

**Unending Crisis: Ida B. Wells, Black Lives Matter, and  
Intellectual Genealogy**

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Master's Thesis

University of Virginia

04/22/2016

## Introduction

Since its founding in 2013, Black Lives Matter has been a staple of American public discourse on race relations. Their protests have been highly visible, blocking bridges and highways, interrupting the speeches of politicians, sometimes trending on Twitter. That the circumstances which inspired the creation of Black Lives Matter – the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder of Trayvon Martin – were highly emotionally-charged, and that the response engendered by the hashtag continues to be so, is not in doubt. Furthermore, that this hashtag and movement were created by women – Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi – is also significant; they learned the tools of social activism from community organizers who fought battles of gender and sexual politics in decades past, and their legacy has in turn inspired a highly self-conscious Black Lives Matter, one which strives to create spaces for all Black life, including explicitly queer and trans Black lives. Yet this legacy has deeper intellectual roots, roots which are deserving of further exploration. Figures like Angela Davis and Cathy Cohen have contributed greatly to the discourse around which Black Lives Matter operates, but so too have people like Ida B. Wells-Barnett.

Recognizing Wells's place in this intellectual genealogy in relation to Garza, Cullors, and Tometi is important for several reasons. First, it reaffirms Wells as a revolutionary figure within the canon of African-American political thought. To draw comparisons between the women behind Black Lives Matter and Wells is to acknowledge that their work makes use of similar rhetorical approaches to accomplish similar goals. Circumstantially, their activism concerns opposition to widespread killing and violence against Black people, and consequently draws on notions of democratic process, equality, and justice. This, in turn, relates to the second point:

Wells, Garza, Cullors, and Tometi make these claims from marginalized spaces, both with regard to race and their gender identity. The work of these activists deals frankly with topics such as sexuality and sexual politics, challenging boundaries of respectability, and intersectionality, topics which are informed by the experiences of Wells and the founders of Black Lives Matter *as* women. While one could easily compare Garza, Cullors, and Tometi to Wells's male contemporaries, it is important to be attentive to the role of gender in these writings. This is not to say that a male perspective on the anti-lynching movement would not provide a valuable point of contrast, but rather that Wells's work is particularly rich with regard to gender.

Finally, bearing in mind the similar, although historically contingent circumstances in which Wells and the women behind Black Lives Matter navigate notions of intersectionality and inclusion in their reporting and commentary, I conclude that Wells is more effective at communicating her message. While Wells is less overtly intersectional in her work, her focus is also smaller, situated as it is almost entirely on lynch law and its attendant themes of Southern sexual politics. Meanwhile, in their attempts to promote engagement with a host of pertinent issues, Garza, Cullors, and Tometi have ultimately been less successful. Moreover, I want to suggest that by studying Wells's rhetorical example, we can elucidate means by which Garza, Cullors, and Tometi can come to articulate a more effective way forward. While Wells was continually aware of the larger social context and systemic failures under which lynching occurred, she chose to use individual instances of lynching and sexual violence as a means through which to make Southern racism more apparent. Garza, Cullors, and Tometi's broader approach engages powerfully with issues of extrajudicial killing and police violence, but suffers from wanting to address too much at once. While their goals are admirable, Black Lives Matter

(particularly as an intentionally-leaderless movement) may ultimately become more persuasive by narrowing their focus.

## **Black Lives Matter**

To Garza, Cullors, and Tometi, Black Lives Matter “is a tactic to (re)build the Black liberation movement.”<sup>1</sup> By Black liberation, they mean that they envision a future in which Black people no longer have to live in fear for their lives as a result of systematic racism. They stress that while they are moved to action by police violence and vigilante killings of Black people, their larger project is the struggle for personhood by Black people in all walks of life, including those marginalized within Black spaces, such as those who identify as queer or trans. “When we say Black Lives Matter, we are talking about the ways in which Black people are deprived of our basic human rights and dignity,” Garza writes.<sup>2</sup> She articulates this deprivation of dignity as a form of state violence, and argues that an end to this violence “will be wide reaching and transformative for society as a whole.”<sup>3</sup> Essentially, large scale dehumanization of Black life is a reflection on the state of equality in the United States, and until Black life receives the recognition it deserves, every person who benefits from privilege is implicated in the perpetuation of state violence against Black people.<sup>4</sup> Garza is also quick to emphasize that while

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<sup>1</sup> Garza, Alicia. “A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement by Alicia Garza.” *The Feminist Wire*, Oct. 7, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Garza, “Herstory,” *Feminist Wire*.

<sup>3</sup> Garza, “Herstory,” *Feminist Wire*.

<sup>4</sup> Black Lives Matter situates itself in relation to anti-Black racism around the world, not just in the United States; it is a critique of capitalism and post-colonial exploitative practices in the Global South in addition to the structural racism present in the American context. For the purposes of this paper, however, I choose to focus on Black Lives Matter as it functions in the United States – which, indeed, constitutes the bulk of its activist work.

she stands in solidarity with non-Black groups who face oppression, Black struggle must be recognized for its own sake. Moreover, while non-Black individuals should acknowledge Black suffering, it is not their place to ingratiate themselves within the movement in central roles. As Garza asserts, “It is appropriate and necessary to have strategy and action centered around Blackness without other non-Black communities of color, or White folks for that matter, needing to find a place or a way to center themselves within it.”<sup>5</sup> And, just as Garza is insistent that Blackness be at the center of Black Lives Matter as a movement, she is also very cognizant of the vital contributions she, Cullors, and Tometi have made as queer women, and characterizes any attempt to co-opt her phrasing – as in #AllLivesMatter or #BlueLivesMatter (as a means of police response) – as theft from queer Black women.

Garza’s arguments are obviously not new; many a Black scholar or activist has touched on similar points, or articulated such sentiments in a similar vein. In *Arrested Justice*, Beth Richie has written about “the possibility of a critical Black feminist approach to ending violence against women.”<sup>6</sup> Cathy Cohen is interested in the broader question of Black norms of respectability and power relations within Black communities, but it is easy to draw comparisons between, for example, her work concerning AIDS as a killer of Black men, and Garza’s own response to vigilante and police violence as a killer of Black people (incidentally, Cohen has been supportive of Black Lives Matter on Twitter).<sup>7</sup> Kevin K. Gaines, while taking a more tempered approach, nevertheless speaks to the transformative power of traditionally

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<sup>5</sup> Garza, “Herstory,” *Feminist Wire*.

<sup>6</sup> Richie, Beth E. *Arrested Justice: Black Women, Violence, and America’s Prison Nation*. New York: New York University Press, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Cohen, Cathy. *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999.

African-American language of uplift with regard to “a commitment to social and economic justice for all citizens” as being beneficial to the nation as a whole.<sup>8</sup> However, while Garza engages subjects well-established within the canon of political theory – ideas of sovereignty, dignity, and equality, just to name a few – it is important that Garza’s work is outside of the academy, and that Black Lives Matter has found a highly receptive audience in spaces which are not traditionally academic. This is not to say that Garza’s writing has not found footing among scholars. Indeed, Cohen and Richie have both been involved in activist work directly related to Black Lives Matter, Cohen with The Black Youth Project offshoot BYP100 and Richie with INCITE! Cohen even argues that “particularly for women of color, there is an understanding you may never be fully embraced in the academy, and what this understanding does is it gives you a kind of freedom to pursue the work that will transform institutions of oppression, including the academy.”<sup>9</sup> But while academics have found Black Lives Matter interesting from a scholarly perspective and, in some cases, personally meaningful, that it primarily functions outside of the academic world distinguishes it, at least to a certain degree, from the scholarship which did much to inspire it.

The simplicity of #BlackLivesMatter as a hashtag, and the deep resonance it has had with people around the world, have invited comparisons to the Black Power movement most associated with the late 1960s and 1970s. Certainly both groups have encountered both widespread support and considerable resistance in their engagement with controversial topics

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<sup>8</sup> Gaines, Kevin K. *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996.

<sup>9</sup> Cohen, Cathy and Sarah J. Jackson. “Ask a Feminist: A Conversation with Cathy Cohen on Black Lives Matter, Feminism, and Contemporary Activism.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Summer 2016.

such as police brutality and mass incarceration, and there are enough obvious similarities between the groups that the comparison is warranted. Nevertheless, the Black Power movement is not the only historical example associated with race consciousness with which Black Lives Matter shares similarities. Especially with regard to the discourse and rhetorical strategies employed by Black Lives Matter's proponents, the writing of Ida B. Wells-Barnett concerning lynching provides a fascinating point of comparison. Indeed, today's social justice activists owe much to Wells and her journalistic achievements, and scholars such as Harvard historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham have drawn parallels between the contemporary Black Lives Matter movement and anti-lynching work by Wells and others.<sup>1011</sup>

Beyond the fact that Black Lives Matter and the anti-lynching movement both combat racist policy and involve women in key roles working to persuade others to join their cause, these movements share profound intellectual lineage. Wells and her allies understood themselves to be acting in defense of Black livelihood in the face of extrajudicial killing; for all intents and purposes, despite the difference in precise circumstances, Black Lives Matter, if we take Garza's remarks as representative, understands itself to be serving a very similar goal. By tying these movements together, I hope to elucidate the commonalities in the persuasive and rhetorical approaches of Wells and Garza, Cullors, and Tometi to their writing, and in so doing to draw

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<sup>10</sup> Mineo, Liz. "Background on Black Lives Matter." *Harvard Gazette* (Cambridge, MA), Nov. 13, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Wells is not the only woman whose work could be relevant here. Mary Church Terrell, Wells's contemporary, did much to advance the cause of women's suffrage and worked closely with Frederick Douglass on civil rights matters, and another contemporary, Mary McLeod Bethune, was also instrumental in advancing the rights of Black women and combating racism more generally. The points of convergence where Wells most directly relates to the women who founded Black Lives Matter concerns their outspoken writing on racialized violence. For the purposes of my project, Wells best suits my own goals here.

larger conclusions about anti-racist dialogue as it has developed in the American context, particularly with regard to racialized violence. I also want to address Wells's effectiveness at communicating her message vis-à-vis that of the women behind Black Lives Matter, especially as concerns the clarity of her aims.

### **Ida B. Wells, Revolutionary Journalist**

Wells began her autobiography, *Crusade for Justice*, with an anecdote in which a young woman approaches her, recalling a time when she named Wells as someone having “traits of character resembling ... French heroine and martyr” Joan of Arc, but shamefully, when pressed by White colleagues, could not articulate why Wells merited this comparison<sup>12</sup>. Wells credited this experience with providing the inspiration for her to write out her life story, which paints a portrait of a truly fascinating person; a woman who constantly skirted the line of respectability, who in some ways balked conventionality and in others was the picture of it. In all respects, Wells was unapologetic in her choices and steadfast in her convictions. She defended her decision to focus on raising her children over her writing career to contemporaries like Susan B. Anthony, who questioned her commitment to activism (despite Wells having taken her young son with her while giving speeches, before devoting herself fulltime to motherhood). Likewise, in the arena in which she is best remembered, her crusade against lynch law and her prolific years as a journalist, Wells refused to defer to any of the social niceties she was expected to embody as a Black woman in the South. Her mission was to expose injustice and right wrongs,

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<sup>12</sup> Wells, Ida B. *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells*, 3. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970.



and nothing other than the unrepentant, unrelenting, unabashed truth would suffice, even at the risk of compromising her own safety.

Wells's journalistic style was known for its bluntness. As Patricia Hill Collins notes in her introduction to *On Lynchings*, a compilation of Wells's pamphlets *Southern Horrors*, *A Red Record*, and *Mob Rule in New Orleans*, in Wells's mind, "those who failed to take a stand against lynching, or who remained silent and looked away, were as culpable as those committing the acts."<sup>13</sup> Thus, for Wells, who had personally experienced the horror of lynching through the murders of friends in Memphis, the best way to take a stand against it was to do what the White newspapers would not, and expose the terror of life in the Jim Crow South in all its brutality, whatever the social mores of her time might dictate.

In addition to her pamphlets, Wells wrote newspaper articles and editorials, gave speeches, and kept diaries. Her journalistic career was prolific; her nickname amongst contemporaries was "the Princess of the Press."<sup>14</sup> Although at first she used a pseudonym, Iola, Wells was not one to shy away from her opinions, and from a young age, felt a keen responsibility to do what she could for the improvement of the conditions of Black life in the United States. In her own words, in the introduction to *Southern Horrors*, Wells explains, "Somebody must show that the Afro-American race is more sinned against than sinning, and it seems to have fallen upon me to do so."<sup>15</sup> When combined with her considerable gifts as a writer – her style was so decided and self-assured she was sometimes mistaken for a man – her passion

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<sup>13</sup> Collins, Patricia Hill, ed. *On Lynchings*, 10. Amherst, New York: Humanity Books, 2002.

<sup>14</sup> Wells, *Crusade*, 33.

<sup>15</sup> Wells, *On Lynchings*, 25.

for justice produced singular work.<sup>16</sup> Particularly incensed by the sensationalist journalistic practices common in the 1890s, Wells maintained that her duty was to tell the truth, both for its own sake and as a corrective to the “malicious and untruthful” pieces she saw printed in White papers.<sup>17</sup>

While devoted to correcting misinformation, unsurprisingly, Wells did not provide bland, strictly factual recitations in her reporting on lynching. Wells’s style is firm and unrelenting, variously referring to “the old threadbare lie that Negro men rape white women,” the “Winchester rifle that should have a place of honor in every black home,” and rape as “a deed dastardly enough to arouse Southern blood,” just to cite a few of the better known examples.<sup>18</sup> Yet it was her engagement with often buried or ignored factual accounts that garnered her such attention; to put it more directly, Wells did not just simply suggest, but openly proclaimed, that Southern White women willingly sought out sexual contact with Black men, contradicting the common assertion that White women’s virtue needed to be protected from predatory Black men.

Needless to say, Wells’s work did not win her universal support. Obviously she was unpopular with a great many Southern Whites, with the death threats that forced her to flee Tennessee providing just one clear example, but she had her share of detractors among northern Whites and Black audiences as well. Her articles, speeches, and books held little back, using bold and provocative language, and daring to challenge prevailing notions of sexuality, especially the sexuality of White women. As a woman, Wells’s frankness and her willingness to engage with the brutality of lynching called her respectability into question in some circles.

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<sup>16</sup> Goldsby, Jacqueline. *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature*, 45. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006.

<sup>17</sup> Goldsby, *Secret*, 45; Wells, *On Lynchings*, 42-6.

<sup>18</sup> Wells, *On Lynchings*, 29, 37, 52.

Wells was also unafraid to criticize Black leaders when she felt they had failed to provide capable guidance, as her 1904 essay “Booker T. Washington and His Critics” amply demonstrates; as noted by Mia Bay in her introduction to *The Light of Truth*, a collection of Wells’s writings, a letter Wells wrote to the *New York Age* taking Washington to task was rejected by T. Thomas Fortune for being too “sassy.”<sup>19</sup>

### **The Movements Compared in Abstract**

Black Lives Matter activists have faced similar criticism. Outside of the movement, there has been considerable pushback on semantics and ideology alike, from those that see the hashtag as promoting a kind of reverse racism to civil rights activists who find the movement’s refusal to embrace a politics of respectability troubling. This is not strictly a generational gap, though it has often been framed in such terms; rather, for those who are committed to the promotion of a certain kind of image and tenor of argument, Black Lives Matter feels unduly confrontational, though there is not often much disagreement on the substance of Black Lives Matter’s message. “Many in my crowd admire the cause and courage of these young activists but disagree with their approach,” explains Barbara Reynolds, who had been active in the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s.<sup>20</sup> She acknowledges that there are ways in which Black Lives Matter has improved on previous examples, especially in terms of structure, praising their rejection of top-down leadership where men took all the key roles. However, Reynolds still believes the movement is still too exclusive when it comes to the participation of those of other races and ethnicities.

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<sup>19</sup> Bay, Mia. *The Light of Truth: Writings of An Anti-Lynching Crusader*, xxix. New York: Penguin Books, 2014.

<sup>20</sup> Reynolds, Barbara. “I was a civil rights activist in the 1960’s. But it’s hard for me to get behind Black Lives Matter.” *The Washington Post*, Aug. 24, 2015.

Others take issue with a perceived lack of civility on the part of the activists, and contend that they are not interested in honest dialogue.

Here, the comparisons to Wells are not quite so tidy and straightforward; while Wells conducted herself rather unusually for a Black woman in her social context, she also had the deep admiration of such figures as Frederick Douglass, and was often invited to speak by wealthy northern White women. Wells challenged notions of respectability in important ways, but took great pains to present herself in an honorable fashion and protect her reputation. In *Crusade for Justice*, Wells recounts a visit to Mississippi where a minister and his wife who had previously hosted her cast aspersions on her character. Wells wrote to the minister and not only demanded his personal apology, but presented him with a written statement to read from the pulpit the following Sunday extolling her uprightness. According to her autobiography, she was persuasive enough to convince him to do so.<sup>21</sup> While Wells made no apologies for her outspoken nature, clearly standards of respectability meant something to her; she wanted to be seen as a lady and as a professional.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, Wells had no patience for hypocrisy, as was evident in her reporting. Her pamphlets expose instances where supposedly respectable White men preyed upon Black girls, and supposedly faithful, demure White Southern wives committed acts of infidelity with Black men. “It is certain that lynching mobs have not only refused to give the Negro a chance to defend himself, but have killed their victim with a full knowledge that the

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<sup>21</sup> Wells, *Crusade for Justice*, 44.

<sup>22</sup> For Garza, Cullors, and Tometi, meanwhile, gendered standards of respectability hold little weight; rather, the issue concerns creating spaces for inclusiveness which embraces difference on egalitarian grounds.

relationship of the alleged assailant with the woman who accused him, was voluntary and clandestine,” said Wells in *A Red Record*.<sup>23</sup>

For the women behind Black Lives Matter, and many followers of the movement in turn, the politics of respectability serve to drive wedges between people who should stand in solidarity with one another. In further contrast to Wells, Garza, Tometi, and Cullors have been very physically present at protests and other Black Lives Matter functions, including in areas where there have been clashes with police; Wells, meanwhile, was forced to leave the South after whites in Memphis threatened her life, and tended to conduct her activism through her writing or in public speeches. She actively sought leads for her stories through correspondence from affected families, as well as perusing White newspapers for their own reports on lynching, but was prevented from returning to the South by fears for her personal safety. The circumstances were such that Wells should not be condemned for staying North; her social world was a far different one from that which we inhabit with Garza, Cullors, and Tometi. Nevertheless, in style, the activism of these women requires conduct that would have appeared quite strange to Wells. Their language is coarser and their personal presentation more informal, and while they repeatedly ask for dialogue with elected officials and other representatives of government bodies, they prioritize coalition-building within Black communities over collaboration with sympathetic Whites.

### **The Movements Compared in Content**

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<sup>23</sup> Wells, *On Lynchings*, 108.

Taking into account the considerable difficulties faced by each of these women and, in turn, their respective political movements, it is perhaps reasonable to wonder why they were, in the case of Wells, and have been, in the case of the founders of Black Lives Matter, so steadfast in their convictions, and what they hoped this passion and commitments to their causes would accomplish. These questions, however, while important, are secondary to my own questions: Which rhetorical tools did Wells and the leadership of Black Lives Matter use to convey the urgency of their causes, and what larger conclusions can we draw from comparing their respective methods?

While the situational similarities between the anti-lynching and Black Lives Matter movements are of course, highly relevant, for the purposes of this paper, they primarily serve to establish context. Related, but separate from the question of historical context and mission, is the actual content of Wells's and Black Lives Matter's written work. Particularly in the latter case, it is important not to treat one essay, tweet, or post as monolithic; obviously each single person within the movement approaches politics with their own ontological sphere, and to account for every individual set of deeply-held beliefs and motivating factors is well beyond the scope of this project. However, by focusing on Black Lives Matter's official social media accounts and foundational essays by figures like Garza, Cullors, and Tometi, I hope to be able to elucidate some guiding principles and themes. These samples, together with Wells's body of work, provide a lens through which to study the respective parties' rhetorical approaches to their messaging. As both Wells and the official Black Lives Matter writings suggest, imply, and sometimes outright state that they are motivated by issues of sovereignty, community, equality, mutual responsibility, and justice, my goal is to suggest that not only do these accounts tell

markedly similar stories, but that, though separated by over a century, and living within very different social contexts, the larger project they serve is similar in style and substance.

In order to effectively interrogate these writings, it is helpful, too, to think of persuasion and rhetoric in the abstract, especially as they have been brought to bear within the realm of political theory. As Bryan Garsten has written, “the reigning view of rhetorical speech is that it is a disruptive force in politics and a threat to democratic deliberation.”<sup>24</sup> He goes on to challenge this line of thinking, arguing for the worth of a politics of persuasion. There is a time and a place for a dispassionate, reasoned approach, but Garsten contends that we must be conscious of the benefits of persuasion: “a feel for how to render moral and political principles psychologically attractive, a prudent sensitivity to the particular passions and interests of different audiences, and a decent respect for the knowledge of probabilities enshrined in common sense and ordinary experience.”<sup>25</sup> Indeed, the second of these benefits speaks most directly to the issue at hand, with regard to race and racialized violence. Passion is absolutely integral to the projects of Wells and the women behind Black Lives Matter, insofar as it communicates a perspective that can be incredibly alien to those living without these women’s embodied experiences. This is not to say that their work entirely avoids some of the traps Garsten outlines in his book; Wells, for example, can alternately smother and overwhelm, and Garza, Cullors, and Tometi often rely on an anti-colonialist framework that serves to establish ideological boundaries without much room for those with differing views to find common ground – but in order to, as Garsten puts it, “[confront] us with a particular situation in speech,” their personal experiences and stylistic

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<sup>24</sup> Garsten, Bryan. *Saving Persuasion: A Defense of Rhetoric and Judgment*, 3. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006.

<sup>25</sup> Garsten, *Saving Persuasion*, 22.

flares lend credence to their accounts.<sup>26</sup> As women of color, Wells, Garza, and Cullors represent a demographic that is still very much categorized as other within the American context; for Tometi, the daughter of immigrants from Nigeria, this is even more the case. It is important to recognize the advantages of a persuasive, experiential approach for those on the margins. Particularly for Wells, a less emotional approach is a luxury reserved for those with greater standing in society. As Patricia Hill Collins has argued, logical positivism directly disadvantages women and people of color. “Separate knowers try to subtract the personality of an individual from his or her ideas because they see personality as biasing those ideas,” Collins explains. “In contrast, connected knowers see personality as adding to an individual’s ideas and feel that the personality of each group member enriches a group’s understanding.”<sup>27</sup> Accordingly, as marginalized women seeking to communicate the struggles of their race, their rhetoric reflects their personal truth.

### **Wells as Rhetorician**

Wells left behind a large body of work, including newspaper articles, pamphlets, diary entries, personal correspondence, and the manuscript of her autobiography, which was published posthumously. Many of her papers were destroyed in two separate house fires in the early twentieth century; nevertheless, those that remain give a great deal of insight into her rhetorical

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<sup>26</sup> Garsten, *Saving Persuasion*, 9.

<sup>27</sup> Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 264. New York: Routledge, 2000.



strategies.<sup>28</sup> Since Wells's pamphlets and newspaper articles constituted her primary public voice, it is chiefly from these that I draw my examples.

### **The Pamphlets: *Southern Horrors* (1892), *A Red Record* (1894), and *Mob Rule in New Orleans* (1900)**

All three of Wells's pamphlets begin with a short introduction where she explains her purpose in compiling lynching stories; *Southern Horrors* and *A Red Record* also contain a forward in the form of the same letter from Frederick Douglass, praising Wells for her bravery and hard work. Each pamphlet contains a compilation of that year's lynching statistics, including reasons given by the perpetrators for committing their crimes. Generally, Wells writes of individual cases in a quasi-anecdotal style, providing some context of the people involved (occasionally including names and ages, where they have been provided by White newspapers or when Wells has discovered them in her own research), and dates of the offenses. Some of Wells's reporting had been previously published in Black newspapers such as the *New York Age*.<sup>29</sup> She closes *Southern Horrors* and *A Red Record* with an appeal to her readers, entreating them to do whatever is in their power to help bring an end to lynching. A similar appeal appears in *Mob Rule in New Orleans* in a chapter entitled "The Remedy," but Wells ends that pamphlet with lynching statistics and accounts of various brutal lynching deaths in addition to a few paragraphs reiterating her condemnation of lynch law and plea for intervention.

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<sup>28</sup> "Guide to the Ida B. Wells Papers 1884-1976." Chicago: The University of Chicago Library, 2009.

<sup>29</sup> Wells, *On Lynchings*, 26.

In order to analyze Wells's rhetorical strategies, perhaps the starting point is to examine what she herself writes concerning her intended accomplishments. Wells concludes her introduction to *Southern Horrors* thusly:

The Afro-American is not a bestial race. If this work can contribute in any way toward proving this, and at the same time arouse the conscience of the American people to a demand for justice to every citizen, and punishment by law for the lawless, I shall feel I have done my race a service. Other considerations are of minor importance.<sup>30</sup>

Some of this closing paragraph appears to deliberately target Whites; Wells sets out to “do [her] race a service” by asserting its humanity, thereby compelling her readers to fight the injustice that has been done by punishing those who have gone unpunished. In other words, Wells tells us that she is aiming to persuade by means of a *pathos* borne of a communitarian sense of connectedness. She wants her readers to keenly feel the plight of Southern Blacks held in the arbitrary grip of lynch law, and she does this work by playing on the reader's sympathies, imploring them to recognize both the violence that is being done to their fellows, and their subsequent call to action to rectify the deep wrongs of the system through a rejection of injustice. There is a direct invocation of citizenship and the legal framework; Wells targets her message to the political as well as the emotional. Interestingly, however, the subtext is a *moral* one.<sup>31</sup> Wells frames her argument as a matter of conscience. This is a theme she visits time and time again throughout the pamphlets; defeating lynch law and ensuring that its perpetrators receive punishment is an urgent and vital matter, and one which should drive all people of

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<sup>30</sup> Wells, *On Lynchings*, 26.

<sup>31</sup> Wells contradicts herself somewhat here; on the one hand, she claims her project is not to moralize, but to let the facts speak for themselves, but on the other, she clearly draws on moral language in order to secure her reader's sympathies. This may just be a side effect of the social context in which Wells wrote, but putting aside Victorian writerly sensibilities, Wells does not always do what she claims to be doing (or not to be doing).

compassionate hearts and sound morals to swift action. As Wells writes in *Mob Rule in New Orleans*, “When this conscience wakes and speaks out in thunder tones, as it must, it will need facts to use as a weapon against injustice, barbarism, and wrong. It is for this reason that I carefully compile, print, and send forth these facts.”<sup>32</sup> To return to the *Southern Horrors* passage, Wells couples her humanitarian message with an implicit demand of recognition and its incumbent duties. It is not only that Southern Blacks are being treated unjustly, which on its own should be sufficient to compel a fast and sincerely-felt response, but that under a humane and reasonable system in which all are equal under the law, Blacks should by all rights expect decency from their fellows.

Wells was not naïve. More than fifty years before Rosa Parks provided the case to ignite the Montgomery bus boycott, Wells had fought and lost her own public accommodations challenge stemming from an incident on a Memphis streetcar.<sup>33</sup> She had personally lost friends to lynching, including Thomas Moss, who had made Wells godmother to his daughter Maurine.<sup>34</sup> Following the murders of Moss and two others in what was known as “The Lynching at the Curve,” and her own strongly-worded condemnation thereof in her newspaper, *The Free Speech*, Wells herself was forced to leave Memphis permanently when a group of White townsmen destroyed her newspaper’s office while she was away in New York on business.<sup>35</sup> She well understood the deep chasm between what was and what ought to be. Nevertheless, as Wells succinctly put it, other concerns were of secondary importance. Despite – or, indeed, because of – the very grave and dire circumstances in which American Blacks found themselves, she

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<sup>32</sup> Wells, *On Lynchings*, 154.

<sup>33</sup> Wells, *Crusade*, 18-20.

<sup>34</sup> Wells, *Crusade*, 47-52.

<sup>35</sup> Wells, *Crusade*, 61-62.

continued on in her battle for recognition. Her task was twofold; it is to prove the inherent human worth and dignity of the African American race, *and* to do so with such effectiveness as to ignite the righteous anger of those with the political power to improve the conditions of Black existence. Essentially, “The Afro-American is not a bestial race” is Wells’s 1892 version of “Black Lives Matter.”

The call to compassion is reiterated in the introductions to *A Red Record* and *Mob Rule in New Orleans*. In the case of the former, Wells recounts recent history, from slavery through emancipation through Jim Crow, drawing attention to the various forms of suffering American Blacks have had to endure. Wells ends on a more universalizing note than in *Southern Horrors*, writing, “We plead not for the colored people alone, but for all victims of the terrible injustice which puts men and women to death without form of law.”<sup>36</sup> In *Mob Rule in New Orleans*, Wells, by then professionally using the name Wells-Barnett, takes a briefer and less heavy-handed approach, but nonetheless basically repeats herself:

The publisher hereof does not attempt to moralize over the deplorable condition of affairs shown in this publication, but simply presents the facts in a plain, unvarnished, connected way [...] We do not believe that the American people who have encouraged such scenes by their indifference will read unmoved these accounts of brutality, injustice, and oppression. We do not believe that the moral conscience of the nation – that which is highest and best among us – will always remain silent in the face of such outrages, for God is not dead, and His Spirit is not entirely driven from men’s hearts.<sup>37</sup>

If certain lines in the introduction to *Southern Horrors* seem to appeal to whites, then the same holds true for *A Red Record*. Featuring the longest of the introductions by far, Wells devotes a significant portion to praising the work of Northern white women during the period of Reconstruction. She writes, “From every nook and corner of the North, brave young white

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<sup>36</sup> Wells, *On Lynchings*, 64.

<sup>37</sup> Wells, *On Lynchings*, 154.

women answered [the] call and left their cultured homes, their happy associations and their lives of ease, and with heroic determination went to the South to carry light and truth to the benighted blacks.”<sup>38</sup> Wells had recently returned from a speaking tour in Britain and had given several public addresses to both Black and White women in New York City, which may have influenced her.<sup>39</sup>

While Wells sometimes divides her approaches between furious condemnation of the establishment and appealing to her readers’ better angels, she also takes the more pragmatic stance one might expect from an assertive woman who had experienced such hardship. In chapter six of *Southern Horrors*, entitled “Self-Help,” Wells encourages African Americans to make their importance known in ways beyond the philosophical, such as through boycott, through relocation, through supporting fact-finding missions like her own by providing financial support to Black newspapers, and through a refusal to accommodate a corrupt system. For Wells, who expressed open contempt at hypocrisy and inaction, there is a palpable note of frustration in her opening paragraph, and an implicit call to action. “In the creation of this healthier public sentiment [with regard to race relations], the Afro-American can do for himself what no one else can do for him,” Wells writes. “The world looks on with wonder that we have conceded so much and remain law-abiding under such outrage and provocation.”<sup>40</sup> Though famous for the aforementioned “Winchester rifle” line, the chapter calls for acts of defiance in a variety of forms. Wells contends that because the labor of Blacks is so crucial to the South’s economic success, withdrawing it “in lynching localities could many times effect a bloodless revolution,”

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<sup>38</sup> Wells, *On Lynchings*, 63.

<sup>39</sup> Wells, Ida B. *The Memphis Diary of Ida B. Wells*, 161. Boston: Beacon Press, 1995.

<sup>40</sup> Wells, *On Lynchings*, 50.

explaining, “The white man’s dollar is his god, and to stop this will be to stop outrages in many localities.”<sup>41</sup> Wells is insistent, first, that waiting for a neglectful legal system to take action will accomplish nothing, and second, despite her heartfelt plea in the introduction, moral arguments have limited power on Whites. She writes:

The appeal to the white man’s pocket has ever been more effectual than all the appeals ever made to his conscience. Nothing, absolutely nothing, is to be gained by a further sacrifice of manhood and self-respect. By the right exercise of his power as the industrial factor of the South, the Afro-American can demand and secure his rights, the punishment of lynchers, and a fair trial for accused rapists.<sup>42</sup>

As the “Winchester rifle” line suggests, Wells does not advocate an entirely pacifist approach – she asserts that the only occasions when an attempted lynching was not completed was when the would-be victim was armed – but the larger thrust of her comments is that Southern Blacks must be resistant however possible.<sup>43</sup> “Nothing is more definitely settled than [the Afro-American] must act for himself,” she concludes. “I have shown how he may employ the boycott, emigration, and the press, and I feel that by a combination of all these agencies can be effectually stamped out lynch law, the last relic of barbarism and slavery.”<sup>44</sup> Wells is clear in her moral condemnation of lynching and those who do nothing to stop it, but she is also clear in her belief that a moral response requires action.

On another note, much of Wells’s imperative is coded male; she employs male pronouns, speaks of waiting (fruitlessly) for white authorities to intervene as sacrificing manhood, and makes use of words like “power” and “demand.” Though the universal “he” was common in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and therefore to be expected in Wells’s work, to modern eyes,

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<sup>41</sup> Wells, *On Lynchings*, 50.

<sup>42</sup> Wells, *On Lynchings*, 51.

<sup>43</sup> Wells, *On Lynchings*, 52.

<sup>44</sup> Wells, *On Lynchings*, 54.

and particularly in comparison to the women behind Black Lives Matter, it and her use of male-inclined language seem something of an odd writing choice. Wells, no stranger to sexism, had had to work hard to assert herself as a competent and professional writer, and strove to emphasize women's struggles even with regard to an issue largely thought of as a problem of men. However, as Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham explains, "During the 'nadir,'" a term used by Rayford Logan, referring to the extreme low point of American race relations, "Black people struggled to maintain family and community cohesiveness in an environment that sought to tear both asunder."<sup>4546</sup> Quite apart from the common writing conventions of her time, at a moment when American Blacks were reclaiming the family and navigating the role of gender within their homes and communities, and Black men were struggling to be recognized as men in their own right, perhaps Wells's stylistic decision makes some sense.

### **Black Lives Matter: The Writings of Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors**

According to Garza, Black Lives Matter is "a call to action for Black people" and "an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise."<sup>47</sup> Where Wells is occasionally more deliberative, Garza and her collaborators Tometi and Cullors are to the point, but for all the distance between them, their content is remarkably similar. They all make arguments rooted firmly in democratic ideals of equality and recognition, even as they emphasize the radical differences firmly entrenched in

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<sup>45</sup> Higginbotham, Evelyn Brooks. *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*, 5. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.

<sup>46</sup> Logan, Rayford W. *The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir, 1877-1901*. New York: Dial Press, 1954.

<sup>47</sup> Garza, "Herstory," *Feminist Wire*.

their respective racial landscapes. While advocating for sweeping change, the founders of Black Lives Matter do not require a complete upheaval such that the state is no longer recognizable, but rather seek to transform it, ensuring it more fully reflects the ideals it claims to represent. They often refer to their movement as revolutionary in nature, but in many important respects it has far more of a reformist character. As Tometi asserts, “In order to have a democracy that works for all of us we need the entire nation to challenge anti-Black racism and get involved in this movement for all Black lives.”<sup>48</sup> To some degree, even as they call for change on a massive scale, the founders of Black Lives Matter retain faith in the fundamentals of the system.

Just as Wells devoted the majority of her pamphlets to reporting individual accounts of lynching, Garza, Tometi, and Cullors use their platforms to draw attention to instances of police and vigilante violence which have received little attention in the mainstream press or whose cases have not generated the response other incidents have. Garza notes that instances of violence against women have generally received far less attention than those against men, in part because women are less likely to be killed by police but more likely to face sexual assault, among other things.<sup>49</sup> Writing for *The Guardian* in June 2015, however, Garza has a litany of names and stories of Black women killed by police or in police custody at the ready:

The circumstances surrounding the deaths of black women at the hands of the police – domestic violence, domestic abuse, poverty, mental health crises – tell us a lot about the conditions that black women face. Take for example 43-year-old Monique Deckhard, who was killed by police after allegedly stabbing a woman in a laundromat: her family said that she a history of mental illness. Or there’s 38-year-old Yvette Henderson, accused of shoplifting from a Home Depot and shot and killed by police. Or there’s

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<sup>48</sup> Tometi, Opal. “Black Future Month: Examining the Current State of Black Lives and Envisioning Where We Go From Here.” *The Huffington Post*, Feb. 1, 2015.

<sup>49</sup> Cullors, Patrisse, Darnell L. Moore, and Alicia Garza. “The black people killed by police are just one piece of a larger structural problem.” *The Guardian* (London, UK), Jun. 12, 2015.



20-year-old Janisha Fonville, who was shot and killed by police who responded to a dispute between her and her girlfriend.<sup>50</sup>

Although Garza certainly devotes time and energy to high-profile cases like Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Eric Garner, she is careful to give weight to other forms of marginalization which are less publicized, including mental illness, LGBTQ issues, and domestic abuse, as outlined above. Garza's piece is intersectional in a way Wells's work generally is not, as might be expected from their respective social and philosophical contexts, although it is worth noting that Wells too engaged issues of class and of sexual acceptance and frankness. For Garza, to concentrate all of her efforts on those incidents which have captured mainstream attention would be to betray the very premise of Black Lives Matter, which is that all Black lives matter – particularly since the most visible cases have tended to concern young, heterosexual, cisgender Black men. She writes with an eye toward critical race theory and intersectional feminism, one which engages politics and the state but is ultimately distrustful of both.

It is hard to imagine Garza, Tometi, and Cullors making some of the same stylistic choices that Wells does. As self-identified queer, radical feminists, the universal “he” is never used in their essays and interviews about Black Lives Matter, and they do not, as Wells does, wax lyrical on the good deeds and services some whites have done to aid the cause of racial justice. Their rhetoric is more pointed, lacking some of Wells's affective voice and her desire to persuade.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, Garza, Cullors, and Tometi are more likely to criticize the white power

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<sup>50</sup> Garza, “Larger structural problem.”

<sup>51</sup> While the focus of this paper is firmly on comparing Black Lives Matter and Wells's involvement in the anti-lynching movement, it is worth noting that Garza, Cullors, and Tometi are activists and community organizers mentored by those who were active in Black Power, and their influence is clearly visible in Black Lives Matter's rhetoric. This, too, is an important part of Black Lives Matter's intellectual lineage.

structure from an anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist perspective, as Cullors does in the *Guardian* piece:

And although white America is seemingly noticing the epidemic of police violence directed at black and brown people for the first time, we as black folks have understood that we are its target since the creation of this country. The brutal history of colonialism is one in which white people literally stole land and people for their own gain and material wealth.<sup>52</sup>

Nevertheless, the pragmatic Wells of “Self-Help” presents a markedly similar comparison to the writing Cullors, Garza, and Tometi have done on Black Lives Matter. Just as Wells noted the effectiveness of removing Black labor and spending from the South, and the economic power White moneyed interests gained from exploiting Black labor, Cullors also explores race relations through an economic lens, writing critically about the history of production and the heavy influence of colonialist and capitalist practices thereupon. “The only way to gain the kinds of often-generational wealth that the 1% has been able to gain is through controlling the populations it relied on to make its wealth,” she contends.<sup>53</sup> In order to combat such a landscape, Cullors calls for a turn away from privatization and an embrace of the communitarian. While she stops short of throwing her full-throated support behind one particular approach, she suggests that a Black radical agenda “pushes us closer to freedom and ... calls for an eradication of white supremacy and an adoption of values and traditions endowed from the Black experience.”<sup>54</sup> She does not elaborate further, but the implication is that a strong society is one in which difference is celebrated and well-integrated into the political, legal, and economic structure. Where Wells defines clear objectives, Cullors is vague, but intentionally so.

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<sup>52</sup> Garza, “Larger structural problem.”

<sup>53</sup> Cullors, “Larger structural problem.”

<sup>54</sup> Cullors, Patrisse. “We didn’t start a movement. We started a network.” *Medium*, Feb. 22, 2016.

Ultimately, as their official website proclaims, “#BlackLivesMatter is working for a world where Black lives are no longer systematically and intentionally targeted for demise.”<sup>55</sup> This extends far beyond bringing an end to vigilante and police killings of Black people, though this is still an important and urgent issue for Black Lives Matter as an organization. Rather, according to the Black Lives Matter Network and those involved with it, “we are broadening the conversation around state violence to include all of the ways in which Black people are intentionally left powerless at the hands of the state.”<sup>56</sup> Where Wells is hyperfocused on lynching in particular, Black Lives Matter is in some ways a much more expansive movement, speaking of instances of Black killing as symptoms of an inherently racist system, specifically laying blame at the feet of the state. Yet, similar to how Wells can make reference to “this great American Republic” in the same breath as condemning a society that tacitly condones lynch law, the organizers behind Black Lives Matter are careful to keep open the possibility of a way forward, including one where the state plays a part. “We affirm our contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression,” the official website explains. The society in which Americans (and, indeed, those all over the world) currently reside is one in which Black existence is tenuous and threatened, but where the contributions of Black people and other people of color still have a place.

## **Conclusion**

The rhetorical strategies employed by Wells and Black Lives Matter are not unique to their movements. Indeed, one could easily compare the writing of Garza, Cullors, and Tompkins to

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<sup>55</sup> “About the Black Lives Matter Network.” BlackLivesMatter.com

<sup>56</sup> “About the Black Lives Matter Network.”

Frantz Fanon's work on colonialism, or Wells's writing to Beth Richie's book on violence against women and mass incarceration. So why put these two movements in conversation with each other?

First, given comparisons to more recent movements such as Black Power, it is important to demonstrate that Black Lives Matter's rhetorical roots are deep. It engages with political thought that goes back much further than the Panthers, or for that matter, Malcolm X or Marcus Garvey; the intellectual genealogy from which Black Lives Matter descends is rich and broad. Wells is only one of many spiritual ancestors, but her work is absolutely vital in its challenge to entrenched racism *and* to the interplay between gender roles and notions of respectability. Garza, Cullors, and Tometi may have little use for the politics of respectability, but, just as Wells before them, as activists and as writers, they have had to define themselves in relation to it, and navigate expectations set for them by virtue of their gender and sexuality. Wells moved in many circles dominated by men, and did not always easily occupy spaces meant for women, given her initial desire not to marry or have children; Miriam DeCosta-Willis describes her as "struggl[ing] to be a 'lady,' using the polite language that defines the type, without compromising her strong 'unladylike' qualities, such as pride, ambition, outspokenness, assertiveness, and rebelliousness."

<sup>57</sup> Garza, Cullors, and Tometi clearly have no such compunctions concerning Victorian propriety, if Garza's fondness for profanity on her Twitter feed is any indication, but their writing shows them to be very conscious of their roles as women. Cullors speaks to this issue in a recent

*Medium* piece:

Black liberation movements in this country have created room and space and leadership mostly for Black heterosexual, cisgender men, leaving women, who are often queer or

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<sup>57</sup> DeCosta-Willis, Miriam, ed. *The Memphis Diary of Ida B. Wells*, 4. Boston: Beacon Press, 1995.

transgender, either out of the movement or in the background to move the work forward with little or no recognition. As younger organizers [Garza, Tometi, and I] recognized a need to center the leadership of women. Among our movement mentors were queer and trans people whose labor had been erased and replaced with an uncontested narrative of male leadership.<sup>58</sup>

Cullors goes on to explain that the exclusion of women, queer, and trans people deeply impacted her own thinking in the founding of Black Lives Matter, noting how profoundly important it was to her, Tometi, and Garza that the hashtag apply to *all* Black lives.<sup>59</sup>

Obviously Wells was not thinking in the same terms as activists today, but her own journalistic work strives to recognize the ways in which lynching and other Jim Crow violence was not only a problem for men, detailing the ways in which the sexual politics of the South meant Black women could not expect protection from rape, particularly when the perpetrator was White, and describing cases in which women themselves were lynched.<sup>60</sup> In a meta sense, she also wrote in fairly explicit terms about the minute details of particular cases of lynching and rape, openly challenged the power structure of the Jim Crow South, and criticized those who claimed to be sympathetic to her cause but did little to intervene. And, while she was not intersectional in the same way Garza, Tometi, and Cullors strive to be, Wells's critique of Frances Willard, the White woman who was president of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, in chapter eight of *A Red Record* is a fascinating precursor to later feminist exchanges about intersectionality and inclusion. Willard had accused Wells of making statements "concerning white women having taken the initiative in nameless acts between the races ... [putting] an imputation upon half the white race in this country that is unjust and ... wholly

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<sup>58</sup> Cullors, "We didn't start a movement."

<sup>59</sup> Cullors, "We didn't start a movement."

<sup>60</sup> Wells, *On Lynchings*, 67, 72, 141.

without foundation.”<sup>61</sup> Wells contended she had merely reported fact, in that many of these encounters were consensual, and found Willard’s indignation over a perceived slight to the decency of White women disheartening in its lack of sympathy for the bigger problem of lynching writ large. Wells’s critique implies a concept that is central to the same reasoning Cullors alludes to when she discusses the need for #BlackLivesMatter to apply to all black lives; women’s rights are human rights, and concern for oppression should not be selective.

Related to this idea, the second reason for putting Wells in conversation with the activists behind Black Lives Matter is to fully acknowledge the radical and revolutionary nature of Wells’s writing. While Wells was in many ways a product of her time, embracing Victorian standards of sentimentality in both her private diaries and elements of her journalistic work, she nevertheless took an uncompromising stance in her commitment to pursuing the truth and exposing the extreme violence and volatility of the Jim Crow South. As Patricia Hill Collins notes, Wells was not a distant observer of racial injustice, but intimately acquainted with it, and using her own skill, passion, and diligence, became an activist of considerable influence. Moreover, she was able to articulate a well-formed class analysis precisely due to her life history as the daughter of freed slaves who did not enjoy relative economic comfort until later in life. “Wells-Barnett’s experiences of growing up in the South not far removed from slavery showed her the trials of African American poverty and working-class life in ways that differed dramatically from her more affluent counterparts,” Collins observes. She continues, “She may have spent much of her life *in* the Black middle class, but she was not *of* the Black middle class, and thus challenged social injustice from this special location.”<sup>62</sup> It is easy for contemporary

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<sup>61</sup> Wells, *On Lynchings*, 129-130.

<sup>62</sup> Collins, *On Lynchings*, 22.

audiences to see figures like Garza, Cullors, and Tometi as the face of activism, with their work in community organizing and their physical presence at rallies and protests, but Wells's rhetorical voice firmly places her within the realm of activism as well. By noting the similarities between her project and that of the women behind Black Lives Matter, as well as their shared methods of persuasion, Wells-as-activist becomes ever more discernable. It is not that Wells's work does not reveal her drive to push for change in its own right, but rather that she fits both historical and contemporary visions of activism.

Finally, placing Wells and Black Lives Matter in conversation points to some overarching trends in anti-racist dialogue. Beyond the simple circumstantial commonalities - both Black Lives Matter and the anti-lynching movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century worked to put an end to anti-Black violence and systematic racism - the rhetorical similarities are also revelatory of anti-racist persuasion more generally. Both Wells and the founders of Black Lives Matter write to combat extrajudicial killing of Black people and othering of the Black body by extolling the worth of Black life vis-à-vis a corrupt structure in which non-normative modes of existence are constantly devalued. To write persuasively about race relies on certain political assumptions, among them a fundamental belief in equality, but it also requires a defense of difference. This move, too, comes with its own attendant assumptions; even if, as Wells and the founders of Black Lives Matter openly admit, one is not convinced the existing power structure can be altered without significant economic pressure, there is an inherent optimism in making claims of recognition. On some level, to demand recognition is to entertain a future in which recognition is granted.

For movements like Black Lives Matter, this optimism reads as more utopian – change is theoretically possible, but unlikely to happen given present circumstances. Hence, for example, Garza is openly suspicious of electoral politics, composing tweets such as “Hillary, Trump and Cruz are all dangerous.”<sup>63</sup> Still, Garza encourages her Twitter followers to work within the system as well as beyond it: “Issue driven and local interventions is a viable strategy right now ... Inside the state, against the state, without the state: use the whole menu.”<sup>64</sup> Much as Wells urges fellow Blacks to challenge injustice however they are able, Garza acknowledges the very significant obstacles on the road ahead but cautions her followers against complete cynicism.

For Wells and anti-lynching, meanwhile, the discontent is deep and palpable, but it is accompanied by an earnest belief that an emotional appeal for recognition will move hearts, change minds, and produce results. Despite the extremely grim content of Wells’s pamphlets, oddly enough, the overall tone may ultimately be more hopeful. Wells is under no illusions that the society she was forced to leave is safe or just, but she is confident in the ability of motivated individuals to combine their efforts and make their voices heard. And, implicit in that confidence is the notion that the powerful will be compelled to listen. Wells suggests a variety of methods to ensure that this listening comes about, be it through Black self-assertion (relocation, boycott, etc.) or emotional appeal of Black humanity, as plainly demonstrated in the horrific accounts within the pages of Wells’s pamphlets.

Obviously, anti-racist writing is heavily contingent upon the circumstances which have inspired it. Yet if juxtaposing Wells with Garza, Cullors, and Tometi teaches us anything, it is that there are strong, philosophical roots which bind very different movements together. Just as

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<sup>63</sup> Garza, Alicia. Twitter post, March 23, 2016, 5:03 pm.

<sup>64</sup> Garza, Alicia. Twitter posts, March 23, 2016, 5:59 pm and 6:01 pm.



Wells herself is the inheritor of a theoretical lineage which regards notions of equality in relation to ideas of difference, she provides a highly creditable perspective in her own right to those who work to combat racism today. Specifically, Wells uses lynching and the sexual politics which govern its practice as illustrative of the brokenness and oppression of the Jim Crow South. Her sharp focus on the stories of individuals and her gathering of statistics puts a human face on a set of happenings which may have felt distant to those removed from that social context. Going forward, this intellectual genealogy needs to be acknowledged and preserved if we are to understand movements like Black Lives Matter for what they are – engagements with race that are simultaneously derivative and radical.