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9

To Call a Thing by Its True Name: The Rhetoric of Ida B. Wells

Jacqueline Jones Royster

Ida B. Wells was born a slave in Holly Springs, Mississippi, on July 16, 1862, the daughter of a carpenter and a cook. By 1890, she had moved to Memphis, Tennessee, and become the editor of the *Evening Star*, a regular contributor to the *Living Way*, co-owner of the *Free Speech*, and a nationally syndicated columnist. In writing about those early years, Wells indicated her surprise at her recognition and popularity as a writer since she was not formally trained as a journalist and had not thought of herself as particularly gifted in the literary arena. She explained what she perceived to be her strength:

> I had observed and thought much about conditions as I had seen them in the country schools and churches. I had an instinctive feeling that the people who had little or no school training should have something coming into their homes weekly which dealt with their problems in a simple, helpful way. So in weekly letters to the *Living Way*, I wrote in a plain, common-sense way on the things which concerned our people. Knowing that their education was limited, I never used a word of two syllables where one would serve the purpose. I signed these articles "Iola." (Duster 23–24)

For the next forty-one years, Wells would cut a broad path across the national and international landscape. She would carve out a unique space for herself within the public discourse of her day as a journalist, a clubwoman, a public speaker, and a community activist. Perhaps more important for this analysis, by doing so she would be among the vanguard

of African American women who would hold in their hands a new claim within the world of rhetoric to the art of speaking and writing effectively.

Over the course of her public life as a speaker and writer, Wells was extraordinarily productive. As an active participant in the Black Clubwomen's Movement, Wells spoke frequently in the United States and Great Britain to varied audiences about race matters in general and the evils of lynching in particular. As a journalist, she had weekly columns in the African American periodical press (including the various newspapers and newsletters that she owned, edited, and published herself), and she contributed occasionally to the white periodical press, for example her column "Ida B. Wells Abroad," a series of articles published by the *Chicago Inter-Ocean* that focused on her British antilynching crusade. Her essays were published in African American magazines and occasionally in white magazines. In addition, Wells also published three pamphlets on lynching, *Southern Horrors, A Red Record,* and *Mob Rule in New Orleans*; wrote an autobiography, *Crusade for Justice,* which remained unfinished and unpublished until 1970, when it was edited by her daughter, Alfreda M. Duster; and kept diaries, one of which has been edited by Miriam DeCosta-Willis (1995).[1]

By general accounts, then, from 1884 when she first began writing and speaking publicly until her death in 1931, Wells created a remarkable record of active participation as speaker, writer, and activist within the public arenas that were available to her. For many decades after these accomplishments, however, her place within the fray of progress and change in the United States was set aside. She was not lauded in public annals of the life and times of her era or her profession. Her name was not on the tongues of those who studied American history or American literature. Despite the centrality and longevity of her involvement with issues of national and international concern, neither this African American woman's contribution to history nor her contributions to the making and shaping of public discourse were recognized. Like too many other women whose contributions have been both singular and noteworthy, Wells fell victim to the muck and mire of racism and sexism.

Recent research and scholarship in feminist studies and African American studies, however, have made it possible for many women's stories to be recovered. For Wells, the result is that her place as a historical figure of note has become clearer. She has now received greater public recognition than ever before with the existence of specific resources that document her footprints as a courageous standard bearer for equity and justice (see, for example, DeCosta-Willis; Duster; Giddings; Lerner; Loewenberg and Bogin; Thompson). Her image is preserved on a stamp by the United States Postal Service. Her story as a journalist and social activist has been immortalized in a documentary, *The American Experience: Ida B. Wells, A Passion for Justice* (1990). Her essays and pamphlets have been made available through reprinted editions (e.g., *On Lynchings: Southern Horrors, A Red Record, Mob Rule in New Orleans,* 1990; *The Antilynching Campaign of Ida B. Wells-Barnett,* forthcoming), and she has been included in various books and articles, especially those that chronicle the participation of African American women in American culture (e.g., Hine, ed., *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia,* 1993).

For those interested in rhetoric, however, Wells has another place that deserves more public acknowledgement and preservation. Wells was not just a woman of distinction who led an active public life. Wells was a rhetor, a speaker and writer whose use of language in public arenas had a significant impact on the thinking and behavior of the audiences of her day and on the application of law.[2] While she spent little or no time discussing abstract notions of the ways and means of rhetorical effectiveness, as philosophers of rhetoric have done, she did spend considerable time engaging in rhetorical acts and demonstrating rhetorical eloquence and expertise. Wells had her eyes on action, and she seemed much more inclined to practice rather than preach the rhetorical arts. She accomplished this task with flair and style, leaving behind a provocative image of language well used. Ida B. Wells engaged in writing as swordsmanship, demonstrating that in the right hands the pen can indeed become a mighty sword.

As suggested in her autobiography, *Crusade for Justice* (1970), and in Mildred I. Thompson's analysis (*Ida B. Wells-Barnett: An Exploratory Study of an American Black Woman, 1893–1930,* 1990), from the beginning of her career as a journalist, Wells evidenced a tendency to be bold and outspoken on sensitive issues. An article in the *Living Way,* in which she chronicled her suit against the Chesapeake, Ohio and Southwestern Railroad for refusing to honor her first-class ticket and forcibly removing her from the train, was the first to bring her significant public attention. The turning point in Wells's career as a journalist came, however, on March 9, 1892, when three men, including one of Wells's closest friends, were lynched in Memphis.

Before this incident, Wells had abhorred lynching but had accepted the idea that it was the horror of rape and other crimes that incited such violence. With this lynching, however, of men whom she knew to be

leading citizens of Memphis, her eyes were opened to the truth of lynching as an act of terror perpetrated against a race of people in order to maintain power and control. Lynching, she began to see, was an instrument used to retard the progress of African Americans in their efforts to participate more fully in social, political, and economic life. With this insight, she was energized to begin a campaign to counter misconceptions and to encourage the application of justice, a campaign that would result ultimately in a dramatic decrease in this type of lawlessness and disorder, especially in the city of Memphis.

Wells's immediate response to the lynchings was to write editorials that encouraged African Americans in Memphis to leave a city that offered no protection of their rights of citizenship and to go West to Kansas and Oklahoma. Her editorials were quite successful, affecting in a significant way the migration of thousands of African Americans to the West (see *The American Experience*). Wells also began collecting data on other lynchings, and on May 21, 1892, she wrote an editorial that served as the springboard to catapult her onto the national scene. She stated:

> Eight Negroes lynched in one week. . . . Nobody in this section of the country believes the old thread-bare 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 be reached which will be very damaging to the moral reputation of their women. (Thompson 177)[3]

When the editorial was published, Wells was traveling in the Northeast. The response of the white community in Memphis was to use this moment as an excuse to silence a discordant voice. They destroyed her press, attempted to kill her partner, and let it be known that if Wells ever set foot in the state of Tennessee again, she would be killed. Instead of silencing her, however, these actions provided an opportunity for Wells to intensify and direct her campaign much more freely away from the immediate terror of the South and much more effectively in terms of the people she could influence to bring about change.

As an exile, Wells was able to bring African American women together for their first collective response to a political cause, an event that became a crystallizing moment for the emerging national Black Clubwomen's Movement. She was also able to reach across the Atlantic Ocean to London where she was instrumental in establishing the first antilynching society. This springboard became the launching pad for an

antilynching campaign that she sustained for over forty years. Much of this Wells was able to do with the power of her pen.

In analyzing the nature of this power, two intriguing points emerge. First, Wells's particular uses of verbal strategies situate her very well within traditions of leadership among African American women. Second, a basic analysis of her rhetorical choices reveals not only that she operated as a rhetor with skill and eloquence but also that she, like other African American women rhetors, did so with what must clearly be recognized as "amazing grace," given her position as speaker within a complex sociopolitical environment.

The Intersection of Leadership Styles and Rhetorical Prowess

Despite being confronted by personal danger, as speaker and writer Ida B. Wells acted boldly and tenaciously in the interest of social change. What is striking about her courage is that her perceptions of what she was trying to do can be contextualized within traditional patterns of leadership among African American women, patterns that directly connect language use and action.

In her autobiography, Wells stated:

> Having lost my paper, had a price put on my life and been made an exile from home for hinting at the truth, I felt that I owed it to myself and to my race to tell the whole truth now that I was where I could do so freely. (Duster 69)

This statement, in concert with the self-assessment of her strengths quoted earlier, illustrates that Wells embraced what appears to be a habit among African American women, i.e., the use of whatever literacy skills they were able to acquire and exercise in the interest of making life better for themselves and for others.

In her own words, Wells wanted to write in a "plain common-sense way on the things that concerned our people." She wrote: "[I] owed it to myself and to my race to tell the whole truth." Her basic goal was to tell the truth, to tell it simply, to tell it directly. She obviously felt that, in that way, she could help her people to understand more clearly what was happening to them and around them. She also felt that such an understanding was important, in keeping with the general belief that knowledge is power. By this reckoning, if African Americans had knowledge, they would also have the option, the wherewithal, to act. So Ida B.

Wells set as her goal speaking the truth as she saw it, and did so despite threats to her life.

To accomplish this rhetorical goal, Wells had to fashion her own vision of womanhood, since the prevailing image did not encourage public roles for women, and certainly not for African American women. Telling her simple truth would therefore mean assuming a public role. She needed to resist prevailing sociopolitical realities, since these conditions urged conformity to a status quo that sought to constrain her within specified racial and gendered boundaries. Speaking out would entail questioning values and assumptions that others were not questioning. Wells needed to defy opinions within her immediate community that had internalized race and gender boundaries and that urged her to silence. In speaking out, Wells would be assuming privileges that at the time women and people of African descent were not entitled to assume.

In keeping with a pattern of behavior that Audre Lorde explained a century later, Wells needed to be willing to stand alone. In the poem "A Litany for Survival" (*The Black Unicorn* 32), Lorde articulates a path to voice that has served as a prescription for many African American women who recognize themselves as "standing upon the constant edges of decision/crucial and alone." In this poem, Lorde presents a gripping image of African American women's lives, capturing the enduring pain, fear, and frustration of those who are disempowered by life's circumstances. She captures abiding fear, the sense of being damned if we do and damned if we do not. She lays open with considerable passion and remarkable clarity conditions that would rob those without power and without choices of the ability to speak. She allows the reader to see and feel the lives of African American women as the heavy hands of oppression seek to strip quietude, voice, joy, possibility, even life.

At the end of this poem, however, Lorde articulates most provocatively a seemingly inevitable recognition, given the course that she charts for the poem. She leads us to understand that under such circumstances, African American women are brought by necessity and by uncommon sense, perhaps, to action. She says:

> So it is better to speak
> remembering
> we were never meant to survive.

The statement from Wells's autobiography indicates that Wells understood, as Lorde would later articulate it, that considering the likelihood that she was not meant to survive, she might as well speak the truth: in fact she "owed" it to herself.

In *Sister Outsider* (1984), a collection of essays, Lorde continues to analyze survival and to see language as a tool of activism. In "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," Lorde talks insightfully about the tools of racism and patriarchy, and in doing so offers a springboard for rethinking what seems a basic legacy of nineteenth-century African American women writers like Ida B. Wells. In this essay, Lorde raises questions about the role that the personal point of view plays in the illumination of choices and in an individual's ability to bring herself to positive action. She suggests the possibility that self-definition and self-activation are inextricably connected. When we raise the possibility of self-definition, we carve out a space from which we can understand that Wells looked closely at her life, named herself, claimed her own vision of reality, claimed her own authority to speak the truth that she saw, entitled herself to this authority, and made the decision to use the tools of rhetoric and composition to bring about what she perceived to be much-needed social change.

As for other African American women, speaking and writing became for Ida B. Wells very much an act of defiance.[4] In defiance of the world around her, Wells chose to be an instrument of her own survival, and she committed herself to the survival of her people as well. However, surviving so defiantly ultimately means, as Lorde says, "learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish" ("The Master's Tools" 112). Seemingly, Ida B. Wells took passionately to standing alone.

As a self-defined crusader for justice, Ida B. Wells was defining and seeking a world in which we, African Americans included, could all flourish. Wells chose to make this cause, i.e. her cause, a common one for others like and unlike herself, through the power of her pen. As a journalist, she built a reputation, according to Mildred Thompson, as "a radical race woman, who had risked alienation among blacks and stirred up sentiments of outrage among whites. She was not a new black woman; she was a militant black agitator" (Thompson 24). Wells observed conditions and circumstances around her. She called what she saw by its name, whether the name was pleasant or not, whether those around her affirmed her efforts or not; and she directed her audiences toward action. Wells was an independent thinker, a skilled businesswoman, uncompromising in her beliefs and in her strategies for action, unrelenting in her

efforts to bring about meaningful change. She was a catalyst, sometimes welcome, sometimes not, always sharp-tongued and always sharp-witted.

In an early essay she wrote:

> I am before the American people today through no inclination of my own, but because of a deep-seated conviction that the country at large does not know the extent to which lynch law prevails. . . . I can not believe that the apathy and indifference which so largely obtains regarding mob rule is other than the result of ignorance of the true situation. And yet, the observing and thoughtful must know that in one section, at least, of our common country, a government of the people, by the people, and for the people, means a government by the mob; where the land of the free and home of the brave means a land of lawlessness, murder and outrage. (Thompson 171)

In calling the act of lynching by its true name, an act of terrorism, an outrage, a crime, a sacrilege against "truth, justice, and the American way," Wells established herself as a bold, outspoken woman, a woman who was willing to risk everything for the sake of her principles, for the sake of truth.

In choosing this path, Wells provides evidence, not just of the resonance of her life with other African American women's lives over time, but also of her connectedness with a tradition of leadership among African American women. In an ethnographic study of three contemporary women, Jacquelyn Mitchell delineates specific characteristics of this brand of leadership. She reports her findings in an issue of *Sage: A Scholarly Journal on Black Women* (5.2) that focused on the cultural and political context of leadership among black women from various backgrounds. The issue gave particular attention to the ways in which women exercise power and authority, gain autonomy, and operate with vision, self-esteem, and confidence in taking care of their responsibilities and in addressing immediate and long-term needs within their communities.

In "Three Women: Cultural Rules and Leadership Roles in the Black Community," Mitchell reports that the women in her study mastered the informal rules of their culture and developed skills that allowed them to "teach." Each of the women had a remarkable ability to garner and sustain authority by helping others to see their own realities for themselves. She discovered that these women all used verbal strategies to get the people around them to hear themselves, to see their situations, and as a result to use what they had come to understand in solving problems. Mitchell concludes that

> —They insist on calling things by their true names.
> —They articulate the fears that inhibit others from acting responsibly.
> —And they prescribe courses of action that focus not on what others have done to them, but on what the individual can do. (Mitchell 9–18)

In drawing these conclusions, Mitchell also suggests that the similarities in behavior among the women in her study are likely, based on general observation and anecdotal evidence, to characterize many women in African American communities and thereby to constitute a vibrant tradition of leadership[5]

In the case of Ida B. Wells, there is more than anecdotal evidence to support Mitchell's theory.[6] Through her articles, essays, pamphlets, and speeches, Wells broke the silence on lynching. She articulated for a race, a nation, and a world the complexities of this problem so that those with the power to do so could act responsibly, and she pointed her readers toward what for her was the obvious thing to do:

> Such attacks imperiling as they do the foundation of government, law and order, merit the thoughtful consideration of far-sighted Americans; not from a standpoint of sentiment, not even so much from a standpoint of justice to a weak race, as from a desire to preserve our institutions. (Thompson 171)

The institutions which she urged her audiences to preserve were those that constitute the founding values of the nation itself: law and order, freedom, justice, and equality for all citizens. Even further, however, she asserted her authority by claiming all of these institutions, not just for white people, but for African Americans as well. In her words, the nation is "our common country," and the institutions, she says, are "our institutions," not just "yours" but "ours." And, of course, she assumed that knowing the truth about lynching would demand action.

To summarize this first point about the nature of Wells's rhetorical power I am arguing that, in general, rhetorical prowess for African American women gains its deepest meaning and clarity within the context of their particular brand of community leadership. I recognize that the essence of our sense of what rhetoric is is deeply rooted in a public sphere, a space that we recognize in contemporary scholarship as historically highly gendered. Making a claim for African American women as rhetors in such a space demands understanding how they have participated in, negotiated, and redefined the "public" sphere (an overwhelmingly

"male"-defined arena) and the "private" sphere (an overwhelmingly "female"-defined arena). It demands also that we understand the ways in which women rhetors, including African American women, have been compelled to "dance" without a net along a rhetorical tightrope between these two spaces.[7]

. . . . . .

For African American women, rhetorical expertise can be significantly defined by their abilities to use language imaginatively, creatively, and effectively in their efforts to assume a subject position. An enabling strategy with these rhetors has been to place themselves in a position, not always to act on their own, but more often than not to influence the power, authority, and actions of others. For them, rhetorical prowess has been intertwined historically with the artful ways in which they have participated as agents of change in community life. A few women, like Ida B. Wells, have been able to stretch the range of their influence to audiences outside their immediate community. As a journalist, public speaker, and community activist, Ida B. Wells had a forum in the public sphere.

Social and Cognitive Dimensions of Rhetorical Competence

In coming to appreciate the abilities of Wells and other nineteenth-century African American women leaders to operate within the highly charged sociopolitical environment in which they lived and worked, I have constructed a matrix of concepts that seem particularly relevant for understanding their ways of being and doing.[8] Among these concepts are: (1) language development as a lifelong learning process; (2) communicative competence as it includes both social and cognitive dimensions; (3) the role of literacy in the development of communicative competence; and (4) a reconsideration of rhetorical competence within the framework of an understanding of both social and cognitive dimensions of communicative competence.

While a short essay does not provide adequate opportunity for a detailed explanation of each of these concepts, the point to emphasize here is that our ability to understand the rhetorical strategies of Ida B. Wells and other African American women rhetors rests to a great extent on the task of thinking more deeply and broadly about more traditional definitions of rhetoric as a "public" enterprise, about the acquisition of rhetorical competence, and about the ways in which we analyze rhetorical events. An initial step toward greater understanding is the recognition that rhetoric, as a use of language and as both a social and a cognitive process, occurs through the internalization of a complex system of understandings that provide the context within which we decode and encode texts, make meaning, and operate with autonomy, power, and authority. Using this perspective, Wells's antilynching campaign becomes a remarkable rhetorical event. The pivotal questions are simplified: How did Wells use language? What did she use it to do? What did her uses of language indicate about the eyes, the mind, even the passions behind the rhetor's hand?

As a core example of her rhetorical style, Wells's antilynching campaign demonstrates that she was an astute writer who had an expert understanding of a complex rhetorical task. As stated earlier, Wells's purpose was to tell the truth, to tell it simply, to tell it directly, and to push her audiences toward actions that would bring about social change. Beyond her impassioned commitment to this purpose, however, Wells's rhetorical prowess can be illustrated in other ways. In her essays (a genre she used frequently, in addition to newspaper articles), Wells was able to use her sociocultural knowledge and understanding, as well as her abilities as a thinker, language user, problem finder, and problem solver with artistry. She used these rhetorical competences to engage in the process of creating and transmitting meaning. Her essays, then, as a manageable and available set of texts, provide an opportunity to analyze the ways in which Wells was able to capture the conscience of a nation and to push that conscience so that the nation might be primed to act responsibly.

An excellent example is the essay from which I have been quoting. One of Wells's earliest essays on lynching, "Lynching in All Its Phases" first saw public light as a lecture on February 13, 1893, in the Boston Monday Lectureship. Later, in May of the same year, it was published in *Our Day: A Record and Review of Current Reform*, a monthly periodical that had debuted in January 1888. This periodical included among its illustrious editors the internationally renowned reformist and president of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, Frances E. Willard. According to its prospectus in the opening volume (January 1888), *Our Day* had as its mission to provide a record that would "form a comprehensive register of Criticism, Progress, and Reform, secular and religious, national and international." It also took as its special task the publication of the Boston Monday lectures that were delivered in February and March of each year. According to the prospectus, these lectures "which

for several seasons have had a circulation of a million copies at home and abroad, will discuss, as they have done for the last twelve years, whatever is at once new, true, and strategic in the relations of Religion to Science, Philosophy, and Current Reform."

This information was apparently not lost on Ida B. Wells. Take note again of her opening sentence:

> I am before the American people today through no inclination of my own, but because of a deep-seated conviction that the country at large does not know the extent to which lynch law prevails in parts of the Republic, nor the conditions which force into exile those who speak the truth. (Thompson 171)

Wells begins humbly, befitting her station as a female who would have no inclination on her own to speak, and as victim who has been unjustly forced into exile for being truthful. At the same time, however, Wells also extends this definition of herself by invoking an image of one who is compelled by "deep-seated conviction" to speak the truth (whether she was to be punished for it or not) and by portraying herself as a patriot among American peers who believe in truth and justice as strongly as she. She explains the genesis of her authority to speak, claims that authority, levels the distance between herself and the audience, and proceeds to weave her tale convincingly and authoritatively. In other words, Wells creates a comfortable seat for an audience with Christian and American values who happen (by whatever circumstance) not to know the truth, and she invites them to sit and to listen—all in one sentence. In doing so, Wells ties her audience swiftly and directly to a set of historical values and to a set of companion obligations, and thereby engages them interactively in a process of creating meaning, in an exchange that she expects will result in action.[9] Wells situates this audience within the concreteness of their shared values and anchors them immediately to her point of view and to her experiences. Consider, in this regard, the second and third sentences:

> I can not believe that the apathy and indifference which so largely obtains regarding mob rule is other than the result of ignorance of the true situation. And yet, the observing and thoughtful must know that in one section, at least, of our common country, a government of the people, by the people, and for the people, means a government by the mob. (Thompson 171)

Wells moves obliquely to an implied rhetorical question that in effect is a thinly veiled indictment, increasing her momentum and invoking the beginnings of moral outrage. She says, in effect, that if righteous people are not acting against this horror, it has to be because they do not know; but the question is how could they not know, these people who are so observant of progress and reform, who are so thoughtful and intelligent. With this strategy, Wells subtly encourages the audience not to delay any longer in doing what must inevitably be done. She encourages them rhetorically to take a noble stance, to listen, and to ready themselves for appropriate action.

At this point in the essay, Wells moves to an antithetical listing of national values alongside specific injustices: "A government of the people, by the people, and for the people, means a government by the mob"; "land of the free and home of the brave . . . a land of lawlessness, murder and outrage"; "liberty of speech . . . license of might to destroy." These juxtapositions lead climactically toward the proposition:

"Repeated attacks on the life, liberty and happiness of any citizen or class of citizens are attacks on distinctive American institutions" (Thompson 171).

Here, Wells subtly shifts the focus of the sentences from incidents of injustice to the citizens against whom these injustices are perpetrated. In one sentence she declares lynching to be an injustice. In the next, she embodies the victims by making them the subject of the sentence. The structuring of these sentences encourages the audience to notice that acts are not just being perpetrated, but that "citizens" are being wronged—not mere random victims, but citizens with rights and privileges that are guaranteed by their citizenship. The audience, then, as fellow citizens, as compassionate and intelligent people who believe in the rights and privileges of citizenship must act, not just to save these victims, but to preserve the law and order and the values of the nation:

> Such attacks imperiling as they do the foundation of government, law and order, merit the thoughtful consideration of far-sighted Americans; not from a standpoint of sentiment, not even so much from a standpoint of justice to a weak race, as from a desire to preserve our institutions. (Thompson 171)

To repeat an earlier point, Wells also reminds her audience that the institutions are "ours," not just "yours," but "ours." This paragraph, as the opener of a rhetorically powerful essay, is densely crafted. Wells establishes an interactive space between the audience and herself, and

then proceeds to lay out, piece by piece, a politically charged message that stings the conscience.

In the next section of the text, Wells tells a story of hard work, commitment to the values of good character, education, and economic opportunity, a story of racial uplift, a story of confidence in the law. She gives a step-by-step chronology of the events that led to the lynching of her three friends and the subsequent events leading to her exile. In journalistic style, she lays out the scene of a crime, uses her oppressors' own words as reported in white newspapers (the *Daily Commercial* and the *Evening Scimitar*) to support her claims of oppression, and clearly indicates where she believes the many injustices rest. Wells crafts her argument from good sense, reason, and logic, and she documents her account through sources that her audience would find reliable, more reliable than the word of a young black woman.

At that point, Wells makes a rhetorical change and ends her chronology with a breathless flair:

> I have been censured for writing that editorial, but when I think of the five men who were lynched that week for assault on white women and that not a week passes but some poor soul is violently ushered into eternity on this trumped-up charge, knowing the many things I do, and part of which I tried to tell in the *New York Age* of June 25, (and in the pamphlets I have with me) seeing that the whole race in the South was injured in the estimation of the world because of these false reports, I could no longer hold my peace, and I feel, yes, I am sure, that if it had to be done over again (provided no one else was the loser save myself) I would do and say the very same again. (Thompson 180)

This paragraph is one sentence, one long sentence fired with passion and determination, a sentence that builds and builds and builds, and in this sentence she underscores the idea, "I said it, and by the powers of truth and justice, I'd do it again."

The next section of the essay extends the arena for lynching beyond the single incident of her friends or the state of Tennessee, giving a specific accounting of the pervasive nature of the problem throughout the South. Wells spends time defending her view of lynching, not just with her own investigations but with the investigations of the Chicago *Inter-Ocean*, a white newspaper. She then refutes excuses for inaction, and ends with a question:

> Do you ask the remedy? A public sentiment strong against lawlessness must be aroused. . . . The voice of the people is the voice of God, and I long with all the intensity of my soul for the Garrison, Douglas, Sumner, Wittier, and Phillips who shall rouse this nation to a demand that from Greenland's icy mountains to the coral reefs of the Southern seas, mob rule shall be put down and equal and exact justice be accorded to every citizen of whatever race, who finds a home within the borders of the land of the free and the home of the brave. (Thompson 185–87)

According to Wells, who re-invokes images of basic American values, images of men of character and people of conscience, the answer to the problem of lynching is to garner righteousness and to bring power and influence to bear so that there will be no more lynching. Her voice, then, becomes the voice that she calls for, the voice "who shall rouse this nation." Further, in the way that she has previously detailed the numbers of atrocities, she communicates also an ever present danger and a sense of urgency.

The Laying of a Foundation

Ida B. Wells was a wonder, personally and rhetorically. She was a small, attractive woman who, if we accept stereotypical images of race and gender, belied in outward appearance the substance of the person within. By all accounts, Wells had a remarkable intellect and passion for truth and justice. As Paula Giddings states, however, "Her entire life, it seemed, had prepared her not only to understand but to confront the broader issue head on—despite the consequences" (Giddings 20).

Wells's parents, politically active in Holly Springs, provided her with strong role models for activism and social consciousness. At sixteen, responsibility was thrust upon her when her parents died suddenly of yellow fever and she had to take care of herself and five younger siblings. She did so by teaching in the public schools of Mississippi and Tennessee, moving to Memphis to better their circumstances.

Wells took with her to Memphis a sense of righteous indignation which she was called upon to demonstrate again and again. By the age of twenty-two, as indicated, she had sued the Chesapeake, Ohio and Southwestern railroad and won the suit, after being evicted from the ladies' coach. The railroad company appealed to the Tennessee Supreme Court and the decision was overturned. In addition, Wells had campaigned in her editorials at the *Free Speech* against the Board of Educa-

tion in the interest of better teachers and better school facilities for African American children, an effort for which she lost her teaching position. Undaunted, she turned an African American newspaper into a financially stable enterprise and continued to build a reputation for herself as a bold woman who spoke the truth (see Duster; Giddings; Thompson; Royster).

Ida B. Wells accomplished many remarkable feats during her lifetime and was instrumental in bringing about changes that made a difference in people's lives. Most remarkable among those accomplishments was the central role she played in reducing the rising tide of atrocities occurring at the end of the nineteenth century. Her efforts were catalytic in bringing the issue of lynching to the attention of the nation and the world. As evidenced by the essays and other texts she has left behind, Wells's primary weapon in these causes was her pen, a pen that she used as a mighty sword to slash across the American scene a new pathway toward truth and justice.

Wells's analytical abilities were distinctive, a strength she used well in her texts as she analyzed the sociopolitical contexts within which she wrote, and as she used an insightful awareness of language to construct meaning and inspire change. Amazingly, she wrote with total regard for truth and justice and little regard for personal affirmation or for personal safety during an era when both were at great risk.

Our rediscoveries of Wells allow us to say, as Thomas T. Fortune said in 1893 and as Mildred Thompson repeated in 1990:

> There is scarcely any reason why this woman, young in years and old in experience, shall not be found in the forefront of the great intellectual fight in which the race is now engaged; . . . if she fails to impress her personality upon the time in which she lives, whose fault will it be? (Thompson 1)

The truth of this statement still rings in our ears some one hundred years later. Clearly, we are just coming to know Ida B. Wells. She, however, is the tip of an iceberg of other notable African American women whose lives and work have been muted and displaced. In the essayist tradition alone, we should know more about Maria Stewart, Anna Julia Cooper, Gertrude Mossell, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, Amy Jacques Garvey, Josephine Silone Yates, Nannie Helen Burroughs, and so many others. Individually, these women provided distinctive examples of language imaginatively and interestingly used. Collectively, they opened for generations to come new pathways for the participation of African American women in public discourse.

The resounding message is that if, in the times in which we live, we fail in our processes of recovery to reestablish a place of respect within the rhetorical domain for Ida B. Wells and for a number of other discarded women, we will know whose fault it is. The fault will be with us. What will remain, I imagine, given the possibilities of African American cultural traditions, is the chance for some bold woman with pen in hand to call us and our deeds by their true names.

NOTES

1. For a more complete review of the works of Ida B. Wells, see Thompson.
2. Analyses of Ida B. Wells as a speaker and writer, rather than a community activist, for example, are still very few. Two dissertations (Hutton; Humrich) are representative of what is currently available.
3. All quotations from Wells's essay "Lynch Law in All Its Phases" are from Thompson.
4. See hooks for a more extended explanation of this notion of defiance.
5. This tradition is documentable at least as early as the mid-nineteenth century, as illustrated, for example, by the fact that Isabella Van Wagener changed her name to Sojourner Truth as a declaration of the activist path she had chosen for herself.
6. For another example of similar habits of action among African American women, see the second chapter of hooks, in which she explains the terms "back talk" and "talking back," both of which are applied to a child (especially a female child) and also a woman in southern African American communities who speaks "as an equal to an authority figure . . . daring to disagree" (5).
7. The seminal text for the historical position of African American women on this issue is Cooper.
8. This theoretical frame is part of my work in progress, *Traces of a Stream: Literacy and Social Change among African American Women.* In addition, the works of Andrews, Campbell, Hymes, Romaine, Saville-Troike, Lane, and Vygotsky offer other points of departure for examining these concepts.
9. See Brandt for a detailed discussion of the ways in which writers forge social, interactive relationships with readers through the language of texts.

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10

"Intelligent Members or Restless Disturbers": Women's Rhetorical Styles, 1880–1920

Joanne Wagner

I

In 1891 A. Wetzell, a writer for *The Mount Holyoke*, commented on Olive Schreiner's first book,[1] which Schreiner had published under a male pseudonym:

> It was only necessary to read a very few pages to discover that it was undoubtedly the work of a woman, so please you, the strong work of a strong woman. Following the example of many talented women, Olive Schreiner, an ardent champion of the increased freedom and larger rights of womankind, sent out the firstling of her pen under a man's name. (Wetzell 1)

Despite her confidence that Schreiner's style infallibly revealed her gender, Wetzell also recognized that a strong woman's style might be better received if it seemed to come from a man. Women speaking and writing publicly in the late nineteenth century were constantly faced with this tension between developing a personal style in language and accommodating society's stylistic expectations. In particular, instruction in rhetorical style at women's colleges presented conflicting ideals to women students studying to participate in public discourse. On the one hand, practical rhetoric courses reified the notion of plain and correct language as the way to enter educated society. On the other hand, increasing emphasis on belletristic models showed women how a personal and pow-