁰ Wells also left an intellectual legacy in the form of her numerous investigative reports, including *Southern Horrors* (1892), *A Red Record* (1895), *Lynch Law in Georgia* (1899), and *Mob Rule in New Orleans* (1900). In these publications Wells provided statistical refutation of the lynching-for-rape myth that has not been surpassed. She was not afraid to write about the taboo subjects of consensual cross-racial relationships and white men's sexual abuse of black women. Nor did she hesitate to point out that lynching was really politically motivated fear over the loss of power. No scholarly article on mob violence in the nineteenth century can avoid references to Wells's incisive analyses. Much of what we know about lynching at the turn of the century is based on her investigative work,

and this worked helped to sensitize the reading public to the surprising number of lynchings taking place, even as that number continued to rise. On January 1, 1902, Wells wrote a letter as head of the Anti-Lynching Bureau in which she complained about race apathy regarding this trend and the need to reignite concern:

There were 135 human beings that met death at the hands of mobs during this year. Not only is the list larger than for four years past, but the barbarism of this lawlessness is on the increase. Six human beings were burned alive between January 1st 1901 and Jan. 1st 1902. More persons met death in this horrible manner the past twelve months than in three years before and in proportion as the number roasted alive increases, in the same proportion has there been an indifference manifested by the public.⁴¹

Wells understood the need to keep attention focused on the matter of lynching, when even African Americans would have preferred to look the other way.

Ironically, as if in defiance of Wells's lifetime of work, nine black males were arrested and jailed in Scottsboro, Alabama, on March 25, 1931, the day Wells died. They had been accused of raping two white women while traveling on a freight train. As a lynch mob gathered outside the jail, the National Guard was called in. A series of trials, mistrials, stays, and changes in defense teams, along with the admission by one of the accusers that she had lied, continued over several years, with the last of the "Scottsboro Boys" gaining a pardon in 1976.⁴² Such incidents demonstrated the truth of her claims about the need for continued diligence. The 1955 story of Emmett Till, a fourteen-year old Chicago boy lynched while visiting relatives in a recently desegregated Mississippi--allegedly for whistling at a white woman--remains etched in the nation's collective memory as an example of how racial violence lies just at the surface of situations involving a hostile political climate, a white woman, a black male, and the perception of impropriety. As recently as 1998, the racially motivated killing of James Bryd, an African American man in Jasper, Texas, serves as a reminder of the continuing relevance of Wells's compelling analysis of race, class, sexuality and the perpetration of violent hate crimes. Speaking of Wells in a documentary on the black press, professor of Mass Communication Jane Rhodes observed the following:

She really set the stage for a very radical, very activist kind of black journalism. And as a black woman, she was also an inspiration because there were so few African American women who had worked in journalism before. And when they did, it tended to be sort of a social service-oriented journalism, not the sort of powerful, radical, you know, vociferous journalism that said, "We won't stand for this, we must do something about the kinds of violence affecting African Americans."⁴³

No social scientist has improved upon her foundational research on this topic and no public speaker has articulated the findings more eloquently.

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Notes

1 Linda O. McMurry, *To Keep the Waters Troubled: The Life of Ida B. Wells* (New York: Oxford, 1998), 18-31.

2 Ida B. Wells, *The Memphis Diary of Ida B. Wells*, ed., Miriam DeCosta-Willis (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995), 141.

3 Ida B. Wells, *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells*, ed., Alfreda M. Duster (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 35.

4 Patricia A. Schechter, *Ida B. Wells-Barnett & American Reform 1880-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 69-70.

5 Ida B. Wells-Barnett, "Southern Horrors," *On Lynchings: Southern Horrors, A Red Record, Mob Rule in New Orleans* (Salem, NH: Ayer, 1990), 4. Please note that this volume is a reprint of the 1969 edition with the same title. Both editions are merely facsimile reprints of the original pamphlets and maintain the original pagination, so that to avoid confusion, I cite the pamphlet title along with the page number in the notes.

6 McMurry, *To Keep the Waters Troubled*, 130-149.

7 Wells, *Crusade for Justice*, 79.

8 McMurry, *To Keep the Waters Troubled*, 169-187.

9 See Carolyn L. Karcher, "The White 'Bystander' and the Black Journalist 'Abroad': Albion W. Tourgée and Ida B. Wells as Allies Against Lynching," *Prospects: An Annual of American Cultural Studies* 29 (2004): 85-119, for a discussion of their collaborative work against mob violence.

10 Emma Lou Thornbrough, "The National Afro-American League 1887-1908," *Journal of Southern History* 27 (November 1961): 494-495.

11 Schechter, *Ida B. Wells-Barnett & American Reform 1880-1930*, 186-207.

12 Wells, *Crusade*.

13 Wells, *Crusade*, 81.

14 See Joseph Cook, *Boston Monday Lectures* (Boston, MA: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1884), 269-271; and McMurry, *To Keep the Waters Troubled*, 181.

15 W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1962), 670-710.

16 For further discussion of this period, see Rayford W. Logan, *The Betrayal of the Negro from Rutherford B. Hayes to Woodrow Wilson* (1954; rpt. New York: Da Capo Press, 1997); Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998); John Hope Franklin, *Reconstruction after the Civil War*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina

Press, 1996); and Phillip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America* (New York: Random House, 2002).

17 Civil Rights Act of 1875, <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=481>. (Accessed on July 10, 2007)

18 Rayford W. Logan, *The Betrayal of the Negro from Rutherford B. Hayes to Woodrow Wilson*, 46, 97, 52.

19 John Hope Franklin, "History of Racial Segregation in the United States," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 304 (March 1956): 9.

20 James Cutler, *Lynch-Law: An Investigation into the History of Lynching in the United States* (Montclair, NJ: Patterson Smith, 1969), 12, 276.

21 Lerone Bennett, *Before the Mayflower: A History of Black America*, 5th ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 505.

22 Logan, *The Betrayal of the Negro*, 76.

23 Cutler, *Lynch-Law*, 172.

24 For excerpts from these testimonies, see Gerda Lerner, ed., *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 172-188.

25 "An Idyll of Alabama," *New York Times*, December 30, 1891, p. 4.

26 Wells, *Crusade*, 231.

27 Ellen Richardson to Frederick Douglass, England, Letter from the Library of Congress, 29 May 1894, *The Frederick Douglass Papers, General Correspondence 1841-1912*, <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mfd&fileName=10/10008/10008page.db&recNum=91&itemLink=%2Fammem%2Fdoughtml%2FdougFolder3.html&linkText=>. (Accessed July 11, 2007) In this same letter, Richardson added that the distinct abilities of Wells lend truth to her belief that "the graces of the intellect and the heart tell their own tale whether it be in 'black or white.'"

28 Lawson Scruggs, *Women of Distinction: Remarkable in Works and Invincible in Character* (Raleigh, NC: Author, 1893), 39.

29 Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, "Style and Content in the Rhetoric of Early Afro-American Feminists," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 72 (1986): 440-441.

30 Ida B. Wells, "Lynch Law in All Its Phases." *Our Day: A Record and Review of Current Reform* XI (January-June 1893): 333-347. Here and elsewhere passages from "Lynch Law in All Its Phases" are cited with reference to paragraph numbers in the text of the speech that accompanies this essay.

31 [Cicero]. *Rhetorica Ad Herennium*, trans. Harry Caplan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1954), IX.lv.1-4; Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria of Quintilian*, trans. H.E. Butler (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1922), VI.ii.32.

32 The 1892 speech "Southern Horrors" is often subtitled "Lynch Law in All Its Phases" but should not be confused with the 1893 speech with the same name under consideration here. In this essay I refer only to the 1893 Tremont Temple speech as "Lynch Law in All Its Phases."

33 Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *A Red Record in On Lynchings: Southern Horrors, A Red Record, Mob Rule in New Orleans* (Salem, NH: Ayer, 1990), 15.

34 Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *A Red Record*, 30-32.

35 For a useful discussion of the political impact of the 1891 Italian lynchings, see Phillip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown*, 130-132.

36 Wells probably acquired these details from an account of the lynching printed in the *New York Times* "Another Negro Burned: Henry Smith Dies at the Stake," *New York Times*, February 2, 1893, p. 1. In *A Red Record* (1895), Wells included the eyewitness account of Reverend King, a black preacher, who barely escaped with his life when he tried to stop the torture and subsequently vowed never to return to the South.

37 Simone W. Davis, "The 'Weak Race' and the Winchester: Political Voices in the Pamphlets of Ida B. Wells-Barnett," *Legacy* 12 (1995): 77.

38 McMurry, *To Keep the Waters Troubled*, 181.

39 "Senate Apologizes For Not Enacting Anti-Lynching Legislation, A Look at Journalist and Anti-Lynching Crusader Ida B. Wells," Tuesday, June 14th, 2005, Democracy Now <http://www.democracynow.org/article.pl?sid=05/06/14/1350253>. (Accessed August 18, 2007) There were, of course, many postings of this action on the Internet. I chose to cite this one because included along with the details of the story is the transcript of an interview with Princeton University historian Nell Painter and sociologist Troy Duster, the grandson of Ida B. Wells.

40 Sarah L. Silkey, "Redirecting the Tide of White Imperialism: The Impact of Ida B. Wells's Transatlantic Antilynching Campaign on British Conceptions of American Race Relations," *Women Shaping the South. Creating and Confronting Change*, ed., Angela Boswell and Judith N. McArthur (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 109.

41 Ida B. Wells-Barnett, "To the members of the Anti-Lynching Bureau," Letter From the Library of Congress, 1 January 1902, Daniel A. P. Murray Pamphlet Collection, [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/murray:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(lcrbmrpt1711div0\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/murray:@field(DOCID+@lit(lcrbmrpt1711div0))). (Accessed on July 10, 2007)

42 For a discussion of the history of the Scottsboro case, see *Scottsboro: An American Tragedy*, American Experience, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/scottsboro/index.html> (Accessed on August 18, 2007)

43 *The Black Press: Soldiers Without Swords* (Transcript), California Newsreel <http://www.newsreel.org/transcripts/soldiers.htm> (Accessed on August 18, 2007)