

Ida b. wells: lynching in america essay sample

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As the twentieth century began in America, the appalling practice of lynching continued to be rampant in every state. Ida B. Wells began her essay, "Lynch Laws in America," with the observation: "Our country's national crime is lynching" (Wells 1). She went on to note that lynching was not only a national epidemic, but also an endemic (and barbaric) part of the American psyche.

It was not "the sudden outburst the sudden outburst of uncontrolled fury, or the unspeakable brutality of an insane mob. It represents the cool, calculating deliberation of intelligent people who openly avow that there is an "unwritten law" that justifies them in putting human beings to death without complaint under oath, without trial by jury, without opportunity to make defense, and without right of appeal" (Wells 1+).

Despite a Civil-War during which black soldiers served with distinction, despite an Emancipation Proclamation ending slavery, the persistence of racism in the aftermath of the Reconstruction resulted in widespread social, economic, and criminal discrimination against blacks. Lynching, one of the most horrific outgrowths of this racism was predicated on a variety of pretenses: "Negroes were killed for disputing over terms of contracts with their employers. If a few barns were burned some colored man was killed to stop it" (Wells 1).

Wells records in her article, the number of lynchings in America in the year 1892, the year she refers to as lynching's "high water mark" in America. The total number of lynchings is cited at two-hundred forty. Of the number, one-hundred and sixty are described as being of African American decent. Of

this latter number, by far the largest number of lynchings recorded for alleged reasons of sexual criminality ““ They are as follows: Rape...46 Attempted rape...11” (Wells).

However, as the following example demonstrates, allegations proffered for lynchings were seldom, if ever, based in reality:

When a white woman in Selma, Alabama, gave birth in 1893, she was forced to disclose the fact that she had been involved in a relationship with a black man named Daniel Edwards. Despite the fact that the consensual relationship had been going on for over a year, Edwards was arrested for rape. He was then “ taken by a mob of one hundred neighbors and hung to a tree and his body [was] riddled with bullets.” A note was pinned to his body saying, “ Warning to all Negroes that are too intimate with white girls. This the work of one hundred best citizens of the South Side.

(Markovitz 1)

As if that example were not disgusting enough, the example cited by Wells in ‘ Lynch Laws in America’ of a brother and sister who were lynched in November, 1892, at Jonesville, La. “ In the case of the boy and girl above referred to, their father, named Hastings, was accused of the murder of a white man. His fourteen-year-old daughter and sixteen-year-old son were hanged and their bodies filled with bullets” (Wells, 1+).

Lynching, far from an act of justice, or and an act of community protection; rather, it was an atrocity committed by mob-violence and demonstrated , in its devastation of the African American communities, a form of socially

integrated racism coupled with a pathology of racially motivated violence. Much like the executions in Europe during the Middle Ages, lynchings in America were “ characteristic of the ritualized violence whites used to lynch and burn black people; an offense has been committed to which the group responds in community spirit with burning, mutilation, gathering trophies, and initiating children.” (Harris 2)

That such an obviously despicable and criminal practice endured past the turn of the twentieth century in America is evidence of the profound degree of racism that persisted despite the will toward integration in some areas. “ It was very early conveyed to all Blacks, and especially to black men, that full humanity was not to be granted to them” and much of this heinous bias was based on sexuality “ The black man became the harmless eunuch who could be tolerated if he accepted that role, or the raging beast who could be killed without conscience if he did not. The black woman became the lascivious slut when her sexual favors were desired and the matronly mammy when whites needed someone to care for their children” (Harris 29).

What force or forces could be arrayed against this deeply ingrained (and often sexually rooted) pathos? What event or series of events would finally abolish lynching in America forever? Because of the deeply rooted sexual component of lynching, “ antilynching activists were concerned with racist representations of, and racist violence directed against, black men and black women. But ... because lynching was justified by referencing myths of black male sexuality and criminality, antilynching activists were forced to devote the bulk of their resources toward combating these myths” (Markovitz 3).

Ironically, or perhaps, inevitably due to the projection of subhuman bestiality onto the black man by the white man, one of the most fiery anti-lynching activists to arise out of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was an African American woman. With her impassioned rhetoric and amazing skills for debate and logic, Ida B. Wells became a formidable champion for woman, for African Americans, for civility, humanity, and racial rights and equality. The daughter of two slaves, Wells rose to prominence not only as an activist, but as a journalist and feminist thinker; she was also one of the first African American women to run for state legislature (McMurry).

“ The remarkable journey of Ida Wells began during the Civil War in the northern Mississippi town of Holly Springs. It was not the most auspicious place for an African American to be born, for Mississippi has been the site of horrific incidents of white racism and violence. In the antebellum period, slaves from other states feared being “ sold down to Mississippi” (McMurry 3).

Wells worked as a teacher and attended Fisk University in Nashville. She upset many people with her views on women’s rights. In 1884 she caused a stir in Memphis when she led a campaign against segregation on the local railway: she was asked to leave her seat on the train to a white man. When Ida refused to give up her seat, the conductor threw her physically out of the car. In 1889, she became co-owner and editor of an anti-segregationist newspaper but was later dismissed because of her fiery editorials. In 1892, she published a famous anti-lynching pamphlet, “ Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases” (McMurry).

In typical heated fashion, Wells wrote, “ The lesson this teaches and which every Afro-American should ponder well, is that a Winchester rifle should have a place

of honor in every black home, and it should be used for that protection which the law refuses to give.” 5” (Cimbala and Miller 103)

Wells was not unusual for speaking out against lynching, but she was the only black leader to make it the focus of her efforts for an extended period of time. Perhaps lynching had touched her more personally than most middle- and upper-class African Americans. (Cimbala and Miller 105)

Wells became a journalist and a part-owner of a newspaper. Her editorials were infamous and created a backlash among conservative whites who tried to defame her personally. She also lectured and her findings on lynchings in periodicals and pamphlets. One pamphlet, “ A Red Record, Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynchings in the United States, 1892- 1893- 1894” “ utilized the gruesome details of various lynchings to show the irrational barbarism of mob justice.” (Cimbala and Miller 106)

“ Such language in both her literature and her lectures continued to inspire white attacks on Wells-Barnett’s character. In 1895 one Missouri journalist impugned not only her morality but also that of black women in general. The argument was a common one: black women did not need protecting because they had no morals to protect...The charge was particularly galling to women of the black elite, who probably valued respectability even more than their white counterparts.” (Cimbala and Miller 106)

These women and Wells appealed to black women in general. “ They formed the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), the first permanent national organization to unite black clubwomen. Local women’s groups had been instrumental in supporting Wells from the beginning of her anti-lynching work, often sponsoring her visits to their cities. At the same time, her activities had spawned a number of those groups. Wells-Barnett hoped the NACW would become the national antilynching organization she had long sought. However, the women did not accept her as their leader or her cause as their issue. (Cimbala and Miller 107)

In 1898 the lynchings of two black postmasters led to the revitalization and reorganization of the Afro-American League as the AfroAmerican Council. “ Wells went with the group’s delegation to ask President William McKinley for federal action on the murder of these federal officers. She also served as the Council’s secretary in 1899 and later became the chair of its Anti-Lynching Bureau. Wells used the organization as a pulpit from which she preached against the ideology of Booker T. Washington and the actions of President McKinley, until Washington and his supporters wrested control of the Council from the “ militants” (Cimbala and Miller 110).

Though lynching continued to be a major focus for the NAACP, Wells failed to remain an active participant. Her forceful personality and infamous reputation limited her role in the organization. (Cimbala and Miller 108)

Wells continued her anti-lynching work to the end of her life. “ In the three years prior to her death, she began her autobiography and ran for the state

senate. On 25 March 1931 death finally silenced her angry voice—a feat no other force could accomplish.” (Cimbala and Miller 110).

Ida B. Wells became what no black man could have dared to be in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in America: an outspoken critic of the white male’s deep psycho-sexual preoccupation with and dehumanization of African Americans, and particularly of African American males. Her militant activism and raging rhetoric as well as her sharp appreciation for political maneuver and public relations as well as her excellent writing and speaking skills allowed her to emerge as one of the most influential civil rights leaders of her generation. Her self-determinism and individual dignity is best recounted in her own words: “ Let the Afro-American depend on no party, but on himself for his salvation.” (Belford 96)

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