

# When and Where I Enter

*The Impact of Black Women  
on Race and Sex in America*

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# I

## *“To Sell My Life as Dearly as Possible”: Ida B. Wells and the First Antilynching Campaign*

Before they took his life, they asked Thomas Moss if he had anything to say. “Tell my people to go west,” he told his abductors. “There is no justice for them here.”<sup>1</sup> With those final words, Thomas Moss and two of his friends, Calvin McDowell and Henry Stewart, were lynched a mile outside of Memphis, Tennessee. A newspaper account of the mob-murder pointed out that the men did not die without a struggle. McDowell had tried to wrestle a gun from the hands of one of the killers. When the Black man’s body was recovered, the fingers of his right hand had been shot to pieces; his eyes were gouged out.

The lynching of March 9, 1892, was the climax of ugly events in Memphis. From the time the three Black men had gone into business for themselves, their People’s Grocery, as it was called, had been the target of White resentment. The store, which sold food and miscellaneous items and became a gathering place for Memphis Blacks, represented, after all, a desire for economic independence. The start-up capital for the grocery had been provided by Moss, a postman who was the city’s first Black to hold a federal position. He worked in the store evenings, while his partners worked there during the day.

For Whites the most galling thing about the People’s Grocery was that it took away business from a White store owner who had long been used to a monopoly of Black trade. The White proprietor initiated against the Black businessmen a series of provocations that culminated in an attack of armed thugs sent to raze the grocery. The attack came on a Saturday night, when the store was full of Black men—armed Black men—who repelled the invaders and shot three Whites in the process. In short order Moss, McDowell, and Stewart were arrested along with one hundred other Blacks charged with conspiracy.

The White press in Memphis whipped the community into a frenzy over the incident. The Black men were painted as “brutes” and

“criminals” who victimized “innocent” Whites. If the wounded men died, Blacks were warned, there was going to be a bloodletting. The threat hung heavy in the air. Whites were permitted to enter the jail where the Blacks were interned to “look them over.” Outside, Blacks stood vigil to discourage the possibility of mob violence.

The vigil ended when it was reported that the Whites would recover from their gunshot wounds—for the Blacks thought their friends would now be safe. They were wrong. In a predawn raid, Moss, McDowell, and Stewart were taken from their cells, put on the switch engine of a train headed out of the city, and lynched. In the angry aftermath of the killing, a judge issued an order for the sheriff to shoot any Black demonstrator who seemed to be “causing trouble,” and prohibited the sale of guns to Blacks. Emboldened by the order, and unappeased by the death of the three men, armed Whites converged upon the People’s Grocery, helped themselves to food and drink, then destroyed most of what they couldn’t consume or steal. Creditors auctioned the brutalized remnants and the store was closed down on an ominous note of finality.

If the incident had occurred in any other time or place, it might have been set down as just another dreary statistic. Lynching (legally defined as murder committed by a mob of three or more persons) of Blacks had been on the rise for the last decade. In 1892, the year of the Memphis murders, there had been 255 lynchings, more than in any previous year.<sup>2</sup> But the deaths of Moss, McDowell, and Stewart would open a new chapter in the racial struggle, for they spurred two women to dedicate their lives to the fight against lynching and the malevolent impulses that underlined it. Two women named Mary Church Terrell and Ida B. Wells.

Terrell was living in Washington, D.C., when she heard the terrible news. Born Mary Church in Memphis, Tennessee, she had been a friend of Thomas Moss since childhood. Terrell had seen him less than a year before in Memphis, at her wedding. That had been such a happy time. She had just returned from two years of study in Europe, and it was so good to see her Memphis friends again—especially Moss. For a wedding present he gave her a set of elegant silver oyster forks.

Moss’s death was particularly unsettling for Terrell at this time in her life. She was twenty-nine and, though expecting her first child, had not found peace of mind in domestic tranquility. That she always wanted to work had been a point of contention between Mary and her

father since her graduation from Oberlin eight years before. A former slave who became one of the wealthiest Blacks in the country, Robert Church wanted his daughter to live the life of a gentlewoman. Ladies didn't work, he always told her. But Mary continually defied that notion. She taught at Wilberforce University and later at Washington Colored High School, despite her father's threats to disinherit her. In D.C. she met Robert Terrell, principal of the highly touted Black public school. She married him and settled in Washington, where the future of her husband—a Harvard graduate and lawyer bound for a municipal judgeship—was assured. The marriage and difficult pregnancy had almost persuaded Terrell to try to live the life of a "lady," as her father would put it. But then came the news about Thomas Moss.

She sought out an old family friend, the abolitionist Frederick Douglass, and together they secured an appointment with President Benjamin Harrison at the White House. They implored him to condemn lynching in his annual address before Congress. Douglass's plea was especially eloquent, Terrell later wrote, but like every President before Franklin Roosevelt, Harrison refused to take a public stand against lynching.

For Terrell, though, the lynching of her friend, followed not long after by the death of her newborn infant in a segregated, poorly equipped hospital, erased forever any idea of leading the traditional life of a lady. She plunged headlong into work, embarking upon a vibrant activism that would continue until her death, sixty-two years later. In a short span of time, she served as president of the country's most prominent Black cultural organization, the Bethel Literary and Historical Society; was appointed to the Washington, D.C., Board of Education, becoming the first Black woman to serve on a citywide board; and co-founded the Washington Colored Women's League.

The implications of Moss's death were seared into Terrell's memory by an editorial in the Black Memphis newspaper *Free Speech*. "The city of Memphis has demonstrated that neither character nor standing avails the Negro if he dares to protect himself against the white man or become his rival," it said in part. The words were written by Ida B. Wells, columnist and co-owner of the paper. She had been so stunned by the lynching that she had had to force herself to write a cogent editorial for her readers. In her ten years as a journalist, and in the nearly half-century of writing that followed, her columns on the Moss lynching were the most painful. A woman who never made friends easily, Wells considered Thomas Moss and his wife, Betty, her

very closest friends. She was godmother to their little girl, Maurine; Betty, she knew, was pregnant with her second child.

As a widely respected journalist, Wells's words were taken to heart by the beleaguered Black community. Her first editorials suggested that Blacks, vulnerable to the whims of White lawlessness, should take Moss's advice to "save our money and leave a town which will neither protect our lives and property, nor give us a fair trial in the courts, but takes us out and murders us in cold blood...."<sup>4</sup> Those residents who could, did just that. Hundreds of Blacks began leaving Memphis for Kansas, Oklahoma, and points west. Ministers escorted whole congregations; entire families began their exodus to unknown territories, taking only what they could carry. Betty Moss stayed in Memphis until her child was born, and then moved to Indiana.

So many Blacks took the advice of Wells that the White business community began to panic. "Business was practically at a standstill," Wells recalled in her autobiography, "for the Negro was famous then, as now, for spending his money for fine clothes, furniture, jewelry, and pianos and other musical instruments, to say nothing of good things to eat. Music houses had more musical instruments, sold on the installment plan, thrown back on their hands than they could find storage for."<sup>5</sup> Wells also helped instigate a Black boycott of the city's trolleys, causing the transportation company to join the list of businesses beginning to teeter on the edge of bankruptcy.

Ida B. Wells didn't believe in the ultimate efficacy of passive resistance, however. She purchased a pistol, determined to "sell my life as dearly as possible," and suggested that other Blacks do the same. "A Winchester rifle should have a place of honor in every home," Wells told her community. "When the white man...knows he runs as great a risk of biting the dust every time his Afro-American victim does, he will have greater respect for Afro-American life."<sup>6</sup>

But Wells would go beyond these responses to the Moss lynching. What had occurred in Memphis was only a part of a larger phenomenon that threatened Blacks throughout the country. Her entire life, it seemed, had prepared her not only to understand but to confront the broader issue head on—despite the consequences.

Her life paralleled Mary Church Terrell's in many ways. The two women were born a year apart, and both were daughters of former slaves. Their fathers were sons of their former masters; both were men who filled their daughters with racial pride—and the spirit of defiance.

Settling in Memphis after the Civil War, Robert Church was the

owner of a saloon which was ransacked in the Memphis riot of 1866. He was shot in the head and left to die, but miraculously survived. The threat of continued violence did not stop him from testifying against the men in a federal inquiry, or from being politically active in the community thereafter. He was a "race man," as one would have been called then.

James Wells, Ida's father, was also a race man, in Holly Springs, Mississippi, where Ida was born. He, too, was a man who refused to be intimidated. A carpenter who worked for the town's leading contractor, Wells refused entreaties to "sell" his newly won vote. The refusal cost him his job, and without hesitation—or regret—he moved his family and went into business for himself. It was a lesson not lost on his oldest daughter. The fathers of both Wells and Terrell married energetic and determined women. Louisa Church established a fashionable hair salon in Memphis which provided the family with their first home and carriage. Elizabeth Wells thrust most of her energies into the rearing of six children, making sure they understood discipline and the need for education, both secular and religious. "Our job," Ida, the firstborn, wrote, "was to learn all we could." Like so many freedmen and women, the Wellses believed deeply in the sanctity of family life. James and Elizabeth were among the many who, though married as slaves, renewed their vows "officially" as persons of free will. Their ideals made the event of 1878 all the more tragic.

That year was a turning point for both families. A yellow fever epidemic raged through the Mississippi Valley leaving death in its wake. Both of Ida's parents were consumed by the disease within twenty-four hours of each other, and their nine-month-old baby died as well. Friends tried to help out, offering to take the children in. But Ida Wells refused to have her five surviving brothers and sisters separated; her parents would "turn over in their graves," she felt, especially since one of her sisters, crippled from a spinal disease, would have been put into an institution. So at the age of sixteen, Wells ended her childhood to become the sole support of her young family. She left Rust College and, lying about her age, got a teaching position in a rural school. For two years Wells maintained a grueling schedule of riding a mule to the school each week and returning on weekends to take care of the domestic needs of her siblings, until at last relatives in Memphis could take the family in.

The epidemic changed the lives of the Churches too, but in another way. Robert Church sent his wife and daughter to New York but remained in Memphis, where residents were deserting their prop-

erties or selling them at depressed prices. Church, speculating that the city would eventually recover, bought up all the property he could. The gamble paid off in handsome dividends. Church reputedly became the first Black millionaire in the South.

Both women lived in Memphis in the 1880's. Wells attended LeMoyné Institute and received a license to teach elementary school. During summer vacations she took teachers' training courses at Fisk University. Although never a close friend of the Churches she had brief associations with both Mary and her father. Once, in dire need of funds, Wells wrote Robert Church, asking him for a loan. She was in California and did not have the fare to return to Memphis in time for the opening of the school semester. In the letter Wells assured him that she would repay the loan, with interest, and that she was a woman of reputable character. She wrote to him, Wells said, because he was "the only man of my race I knew could lend me that much money [\$150] and wait for me to repay it."<sup>8</sup> Robert Church sent her the needed fare.

Wells also met Mary Church briefly, probably just before the latter went to Oberlin. On Ida Wells, who was serious-minded and disdained social frivolities, the meeting left a lasting impression. Mary Church was "the first woman of my age who is similarly inspired with the same desires, hopes and ambitions," she observed. "I only wish I had known her long ago."<sup>9</sup> At the time, Wells hardly realized that their lives would diverge, only to intersect periodically, sometimes contentiously, for the remainder of their lives. Both had distinct roles in the struggle ahead, roles shaped by the contrasting resonances of their young adult years.

While Mary Church was studying the "Gentleman's Course" at Oberlin—a curriculum that included classical Latin and Greek—Wells underwent a different sort of education. It was 1884, and Ida B. Wells took her accustomed seat in the "Ladies' Coach" of a train bound for Memphis from Woodstock, Tennessee. But by that year, customs in the South were changing. A conductor demanded that Wells leave the first-class section for the smoking car. When she refused, the conductor attempted to force her from her seat—a mistake, he quickly realized when he felt a vicelike bite on the back of his hand. He called more conductors to his aid, and to the standing cheers of the White passengers on the train, the three men dragged the petite Black passenger out of the car.

A humiliated and angry Wells returned to Memphis and immedi-

ately engaged the sole Black lawyer in the city to bring suit against the railroad. The attorney seemed to dawdle on the case, and Wells suspected that he had been bought off by the authorities. She got a White lawyer and had her day in court. Before a judge who was an ex-Union officer, the determined Wells won the decision. The case prompted a White paper, the *Daily Appeal*, to write the first of many articles about the city's most controversial resident: A DARKY DAMSEL OBTAINS A VERDICT FOR DAMAGES AGAINST THE CHESAPEAKE & OHIO RAILROAD ran its headlines on Christmas Day, 1884.

Needless to say, Wells was ecstatic about the victory. Inaugurating her journalistic career, she wrote an article in a Baptist weekly called the *Living Way*. If Blacks stood up for their rights, she said, those rights, granted in Reconstruction legislation, would be preserved. But what she would come painfully to realize was that Reconstruction, in more ways than one, was in rapid eclipse. What historian Benjamin Quarles calls the South's "counterrevolution," though incomplete, was inexorably moving forward. The institutionalization of "legal" disenfranchisement, segregation, and White terror tactics had not yet congealed, but it was hardening.

The Chesapeake & Ohio Railway appealed to a higher court. Company officials offered Wells more money than the damages previously awarded, if she would agree not to contest the case. Of course she refused the money, on principle, but it was not until much later that she realized the full import of the case. Wells was the first Afro-American to challenge the 1883 nullification of the Civil Rights Bill passed during Reconstruction. Her victory would have set a significant precedent—a fact not lost on the Tennessee Supreme Court, which reversed the lower court's decision.

Wells was devastated. For her, it wasn't just the loss of the case, but the loss of faith that justice would ultimately prevail. "I feel shorn of that belief and utterly discouraged...." she wrote in her diary.<sup>10</sup> In hindsight, her despondency seems naïve, but as late as the 1880's most Blacks still believed that racial injustice was the handiwork of the lowly, an aberration that could be successfully challenged. It was their faith in the "system" that steeled their determination to be worthy citizens despite the bitter experience of slavery and discrimination. With that faith, Afro-Americans—and not just the most privileged ones—were making substantial economic gains after the war. They were attending school in droves: All in all, more than a quarter million Blacks attended more than four thousand schools established by the



Freedmen's Bureau. Afro-Americans were also making extraordinary efforts to organize their family life in the wake of a turbulent slave system. But as the twentieth century drew nearer, that deeply rooted faith in justice began to be shaken.

For Wells, the court decision brought a focus to her brooding concerns, a focus that would be expressed through journalism. She began writing a column for the *Living Way* on a regular basis, and her articles, about everything from compelling national issues to local community ones, became so popular that they were picked up by other Black newspapers throughout the country. The evolution of her career would parallel that of the Black press nationally. In the 1880's almost two hundred Black newspapers were being published every week, and the best of them—including the Detroit *Plaindealer*, the *New York Age*, and the *Indianapolis Freeman*—carried her columns under the pen name of "Iola." Wells's bold style, combined with her physical attractiveness, elicited a great deal of attention—especially from her male colleagues. The editors of the *Washington Bee* described her as a "remarkable and talented schoolmarm, about four and a half feet high, tolerably well proportioned and of ready address."<sup>11</sup>

The careers of Wells and Church continued on divergent paths in the late 1880's and 1890's. In 1889, while Mary Church was studying in Europe, Wells was elected as the first woman secretary of the National Afro-American Press Association. T. Thomas Fortune, editor of the *New York Age*, referring to her election at the association's convention in Washington, D.C., noted:

She has become famous as one of the few of our women who handles a goose quill with diamond point as handily as any of us men. She is girlish looking in physique with sharp regular features, penetrating eyes, firm set thin lips, and a sweet voice. She stuck to the conference through all the row and gas and seemed to enjoy the experience. If Iola was a man she would be a humming Independent in politics. She has plenty of nerve; she is smart as a steel trap, and she has no sympathy with humbug.<sup>12</sup>

Although Wells, unlike Church, was always strapped for funds, she managed to buy a one-third interest in *Free Speech* that year, and none too soon, it turned out. In 1891, the year that Church married an upwardly mobile young lawyer, Wells was fired from her teaching position as a result of an exposé on the Memphis school system. Her lack of sympathy with "humbug" obviously applied as much to the Black community as to the White. Teaching, frankly,

bored her anyway, but the dismissal did pose a financial problem. For all of her fame as a journalist (she was even called “Princess of the Press”) it didn’t pay the rent. But her new circumstances forced her to turn a passionate avocation into a full-time job. So she took to the road, traveling through Arkansas, Mississippi, and Tennessee to increase the paper’s circulation. Within nine months after her school dismissal, *Free Speech* subscriptions increased from 1,500 to 3,500, and within a year she was earning the same income she had as a teacher. Wells was in Natchez on one of those business trips when she heard about the lynching of Thomas Moss.

While Terrell agonized over the incident from afar—in Washington—Wells was forced to return to a Black Memphis community in shock and despair. “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 protection of the law was no longer ours,” she wrote.<sup>13</sup> Wells must have had a sense of *déjà vu* from her own earlier experiences with the railroad. What she had gotten a glimmer of in 1883 was being vented full-force less than a decade later. Beginning with neighboring Mississippi in 1890, all the southern states were in the process of disenfranchising Blacks by legal means; oppressive Black codes replaced their slave antecedents; segregation was becoming the rule, and violence toward Blacks was on the increase.

Still, Blacks in Memphis, perhaps more than those of any other southern city, were convinced that the blood tides would not reach them. True, Memphis had been the scene of one of the worst postwar riots in the country, when forty-six Black men, women, and children were killed and more than \$100,000 worth of Black-owned property was destroyed. Black women had been especially victimized by the violence. Federal inquiries revealed that many of them, living alone, were robbed, beaten, and raped. Cynthia Townsend, a Black woman who testified before federal authorities, told of a neighbor who was attacked by “three or four men,” all of whom “had connexion [sic] with her in turn around, and then one of them tried to use her mouth.” The woman, Townsend told the authorities, “has sometimes become a little deranged since then.”<sup>14</sup>

It was widely believed that such racial violence was a perversion, the work of poor Whites who had always resented economic competition from Blacks. But endemic racial violence was a thing of the past, many Blacks believed. In subsequent years, Black businessmen had thrived; Black legislators were elected to state and city government. But the Moss lynching of 1892 dimmed such optimism. And the rude

awakening sent Wells and Terrell on a course that changed both their lives. Their approaches were different—symbolized by Wells purchasing a pistol, situated as she was within the belly of the beast, while Terrell, no doubt wearing her accustomed white gloves and expensive strand of pearls, went to the White House. Each would be effective in her own way; but Wells's radical response would have a more immediate impact.

### **“The Truth About Lynching”**

The lynching of Thomas Moss further clarified Wells's perspective: The increasing violence toward Blacks had little to do with their alleged criminal behavior; rather lynching was the tool of the new caste system being imposed by the South. For Thomas Moss, everyone knew, was a good man, a loving husband and father, and a sterling citizen. His only crimes were to succeed at a business of his own, then to defend himself when Whites tried to destroy it. Furthermore, his murder was not at the hands of a few aberrants, but with the entire White establishment as accomplice. “The more I studied the situation,” wrote Wells, “the more I was convinced that the Southerner had never gotten over his resentment that the Negro was no longer his plaything, his servant, and his source of income.”<sup>15</sup> The resentment was even more intense, she surmised, toward Blacks who were in a position to compete with Whites. Lynching was a direct result of the gains Blacks were making throughout the South.

Thomas Moss was only one of a growing number of Afro-Americans who were planting solid economic stakes into southern soil. At the turn of the century, the National Negro Business League, an organization founded by Booker T. Washington, reported that in a city as small as Montgomery, Alabama, with two thousand Black residents, there were:

...twenty-three Black-owned restaurants, a dry-goods store, thirty shoemakers, twelve contractors and builders, fifteen blacksmith shops, wood and coal yards, butcher stalls, greengrocers, draymen, insurance and real-estate agents, a lawyer, a dentist, 400 preachers, five physicians, and two undertakers—all doing well.<sup>16</sup>

The same report noted that 187,000 Afro-Americans in the South owned their own farms, several of them more than a thousand acres

in size. How such figures could be translated into political power was vividly seen in the Populist movement of the late nineteenth century. The movement was made up of farmers who sought to wrest control from the planter class, and in a number of contests, Blacks held the balance of power in electing Populist candidates in the South. If something weren't done, Blacks could upset the South's long-standing political and economic power base. For Black men now represented a significant portion of the electorate; in some states like Mississippi—whose border lay close to Memphis—there were more Black eligible voters than White. There was no doubt about it: Afro-Americans were a threat and lynching was the means to counteract it.

Of course Whites used a more devious rationale to explain the "strange" dark-skinned "fruit" hanging from southern trees. The "Black peril," authorities like Philip A. Bruce proclaimed, was loosed upon the land of the magnolias.

There was no better candidate to articulate the "danger" for the entire nation than Bruce. He was a trained historian; the son of a plantation owner who had lorded over five hundred slaves; the brother-in-law of writer Thomas Nelson Page; the nephew of the Confederacy's former secretary of war—and a Harvard graduate. Bruce's thesis, formulated in the 1889 publication *The Plantation Negro as a Freeman*, was that Blacks, "cut off from the spirit of White society," had regressed to a primitive and thus criminal state. Bereft of the master's influence, Blacks were now even closer to the "African type" than the slaves had been.

This sudden outbreak of barbarism included a penchant for rape. Black men, he said, "found something strangely alluring and seductive in the appearance of White women."<sup>17</sup> If any poor Black soul thought he could take refuge from the sweeping charges on the basis of his class, he was sorely mistaken. The regression and attendant lust was as true for "the Black legislator, the teacher who graduated from college, and the preacher who studied the Bible as it was for the common laborer," Bruce concluded.<sup>18</sup> In fact, as a *Harper's Weekly* article noted, middle-class Blacks were the greater threat. For it was they who were "most likely to aim at social equality and to lose the awe with which in slavey times, Black men had learned to respect the woman of the superior race."<sup>19</sup> The magazine called the phenomenon "The New Negro Crime."

The charge was leveled so consistently against Black men, and came from such impeccable sources, that the whole nation seemed to

take it for granted. Not only *Harper's* but other scholarly and reputable magazines and newspapers wrote about the "new crime." The liberal reformer Jane Addams, though opposed to lynching, nevertheless believed that Black men had a proclivity for rape. Even some Blacks began to wonder. Frederick Douglass had begun to believe that "there was an increasing lasciviousness on the part of Negroes," according to Wells.<sup>20</sup> Wells herself had doubts: "Like many another person who had read of lynching in the South," she wrote, "I had accepted the idea meant to be conveyed—that although lynching was irregular and contrary to law and order...perhaps the brute deserved death anyhow and the mob was justified in taking his life."<sup>21</sup>

But Moss and his friends were not guilty of any crime, "new" or otherwise. Perhaps others weren't either. Perhaps, as Wells wrote, "lynching was merely an excuse to get rid of Negroes who were acquiring wealth and property and thus keep the race terrorized and 'keep the nigger down.'"<sup>22</sup> Wells set out to find the truth by investigating every lynching she could. For months, she culled newspaper accounts, went to the scene of lynchings, interviewed eyewitnesses. All in all, she researched the circumstances of 728 lynchings that had taken place during the last decade.

The result was a fastidiously documented report. Only a third of the murdered Blacks were even *accused* of rape, much less guilty of it, Wells discovered. Most were killed for crimes like "incendiarism," "race prejudice," "quarreling with Whites," and "making threats." Furthermore, not only men but women and even children were lynched. "So great is Southern hate and prejudice," Wells wrote, "they legally (?) hung poor little thirteen-year-old Mildrey Brown at Columbia, S.C., Oct. 7th on the circumstantial evidence that she poisoned a white infant. If her guilt had been proven unmistakable, had she been White," Wells concluded, "Mildrey Brown would never have been hung. The country would have been aroused and South Carolina disgraced forever...."<sup>23</sup>

Had Wells been content to publish these findings, she would have been provocative enough. But she tempted fate even further by exposing the rawest nerve in the South's patriarchal bosom. In the course of her investigations, Wells uncovered a significant number of interracial liaisons. She dared to print not only that such relationships existed, but that in many cases White women had actually taken the initiative. Black men were being killed for being "weak enough," in Wells's words, to "accept" White women's favors.

Wells gave an example of a lynch victim who had tried to escape the advances of his boss's daughter, even to the point of quitting his job. The woman pursued him, however, and when they were discovered together, the girl charged rape. In another instance, Wells investigated a case in Indianola, Mississippi, where a man was lynched after allegedly raping an eight-year-old girl. The girl, Wells discovered, was not eight but *eighteen* and had been a frequent visitor to the Black man's cabin. The journalist also documented several cases of White women calmly bearing Black babies; one such woman, to protect her lover, tried to deny that she was White. She had reason. Several Black men had been lynched for the crime of miscegenation.

When two more lynchings occurred while Wells was still conducting her investigations, she wrote the editorial that prompted her permanent banishment from the South. "Nobody in this section of the country believed the threadbare lie that Negro men rape white women," she challenged. "If Southern white men are not careful, they will overreach 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."<sup>24</sup>

Fortunately, while the editorial was still being set into type she was on her way to Philadelphia to accept a long-standing invitation from the activist and writer Frances Ellen Harper. From Philadelphia she went to New York, where she was met by T. Thomas Fortune of the *New York Age*. By then, the editorial had come out in Memphis and the backlash had been brutal and immediate. Wells's newspaper office was looted and burned to the ground; her co-owners, barely beating the mob, were run out of town; and Wells herself was warned that she would be hanged from a lamppost if she were to return. There were "agents" posted at the train station, she was told, to watch out for her. Fortune, who was no stranger to the South (he was a Floridian) was troubled by the news from Memphis. Now that she was in New York, he told her, "I'm afraid that you will have to stay."<sup>25</sup>

"The issue was forced," Wells thought after hearing the reaction to her editorial. She would simply have to fight from "exile." On June 5, 1892, the *New York Age* carried her seven-column article on its front page. Touted as the "first inside story of Negro lynching," it included names, dates, places, and circumstances of hundreds of lynchings for alleged rape. The response to the article was sensational and Fortune published ten thousand copies of the issue; one thousand were sold in the streets of Memphis alone.

In the following months, as a paid contributor, Wells continued to write two weekly columns for the paper under the heading "Iola's Southern Field." Always the businesswoman, Wells also purchased a one-fourth interest in the *Age* in exchange for her *Free Speech* subscription list.

Wells next wanted to publish her investigative findings in booklet form. But she faced the ever-present problem of insufficient funds to underwrite such an enterprise. In 1892, Black women came to her aid. They planned a testimonial, both in honor of her courageous stand and to raise funds for her booklet, which would be called "Southern Horror: Lynch Law in All Its Phases."

The testimonial, held October 5 in New York City's Lyric Hall, was a historic event: "the greatest demonstration ever attempted by race women for one of their own number," Wells later wrote.<sup>26</sup> Never before had so many leading women of the race come together. Two hundred and fifty Black women came to honor Wells, and the list was a veritable *Who's Who* of the Black eastern establishment. Present was Boston's Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, a suffragist, activist, and wife of a prominent legislator and judge. Dr. Susan McKinney from Brooklyn was also there. She was the valedictorian graduate of Long Island Medical College and considered the leading woman physician of the race. Sarah Garnet, the first Black principal of an integrated school in New York, and widow of the famous abolitionist Henry Highland Garnet, also attended, as did the journalist Gertrude Mossell, whose Philadelphia family could trace its activism and wealth to the eighteenth century. The prime organizer for the event was Victoria Earle Matthews of New York, whose White Rose Working Girls Home was a predecessor of the Urban League.

The testimonial had all the earmarks of a grand occasion. Wells's pen name, Iola, was spelled out in electric lights across the dais. The printed programs were miniature prototypes of the Memphis *Free Speech*. Soul-stirring music was interspersed with uplifting speeches. Five hundred dollars was collected for the booklet, which Wells dedicated "To the Afro-American women... whose race love, earnest zeal and unselfish effort made possible this publication."

Wells *was* genuinely grateful for the support—if a little surprised by it, especially since it was initiated in New York. The city, she knew, "had the name of being cold-blooded and selfish in its refusal to be interested in anybody or anything who was not to the manner born, whose parents were not known, or who did not belong to their cir-

cle."<sup>27</sup> The pistol-toting journalist was many things, but she was not "to the manner born."

But as Wells's investigations had so vividly revealed, all Blacks, regardless of class or achievement, were vulnerable. Also, the nature of Wells's campaign had struck a particular chord in Black women, who had never been thought of as a significant factor in the racial struggle, who remained unprotected, and who were held responsible for the denigration forced upon them. They well knew, as Wells stated publicly, that while Black men were being accused of ravishing White women, "The rape of helpless Negro girls, which began in slavery days, still continues without reproof from church, state or press."<sup>28</sup>

The negative images of Black women had always made them vulnerable to sexual assault, but by the late nineteenth century, that stereotype had even more sweeping consequences. Philip Bruce had included women in his diatribe against the race. They, too, were "morally obtuse" and "openly licentious," he wrote. But because they were women, their regression was seen as much worse than that of men. For it was women who were "responsible" for molding the institution of marriage and a wholesome family life which was the "safeguard against promiscuity." In Bruce's eyes, Black women who saw no "immorality in doing what nature prompts," who did not "foster chastity" among their own daughters, were not only responsible for their own denigration but for that of the *entire race*. Even the Black man's alleged impulse to rape was the Black woman's fault. Historically, the stereotype of the sexually potent Black male was largely based on that of the promiscuous Black female. He would have to be potent, the thinking went, to satisfy such hot-natured women. Now released from the constraints of White masters, the Black man found White women so "alluring" and "seductive" because, according to Bruce, of the "wantonness of the women of his own race."<sup>29</sup>

Wells's campaign, by undermining the stereotype of Black men, also challenged presumptions of the immorality of Black women.<sup>30</sup> And it was the public defense of the integrity of Black women, by Black women, which opened the way for the next stage of their political development. Black women like those at Lyric Hall responded to Ida B. Wells's antilynching campaign as not only a call to arms for the race, but for women specifically as well.

The ideas that drew them into battle were older than the Republic itself—for they were rooted in the European minds that shaped America.



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