

“An Anomaly to Myself and Others”: Ida B. Wells, and Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Memphis in the late 19th Century

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2014 Rhodes Institute for Regional Studies

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Ida B. Wells’ impact and legacy can be defined succinctly in an excerpt from the May 27, 1892 issue of *The Free Speech*, a Memphis-based African-American newspaper that Wells owned, edited and published: “No one in this section of the country believes that old thread-bare lie that black men assault white women.”¹ With a single line, Wells centered herself in the tenuous crucible of gender, sex, and race in the late 19th century, a position she had been working towards since her arrival in Memphis twelve years earlier.

Scholars typically view Wells’ editorial as the catalyst for a life of incredible accomplishments. It propelled her into the political sphere in New York and Chicago, attracted international recognition to her writing, and prompted a nationwide movement to prosecute lynch mobs across the United States.² For activists around the world, the article lionized Wells as a heroic example of journalistic power. For the architects of the racial hierarchy at the end of the nineteenth century in Memphis, however, the editorial was a challenge that justified violent retaliation. Within a week of its publication, the *Free Speech* offices were burned to the ground, demonstrating a greater problem at the intersection of race and gender: ignorance. Wells and other activists of the time confronted not only racial and sexual violence, but also the negative consequences of exposing truth about said violence. Fighting injustice carried its own set of

¹ Wells, *Southern Horrors*, 18

² Wells, *Crusade for Justice*

risks, but attempting to publicize the fight incurred even more.³ This editorial marked the end of a period in Wells' time in the United States South. She never returned to the region she called home, and in the minds of many native Memphians, she lived on in infamy, a traitor across the nation who published libel against the city.

Intellectually, the editorial and its aftermath marked the beginning of Wells' increased commitment to serve as a voice for justice – the springboard for a lifelong career of activism.⁴ She wrote in her autobiography that after the Lynching at the Curve⁵ and the reaction to her editorial, “I felt that I owed it to myself and my race to tell the whole truth”.⁶ *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* was published in 1892 as an extension of her controversial May editorial, and *The Red Record* was published in 1895 as a comprehensive study of lynching and accusations of sexual misconduct in the South from Emancipation to 1894. Wells ran for political office in Chicago, travel throughout Europe to lecture on lynching, and continued race and gender advocacy through investigative journalism for the rest of her life.

³ Wells, *Crusade for Justice*, 58. This article revealed not only the greater issues of gender, race, and sexuality in lynchings around the south, but also told the oft misreported details of the Lynching at the Curve, a lynching that occurred in Memphis, TN on March 9th, 1892. Three black businessmen and close friends of Ida B. Wells – Thomas Moss, Henry Stewart, and Calvin McDowell – opened the People's Grocery Company on Mississippi Boulevard in 1885. Their success began to take business from the white grocery store in the neighborhood, they were warned a white mob would come attack the grocery. On March 8th, nine out-of-uniform sheriffs deputies entered the grocery, and the three black men fired on them, and were subsequently jailed. That night, a white mob broke into the jail, kidnapped the three men, lynched them. Wells was horrified by the crime – she was not only close friends with the three men, but godmother to Thomas Moss' child. She immediately wrote in *the Free Speech* that black Memphians should leave the city: nearly 6,000 did.

⁴ Giddings, Paula, *Ida: A Sword Among Lions*, 7: “Memphis served as the beginning of Wells' activism.”

⁵ Wells, *Crusade for Justice*, 58. The Lynching at the Curve occurred in Memphis, TN on March 9th, 1892. Three black businessmen and close friends of Ida B. Wells – Thomas Moss, Henry Stewart, and Calvin McDowell – had opened the People's Grocery Company on Mississippi Boulevard in 1885. Their success began to take business from the white grocery store in the neighborhood, they were warned a white mob would come attack the grocery. On March 8th, nine out-of-uniform sheriffs deputies entered the grocery, and the three black men fired on them, and were subsequently jailed. That night, a white mob broke into the jail, kidnapped the three men, lynched them. Wells was horrified by the crime – she was not only close friends with the three men, but godmother to Thomas Moss' child. She immediately wrote in *the Free Speech* that black Memphians should leave the city: nearly 6,000 did. It was this lynching that eventually inspired her controversial May 27th editorial that drove her from the city.

⁶ Wells, *Crusade for Justice*, 63: “They [white Memphian mob] had destroyed my paper, in which every dollar I had in the world was invested. They had made me an exile and threatened my life for hinting at the truth. I felt that I owed it to myself and my race to tell the whole truth.”

Wells' time in Memphis illustrates how race and gender interlocked in southern culture to protect white supremacy. In confronting racial and sexual violence, Wells exposed the myth of black masculine aggression used to justify lynching, while simultaneously addressing other issues of black sexual negativity in regards to white supremacy.

Although her well-known accomplishments occurred outside Memphis, this city on the bluff served as a wellspring of experiences which revealed the insidious power of race and gender – and provided her with an opportunity to upend these social constructs. As literary scholar Rychetta Watkins states “Wells should be considered revolutionary because her experiences in the Mid-South informed a materialist critique of the ‘lynch law’ system, which compelled her engagement in political, legal, and economic transformation in Southern society.”⁷ The emasculated racism through sexual assault accusation and other extralegal rulings in Memphis provided raw materials for her activism. Wells used the *Free Speech* in addition to other black news-sources to hone her journalistic voice and enter a field of written literature – American Modernism – that attacked the social constructs of race and gender identity, amidst the rise of Social Darwinism, eugenics, and the Cult of Domesticity.⁸ This raises the question: in a society of white patriarchal supremacy, when women, African Americans, and especially female African Americans were regarded as inferior, what about Memphis made Ida B. Wells believe she could make a difference? Surrounded by intellectual peers of local preachers, journalists and black activists in Memphis and across the country, Wells spoke out against injustices in a way

⁷ “The Southern Roots of Ida B. Wells-Barnett’s Revolutionary Activism.”

⁸ At the precipice of the turn of the century, industrialization, urbanization, increased education, and increased spread of information challenged the self-identity of many individuals. Their lifestyles changed, their goals shifted, and awareness of other types of day-to-day living increased exponentially. At the same time, this also challenged the social constructs of society. Definitions of “manhood” changed with new career opportunities, definition of “educated” changed as people had greater access to higher education, social constructs of “gender” changed with the suffragist movement, and many other social constructed definitions were altered with the swiftly changing world. Athey, Stephanie, *Eugenic Feminisms in Late Nineteenth-Century America: Reading Race in Victoria Woodhull, Frances Willard, Anna Julia Cooper and Ida B. Wells*

that would have been impossible in many other southern cities, especially for a black woman.⁹ This paper will argue Wells' activism and writing in the city of Memphis at the turn of the 19th century are extraordinary paths for examining the permeable borders of the seemingly impenetrable social constructs of race, gender, and sex. Her unique experience in the Mississippi Valley created the empowered and Modern black female professional who challenged social constructs of race, gender, and sexuality through writing and activism for the rest of her life.¹⁰

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The 1880s and 1890s were a changing and challenging time for the development of culture and society in the south, and Ida B. Wells found herself living and working in one of the fastest growing cities in the United States. Wells moved to Memphis in 1880 out of financial necessity to live with her extended family and take a teaching job.¹¹ The two years without her parents had been emotionally, physically, and financially challenging.¹² While Wells was aware of the “dark side” of Memphis, the young woman was also drawn to the “glitter”: the theaters, industry, culture, libraries, and most importantly, the career opportunity.¹³

Memphis in the 1880s presented what scholar Margaret Vandiver called “an interesting amalgam of opportunity and discrimination for African Americans.”¹⁴ In the Yellow Fever epidemic, over 6,000 Memphis citizens died between 1877 and 1880, and even more fled in fear

⁹ In other cities, African American people, especially African American women, were silenced in order to maintain complete white supremacy and power.

¹⁰ Here, “Modern” denotes an urban, educated, more-independent, working woman.

¹¹ Both of her parents had died within twenty-four hours of each other in the 1878 Yellow Fever epidemic in Holly Springs, Mississippi, leaving sixteen-year-old Ida to care for five remaining siblings. Ida immediately dropped out of Rust College to take a job as a school teacher in Holly Springs, but the meager salary necessitated constant charity from other families in the town. She was forced to travel to and from school by mule, and was unable to spend time with the family she was supporting. Eventually, her Aunt Fanny and Uncle Alfred, who lived in Memphis, offered to take in the girls, and find apprenticeships for the boys.

¹² Giddings, Paula, *Ida: A Sword Among Lions*, 16

¹³ Decosta-Willis, Miriam, *The Memphis Diary of Ida B. Wells*

¹⁴ Vandiver, Margaret, *Lethal Punishment: Lynching and Legal Executions in the South*, 51

of catching the disease.¹⁵ Because of the black biological resistance to the disease, the majority of this population loss was white, opening a multitude jobs and living spaces.¹⁶ African Americans from the surrounding rural areas – like Ida B. Wells from Holly Springs – rapidly moved into the city, yearning to take their place in the modern, industrial, urban economic impulse that was sweeping the nation. Amidst the stifling environment of the Jim Crow South, Memphis became a center of black business, culture and social life. For a short while, because of a lack of “suitable” – meaning white - officers, black men were allowed and even encouraged to join the Memphis municipal police force to bolster the dwindling forces.¹⁷ Only 25% of convicted criminals were African Americans, which initially showed a lack of legal racial discrimination, though only 4% of African Americans were land-owners, showing racial bias in regards to stereotypical white privileges, like homeownership.¹⁸ Other southern cities removed black influence from their political system, yet Memphis had black representation in multiple prominent positions.¹⁹ This prevalence of black leadership after 1877 made Memphis distinct in the post-Reconstruction south. According to many historical sources, there was a sense of progress and pride among the black population. In 1908, black principal G. P. Hamilton confirms this, as he writes in Memphis “civic righteousness instead of wickedness prevails,”²⁰ and “the relationship between the two races in Memphis is as friendly and cordial as can be reasonably

¹⁵ Crosby, Mary Caldwell, *The American Plague*: This death total is more than the total people that died in the Chicago fire, the San Francisco earthquake, and Johnstown flood, combined.

¹⁶ *ibid*: The black population was mostly resistant to this widespread, rampant disease because the virus was carried into the United States by mosquitos from Africa. African ancestral roots kept African Americans safe, because once a family was infected with the disease, it achieved genetic immunity.

¹⁷ *ibid*, 361. However, it should be noted that black police officers were replaced by white police officers as soon as possible.

¹⁸ Wells, Ida, *The Memphis Diary of Ida B. Wells*

¹⁹ In the late 1870s and early 1880s Alexander J. Dickerson and H.E. Pinn had both served on general council, while Edward Shaw held the position as Wharf Master in the shipping-driven city. Lymus Wallace accepted a position on the school board in 1882. Dowdy, Wayne. *A Brief History of Memphis*, 53.

²⁰ Hamilton, G. P. *The Bright Side of Memphis*, 9.

expected.”²¹ Yet this sentence – and the white-perspective historical accounts - obscure more than they reveals. On the surface level, Hamilton’s endorsement of race relations in Memphis paint the city as a progressive and healthy town, just as many historical overviews. But by 1908, it is important to consider that white supremacy was firmly re-established in the city.²² Just as Hamilton’s words can be read as the “bright” side of Memphis, they can also be read as a tongue-in-cheek commentary on the persisting race problems, and an half-hearted attempt to make the city seem livable to an African American population. G.P. Hamilton’s comment can be read as a façade covering the grinding poverty and violence that defined race relations in Memphis.²³ Wells entered this place ready to take full advantages of the resources, confront the challenges, and shape by its complicated identity.²⁴

The Memphis Massacre in May of 1866 was among the most deadly racial conflicts to occur during Reconstruction; over 46 black men were killed, and another 76 were injured in a three-day black-vs-white-police confrontation.²⁵ No one was jailed or punished at the end of the riot, setting a standard for one-sided justice and racial disparity in legal policies. A study on African Americans in Memphis show that from 1878 to 1920 officials and police officers were involved in every major physical attack against the black community.²⁶ Wells wrote in her own diary that the black schools in Memphis had unsatisfactory teaching conditions compared to the white schools in town, from building spaces to available materials.²⁷ In the field of science, the rise of Social Darwinism and eugenics provided academic justification constructions of “natural”

²¹ *ibid*, 10

²² Silver, Christopher, *The Separate City*

²³ Woodard, C.V.

²⁴ Bond, Beverly. *Memphis in Black and White*, 44.

²⁵ In his recent book *A Massacre in Memphis: A Race Riot That Shook the Nation One Year After the Civil War* Steve Ash begins to refer to the 1866 riot a “nothing less” than a massacre.

²⁶ Bond, 51

²⁷ Broken pipes and over-crowded classrooms were the norm in black public schools. January 24, 1885. *The Memphis Diary of Ida B. Wells*

racial inequality. Scholar Stephanie Athey argues “within the economic, racial and gendered logic of the late nineteenth century, eugenics research and policy targeted especially the behavior of women of all races, men of color, and those on the margins of ‘whiteness.’”²⁸ Ida B. Wells began her career in place with incredible tension, at a point of intersection. In some ways, Memphis was a place of progress, possibility, and amazing opportunity for mobile rural African Americans. However, Memphis was also a place of intense oppression, a time C. Vann Woodard describes “the nadir of African American life, the crucible of race.”²⁹ Wells navigated and challenged these conflicting forces during her time in the city.

In addition to the growing African American culture and increasing struggles for the black community in Memphis, literary societies contributed heavily to Wells’ fledgling career in Memphis. As a writer and schoolteacher, Wells would have been eager to tap into these intellectual groups. By providing outlets for higher thought and conversation, these societies challenged the white supremacist idea that African Americans were incapable of being intellectuals. She writes in her autobiography that the lyceums were “a breath of life,” as they provided higher literary and cultural discussions.³⁰ Wells moved to Memphis on the brink of the American Modernism movement, an incredibly important period of American art. The end of slavery and Reconstruction completely changed the social and cultural dynamics of the United States, and out of this instability and period of significant upheaval (in addition to other factors), Modernism emerged as an art form to represent anxieties about identity, time, and place.³¹

²⁸ Athey, Stephanie. *Eugenic Feminisms in the Nineteenth-Century America: Reading Race in Victoria Woodhull, Frances Willard, Anna Julia Cooper and Ida B. Wells*

²⁹ 45

³⁰ Because she had dropped out of school early to care for her siblings, Wells says herself that she had “no normal training. The only work I did besides keep up with the work, was to teach in Sunday School.” Crusade for Justice

³¹ In her essay defining the period, Rita Barnard writes that the anxiety of Modernity “extended unevenly but inexorably across the nation – even into the country store and into the minds of the folks who still gathered around the woodstove to chat.”³¹ With urbanization, increased transportation, the printing press, industrialization,

William Wordsworth writes in his *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* that “all good poetry is a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” and the powerful overflow of feelings only occurs in “acknowledgement of the beauty of the natural universe.”³² This is an obvious criticism of urbanization and industrialization, and the effect of this “progress” on art. The defining poet of the American Modernism period T.S. Eliot “recognizes and helps define worry as a mixture of the ordinary”³³ as the “birth of the new world attended by the birth of worry.”³⁴ In his poem “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” the identification anxiety of the period seeps through. The line “do I dare” occurs over and over again, questioning social and cultural standards and actions.³⁵

The motifs of Modernism also existed in the white portrayal of the black public. A popular form of theater among white society - minstrelsy - used black caricatures to exploit the anxieties of Modernism. In the midst of an identity struggle, as black men and women moved into cities, the workplace, and schools, minstrelsy was a way for white artists to actively construct and reinforce the perception that blackness was synonymous with the rural past and second-class citizenship. In minstrel shows, African Americans were simple, shiftless, lazy, rude, mindless, and worthy of condemnation.³⁶ This “art” form was linked to the rise of science to further construct ideas of blackness. Social Darwinism and eugenics were dubious forms of scientific justification used to prove that African Americans were less capable than their white counterparts, vogue ideas white Memphians used to convince themselves and their children of their own superiority. This same ideas can be seen in the literature of the period. Mark Twain’s

there was a shared anxiety about the changing identity of the US. For many, this prompted an artistic rebellion and a new style of writing.

³² Wordsworth, William. *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, Norton Anthology of Criticism, 566.

³³ O’Gorman, Francis, *Modernism, T.S. Eliot, and the “age of worry*, 1017

³⁴ *ibid*

³⁵ Eliot, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” 7:2, 9.

³⁶ Bean, A, Hatch, JV, McNamara, *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in nineteenth-century blackface minstrelsy*

*Huckleberry Finn*³⁷ – though outwardly anti-slavery – is often criticized for over-simplifying black characters, and over-use of the word “nigger.” Though the text engages with black characters, some view it as a criticism of African American potential. Anxiety about black identity in the post-slavery United States were evident in the late 19th century art, science, and politics: Memphis was no exception.

While Wells would have studied the traditional Western canon in her lyceum, including the more racist texts, she also would have discussed African American writing and progress, and perhaps read African American texts. Not to be excluded from the artistic impulse, African American texts also displayed Modernist motifs. Rita Barnard explains that Modernism dealt with a sense of “dislocation, displacement, and alienation,” acute struggles for African American public in the rise of the Jim Crow.³⁸ Amidst the racial anxiety and fear of abuse there was, however, hope. The growing distance between the black population’s current existence as free African Americans and the institution of slavery prompted optimism for the new century – a “climate of opportunity” - that presented new literary material for many African Americans.³⁹ In the nadir of African American history, literature attempted to reframe blackness in a positive light.⁴⁰ Just as the rise of gospel music and precursors of jazz represented the African American struggle at the turn of the century by incorporating old struggles and tradition with new artistic and cultural impulses, black writers incorporated the same tension in their work. There was a clear anxiety, struggle, and grappling with identity as they combined the old with the new. In many ways, as Wells became an established writer in the newspaper scene, she shared the styles and ideas of these prominent black writers of the period (before becoming a prominent black

³⁷ Twain, Mark. *Huckleberry Finn*, 1885, Charles L. Webster and Company

³⁸ *Modern American Fiction*, 49

³⁹ March, Deborah M, *Reframing Blackness: The Photograph and the African American Literary Modernism at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*, 10

⁴⁰ *ibid* 15

writer herself).⁴¹ The simple eloquence of Wells' writing mimics the speeches of early black feminist Sojourner Truth. Truth says in her famous "Ain't I a Woman" speech "If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again," while Wells writes of her male counterparts "These dynamic men of ideas and action were heroic models – the only models – of who ambitious, intelligent, and racially committed Black women might become, for Black Memphis women at that time occupied neither pulpit nor the podium."⁴² The struggle for identity, paired with worry, anxiety, fear and extreme hope for the new century that defines Modernism literature echoes the sentiments of the African American public, and contributed to the atmosphere of Memphis. As a writer, Wells became a part of this movement, and though her style was more fact-based than fiction, her investigative journalism asked some of the same questions about gender, sexuality, and race that art from that period.

Wells' participation and eventual leadership in these lyceums and literary society also defied the prevalent gender norms of the time. While women were expected to be able to read and work in careers such as teachers, nurses, and secretaries, they were not expected to be involved in politics or be prominent figures in activism. As Jacqueline Jones Royster argues, literary clubs and societies allowed black women to disrupt and challenge the patterns of

⁴¹ Jean Toomer's Cane contains a series of vignettes that reveal the black struggle for identity and connection in both the North and the South.⁴¹ Cross-racial sexual relationships, racial violence, and black success are all presented from different perspectives. The protagonists of Nella Larsen's Passing articulates the period more clearly in her constant preoccupation with safety; as a black woman occasionally passing for white, she says, "I'm beginning to think that no one is ever completely happy, or free, or safe." Though her light skin should make her life easier in regards to Jim Crow laws, the emotional and mental pressure of constantly worrying about passing causes overwhelming stress.⁴¹ Finally, there is W.E.B. Dubois' The Souls of Black Folk. Published in the first few years of the American Modernism movement, everything from the crisp, syncopated but smooth style of writing to his attempt to identify and define the black population fits with the themes of the period.

⁴² Truth, Sojourner, *Ain't I a Woman*; Wells, The Memphis Diary of Ida B. Wells

oppression determining their lives, and Wells' lyceum was no exception: they participated in literary recitations, analysis of essays, and debates around the current state of Memphis.⁴³

Wells' womanhood was challenged not only by her career and intellectual choices but by her race as well. It is nearly impossible to discuss the history of gender advocacy without discussing race advocacy - and gender complexities during Wells' time in Memphis are no exception. When Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton were not allowed to sit on the floor of the World Anti-Slavery Convention in 1840, they began planning the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848.⁴⁴ However, after the Emancipation Proclamation, black and white women lost a common platform, and race and gender advocacy had diverged in what Stanton called "the great schism." At the 1869 meeting of the American Equal Rights Association, black activist Frances Harper uttered the line "When it was the question of race, let the lesser question of sex go."¹ This loaded statement placed black women at an intersection within their respective communities - would their loyalty and activism lie with their race or gender? This line also forced white women within the movement to consider their primary allegiance - were they fighting for all equal rights, or their own equal rights? From this moment on, the Women's Movement was divided over the black women's suffrage movement and white women's suffrage movement. Activist Adella Hunt Logan articulated "If White women needed the vote to acquire advantages and protection of their rights, then Black women need the vote even more so." According to those who supported a white female vote, but not a black female vote, there was a distinct difference between black and white women, therefore splitting their platform became necessary. Consequently, the women's movement as a whole lost significant political power. White womanhood and black womanhood were not culturally constructed in the same way, and because

⁴³ Royster, Jacqueline Jones, Traces of Steam: Literary and Social Change Among African American Women

⁴⁴ This is often referred to as the beginning of the Woman's movement. Cott, Nancy F. The Grounding of Modern Feminism.

of their inability to decide whether to advocate for suffrage for all, or suffrage only for privileged whites, tensions continued to grow and stereotypes persisted. As Anna Julia Cooper famously remarked, “only the black woman can say when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole race enters with me.”⁴⁵ Cooper implies that only with recognition of black womanhood came the complete acceptance of the African American race. Since race relations were strained post-Reconstruction, it is no surprise that “black womanhood” was also controversial, and therefore a racial systemic barrier for suffrage.

In Memphis specifically, gender norms for black women such as Wells were not only tied to Victorian womanhood, but tied to the idea of a Southern belle, and the pressures of morality and domesticity associated with specifically *southern* Victorian ideals. According to sociologist Zandria Robinson, “white gender archetypes are erected against constructions of black gender archetypes, black folks managed to appropriate categories from which they were excluded – belle, lady, and gentleman, for instances – and participate in a racialized version of regional culture that wrested some dignity through performance.”⁴⁶ Robinson argues that black women were constantly performing to fulfill the “southern belle” stereotype, but because they could never completely access all forms of the pure white womanhood, they became “southern *guls*.”⁴⁷ Their performance fell short. “*Guls*” were black women who existed with a focus on domesticity, hospitality, religiosity, and subservience to male figures in black as well as white cultures in Memphis. Outspokenness, independence, and professional education were not encouraged or

⁴⁵ *ibid*, 13

⁴⁶ Robinson, Zandria, *This Ain't Chicago*, 29

⁴⁷ “Southern guls” refers to a black, southern, typically lower-class woman without access to privileged white womanhood, *ibid* 121

valued.⁴⁸ While Henry James' concept of the "New Woman"⁴⁹ gained popularity during the end of Wells' time in Memphis, the Memphis Wells entered favored a stricter adherence to the "Cult of Domesticity," a feminine ideal of domesticity.⁵⁰ Wells writes in her diary that she often wanted to show femininity without losing respect from her male peers, and this was constantly a challenge.⁵¹ As a black woman, Wells' "womanhood" required constant negotiation of femininity to align with the white norms, which were ultimately impossible.⁵² Domestic Victorian perfection was a constant yet unattainable goal for Wells and other black women. This maintenance of femininity and propriety was an absolute necessity for black women in Memphis. Any transgression relegated them to one "typical" black woman: ignorant, savage, and full of immoral vices.⁵³

Wells' "black womanhood" was an essential part of her first attempt to challenge the social constructs of race and gender in Memphis. While living with her aunt, Wells became a schoolteacher and traveled to and from Memphis on the weekends. On 15 September 1883, Wells boarded the Chesapeake and Ohio railroad train. She noticed the colored car was not only smoky, but also occupied by a drunk white man. Privy to stories of white sexual violence against black women without punishment and her own sense of self-worth, Wells sat in the white ladies car, a place black women were only permitted if they were accompanying a white woman as a maid.⁵⁴ When Wells was asked by the conductor to move, she refused, physically resisting him

⁴⁸ Giddings, Paula. *Ida: A Sword Among Lions*, 6

⁴⁹ The "New Woman" is the term given to the women in Henry James' novel in the late 19th century. These women were often outspoken, educated, flirtatious ex-patriots who exercised independence throughout the story. In some interpretations, they show sexual empowerment or divergence from heteronormativity.

⁵⁰ The prevailing value system in the United States in the late 19th century for the middle to upper class, which favored female femininity, domesticity, purity, and submission.

⁵¹ Wells, *The Memphis Diary of Ida B. Wells*, 6

⁵² According to Paula Giddings, "while their white peers were riding the wave of moral superiority that sanctioned their activism, Black women were seen as immoral scourges."

⁵³ *ibid*, 82

⁵⁴ McGuire, 140

until other passengers stepped into to help.⁵⁵ She was eventually forced out the car to the cheers of the white passengers.

What may have seemed like a momentary failure in discrimination resistance turned into a legal and symbolic success that affirmed Wells' political power. In December of 1884, her white lawyer James Greer won the case and her a \$500 settlement.⁵⁶ Despite the white newspapers' attempt to downplay the victory, the case was incredibly important.⁵⁷ While this event occurred before Jim Crow laws applied to transportation in Tennessee, Wells' felt it was her right to have accommodations equal to white women. By moving into the ladies' car without accompaniment from a white woman, Wells challenged social constructs of gender and growing legal barriers of race. The top African American publishing house in New York City made the story a national one, "urging others to follow in Wells footsteps."⁵⁸ Later that year, the federal Supreme Court overruled the decision, stating the short length of Wells' journey and her aggressive reaction justified her movement to the colored car.⁵⁹ It was an emotional loss for Wells. She writes in her autobiography "In this, as in so many other matters, the South... did not want or intend to give justice to the Negro after robbing him of all the resources from which to secure it."⁶⁰ Racial apprehensions about the value of black womanhood, even before the Jim Crow-era, denied Wells access to a comfortable and safe journey. She took this insult to heart, and began to challenge social constructs of race, gender, and sexuality even more aggressively.

⁵⁵Giddings, Paula, 62: "The conductor attempted to physically pull her out of her seat, tearing the sleeve off her dress in the process... Ida, determined not to be taken, hooked her feet under the seat in front of her, began scratching the conductor with her nails, and then bit his hands deeply enough to draw blood. The conductor asked for help from the passengers and they readily complied."

⁵⁶Giddings, Paula, 67

⁵⁷ *ibid*: The headline from the next day in the *Avalanche* read: "A Darky Damsel Obtains a Verdict for Damages...What It Costs to Put a Colored Woman in a Smoking Car: \$500"

⁵⁸ *ibid* 68

⁵⁹ Wells-Barnett, *Crusade for Justice*, 22

⁶⁰ Wells, *Crusade for Justice*, 20

Shortly after this incident, Wells was promoted to teach in the Shelby County public school system.⁶¹ The change had profound impact on the rest of her life in Memphis – both financially and socially. With a more substantial presence in Memphis, Wells’ participation in lyceums and other clubs increased. Wells met Reverend R. N. Countee, the pastor of one of the most popular black Baptist churches in town at a lyceum meeting. Countee asked Wells to contribute to the Baptist church weekly newsletter the *Living Way* and she began writing columns for both the *Evening Star* and the *Living Way* under the penname Iola.⁶² Though she lacked formal education, her simple, concise, and bold writing grew so popular that black newspapers around the country began to reprint her work: the *Detroit Plaindealer*, the *New York Age*, and the *Indianapolis Freeman* all published the young female author regularly.⁶³ She became a nationwide figure of the journalism world.

1889 was an incredibly important and successful year for Wells as a journalist. Due to her growing nationwide popularity, she became the first ever woman to serve at the secretary of the National Afro-American Press Association.⁶⁴ Wells had distinguished herself as one of the top women in her field. This success, however, was also paired with isolation and a sense of alienation from other black women. With such a focus on her career, she could not maintain expectations of the domestic ideal; maintaining the perfect “Cult of Domesticity” appearance would have been financially impossible. As a single woman, Wells needed to work to support

⁶¹ Her first school was Kortrecht School, the first brick building in the city built for African Americans.

⁶² The *Living Way* was a weekly religious newsletter started in 1874, “in the interest of Negro Americans.” Wells-Barnett, *Crusade for Justice*, 23

⁶³ Wells-Barnett, Ida. *Crusade for Justice*, 23: “I had an instinctive feeling that the people who had little of no school training should have something coming into their homes weekly which dealt with their problems in a simple, helpful way. So in weekly letters to the *Living Way*, I wrote in plain, common-sense way on the things which concerned our people. Knowing that their education was limited, I never used a word of two syllables where one would serve the purpose.”; Giddings, Paula J. *When and Where I Enter*, 24

⁶⁴ At the election conference in Washington DC, editor of the *New York Age* T. Thomas Fortune said: “She has become famous as one of the few of our women who handles a goose quill with a diamond point as handily as any of us men... If Iola was a man she would be humming *Independent* in politics. She had plenty of nerve; she is smart as a steel trap, and she has no sympathy with humbug.”

herself. Her fellow teacher and female friends seemed to conform to the gender roles of “usefulness” and “passivity” and Wells expressed anxiety over the myriad marriages she attends without a consistent suitor of her own.⁶⁵ She had “nerve” when expected to show empathy, she was “smart” when women were supposed to be subservient, and she had “no sympathy with humbug” when women were expected to be welcoming and accepting. Just as successful black men were accused of rape and assault as a way to undermine their manhood, Wells’ success was undermined by alleged transgressions of traditional femininity. As she traveled through the ranks in the journalism and education profession, she was accused of sleeping with a man in Holly Springs for money, having relations with male colleagues in the journalism world, and giving birth to a illegitimate child.⁶⁶ Her refusal to comply to normative forms of gender performance – settling down, getting married, and having children as a young, mid-twenties school teacher – prompted white men to condemn her success by questioning her sexual morality. The idea of black promiscuity that fueled many of the lynching cases was here being applied to a successful black woman in an attempt to make her less of a threat to the white public. In short, because she was black and successful, she must somehow be a slut.

This association of black womanhood with promiscuity and questionable morality was common during this time period in Memphis and elsewhere. Tied to black women’s inability to completely fulfill the southern belle stereotype was the negative and promiscuous perception of African American sexuality. During slavery, slave owners raped black female slaves under the justification of preserving their wives’ “Victorian womanhood.” Sex within white marriages was meant to be monogamous, loving, and for the sole purpose of procreation; any other type of relations would violate the “purity” of the Victorian, Christian wife, and be deemed as immoral.

⁶⁵ Gilmore, Glenda Elizabeth, *Gender and Jim Crow*, 36

⁶⁶ *ibid* 111

Therefore, when white slave owners were overcome with “desire,” they would use their property – black women – to release such barbarian urges, rather than violate their white wives.⁶⁷ This systemic history of rape of black women created multi-fold negativity regarding black sexuality. According to Civil Rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer, “A black woman’s body was never her own.”⁶⁸ It was constantly undergoing what Martin Luther King called “thingification” by whites, removing their humanity while simultaneously making them an object of competition and envy of white women.⁶⁹ While white women condemned black female slaves for stealing intimacy from their husbands, and those same slaves began to disdain their white female slave owners, for refusing to step in against the repeated sexual assault.⁷⁰ Animosity between black and white women persisted in the first wave of feminism and limited gender alliances across racial lines. Wells’ ability to link gender and race activism defied this animosity; despite experiencing racial prejudice from the women’s movement, she befriended Susan B. Anthony and Frances Willard, and fought for women’s rights with race rights.

In the 1890s, the rape and exploitation of black women was still seen as “no consequence beyond the black community,” since black women failed to access to the sanctity of “womanhood” that white women were privy to, as previously discussed in Wells’ train-car situation.⁷¹ Often, rape was used as a “tool of terror” to re-assert white supremacy – dominating the mind, spirit, and body of African American women.⁷² Because of the sexual misconduct that occurred during slavery, black women were still seen as inherently sexual creatures, and through the Jim Crow era and beyond, “black women were engaged in a painful, patient and silent toil to

⁶⁷ Petty, Leslie, *Intro to Gender and Sexuality*

⁶⁸ McGuire, Danielle L. *At the Dark End of the Street*, xiv

⁶⁹ White women were often aware of relations between their husbands and slaves. *Ibid*, xv

⁷⁰ Petty, Leslie, *Intro to Gender and Sexuality*

⁷¹ Carby, Hazel V. “On the Threshold of the Women’s Era:” *Lynching, Empire, and Sexuality in Black Feminist Theory*, 269

⁷² McGuire, xvii

gain titles to the bodies of their daughters.”⁷³ Compared to white women –especially white, southern, Christian, Victorian woman – black women were impure and promiscuous, sexual deviants. A newspaper in South Carolina wrote “it is not the same thing for a white man to assault a colored woman as for a colored man to assault a white woman, because the colored woman had no finer feelings nor virtue to be outraged.”⁷⁴ Barely considered citizens, black women lack the same perception of sexual purity and worth as white women. They did not deserve sexual respect. Thus the questioning Wells’ sexual conduct as a means of undermining her success was a common tool used to control the social location of black people. The common conception from the white perspective was that black women were lascivious, untrustworthy creatures, so Wells must be as well, and this could be used to undermine her.

This sexual reputation clearly bothered Wells, but it was not until the end of her career in Memphis - and one of the turning points of her life as an activist - that she began to speak out against such sexual injustice.⁷⁵ By 1892, Wells was a prominent figure in the newspaper world of Memphis. She was co-owner of the *Memphis Free Speech*, and she had earned the national nickname “Princess of the Press” because of how often her writing was reprinted across the country.⁷⁶ Her articles in the *Free Speech* were revolutionary: with a focus on racial injustice and activism, the paper often printed editorials and articles criticizing Jim Crow laws, challenging white politicians in Memphis, and spotlighting black industry and success, topics that were controversial even in more integrated cities. In a time when many black women lacked the leisure time, resources, education, and privacy to publish meaningful work, Wells’ paper and

⁷³ Anna Julia Cooper

⁷⁴ Hine, Darlene Clark, *African American Women and Their Communities in the Twentieth Century*, 6

⁷⁵ Wells often wrote in her diary about her frustration with the opposite sex.

⁷⁶ Wells became co-owner of the *Memphis Free Speech* in 1891. Reverend Taylor Nightingale of the Beale Street Baptist Church initially offered her the position of editor, but she would accept nothing less than co-owner, scarping up the funds to buy her way into one-third of the publication.⁷⁶ She soon named herself Editor-in-Chief in addition to co-owner, and began to build the paper.

writing influenced the ideas, thought processes, and activism of the educated black population of Memphis.⁷⁷ After publishing a controversial article about the politics of the Shelby County School system, Wells lost her job as a teacher, and began working for the *Free Speech* full time as co-owner, columnist, and editor-in-chief.⁷⁸ Within 9 months, she had increased the circulation of the paper from 1,500 to 3,500 issues a month, and met her previous teaching salary with the increased business.⁷⁹ Miss Lucy Smith wrote of Wells' writing:

No writer, the male fraternity not excepted, has been more extensively quoted since none struck her harder blows at the wrongs and weaknesses of the race. Her readers are equally divided between the sexes. She reaches men by dealing with the political aspect of the race question, and the women she meets around the fireside. She is an inspiration to the young writers and her success has lent an impetus to their ambition.⁸⁰

It was during one of these regional trips to increase *Free Speech* business, on March 9, 1892, that Wells first heard about the Lynching on the Curve and the death of her friends, an incident she states "changed the course of my whole life."⁸¹

For a close friend of all three victims, and the godmother of Thomas Moss' daughter Maurine, the attack was both personal and political. Though she was out of town in Natchez, MS at the time of the lynching, Wells acted immediately and began doing the thing she did best: writing. When Thomas Moss asked if he had anything to say before he was killed, he said "tell

⁷⁷ It should be noted that Wells also influenced the illiterate black population of Memphis through speeches, rallies, and general networking. *The Memphis Diary of Ida B. Wells*, xv

⁷⁸ Wells published an expository editorial on the injustices between the white and black schools in the Shelby County Public school system. She criticized the poor buildings provided for the black students and questioned the morality of some of the teachers in the black schools, implying that their positions were due less to their qualifications and more to their elicit relationships with members of the school board. She was immediately fired. She wrote in her autobiography: "I never cared for teaching, but I had always been very conscientious in trying to do my work honestly... The correspondence I had built up in newspaper work gave me an outlet though which to express the real 'me' and I enjoyed my work the utmost."⁷⁹

⁸⁰ *ibid* 33

⁸¹ *ibid* 47

my people to go West – there is no justice for them here.”⁸² That week, the front page of the *Free Speech* read:

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. There is nothing we can do about the lynching now, as we are out-numbered and without arms. The white mob could help itself to ammunition without pay, but the order was rigidly enforced against the selling of guns to Negroes. There is therefore only one thing left that we can do; save our money and leave a town which will neither protect our lives and property, nor give us a fair trial in courts, but take us out and murders us in cold blood when accused by white persons.⁸³

This front-page article appeared alongside Thomas Moss’ final words before the lynching and inspired groups of black families to move from Memphis to the West, to cities like Kansas City and St. Louis. According to Wells’ diary at the time, it seemed as if “hundreds” had moved in the first week, all because of the *Free Speech’s* influence. The impact on Memphis economy was monumental. Sales in restaurants and specialty shops plummeted, and use of streetcars dropped dramatically. Six weeks after the lynching, the superintendent and the treasurer of City Railway Company came into the offices of the *Free Speech* to beg Ida B. Wells to use her influence to persuade African Americans to use the street cars again since they were losing so much business.⁸⁴

This struggle illuminates Wells’ power in the Memphis community, while reflecting an interesting Memphis paradox. Literally weeks after a violent, white supremacist lynching of a successful black businessman, the leader of one of the most important transportation companies in Memphis turned to a black, successful businesswoman not to harm her, but to ask for help.

⁸² *ibid* 51

⁸³ *ibid* 52

⁸⁴ The superintendent of the City Railway Company thought the African American community was refusing to use the streetcars because they were “afraid of electricity,” and wanted Wells to publish an editorial informing the black population of the safety of the street cars. Wells informed them that the African American community been using the streetcars for six months, so clearly there was no fear of electricity, and rather the boycott had a direct correlation to the lynching at the People’s Grocery.

The black population wielded unmatched economic power, but lacked civil rights. Just a few miles away, outside the center of the city, rampant black success resulted in murder. But on Beale Street in the offices of the *Free Speech*, black success led to white supplication and a request for aid. The racial power dynamic shifted, as had the gender roles. After the men left the office, Wells wrote an editorial in the *Free Speech* praising black Memphians for their commitment to the boycott, and encouraging them to continue avoiding the streetcars. She also traveled to the two largest African American churches in Memphis and implored them to stay off the streetcars as well, to ensure she did not miss a single person contributing to the boycott.

Three months after the lynching, Wells was a wanted woman. One of her editorials had been published in Memphis while she was gone promoting the *Free Speech*.⁸⁵ Like most of her articles at this time, the editorial was part of a larger project to express her opinions while completing investigative journalism on lynching in the South, a project spurred in response to the Lynching on the Curve. The editorial dealt with her discoveries about lynching, but also included reflections on claims of rape and sexual assault on white women by black men, and general race and sexual theory. Wells wrote in her autobiography that the Lynching at the Curve opened her eyes to what lynching truly was, and inspired her to spread her realization to the rest of the nation: this editorial was part of that process.⁸⁶ After three months of investigative research, in the final week of May 1892 she wrote: “No one in this section believes that old thread-bare lie that Negro men assault white women. If Southern white men are not careful they will over-reach themselves and a conclusion will be reached which will be very damaging to the moral

⁸⁵ On May 27, 1892

⁸⁶ Wells-Barnett, *Crusade for Justice*, 64: “This is what opened my eyes to what lynching really was. An excuse to get rid of Negroes who were acquiring wealth and property and thus keep the race terrorized and thus “keep the nigger down.” I then began investigating every lynching I read about.”

reputation of their women.”⁸⁷ This bold, accusatory, but well-supported statement pushed the white supremacist community in Memphis into a tizzy. It was published in the *Free Speech* on a Saturday, and reprinted in the Monday issue of the white-run *Appeal*, with a call to the “chivalrous white men of Memphis” to do something to avenge the insult to their women.⁸⁸ The night after the editorial was published, a mob of leading white citizens stormed the offices of the *Free Speech* and ran the business manager, J.L. Fleming, out of town with threats of death to him and his family. They destroyed the furniture, type sets, and archives, and left a note on the front door that stated anyone that attempted to publish the paper again would be expelled Memphis, or worse. The trains and Ida B. Wells’ home were monitored around the clock by mobs of white men who vowed to kill Wells immediately upon seeing her. In response, a group of armed black men assembled together in defense and in support of Wells. Tension in Memphis was high, and friends of Wells wrote her incessantly, begging her not to return to avoid pandemonium and murder across the city.

This attack on white sexuality made a huge impact in Memphis. Clearly, ideas of black female sexuality were linked to promiscuity, as Wells experienced through the creation of sexual-morality based rumors. In the same way, ideas of black male sexuality were also linked to promiscuity – but more brutal, aggressive, promiscuity.⁸⁹ Reconstruction threatened white supremacy, and in order to reconstruct the racial hierarchy after Federal troops left, white men not only tried to limit black economic, political and social power, but also their sexual power.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ May 27 1892

⁸⁸ 66

⁸⁹ Sociologist Gunnar Myrdal wrote, “Sex is the principle in which the whole structure of segregation...is organized.”

⁹⁰ By labeling black men as sexual beasts, and perpetuating rumors of sexual deviancy. White men believed that the post-slavery freedom and equality would release an “innate propensity for violence and sexual transgression in African American men” that would lead to the violation of their wives, sisters, and daughters, miscegenation, and a sexual competitor. While white men raping black women had been used to uphold white patriarchy, the claim of

After the Emancipation Proclamation, reports of black men raping white women began, and continued through the Civil Rights Movement.⁹¹ Between the years of 1882 and 1968, there were over 4,743 reported lynchings, the majority of which were associated with some sort of black, male sexual misconduct. The perception of the “beastly black man” was so pervasive that “an unsubstantial rumor or innocent glance, a misconstrued gesture or an informal greeting between a black man and white woman could end in murder.”⁹² This tense environment set the context for Wells’ editorial.

Though the Lynching at the Curve was not justified by an accusation of sexual misconduct, the murder still played into the question of black and white sexuality, and more specifically, black manhood compared to white masculinity. The loss of sense of white supremacy from Reconstruction also resulted in a loss of identity.⁹³ However, the mob-system used for most lynchings created a sense of power, community, and efficacy in a time period where social, racial, political, and cultural norms were contested. According to Carby, in a time when black men were starting to succeed in myriad ways, “lynching was instituted to crush the manhood of the enfranchised black.”⁹⁴ This is even represented in the literature of the period; Barnard explains “it was a time when insecurity imposed a certain conformity and when the homegrown idea of “culture” thrived.”⁹⁵ In the rural south, this homegrown culture became a culture of violence against African Americans, justified by white supremacy and black

black men raping white women was used to punish those African Americans who challenged the status quo.⁹⁰ This crime against the pure, defenseless white womanhood was so heinous that according to Hazel Carby, it “placed the black man beyond the place of human sympathy.”

⁹¹ McGuire, Danielle L, *At the Dark End of the Street*: “Decades before radical feminists in the women’s movement urged rape survivors to “speak out,” African American women’s public protests galvanized local, national, and even international outrage and sparked larger campaigns for racial justice and human dignity.” Black women rapes without persecution continued into the Civil Rights Movement.

⁹² McGuire, 148

⁹³ Barnard, Rita. *Modern American Fiction*, Cambridge Comparison of American Modernism, 44

⁹⁴ 275

⁹⁵ *Modern American Fiction*, 44

promiscuity. Though there was no way for the white supremacists to halt urbanization, recreate slavery, force women to stop asking for the vote, and keep the turn of the century from happening, they could invoke a sense of neighborliness nostalgia as they gathered (often in groups of men) to do something “righteous” for the town.⁹⁶ For the white man experiencing extreme identity loss or anxiety, the lynch mob became an idealized community in a time of uncertainty, and the act of lynching became a noble action, one that reiterated white superiority in the name of black inferiority and suffering.⁹⁷ It was a ritualized, performative, and well-documented. The act became popularized by photographs in mass newspapers; modern technology made violence entertainment. In many cases, the actual lynching was less about murdering one criminal but rather completing a sensationalized, very public attack on black male masculinity and power as whole. In some situations, black men were castrated before the lynching. In this way, black manhood was violently removed, and white manhood was reinforced through the violent act of “defending” their white women. While the lynchings that informed much of Ida B. Wells’ activism occurred in the cities around her, rather than her actual home of Memphis, the notion of misconstrued black sexuality permeated into the city. The Lynching at the Curve confirmed these social constructions. Black women were denied access to southern womanhood, and for black men, manhood was challenged and condemned. For both black men and women, promiscuity and negative sexual morality were immediate associations with their characters. These facts permeated the writing of Wells’ first and second book: *Southern Horrors* and *The Red Record*, and motivated her research to disprove such ideas.

As to be expected, the editorial and violence that followed the lynching quickly gained nationwide attention. While white Memphians were forced to question their actions, the

⁹⁶ Wood, 10

⁹⁷ *ibid*, 24

extralegal, brutal lynching revealed to the world the gender, racial, and sexual misconceptions of the US South as whole. Wells editorial had many effects. It challenged further white supremacist's justifications for lynchings. It made Memphians the brunt of Northern – and world-wide - criticism. And it revealed a fact that many white men did not want to consider: they were not as successful, desirable, or manly as they thought, and black men were a legitimate threat to their absolute power and influence. Even more so, with people like Ida B. Wells, black women now were as well.

For Wells herself, the destruction of the *Free Speech* newspaper was not unexpected. “I know now that it was an excuse to do what they wanted to do before but had not dared because they had no good reason until the appearance of that famous editorial,” Wells wrote in her autobiography.⁹⁸ The editorial justified an attack and destroyed property of a part of Memphis that had been causing white financial and social loss for months. Wells elaborates that “months passed after the lynching before the opportunity came in which they appeared to be “defending the honor of their women” and therefore justified in destroying the paper which attacked their honor.”⁹⁹ The *Free Speech* was a scape-goat for building concern with the power of the black press in Memphis; Wells editorial was the perfect catalyst for revolt.

After begin prohibited from coming home to Memphis in fear of death, Wells chose to stay in New York, and began working under T. Thomas Fortune for the *New York Age*.¹⁰⁰ She became a weekly contributor, and began to tell “for the first time the true story of Negro lynchings,” which laid the foundations of a full investigative report on lynchings between 1880 and 1894, that would later result in two books.¹⁰¹ In the last week of June, the *New York Age*

⁹⁸ 63

⁹⁹ *ibid* 65

¹⁰⁰ Prominent black newspaper in New York City.

¹⁰¹ *Southern Horrors*

published a seven-column article on lynchings, that confirmed and validated all of Wells' claims, confirming her research prowess.

From that point on, Wells became the single most influential lynching authority in the United States. In her autobiography, she succinctly states the cultural, social, and time-based impulses that contributed the racist sexual abuse at the turn of the 19th century.¹⁰² She synthesized information about racism in gender and sexuality scholars are still grappling with today. Shortly after publishing her book, she travelled to Europe to spread the word about lynching. By exploiting the economic influence of the Memphis-London trade route through convincing London businessmen it was their moral obligation to stop associating and trading with places that allowed lynching, Wells began to exert extreme financial pressure on powerful Memphis businessmen. This eventually forced Memphians to change their ways, and advocate for legal changing to prevent lynchings from occurring.¹⁰³ It cannot be underestimated how many lynchings did not happen because of the smart, succinct, powerful writing and activism of Wells in the United States and beyond.

¹⁰² Crusade for Justice, page 70: "All my life I had known that such conditions were accepted as a matter of the course. I found that this rape of helpless Negro girls and women, which began in slavery days, still continued without let or hindrance, check and reproof from church, state or press until there had been created this race within a race – and all designated by the inclusive term of "colored." I also found that what the white man of the South practiced as all right for himself, he assumed to be unthinkable in white women. They could and did fall in love with the pretty mulatto and quadroon girls as well as black ones, but they professed an inability to imagine white women doing the same thing with Negro and mulatto men. Whenever they did so and were found out, the cry of rape was raised, and the lowest element of the white South was turned loose to wreak its fiendish cruelty on those too weak to help themselves... The more I studied the situation, 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. The federal laws for the Negro protection passed during Reconstruction times had been made a mockery by the white South where it had not secured their repeal."

¹⁰³ After explaining the lynching situation in Memphis to businesses throughout London, many refused to participate in business exchanges unless something was done against the violence. In order to preserve income, business owners in Memphis were forced to advocate for increased legal protection for black men, and increased punishment for lynch mobs.

During Wells time in Memphis, she worked at the intersection of two incredibly marginalized communities: African Americans, and women. While many activists choose to devote their time to one point of prejudice, Wells fought to challenge the social constructs of race, gender, and sexuality without bias. She believed in her own power as a black woman in a time when black womanhood was criticized, and considered even worse than second-class citizenship. In her own actions and life, she defied race, gender, and sexuality stereotypes. In her writing and research, she gave intellectual reasons for her own defiance.

Her writing was both influenced by and contributed to the American Modernism movement, an artistic impulse that helps to define the end of the 19th century. As the end of Reconstruction and turn of the century brought new social sciences and technology, Americans across the country began to experience a morphing identity and displacement that challenged and changed the art of the time. The gender and race issues that perplexed the public found their way into the complexities of the art, especially writing. Even as a journalist, Wells became a part of the artistic shift towards a less romanticized style of writing (though it was through non-fiction, rather than the more creative fiction).

Finally, as Wanda Rushing explains, Memphis is a “paradox... a place of innovation and tradition, poverty and power, as well as continuity and disruption.”¹⁰⁴ Memphis has never been an easy city to define, and Wells’ time during 1880s-1890s is no exception. In a time before women could vote, own property, make legal decisions about their children’s health and education, or open a bank account, Ida B. Wells became a schoolteacher, protested racial inequality in public, and ran a newspaper. In a city where racial violence was the norm, in a region where hundreds were lynched by the end of the 19th century, she spotlighted African American success and exposed the emotional, financial, and physical violence on blacks under

¹⁰⁴ Rushing, Wanda. Memphis and the Paradox of Place, 7

the justification of white supremacy. Though most of her activism occurred in exclusively all-black communities, her influence spread over the whole Memphis community – white and black - and then across the entire country. Memphis defined her, and now in her legacy, she defines Memphis herself. Wells was a paradox in a paradoxical city. She was, in her own words, “an anomaly” to herself and others.

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