



## CHAPTER 26

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# THE QUARTET IN THE POLITICAL PERSONA OF IDA B. WELLS

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Although the race was wild over the outrage [of lynching], the mockery of law and justice which disarmed men and locked them up in jails where they could be easily and safely reached by the mob—the Afro-American ministers, newspapers and leaders counselled obedience to the law which did not protect them.

Ida B. Wells, *Southern Horrors*, 1892

I am a Black revolutionary woman . . . .  
accused of every alleged crime . . . .  
[police] have plastered pictures alleged to be me . . . .  
issued orders to shoot on sight and to shoot to kill.

Assata Shakur, “To My People,” 1973

MULTIPLE aspects of praxis, from Christian to Marxian and beyond, are reduced here to a quartet of concepts in the political persona of antiterror activist Ida B. Wells. This quartet, excerpted from a letter by a black maternal political fugitive, focuses on the revolutionary black woman; criminalization of blackness (Muhammad 2011); commoditization of black icons; and repression of black resistance to racism and rape.

My exploration of antilynching crusader Ida B. Wells uses an excerpt from an open letter by former Harlem Black Panther Party (BPP) member and Black Liberation Army political prisoner Assata Shakur (Joanne Chesimard), a political fugitive living in Cuba (Shakur 1987). The increased \$2 million bounty levied and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) placing Shakur on its “terrorist” list, like the rise of the mass movement Black Lives Matter against antiblack killings and rapes by police and deputized whites, appears coterminous with the anomaly of the first black president of the United States, a democracy born from slave states.



Historian John Bracey stated at a 1992 University of Massachusetts–Amherst forum that although blacks admired the courageous stance Wells took against lynching, they would likely not wish her to move next door—proximity to radicals increases vulnerabilities. Similar could be said of Shakur—better to cheer her from the safety of another country or century than incur the wrath of police and governance that criminalized her and the BPP and seek her (political) demise. Viewing “law and order” as a mandate for racial hierarchies, Wells calls for resistance; and so, like Shakur, has become the embodiment of a revolutionary persona. Despite this emphasis on radicalism, Wells is conflicted and seeks harbor within legal structures, writing in “The Remedy” of *The Red Record*:

It is a well-established principle of law that every wrong has a remedy. Herein rests our respect for law. The Negro does not claim that all of the one thousand black men, women and children . . . hanged, shot and burned alive during the past ten years, were innocent of the charges made against them. . . . But we do insist that the punishment is not the same for both classes of criminals. (Wells 1895, 58)

## “A BLACK REVOLUTIONARY WOMAN”

The Negro Women’s Club movement raised funds to publish Ida B. Wells’s political pamphlets *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases*; *The Red Record*; and *Mob Rule in New Orleans* (Wells 1892, 1895, 1900). Her autobiography, *Crusade for Justice* (posthumously edited by her daughter Alfreda M. Duster [Wells 1970]), is popularized through William Greaves’s documentary, *Ida B. Wells: A Passion for Justice*, which features Toni Morrison’s skillful reading of Wells’s works (Greaves 1989). A revolutionary persona with no male peer, Wells’s pulpit candor decried the lethal manipulation of “rape” into a category of white victimization. She satirized white society for defining voluntary associations between black men and white women as “rape” while ignoring forced and violent associations between white men and black women.

Associated with the antilynching movement, although not generally recognized as the architect of small antiracist, profeminist organizations, Wells was maneuvered out of the founding leadership of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) by W. E. B. Du Bois and the white philanthropist Mary White Ovington (James 1997). Her memoir records regret that she was unable to influence the civil rights organization to better address the concerns of working-class and poor blacks most vulnerable to racist atrocities and exploitation (Wells 1970).

Unlike Frederick Douglass and Du Bois, Wells publicly asserts that Afro-Americans must mobilize for protections against white society and governance that hinder black equality and safety. She focuses on “terror” rather than on “inequality” to attack the horrors and fragility of lives and kinship destabilized or destroyed by theft, torture, rape, and murder. Wells courageously confronts the taboo of her era: sexual terror as a weapon of racial subjugation. *Southern Horrors* and *The Red Record* document that despite the charges of black sexual savagery against white females, most interracial rape linked to lynching materialized when black women and children were raped prior to and during lynching, as well as lynched with black males (who were sexually assaulted during lynchings) that assisted them in resisting

or avenging rape by white males. Lynching apologists obscured (for whites) the reality that interracial rape was a constant nightmare for black females yet rare for white females. Most interracial rapists of that era would be white males; a correlation between interracial sex crimes and extrajudicial executions would have rendered the majority of the lynched white. Wells illustrates how white male rapists were rarely punished:

In Nashville . . . a white man, Pat Hanifan, . . . outraged a little Afro-American girl, and, from the physical injuries received, she has been ruined for life. He was jailed for six months, discharged, and is now a detective in that city. In the same city, last May, a white man outraged an Afro-American girl in a drug store. He was arrested, and released on bail at the trial. It was rumored that five hundred Afro-Americans had organized to lynch him. Two hundred and fifty white citizens armed themselves with Winchesters and guarded him. A cannon was placed in front of his home, and the Buchanan Rifles (State Militia) ordered to the scene for his protection. The Afro-American mob did not materialize. (Wells 1892, 8)

After deconstructing the specious rationalizations for white terror—Negro domination of whites through the vote; Negro race riots; black male sexual assaults of white females—Wells notes that the accusation of black sexual savagery became the apologia for lynching (Wells 1895). She critiques white chivalry's mythology to argue that it garners "little respect from the civilized world, when it confines itself entirely to the women who happen to be white" (Wells 1892, 3). Noting their duplicitous prosecutorial performances, Wells accuses white males of centuries of interracial rape:

To justify their own barbarism they assume a chivalry which they do not possess. True chivalry respects all womanhood, and no one who reads the record, as it is written in the faces of the million mulattoes in the South, will for a minute conceive that the southern white man had a very chivalrous regard for the honor due the women of his own race or respect for the womanhood which circumstances placed in his power. (Wells 1892, 3)

Whites defined consensual sexual relationships between white women and black men as assaults punishable by the death of the black male lover. Wells redefines them as voluntary and represents white male sexual relationships with black females, en masse, as rape. The moral and legal prosecutors of sexual violence in Wells's era, white men were the least prosecuted and censured for sex crimes. In her August 4, 1894, post from Liverpool as a special correspondent for the anti-lynching Chicago newspaper *Inter-Ocean*, Wells writes: "The machinery of law and politics is in the hands of those who commit the lynching . . . it is only wealthy white men whom the law fails to reach" (Wells 1894, 9). In contrast to virtual immunity for elite white males, and the charges of "assault" for adulteries, she observes: "Hundreds of Negroes including women and children are lynched for trivial offenses on suspicion and in many cases when known to be guiltless of any crime . . . the law refused to punish the murderers because it is not considered a crime to kill a Negro" (Wells 1970, 157).

Locating sovereign powers—the right to decide who lives or who dies—within racial-sexual animus as the driving engine for economic and libidinal accumulation, Wells dethrones the sovereignty of white manhood, contesting its right to rule by identifying it as the rule of rapists and terrorists. She argues that the United States essentially has no binding social contract with Afro-Americans and so black Americans have no binding contract with the United States; and inverts the white nationalist script: governance so violent and pernicious has abdicated its right to rule (Wells 1970).

The rise of the Ku Klux Klan during Wells's childhood established a symbol of antiblack terror (a century later it appears as "Amerikkka" in Shakur's *Assata* [1987]), a signifier that wars against African descent people despite a civil war to preserve the union led to an undefeated confederacy, as interregional, intergenerational white bonds permitted and profited from lynching, the convict prison lease system, Jim Crow segregation, mass incarceration, police/prison rapes, and killings. In *The Birth of a Nation*, D. W. Griffith's cinematic championing of white supremacy through the violence of the KKK features southern aristocrats mourning President Abraham Lincoln's death and bonding and marrying with their northern peers who had defeated them in battle (Griffith 1915). Wells flips the script. Her etymology inverts the speech and meanings of racial sovereigns: "lynching," understood as "law-and-order" interventions, becomes "racist murders" by white rapists. The emperor's undress requires Afro-American flight through migration or fight through armed self-defense.

For Wells, lynching mystifies rape and derails prohibition and prevention. (When mob lynching gave way to legal prosecutions, black males were disproportionately imprisoned and executed for interracial rape charges on unsubstantiated charges.) Wells tramples the twin myths of white supremacy: sexually pure and racially civilized. She rejects the discourse of black deference as a form of civility, viewing the mandate to forgive atrocities as rendering Afro-Americans more vulnerable to racist aggression.

Wells's revolutionary rhetoric and strategies linked to nonelite blackness grew as did her vulnerability to attack and misrepresentation. She endeared herself to the working class and poor who benefitted directly from her militancy. But the poor rarely author the historical record read in the mainstream, and Wells speaks with their voice and grief, and channels the outrage that although terrorized they are criminalized by their assailants.

## "ACCUSED OF EVERY ALLEGED CRIME"

Without the historicity of Ida B. Wells, one might lose sight of what it means to be stripped of virtue and honor, humiliated, criminalized, and hunted. One might also forget the meaning of battling for honor and risking life to gain life. With sex crimes real or fabricated, the only offense that galvanized white consensus for racial terrorism, Wells attacked the lynch rallying call of "rape!"; used in only a fraction of lynchings, it was highly effective. Sexually denigrated under white supremacy, Wells publicly exposes the duplicity of the rape trigger: interracial rapes, a fraction of actual rapes, become the signifiers for "rape"; whiteness the signifier for "virtue"; blackness the synonym for "savage." Anomaly supplants norm. The sexual predator is collectivized and fetishized as black; the sexual protector as white; the racial subjugation of a race enslaved by exploitation and violence is thus validated. Rapes, unsurprisingly, remain underprosecuted.

Accused of aiding and abetting every crime attributed to blackness, Wells foments rebellion, disturbing the equilibrium of conventional political alliances. Her legacy is often viewed as a political anachronism given the passing of lynching. However, antiblack violence endures legitimized by both the continued criminalization of blackness and official condemnations of racist terror.

In June 2005, the US Senate passed Resolution 39, marking the official closure to lynching. The bipartisan agreement cemented lynching as a horrific historical artifact in the minds

of the public, and it was accompanied by the first government apology for the mass murder (the press used the verb “treatment”) of black Americans. Lynching survivors and the descendants of the slain viewed proceedings in the Senate gallery; lunched with Congress; posed for photos; and spoke with the press (Thomas-Lester 2005). *The Washington Post* quoted denunciations of lynching by Louisiana Senator Mary Landrieu: “There may be no other injustice in American history for which the Senate so uniquely bears responsibility”; and Virginia Senator George Allen “[lynching is] the brutal atrocity that plagued our great nation” (Thomas-Lester 2005). Georgia Congressman and former SNCC activist John Lewis, echoing Ida B. Wells to describe lynching as an extension of slavery, demanded an apology for slavery.

In August, following the failures of substandard Army Corps of Engineers levies and FEMA, Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco and President George W. Bush issued shoot-to-kill edicts for “looters” racially configured as black New Orleans residents abandoned after Katrina. That homicidal edict applied to black maternals seeking food, formula, and diapers but seemed to veer from whites seeking survival by “searching for” food and water. Antilynching governance had already plastered pictures of the death of lynching with the passage of Resolution 39; so the “treatment” of black Katrina survivors was barely perceived by society as an accusation of crimes to incite antiblack terror.

## “PLASTERED PICTURES ALLEGED TO BE ME”

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Both *Southern Horrors* and *The Red Record* document lynching atrocities, with the preface by abolitionist Frederick Douglass, who paints a prophetic portrait of Ida B. Wells:

DEAR MISS WELLS:

Let me give you thanks for your faithful paper on the lynch abomination now generally practiced against colored people in the South. There has been no word equal to it in convincing power. I have spoken, but my word is feeble in comparison. You give us what you know and testify from actual knowledge. You have dealt with the facts with cool, painstaking fidelity, and left those naked and uncontradicted facts to speak for themselves.

—Honorable Frederick Douglass (Wells 1892, 3–4)

Douglass’s praise introduced Wells to a greater public and protected her from her black detractors and perhaps fractured some white support for lynching. He praises her courage and boldness without directly recommending her raw confrontations with white domination through rape and terror, and her advocacy for armed self-defense—all disturbing to governance, whites, and some black elites. Contemporaries sought to dilute her radicalism. Yet her growing popularization after her death—in ways that avoid or engage her self-defense advocacy—suggests a political need for the political persona of Ida B. Wells. Still, misleading, dismissive portraits of Wells are produced. Wells’s attempts to simultaneously denounce rape and lynching are dismissed by feminist accusations that she is indifferent to the rapes of white women raped by black men due to an overemotional investment in the protection of black males. Unintentionally, these accusations converge with the charges brought by white racists—that she is an apologist for rape (James 1997). An antiracist profeminist and fierce antagonist to white rapists, Wells noted both white female complicity in lynching and the

courage of white women who “loved and lived openly with” Afro-American men (she makes no mention of same-sex interracial desire [Wells 1892]). A colleague of Susan B. Anthony, and a suffragist, as was her antilynching contemporary Mary Church Terrell, Wells’s militancy is caught in the crosshairs of divergent camps. In her own preface to *Southern Horrors*, Wells clearly takes on her detractors, asserting that her writing

is not a shield for the despoiler of virtue, nor altogether a defense for the poor blind Afro-American Sampsons who suffer themselves to be betrayed by white Delilahs. It is a contribution to truth, an array of facts, the perusal of which it is hoped will stimulate this great American Republic to demand that justice be done though the heavens fall. (Wells 1892, 4)

Wells’s activism exhibits strategic passion, militancy, and specificity; it is not bound by ideology, coalitions, institutional funding, or interracial alliances with white elites. The red record of lynching is not gender specific. The numbers of murdered males outnumber the number of females; the casualty count skews male but reflects an ungendered phenomenon that embodies collective punishment. Terror and community shape Wells’s political persona. Her revolutionary persona transcends gender lines, and so inaccurate portraits of her as indifferent to female victimization, counterfeminist, or a racial chauvinist are more easily fabricated.

A post-Reconstruction, independent, and radical young woman, Wells was coolly received by the more cautious and connected. Wells’s more influential peers included Du Bois, with a PhD from Harvard, and Terrell, with degrees from Oberlin. Their training and networks eluded Wells, who, orphaned at fifteen and largely self-taught as a journalist, never graduated from college. Du Bois, Terrell, and other black elites benefitted from the excitement and mass agitation that surrounded Wells’s incendiary critiques—she infamously declares that she will use the pistol in her handbag to sell her life dearly to a lynch mob (Wells 1970). Her data collection on lynching was daring (she would disguise herself as a black sharecropper and visit imprisoned black men and boys facing lynch mobs to take their testimonies). Both black elites and whites sought to excise or supplant her political persona from public memory, likely due to competitive proprietary politics and a desire to ban her praxis of radical autonomy and self-defense.

The production of icons from black struggles seems inevitable. The National Park Registry landmark status of Wells’s Chicago home and her 1990 US postage stamp (issued several years before the Malik El-Shabazz [Malcolm X] stamp) likely reflect the demands of black and antiracist citizens. Iconic desire though does not foreclose commoditization and false representations that veil the continuation of lethal repression.

## “ISSUED ORDERS TO SHOOT ON SIGHT AND TO SHOOT TO KILL”

Mr. Fleming [co-owner with Wells of the *Free Speech*] had to leave town to escape the mob, and was afterwards ordered not to return; letters and telegrams sent me in New York where I was spending my vacation advised me that bodily harm awaited my return.

Ida B. Wells

Wells grieved murdered kin and sought justice by risking her life in order to pass through fear into resistance. One lynching out of thousands created a catalyst for an editor, a har-binger of rebellion. The 1892 lynching of Thomas Moss, the father of Wells's two-year-old goddaughter, Maureen, was the murder that created a crusader; grief at the destruction of her surrogate family and rage at democracy's betrayals were Wells's rite of passage into revolutionary struggle. Wells recalls that the men lynched in Memphis had focused on hard work and economic wealth as a resolution to racial repression; "eschewing politics," they built the People's Grocery, which economically threatened a local white grocer, Barrett, who in turn physically threatened the black businessmen and led armed white plainclothes officers—who later claimed they were trying to serve a warrant—at night through the back alley toward the People's Grocery. Thinking they were under attack by Barrett, the men shot at the intruders, wounding several; realizing they were police, they ceased firing. Thirty-one businessmen were jailed as "conspirators," according to Wells, and a mob removed the president, manager, and clerk of the People's Grocery from jail to offer a "lesson of subordination" by lynching them (Wells 1892).

After authorities failed to act against the lynching of "some of their best citizens," black Memphis communities organized economic boycotts and mass migration to cripple the city's economy. Familiar strategies were deployed to undermine black resistance: white city leaders called upon the *Free Speech* to urge black patronage to return to white businesses. When the editors refused, white citizens passed resolutions condemning the lynching but did not prosecute the killers. Afro-American communities were so divided that Wells—using language Malcolm X would later codify into field-house slave conflict—distinguishes between the compromises of willing "slaves" and the militancy of activists demanding self-defense.

Wells writes that when official black leadership urged blacks to remain law-abiding, their "counsel was heeded and not a hand was uplifted to resent the outrage." *The Free Speech* responded differently. Following its editorials, Memphis's Afro-American community left for Oklahoma and elsewhere in droves. The white press began a campaign of character assassination of both those killed by lynching and those protesting it. Wells denounced southern whites in their passivity or acquiescence to lynching as accomplices just as guilty as lynchers. Wells's 1892 controversial *Free Speech* editorial prompted white city leaders to meet at the Cotton Exchange Building:

Eight negroes lynched since last issue of the *Free Speech* one at Little Rock, Ark., last Saturday morning where the citizens broke(?) into the penitentiary and got their man; three near Anniston, Ala., one near New Orleans; and three at Clarksville, Ga., the last three for killing a white man, and five on the same old racket—the new alarm about raping white women. The same programme of hanging, then shooting bullets into the lifeless bodies was carried out to the letter. Nobody in this section of the country believes the old thread-bare lie that Negro men rape white women. If Southern white men are not careful, they will overreach themselves and public sentiment will have a reaction; a conclusion will then be reached which will be very damaging to the moral reputation of their women. (Wells 1892, 1895, 3)

On May 25, Memphis's white *The Daily Commercial* quoted the last two sentences of her editorial and issued a threat: "Those negroes who are attempting to make the lynching of individuals of their race a means for arousing the worst passions of their kind are playing with a dangerous sentiment" (Wells 1892). *The Evening Scimitar* reprinted *The Commercial*

editorial, adding commentary of castration of the editorial author whom they presumed to be male:

If the negroes themselves do not apply the remedy without delay it will be the duty of those whom he has attacked to tie the wretch who utters these calumnies to a stake at the intersection of Main and Madison Sts., brand him in the forehead with a hot iron and perform upon him a surgical operation with a pair of tailor's shears. (Wells 1892, 4)

After the Cotton Exchange Center meeting, creditors took over *The Free Speech* and sold it, ending Memphis's influential organ of black radicalism. But Wells's writings had revealed the stains on white "virtue":

The miscegenation laws of the South only operate against the legitimate union of the races; they leave the white man free to seduce all the colored girls he can, but it is death to the colored man who yields to the force and advances of a similar attraction in white women. White men lynch the offending Afro-American, not because he is a despoiler of virtue, but because he succumbs to the smiles of white women. (Wells 1892, 2)

In *Southern Horrors*, under the category "self-help," autonomy and uncompromised resistance in self-defense evolve: "the Afro-American can do for himself what no one else can do for him. The world looks on with wonder that we have conceded so much and remain law-abiding under such great outrage and provocation" (Wells 1892, 15). Advocating economic disruption, Wells argues that black labor rehabilitated the South devastated by war and calls for strikes:

If labor is withdrawn capital will not remain. The Afro-American is thus the backbone of the South. A thorough knowledge and judicious exercise of this power in lynching localities could many times effect a bloodless revolution. The white man's dollar is his god, and to stop this will be to stop outrages in many localities. (Wells 1892, 15)

Viewing lynching as an extension of slavery, Wells's political persona bridges insurrections—antebellum slave rebellions; 200,000 black civil war combatants; southern civil rights Deacons for Defense and Justice; northern black liberation Black Panther Party. She observes:

The only times an Afro-American who was assaulted got away has been when he had a gun and used it in self-defense. 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 it should be used for that protection which the law refuses to give. When the white man who is always the aggressor knows he runs as great risk of biting the dust every time his Afro-American victim does, he will have greater respect for Afro-American life. (Wells 1892, 16)

For Ida B. Wells, US democracy's subjugation of black lives is revealed in its triumvirate: sex, money, and domination through violence. Rebellions thus focus on rape, economic exploitation, and lynching or police murder.

## CONCLUSION: RESURGENCE REBELLION

The heirs to Ida B. Wells's political persona include civil rights icons Ella Baker, Rosa Parks, and Mamie Till. Baker and Parks organized around the 1930s Scottsboro case of legal



lynching in which black Alabama youths were falsely arrested, convicted, incarcerated, and tortured for years for allegedly raping two white women (one testified in their defense, admitting that white young hobos having instigated and lost a fight on a train with black youths also traveling to seek work used false accusations of rape as racial revenge). With pliability lacking as middle-aged, seasoned activists, Baker and Parks as young women seemed malleable to NAACP liberal, legalistic directives. Baker worked as a field coordinator; Parks organized in Alabama in the 1940s on interracial rape cases with black women and girls who survived rape by white men (McGuire 2012). The NAACP attempted to harness Mamie Till, the grieving mother of fourteen-year-old Emmett, to its national agenda, but her rage moved her “off script.” Wells, rejected by the NAACP, could not be placed into the role of organizational spokesperson or consumable icon, roles that the revolutionary within Baker, Parks, and Till eventually rejected.

Today’s mass mobilizations against antiblack terror focus on government police forces, not on rape or lynching, although citizens are asked to see police as agents against violence and lynching. With immunity from most prosecution, police and prison guards, through rape, torture, and homicide, invoke the racial sovereign of past centuries. Wells’s critique of corrupt policing in 1900 New Orleans resonates today (Wells 1900; PBS Frontline 2015). In her adopted hometown, Chicago, a 1969 joint FBI-Chicago police task force predawn raid killed Black Panther Party members Fred Hampton and Mark Clark while they slept (the government later settled with survivors and families for \$1.8 million [Massiah 1990]). In 2007, Chicago’s Cook County paid \$19.7 million to survivors falsely imprisoned through a police torture ring largely targeting black men. Police terror inspired Chicago’s “We Charge Genocide” activism, an invocation of the 1951 petition to the United Nations on antiblack discrimination and lynching; and police rapes inspired the Black Women’s Blueprint UN tribunal on the rape of black women and girls. Wells documents these historical phenomena. Their continued reoccurrence despite financial compensation for grief and the purchase of justice with multi-million-dollar settlements (paid from tax revenues, an additional “black tax” on pain and suffering) fosters new forms of militancy.

The political persona of Ida B. Wells embodies a nongendered, maternal resilience in which individual sacrifice enables family and community. Before marriage and children, Wells appears in a long line of maternal women who change sacrifice into a form of political activism. Such sacrifice, disproportionately expected from and borne by radical black females, leads to self-harm if the capacity of revolutionary impulse and productivity exceeds the capacity for resiliency in recovery from trauma.

Intergenerational, systemic, or structural, lynching and torture alter epigenetics. Genocide, racial capital/rape, enslavement and poverty, dishonor and disrespect as environmental conditions rewire us not just for trauma but also for rebellion. In the face of scarcity, insecurity, and threats, we inherit potential disabilities as well as resiliencies that transform political experience. Wells commingles black suffering and rebellion. Some focus on suffering; others on militancy. Her public persona embraced both. This is the source of Ida B. Wells’s political power in radical agency manifesting in a quartet that spans generations.

Black Lives Matter activists don shirts emblazoned with “Assata Taught Me” and post selfies/photos online commingling their visages with that of a FBI political fugitive, a black revolutionary woman (James 2009). Wells, also a fugitive during her era, offers a template to question which teachings to follow or critique; how best to manage defiance, discipline, and fear within political lineage. Young activists never met Wells and will likely never meet Shakur, exiled in Cuba for decades. Yet they read, write, and analyze. They speak and

organize. Some are arrested. Some pray. In the mix of their political personas rests the quartet of Ida B. Wells, the ancestor mother who cautions: “The gods help those who help themselves” (Wells 1892; Braxton 1989).

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