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"The Malicious and Untruthful White Press": Ida B Wells's Fight Against White Supremacy in the Contemporary Age

Natalie Henriquez

The brutal murder of George Floyd at the hands of law enforcement on May 20, 2020 sparked a wave of protests across the globe. Conservative media outlets emphasized how the “riots” and looting disrupted civility in American society, largely ignoring the role of police brutality and racially charged violence. An analysis of the coverage surrounding police brutality and the 2020 protests reveals that the media still minimizes the claims of oppression made by African American individuals to focus on notions of “civilization” in America. Lethal violence directed toward African American men is nothing new in the United States, nor is media coverage that disparages activists working to end racialized killings. More than a century before the Black Lives Matter movement, the anti-lynching crusade led by Ida B. Wells was vilified by newspapers across the country and depicted as a slanderous attack to undermine the morality and civility of the South. The staggering responses to the 2020 protests suggest that the nation is still fighting against the modern system of slavery that Ida B. Wells so honorably challenged at the turn of the twentieth century. This paper provides historical context for the vilification of Black Lives Matter protests by illustrating how newspapers across the United States reported on Wells and her anti-lynching crusade between 1892 and 1895.

The years 1892 to 1899 witnessed some of the highest rates of lynching in American history.¹ Wells inverted the arguments of socio-cultural and political supremacy charged by white southerners and dismantled the justifications for lynching by

¹ Charles Seguin and David Rigby, “National Crimes: A New National Data Set of Lynchings in the United States, 1883 to 1941,” *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World*, 5 (2019).

emphasizing the civility, morality, and even innocence of African American men, in contrast to the barbarity and cruelty of white lynching apologists. Wells also vehemently argued that lynching was motivated by fears of the increasing socio-economic and political autonomy of African American men and fears of “miscegenation” — a term invented a generation earlier to stoke fears of racial mixing.² Focusing on the way she was depicted in a sampling of newspapers from across the country underscores why Wells was so threatening and why publishers felt it imperative to refute her claims.

There is extensive literature analyzing Wells’ autobiographies, anti-lynching crusade in Europe, and rhetorical battles with southern newspapers (particularly the *Commercial Appeal* of Memphis, Tennessee). Linda McMurry’s book *To Keep the Waters Troubled: The Life of Ida B. Wells*, as well as Gail Bederman’s article “Civilization,’ the Decline of Middle-Class Manliness, and Ida B. Wells’ Antilynching Campaign” are the best sources to consult. However, there remains a void in an analysis of Wells’ impact across the United States.³ This paper focuses on *The Atchison Globe* (Atchison, Kansas); *The New York Times*; *The News and Observer* (Raleigh, North Carolina); and *The Oregonian* (Portland, Oregon) in order to draw on a representative sample of national papers. Developments in newspaper production and transportation lines made national and even international coverage

² This is precisely what scholar Martha Hodes meant when she asserted that “after the war, in order to preserve racial hierarchy, whites set out to fashion a more rigid dividing line based upon stricter racial categories. One of the most certain ways to sustain the racial categories of ‘black’ and ‘white’ was to make sure that people of African ancestry and people of European ancestry did not have children together,” Martha Hodes, *White Women, Black Men* (Yale University Press, 1997), 174.

³ For a detailed account of Ida B. Wells’ anti-lynching crusade see: Linda O. McMurry, *To Keep the Waters Troubled: The Life of Ida B. Wells. To Keep the Waters Troubled: The Life of Ida B. Wells.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Gail Bederman, “Civilization,’ the Decline of Middle-Class Manliness, and Ida B. Wells’ Antilynching Campaign” (1892–94).

of Wells' anti-lynching crusade possible.⁴ *The Atchison Globe* provides an interesting perspective; Wells conducted a lecture in Atchison, KS that served as a kind of battleground between pro-Union and pro-confederate forces, where both pro-slavery and pro-abolition opinions had sway in the preceding forty years.⁵ Since Wells never traveled to Oregon, *The Oregonian*'s perspective was based on word-of-mouth accounts.⁶ The fact that the Editor of *The News and Observer*, Josephus Daniel, purchased the newspaper to spread white supremacy and protect against "Negro domination,"⁷ makes *The News and Observer* the ideal source to gauge how threatening white southerners found her rhetoric.

The People's Grocery Lynching

A pivotal moment in Wells' career was the "People's Grocery Lynching" on March 9, 1892, when her close friends and business partners, Tom Moss, Calvin McDowell, and Will Stewart, were lynched. Wells published an editorial in her *Memphis Free Speech* in response:

Nobody in this section of the country believes the old threadbare lie that Negro men rape white women. If Southern white men are not careful, they will overreach themselves and public sentiment will have a reaction; a conclusion will then

⁴ Michael Weaver, "Judge Lynch in the Court of Public Opinion: Publicity and the de-Legitimation of Lynching." *American Political Science Review*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 294.

⁵ "The ghost walked for the Missouri Pacific to-day." *Atchison Globe*, 21 May 1895, p. 4. *Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers*; "Atchison County, Kansas." Legends of Kansas, n.d.

⁶ To read more about the history of white supremacy and racism in Oregon, see Oregonian/OregonLive, Douglas Perry | "Oregon's Founders Sought a 'White Utopia,' a Stain of Racism That Lives on Even as State Celebrates Its Progressivism." *oregonlive*, June 15, 2020. www.oregonlive.com

⁷ For more on Daniel's instrumental role in motivating the Wilmington race riots, see Timothy B. Tyson, "The Ghosts of 1898." *Raleigh News & Observer*, November 2006.

be reached which will be very damaging to the moral reputation of their women.⁸

The Commercial Appeal urged its Memphis residents to respond to Wells' so-called attacks on white womanhood.⁹ Soon after, a mob in Memphis, Tennessee vandalized the office of *The Free Speech* and burned it to the ground. In response to Wells' claim that African American men did not rape white women and that many allegations of rape were merely lies to conceal consensual and adulterous relationships, *The Commercial Appeal* issued a vicious statement attacking Wells.¹⁰ Their response only further highlighted Wells' claim on how fearful the white press was of miscegenation and the perceived moral contamination of innocent white women. Fearing for her life, Wells relocated to New York, where she wrote for *The New York Age*, *The Chicago Conservator*, and *The Inter-Ocean*.

The “People’s Grocery Lynching” catalyzed Wells’ anti-lynching lecture campaigns and pamphlets. The victims had operated a grocery store in a district that historically served whites and had never committed any crimes against white women, which made it clear to Wells that lynching was no more than “an excuse to get rid of Negroes who were acquiring wealth and property and thus keep the race terrorized and ‘keep the nigger down.’”¹¹ Wells exposed the economic motivations and anxieties of miscegenation

⁸Ida B. Wells-Barnett, “The Offense,” in *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* (New York, New York: New York Age, 1895).

⁹ *The Commercial Appeal* declared that “there are some things that the Southern white man will not tolerate, and the obscene intimations of the foregoing have brought the writer to the very outermost limit of public patience. We hope we have said enough.” Wells-Barnett, “The Offense.”

¹⁰ To read more about *The Commercial Appeal*’s claim “the fact that a black scoundrel is allowed to live and utter such loathsome and repulsive calumnies is a volume of evidence as to the wonderful patience of Southern whites. But we have had enough of it.” See Wells-Barnett, “The Offense.”

¹¹ Ida B. Wells-Barnett, “At the Hands of the Mob” in *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells*, Edited by Alfreda Duster, Eve L. Ewing, and Michelle Duster (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2020).

behind lynching in *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases*, *The Reason Why The Colored American is not at the World's Colombian Exposition*, and during her 1893 and 1894 European lecture campaigns.¹²

Anti-Lynching Pamphlets

Wells directly challenged the prevalent myths surrounding dominant white perspectives on lynching: the inherent purity of white women against the comparative barbarity and lasciviousness of African American men. By inverting the argument that white men relied on to justify lynching, Wells successfully argued that white southern men and their accomplices in the white press were the origin of the racial strife and barbaric lynching that spread across the United States.¹³ White southerners justified lynching as necessary in cases of rape, but as Wells illustrated, "only *one-third* of the 728 victims to mobs [had] been *charged* with rape."¹⁴ The accounts of thirteen white women who willingly engaged in sexual relationships with African American men strengthened Wells' argument that "the white delilahs who falsely cried out 'rape'" were instigators of such illicit relationships.¹⁵ According to Wells, lynching was employed after the Civil War, particularly following

¹² To see Curry's assertion that "it was this realization of the danger Black manhood's economic self-sufficiency posed to the economic regime of white Southerners that brought Wells to the truth and freed her from the propagandist lies that held lynching to be a just punishment for the crime of rape" see Tommy J. Curry, "The Fortune of Wells: Ida B. Wells-Barnett's Use of T. Thomas Fortune's Philosophy of Social Agitation as a Prolegomenon to Militant Civil Rights Activism," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 48, no. 4 (2012), 466.

¹³ Wells stated that "they forget that a concession of the right to lynch a man for a certain crime, not only concedes the right to lynch any person for any crime, but (so frequently is the cry of rape now raised) it is in a fair way to stamp us a race of rapists and desperadoes." Wells-Barnett, "The New Cry," in *Southern Horrors*.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Bederman, "'Civilization,'" 14; See Wells-Barnett, "The Black and White of It," in *Southern Horrors* for more information on Edward Coy, specifically how Edward Coy's lover was coerced to say that she was raped by Coy, despite having had consensual sexual relations with him for more than a year previously. Coy also asked the woman "if she would burn him after they had 'been sweetheating' for so long."

equal suffrage and emancipation, to reinforce socio-economic hierarchies and defend southern notions of white manhood that were threatened by modernization.¹⁶ The purity of white women took on immense socio-political value. Because the ability to “protect” white women was seen as a symbol of the virility and strength of white men, these lynching apologists relied on their perceived unique qualifications to defend this purity as justification for their political dominion.

Wells distinguished herself from her contemporaries (particularly Mary Church Terrell) by presenting the illicit relationships between white women and African American men, couching lynching as an economic issue, and asserting that African Americans should fight back both economically and physically.¹⁷ Knowing that she could not continue her publications through the black press exclusively if she wanted to “mold public sentiment,” she asserted that what she called “the white press” was “the medium through which [she] hoped to reach the white people of the country.”¹⁸ Thus, Wells set forth to present her lectures on

¹⁶ Wells called lynching “the last relic of barbarism and slavery.” The fact that no acts of rape were committed during the Civil War strengthens her declaration that “The thinking public will not easily believe freedom and education more brutalizing than slavery, and the world knows that the crime of rape was unknown during four years of civil war, when the white women of the South were at the mercy of the race which is all at once charged with being a bestial one” (Wells-Barnett, “Self-Help,” *Southern Horrors*); McMurry contends that in the wake of this modernization was a shift in what constituted manliness, specifically she notes that manliness previously favored brute strength and aggression, but at the turn of the 20th century, the new industrial capital economy demanded an emphasis on restraint, discipline, and responsibility (McMurry, *To Keep the Waters Troubled*, 166).

¹⁷ According to Martha Solomon Watson, Church Terrell specifically tried to not offend newspapers in the North and South by avoiding the assertion that lynching was motivated by economic concerns of autonomy and that lynching served to obscure the illicit relations between black men and **white women** (Watson, Martha Solomon, “Mary Church Terrell vs. Thomas Nelson Page: Gender, Race, and Class in Anti-Lynching Rhetoric,” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 12 (1), 2009: 66-68).

¹⁸ Ida B. Wells-Barnett, “Light from the Human Torch,” in *Crusade for Justice: Autobiography of Ida B. Wells*, edited by Alfreda Duster, Eve L. Ewing, and Michelle Duster, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2020).

"Lynch Law in All its Phases" in Scotland and England.¹⁹ All eyes were on the United States as it scrambled to secure a position as a great world power and demonstrate its moral and technological superiority. Among these attempts to prove American worthiness of global praise was the 1893 Chicago Exposition, in which white men sought to display to the world an idealized, or "civilized," version of the United States.

1893 Chicago World's Fair

White southerners, feeling threatened by Wells' 1893 lecture tour in England, relied on the Chicago World's Fair to defend their superior morality and civility.²⁰ Wells' exclusion from the Chicago World's Fair led to the publication *The Reason Why*, in which she further developed her argument on the economic motivations of lynching and her rhetorical strategy of inverting arguments of civilization against white men. Wells sought to undermine the argument that African American men's inherent criminality and barbarity caused lynching by declaring that many lynchings were not the result of actual crimes, but rather a consequence of the growing economic autonomy of African American men and white fears of racial mixing.²¹ She pointed to fact that nearly fifty men were lynched between 1881 and 1891 without valid reasons, the sentencing disparities between white men and African American men charged with the same crimes, that no African American men were charged with rape during the Civil War, and the previously-mentioned statistic that only one third of the victims of lynching had actually been charged with rape. Wells' investigative journalism revealed the double-standard that African American

¹⁹ This follows from Wells' claim that "America cannot and will not ignore the voice of a nation that is her superior in civilization, which makes this demand in the name of justice and humanity" (Wells-Barnett, "Breaking the Silent Indifference," *Crusade for Justice*).

²⁰ Linda McMurry contended that "the Colombian Exposition provided physical representations of the boasted cultural, political, and economic superiority of white men" (McMurry, *To Keep the Waters Troubled*, 199).

²¹ Wells-Barnett, *The Reason Why*.

men faced at the hand of a racially-fraught justice system.²² Much like she did in *Southern Horrors*, Wells placed the onus on the lynchers and the white press.²³ The fact that African Americans are three times more likely than white Americans to be shot or killed by law enforcement personnel today suggests that we are still fighting against the same corrupt justice system Wells challenged.²⁴

1894 Anti-Lynching Crusade in Europe

Doubling down on her inversion of the traditional white argument that the lynching of "barbaric" African American men was necessary to create a civilization safe for white women, Wells made herself known in both the American and British press through two different tours in Europe. Wells controversially declared that white men, not African American men, were morally backwards due to their failure to adhere to the court of law and curb vicious mob attacks, as well as hypocrites for blaming their

²² Wells presented four critical arguments: that "only one-third of nearly a thousand murdered black persons have been even charged with the crime of outrage"; secondly, she argued against the idea that white women and children require protection against barbaric black men, as there were no assaults during the civil war; third, Wells pointed to how "robbery, incendiaryism, race prejudice, quarreling with white men, making threats, rioting, miscegenation (marrying a white person), and burglary," are capital offences punishable by death (lynchings) when committed by a black against a white person; finally, Wells contended that the fact that "for nearly fifty of these lynchings no reason is given, ...no one is held responsible...[suggests that] the simple word of any white person against a Negro is sufficient to get a crowd of white men to lynch a Negro" (Ida B. Wells-Barnett, "Lynch Law," in *The Reason Why the Colored American is Not in the World's Colombian Exposition*, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library (1893)).

²³ Specifically, she claimed that "[White southerners] have gone on hoping and believing that general education and financial strength would solve the difficulty [of racial tensions], and are devoting their energies to the accumulation of both." (Wells-Barnett, "The New Cry," in *The Reason Why*)

²⁴ "Fatal Force: 987 people have been shot and killed by the police in the past year," updated March 2, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database/>

own sexual crimes on African American men.²⁵ Wells painted white Southern men as unrestrained, irresponsible, and uncivilized to deconstruct traditional white notions of civility. Additionally, she denounced Northern men as cowards for failing to curtail (or even condemn) lynching.²⁶

Her assertions that one-third of rape allegations against African American men were connected to lynching and that coverage of lynching in the white press coverage ignored the exponential rates of lynching throughout the 1890s allowed Wells to “[expose] the masked patriarchal and racist grounds for segregationist thinking in the United States.”²⁷ Further, by depicting white men in a barbaric and uncivilized light and charging that white southern men continued to rape African American women with the expectation that there would be no consequence, Wells stripped white men of their self-administered masculine authority to exercise lynching.²⁸ Scholar William Pinar called this the “inversion of civilization,” positing that Wells “created an antiracist notion of manhood...by severing the link between White Supremacy and manliness.”²⁹ This strategy of breaching the association between the socially-constructed manly authority and civilized nature of white men, and instead characterizing African American men as civilized victims, was particularly effective in catching the attention of the white press at home.

²⁵ To see Wells' argument that white men raped black women without any punishment see Wells-Barnett, “Inter-Ocean Letters” *Crusade for Justice*). McMurry similarly argued that “cast lynchers as crude barbarians rather than as manly defenders of womanhood” (McMurry, *To Keep the Waters Troubled*, 167).

²⁶ Wells-Barnett, *Southern Horrors*.

²⁷ Hazel V. Carby, ""On the Threshold of Woman's Era": Lynching, Empire, and Sexuality in Black Feminist Theory." *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (1985): 262-77. Accessed February 9, 2021.

²⁸ McMurry dives deeper into this concept, stating that “because civilization brought with it the right to rule others, political power was an element of true manhood” (McMurry, *To Keep the Waters Troubled*, 165).

²⁹ William, “The Emergence of Ida B. Wells,” 167.

Beyond turning the tables on white southerners by using their own argument of civilization against them, Wells exalted the British for their economic dominance following abolition. Wells argued that “Liverpool has learned that she can prosper without the slave trade or slave labor.”³⁰ Historian Tommy J Curry asserts that Wells’ appeals to Britain’s interest in global dominance allowed her to “effectively conduct her assault against the United States’ image and negate its claim to a superior government and democracy.”³¹ By dismantling the justifications for lynching and white supremacy, and challenging America’s claim to global dominance, Wells made herself a “formidable foe” in the eyes of the white press back home.³²

The ways in which the British press adopted Wells’ line of argument to ridicule the United States and project a sense of British superiority proved to be a slight that the hubristic American press simply could not tolerate.³³ As scholar Gail Bederman explains, “white Americans had discovered that, due to their tolerance and practice of lynching, the rest of the world’s Anglo-Saxons doubted whether white Americans were either manly or civilized,” a true insult to a nation that, in the midst of American imperialism, placed these values above all others.³⁴ The British

³⁰ Unlike white southern men, Wells found that the “freedom-loving citizens [in England] not only subscribe to the doctrine that human beings regardless of color or condition are equal before the law, but they practice what they preach.” This quote expresses her belief that Europeans were more civilized and moral than Americans because they found success without slavery and were able to treat all people as human beings (Wells-Barnett, “In Liverpool,” *Crusade for Justice*).

³¹ Carby notes it is no coincidence that Frederick Douglass relied on this same strategy of playing off American’s anxieties of securing the favor of the British to wage abolition in 1845 (Carby, “On the Threshold of Woman’s Era,” 54); McMurry makes note how “The white press at home was only made to be more defensive by the fact that “America was falling behind in the acquisition of colonies, which seemed to be the yardstick to measure national greatness” (McMurry, *To Keep the Waters Troubled*, 197).

³² McMurry, *To Keep the Waters Troubled*, 219.

³³ McMurry argues that “Americans especially desired affirmation by the English, who had established a great colonial empire and with whom Americans claimed racial kinship” (McMurry, *To Keep the Waters Troubled*, 197).

³⁴ Bederman, “Civilization,” 14.

Birmingham Daily Gazette's statement that "the American citizen in the South is at heart more a barbarian than the negro whom he regards as a savage," and *The Edinburgh Evening Gazette*'s observation that Wells "has everywhere been heard with deep attention and interest, and has evoked unanimous expressions of sympathy" illustrates how receptive the British were to her anti-lynching campaign.³⁵ The American *Commercial Appeal* struck back by depicting Wells as an unchaste "adventuress," whose charged "foul and slanderous tirades...inspired by the venom and malice of a half cultured hater of all things Southern."³⁶

The Commercial Appeal not only attacked Wells herself, but defended the civility of America once Wells' argument on the barbarity of white southern men was embraced by the British press.³⁷ However, the vicious attacks on Wells' credibility, motivations, and character only made the British more sympathetic to her claims about the immorality and uncivilized nature of white Anglo-Saxon men.³⁸ *The Commercial Appeal* proposed that "if Englishmen can imagine their own sisters or daughters violently deflowered by ignorant, unclean men, lower in the scale of morality and intelligence than the basest peasantry in the world, men of another race, an inferior race, and specimens of the worst possibilities of social and racial inferiority, they can come to form some slight conception of the vileness."³⁹ This proposition caught the attention of *The Liverpool Daily Post* journalists, who declared that such "language could not be possibly reproduced in an English journal," and that Wells was a "young, well educated, and a capital

³⁵ The Birmingham Gazette was a newspaper in Birmingham, England (Bederman, "Civilization", 18); *The Edinburgh Evening Gazette* is the official newspaper of the Crown and is published on behalf of Her Majesty's Stationery Office (McMurry 191).

³⁶ "Career of Ida B Wells," *The Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 26, 1894.

³⁷ Americans took particular offense to the fact that Europeans sided with Wells and empathized with her claims. This was because justifications for civil supremacy revolved around the fact that white Anglo-Saxons were of European descent, making them as civil and equal to their European counterparts (McMurry 160).

³⁸ Bederman, "Civilization," 18.

³⁹ "Career of Ida B Wells," *The Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 26, 1894.

speaker.”⁴⁰ Wells’ strategy of inverting arguments of civilization and appealing to the tensions for global dominance between Europe and the United States successfully allowed her to reach the mainstream press. The increase in her coverage across the United States and the fact that the British press defended her character and intelligence against *The Commercial Appeal*’s unscrupulous attacks are testament to this fact.⁴¹

Similar to the way Wells’ lectures made the British press question the morality and civility of the United States, present-day media’s concern with President Donald Trump’s failure to eradicate, or even recognize, racial violence, led them to question America’s position as a developed nation. *The Hindu* asked its readers to “imagine if it was a non-western President, who called the protesters “thugs”, threatened to shoot them...[and] posed for a photo...after clearing the peaceful protesters using force.”⁴² Parallels can be drawn between how Trump vilified protestors to propagate the message that “violent protesters [were] at war with good cops,” and the language Wells’ staunchest critics relied on to refute her claims.⁴³

The Responses of the American White Press

Wells’ notoriety presented something of a double-edged sword: people across the world were now paying attention to Wells’

⁴⁰ The Liverpool Daily Post, June 13, 1894; quoted in McMurry, *To Keep the Waters Troubled*, 215.

⁴¹ The creation of the first anti-lynching organization in the world, the London Anti-Lynching Committee in 1894, further illustrates Wells’ success in Europe (McMurry, *To Keep the Waters Troubled*, 200-219).

⁴² The Hindu, a newspaper organization located in Tamil Nadu, India, asked its readers to “Imagine if it was a non-western President, who called the protesters “thugs”, threatened to shoot them and used the country’s military against them, and posed for a photo in front of a worshipping place, holding a religious text aloft, after clearing the peaceful protesters using force” (Stanly Johny, “Divided States of America,” *The Hindu*, June 2, 2020. <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/divided-states-of-america/article31729541.ece>).

⁴³ Ciara Nugent and Billy Perrigo. “How the World Reacted to Protests Over George Floyd’s Death.” *Time*, June 2, 2020. <https://time.com/5846698/world-reactions-george-floyd-protests/>.

crusade, but her increased profile convinced her enemies to redouble their efforts to slander her. Over the course of 1894, *The Atchison Globe*, *The NYT*, *The News and Observer*, and *The Oregonian* depicted Wells' claims as absurd exaggerations and blatant lies in an attempt to defend American civility and white masculinity. *The Atchison Globe* quoted South Carolina Governor Tilman's refutation of Wells' "slanders."⁴⁴ A series of scathing articles published by *The NYT* illustrates how Northerners were deeply offended by her claim that the North acquiesced to the evils of the South in their complacency to lynching.⁴⁵ *The NYT* journalists called African American men "negro ravishers," and argued that Wells was "slanderous and nasty-minded mulattress, who [did] not scruple to represent the victims of black brutes in the South as willing victims."⁴⁶ The same paper later condemned Wells for her depiction of the "brutality of Southern white men and the unchastity and untruthfulness of Southern white women."⁴⁷ *The NYT*'s declaration that lynching was an act of savages "that could not take place in a civilized community" underscores how Wells' rhetoric struck a chord with Northerners who, following Well's condemnation of their morality, wanted to distinguish themselves from the lynching apologists in the South.⁴⁸

When the white press was not vilifying Wells and her compatriots based on their race, they were engaging in ad hominem attacks against Wells herself, arguing that her writing

⁴⁴ Governor Tillman, who served as the Governor of South Carolina from 1890-1894, specifically stated that "that he will lend a mob any time to lynch a man, black or white, who has raped a woman, black or white. He says he is opposed to lynch law for all crime except rape." ("Excitement in Leavenworth." *Atchison Globe*, June 2, 1894.)

⁴⁵ Bederman, "Civilization,"; 15, 20-25; McMurry, *To Keep the Waters Troubled*, 144-146.

⁴⁶"Editorial Article 3 -- No Title." *New York Times*. July 24, 1894.

⁴⁷ "BRITISH ANTI-LYNCHERS." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, August 2, 1894.

⁴⁸ For information on *The NYT*'s claim that the "British Brethren should mind their own business...., that Wells was a "mulatto refugee, who was a refugee because she had imputed unchastity to the victims of negro outrages in the South" see "BRITISH ANTI-LYNCHERS." *The New York Times*. August 2, 1894.

fomented the racial tensions around lynching.⁴⁹ *The Oregonian's* claim that “Ida Wells has retarded [anti-lynching] work by her outrageous attacks on Southern women”⁵⁰ is quite similar to how conservative media outlets today harped on and lamented the looting that accompanied some of the 2021 protests. *The Oregonian's* article also excoriated Wells for pitting “the races against one another,” and argued that “the remedy for lynching [was] not race conflict,” implying that Wells and her compatriots were the origin of racial strife.⁵¹ *The News and Observer* alluded to the passage of anti-mob legislation that local officials had recently passed to defend the morality and civility of the South against the “fanatic” Wells.⁵² This article and Georgia Governor Northen’s letter to Wells, in which he argued that the British were hypocrites who should get their information from a reputable source, illustrate how the white press across the United States became fixated on Wells’ claims.⁵³ Governor O’Farrell of Virginia similarly claimed that Wells’ “misrepresentations and slanderous utterances” only served to “intensify...the spirit of violence”, and declared that “the work of Ida Wells was a deep-laid scheme to check...the progress of the South.”⁵⁴ The white press engaged in fear mongering in an attempt to undermine Wells’ strides in Europe, much like how the

⁴⁹ The white press relied on the identifications of “negro ravishers” and “mulattress” in lieu of referring to Wells and her contemporaries by their names.

⁵⁰ “Undoing the Work.” *Portland Oregonian* [Oregon Territory], August 7, 1894, 4. *Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers*.

⁵¹ “Undoing the Work.” *Portland Oregonian*.

⁵² The anti-mob law act specifically ensured that if a “prisoner is killed by a mob it is of course murder and the offenders are punishable by death...the article also stated that this law would ensure “speedy trials for offenders,” and how the “law will be able to protect the innocent, punish the guilty and to effectually suppress crime.” (“A Negro on Lynching.” *News and Observer*, December 4, 1894).

⁵³ “Governor Northen accused the British of unmanly hypocrisy, suggesting that the anti-lynching committee return to England and ‘prevent by law the inhuman sale of virtuous girls to lustful men in high places. Hang all such demons as ‘Jack, the Ripper’; punish as it deserves the barbarous, wholesome slaughter of negroes in Africa by Englishmen who go there to steal their gold...’” (Wells quoted in Bederman; “Civilization,” 20-25).

⁵⁴ “In Ringing Words.” *News and Observer*, September 14, 1894. *Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers*; Bederman; “Civilization,” 20.

conservative press today attempted to spread fear that the protests were making cities dangerous during the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests. Almost all of the articles depicted Wells as a self-serving crusader whose sole goal was to vilify the South and exacerbate racial tensions. This technique of scapegoating the victims of oppression for the violence and civil unrest associated with that very pattern of subjugation continues today.

Last summer, Tucker Carlson, a reporter on Fox News, spewed conspiracy theories about George Floyd's murder, claiming that George Floyd did not die at the hands of the policeman Derek Chauvin, but from a fentanyl overdose. He even charged protestors with “[using] the sad death of a man called George Floyd to upend our society.”⁵⁵ Carlson was joined by Fox network's Jeanine Pirro and Sean Hannity, who focused almost exclusively on looting and completely ignored the root cause of the protests.⁵⁶ Many other conservative outlets presented the tragic death of George Floyd as an aberration, an isolated instance in the purportedly civilized United States. These present-day responses are almost identical to those of Wells' biggest critics in the 1890s.⁵⁷

Another rhetorical pattern amongst Wells' critics was journalists' consistent use of social Darwinist concepts of various innate racial traits to cling to the notion that African American men

⁵⁵ Carlson also lamented how “It was too late. Cities had been destroyed, along with the fabric of this country itself. Scores of people had been killed. Democratic partisans used a carefully concocted myth, a lie, to bum-rush America into overturning the old order and handing them much more power.” (“Opinion: How Trump’s lawyers (and Tucker Carlson) are using BLM to Exonerate Trump,” *The Washington Post*, February 12, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/02/12/how-trumps-lawyers-tucker-carlson-are-using-blm-exonerate-trump/>).

⁵⁶ Sean Hannity condemned the protestors for “exploiting” George Floyd’s death. (Paul Farhi and Elahe Izadi. “‘Carnage,’ ‘Radicals,’ ‘Overthrow the Government’: How Fox and Other Conservative Media Cover the Protests,” *The Washington Post*, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/media/heres-how-fox-news-and-other-conservative-media-are-covering-the-protests-and-violence-following-the-george-floyd-killing/2020/06/02/c0dd4458-a4de-11ea-bb20-ebf0921f3bbd_story.html.)

⁵⁷ Ibid.

were inherently barbaric. *The NYT*'s proclamation that rape was a crime particular to African American men, is strikingly similar to claims that African American men more represented in criminal statistics than white men because they are especially inclined to violence and criminality.⁵⁸ Reporters for *The Oregonian* during Wells' time elevated America as the "highest civilization," and drew parallels between the so-called barbarism and unfettered sex instinct of African American men and that of wild cattle, to argue that "the organism has not developed to fit the environment."⁵⁹ By a similar token, *The News and Observer* quoted African American physician Dr. Purvis who argued that "many of the vicious habits common to the race were transmitted by hereditary descent... and others due to the environment."⁶⁰ These journalists relied on such social Darwinist arguments in hopes of convincing their readers of the absurdity of extending suffrage to a group of men who were purportedly driven exclusively by their sexual desires. Dr. Purvis's proposal that "proper education would bring about the hope of result in due season" illustrates white southerner's perception of the cause of and remedy for lynching, and how the white press felt

⁵⁸ *The New York Times*. August 2, 1894; Pat Buchanan's argument that "The real repository of racism in America — manifest in violent interracial assault, rape and murder — is to be found not in the white community, but the African-American community" and David Duke's assertion that "personality disorder of which the central feature is lack of a moral sense" illustrate the contemporary perspective of Social Darwinism. To read more about how white supremacists today defend their superiority and distort criminal statistics see Heidi Beirich. "Pat Buchanan Again Cites Racist Sources on Black Crime." Southern Poverty Law Center, August 22, 2007, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2007/08/22/pat-buchanan-again-cites-racist-sources-black-crime>.

⁵⁹ Charles Appleby, "Law and the Negro." *Atchison Globe*, September 22, 1894, 2, *Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers*.

⁶⁰ Notably the article does not include Dr. Purvis's first name, and also states that Dr. Purvis was not in favor of calling African American men "negros." The failure to use Dr. Purvis's full name only underscores how racist this article was. They did not care about him as a person, they merely just wanted to use his credentials as evidence that even a doctor who was African American thought that the African American community was at fault ("A Negro on Lynching," *News and Observer*, December 4, 1894).

it so essential to defend the barbarity of African American men.⁶¹ This is the antithesis to Wells' insistence that White southerners relied on lynching to subordinate African American men and protect their white sociocultural and economic supremacy. The white press felt it so essential to refute Wells' claims by painting black men as innately backwards and barbaric so that they could build up their argument as to why African American men needed to be subjugated to extreme violence. Lynching apologists relied on the logic that if African American men were as civil and moral as white men, then white men had no qualified authority to supremacy.⁶² In the eyes of the white press, African American men had to be barbaric and uncivilized so that white men could serve as the protectors of white womanhood and hold unfettered socio-cultural, political, and economic authority.

Conclusion

In contrast to other female reformers during the 1890s, Wells sought to directly dismantle white supremacy by unveiling how fears of racial mixing and the burgeoning economic autonomy of African American men were the main motivations behind lynching. As Wells found, White southern men — afraid of losing their supremacy in the wake of abolition, dynamic economic structures, and equal suffrage for African American men — relied on lynching to assuage their fears of racial mixing. Thus, lynching was no more than backlash against modernization and an attempt to reclaim ownership over the bodies of African American men.

⁶¹ *The News and Observer* journalists argued that African American's men inextricable barbarity could only be mitigated by education, and that African American men must stop raping white women if they desired lynching to stop ("The Odds against It," *News and Observer*, December 23, 1894, *Nineteenth Century Newspapers*.) and fault ("A Negro on Lynching," *News and Observer*).

⁶² McMurry notes how "by emphasizing a sharp dichotomy between their own "civilized" natures and the "barbarity" of the rest of humankind, [white southern men] justified imposing their government and economic control on others" (McMurry, *To Keep the Waters Troubled*, 158).

McMurtry has adroitly identified the most effective element of Wells' denunciation as its inversion of the predominant ideologies of manliness that served to motivate lynchings. Wells revealed the hypocrisy behind the rationale that lynching was necessary to protect white womanhood by insisting on the barbarity of the white men who raped African American women, while simultaneously imagining themselves as leaders of the so-called moral crusades against African American men. Rather than acquiesce to the notion that white lynchers were answering the call to protect vulnerable white women by punishing their barbarous attackers, Wells argued that the true barbarism lay in perpetrating mob violence in the name of clinging to outdated and ultimately anti-democratic notions of what it meant to be a white man in America. The white press did everything in their power to deny the truth of such motivations by vilifying Wells and defending the civility and morality of the South.

It is a chilling testament to the endurance of white supremacist ideologies that many remain unable to accept the truth behind Wells' claims even today. The way that present day media outlets dismiss the claims of racial violence made by African American individuals as slanderous exaggerations or unfair attacks against innocent and brave American law enforcement echo the vilification Wells faced in the white press a century ago. Newspapers and media at large are often outlets for the enfranchised and powerful. When media outlets are not appropriately vigilant, they can end up becoming instruments of oppression by amplifying the viewpoints of the privileged class. Positioning the victims of oppression as the originators of the oppression itself means that the perpetrators are not held accountable, and the pernicious cycle of violence repeats itself. The increasing visibility of white nationalism in the United States during the Trump administration is not simply a backlash against the first African American protest; it is the continuation of a long legacy of racist beliefs and actions, packed and promulgated by powerful media.

Author Bio:

Natalie Henriquez is a fourth-year student pursuing a double major in History and Philosophy. Her experiences growing up in an immigrant household motivated her to be an advocate for disenfranchised groups and to learn more about the origins of inequities that continue to stymie reform today. She hopes to attend a law school with a vigorous public interest problem and is passionate about the "crimmigration" intersections between criminal and immigration law. Learning about Ida B Wells inspired her to use writing as an avenue to promote social justice and amplify the voices of disenfranchised groups across SCU's campus. She is a Senior Senator for the Associated Student Government, Co-Chair for the Undocumented Students and Allies Association, Fellow at the Center for Arts and Humanities, and Editor for HerCampus SCU. In her free time, she loves to do yoga, read, go on runs, and cook with family and friends! Natalie won the Giacomini Prize for the best paper using primary sources from the History Department and the Nina Liebman Prize from the Women's and Gender Studies Department.