

## Part Two

# A Matter of Perspective: Ida B. Wells's Critique of Lynching

*From our inner strength, we acquire courage to stare hatred in the face and examine the limits to which some will go in order to manufacture a prescribed way of life.*

—Angela D. Sims

Lynching, without qualification, is a destructive act. In a speech delivered at Tremont Temple<sup>1</sup> in the Boston Monday Lectureship<sup>2</sup> on February 13, 1893, Ida B. Wells asserted adamantly that

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; and where liberty of speech means the license of might to destroy the business and drive from home those who exercise this privilege contrary to the will of the mob.<sup>3</sup>

To address a national sentiment expressed in these remarks, Wells's work had two distinct purposes. She wanted to promote a collective positive self-definition of African Americans in the public sphere 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.”<sup>4</sup>

James Cutler, as I indicated earlier, wrote about this “grisly chapter in American history”<sup>5</sup> in the early twentieth century for some of the same reasons as Wells. In the foreword to his 1905 publication *Lynch-Law: An Investigation into the History of Lynching in the United States*, Cutler, an economics professor at Wellesley College and a visiting professor in political economy at Yale University when he conducted his research on lynch law, listed four specific objectives that he hoped his research would accomplish. From the data that informed his study, Cutler hoped to (1) determine the causes for the prevalence of the practice, (2) determine what the social conditions are under which lynch law operates, (3) test the validity of the arguments that have been advanced in justification of lynching, and (4) contribute in some measure to a better understanding of this most serious and difficult problem.<sup>6</sup>

Cutler provides a more extensive overview of the origination of the term lynch than that offered later by scholars such as civil rights historian Philip Dray and sociologist Orlando Patterson.<sup>7</sup> As one example of many proffered definitions, Cutler referred to an 1899 legislative act in Indiana that declared that

any collection of individuals assembled for any unlawful purpose intending to injure any person by violence and without authority of law shall, for the purpose of this act, be regarded as a “mob,” and any act of violence exercised by such mob upon the body of any person shall constitute the crime of “lynching,” when such act or acts of violence result in death.<sup>8</sup>

Like other “forms of collective action mob violence is more than simply random and irrational violence,”<sup>9</sup> as historian W. Fitzhugh Brundage emphasized. This exertion of will is frequently associated with a deliberate use of coercion for self-serving purposes. As Michael J. Pfeifer explained, “[C]ollective violence most often served the goals of white supremacy, as lynchers especially targeted alleged African American offenders.”<sup>10</sup>

Published in the late twentieth century, Brundage’s research documents vicious acts of human butchery during a fifty-year period, from 1880 to 1930, in Georgia and Virginia. His results parallel the findings presented by Wells almost a century earlier. Although Brundage and sociologists E. M. Beck and Stewart E. Tolnay presented evidence that

pointed to black participation in mob violence,<sup>11</sup> Brundage insisted that “there can be little question that lynchings were inherently conservative, directed as they were against blacks and other subordinate groups, and that the mere threat of mob violence became a form of coercion that sustained the status quo in the South.”<sup>12</sup> Based on this, it stands to reason that such intimidating behavior can contribute to sanctioning a culture of terror as a normative social construct. Given this climate, the horrors of lynching and the sense of vulnerability it created left a permanent mark on black culture.

Quite often, individuals who subscribe to a tyrannical form of government do so to protect perceived points of privilege. In response to an 1897 opinion on lynching, the Rev. Norman B. Wood, a graduate of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary of Louisville, explained what was accepted by many as a given in the United States. Wood stated correctly that “we have Anglo-Saxon law in our American code for the Anglo-Saxon civilization, which it is; and then for the new race of African citizens, the inauguration of African law in the form of lynch law.” All too often, as Wood noted, this tendency to view America and Anglo-Saxon as synonymous perpetuated America’s race problem. Given this prevalent view, Wood recognized that as “long as we have two races so diverse in genius, so long will it be necessary to adapt the forms of law to those special types of humanity, and if the statute books do not furnish them the abiding sense of justice vested in the mind of the body politic will.” For this reason, Wood surmised that “the sentiment of the South is one law, and one standard of right for the white citizen and another law, and another standard of right for the black citizen.”<sup>13</sup> His assessment implies that active and passive participation can function to foster an environment in which, as Wells wrote, “the unsupported word of any white person for any cause is sufficient to cause a lynching.”<sup>14</sup> Although this statement is broad and may be perceived by some as an overgeneralization, an examination of U.S. history during the period 1892–1910 supports Wells’s claim about the tendency to ignore what she characterized accurately as human slaughter. Wells asserted, in no uncertain terms, that failure to acknowledge barbaric practices that symbolize a “league with death and the covenant with hell”<sup>15</sup> only serve to exacerbate the problem.