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Jessica Hubbard  
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A “Woman’s Mission”: Victorian Ideals  
of Womanhood in the Anti-Lynching  
Movement, 1892-1922

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**M.A. Thesis in History**  
**Professor Downs**  
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of the City College of the City University of New York**

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## Introduction

On June 25, 1892 the *New York Age* published a seven-column article titled, “The Truth about Lynching.” It was the first of its kind; a public denouncement of racism, mob violence, murder and terror that sought to expose the pillars of Southern society—chivalry, virtue, gentility and the protection of white womanhood as bitter fallacies. The article laid bare over seven hundred lynchings, citing names, dates, places and the horrific circumstances under which they had occurred. The author attacked lynching without compromise, condemning not only the practice but the theories that supported it, stating, “Eight negroes lynched since the last issue of the “Free Speech”, one at Little Rock, Ark., last Saturday morning where the citizens broke (?) into the penitentiary and got their man; three near Anniston, Ala., one near New Orleans; and three at Clarksville, Ga., the last three for killing a white man, and five on the same old racket- the new alarm about raping white women. The same programme of hanging, then shooting bullets into the lifeless bodies was carried out to the letter. Nobody in this section of the country believes the old thread bare lie that Negro men rape white women. If Southern men are not careful they will over-reach themselves and public sentiment will have a reaction; a conclusion will then be reached which will be very damaging to the moral reputation of their women.”<sup>1</sup>

The article was simply signed, “Exiled;” its author was Ida B. Wells.

Wells' article, published a few short months later as her seminal pamphlet, *Southern Horrors. Lynch Law in All its Phases*, effectively marked the beginning of the anti-lynching crusade in America. Her investigations led her to the conclusion that in addition to the act of lynching, both the threat of black rape and the Southern ethos that praised the sanctity of white womanhood were key components in keeping African-Americans in an oppressed and subservient role. The charge of rape and the consistent images of black men and women as a lustful, bestial and degraded race positioned African-Americans as a people undeserving of support, which greatly contributed to both the frequency of lynchings and the considerable lack of public outcry.<sup>2</sup> As the editor of the pro-South *Memphis Commercial* confirmed, "There is nothing which fills the soul with horror, loathing and fury as the outraging of a white woman by a Negro."<sup>3</sup>

Wells and other female reformers knew that to attack and end the practice of lynching, they would have to both challenge the Southern ideology that revolved around the protection of white womanhood and reclaim and reconstruct social beliefs regarding the nature of African-Americans. Anti-lynching campaigns led by African-American women reflected their commitment to defending and redefining their own womanhood in the face of a culture that had defamed and manipulated it as a tool of racial supremacy.

Black female reformers chose to confront current notions of black and white womanhood and redefine their image in the face of a prevailing Victorian

ethos that praised purity, propriety and submission to the racial and gendered status quo. This thesis seeks to examine how African-American female activists in the anti-lynching movement responded to, wrestled with, and were influenced by the Victorian ethos of womanhood in their campaigns to end lynching, principally in the years between 1892 and 1922. Although Wells had been running a “one-woman crusade” for much of the 1890s, by the turn of the century and through the 1920s, social activists such as Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, Mary Church Terrell, Mary Talbert and Charlotte Hawkins Brown joined in the fight against lynching. However, the relationship between Wells and the latter women, all of whom were aligned with the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), was tenuous. Their rhetorical styles, methods of investigation and protest and the manner in which they invoked Victorian ideals of womanhood represented deep ideological differences in their approaches to combating lynching. Throughout her career, Wells was unrelenting in her goal to confront the bitter myth that black men were lynched as punishment for raping white women, to prove that the Southern cult of white womanhood was hypocrisy, and to assert that black women did not need to prove their worth to the white majority who had sullied it in the first place. However, her forcible style, exemplified by her mantra of, “Agitate and act until something is done,” came at a time of increasing black conservatism. As scholar Crystal Feimster argues, other female activists, many of them acting under the umbrella of the NACW, sought to

combat the problem of lynching by embracing the “politics of respectability,” essentially modeling themselves and their work after the established Victorian ideal, entrusting that “racial uplift would chip away at white supremacy.”<sup>4</sup> The NACW’s motto, “Lifting as We Climb,” evoked the ideology of racial uplift, identified by scholar Kevin Gaines both as the belief that educated African Americans were responsible for the welfare of their race and the view that their material and moral progress would diminish white racism.<sup>5</sup> As Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, the founder of the NACW, urged in 1895, “We will achieve protection through a dignified showing,” which included a focus on cleanliness and domesticity, motherhood, and unimpeachable moral character, all hallmark virtues of Victorian womanhood.<sup>6</sup> As the twentieth century progressed, female anti-lynching campaigns, such as Mary Church Terrell’s “Lynching from a Negro’s Point of View,” and the work of the Anti-Lynching Crusaders, led by Mary Talbert, invoked themes of uplift, dignity, morality and black womanhood as a method of dislodging beliefs that provided the justification for lynching.

The anti-lynching crusade presented uniquely complex challenges for female reformers, both radical and conservative, who chose to speak of and expose the most taboo of subjects- a horrific act borne of blood, sex, and violence; an act without sanctuary meant to inflict the utmost terror in order to maintain racial and gendered supremacy of the white male power structure. The response required female activists to battle not only from a racial, legal or political

standpoint, but from a deeply personal position where they fought to assert control over the ideals of womanhood that had been prescribed to them and used to perpetuate racism, oppression, and unimaginable acts of brutality. The question that remains is how were female anti-lynching crusaders, particularly those of African-American descent, influenced by the existing and traditional ideals of female purity and gentility? What do the competing campaigns of Wells and reformers of the NACW reveal about their ideologies of womanhood in the face of the prevailing Victorian ethos, which was constructed and supported by the existing white power structure? Scholars have divided on this point.

Wells biographer Paula J. Giddings presents Wells as a woman who was both enamored with and enraged by the ideals of Victorian womanhood. She asserts Wells essentially rejected Victorianism and its “radical innocence” in favor of exposing truths and forcing change through political protest. Yet Giddings also argues that Wells’ desire to expose both black rape as a myth and the Southern cult of white womanhood as hypocrisy was partially borne out of anger that Victorian ideals, which had once been a point of pride for her, had been hijacked by the white power structure. Giddings recounts how Wells wrote of her admiration of “noble true womanhood and perfect ladyship,” and also of her desire to “suppress her unfeminine anger,” yet could not hide her fury over the over the fact that “true womanhood” had been manipulated by Southern whites as a tool of racial oppression. In her analysis of the “The Truth About Lynching”

Giddings writes, “In her universe it was white women who were sexualized, black women victimized; it was white men who were feral and barbaric, black men successful and sentimental.”<sup>7</sup> While Wells still believed in “true womanhood” and would consistently defend black womanhood, she did not employ it as a political device in the same manner the women of the NACW would do. Giddings determined that the present state of Victorianism in which the “characteristics of race, class and gender were fixed by immutable laws,” had no effective use for Wells who replaced the “language of gentility with reality” and dispensed with the “false delicacy” of the “unspeakable crime.”<sup>8</sup> “Somebody must show that the Afro-American race is more sinned against than sinning,” Wells avowed, “and it seems to have fallen upon me to do so.”<sup>9</sup>

Many scholars position Wells as militant or radical, but in her analysis of Wells’ anti-lynching rhetoric, Simone Davis argues “unlike some progressive thinkers she did not design a sense of self around the notion of her own polarization from the mainstream; rather her unflagging, keen sense of radicalism was experientially part of a stern ethical code.”<sup>10</sup> Davis forwards an important point here, one that lends weight to the argument that Wells, rather than rejecting traditional ideals of womanhood, was more so incensed by and protested against the manner in which it had been manipulated and conscripted by the South.

In her work on women and the politics of rape and lynching in the South, Feimster places clubwomen in agreement with Wells in their belief that the

negative portrayals of black women served to keep the race politically, economically, and socially degraded. Her analysis, however, highlights their divergent approaches, arguing the methods and rhetoric espoused by the NACW were firmly rooted in an interpretation of Victorianism that did not agree with combative or confrontational politics. Though traditional notions of womanhood had been manipulated by the white power structure to exclude black women, Feimster asserts that clubwomen were determined to reclaim their place as “true women” and use it as a weapon of protest.<sup>11</sup> Mary Jane Brown, in her exploration of women in the anti-lynching movement, agrees that for clubwomen, “the defense of black womanhood became the defense against terror and abuse.”<sup>12</sup>

Though the women of the NACW resisted challenging the sanctity of white womanhood in the same manner as Wells, Feimster shows they did confront the hypocrisy of Southern chivalry that denied respect and protection to black women. She cites activists like Anna Julia Cooper, Nannie Burroughs and Addie Hunton who attacked the exploitation of black women by white men and praises former NACW president Mary Church Terrell’s “Lynching from a Negro’s Point of View” for its denunciation of the utter disrespect shown towards black women in the South. According to Feimster clubwomen viewed their womanhood and the respect and protections it provided as crucial components to their cause and did not shy away from taking Southern whites to task over the

legacy of slavery or the continued degradation of African-American female morality.

Feimster's examination also highlights the difficulty conservative women had in negotiating arguments involving sexual mores, often blaming immoral behavior on the legacy of slavery rather than refuting its existence. While Wells would flatly argue "*True* chivalry respects all womanhood," Feimster cites another activist who wrote, "...it is a fact that a very great number of negro women are depraved. It is also a fact that...Christian men and women of the South sold wives away from their husbands and compelled them to live with other men...The negro woman's immorality shows more plainly than her white sister's because she is poor and ignorant."<sup>13</sup>

Imbued with a strong sense of duty to their race, the leaders of the NACW also espoused Victorian ideals, perhaps, as Christina Simmons argues, even more so than their white counterparts, as it functioned as a marker of their civility and social status.<sup>14</sup> However, scholars assert the NACW's upper class values and commitment to Victorianism contributed to their inability to attack the lynching narrative with the same voracity as Wells. In her analysis of Terrell's "Lynching from a Negro's Point of View," Martha Solomon Watson argues Terrell's article reveals a woman unable to evade the bias of her elite social standing. In her desire to appeal to white, educated, middle and upper-class Northerners, Watson

contends that Terrell both reinforced the negative images of African-Americans that excused lynching and accentuated class cleavages within her own race.

In their analyses of the anti-lynching campaigns of women in 1920s, including the work of the Anti-Lynching Crusaders, many scholars contend they used Victorian ideals and the “bonds of common womanhood” to appeal to white women and bring them into the anti-lynching conversation. Though Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, in her biography of Jessie Daniel Ames and the female anti-lynching movement, concludes the Crusader’s attempts at interracial cooperation were largely futile, she credits them with further publicizing the crusade to a white audience and “making inroads on the consciousness of a nation” that helped pave the way for the Ames’ anti-lynching work in the 1930s.<sup>15</sup>

Scholars of female African-American activists during this time acknowledge the ideological gulf that existed between Wells and her more conservative counterparts, often pointing towards their competing interpretations of womanhood and how each chose to put it to political use. Though their goals of ending lynching were the same, it had become clear that by the turn of the century both camps felt that the methods of the other were inimical to the interests of the movement. Wells continually clashed with the women of the NACW who worried that her provocations were causing more harm than good and were irritated by her refusal to assume a more moderate tone. On the other hand, Wells could not reconcile the fact that the NACW was not “*doing* anything.” “That is

why she left the National Association of Colored Women,” Wells’ daughter Alfreda Duster stated, “The National Association was top-heavy with social life; they weren’t willing to get in to the fray.”<sup>16</sup>

## The Southern Ethos of Womanhood and the Lynching of African-Americans

In 1919, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People released its landmark study, *Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States, 1889-1918*, naming 3,224 individuals who lost their lives at the hands of lynch mobs. Of the victims, 2,522 were identified as “Negro.”<sup>17</sup> The report located nearly ninety percent of recorded lynchings within former Confederate states. While lynchings occurred in other parts of the country and claimed victims other than African-Americans, lynching as a construct within the popular mind, as evidenced by the NAACP’s report, most conjured images of white-on-black violence that was most common in the South.<sup>18</sup> Though the cause of death for lynch victims was most always listed “at the hands of persons unknown,” lynching was not a crime committed in secret. On the contrary and more often than not, it was an act performed for audiences of men, women and children that numbered as large as 20,000, a macabre spectacle whose barbarism far surpassed the boundaries of cruel and unusual punishment. Furthermore, the expansion of communication,

investigative reporting, photography and sensationalized journalism kept lynching in the forefront of Southern consciousness as the most vivid symbol of black oppression and white power.<sup>19</sup> In an effort to draw larger crowds and both capitalize on and perpetuate the sensational nature of lynching, local newspapers often advertised an impending event with bold front-page headlines such as “3,000 Will Burn Negro,” printed by the *New Orleans States* and “John Hartfield Will Be Lynched By Ellisville Mob Today At 5 O’Clock,” printed by the *Jackson Daily News*- both offered on the same day, June 26, 1919.<sup>20</sup> The former’s headline confirms what had become a particularly gruesome method of execution as victims were often beaten, tortured, doused in oil and set ablaze, forced to endure agonizing deaths, their pleas for mercy unanswered by those who had assembled to take in their suffering as entertainment.

Despite the claim by Southerners that lynch mobs were meting out “justice,” as documentation supports, lynch mobs appeared to have given little thought to the actual guilt or innocence of their victims. Scores of reports discuss individuals who were either proven innocent after the fact, were misidentified in the first place or were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. Some lynch victims were murdered for offenses as benign as talking back to whites, “mingling in the affairs of an employer” or defending themselves against attack.<sup>21</sup> What statistics most interestingly show, however, is that less than a third of African-American victims were even charged with rape or the lesser crime of “attacks

upon women,” (defined by the NAACP as incidents where “an attack was made but it was not clear whether rape was alleged to have been consummated or attempted”). This fact would be cited again and again by activists who desperately tried to undo the cultural mechanizations that rationalized lynching.

The mythology that surrounded the practice of lynching was ingrained into the fabric and memory of Southern life and greatly influenced the language of protest used by the anti-lynching movement. By the turn of the century, white womanhood had been elevated to a “social deity” in the South. “To the outside world,” John Carlisle Kilgo wrote in 1902, “there may appear something of a poetic glamour about these ideals...but the fact that there is a severity in the sensitive feelings for them cannot be disregarded. For their defense there are unwritten laws, laws that belong to social sympathies, which take precedence of statutory enactments, and courts are powerless to convict for an act of violence in defense of [women] and the home...”<sup>22</sup> The Southern ethos followed that above all else, white women required protection from black men, who by the end of Reconstruction had seen their images wholly morphed from the inferior, simple-minded children of the antebellum to a people whose bestial impulse and uncontrollable sexual appetites led them to covet what society had deemed the most egregious of acts. Both scholarly studies and the white media contributed to the negative stereotypes attributed to African-Americans by furthering the idea that that slavery had been a civilizing influence on blacks, its absence allowing

the race to sink into its natural state of savagery. Playing to what Hall describes as the “most lurid Victorian fantasies and fears of a violent sexual congress between a black man and a white woman,” studies emphasized the African-American male’s unbridled lust for white women and the high frequency of “the most frightful crime” of rape.<sup>23</sup> In his widely-read 1889 study, *The Plantation Negro as a Freeman*, Philip A. Bruce writes, “There is something strangely alluring and seductive to them in the appearance of a white woman; they are aroused and stimulated by its foreignness of their experience of sexual pleasures, and it moves them to gratify their lust at any cost and in spite of every obstacle. This proneness of the negro is so well understood that white women of every class, from the highest to the lowest are afraid to venture any distance alone, or even wander unprotected in the immediate vicinity of their homes...if it were not for the capital punishment that ensues so swiftly, this crime would be far more frequent than it is.”<sup>24</sup> Writing in 1904 Ray Stannard Baker warned of a “a growing class” of “floating, worthless Negroes...not known to the general white population...usually ignorant and lazy...He prowls the roads by day and by night; he steals; he makes it unsafe for women to travel alone.”<sup>25</sup> Edward Carmack, editor of the *Memphis Commercial*, echoed this sentiment as he warned that a new phase of sexual violence was terrorizing women in “thinly settled country communities” where no “man can leave his family at night without the dread that some Negro ruffian is watching and waiting for his opportunity.”<sup>26</sup> “He [the

black man] grows more bumptious on the street. More impudent in his dealings with white men,” read a 1906 editorial in the *Atlanta Constitution*. “...When he cannot achieve social equality as he wishes, with the instinct of the barbarian to destroy what he cannot attain to, he lies in wait, as that dastardly brute did yesterday near this city, and assaults the fair young girlhood of the south.”<sup>27</sup>

The act of lynching has been identified by scholars as a tool used by Southern whites to maintain dominance over blacks in the face of the revolutionary changes that had occurred within their society following the Civil War. Despite opposition to these changes and their effects on the social, economic and political fabric of the South, whites were continually able to shift the focus of lynching as a tool of supremacy by creating and fostering an alternative narrative that placed the rape of white women by black men as the primary cause of lynching.<sup>28</sup> “Lynch mobs,” scholar Jonathan Markovitz argues “worked to ensure that black audiences were aware of the strength of white supremacy and the costs of violating the boundaries of the racial order; at the same time they reinforced the images of white men as chivalrous protectors of white women.”<sup>29</sup>

The character of African-American women also played a key role in the lynching narrative. As Giddings argues, negative characterizations of black women had long made them vulnerable to sexual assault, but by the late nineteenth century, the stereotype would have sweeping consequences.<sup>30</sup> “The

Black man's alleged impulse to rape was the Black woman's fault," Giddings concludes, as the "stereotype of the sexually potent Black male was largely based on that of the promiscuous Black female."<sup>31</sup> Nineteenth century scholars like Bruce contributed to this characterization, casting black women as practitioners of "low debauchery," whose loose associations with the opposite sex served to be "peculiarly demoralizing" not only to their own characters, but to those of the entire race. Women, Bruce wrote, "properly should be bulwarks of sobriety and conservatism to the society in which they move, whereas they [black women] are in general the floodgates of the corrupting sexual influences that are doing so much to sap and destroy it."<sup>32</sup> A race "wholly devoid of morality," wrote John Jacks, president of the Missouri Press Association, in an open letter addressed to the secretary of the London Anti-Lynching Committee (who had been coordinating her efforts with Wells) in 1895. With the intention of "educating" the secretary on the black race, he continued he had "lived for years where negroes are plentiful," the women "were prostitutes and all are natural liars and thieves."<sup>33</sup>

African-American female reformers consistently fought against the negative portrayals of black women that were not only degrading but served as justification for discrimination, segregation and ultimately, lynching. Just as "true womanhood" and "ladyship" were bestowed upon white women as a marker of their status, it was withheld from black women as a reminder of their inferior

status and was continually employed as a construct of white supremacy. Furthermore, white men continued to rape, coerce and exploit black women in far greater numbers than the reverse. “I believe all white men take, and expect to take, undue liberties with their colored servants,” wrote an African-American nurse who wished to remain anonymous. “Those who rebel against such familiarity must either leave or expect a mighty hard time, if they stay.” “The results of this concubinage,” she continued, “can be seen in all of our colored public schools in the South...the majority of young men and women and boys and girls are light-skinned mulattoes...”<sup>34</sup> “Few colored girls reach the age of sixteen without receiving advances,” lamented a mother who also chose to write anonymously. “The color of her face alone is sufficient invitation to the Southern white man.”<sup>35</sup> Like their male counterparts, African-American women and girls had little to no recourse or protection from the crimes committed against them by whites. Certainly not from the judicial system that vowed never to take their word “against the word of a white man” and if their “fathers, brothers or husbands” sought to “redress their wrongs” affirmed the nurse, “under our peculiar conditions, the guiltless negroes will be severely punished, if not killed, and the white blackleg will go scot-free!”<sup>36</sup>

Despite the legacy of slavery and the power that a white man held over a black woman in the Jim Crow South, African-American women shouldered the blame for their own sexual exploitation; their oppression becoming yet another

facet of the narrative that positioned them as individuals of loose morals and illicit character. Instead of victims they were seducers; just as they encouraged sexual deviancy in black men, they sought to do the same to white men- exactly the opposite of white women who were posited as modest and moral pillars of American life. Each construct gained strength from the other- the virgin versus the whore; the fair Southern lady and the amoral harlot.

The juxtaposition of light and dark, of black men and white women as predator and prey was imprinted upon the soul of the South and had created the vehicle for lynching to be seen as an acceptable, even necessary practice to those who believed that African-Americans had to be kept in their place. Anti-lynching activists, particularly black female activists, knew they had to address and unseat ideals about rape and white and black womanhood in their campaigns if they wanted to end the brutal practice. Yet even as they railed against the status quo they could escape neither the influence of late Victorian ideals of womanhood in their campaigns nor could they escape being judged by them in the eyes of society. Women like Ida B. Wells, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, Mary Church Terrell, and Mary Talbert at times personified, strived for, struggled with and rejected what scholar Barbara Welter calls the “four cardinal virtues” of “True Womanhood”-purity, piety, submissiveness, and domesticity in their anti-lynching campaigns.<sup>37</sup> The years between 1892 and 1922 imparted a great deal of agitation on lynching where women most struggled with ideals of Victorian

womanhood, opening with Wells' fiery indictment and culminating with the campaign to pass the federal Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill.

### Ida B. Wells, "True Womanhood" and the Truth about Lynching

As Giddings describes, Wells reveled in her admiration of women who embodied "true noble womanhood and perfect ladyship."<sup>38</sup> In an 1885 article for the *New York Freeman* titled, "Woman's Mission," she wrote of women's responsibility asked, "What is, or should be a woman? ...A strong bright presence, thoroughly imbued with her mission on earth and a desire to fulfill it...but a womanly woman for all that, upholding the banner and striving for the goal of pure bright womanhood through all vicissitudes and temptations. Her influence is boundless."<sup>39</sup> In her 1888 short story "The Model Woman: A Pen Picture of the Typical Southern Girl" Wells portrayed her main character of Annie, "a young Black student" as espousing the ideals of Victorian womanhood, deeming her a person of "ladylike refinement" and "obedient disposition." "Her bearing toward the opposite sex," Wells writes, "is of such nature as increases their respect for and admiration of her sex, and her influence is wholly for good."<sup>40</sup>

Wells ideation of womanhood likely contributed to her initial reasoning that "although lynching was irregular and contrary to law and order, unreasoning

anger over the terrible crime of rape,” had led to its resort.<sup>41</sup> At the same time events were happening that were creating serious doubts for Wells that lynching was done in defense of womanhood. Furthermore, it was becoming even clearer to her that in the post-Reconstruction South black women were increasingly being slandered, degraded and excluded from white definitions of true womanhood. Wells was aghast over the 1886 lynching of Eliza Woods writing, “She was taken from the county jail and stripped naked and hung upon the courthouse yard and her body riddled with bullets was left exposed to view!” Woods was a black cook who had been accused, based upon “purely circumstantial evidence,” of poisoning her white employer, described in the press as an “esteemed Christian lady.” In contrast, Woods was described as a “black creature” and a “she devil.”<sup>42</sup> Even in the lynching of woman, the Memphis *Avalanche* invoked the protection of white womanhood by reporting the mob cried, “EVERY MAN WHO HAS A WIFE COME FORWARD,” before they “overpowered” the sheriff’s guards.<sup>43</sup> “It may be unwise to express myself so strongly...but I cannot help it,” Wells wrote of her indignant article where she “almost advised murder” over the lynching of Woods, a woman who, as Wells biographer Giddings points out, shared the skin color, name, and occupation of Wells’ own deceased mother.<sup>44</sup>

The Woods lynching continued to haunt Wells and inform her perspective on black womanhood and the need for its defense. In 1889 she learned that Woods had been discovered to be innocent of the crime for which she had been

lynched. Wells could not hide her fury as she let go of the cardinal virtue of “submissiveness” and railed against the black men in the community for “allowing white men to outrage all decency by stripping one of our women and hanging her merely on suspicion.” She implored black men to “rise in their manhood and resent such outrages as white men do.”<sup>45</sup> In a statement that would continually set her apart from her contemporaries, Wells publicly called black men to task for not protecting black women and for not protecting themselves. “God expects us to defend ourselves...when we fail to do so we have only ourselves to blame.”<sup>46</sup> Outraged over the slander of female purity while reminding her readers of the duty they had to themselves and God’s plan, even prior to 1892 Wells’ daring rhetoric was redefining her vision of “the model woman.”

The murders of her friends Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell and Will Stewart created a deep and lasting wound for Wells. In addition to her personal grief over their deaths, the circumstances of their lynching fully confirmed what Wells had been realizing since the death of Eliza Woods- that lynching was not an act committed in retaliation for “the horrible crime of rape” but was a product of race hatred meant to terrorize blacks into subordination. On March 10, 1892 the lynchings made the front page of the *New York Times* under the banner “NEGROES LYNCHED BY A MOB, Three Shot to Death at Memphis, Tenn.” The article continued, describing how the “bodies were literally shot to pieces.”

“The crime for which this summary vengeance was wreaked upon them was the ambushing and shooting...of four deputy sheriffs in a negro locality known as the Curve...”<sup>47</sup>

Contrary to the *Times*' article it was Moss, McDowell and Stewart who were ambushed; their lynchings the culmination of a tragic series of events and extreme racial tensions that had begun with a fight between two boys- one white and one black, over a game of marbles. In her autobiography, Wells wrote the lynching of her friends “changed the course of my entire life.”<sup>48</sup> Their deaths brought into sharp focus for her the falsehoods that surrounded Southern justifications for mob violence. More so than rape it was events like the ones that befell her friends that would most often culminate in lynchings. Nearly half of all lynch victims were accused of murder or assault and investigative reports surrounding these lynchings often revealed an element of self-defense on the part of the victim or a disagreement gone wrong between blacks and whites, rather than cold-blooded killings. Lynching's message was an order of submission- under no circumstances would African-Americans be allowed to exercise control over whites, even in their own defense. Moss, McDowell and Stewart were all successful members of the community, ones that lived Booker T. Washington's ideal of racial uplift through self-reliance and economic stability. But as years carried on Wells became more and more convinced that the conservative Washingtonian model of race relations would not protect blacks, on the contrary,

she argued, the more successful African-Americans became, the more it often served to antagonize whites who were determined to keep them in a state of oppression. Relating back to the subject of womanhood, though Wells was already challenging the veracity of the rape against white women justification for lynching, this event caused a final schism for her, one that scholars argue would radicalize her viewpoint. “The outrage of lynching matched her inner storm,” Giddings states, “and the blood-libel horror of the crime gave Wells wide berth for her moral indignation and anger.”<sup>49</sup>

In her 1892 pamphlet *Southern Horrors*, Wells set out to wholly unseat the Southern cult of white womanhood which she had deemed responsible for creating the veil behind which acts of lawlessness and race hatred were committed. “To palliate this record (which grows worse as the Afro-American becomes intelligent),” she writes, “and excuse some of the most heinous crimes that have ever stained this history of a country, the South is shielding itself behind the plausible screen of defending the honor of its women.”<sup>50</sup>

The most holy of all female virtues in the arena of true womanhood was not piety, but purity, and Wells attacked its existence with full force. She begins her pamphlet by reprinting a question posed by J.C. Duke five years prior in the Montgomery, Alabama *Herald*, (one that forced him to flee the city for his life after it was printed): “Why is it that white woman attract negro men now more than in former days? There was a time when such a thing was unheard of. There

is a secret to this thing, and we greatly suspect it is the growing appreciation of white Juliets for colored Romeos.” “The truth remains,” Wells contended, “that Afro-American men do not always rape (?) white women without their consent.”<sup>51</sup>

Wells continues in her section “The Black and White of It” to cite a dozen stories of white women engaged in consensual relationships with black men and the retaliation they both feared and faced by white society. Despite the fact that interracial relationships without a doubt occurred, the idea of them occurring was beyond preposterous in the South, for again, it was completely antithetical to the ideals of purity and white womanhood whose demands applied to all white women regardless of their class. Wells offers several examples of “Afro-American Sampsons” who were “betrayed by white Delilahs,” but also offers a story printed in the *Memphis Ledger* in June of 1892. The author writes, “If Lillie Bailey, a rather pretty white girl seventeen years of age, who is now at City Hospital, would be somewhat less reserved about her disgrace there would be some very nauseating details in the story of her life. She is the mother of a little coon. The truth might reveal fearful depravity or it might reveal the evidence of a rank outrage.” The article continues to report Bailey had run away from home and refused to name the man who was the father of her child. “Note the wording,” Wells writes, commenting on the term “fearful depravity:” “If it had been a white child or Lillie Bailey had told a pitiful story of Negro outrage, it would have been a case of woman’s weakness or assault...But a Negro child and

to withhold its father's name and thus prevent the killing of another Negro 'rapist.' A case of 'fearful depravity.'"<sup>52</sup>

Although Wells does challenge the purity of white womanhood in *Southern Horrors* she more so trains her focus on the system that has been created and enforced by the white male power structure. Rather than calling Bailey a tramp for cavorting with a man of a different race or having a child out of wedlock, essentially insulting her purity, Wells is focused on the fact she has done what society has deemed either impossible or completely unacceptable according to the parameters of Southern womanhood, i.e. a "depraved act." But by exposing these stories, Wells was poking holes in the façade of this ethos- clearly consensual interracial sex was not impossible and furthermore, what was more depraved, refusing to name her lover and in turn suffering as a social pariah or naming him under a false cry of rape, which would save her from disgrace, but would unleash the fury of a lynch mob? "There are thousands of such cases throughout the South," Wells writes, "with the difference that Southern white men in insatiate fury wreak their vengeance without intervention of the law upon the Afro-Americans who consort with their women."<sup>53</sup> But as Giddings asserts, the system that forbid miscegenation and portrayed black men as prowling rapists served to keep white women in subordinate positions as well- too fearful and obedient to their protectors to wander outside the parameters of their prescribed social roles.<sup>54</sup>

Wells' pamphlet attacked lynching from multiple angles, including the role of the "malicious and untruthful white press," and the unwillingness of Southern law bodies to control extra-legal violence or hold lynchers accountable. In her final section titled, "Self-Help" she advocated for African-Americans unite in defending themselves against white aggressors. "The more the Afro-American yields and cringes and begs, the more he has to do so, the more he is outraged, insulted and lynched." The bulk of her pamphlet, however, was dedicated to presenting a set of facts that undermined the theory that lynching was an act done for the defense of white womanhood. Though she undoubtedly still ascribed to the tenets of true womanhood, she knew she had to wrest the control of it from the hands of white men for she understood its unparalleled power. "Humanity abhors the assailant of womanhood," she confirmed, "and this charge upon the Negro at once places him beyond the pale of human sympathy."<sup>55</sup>

Officially exiled from her home (under numerous threats to her life) and under an increasing amount of slurring criticism—the *Memphis Commercial* had recently deemed her a "wench" and a "black harlot" and the *New York Times* labeled her, "a slanderous and dirty-minded mulatress"—Wells' fellow female reformers rallied around her and were inspired to both enter the crusade against lynching and to further unite in defense of black womanhood.<sup>56</sup> Many, however, had different opinions on how to approach the issue of lynching, particularly its gendered and sexual subtexts. Though women like Ruffin and Terrell came to the

defense of Wells, particularly when her character or womanhood was attacked, they had come to the conclusion that the best method of protest was a showing of dignity and refinement. By the late 1890s they had become increasingly dismayed by Wells' fiery indictments and her continued challenges to the purity of white womanhood. Wells responded in kind, frustrated by the fact that "they didn't understand that the issue wasn't white women, per se, but the underlying racism that drove the charges of rape that provided the rationale for lynching."<sup>57</sup> This could only be achieved if she could convince the American public that rape was not occurring on the level that Southerners wanted everyone to believe. The women of the NACW agreed that racism drove the charges of rape, but disagreed with Wells on how to dismantle the Southern ethos. Rather than Wells' method of investigation and direct confrontation they chose to chip away at the foundations of white supremacy by focusing on the elevation of black womanhood.

Wells addressed the slander of black womanhood in her campaigns as well, always reserving space for the argument that African-American women had a history of being "outraged" far more often by white men than white woman had by blacks. It is clear from her writing she did not feel black women had to prove they were worthy of receiving the title of "true women" any more than white women as a whole had to prove they were worthy. Yet that was essentially the difference in the Jim Crow South, the prevailing belief held by whites was that

white women were worthy of protection, regardless of class or merit because they were white. Conversely, black women, regardless of class or merit, were unworthy of protection because they were black. In *A Red Record*, her second pamphlet of tabulated statistics and analyses of the “alleged causes of lynchings in the United States from 1892-1894,” Wells quotes a “leading journal in South Carolina” who openly stated, “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 has no finer feelings nor virtue to be outraged!” To which Wells simply replied, “Colored women have always had far more reason to complain of white men in this respect than white women have had of Negroes.”<sup>58</sup> Yet it was statements like the former’s that held heavy sway and contributed to the justification for lynching by implicating that black women’s depravity both failed to check and further fed the sexual aggression of black men.

### **The National Association of Colored Women and the Defense of Black Womanhood in the Anti-Lynching Movement**

In 1896 the National Association of Colored Women was formed with the clear mission of defending and celebrating the moral integrity of black women.<sup>59</sup> Under their umbrella were thousands of women who worked through the arm of

organizations dedicated to addressing problems of social welfare including health, sanitation, education, women's suffrage and racial uplift. Though African-American women were inspired by the gains made by the white female club movement that had begun twenty-five years earlier, they were also not to be deterred by the fact that they were generally excluded from joining these existing organizations. In creating their own clubs they were able to exercise far more autonomy that they would have if, as Giddings writes in her study of the black female club movement, they were "participating in a women's auxiliary of a likeminded men's group" or if they had served as a minority faction in a white women's groups, as was the case with the YWCA and the Women's Christian Temperance Association.<sup>60</sup> In less than twenty years the National Association of Colored Women represented 50,000 women in 28 federations and over 1,000 clubs across the nation and had become the voice of black female activism.<sup>61</sup> Their message, whether it was applied to education, suffrage, racism or lynching, was clear. In Boston in 1895, in her opening remarks at the first national convention of black women's clubs Women's Era club president Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin stated, "for the sake of our own dignity, the dignity of our race and the future good name of our children, it is 'mete, right and our bounden duty' to stand forth and declare ourselves and principles, to teach an ignorant and suspicious world that our aims and interests are identical with those of all good aspiring women. Too long have we been silent under unjust and unholy charges;

we cannot expect to have them removed until we disprove them through ourselves.”<sup>62</sup> Ruffin called on black clubwomen to hold themselves as esteemed representatives of high Victorianism and serve as models of true womanhood in order to eradicate the negative portrayals of black women that many felt served to keep the race politically, socially and economically degraded.<sup>63</sup> “We cannot too seriously consider the question of the moral uplifting of our women,” said NACW leader Olivia Davidson, “for it is of national importance to us. It is with our women that the purity and safety of our families rest, and what the families are, the race will be.”<sup>64</sup>

Feimster asserts that black clubwomen designed their campaigns around the belief that “racial uplift would chip away at white supremacy.” Their methods and rhetoric, however, dismayed Wells-Barnett<sup>1</sup> who for years had countered that race hatred was the cause of lynching and that racial uplift, particularly economic independence, had antagonized whites who were bound and determined to keep blacks in a subservient role. Yet for many Progressive black women their commitments to moderate discourse and their desires to elevate their race through dignified living was as much a product of their own social class as it was for conservative white women. Women like Terrell, Ruffin, Talbert and Wells-Barnett embodied, in the words of scholar Shirley J. Carlson, “Black Victoria.”<sup>65</sup> Most were born in or now lived in the North, they were highly educated and often

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<sup>1</sup> With her marriage to Ferdinand Barnett in 1895, Wells hyphenated her last name to Wells-Barnett.

came from esteemed families. Pious and “morally unassailable” they were also wives and mothers, maintained attractive homes, were impeccably dressed and dedicated themselves to a number of social causes, clubs, committees and functions. “Black Victoria upheld the expectations of ‘true womanhood,’ which were shared by larger society,” writes Carlson, “She was a ‘lady.’”<sup>66</sup>

This choice on behalf of black clubwomen to use Victorian notions of womanhood reflected both their elite status and their desires to both wrest control of their own racial, gendered and class narratives and gain acceptance from larger society. Many also sought to enlist the help of white female reformers whom they believed were necessary to unhinging the belief that black men were lynched as punishment for the rape of white women.

In June of 1904 Terrell, the first and now former president of the NACW penned an anti-lynching editorial for the *North American Review* titled “Lynching from a Negro’s Point of View.” Significant in many aspects, not least of which was the fact the piece was the first anti-lynching article written by an African-American woman published by a journal controlled by Northern white editors with a largely white readership. Until this time the work of black clubwomen specifically in regards to the anti-lynching movement was largely relegated to the passing of resolutions condemning the practice and the forming of committees to raise money for the cause. Even Wells-Barnett published all of her investigative work and pamphlets privately or through the black press. Writing as the honorary

president of the NACW, Terrell was effectively representing a very large segment of African-American women and their perspectives on lynching to white America.

“Lynching from a Negro’s Point of View” was written as a response to an article published in the *Review* by Thomas Nelson Page the previous January titled, “The Lynching of Negroes: Its Causes and Its Prevention.” Page’s piece bolsters what Wells, twelve years prior, had deemed “the same old racket”- the cause of lynching, he asserted, “has its root deep in the basic passions of humanity; the determination to put an end to the ravishing of their women by an inferior race, no matter what the consequence.”<sup>67</sup> Though Page acknowledges that there exists within the race “a better element...the intelligent negro” that understands what “social equality truly means,” the majority of African-American men he demoted to beings of utter depravity. “The talk of social equality...inflames the ignorant negro...It is beyond his comprehension. In the next place his passion, always his controlling force, is now, since the new teaching, for the white woman.” In pondering the idea that lynching did not seem to deter black on white rape, he argued that the remedy for the prevention of lynching lay in more efficient judicial proceedings, a system that would “secure a reasonably prompt trial and speedy execution by law” since it appeared that the delay of justice was most responsible for the mob’s appetite for “wild justice.” Page ended his argument by calling to task both law enforcement and the “better

element” of African-Americans in relation to lynching’s cause and prevention. “Few ravishings by negroes would occur if the more influential members of the race were held accountable for the good order of their race in every community; and few lynchings would occur, at least after prisoners were in the hands of the law, if those officers, by mere fact of relinquishing their prisoners should be disqualified from ever holding office again.”<sup>68</sup>

Page’s perspective was not an anomaly but rather an exploration and affirmation of commonly held beliefs in the white South, which made it all the more dangerous. His thesis that white men were driven to mob violence by the “the shock” which comes from witnessing “the ravishing and butchery of their women and children,” his repeated descriptions of African-American men as “ignorant,” “brutal,” “ravishing beasts,” his numerous examples of white women who were assaulted, raped and murdered by black men- all provided further fuel to the narrative that portrayed “women as frail, frightened, and fragile victims who needed to be protected by southern white chivalry.”<sup>69</sup> In her comparative analysis of Page and Terrell’s dueling articles, Watson contends “Although Page’s viewpoint is repugnant to modern readers, his essay reveals his rhetorical adroitness...as he positions himself as a socially responsible citizen seeking a remedy to a growing problem.”<sup>70</sup> He offered no sympathy for the victims of lynching, but rather frames the act of lynching as a problem because it threatened the social order and rule of law. This argument would also become increasingly

popular with female reformers who were able to use it to sidestep the issue of rape, instead seeking to appeal to good Christian Americans to preserve law and order. Page's article caused considerable outcry in the African-American community, with Terrell deeming it, "one of the most scurrilous attacks on colored men of this country which has ever appeared in print." She furthered, "I thought I could not survive if something were not done to correct the impressions that Mr. Page's article had made." Her response was published in the same journal five months later.<sup>71</sup>

With "Lynching from a Negro's Point of View" Terrell took the opportunity to reframe the argument of African-American women on lynching by pulling back from the confrontational rhetoric favored by Wells-Barnett. Though "Lynching" has been criticized by scholars as "disheartening," and "lifeless," one in which she panders to the white power structure's viewpoint, Elizabeth McHenry also notes that Page had already defined the terms of the argument, rendering his perspective "inescapable," a problem that faced many African-American reformers, who were consistently faced with arguing from a defensive or explanatory position.<sup>72</sup> In crafting her response, Terrell was also undoubtedly keenly aware of the white readership, not to mention the panel of white editors, who took the time to remind her of her status when they removed "Colored Woman" from her original title and replaced it with the non-gendered, non-classed, all-encompassing label of "Negro."<sup>73</sup>

Throughout her article, Terrell attempts to appeal to readers' sense of justice and rational thought. Though she does directly address the rape narrative and its firm place in the Southern ethos as boldly as Wells does, she introduces her work by stating, "The reasons why the whole subject is deeply and seriously involved in error are obvious. Those who live in the section where nine-tenths of lynchings occur do not dare to tell the truth, even if they perceive it. When men know that the death-bell of their aspirations and hopes will be sounded as soon as they express their views to which the majority in their immediate vicinage are opposed, they either suppress their views or trim them to fit the popular mind."<sup>74</sup> The opening words of Terrell's article have been given little attention by scholars, but contained in them are a signal for the public. By applying this statement as a preface to her argument, it was perhaps her way of asking readers, in particular Northerners, to read between the lines and examine more rationally their own beliefs regarding lynching, a theme she carries throughout her piece.

Terrell begins with the rape issue, which she deems as "simply the pretext and not the cause of lynching," employing the use of statistics to prove that, in fact, "rape is the most *unusual* crime for which negroes are shot, hanged and burned." Terrell avoids, however, confronting the stereotypes and belief systems that allowed for rape to flourish as an acceptable cause of lynching. As opposed to Wells she does not delve into a discussion of sexuality and refrains from directly challenging the Southern ethos that revolved around the protection of

white womanhood. Instead, Terrell entreats Southern women to “arise in the purity and power of their womanhood” and “implore their fathers, husbands, and sons no longer to stain their hands with the black man’s blood!” By invoking Victorian standards of female empowerment, Terrell sought to enlist white women to the cause, an example of her and the NACW’s desire to force change by appealing to, rather than offending, the sensibilities of larger society.

Terrell attacks Page’s theory that the idea of social equality had driven the “ignorant negro” to covet white women, instead writing, “It is safe to assert that among the negroes guilty of ravishing white women, not one had ever been taught he was the equal of white people or had ever heard of social equality.” Yet strangely, she furthered, “illiterate negroes, who are the ones contributing largely to the criminal class, are caressed and coddled by the South...to the educated, cultivated members of the race [they are] held up as bright, shining examples of what a really good negro should be,” while educated African-Americans, those belonging to the “New Issue” or those “who aspire to knowledge and culture” are approached with “disgust, hatred and scorn.”<sup>75</sup> Terrell continues, addressing the “widely circulated statement that the moral sensibilities of the best negroes are so stunted and dull...they do not appreciate the heinousness of rape.” It is here, though, that Terrell falters, perhaps shocked by the insult to her moral esteem. Those “who have had the advantage of education and moral training, together with others occupying positions of honor and trust, are continually expressing

their horror of this one particular crime” and doing everything in their “power to wash the ugly stain of rape from the race’s good name. And whenever the slightest pity for the victim of mob violence is expressed...it is invariably because there is a reasonable doubt of his innocence, rather than because there is a condonation of the alleged crime.” Terrell then recounts the brutality of specific lynchings where victims were later determined to be innocent of the crime which they were accused of, her examples both bolstering her claim that African-Americans have a right to be outraged by lynching and providing a counter argument to Page’s numerous depictions of women who were raped and murdered by black men. However, in her statement she inadvertently separates African-Americans into two categories those with “education and moral training” and those without, a point she continually makes throughout her work, thereby failing to reinforce the humanity of all African-Americans, instead focusing on worth of the elite. Her goal, illustrated with statements such as, “Negroes who are educated in Northern institutions of learning with white men and women...neither assault white women or commit crimes, as a rule,” was undoubtedly to counter Page’s argument that the desire for social equality had created criminal urgings, but by focusing on the elite, she left the majority of African-Americans, particularly those most in harm’s way, unaccounted for.

“What then is the cause of lynching?” Terrell asks. “In the first place it is due to race hatred, the hatred of a stronger people towards a weaker who were

once held as slaves. In the second place, is lawlessness so prevalent in the section where nine-tenths of the lynchings occur.” Though she takes the opportunity in this section to illuminate for Northern readers the many facets of racism in the South, discussing the legacy of slavery, the peonage system, the lack of educational opportunities, and disfranchisement, naming lynching as “a manifestation of this spirit of vengeance and intolerance in its ugliest and most brutal form,” she also explains, rather than contests the immoral behavior of the lower classes, stating, “The only object lesson in virtue and morality which the negro received for 250 years came through the medium of slavery and that peculiar institution was not calculated to set his standards of correct living very high.” Quoting from a white minister she added, “It is from the white man the negro learned to lie and steal. If you wish to know who taught the negro licentiousness, you have only to look into the face of thousands of mulatto people and get your answer.” Though Terrell struggles to challenge the myths and negative stereotypes that excused lynching, here she does not miss the opportunity to call white men to task for the exploitation of black women, a tactic that both Wells-Barnett and the women of the NACW would readily employ in their anti-lynching rhetoric.

Terrell’s position in “Lynching from a Negro’s Point of View” illuminates her social status and commitment to an agenda that sought to pursue racial equality by highlighting the achievements of the elite. Throughout her life and

career she furthered the model of true womanhood, operating under the belief that her race would be advanced through elite leadership and that women, in particular were capable of providing the moral guidance the downtrodden so desperately needed.<sup>76</sup> Her acknowledgment, though, of the divide between educated and uneducated African-Americans does further damage to the lesser by repeatedly affixing the term “moral” only when describing the upper classes. In separating the race into two distinct classes, Terrell’s words sustain her belief in education as a great civilizing force for her race, but again, by only ascribing positive characteristics to the elite she leaves the majority of African-Americans devoid of morality to white readers, a view that may not have been a sharp departure from her own. During her tenure as president of the NACW she committed to an agenda that urged women to focus on “Homes, more homes, purer homes, better homes.” In her inaugural address as president she deplored the conditions in which many of her race lived, describing their dwellings as places in which “the air is foul, the manners bad and the morals worse,” noting that such a “so called home” was “a menace to health, a breeder of vice, and the abode of crime.”<sup>77</sup> In other works she equates “poverty and lack of hygiene” to “inferiority and immorality.”<sup>78</sup>

In the end, Terrell’s most compelling argument was her contention that lynching was caused by race hatred. It is here that she creates the strongest narrative to present to the North, which undoubtedly was her goal- to present the

alternative, the real truth as to what was happening in the South. With statements like “So great is the thirst for the negro’s blood in the South, that but a single breath of suspicion is sufficient to kindle into an all-consuming flame the embers of hatred ever smoldering in the breasts of the fiends who compose a typical mob,” she is most able to communicate her passion for her cause.<sup>79</sup> However, too often in other segments “Lynching” reads as a defense of her own social class, something she certainly felt she had to defend, her dismay apparent in statements like, “Whenever Southern white people talk about lynching they are prone to slander the entire negro race.” Her repeated positioning of the South as brutish and bloodthirsty and the North as enlightened also reads as if she was speaking as one elite member to the other about the conditions of the lowly.

Terrell’s tone was an example of the sea change that had occurred within the larger female anti-lynching crusade who since the late 1890s been consolidating into more measured and conservative voice that Wells-Barnett did not fit into. While Wells-Barnett was writing *Lynch Law in Georgia* and lamenting over the awfulness of the race riot that had recently occurred in Wilmington, North Carolina, Terrell was writing, “From the gloom and dismay into which the Wilmington riot and the Illinois outrage have plunged us let us turn away...so that we may look upon the bright side of our present condition in this country.”<sup>80</sup> In *Mob Rule in New Orleans* Wells wrote of the infamous lynching of Sam Hose whose “ears were cut off, then his toes and fingers and passed round to

the crowd.” His “eyes put out, his tongue torn out, his flesh cut into strips,” before they finally “poured coal oil on him and burned him to death.” “Men and women of America,” she demanded, “are you proud of this record which the Anglo-Saxon race has made for itself? Your silence seems to say that you are. Your silence encourages a continuance of this sort of horror. Only by earnest, active, united endeavor to arouse public sentiment can we hope to put a stop to these demonstrations of American barbarism.”<sup>81</sup> While Wells-Barnett wrote these words, the latest president of the of NACW praised the work of Margaret Murray Washington, the editor the NACW’s newsletter, “Our paper must be kept in a conservative tone that will show we are not ranters, not seeking notoriety, that the matter of race elevation through intelligent and continuous work in the right direction is all we are seeking.”<sup>82</sup>

What set Wells-Barnett apart from her contemporaries was her insistence on the fact that black rape and the protection of white womanhood were fabrications. Her dedication to this narrative, her desire to explode the Southern ethos at every opportunity, truthfully made her one of the very few activists that could match the accounts presented by individuals like Page, Baker and Bruce, yet in the current climate her ideals, and her reportedly difficult personality, led her to be viewed as overly aggressive, confrontational and increasingly, a liability to the goals of the larger racial movement. Many members of the NACW were enthusiastic over an anti-lynching article, titled “Respect for Law,” written by

Jane Addams in 1901. Addams, well-known as a “friend of the race” was exactly the type of individual they were trying to further enlist in the anti-lynching movement. Her piece condemned lynching and focused on attacking “the theory of its ablest defenders” that “criminality can be suppressed and terrorized by exhibitions of brutal acts of punishment; that crime can be prevented by cruelty.”<sup>83</sup> Wells-Barnett, though, penned a response in *The Independent*, where she praised Addams for her public denunciation of lynching but criticized her for accepting the “unfortunate presumption” that the rape accusations that prompted lynchings were true. Wells-Barnett would not entertain any anti-lynching rhetoric that allowed for the Southern rape narrative to be seen as truth, a move that would increasingly push her to the margins of a movement that was slowly being controlled by women who were committed to conservatism and traditional standards of womanhood.

An ideological schism had fully developed among black reformers, exemplified in the belief held by more militant activists who firmly believed that economic success, Puritan virtues and Victorian conservatism would not save blacks from lynching.<sup>84</sup> Though Wells-Barnett was increasingly pushed to the fringes as a voice within the NACW, she was pleased to have been named the Chairman of the Anti-Lynching Bureau of the Afro-American Council in 1899. She was greatly disappointed, however, when Booker T. Washington, who instead of putting force behind the Bureau had launched the National Negro Business

League in 1900. The focus of Washington, the Afro-American Council and the NACW, Wells-Barnett felt, was divisive to the anti-lynching cause. “Mr. Washington says...Give me money to educate the Negro,” she railed, and “he will not commit the crime for which lynching is done. Mr. Washington knows when he says this that lynching is not invoked to punish crime but color, and not even industrial education will change that.”<sup>85</sup> Until Southern ideology was changed, laws were enacted and mobs were punished, Wells-Barnett argued, the horror of lynching would continue.<sup>86</sup> Such criticisms which embodied her refusal to abandon her own convictions and submit to authoritative voices within the black community further contributed to Wells-Barnett’s marginalization. As Washington’s secretary warned, “Miss Wells is fast making herself so ridiculous that everybody is getting tired of her.”<sup>87</sup>

By the mid nineteen-teens, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People had become the voice of African-American activism and protest. The publication of *Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States* in 1919 solidified their commitment to the anti-lynching crusade as well, having been written and financed by members of the NAACP’s Anti-Lynching Committee. According to Giddings, though, in their desire to be heard as the single voice of African-American reform, they now operated as if they were the only individuals or organization that had done any effective anti-lynching work, hardly

acknowledging the work of previous or current crusaders, including Ida B. Wells-Barnett.<sup>88</sup>

Following the publication of their anti-lynching tome, the NAACP threw their efforts full force in advocacy of the passage of the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill, which would have made lynching a federal crime, by holding accountable both the mob and the law enforcement who allowed extra-legal actions to occur. Many states had similar mandates, yet they were rarely, if ever, enforced. From 1901-1920 sixteen anti-lynching bills were also offered to the Senate, under the rationale that the refusal of state and local authorities to enact or enforce anti-lynching laws amounted to a violation of citizen's Fourteenth Amendment rights, but the Dyer Bill was the only one who had made it out of committee and was offered to the House for a vote.<sup>89</sup> It passed the House of Representatives on January 26, 1922, but its ultimate fate rested upon the Senate. In preparation for the Senate vote, in 1922 the Anti-Lynching Crusaders were founded as an all-female committee charged with the task of managing a "short, sharp campaign," lasting a little over a year in support of the bill.<sup>90</sup> Mary Talbert, the current president of the National Association of Colored Women, was chosen to lead the campaign. Talbert's efforts and organization of the campaign were unique in that she planned to directly appeal to white and black women and raise one million dollars for the NAACP's anti-lynching efforts. In a letter to NAACP executive secretary James Weldon Johnson, she wrote, "I firmly believe I can put this over--

one million, but I can do it. I will enlist every secret organization in every state-- and every church... This is to be a drive for one million women to suppress Lynching of Colored Women.”<sup>91</sup> Many women in the NACW had long desired to pursue interracial cooperation in their campaigns, an idea that Wells-Barnett had balked at for much of her career. By shifting the focus to female lynch victims Talbert believed white and black women would be more sympathetic and more willing to donate towards her goal of one million dollars. Inspired by Dyer Bill sponsor Leonidas Dyer who claimed, “If 1,000,000 people were united in the demand from the Senate that the Dyer Bill be passed, there would be no question of its passage” the Crusader’s adopted the slogan “One Million Women United to Stop Lynching.”<sup>92</sup> As Talbert had written to Johnson, her primary tactic was to involve a million women throughout the country through a vast network of social clubs and churches. Her first pieces of literature sought to appeal to women by highlighting the fact that “83 women have been lynched in the United States since 1889.”<sup>93</sup> Grace Johnson, the New York representative of the movement added, “American women are realizing that until this crime is ended, no home is sacred from violence, no part of the country from race clashes, and the fair name of our country is soiled throughout the civilized world...we urge every woman who is determined to do her share toward ending American lynching, to communicate with the Anti-Lynching Crusaders...”<sup>94</sup> This strategy represented a different application of womanhood in anti-lynching campaigns as it was one of the first

times a campaign was targeted specifically towards women. The focus on the lynching of women, the conjuring of its threat to the home and the moral fabric of America were all applied in the hopes that it would awaken a sense of indignation among its target audience.

The campaign was structured around three main ideals- fundraising through donations and the selling of buttons, prayer and interracial cooperation. Fundraising was crucial to the NAACP's cause. As Talbert discussed with her executive committee, a successful anti-lynching program would require support in the areas of publicity, pressure upon Congress, pressure upon state legislatures, investigation of every case of lynching and mob violence, and legal aid.<sup>95</sup> Yet some were not convinced. An editorial in the *Philadelphia Courier* read, "Mr. Dyer, now nationally known as the father of the Anti-lynching Bill, said..that if a million people get in back of the Anti-lynching Bill, it would pass." But, the author furthered, "...Mr. Dyer has not authority to commit the United States Senate...Let us be sane, if not intelligent. What can be done with a Million Dollars? Is it proposed to buy up a few Senators and their votes? If it will take a Million, why not Two Million?" Focusing on the women of the Crusaders, the author asked, "A Million women. Why not a Million Men? What is the difference? Is it thought that the dear women would fall for the BUNK, and the men would not?"<sup>96</sup>

Prayer was to be another large focus on the campaign. “The crusading,” Talbert wrote, “is to be conducted thru [*sic*] prayer.” Talbert instructed all members of the crusade to begin on October 1, 1922 with a sunrise prayer and then to continue each day by reciting the “Prayer for the Deliverance of Colored People,” which was published in African-American newspapers, including the *Crisis*. “We believe that God answers prayer and we are going to pray every day at noon during the months of October, November and December for God’s help in this particular movement.”<sup>97</sup> The use of prayer was not only indicative of the role religion played in African-American activism, but as a Victorian virtue, Talbert also hoped it would serve as a bridge to white Americans. In a letter to NAACP founding member Mary White Ovington, Talbert pressed, “We want to urge upon white ministers to lift up their voices against this terrible blot upon America’s civilization and we want you to pray and work with us.” And “We believe that every Christian woman in America stands against lynching and mob violence.”<sup>98</sup>

Talbert and many of her contemporaries were, as she put it, “anxious that southern white women as well as northern white women would join us.” This lay in contrast to Wells-Barnett who was often critical and unimpressed by the work of Progressive white women, even those who were deemed, “friends of the race,” whom she claimed had “made little effort to know the soul of the black woman” and had “fallen far short of helping a race which has suffered as no white woman has ever been called upon to suffer or understand.”<sup>99</sup> Though the women of the

NACW were undoubtedly disappointed with the track record of cooperation from their white counterparts, they still sought to use their “bond of common womanhood” to engage them in the anti-lynching crusade.<sup>100</sup> In her appeal to Ovington, Talbert spoke of Mrs. Juliette V. Haring whom she deemed a “champion” of the anti-lynching cause after she had reportedly prevented a lynching in Virginia. Haring had also subsequently published “A Lynching,” one of the few accounts of the act publicized by a Southern white woman, leaving readers with the words, “This abomination...must be stamped out. Lawlessness begets lawlessness...The essence of lynching is not the satisfaction of the law, but revenge, and revenge is an endless chain.”<sup>101</sup> Two years prior Charlotte Hawkins Brown spoke directly to Southern white women at the first Women’s Interracial Conference in Memphis. Using tactics that had been cultivated by Terrell and the NACW, on the subject of lynching she sought to engage white women by appealing to their sense of morality and female empowerment stating, “The Negro women of the South lay everything that happens to the members of her race at the door of the Southern white woman. Just why I don’t know, but we all feel that you can control your men. We feel that so far as lynching is concerned that, if the white woman would take hold of the situation that lynching would be stopped, mob violence stamped out and yet the guilty would have justice meted out by due course of law and would be punished accordingly.” Just as Terrell implored Southern women to “rise in the power and purity of their womanhood” to stop

lynching, Brown does the same, yet also in the same vein as Terrell she is careful not to suggest, as Wells-Barnett would, that the rape narrative was a myth. She adds, “We do not condone criminality. We do not want our men to do anything that would make you feel that they were trying to destroy the chastity of our white women..” Though the former statement reads as severely accommodating to the Southern viewpoint, Brown uses it to lead into her final point where she firmly states, “...on the other hand, I want to say to you, when you read in the paper where a colored man has insulted a white woman, just multiply that by one thousand and you have some idea of the number of colored women insulted by white men.”<sup>102</sup> Brown’s speech was incredibly significant in the fact that it was the first time an African-American woman had spoken directly and in person to white women on issues of race, womanhood and lynching. She deftly empowers women to be agents without directly attacking the Southern ethos, a move that would continually exasperate militant activists like Wells-Barnett, but would continue to be seen as the best path for progress by more conservative reformers.

Despite the efforts of the Anti-Lynching Crusaders and the organizations like the Commission on Interracial Cooperation, interracial work among women was extremely limited. Hall reports after Brown’s speech the white delegates to the convention “rose to their feet in ritual evangelical response: heads bowed, spontaneously singing a familiar hymn of Christian fellowship and solidarity,” yet the complex nature of their involvement in the narrative of Southern racism, a

Victorian ethos that scarcely allowed discussion of sexual politics, and their own racist and paternalistic viewpoints precluded white women from contributing to the anti-lynching movement in any significant way until the 1930s.<sup>103</sup> Furthermore, though exchanges did occur between white and black women, such as with Wells-Barnett and Addams, and invitations to aid in the cause were extended, for many African-American reformers the history of their experience with their white counterparts was one of exclusion and discrimination and they remained distrustful of the white agenda in regards to race issues.

The documentation left by the Anti-Lynching Crusaders rings with an air of women who were excited and determined about their cause and steadfast in their belief that they, imbued the strength of their womanhood, were the right organization to bring about the end of lynching. Their hopes, however, did not come to fruition. The Crusaders did not receive the adequate start-up funding they were promised by the NAACP and they were unable to raise the million dollars Talbert had been so sure she could do. In the end Talbert, who had told women they were raising money for legislation, felt bullied and used by the NAACP who demanded she to turn over all of her monies to pay for an advertisement titled “The Shame of Lynching.”<sup>104</sup> Furthermore by the end of 1922 the Dyer Bill was a dead letter in the Senate, falling to filibuster by Southern Democrats. Dyer would introduce it again in 1923 and in 1924, but its passage was unsuccessful. However, many scholars credit the NAACP’s public

awareness campaign and the media's reporting on the bill as responsible for the general decline in lynchings in the 1920s.<sup>105</sup> Opponents of the Dyer Bill were also defeated in the Congressional elections of 1922 in Delaware, New Jersey, and Wisconsin, which Giddings credits to the work of black female activists who agitated against their reelections.<sup>106</sup>

What was also undoubtedly hurtful to Talbert was Wells-Barnett's reaction to the Anti-Lynching Crusaders. Wells-Barnett was asked to be a "key woman," or point person for a local chapter, a request that she took as an insult in light of her record of protest. Her reaction to the structure, strategy and goals of the campaign was also one of righteous indignation which she thoroughly displayed in a piece titled "The Anti-Lynching Crusaders" in the *Woman's Forum*.<sup>107</sup> Wells-Barnett began by praising Talbert's record of work, but quickly got to the heart of the matter stating that she could not be a "key woman" for "this new organization which has sprung full-fledged overnight." She chastised the Crusaders for aligning with the NAACP and not remaining solely within the NACW and also questioned, much like the editor of the *Philadelphia Courier*, how the money raised would be spent, furthering that the funds would have been much better spent to employ legal talent in defense of the race.<sup>108</sup> Further, she failed to see how "Prayer meetings...and wearing buttons are going to make the Dyer Bill a law." "If you had started a crusade to get every woman voting out to the polls this month...and vote against those congressmen and senators...who are

known to be against [the bill]- then indeed you would have been doing something.” Wells-Barnett ended her critique with scathing words, “The whole scheme is utterly unworthy of you, Mrs. Talbert, and a direct insult to the intelligence of Negro womanhood of the land.”<sup>109</sup>

The failure of the Anti-Lynching Crusaders was a great blow to a prestigious reformer like Talbert who among her great accomplishments had been a key member of the Niagara Movement and the NAACP, was responsible for restoring the Frederick Douglass home during her tenure as president of the NACW, had spearheaded a drive that sold \$5 million dollars worth of bonds among black clubwomen during World War I, and in 1922 was the first woman to be awarded the NAACP’s Spingarn Medal for outstanding achievement.<sup>110</sup> The attack from Wells-Barnett clearly troubled her, but also further alienated Wells-Barnett from the racial and political conversation that was now being controlled by the NAACP. Wrote James Weldon Johnson in a letter to Talbert, “I agree with you that the editorial written by Mrs. Ida Wells Barnett is a nasty and vicious thing for her to do...Of course the final decision will have to be made by you, but I am of the opinion that the best thing to do is to ignore a woman of her type. She has had a grouch on for years because she has not secured the recognition which her great ability (in her own opinion) warrants. We have found that the best way to treat such attacks is to pass them by unnoticed.”<sup>111</sup>

## Conclusion

The work of African-American women in the anti-lynching movement from 1892-1922 placed them in the vanguard of civil rights protest. Their work and words able to articulate so eloquently the terror and degradation wrought by both the Jim Crow South and the tacit acceptance of an entire nation, laid the foundation for the broader movement that would arrive decades later. Though Congress never passed a bill that made lynching a federal crime, as the new century progressed and activists organized and campaigned about the scourge of lynching, the nation saw a steady decrease in its practice. 1902, ten years after Wells' published *Southern Horrors*, was the first year since lynchings were recorded that the number of victims fell below 100; 1924 marked the first year the number of victims fell below 20 and with the exceptions of the years 1926, 1930, 1933 and 1935, the number stayed below 20.<sup>112</sup>

The anti-lynching movement provided African-American women the opportunity not only to fight against racism, violence, and mob rule, but to confront and reshape ideals concerning their own womanhood. It was, however, an undoubtedly gut-wrenching pursuit. Not only did the cause ask them to walk deeply into the horrific nature of lynching, but it, like all "race work," required them to defend their own worth as human beings. As women, female reformers

were both constricted and elevated by Victorian ideals of womanhood. Women were elevated in the manner that they were viewed as the moral pillars of society, capable of providing guidance in matters of civilization and the home and, to an extent, in exerting pressure on their male counterparts in matters that intersected these boundaries, a trait that Charlotte Hawkins Brown referenced when she beseeched the crowd of white women in Memphis, “Just why I don’t know, but we all feel that you can control your men. We feel that...if the white woman would take hold of the situation that lynching would be stopped...” Women were also constricted by traditional values, as their “four cardinal virtues” of “purity, piety, submissiveness, and domesticity” further detailed by their characterization as fragile, weak, and emotional, often restricted them from discussions within the larger male-controlled political and economic arenas. As a result, when Progressive female activists and political agents engaged in protest and reform they often invoked Victorian ideals of womanhood, employing them as tools of moral superiority which they hoped would lend weight to their cause. This was no different in the case of crusade to end lynching, but for African-American women, “true womanhood” was complicated. Middle and upper-class African-American women espoused these ideals, perhaps, as Simmons argues, even more so than their white counterparts, as it functioned as a marker of their civility and social class. Yet they could not escape that historically, particularly in the South, this term, its characteristics and the respect it afforded was not only denied to the

women of their race but was used as a mechanism to further oppress, terrorize, and lynch African-Americans. The work of black female activists in the anti-lynching movement challenged this notion using methods that reflected both radical and conservative approaches to reform.

Women like Terrell and Talbert struggled to crystallize the argument against lynching with the same force as Wells-Barnett. Their adherence to Victorian standards of womanhood complicated their strategies and ultimately prevented them from fully challenging the pathology that allowed lynching to be regarded as an acceptable practice. Terrell's "Lynching from a Negro's Point of View," as well as the broader work of the NACW, can be viewed as accomodationist or pandering to the white power structure as they essentially fought to prove that with education and moral training, African-Americans were worthy of equality and respect, yet on the other hand, as Simmons points out, conservative black female reformers also put "Victorianism to political use," and were steadfast in their own beliefs that steady, albeit slow, improvement was the best course of action.<sup>113</sup> It must also be noted that while the women of the NACW avoided explicitly attacking the cult of white womanhood, by focusing on the factual evidence that disproved the rape narrative, reminding whites of their own sexual exploitation of black women, pointing to the positive impact of education, "moral training," and economic self-sufficiency, and launching broad campaigns that both defended and celebrated their own womanhood, they too

were poking holes in the Southern ethos that used the protection of white women as a veil for white supremacy. Women like Terrell very much believed in the power of their own “true womanhood.” They were committed to the idea that “morality, purity, cleanliness, homecare and prayer would serve as weapons of protest” and uplift their race.<sup>114</sup> It is not unusual or surprising, therefore, that these themes would play a strong role in their anti-lynching rhetoric.

Scholars have identified Ida B. Wells-Barnett as a radical in her time; a term that signals an individual whose ideals and methodologies ran counter to the accepted and prevailing viewpoint. As a Progressive reformer—male, female, black or white—she was one of the very few that boldly attacked the racial, sexual and gendered hegemony that supported Jim Crow America. She refused to accept the cult of white womanhood as truth and took every opportunity she could to unequivocally refute, as opposed to excuse, the myths and stereotypes assigned to black men and women. She also refused to submit to larger forces within the black community that favored a more moderate tone. It is clear, as Giddings argues, that Wells-Barnett turned her back on Victorianism as a political tool, yet questions still remain as to how much traditional views of womanhood informed her position as many scholars attribute her radicalized voice not as indicative of her rejection of Victorian mores, but rather as indicative of her support of them; her work representative of an individual of great religious conviction and uncompromising ethics who was righteously indignant over the violation of moral

laws. Though her uncompromising and aggressive style often left her as a lone voice, the historical record of her work and the work of all women engaged in the fight to end lynching illuminates the tensions and dynamics experienced by many female activists as they negotiated the minefield of gender, racial and sexual politics endemic to the early decades of the twentieth century.

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## Notes

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- <sup>2</sup> Paula J. Giddings, *Ida: A Sword Among Lions*, (New York: Amistad, 2008), 207.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 161; Crystal N. Feimster, *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 114.
- <sup>5</sup> Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics and Culture in the Twentieth Century*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996.)
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- <sup>7</sup> Giddings, *Ida: A Sword Among Lions*, 228.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>9</sup> Wells, *Southern Horrors*, 50.
- <sup>10</sup> Simone Davis, "The 'Weak Race' and the Winchester: Political Voices in the Pamphlets of Ida B. Wells-Barnett," *Legacy*, Vol. 12 No. 2 (1995): 77-97, 85.
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- <sup>13</sup> Ida B. Wells, *A Red Record in Southern Horrors and Other Writings. The Anti-Lynching Campaign of Ida B. Wells, 1892-1900* ed. Jacqueline Jones Royster (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 1997), 80; Feimster, *Southern Horrors*, 115.
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- <sup>16</sup> Brown, *Eradicating this Evil*, 70.
- <sup>17</sup> National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. *Thirty Years on Lynching in the United States, 1889-1918*, (New York: NAACP, 1919), accessed through "Legacy of Slavery" Maryland State Archives, <http://www.msa.md.gov>, 2012.
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- <sup>20</sup> Reprinted in *The Crisis*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (New York: National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 1919-08), 208. The Modernist Journals Project (searchable database). Brown and Tulsa Universities, ongoing. <http://www.modjourn.org>.
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- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 83-84.
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- <sup>43</sup> "Lynching in Jackson," *Daily Memphis Avalanche*, August 19, 1886, accessed at [www.southernhistory.net](http://www.southernhistory.net).
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- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.
- <sup>47</sup> "Negroes Lynched by a Mob," *The New York Times*, March 10, 1892, accessed at *New York Times Article Archive*. [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com).
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- <sup>49</sup> Giddings, *Ida: A Sword Among Lions*, 229.
- <sup>50</sup> Wells, *Southern Horrors*, 61.
- <sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.
- <sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.
- <sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.
- <sup>54</sup> Giddings, *Ida: A Sword Among Lions*, 226.
- <sup>55</sup> Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry*, 146.

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- <sup>57</sup> Giddings, *Ida: A Sword Among Lions*, 318.
- <sup>58</sup> Wells, *A Red Record* , 127.
- <sup>59</sup> Paula J. Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*, 81.
- <sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.
- <sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*
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- <sup>64</sup> Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*, 87.
- <sup>65</sup> Shirley J. Carlson, "Black Ideals of Womanhood in the Late Victorian Era," *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 77 No. 2 (Spring 1992): 62.
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- <sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>72</sup> McHenry, "Toward a History of Access: The Case of Mary Church Terrell," 389.
- <sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*
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- <sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*
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- <sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 628.
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- <sup>100</sup> Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry*.
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- <sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 629.
- <sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 630.
- <sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 631.

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- <sup>111</sup> James Weldon Johnson's Assistant Secretary to Mary B. Talbert, 21 Oct 1922, NAACP Papers, Part 7: The Anti-Lynching Campaign, 1912-1955, Series B: Anti-Lynching Legislative and Publicity Files, 1916-1955, Library of Congress (Microfilm, Reel 3, Frame 298) in Angelica Mungarro and Karen Anderson, "How Did Black Women in the NAACP Promote the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill, 1918-1923?," 2003 in Kathryn Kish Sklar and Thomas Dublin, eds., *Women and Social Movements in the United States, 1600-2000*. Accessed through City College of New York, Morris J. Cohen Library, <http://www1.cuny.cuny.edu/library/>.
- <sup>112</sup> Douglas Linder, "Lynchings by Year and Race," *Lynching in America: Statistics, Information, Images*, <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/frtrialshipp/lynchstats.html>, 2000.
- <sup>113</sup> Simmons, "African Americans and Sexual Victorianism in the Social Hygiene Movement, 1910-40."
- <sup>114</sup> Feimster, *Southern Horrors*, 114.



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