

## Part Four

# A Paradigm Shift: Resources for a Christian Ethic of Resistance in the Works of Ida B. Wells

*We must become more conscious of the ways in which God reveals God's self.*

—Angela D. Sims

Ida B. Wells was not the only person to use lynching statistics compiled by the *Chicago Tribune* and other newspapers in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth century as a primary source from which to develop an analysis of southern horrors and mob rule. This text references the work of sociologist James Elbert Cutler. As previously noted Cutler, who earned his doctorate from Yale University, employed a research method that modeled aspects of the approach that Wells used more than a decade prior to his 1905 publication on the investigation of lynching.<sup>1</sup>

Wells's lynching assessment also emerged from and was informed by her confrontation with the effects of lynch law during this gruesome era in American history. A March 1892 experience of racially motivated hatred prompted her to reconsider her position on lynching. In response to this vigilante execution, she employed her journalistic skills to critique brutal acts of cruelty. At issue for her was

how to come to terms with the realization that innocent individuals were lynched. To address this dilemma, she illustrated that lynching pointed to a level of depravity in the United States that contradicted attributes recognized as civilized behavior. Encouraged by Frederick Douglass to “go, my child; you are the one to go, for you have the story to tell,” and in response to an 1893 invitation to “air this intolerable condition” in the United States of “burning human beings alive in the nineteenth century,”<sup>2</sup> Wells presented her interpretation of the facts to an international audience during two separate trans-Atlantic speaking engagements.<sup>3</sup>

Wells met Catherine Impey, editor of *Anti-Caste*, a magazine in England that focused on segregationist issues and other human rights violations,<sup>4</sup> in Philadelphia in 1892 at a meeting in which Wells was the keynote speaker. This public talk prompted Impey, a Quaker, to arrange a private conversation with Wells about lynching. Wells recalled that “Impey was shocked over the lynching stories I told, also the indifference to conditions which she found among the white people in this country. She was especially hurt that this should be the fact among those of her own sect and kin.”<sup>5</sup> As a result of this interview, Wells and Impey concluded that they must both continue, in their own way, to “plug away at the evils both of us were fighting.”<sup>6</sup> What transpired was an invitation to England for Wells and the beginning of her worldwide campaign against lynching.<sup>7</sup>

In a letter to Frederick Douglass dated March 13, 1894, Wells mentioned that she had “already addressed an audience of 1500 persons”<sup>8</sup> in Liverpool during the first week of her second speaking tour to England, Scotland, and Wales. The guest of Rev. C. F. Aked,<sup>9</sup> whom Wells described as “the most popular pastor in Liverpool with the largest congregation,”<sup>10</sup> Wells, at Aked’s request, asked Douglass to provide letters of introduction on her behalf.<sup>11</sup> Recognized internationally and respected by many for his work several decades earlier on the moral dilemma of slavery in the United States, Wells communicated to Douglass that Aked suggested that “if you wish for the splendid success of the work to write letters to all your friends in Great Britain commending me to others.”<sup>12</sup> In response to Wells’s request, Douglass thanked Aked for “opening the doors of your church, and otherwise assisting her in obtaining a hearing in England.”<sup>13</sup> On the issue of lynching and Wells’s ability to counter claims that the “negro race is a brutish one, deserving death,”<sup>14</sup> Douglass told Aked that “Southern papers have denounced Miss Wells and have assailed her as an unworthy person, but I give no credit to their denunciation.

The motive for their assaults is simply to destroy the effect of her disclosures.”<sup>15</sup>

Wells was also not the only African American to write editorials that provided a vicarious depiction of human interaction that challenged portrayals of justice. J. C. Dukes, editor and owner of the *Montgomery Herald*, a Montgomery, Alabama, black-owned newspaper offered a scathing analysis in 1887, five years prior to Wells’s editorial in response to the lynching of her friend Thomas Moss and his two business partners in Memphis, Tennessee, that questioned the validity of race-based rape as a justification for lynching. What distinguishes Wells from others who provided an analysis of the cause and effect of lynching is the tripartite pragmatic strategy she recommended that an oppressed group implement, in part or whole, as an antidote to counter the effects of inhumane viciousness. Although designed to address a specific moral problem and ethical dilemma—lynching—Wells’s proposal in 1892 to boycott, migrate, and write functions as a constructive resource for a twenty-first-century Christian ethic of resistance to systemic violence.