The Southern Roots of Ida B. Wells-Barnett’s Revolutionary Activism
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We recover what we are culturally and psychologically prepared to recover and what we ‘recover’ we necessarily rewrite, giving it meanings that are inescapably contemporaneous, giving it a new discursive life in the present, a life it cannot have had before. — Cary Nelson

In the midst of my research for this essay, it suddenly struck me how little I, a proud native Memphian, educated in the city’s public school system, raised in Bethel Grove—a predominantly black neighborhood on the southeast edge of the urban core—knew about Ida B. Wells-Barnett. I had been exposed early to the history of Memphis. I vividly recall visiting the Memphis Room, the archives of the Memphis Public Library System, while doing local history research projects in elementary school. I also remember learning about W. C. Handy and the city’s storied musical history, Tom Lee’s heroic rescue of survivors of a fiery riverboat accident, and the Yellow Fever epidemic that decimated the city, the epic New Madrid quake that reversed the course of the Mississippi River, and, of course, I visited Mason Temple and the Lorraine Motel, even before it became the wonderful, glittering, interactive tribute to the “beautiful struggle” embodied by the martyred Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. However, I knew comparatively little about Ida B. Wells-Barnett, “crusading journalist.” I was aware that she had written for a newspaper in the city and that she supposedly fled Memphis in fear for her life; beyond that, I recalled few specifics about her life, work, or legacy in my hometown. Thus, writing this essay involved a personal journey of re-education about this dynamic woman even as I endeavored to re-interpret her legacy as an activist and Southerner.

The reasons for Wells-Barnett’s erasure from my personal memory could be myriad. Admittedly, I do not have the best memory; however, several more significant social and historical currents seem to contribute to her low profile amongst Civil Rights pioneers. Racism, sexism, classicism, and personality clashes have all been cited as reasons for Wells-Barnett’s marginalization. Various scholars treat Wells-Barnett’s absence/erasure/dismissal from the historical record as a given even as they try to recover her as an early feminist, an intellectual, publishing industry innovator, and founding executive committee member of the

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NAACP. While Wells-Barnett almost single-handedly ignited the movement against lynching in post-Reconstruction America, the negative and feminine connotations of the crusader label cast her as a shrill critic whose warnings lack material effect. I agree that all of these factors contributed to Wells-Barnett’s marred historical record, however, I propose a different type of recovery. Perhaps it is not that Wells-Barnett is unknown, but that her career has been reduced to her “anti-lynching campaign.” The focus on such activism has led, paradoxically, to her being reduced to a one-issue “crusader.” Moreover, this emphasis on Wells-Barnett’s anti-lynching activism in New York, Chicago, and Britain overshadows her earlier activities in Mississippi and Tennessee, creating a false bifurcation of her life and work. Frequently, scholars criticize Wells-Barnett for the lack of practical effects, noting that her work did not result in a federal anti-lynching law. A reevaluation of her southern roots reveals that while her national efforts may not have resulted in comprehensive legislation, she did have an effect locally, specifically in Memphis and other parts of the South. Understanding Wells-Barnett as a Southerner also undercuts the Manichean binarization of North and South that casts the North as inherently good and the South as irredeemably evil, a construction which further obscures Wells-Barnett’s record of political action in the South. To “recover” Wells-Barnett’s political impetus and give it “a new discursive life in the present,” as Cary Nelson theorizes, we must uproot it.

Wells-Barnett’s autobiography connects her with the “peculiar institution” and embed her in a southern context, revealing impulses both aspirational and inspirational:

I was born in Holly Springs, Mississippi, before the close of the Civil War [16 July 1862]. My parents, who had been slaves and married as such, were married again after freedom came. My father had been taught the carpenter’s trade, and my mother was a famous cook. As the erstwhile slaves had performed most of the labor of the South, they had no trouble in finding plenty of work to do.5

Here, Wells-Barnett presents a trajectory from slavery to success. She provides evidence of her parent’s morality and character by stressing their commitment to marriage and skilled labor. These identifications establish Wells-Barnett as a product of and an authority on the black southern experience. She spent the first half of her life in and around the Mid-South (roughly defined as the region of east Arkansas, west Tennessee, and north Mississippi centered around Memphis). While Wells-Barnett traveled extensively, lecturing, investigating stories, and soliciting subscriptions, the Mid-South remained her base for thirty years:
“Wherever I went people received me cordially and gave me their warm support. A woman editor and correspondent was a novelty; besides, Mississippi was my native state.”3 However, this southern comfort subsided at the death of three black businessmen – Thomas Moss, Will Stewart, and Calvin McDowell, in the “Lynching at the Curve.” While these men were ostensibly punished for aggression against white officers breaking up unsavory activity at the store, their real “crime” was that they opened a successful grocery not far from that of a white businessman and rebuffed his demands to close. When security guards hired by the black businessmen fired on a group of white men who broke into the store, the local white newspapers trumpeted the outrage, prompting a mob to take the businessmen into custody. Eventually, the three were taken from the jail and brutally beaten, shot, and killed.7

The killings of Moss, Stewart, and McDowell in 1892 disturbed the black community and lead to an escalating cycle of skirmishes between blacks and deputized whites. However, even as conditions in Memphis deteriorated during the weeks following the lynching, Wells-Barnett did not seem pressured to leave the city. According to her own account, she left Memphis for Philadelphia and New York just as her incendiary May 1892 editorial in The Memphis Free Speech editorial alluding to willing white female participation in interracial relationships was to be published. Yet, she assumed she would be able to return home and have time to “be better able to decide where to go.”8 Following the editorial, a mob ravaged the offices of her newspaper, the Free Speech, and she was warned not to return. Wells-Barnett’s subsequent self-identification as an “exile from home” underlines her identification with the South and southernness.9

Critical evaluations of Wells-Barnett that do not deal with her southern identity only reinforce her “unhomeliness,” further distancing her from her regional and historical context and complicating attempts to fully evaluate her legacy as an activist, writer, publisher, and race leader. Thadious M. Davis aligns this type of exclusion of southern blacks from their regional context with “an expansion of the definition of southern culture based upon an insistence that race and region are inextricable in defining a southern self, society, or culture,” a project which effectively equates southerness with whiteness.10 Davis persuasively argues that for many black Southerners, identification with the region is a significant, indeed integral, part of their identity, acknowledging that one can be both black and Southern. Thus, she argues, new scholarship on the South must attend to the roles African Americans play in the region’s history. Wells-Barnett’s “Southern setting,” in the words of Preston King, is not just the background for her early life. Her experiences as a Southerner in the South are the source for her revolutionary consciousness and praxis. Her
parent’s influence, her schooling, and her life in Memphis contributed to a template for activism and an ideological foundation that she refines in exile. Reading Wells-Barnett through a southern lens brings into relief her personal, political, and intellectual development as products of her active identification with the South.

In this essay, I will use her Memphis diary and her remembrances of Memphis and North Mississippi in her posthumously published autobiography Crusade for Justice to reconstruct Wells-Barnett as a Southerner. First, a re-evaluation of Wells-Barnett’s Southern setting reframes her activism. The conventional division of her life into pre- and post- “exile” privileges her touring, speaking, organizing, and writing after her move from South to North. A reframing demonstrates a continuous development rather than a sudden onset for Wells-Barnett’s activism. Using this frame, I will then trace her revolutionary program: the development of her revolutionary consciousness, her commitment to militant praxis to resist the existing social order, and her advocacy of the revolutionary principles of self-determination and self-protection to secure the safety and viability of the black community in the region. My goal is a reading of Wells-Barnett’s revolutionary southern sensibility made possible by the discourses of race and revolution circulating during the century since her departure from the South.

Recovering Wells-Barnett’s southern identity complicates the conventional wisdom that has resulted in a reductive treatment of her life and career. For many years, Wells-Barnett was remembered primarily as a crusading journalist who fled the barbaric South to find security, fame, and family in Chicago. A short bibliographic sketch about Wells-Barnett on the PBS website sums up the conventional wisdom: “In 1892 [Wells-Barnett] became part-owner of The Memphis Free Speech. On 9 March of that year, she printed an article that denounced the lynching of three prominent black businessmen. Her article angered many Memphis whites and she was forced out of town. The event launched her lifelong career as an anti-lynching crusader and pioneering journalist.” The passage implies that Wells-Barnett’s crusade began after this lynching; however, her autobiography, articles, and speeches indicate that her response to the incident was more of a continuation and amplification of her career as an activist, not a beginning. This pattern of development follows a narrative trajectory often imposed on the personal narratives of many leading black activists at the end of the nineteenth century. In addition to the slave narratives of figures like Frederick Douglass, this pattern is found in others like W. E. B. Du Bois, radicalized in part because of his experiences traveling and teaching in the South at Fisk and Atlanta University, or Mary Church Terrell, who was born in Memphis, educated in Ohio, and settled in Washington, D. C. This pattern valorizes the move
North while denigrating and flattening the South into a brutal landscape that stifles black ingenuity and advancement. This narrative’s rigid northward teleology privileges what comes after the “escape” from the South, diminishing black Southern identity and gradually erasing blackness as an integral component of Southern culture.

Because of this conventional wisdom, Wells-Barnett’s radical praxis receives less attention than that of contemporaries like W. E. B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, A. Philip Randolph, and Marcus Garvey. Fortunately, more recent assessments have begun to shed a different light on Wells-Barnett. In “Missing in Action: Ida B. Wells-Barnett, the NAACP, and the Historical Record,” Paula Giddings “reads” the historical Wells-Barnett, uncovering the origins of her contentious relationship with the NAACP. Building on the portrait of Wells-Barnett begun in her groundbreaking _When and Where I Enter_ (1984), Giddings cites Wells-Barnett’s militancy for being swept aside while others “incorporated her insights into their own strategies.”

Using contemporaneous editorials, newspaper stories, and correspondences, Giddings depicts Wells-Barnett as alternately battling and embattled. Giddings argues that setting the record straight about Wells-Barnett’s role in the founding of the NAACP will reveal the “full breadth” of her historical “impact.” However a “full” picture of Wells-Barnett’s activism must reach beyond recovering her role in founding the NAACP to her earliest activism in the South. While Giddings reconstructs the events surrounding the founding of the NAACP, a more recent study focuses on Wells-Barnett’s public persona and speechmaking. Olga Davis maps the nexus of gender, race, and social status that shaped Wells-Barnett’s rhetoric and public persona, arguing that Wells-Barnett deftly negotiated mainstream and in-groups notions of femininity and social mores using speech as a form of activism.

Davis acknowledges that some have criticized Wells-Barnett, reading her crusade against lynching as coming at the expense of activism on behalf of black women. On the contrary, Davis argues that her greatest innovation was rhetorical, “critically explicating the American/Western ideology of Black sexuality that exoticizes, commodifies, politicizes, and polices Black heterosexual male and female bodies.” In other words, Wells-Barnett used her activism to challenge the system or program of racialization and gendering that masked the brutal and unjustified murder of black men and sexual exploitation of black women, while simultaneously negotiating “true womanhood” in her personal and professional life.

In addition to recovering her southern context, Wells-Barnett’s activism also needs to be recontextualized. Both Hazel Carby and Melina Abdullah analyze Wells-Barnett’s leadership within the context of race and gender, considering her as both black and feminist. In “‘On the Threshold of a Women’s Era’: Lynching, Empire, and Sexuality in Black
Feminist Theory," Carby explicates the "theoretical analysis of race, gender, and patriarchal power" in the writings of Wells-Barnett, Anna Julia Cooper, and Pauline Hopkins. Carby lauds Wells-Barnett for her detailed analysis of lynching as an "institutionalized practice" justified by the intersecting ideologies of "sexuality," "manhood," and "womanhood" and used to enforce "political and economic subordination."17 While Carby acknowledges that "[b]lack women listened, organized and acted" on Wells-Barnett's words, she does not consider her activist praxis beyond the text. Indeed, Carby's turn to Pauline E. Hopkins' Contending Forces (1900) as an attempt to "disrupt imperialist forces" further reifies textual activism.18 In "Emergence of a Black Feminist Leadership Model," Melina Abdullah attempts to fill this gap, calling Wells-Barnett, a "catalyst for mass action ... [whose] willingness to engage in the action herself begins to distinguish Wells-Barnett as an early example of a black feminist leader." Abdullah identifies four characteristics of black feminist leadership: 1) it connects theory and practice, 2) "it is proactive," 3) it is collectivist, and 4) it incorporates "traditional and nontraditional forms" of political engagement.19 She points to Wells-Barnett's anti-lynching journalism and activism with the black clubwoman's movement as evidence of her commitment to political action, which she defines as "the attempt to address and redistribute power in society."20 Acting on her beliefs, Wells-Barnett "sought substantive change in not only the act of lynching itself, but those political, social, and economic conditions that bred the view that black lives were dispensable."21 Abdullah labels Wells-Barnett radical, which she defines in a footnote as "an ideology that seeks fundamental transformation – one that moves beyond an approach of liberal reform."22 I would argue that this combined commitment to social change motivated by her analysis of power makes Wells-Barnett not just radical but revolutionary.

Much of my work is primarily preoccupied with the Power moment of the late 1960s and 1970s in African American and Asian American literature and culture. The Power Period, which I define as stretching from 1965, when the term was coined, to 1981 when Elaine Brown stepped down as chair of the Black Panthers, signifies a substantial engagement with the anti-colonialist model for radical resistance to America's racist political system. While a sustained engagement with revolutionary ideologies marked the Power moment, Wells-Barnett, Du Bois, Douglass, Terrell, Frances Harper and others were also preoccupied with revolution. During the waning days of the nineteenth century, these African American intellectuals and activists sought to revolutionize American society through radical social change and practical praxis to facilitate integration of the "New Negro" into the American body politic. Drawing on Frantz Fanon, the Martinique-born French trained psychologist who
supported the native Algerian anti-colonial struggle, I define a revolutionary as an individual social agent who, radicalized by an awareness of the lethal power inequities in his or her society, undertakes political action to create systemic social change. Thus, Wells-Barnett should be considered revolutionary because her experiences in the Mid-South informed a materialist critique of the “lynch law” system, which compelled her engagement in political, legal, and militant actions to bring about social, political, and economic transformation in Southern society.

Key to revolutionary subjectivity is the development of a revolutionary consciousness based on a dialectical critique of material culture. Thus, Wells-Barnett’s revolutionary ideology flows from her revolutionary consciousness, and is demonstrated in her commitment to militant praxis, changing the existing social order and exerting pressure to ensure that black group self-interests are served and preserved. This revolutionary ideology can be detected in many themes running through her works. Wells-Barnett advocated self-determination, self-protection, organized political action, economic development and ownership, as well as group solidarity. Considering Wells-Barnett as a revolutionary would encompass her bold efforts across her life, reconnecting her career in New York and Chicago with her early acts of resistance in Memphis and North Mississippi, and providing an ideological context for her radicalism.

Wells-Barnett’s early life stoked the development of her revolutionary consciousness. Her family history is well known and tragic. Orphaned at the age of fourteen by a yellow fever outbreak that spread to Holly Springs, Mississippi, Wells-Barnett vetoed plans to scatter her remaining five siblings between family and friends. She choose instead to leave her education at what is now Rust College and find work as a teacher so that she could support her siblings. For the next sixteen years, she lived and taught mostly in Memphis, traveling to conferences, engaging in the local social scene, and working, all without the benefit of a male
guardian. Wells-Barnett later attributes her propensity to defend herself to this early need to guard her reputation in the absence of male relatives to do so for her.23 Wells-Barnett’s revolutionary identity is thus rooted not only in the dialectic between white and black during the contentious post-Reconstruction period in the South, but also in the interplay of male and female gender roles and class-based social mores dictated by the late Victorian Era culture that defined “civilized society” in late nineteenth century America. During her time as a teacher in Memphis, Wells-Barnett repeatedly manipulated these discourses in both her personal and private lives in order to maintain her independence and earn a living. These negotiations prepared her later critique of the same systems of race, class, and gender underlying the Southern “lynch law” system.

Like many blacks, Wells-Barnett hoped that the South would deliver on its Reconstruction era promise. However, her forcible ejection from a Chesapeake and Ohio railcar in 1894 disabused her of that notion and sparked the coalescence of her revolutionary consciousness. In a scene that predates Rosa Parks’ protest, Wells-Barnett forcibly resisted being removed from her first-class seat in a women-only car of a train headed from Memphis to Woodstock, Tennesse. She later sued and initially won her case against the railroad. The decision was subsequently overturned because of the troublesome judicial precedent, which would have exposed the “separate but equal” doctrine to legal challenge. In this instance, Wells-Barnett used the judicial system to challenge the system of segregation only to see her suit arbitrarily overturned by the Tennessee high court. Despite the ultimate outcome, her suit exposed another weakness in the overall repressive system of segregation strengthening across the South and further fueled Wells-Barnett’s commitment to change.

Wells-Barnett’s groundbreaking critique of mob rule flows directly from her experience of this Southern system. Indeed the extreme sanction, lynching, prescribed by the Southern “lynch law” system made it visible and thus susceptible to Wells-Barnett’s savvy exposé. Her antilynching campaign was not only the product of her shock, anger, and grief in reaction to a horrific incident involving one of her dear friends, her radical consciousness compelled her to comment on the fatal flaws in the southern system vividly highlighted by this lurid episode. In Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases (1892), Wells-Barnett describes her dismay in the aftermath of the “Lynching at the Curve”: “Although the race was wild over the outrage, the mockery of law and justice which disarmed men and locked them in jails where they could be easily and safely reached by the mob – the Afro-American ministers, newspapers and leaders counseled obedience to the law which did not protect them.”24 Unlike other race leaders with a more tenuous connection to the South, Wells-Barnett understood that this system required
a measure of complicity by some in the black community. Yet, she
criticized black leaders whose inaction sustained Memphis’s inequitable
social, political, and economic systems. In her autobiography, Wells-
Barnett characterizes lynching as a contract between the mob and the
white business and political interests of the city: “The colored people
feel that every white man in Memphis who consented to his death is as
guilty as those who fired the guns which took his life.”25 Wells-Barnett,
who had personal experience with the Southern system of “justice,”
understood “obedience” as “subordination,” submitting to a social and
legal system that was unfair and ultimately lethal to black self-interest.
She later sharpens her critique, pointing out that while most lynching
victims are charged with rape or sexual assault, Moss, McDowell, and
Stewart were upstanding businessmen. She concludes: “This is what
opened my eyes to what lynching really was. An excuse to get rid of
Negroes who were acquiring wealth and property and thus keep the race
terrorized and ‘keep the nigger down’.”26

With eyes wide open, Wells-Barnett redirects her efforts, using her
editorials to direct and encourage revolutionary action. Indeed, she ad-
monishes blacks in Memphis to heed the advice of one victim, Thomas
Moss, and leave the city: “tell my people to go West – there is no justice
for them here.”27 The lynchings did not compel Wells-Barnett to flee the
city, but they propelled her to greater action. In her Free Speech edito-
rials, Wells-Barnett encourages a sustained boycott of the city trolley
lines, a boycott so successful that the white operators asked her to use
her “influence” to get black people back on the cars. With an acerbic air,
Wells-Barnett reports, “I urged them [black people] to keep on staying
off the cars.”28 In response to her revolutionary advocacy, city leaders
sought to repress Wells-Barnett’s newspaper which was the vehicle ferry-
ing her radicalizing message to Memphis’s black community, propelling
them to group action that weakened the city’s exploitative political and
economic systems. After her experience with the injustice of the legal
system, Wells-Barnett could not advocate that African Americans wait
for the system to deliver on its promises. By the time of this 1892 lynch-
ing, Wells-Barnett possessed a revolutionary consciousness, the ability
to disseminate her message, and the occasion to stimulate revolutionary
action in other black people. Thus, the 1892 editorials following the
“Lynching at the Curve” constitute not a break or a new development,
but the emergence of the public phase of her well-established campaign
to subvert the “Southern system.”

Wells-Barnett paid a high cost, however, for the liberties she gained.
In her introduction to the Selected Works of Ida B. Wells-Barnett, noted
literary critic Trudier Harris addresses Wells-Barnett’s complicated
persona: “While she was certainly celebrated by blacks, some of them
nevertheless painted her as egotistical or as a crazy woman, a loner who did not represent the sentiments of the majority of forward-thinking black intellectuals.” While she became a credible advocate whose critiques were heard around the world, she was forced to occupy a critical space outside of the mainstream “race leaders.” I do not wish to make Wells-Barnett a liminal, marginal, or borderlands figure; instead, I would characterize this social space as the vanguard, the thin leading edge of ideological and political activism which opens up a space for social change. The vanguard, necessary but isolated, is charged with preparing the masses for social change, sparking revolutionary consciousness, spreading revolutionary ideology, and preparing themselves and the people for a militant offensive.

Wells-Barnett advocated political agency through her writing and investigations. Radicalized by her experience with the railroad and activated by the outrageous lynching at “the Curve,” Wells-Barnett spread the revolutionary principles of self-protection and self-determination to Memphis’s black community via her editorials. In her autobiography, diary, and editorials, Wells-Barnett repeatedly denigrates the otherworldly advice of many black spiritual leaders: “I had already found out in the country that the people needed guidance in everyday life and that the leaders, the preachers, were not giving them this help.” Wells-Barnett observed that the gains made by blacks in places like Memphis had not spread to “the country” or the most rural areas of the South. Thus, Wells-Barnett vows to use her writing to offer “practical” advice, beginning in her “Iola” articles and continuing throughout her Free Speech editorials and other publications. In addition to the trolley boycott and the campaign urging blacks to go West, Wells-Barnett used her later writings to urge African Americans to protect their self-interests. In “Self Help,” chapter six of Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases, Wells-Barnett offers successful examples of group action in order to encourage further organizing: “In the creation of this healthier public sentiment, the Afro-American can do for himself what no one else can do for him.” In the article, Wells-Barnett identifies self-sufficiency and continued economic action as tools to translate the buying power of the black community into political leverage with the political and business establishment. Wells-Barnett cites group identity as the basis for successful political action. Without group identity and group action, no amount of “practical” advice would help the black community end the threat of lynching. She concludes: “Nothing is more definitely settled than [the Negro] must act for himself. 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 effectively stamped out lynch law, that last relic of barbarism and slavery. ‘The gods help those who help them-
selves’.”33 Wells-Barnett also grasps that this type of resistance could lead to fundamental change in American society: “A thorough knowledge and judicious exercise of this power in lynching localities could many times effect a bloodless revolution.”34 These “agencies” provide agency, the revolutionary “power” to upend social systems that endorsed and sustained “lynch law.”

Wells-Barnett has been criticized for a lack of results; however, attending to her revolutionary activism in the Southern context reveals that her journalistic activism produced both short and long term changes. In “Miss Ida B. Wells and Memphis Lynching,” David Tucker asserts that Wells-Barnett’s anti-lynching agitation had an immediate and tangible impact:

Influence is difficult to measure, to be sure; but when the Memphis lynchings of 1892 occurred shortly after Miss Wells-Barnett’s return from England (six accused barn burners were shot while being brought to the Shelby County jail), white business leaders immediately took conspicuous steps to condemn the crime publicly. Businessmen called a public meeting in the Merchant’s Exchange [where they had earlier met to plan against the co-editors of the Free Speech] where they adopted resolutions censuring the ‘wicked, fiendish and inexcusable massacre,’ demanded the ‘arrest and conviction of the murderers,’ and raised one fund for apprehending ‘the criminals’ and another for the benefit of the widows and orphans of the ‘murdered men.’ Never before had the white citizens made such a forthright condemnation of racial lynching.35

In other words, following the 1892 lynching, the Memphis establishment reacted differently to protect its own self-interest and stave off national and international opprobrium by taking the tack opposite of that taken two years prior.36 Understood discursively and materially, the dominant system acted to contain this disruption and protect itself from renewed criticism.

In addition to economic pressure and other “agencies,” Wells-Barnett advocated self-protection, or armed force to protect a community’s interests. Many critics and scholars point to one passage from Wells-Barnett’s autobiography as evidence of her extreme militancy:

I had bought a pistol the first thing after Tom Moss was lynched, because I expected some cowardly retaliation from the lynchers. I felt that one had better die fighting
against injustice than to die like a dog or a rat in a trap. I had already determined to sell my life as dearly as possible if attacked. I felt that if I could take one lynch with me, this would even up the score a little bit.37

Later, she develops this idea in the “Self Help” chapter of Southern Horrors. After recounting a story of several lynchings that were thwarted by potential victims who used arms in “self-defense,” Wells-Barnett concludes, “the lesson this teaches and which every Afro-American should ponder well, is that a Winchester rifle should have a place of honor in every black home, and that it should be used for that protection which the law refuses to give.”38 While these statements seem sensational to us, it is a mistake to classify Wells-Barnett’s sentiments as militant extremism. A rereading of these passages with Wells-Barnett’s Southern and revolutionary identities in mind places her advice into context. Following the Civil War, black militias were often used as a hedge against white violence. Before the lynching of Moss, McDowell, and Stewart, Wells-Barnett decried the disarming of the Tennessee Rifles, a “Negro guard,” which watched over the jail where the victims were held.39 In the post-Reconstruction South, being armed could mean the difference between life and death. However, Wells-Barnett never advocates using weapons offensively, only when attacked or threatened. Spontaneous and unprovoked white mob action threatened individual lives and community security. Self-protection was necessary because the judicial and legal systems did not protect blacks; thus, armed self-defense was necessary to prevent further injustices.

As time passed, as segregation consolidated its hold, and black leadership became more institutionalized, Wells-Barnett was increasingly criticized for her militant revolutionary rhetoric and action. Before 1900, while she was still in the South, most contemporary figures noted Wells-Barnett’s fervor, lauding her for her courage and action:

She had already shown tendencies to be a radical race woman, but [the lynching at the Curve], her subsequent protest, and exile from the South gave her a sense of prophetic mission to crusade against lynching. Her fervor was reinforced by public acclaim and denunciation, indicating that she was being heard. The determination with which she carried on her anti-lynching crusade was transferred to every area of civil rights reform in which she was involved. Her single-minded persistence and aggressiveness lost their force, however, as leaders and organizational patterns changed.40
While Thompson does not see the move North as a break, she does note that Wells-Barnett’s “force” changed after the move. She acknowledges that Wells-Barnett’s “adult experiences in the South [gave] her confidence and a sense of success,” but notes that the increased exposure after the “Lynching at the Curve” and her fiery editorial brought greater criticism. Thus Wells-Barnett’s absence could also be read as an example of the movement of ideology. Initially, her writing and activism could be more strident because it was local. After the 1892 lynchings of the three black businessmen, she was exposed to a wider audience, and her revolutionary message was propelled onto a larger national arena to compete for primacy with other activist ideologies, like the abolitionist and feminist work of Douglass, Washington’s accommodationist model, the educational advancement model of Du Bois, and the uplift models of Harper and Terrell. However, Wells-Barnett’s ideology did not win in the battle for discursive dominance, supposedly because of its militancy, but primarily because of the politics of gender and sexuality at the heart of her critique. Caught between the “simple” folk and the “academic few,” Wells-Barnett constructed a revolutionary identity with Southern roots. This balancing act marks her as a member of a vanguard whose message spurred others to action, even as her methods were decried.

In addition to her discursive understanding of the Southern system and her revolutionary advocacy, Wells-Barnett herself can also be understood discursively. Despite her lack of “literary gifts and graces,” Wells-Barnett claims she undertook the “Iola” articles because of “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 […] 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.’” Initially the articles, which grew out of reflections delivered at her literary salon that met at Vance Street Christian Church, appeared in the “Evening Star” a local Memphis church publication that began in about 1886. Later, the pieces appeared in the “Living Way,” another church affiliated publication. Following her “exile,” her dispatches ran in the New York Age as “Iola’s Southern Field,” the name change highlighting her Southern identity even as she was estranged from her home.

The name Iola is later evoked in the title of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper’s popular 1892 novel, Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted. “Iola,” Greek for violet colored dawn, is the name of the novel’s heroine. After a bucolic childhood, Iola, the daughter of a Creole planter and his mulatto wife whom he educated and manumitted, is sold into slavery by her father’s cousin after the father’s death from yellow fever. The
lovely quadroon, who could pass for white and flee the South to escape slavery, chooses to cast her lot with her race and work on its behalf in the South. Near the end of the novel, Lola hosts a salon "with a select company of earnest men and women deeply interested in the welfare of the race." The assembled discuss black illegitimacy, hygiene, education, and criminality, in an effort to arrive at a plan of action for racial progress. The naming of the novel and main character constitute a moment of intertextuality, an intersection of Harper’s text and contemporaneous discourses about race, leadership, and progress. Wells-Barnett and Harper enjoyed a long acquaintance; therefore, the connection is not difficult to imagine. Indeed, according to Giddings’s account, Wells-Barnett was on her way to Philadelphia to speak at a meeting organized by Harper when her explosive May 1892 Free Speech editorial, which implied that some white women willingly chose relationships with black men, was published. By the late 1880s, Harper was a well-established national leader and author of popular fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. At the same time, Wells-Barnett was enjoying a burgeoning reputation as a "crusading journalist." Other similarities also hint at an intentional connection. Wells-Barnett’s male colleagues, peers, and mentors often noted her attractiveness, one remarking that she was "pretty as well as smart." Similarly, Lola is repeatedly described as lovely, strangely beautiful, and "angelic." In chapter thirty of Iola Leroy, the protagonist delivers a stirring speech, "Education of Mothers," arguing that the fate of the race depends on the development of "enlightened" mothers. This discussion is similar to a Christmas 1885 "Iola" editorial, "Women’s Mission." In it, Wells-Barnett defines a woman’s sphere of "influence" as her home, community, and nation. She outlines the proper role for a woman as "a strong, bright presence (sic), thoroughly imbued with a sense of her mission on earth and a desire to fill it" and urges black women to take up this mission to ensure the success of the race. While Harper does not directly acknowledge Wells-Barnett’s influence, other contemporaneous influences on her novel, like William Wells Brown’s Clotel, have been noted. It seems that Harper appropriated the name Iola to imply a certain passionate activism and devotion to the black community. This intertextual moment is further heightened by Wells-Barnett’s own appropriation of the moniker to write herself into activism. She adopts the "Iola" identity to negotiate the "Southern fields" separating the black folk and the black intelligentsia. Although others note her boldness and fervor, Wells-Barnett professed "surprise" when she is first named editor of the Evening Star. Soon thereafter, she took up the "Iola" editorials. Thus, the Iola character is doubled, a representation of Wells-Barnett’s revolutionary identity created to relate to the masses and offer "practical" praxis. Wells-Barnett’s attempt to appeal to the concerns of "the
folk” is fraught however. The condescending tone and references to the “simple” people with “limited education” belie a tension between Wells-Barnett and her audience, between her revolutionary identification and editorial representation. Iola thus functions as a literary representation of passionate praxis wrapped in finer womanhood and as a passionate attempt to distill revolutionary ideology into practical principles.

While Wells-Barnett’s Southernness is central to the development of her revolutionary identity, it may have hindered scholarship about her. Mildred Thompson’s 1990 book, *Ida B. Wells-Barnett: An Exploratory Study of an American Black Woman, 1893-1930*, strives to fill some of the gaps in the scholarship. She provides a succinct, but comprehensive, history of Wells-Barnett, offering valuable details about the beginnings of her writing career. However, Thompson points out a gap in Wells-Barnett scholarship that has yet to be filled: a compilation of her Memphis editorials published in the various church sponsored publications and the *Free Speech*. Granted, much of this record has probably been lost to time and the two fires that hit Wells-Barnett’s household. However, the poorly preserved record of many smaller black periodicals in the South also contributes to this silence in the literary historical record. Thompson recounts her work in Chicago and Springfield, Illinois, remarking that more bibliographical and archival research remains to be done in Memphis and Holly Springs, Mississippi, home of Rust College. Perhaps these southern sites hold still uncollected editorials and writings. Because of this gap, much of the work of reinterpretation has been based on Wells-Barnett own words and recollections. We cannot continue to rely on her accounts, no matter how compelling, because memory is fallible and subjectivity is inherently self-interested.

I undertook this project because Wells-Barnett intrigued me. Her status as a Memphian and as an activist appealed to my own politics and sense of place. While I sensed that Wells-Barnett and her work would resonate with my primary preoccupation with the ethnic American liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s, the extent of the parallels surprised me. For example, Wells-Barnett’s treatment at the hands of the black intelligentsia of her time presages post-Black Arts academic dismissals of black radicals and revolutionaries of the Power period. Although I am still puzzled by Wells-Barnett’s absence from my memory, defining her as a revolutionary may help to explain this gap. Revolutionaries serve as part of a short-lived vanguard, creating the social conditions and preparing the people for systemic social change. While the passage of a federal law against lynching was not realized during her lifetime, Wells-Barnett’s agitation and activism paved the way for the black woman’s club movement and the NAACP, among other organizations here and abroad, and led to long-term changes in Memphis, while her mere presence stopped
lynchings in other parts of the country. More than a newspaper woman, Ida B. Wells-Barnett should be remembered as a change agent whose experiences in the Mid-South during the late nineteenth century set the stage for a life of committed revolutionary activism dedicated to the people of her “Southern fields.”

NOTES


We must move past indecision to action. Now let us begin. Now let us rededicate ourselves to the long and bitter, but beautiful struggle for a new world. This is the calling of the sons of God, and our brothers wait eagerly for our response.

Lastly, “Beautiful Struggle” is the title of a radio program on KPFK-FM, Los Angeles that is an open conversation focused on African American social and political issues, thought, history, inspiration, resistance, and social change. The program aims to educate and motivate the audience to work for justice and social change.

4 Preston King (2005: 114).
6 Ibid., pp. 7-8.
7 Ibid., p. 51.
8 Ibid., p. 59.
9 Ibid., p. 69.
10 Thadious Davis (1988: 5).
12 Giddings (2001: 1).
13 Ibid., p. 2.
15 Ibid., p. 309.
16 Hazel V. Carby (1997: 338)
17 Ibid., p. 336.
18 Ibid., p. 339.
20 Ibid., p. 338.
21 Ibid., p. 345.
22 Ibid., p. 335, 345.
23 The Memphis Diary of Ida B. Wells: An Intimate Portrait of the Activist as a Young Woman (1995) covers events from 1885-87 and 1893. Miriam Decosta-Willis,
editor of the diaries, notes that Wells was in constant conflict with the "conventional female roles."

A number of circumstances required Wells to occupy social positions often associated with men, even as she adhered to the strict social mores that governed behavior for women. This tension was expressed in her anxieties about bearing the financial burden of caring for her siblings, which at times required her to acquire loans from older men in the community. Her status as a teacher, a position which required high moral standing, also meant she had to be acutely aware of the need for propriety as she participated in the Memphis social scene. Finally, after becoming a journalist, Wells had to delicately negotiate her relationships with men as colleagues, employers, and advisors without compromising her reputation.

26 Ibid., p.64.
27 Ibid., p.51.
28 Ibid., p.55.
31 Ibid.
32 see quote in Royster (1997: 68).
33 Ibid., p.72.
34 Ibid., p.68.
36 Ibid., p.121-122.
40 Mildred Thompson (1990: 8).
41 Ibid.
46 Ibid., p.115.
48 Ibid., p.253.
50 Ibid., p.180.

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