The Terrorism of Lynching and the Works of Ida B. Wells
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Writing on the 1892 lynchings of Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell, and Will Stewart, African American journalist, speaker, and activist, Ida B. Wells penned it was the heinous nature of this act of violence that "opened [her] eyes to what lynching really was," in that lynching was "[a]n excuse to get rid of Negroes who were acquiring wealth and property and thus keep the race terrorized."[1] While analyzing racial and regional patterns in cases of lynchings in post-civil war America, one can conclude that despite lynchings being mythicized as spontaneous reactions to Black conduct, including the dichotomous 'bestial' and 'uppity' racial etiquette narratives, lynchings were instead calculated acts of terror perpetrated against Black Americans to maintain power and control and hinder the social, political, and economic progress of Black Americans. Balancing qualitative case studies with quantitative data, Ida B. Wells' exposition of and resistance to this lynch law, and the contradictions and hypocrisies of post-reconstruction America, reveal lynchings' complex relationships to often intersecting systems of gender, racial power and domination.

The concept of lynching originally developed as a form of vigilante retribution to enforce popular justice in the Western frontier in the early nineteenth century; however, it quickly developed as a vicious tool of racial control. Lynching became even more racialized in the South after the end of the Civil War. African Americans were lynched under various pretenses, yet the most common social reasoning given to justify the lynching of Black Americans developed from the master narrative of post-civil war 'degeneration' of black people to animalistic and criminal

[1] Jacqueline Jones Royster, *Southern Horrors and Other Writings: The Anti-Lynching Campaign of Ida B. Wells, 1892-1900* (2nd edition; Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2016), 3-4.

tendencies. Whites argued that previously civilized by slavery, the freedoms given to freed slaves resulted in a reversion to their bestial nature, thus the 'bestial' public discourse was born, and lynching was viewed to be the only solution.[2] This bestial discourse especially exploited the violent, dangerous, and uncontrollable sexual aggressors that Black men were characterized as. When coupled with the stereotype and iconography of the "pure, virginal" white women, this fueled a pervasive fear of Black men raping white women.[3] Whites' hypervigilant enforcement of racial hierarchy and social separation instigated lynchings as punishment for, what were in many cases fabricated, crimes against white women by black men, including rape and murder, as documented in Wells' "Red Record."[4] The standard had been set; lynchings were able to be justified as a form of crime control but only when it came to Black 'criminals'. Hundreds more Black people were lynched based on accusations of far less serious crimes such as arson, suspected robbery, assault, and vagrancy, crimes not punishable by death if charged in a formal court of law.[5] However, many lynching victims were not even accused of any criminal act whatsoever, and instead were lynched for non-criminal violations of social customs or racial expectations.[6] As well, many African Americans were lynched not for criminal and social infractions or accusations, but simply because they were black and present when the accused party could not be located, as seen in the lynching of Cordelia Stevenson, who was lynched in place of her son.[7] Thus, rather than any alleged offence, race sealed the lynching victim's fate, a statement of racial terror and white supremacy that sought to keep the African American community terrorized and in a constant state of fear.

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[2] Royster, *Southern Horrors*, vii.
[3] Royster, *Southern Horrors*, 30.
[4] Royster, *Southern Horrors*, 30.
[5] Royster, *Southern Horrors*, 83.
[6] Leon Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Knopf, 1998), 290.
[7] Litwack, *Trouble,* 290.

Although the bestial narrative and its exploitation of gender and racial stereotypes were the main justification used by white southerners for lynching, in reality, black success or pride, referred to as acting 'uppity,' was often punished in a similar manner as 'bestial' cases. Anthony P. Crawford, a successful Black entrepreneur and leader in Abbeville, South Carolina, was arrested, attacked by a mob, and eventually lynched for "imprudence" and lack of "humility" after being "insolent to a white man."[8] In addition to lynchings targeting the supposed 'crime' of Black "achievement," lynch law also targeted those who protested being treated as second-class citizens, violently repressing efforts to fight for economic power and equal rights, as seen in the 1892 lynchings of John Hughes, Isaac Lincoln, and Will Lewis on account of their being "saucy to white people."[9] Thus, whether Black Americans attempted to 'raise' themselves to be seen as equal or resisted the oppression under white intolerance, they were met with violence and death as whites used these acts of terrorism to relegate African American men, women, and children to a state of second-class citizenship and economic disadvantage that would last for generations after emancipation and create far-reaching consequences.[10]

The logic of lynching was not only criminal, but it was also economic. Lynching and mob violence were tactics of economic subordination, used to protect white economic power and ensure a captive Black labour force. The 1892 lynchings of the owners of the People's Grocery Company symbolized the violence that the threat of economic competition stimulated.[11] Whites were embittered against Black economic success, viewing the success as a threat to racial power dynamics, including economic power. Thus, lynching was used as a tool to thwart Black economic advancement, punishing Black individuals for their success while ensuring prospective Black

[8] Litwack, *Trouble,* 309-10.
[9] Royster, *Southern Horrors*, 29-107.
[10] Royster, *Southern Horrors*, 28.
[11] Royster, *Southern Horrors*, 28.

business owners and entrepreneurs were scared into subordination. Lynchings were also an indicator of long-term economic stress due to falling cotton prices through much of the 19th century, in addition to financial depression in a post-war economy. Whites in the post-Reconstruction South required cheap labour to keep up with the advancements of the industrial revolution and coupled with resentment for the economic competition from African Americans, fueled an increase of lynchings and mob violence, contrary to the accepted mass narrative that lynchings were a crime-prevention tool.

Combining racist narratives and stereotypes with economic stress, lynchings also reflected the tensions of labour and political changes, as the whites imposed Jim Crow rules, legal segregation, and white supremacy. Congress repeatedly failed to pass any of the anti-lynching statutes proposed, largely due to arguments that no such law could withstand a constitutional challenge under the Court's Reconstruction-era precedent.[12] It was also argued that as lynching primarily affected Black people, federal lynching legislation could constitute racial 'favouritism,' reminiscent of failed Reconstruction-era policies.[13] Political inaction on the part of both Southern and Northern politicians was also a result of an acceptance of the dominant political narrative that blamed lynching on its victims, insisting that brutal mob violence was the only appropriate response to the 'growing' number of Black rapists attacking white women.[14]

When analyzing lynchings' complex relationship to systems of power and domination, one cannot overlook the response of social activists, including the activism of African American women such as Ida B. Wells, who harnessed the growing power of the Black press, demanding

[12] Royster, *Southern Horrors*, 7-156.
[13] Royster, *Southern Horrors*, 5-7.
[14] Royster, *Southern Horrors*, 30-1.

lynch mobs be held accountable for committing murder and launching public education campaigns to combat the spread of misinformation and dispute the myth of Black-on-white rape.[15]

Born into slavery in Holly Springs, Mississippi in 1862, Wells' formative years were spent in a politically knowledgeable family, her parents intimately involved in the leadership of African American communities.[16] The Radical Reconstruction era she was born into shaped her political and activist experience as a child as she came to age in an America defined by the reluctant political recognition of Blackness and in tandem with the emergence of secret terrorist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan.[17] At the age of eighteen, she moved to Memphis to work as a teacher and at the age of twenty-two, she sued the Chesapeake & Ohio & Southern Railroad Company for forcibly removing her from a train after she refused to be reseated in a segregated car.[18] Though ultimately losing the suit, the effort foreshadowed her lifelong fight against racial injustice.

A prolific reader and writer, Wells went on to rise to the editor and part owner of the Memphis 'Free Speech and Headlight,' a newspaper whose platform she regularly used to criticize racial inequality.[19] The 1892 lynchings of her friends Moss, Stewart, and McDowell, catalyzed her desire to enact and inspire change challenging mass pro-lynching narratives through writing and speaking on atrocities of lynching and the need for Black resistance and federal and international intervention.[20] Wells was one among a relatively small but growing number of "public" women in an era when public arenas were not considered the place for women.[21] Going against this grain, Wells earned a reputation as an outspoken and steadfast crusader for justice; her 1892 pamphlet, *Southern Horrors*, is a testimony to her achievements. In *On Lynching: Southern Horrors, A Red*

[15] Royster, *Southern Horrors*, viii.
[16] Royster, *Southern Horrors*, 14.
[17] Royster, *Southern Horrors*, 14.
[18] Royster, *Southern Horrors*, 14-7.
[19] Royster, *Southern Horrors*, 17.
[20] Royster, *Southern Horrors*, 33-9.
[21] Royster, *Southern Horrors*, 19-23.

Record and A Mob Rule in New Orleans, a compilation of her most impactful works, Wells describes the goal of her life's work, stating "[t]he Afro American is not a bestial race. If this work can contribute in any way toward proving this, and at the same time arouse the conscience of the American people to a demand for justice to every citizen, and punishment by law for the lawless, I shall feel I have done my race a service."[22]

Using the *Southern Horrors* to examine Wells, her work, and her accomplishments allows one to more carefully consider the complexity of issues and actions that converge to make lynching such a fascinating but devastating defining feature of post-reconstruction era America. Not long after its publishing in 1895, Wells published a more ambitious project, *The Red Record*. Similar to her first pamphlet but on a larger scale, Wells provided details of lynchings including the victims' names, dates, locations, and alleged motives. *The Red Record* was an account of the research on lynchings she conducted between 1892 and 1894 across the country. The book also included narratives and lynching photographs. The pamphlets were useful in dispelling the rape myth, as they established a clear pattern of using lynchings not for criminal justice, but rather in the service of white supremacy.

Wells' radical inquiry into lynching had a profound effect on the future of civil rights in the United States. She is responsible for several extraordinary 'firsts' in the effort to rid America of lynchings; she was the first person to risk her life, time after time while conducting dangerous lynching investigations, the first American to travel abroad to seek international support in the fight against lynchings. She also wrote the first article and pamphlet exposing the economic underpinnings of lynchings.[23] Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Wells was the first to

[22] Royster, *Southern Horrors*, 50.
[23] Royster, *Southern Horrors*, 39-41.

effectively situate lynching as the hypocritical failure of American democracy: to protect the voting, education, and workplace rights of African Americans, their senseless killings had to stop.

The act and threat of lynching developed from a regulatory tool of the Wild West, to a form of terrorism used to enforce economic, political, and cultural racial exploitation. Characterized by Southern mob violence intended to reestablish white supremacy and suppress Black social, economic, and civil rights through terror, the Reconstruction era was a violent period in which tens of thousands of people were killed in racially, politically, and economically motivated massacres, murders, and lynchings. Through the qualitative and quantitative data compiled into moving works by activist Ida B. Wells, one can conclude that despite dominant historical narratives that continue to infiltrate society today, lynchings cannot be analyzed on an individual basis as spontaneous reactions to Black conduct. Instead, they must be recognized and reconciled as a routine and systematic effort to subjugate the Black American minority, edging on a genocidal nature.

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