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Race in Feminism:

Critiques of Bodily

Self-Determination in Ida B. Wells and Anna Julia Cooper

Stephanie Athey

Introduction

If, as Angela Davis has argued, “the last decade of the nineteenth century was a critical moment in the development of modern racism,” the same can be said of the development of modern feminism. Late nineteenth-century feminism, like institutional racism, saw “major institutional supports and ideological justifications” take shape across this period.¹ Organizations of American women, both black and white, were shaping political arguments and crafting activist agendas in a post-Reconstruction America increasingly enamored of hereditary science, prone to lynching, and possessed of a virulent nationalism. This essay takes a historical view of “womanhood,” bodily self-determination and well-being, concepts now at the heart of feminist thinking by women of color and white women. It explores the racist tenor of the 1890s and its impact on the concept of female “sovereignty” as it emerged in the speech and writing of four black and white intellectuals at the turn of the century. Reading work of Anna Julia Cooper, and Ida B. Wells in the context of Frances Willard and Victoria Woodhull, I explore the emergence of “sovereignty” or self-determination of the body as a racially charged concept at the base of feminist work.

A central tenet of twentieth-century feminist work, the concept of female sovereignty—women’s economic, political, sexual, and reproductive autonomy—was first defined and justified by late

nineteenth-century feminists, black and white, who either adopted or rejected the eugenic philosophies gaining circulation at the time.

Two intellectuals and race leaders of the 1890s, Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Anna Julia Cooper, offer race and gender analyses that deserve closer attention in this regard.² Wells, a journalist and anti-lynching crusader, and Cooper, essayist and educator, are exceedingly important because each offers a nuanced reconceptualization of this dominant ideology of femininity. To place their critiques of white womanhood and bodily self-determination in context, the writing and oratory of two prominent white women of the 1890s, Victoria Woodhull and Frances Willard will be analyzed.

Far from an arcane inquiry into abstract ideas that have now passed from the scene, a study of the early arguments points to the racist retentions in contemporary theoretical concepts—racist retentions that have practical implications for the ways in which feminists have organized and the ways in which feminism has reflected, not resolved, racial divisions. A racially charged notion of bodily self-determination has stymied progress in many areas of theory and activism including, for example, work in some of the most visible arenas of feminist struggle: the fight for reproductive health, anti-rape activism, sex and race discrimination law, and anti-racist activity.³ Moreover, a study of eugenic thinking and its permutations is important in the current political climate. Similar to the late nineteenth century, the late twentieth century and turn of the twenty-first have seen a resurgence of racially motivated hate crimes and an interest in measures related to “social hygiene,” that is, incentives to control the sexuality and fertility of the poor and females on state aid, an increase in anti-immigrant sentiment, and a narrow sexual abstinence approach to controlling the HIV/AIDS epidemic. All demonstrate an interest in controlling the sexuality and limiting the fertility and growth of certain populations within the United States and abroad. A new era of genetic determinism has been shaping scientific research agendas and fueling a popular receptivity to the “truth” of genetic explanation, even in the case of genetic hypotheses—such as those replayed perennially in publications like *The Bell Curve*—that have been disproved time and time again. A vigorous, progressive, anti-racist feminism is only possible if feminists and historians investigate the ways in which racist and imperialist notions of womanhood, well-being, and “the body” are still fundamental to

feminist conceptions of law, rights, and citizenship.⁴

Contemporary Perspectives

Black feminist historians and scholars note that some strains of feminism, while at times employing a rhetoric of interracial solidarity, remain partial or hapless allies of (when not deliberate obstacles to) the feminist theory and activism of women of color. Current debates over racism within feminism tend to focus on the exclusion of women of color in definitions of "women's experience" and on the "marginalization" of women of color in organizational structures and theoretical models devised by white women. Yet it is not enough to acknowledge a racist past within feminism or to build more "inclusive" structures if that does not, in turn, mean a reconfiguration of the political concepts that have been complicitous with white supremacy.

For example, many historians who study racism within feminism focus on the racist debates over woman suffrage that took place at the time of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. Their scholarship often spotlights the divided suffrage campaign, juxtaposing the so-called militant National Women's Suffrage Association with its more conservative sibling, the American Women's Suffrage Association—organizations that split in 1869 over the black male franchise and reconciled in 1890. When scholars of these predominantly white organizations consider race and racism within those bodies, they tend to focus on segregated membership practices, a tally of black or Native American women who were active participants, or white suffragists' doctrine of "expedience," which opted to forfeit interracial alliance in order to win Southern support for the white women's vote. In general, rather than see certain radical initiatives as thoroughly compatible with racism, or rather than view white feminist positions as creatures of white supremacy, many contemporary historians have attempted to salvage a usable radicalism in white feminisms and alternately isolate and condemn, apologize for, or ignore the racist tenor and racist intent of early feminist arguments.

It is crucial to recognize that the history of racist maneuvering within white feminist thought is much more than a problem of "exclusion" or "marginalization"—that is, a problem of segregated organizations or divisive suffrage strategy—but more deeply, as Anna Julia Cooper once said, the caste system of "woman's sphere" is held in

place by “codes and counter-signs of perfect subordination.”⁵ Racial codes and meanings are encoded in fundamental concepts of personal and national well-being, self-protection, and the ideal of autonomous womanhood.

Nineteenth-Century Feminisms: Correspondences Across the Color Line

A study of women's political activity at the turn of the century shows both black and white women resisting and revising dominant expectations of femininity as they struggled for physical safety, economic empowerment, suffrage, and equal access to education. Though the 1890s are considered by many to be a decade of sharp regression in terms of racial interrelations, this was a remarkable decade in terms of black women's organized political activity. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham notes that between 1880 and 1920, black women's clubs gained in strength and scope, agitating for “voting rights or equal employment and educational opportunities . . . develop[ing] a distinct discourse of resistance, a feminist theology.”⁶

A study of conjunctions and disjunctions among white and black intellectuals of the period demonstrates that the theory of black and white women in the 1890s is strikingly similar, attempting as it does to build political muscle in the face of legal disenfranchisement, economic insecurity, physical violence, and mutating sexual ideologies. Conceptions of bodily sovereignty, citizenship, sexuality, and “race” formed a common matrix of concerns. By and large it is the manner in which these terms are defined and the configurations into which they are cast that distinguishes the activist agenda of early black feminist politics from their segregated white counterparts. Hazel Carby charts the “collective production and interrelation of forms of knowledge among black women intellectuals” of the late nineteenth century and follows their theory across a number of media outlets—fiction, journalism, essay, and lecture.⁷ She emphasizes the continuity of black women's thinking, the links black female intellectuals forged between internal and external colonization, and the very different bases upon which black and white women promoted their political presence and action at the turn of the century. Yet, to examine the intellectual foundations of black activism during this period is to uncover the ways in which white supremacist hereditarian, domestic, and nativist

premises were both resisted and, at times, partially absorbed by black women's organizations. For instance, leaders of the Boston-based Women's Era Club fought against lynching and racial segregation while maintaining elitist and nativist positions on working-class culture, "foreigners," and an attendant interest in "social hygiene."⁸

Moreover, while white feminisms, by and large, pointedly excluded black women as objects of concern or companions in the struggle, their racially charged concept of the ideal "womanhood" was refashioned nonetheless, in black women's hands, as a tactical means of incorporating black "womanhood" into a white supremacist society. For instance, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham discusses the seminal role played by the northern, white American Baptist Home Mission Society (ABHMS) in the education of black leaders. The ABHMS created and nurtured Spelman College and other institutions increasingly geared toward the production of a "Black and female Talented Tenth." Brooks Higginbotham argues that Spelman women modeled a style of bourgeois black womanhood that was meant, by white and black leaders alike, to "redeem" the (black) "race." Equipped as educators and missionaries, students and graduates toiled to "uplift" rural black communities of Georgia and Alabama from the seeming abyss of rural black folk culture. Institutions like Spelman, then, supported in large part by the black church and community, became important mechanisms for assimilation—moving African-American women and families toward white ideologies of gender, nation, race, and class and distancing them from the black masses. These observations demonstrate the inadequacy of labeling any feminist philosophy as wholly conservative or progressive, "white" or "black."

Black leaders like Ida B. Wells and Anna Julia Cooper were aware of the racism implicit in concepts of "ideal womanhood" and bodily sovereignty, and they carefully countered them. They aimed to build theoretical foundations that might sustain racial justice as well as women's physical, economic, and political independence. The contribution of Wells and Cooper is made clear when viewed in relation to the idea of bodily self-determination developed by white feminists Victoria Woodhull and Frances Willard.

In contemporary scholarship, Victoria Woodhull—a two-time presidential candidate, an advocate of eugenics and woman's sexual freedom—and Frances Willard, who shaped the policy of the Women's

Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) for two decades, are chiefly remembered as strong advocates of woman suffrage and champions of women's political organization.⁹

Yet, Willard and Woodhull are often positioned at two ends of the feminist political spectrum. When historians discuss Willard's Women's Christian Temperance Union it is often as a foil to the more "radical" agenda of the suffragists. In studies of the WCTU, the Union has usually been treated as a pioneering grassroots feminist and philanthropic movement, interested in retaining a woman's sphere while expanding its reach through a moderate agenda of reforms or "social housekeeping."¹⁰ Just as historians have viewed suffrage organizations as radical in comparison to the Women's Temperance organization, Victoria Woodhull's doctrine of "free love" and her denunciation of exploitive capitalist industry has been seen as far more "radical" than most suffragists could bear.

Woodhull, especially, was an extreme voice in the 1890s. Hers was not a True Womanhood by any means, and her ideas on free love and socialism were not legitimated or promoted by the same broad political base that Frances Willard enjoyed as head of the WCTU. In fact, Victoria Woodhull's economic and sexual philosophy was far in advance of suffragist positions and in direct conflict with WCTU's doctrines of "home protection" and "moral purity." Though viewed, respectively, as more "radical" and "conservative" than most suffragist strategy in this period, Victoria Woodhull and Frances Willard offer excellent examples of disparate feminist projects founded on common eugenic philosophies. Both are important for precisely this reason. They demonstrate how a spectrum of seemingly incompatible feminisms mobilized the same connection between eugenic science, imperialism, whiteness, and the female body. Both forge a particularly feminist brand of white supremacy. They argue that white women's political and sexual empowerment and autonomy, their "sovereignty," is central to the national well-being. This was so because, both women argued, the white female's unique role as citizen was in retaining white supremacy in the face of challenges at home and abroad. The white woman retains white supremacy and strengthens the white race through social reform and "educated" sexual choice.¹¹

While Willard and Woodhull made the sovereign white female the guarantor of the sovereign white state, Ida B. Wells and Anna Julia

Cooper committed grave offense by inverting this formula and implying that white womanhood was, in fact, a threat to the nation. Wells and Cooper would argue that this very ideal of sovereign white womanhood could only be supported by a racist economic and social arrangement. White women's "bodily sovereignty" sanctioned violence and a lesser standard of living for black women and men and all those situated on the ethnic and economic margins of "whiteness." Therefore, Wells and Cooper both suggested that prevailing constructions of white womanhood not only endangered black bodies but also suppressed enormous economic resources, robbing the nation of talent and wealth. To challenge the racist freight of this white feminist ideal, each would reverse imperialist rhetoric and construct an *economic* rather than a eugenic vision of race and womanhood.

To draw the context for Cooper's and Wells's critiques of bodily self-determination, this essay also explores the racially encoded dimension of female sovereignty as it emerged across the 1870s and 1880s in white feminist arguments. This article looks at that racial content through two means: first, the rhetoric of "new abolition" by which Willard and Woodhull lay claim to the moral authority of abolitionists a generation before, even as they recalibrate those arguments to win the emancipation of the specifically white female body. Anna Julia Cooper repudiates this version of so-called "women's" emancipation and its tacit acceptance of economic exploitation and violence against black women. Second, the racial content of bodily self-determination is revealed in the specifically eugenic arguments that drove Woodhull and Willard's campaigns for white women's suffrage, sexual sovereignty, and safety. While Cooper and Wells adopt or reject eugenic arguments to different extents, both counter the racially charged notion of bodily self-determination with specifically economic appeals.

"New Abolition," (White) Bodily Sovereignty, and Violence against Black Women

Frances Willard served as president of the Women's Christian Temperance Union from 1879 to 1898. By 1881, Willard had persuaded the national WCTU to endorse women's suffrage. By 1883 departments of Hygiene and Heredity had been officially added to the program alongside departments such as Social Purity, Colored Work, Scientific Temperance Instruction, and the like. Her executive skills fashioned

temperance into a finely tuned philosophy of physical, mental, and moral well-being, and at the core of her philosophy was the belief that the well-being of "woman" stood in direct relationship to the well-being of the white race and the nation.¹² But as her writing shows, the term "woman" was carefully encoded as "white woman" and it was not simply—if such exclusions are ever simple—that the experience and oppression of women of color had been inadvertently "marginalized" or excluded in her feminist agenda, but rather that her vision of well-being necessitated a white supremacist structure of society.

Interestingly, both Willard and Victoria Woodhull used the popular rhetoric of "new abolitionism" to describe the emancipatory energies, which alone could bring the sovereign woman into being. Willard's ideal of sovereign womanhood, as stated in 1886, heralded a new epoch of chivalry and safety: the woman of the late nineteenth century could, like the knight-errant or the "circumnavigating" explorer, travel the world without threat of violence, and, like the knight-errant, she traveled with a mission in mind.¹³ In 1895, Willard rallied her constituents to a "New Chivalry" at a global level, exhorting female temperance crusaders to defend other females in the name of "social purity." She called for female "knights of the new Chivalry," to defend the honor of "disadvantaged" women or prostitutes against the Contagious Disease Acts in Britain, legislation that subjected public prostitutes to the "outrage" of forced medical examinations to ensure "public hygiene." She then extended WCTU protection to the white prostitute population in U.S. cities, or those in less settled regions adjacent to industries like mining and lumber.¹⁴

Willard announced sovereignty as a fundamental principle: a woman's "personality"—meaning body and sexual parts—was "sacred to herself":

Wherever the law makes it possible for any class of men to invade the personality of any class of women in the name of public safety, there these new abolitionists raise their white banner and fight to the death . . . there is one straight, sure path, and it leads to woman protected, honored, pure and regnant over her own person, purse and purposes of life.¹⁵

Significantly, to be "pure and regnant" over one's purse and purposes encoded *economic* as well as racial disparities into the sense of female "well-being." This is apparent in such handbook chapters as "How Do You Treat Your Laundress?" The temperance woman was more likely to have a laundress than to be one, and it was assumed that this laundress, implicitly Irish, was essential to the temperance woman's support and well-being. This very ideal of womanhood, therefore, implied a particular definition of bodily "well-being": a level of bodily health, political, sexual, social autonomy, and access to material resources that can only be sustained through the support and labor of others.

For Willard, to "reign" over one's purse, one must first be sovereign over one's body. Even in Willard's epoch of the new woman, some women still suffered violation. The temperance leader's rhetoric of new abolition and chivalry claimed the older, antislavery abolitionist discourse but encoded a shift in terms of who *required* protection, and who had to *provide* it. In reconfiguring "abolition" it is vital to note that Willard *disengaged* from the historical situation of black females.

Where one generation earlier, sympathy for the sexual vulnerability of the enslaved black female had driven reformist fiction and philanthropy, Willard's concerns seemed to exclude the hazards faced by post-emancipation black females.¹⁶ Willard, who often declared herself the child of abolitionist parents, reworked the old chivalric-abolitionist formula in which the female reformer "emancipates" herself by working on behalf of the enslaved and sexually vulnerable black female. Yet, the females Willard's new abolitionists sought to protect were implicitly white. Thus, Frances Willard's ideal still mobilized a discourse of sexual violation and protection, but the "new abolitionist" trope disguised the aggressively white racial dimension of Willard's ideal.

Using a similar rhetoric of "new abolition," Victoria Woodhull invoked the rhetoric of slavery and emancipation to excoriate the sexual subjugation of wives. She argued against marriage and for a woman's right to sexual activity *outside* of marriage.¹⁷ But in comparing marriage to slavery she refused any of the cross-race solidarity these comparisons forged one generation before: "Proportionally," she stated, "the instances of extreme cruelty in marriage are double what they were in slavery, and cover a much broader field, involving all the known

methods by which the body can be tortured and the heart crushed."¹⁸

When Willard and Woodhull rallied "new abolitionists," they pointedly marked their disconnection from the experience of black women. Black women of the 1880s and 1890s spoke out strongly on the continuing sexual violence against black women, condemning white men for "invading the personality" of "the class" of black women (to use Willard's euphemisms). In Willard and in Woodhull there is no acknowledgment of slavery's legacy, that is, no acknowledgement of continued assaults upon Willard's "emancipated" black countrywomen, assaults that black women such as Lottie Wilson Jackson, Ida B. Wells, Victoria Earle Matthews, and Anna Julia Cooper, consistently brought to the attention of white reformers.

Anna Julia Cooper, for instance, in her collection of essays entitled *A Voice from the South*, gave an eloquent assessment of the racial double standard instituted by Willard's "abolitionist" ideal.¹⁹ In 1886, the same year Frances Willard declared women can "circumnavigate the globe alone, without danger of an uncivil word, much less of violence," black educator Anna Julia Cooper delivered her appraisal of contemporary womanhood. Her title, "Womanhood, A Vital Element in the Regeneration and Progress of the Race" suggests that she too had a stake in connecting female sovereignty to the fate of the race. Like other tenuously "middle-class" black women of the Jim Crow era, Cooper was faced with increasingly violent conditions when traveling by train. Black clubwomen spoke directly on this subject and more obliquely on the daily threat of assault faced by less economically advantaged black females. Denouncing the *inability* of black women to travel safely within their own country, Cooper entered this "plea" on behalf of:

the *Colored Girls* of the South—that large, bright
promising fatally beautiful class . . . in the midst of

pitfalls and snares, waylaid by the lower classes of white
men, with no shelter, no protection.²⁰

Arguing for an organized effort like the White Cross League in England "for the protection and elevation of our girls," Cooper remarked, "English girls are dispirited and crushed down by no such all-leveling prejudice as that supercilious caste spirit in America, which cynically assumes 'A Negro woman cannot be a lady.'" Cooper's address

pinpointed the greater vulnerability of black women relative to white women as the unmistakable token of a double standard implicit in the concepts of "Lady" and the ideal of bodily sovereignty.²¹

Cooper's point is illustrated aptly by the experience of black suffragist Lottie Wilson Jackson's appearance before the annual convention of the National American Women's Suffrage Association (NAWSA) in 1899. Jackson proposed a resolution that decent and safe accommodations be provided for black women traveling by train; her resolution was tabled by the majority of white delegates, and Susan B. Anthony excused the maneuver, saying it was not the organization's place to interfere in "local customs" nor could the "helpless, disenfranchised class" of woman seek to affect railroad corporations by resolution.²²

Cooper often shared with the likes of Frances Willard key suppositions concerning femininity, civilization, and progress, and in one essay she offered high praise for the moral mission of the WCTU and women's special role in making the world home-like. But these sentiments were accompanied by severe criticism. Cooper singled out white women's politics for ridicule:

Lately a great national and international movement characteristic of this age and country, a movement based on the inherent right of every soul to its own highest development, I mean the movement making for Woman's full, free, and complete emancipation, has, after much courting, obtained the gracious smile of the southern woman—I beg her pardon—the Southern *lady*. . . she must not, in any organization she may deign to grace with her presence, be asked to associate with "these people who were once her slaves."²³

Cooper deflated the contemporary fracas over "social equality with the negro," deeming it a disingenuous inversion of the history of violence she had just recounted: "I might add that the overtures for association in the past history of these two races were not made by the manacled black man, nor by the silent and suffering black woman!"²⁴ In this essay and others in the volume, Cooper's comments on white women's political culture stressed the disparate standards of "womanhood" and bodily self-determination for white and black females. While the body of one was

legally protected, that of the other was legally violated.

It is the intersection between institutional racism and white women's progressive associations and their suppressive impact on an incipient black feminism that Cooper continually attacked in her essays. Cooper used a political metaphor to describe the race and class stratification of "women's sphere":

Shop girls and serving maids, cashiers and accountant clerks, scribblers and drummers, whether wage earner, salaried toiler, or proprietress . . . the working women of America in whatever station or calling they may be found, are subjects, officers, or rulers of a strong centralized government bound together by a system of codes and countersigns which, though unwritten, forms a network of perfect subordination.²⁵

Here, working women comprised a well-ordered state, a nation unto themselves in which a few *female* rulers, "queens of the drawing room," dictated what Cooper called the "law of caste," which sustained a "network of perfect subordination." Despite white women's attempts at segregated politics, Cooper argued, all women were already bound in a highly politicized collective, a nation that set the standard for the larger nation. Thus, this system of racist "codes and countersigns" by which elite white women ruled the social register had important ramifications in every sector and at every level of society.²⁶

That Cooper saw white women's political organizations as chief enforcers of this law of "caste" suggests the struggle for white woman's bodily sovereignty dictated a lesser standard of well-being for those around her. Cooper said as much when she enumerated the "network of perfect subordination" that bound all "shop girls" to the *sovereign* "queen of the drawing room," and when she linked segregated politics to the physical assault of black women. Cooper's acid critique held that in order to sustain the level of "well-being" essential to the white woman's sovereignty—privacy, honor, protection, wealth—the white woman had traditionally required a cast of numerous supporting persons who were exploited in various ways.

According to Cooper, therefore, the racism of white women's political practice in the 1890s was not simply a matter of segregated organizing. The "new abolition" elevated white bodily sovereignty and

simultaneously masked deliberate racist maneuvering in political philosophy as well as practice. This is important because white women's organizations saw that to achieve political power, women could not merely be "pure and protected," they had to be seen to be indispensable protectors of the nation in their own right. White women legitimated their quest for power and autonomy by proclaiming their unique ability to protect the nation against the "rapid multiplication" of "dark-faced mobs," the black and foreign populations whose very presence and potential economic and political power seemed to threaten white supremacy itself.

The theory and activism of black feminists can and should be seen in the context of this eugenic thought and nationalism shaping white women's arguments during this period. The following sections focus on how Victoria Woodhull framed her eugenic arguments for women's independence in order to show how Anna Julia Cooper counters the eugenic conception of "race" with an economic one. The essay then moves to a discussion of the eugenic and imperialist notions of white bodily sovereignty latent in the debates over lynching, notions which Ida B. Wells addressed head-on.

Degeneration of the Race in Victoria Woodhull

Like Frances Willard, Victoria Woodhull developed her model of proper womanhood within a white supremacist context, drawing on the language of hereditary science and social reform. Woodhull had an uneasy relationship with white suffrage and temperance organizations, and her own publication, the *Woodhull and Claflin Weekly*, constantly aligned her with the radical causes of her day. She published America's first English language translation of the *Communist Manifesto* and took strong stands on women's economic independence.²⁷ She drew the most fire, however, for her campaign against the "social evil" of legal marriage and her support for individual sovereignty in sex. Her doctrine of promiscuity or "free love" was derided by other white supporters of "women's rights." And yet, Woodhull's eugenic arguments press a theme familiar to white temperance workers and suffragists alike: white women's bodily sovereignty could maintain national sovereignty and racial supremacy. Victoria Woodhull understood that eugenic thought could offer powerful rhetorical tools in the fight for the empowerment of white women. For instance, Woodhull and other reformers of the period

including Willard, grabbed hold of the notion that the *female* citizen, like the “female cell” sought by some geneticists, held the key to conserving the “race” against the threat of degeneration.²⁸

In 1874, Woodhull published a lengthy “oration,” which inaugurated her campaign *against* marriage *in favor of* more pleasurable sex. She argued that freedoms for women meant improvements in the race: “Women cannot bear their *best* children except by the men they love best and for whom they have the keenest desire.”²⁹ Woodhull maintained that the selection between proper and improper sex had to remain in the realm of the woman’s individual judgment; marriage laws and the stigma of immorality had to be abolished and the matter “remanded back from law, back from public interference, to individuals, who alone have the sovereignty over it.” Woodhull insists that “to woman, by nature, belongs the right of sexual determination.”³⁰

During the 1870s and early 1880s, Woodhull steadily built her case that any threat to women’s sovereignty threatened the nation as a whole. If women were not free to choose their partners and to choose them well, the entire genetic material of the nation would be damaged. By 1888, Woodhull had become stridently nationalist in tone, condemning marriage law and women’s poor sexual selections as *crimes* against the nation.³¹ In 1891, she maintained that legal marriage, women’s economic dependence, and exploitative industrial and urban conditions all infringed on white women’s sexual self-determination and, therefore, promoted the “rapid multiplication of the unfit.”³² Woodhull focused her concern on eliminating the “unfit” *within* the white race.³³ She argued that the physical strength of the white population, not that population’s size, would ensure commercial and racial dominance in the face of rapid population growth in India and China.³⁴

For Victoria Woodhull, the “individual sovereignty” of the white female body was an economic, political, reproductive, and sexual program. That program was essential to racial and national wellbeing. Woodhull combined her forthrightly eugenic feminism with a socialist critique.³⁵ As a result, her racist program may seem paradoxically quite “progressive.” Her racism promoted a platform of progressive economic changes and white women’s bodily and political rights. She argued for equal distribution of wealth, improved living and working conditions, sex education, and, above all, for increased financial and sexual opportunities for “fit” females—that is, white females unaffected by the

"fatigue poisons" of the work place. She did not argue for restrictions on "unfit" whites or other races; she did not advocate imperialist military control of the "vast hordes" multiplying in the nonwhite world, she did not, to my knowledge, openly advocate lynching, nor did she insist on population controls that would regulate reproductive behavior. Yet, her program for the increased "freedom," well-being, and sexual self-determination of white women was simultaneously an argument for white supremacy: the betterment of white women would stave off the decline of Western civilization.

While it is beyond the scope of this essay to demonstrate this same eugenic argument at work across the body of Willard's writing, the eugenic feminism Woodhull was crafting existed as a submerged but no less powerful agenda in Willard's WCTU handbooks. Victoria Woodhull's embrace of eugenics as a nationalist imperative, like Frances Willard's eugenic engagements and her tacit approval of lynching as a necessity of empire, represented the core of their political analyses, not simply racist blind spots in otherwise "progressive" feminist agendas. White women, the argument went, could only reform and reproduce effectively for the benefit of the nation and race if they had complete and "sovereign power" over their bodies. Therefore, any threat to white women's sovereign power was tantamount to a threat against the nation and the white race itself.

Thus, in Frances Willard and Victoria Woodhull, female sovereignty, the basis of their feminism, was itself a racial concept. Their arguments for bodily rights were inseparable from doctrines of white supremacy. What is more, those bodily rights were predicated on certain class structure and a racially divided arrangement of society.

Degeneration vs. Depreciation: Cooper's Economic Response to Eugenic Feminism

As many white feminists like Victoria Woodhull were equating bodily sovereignty and "well-being" with white dominance at home and abroad, Anna Julia Cooper worked to create a different standard of well-being, a standard that countered some of these eugenic notions while embracing others. Cooper did this by direct engagement with African-Americans' status as economic commodities, consumers and producers. She shrewdly points the reader to the market as a means of

reconceiving racial "value" and arguments for women's political power.

A particularly provocative essay in this context is Cooper's 1892 "What are We Worth?"³⁶ Though it has gone unremarked, this essay makes direct response to the highly influential tract on convicts and heredity by Richard L. Dugdale published in 1875: *The Jukes: A Study in Crime, Pauperism and Heredity*. Attempting to document the inheritance of "criminal tendencies" over six generations, Dugdale computed what the Jukes family and their degenerate stock had cost the state of New York in assistance, medical costs, arrests, and confinement over the generations.³⁷

Cooper performs a clever appropriation of Dugdale's themes. She uses the study of generations to give authority to the study of history itself and to dismiss hereditary factors. She changes the rhetorical ground from a study of genetic "germs" or (implicity genetic) "seeds" to a study of the soil and those who own it. With this new emphasis on the American environment, in particular the behavior of Southern landowners, she foregrounds the impact of historical conditions on African-American achievement. Dismissing claims to inferior racial stock—"original timber as it came from African forests was good enough"—Cooper argues these materials have undergone poor cultivation and conditioning on American soil.³⁸ "There is no doubt that in the past two hundred and fifty years of working up, the material we now inherit has *depreciated* rather than enhanced its value."³⁹ The shift from "degeneration" to "depreciation" is crucial, because labor and investment, not genetic material, will be central to her redefinition of human value.

Cooper's calculation of racial value "may be made in the same way and on the same principle that we would estimate the value of any commodity on the market."⁴⁰ The appropriate questions about race in an urban wage-labor economy are: "What have you produced? What consumed? What is your real value in the world economy? How are you supplying the great demands of the world's market? This we may be sure, will be the final test by which the colored man in America will one day be judged."⁴¹ In parody of Dugdale's study, she figures the value of the labor or workmanship invested when transforming human "raw material" into a finished contributing worker. She diminishes the value of the hereditary "raw material" to almost nil. A newborn infant is, by these calculations, worth little. Only the labor

expended on crafting the child, and specifically the mother's labor, creates the child's value.⁴²

Cooper's "manufacture of men and women for the markets of the world," takes place first in the home, under the supervision of the female who presides there. Like her white contemporaries, Cooper is careful to assert women's control over reproduction. In contrast to eugenic discourse of Woodhull and Willard, however, sexual relations are neither a laboratory for the scientific propagation of the "race," nor is the home a eugenic citadel apart from the marketplace. Instead, the home becomes a foundry or small-scale manufacture where raw material is tooled for the future and where women have both economic and moral muscle, positioned as they are as managers and engineers. Women are at the foundation of the national well-being because of the quality of their work, not their race. Reproduction is still women's central contribution but its meaning extends to all forms of education. Women's "reproduction" is chiefly an economic contribution to the wealth of the whole nation, not a genetic contribution to a nation divided by race.

In these revised terms, Cooper casts black bodies as commodities that have a collective value and collective expense:

The number spoiled in the making necessarily adds to the cost of those who survive . . . If thirty-five colored persons out of every thousand are, from any cause whatever, lost in the making, the remaining nine hundred and sixty-five will have to share the loss among them . . . The colored gentleman who . . . lives in luxury is made to feel the death gasps of every squalid denizen of the alley and poor-house. . . . What our men of means need to do then is to devote their money, their

enlightened interest, their careful attention to the improvement of sanitation among the poor.⁴³

The bent of Cooper's argument is quite similar to Victoria Woodhull's—the poor health conditions of industrialized, urbanized populations are decreasing the collective "value" of the "race."⁴⁴ But where Woodhull spoke of *degeneration*, which posed a threat to white race dominance and national sovereignty, Cooper spoke of *depreciation*,

which affected the prospects and prosperity of all. Cooper's argument offered an economic motivation for cross-racial solidarity and women's advancement.⁴⁵ Her metaphors worked to stress the *interconnectedness* of men, women, and all races, not the sovereignty and supremacy of some persons over others.

As I've argued elsewhere, while Cooper deftly counters key eugenic concepts embedded in bodily sovereignty, she does not move entirely free of eugenic premises, and some of her essays reinforce those premises.⁴⁶ Throughout her essays, however, Cooper's emphasis on the power of white women's political organizations, on the racial double standard for economic and physical "well-being," and on the economic power of African-Americans provide the context in which to consider Ida B. Wells's ingenious use of those same core themes.

Bodily Sovereignty and the Crusade Against Lynching

Ida B. Wells's campaign against lynching provoked a dispute over the nature of black and white womanhood in both England and the United States. In the context of nineteenth-century women's organizations, the "lynching question" became an earnest contest over *which* bodies will be deemed sovereign, that is, which will receive protection by law and the benefits of civil society and which would not.

Wells organized against lynching on the national level in 1892, working with Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, Mary Church Terrell, and other black women journalists and educators. This antilynching campaign galvanized new federations of black women's clubs and church-sponsored associations, transforming local groups into a national force engaged on many fronts.⁴⁷ In 1895 Wells published a personal attack on Frances Willard and the Women's Christian Temperance Union in *A Red Record: Lynching in the United States*. Her chapter on Willard reprinted interviews and conference proceedings spanning the years 1890–94 in order to demonstrate that Willard had "gone out of her way to antagonize the [antilynching] cause."⁴⁸ With this publication, Wells challenged Willard and underscored the racial meanings inherent in bodily sovereignty.

As a black feminist, militant publicist, and organizer committed to urban and working-class needs, Ida B. Wells's career and her writing spanned several decades. Though many academic discussions of Wells focus solely on her work during the time of the antilynching campaign,

Wells's years of organizing included work on anti-Negro laws, black education and urban unemployment, and black female suffrage.

Wells's early columns, diaries, and the writing of mature years, as well as her lynching analysis should all be rethought in terms of the eugenic preoccupation of her time. As a journalist, avid reader, and public intellectual, she would have followed eugenic arguments as they were reported in the white and black press, including the eugenic debates among associates such as Cooper, T. Thomas Fortune, and DuBois. Despite the fact that she does not name and argue against specific eugenicists directly in the way Cooper does, Wells's work is pointed in its attack on basic eugenic premises.

Just as one cannot see Wells's work in isolation from these eugenic debates, one cannot see her work apart from the eugenic dimensions of white feminist discourse. Wells worked with white feminists and watched their careers; she was familiar with bodily sovereignty claims, and she paid attention when Frances Willard marshaled them against the black vote and in defense of lynching.

In 1890, upon returning from the WCTU annual convention held in Atlanta, Georgia, the first time a southern state had hosted the national meeting, Frances Willard gave an interview to the *New York Voice*, a temperance publication. In the interview, Willard described her impressions of the South and spoke of voting rights for black men. Her position echoed that of the newly reconciled National American Women's Suffrage Association—namely, that white women should be granted the vote in order to maintain white rule.⁴⁹ Willard had advocated the vote for women since 1876, but she put this radical notion before her conservative constituency as the “home protection ballot.” Her artful semantic maneuver was meant to demonstrate that women's vote was by no means a threat to the established order, instead, the ballot was a “weapon of protection” against other threats entirely. Even in her first statement on the vote, Willard was precise about those threats: the “tyranny of drink” and “infidel foreign populations.”⁵⁰

By 1890, Willard was working steadily to pass woman suffrage planks in both the Farmer's Alliance and the Prohibition Party.⁵¹ But in the 1890 interview, Willard avoided direct comment on the ballot for women and instead developed an argument for white voting supremacy. She effectively united white women and voting white males, North and South, in an inclusive white “we”: “we have wronged

ourselves," she stated, by granting the ballot to the "unreasoning and unreasonable" "dark-faced mobs" of the South and the "alien" illiterates who "rule our [northern] cities today; the saloon is their palace, and the toddy stick their scepter":

The Anglo-Saxon race will never submit to be dominated by the Negro so long as his altitude reaches no higher . . . than the saloon. . . . Half-drunken white roughs murder them at the polls, or intimidate them so that they do not vote. But the better class of people must not be blamed for this, and a more thoroughly American population than the Christian people of the South does not exist. They have the traditions, the kindness, the probity, the courage of our forefathers. The problem on their hands is immeasurable.⁵²

According to Willard, "Christian Southerner," "thoroughly American" and "Anglo-Saxon" are synonymous terms. Despite the chaos provoked by the upstart Negro and the response of white roughs, this "better class" of people marshal a fortitude reminiscent of "*our* forefathers," the ones who, presumably, also built a nation in the face of lawlessness and violence, that is, in the face of a frontier populated by American Indians.⁵³

The Anglo-Saxon race and American nation face not only black and foreign-born illiteracy and drunkenness, but also their "rapid multiplication." Implicitly and syntactically, rapid multiplication is connected to excessive appetites for sex and alcohol:

The colored race multiplies like the locusts of Egypt. The grog-shop is its center of power. "The safety of woman, of childhood, of the home, is menaced in a thousand localities at this moment, so that the men dare not go beyond the sight of their own roof-tree." How little we know of all this, seated in comfort and affluence here at the North, descanting upon the rights of every man to cast one vote and have it fairly counted.⁵⁴

The risk to the Anglo-Saxon race and nation posed by black appetites culminates in the certain violation of "woman, of childhood, of the home," and Willard's remarks situate the civilized North as imperial

center and the unruly South as colonial outpost. In doing so, Willard invoked a time-honored distinction between what was permissible under the sway of an orderly metropolis and what is permissible in the outlying regions, the frontiers or the colonies. Willard implied that lynching, or murder at the polls, was a necessity of empire.⁵⁵ Meanwhile by deriding these "mobs" of nonwhite men, she designated temperate, literate, middle-class white females superior candidates for the franchise.⁵⁶

For all these reasons, when Willard's *New York Voice* interview on the black male franchise appeared in 1890, it produced an outcry from the black press, an outcry that Wells, as secretary of the National Press Association and editor and co-owner of the *Memphis Free Speech* well remembered.

Though Wells grew to be a determined critic of the version of white female honor and of white civilization that Willard espoused, Wells's work retained both "honor" and "civilization" as operating concepts.⁵⁷ Wells's girlhood diaries and first news columns demonstrate her early investment in the "uplift" model of black womanhood. In "Woman's Mission," she argues that black women's fidelity to the bourgeois code of respectable behavior would spur race progress and improve the status of African-Americans in the United States. Female moral bearing would assist African-Americans "to attain a level in the status of civilized races."⁵⁸

This dominant notion of "race progress" was reinforced consistently in Wells's own life, and her 1887 diary reflects this. Here, she indicates that the defense of women's moral reputation could justify almost anything. She records an incident in which a boy who boasted of his adulterous liaison with a woman in the community was killed by the woman's brother. Wells writes:

It seems awful to take a human life but hardly more so than to take a woman's reputation and make it the jest and byword of the street. One is strongly tempted to say his killing was justifiable.⁵⁹

Because this sentiment condones the type of "justifiable" killing that Wells will condemn so harshly five years later, the diary entry gives one pause. For Wells, the most grievous offense here is the public and verbal attack on a woman's sexual reputation.

But in 1892, Wells' proximity to the lynching of three Memphis grocery owners and threats on her own life forced her to reexamine her faith in race advancement through bourgeois codes of good behavior.

Wells's investigation of this lynching and others to come revealed the collaboration of local institutions in lynching events, and her evidence revealed repressive economic and political energies operating behind the smoke screen of vigilante justice: lynching was not a check on black "degeneracy" but on black advancement and success. Often carried out in conjunction with mass arrests and the looting and destruction of black-owned businesses or homes, lynching was an obvious attempt to buy or squelch the black vote, restrict black business, and ensure black consumers for white goods and services.⁶⁰

Her work increasingly embeds these economic findings within longer historical accounts of American race relations. In "How Enfranchisement Stops Lynchings," Wells defines African-Americans as "wealth producers." She contrasts the early British settlers' relative inefficiency with the undeniable productivity of enslaved Africans, workers who "created vast wealth for the masters and made the United States one of the mighty nations of the earth." After emancipation, however, blacks' increasing economic success and model behavior led only to increased violence against them:

But the more lands and houses he acquired . . . the less protection is given. . . . The more complete the disenfranchisement, the more frequent and horrible has been the hangings, shootings, and burnings.⁶¹

To demonstrate that the violence bore no connection to black behavior was to expose the discourse of black degeneracy as a sham. Wells here designates black *economic production* and the struggle to control that production—not a struggle to control Negro degeneracy—as the motive for lynching terror.

As a consequence, Wells fashioned a campaign that encouraged economic retaliation. Wells made of herself a news event and used that media access to encourage economic retaliation. Following the 1892 lynching in Memphis, she used her position as editor and part-owner of the *Memphis Free Speech* to convert a committed readership into an activist, economic block. Her editorials endorsed what amounted to an economic pullout from Memphis. She urged black citizens of Memphis

to boycott the streetcar lines and to "save our money and leave a town which . . . takes us out and murders us in cold blood when accused by white persons." ⁶²

So too, Wells's two extended lecture tours through Scotland and England asked British business opinion to do the work black economic power could not do alone. On her second lecture tour, Wells served as a correspondent to the Chicago *Inter-Ocean*. Understanding the dependence of U.S. exporters on British industry, she began her reports with a discussion of the manufacturing interest of Liverpool or Manchester before detailing the success of the antilynching campaign in that vicinity. ⁶³

Her pamphlets, articles, and eventually her autobiography all reprint items in the London press that denounce lynching for commercial reasons. Wells counted as a great victory the fact that even the *London Times*, a daily that launched the most "bitter attacks" against Wells's work, acknowledged the southern states were poor prospects for British investment:

Without in any way countenancing the impertinence of the "anti-lynching" committee, we may say that a state of things in which the killing of Negroes by blood-thirsty mobs is an incident of not unfrequent occurrence is not conducive to success in industry. ⁶⁴

Certainly Wells's lectures relied upon the magnificent British appetite for civilizing missions. By exposing "barbarity" in the United States, Wells offered up a new mission field to the reformers. But beyond *moral* indignation, her tours gathered the support of leading British newspapers and pointed to the potential for economic pressure that could move white U.S. audiences to receive her lectures and analysis.

To foreground the economic and political suppression that motivated lynching in this way, Wells's had to first defuse the volatile sexual myths and justifications that excused lynching. She focused on lynching's wholesale attack on black manhood as well as its double messages concerning female sexuality and bodily sovereignty for white women and for black. Indeed, her 1894 analysis in *A Red Record* argued that lynching ritual supported the "outrage" to black or "colored" girls and women while purportedly protecting white women from similar assaults. This conviction was no doubt deepened as a result of her travels

in England, which featured several exchanges with the moral standard-bearer for "white womanhood," Frances Willard.

When Wells began her antilynching lectures in Britain in 1893, her trip coincided with Frances Willard's stay in London. Willard had become a popular figure in Britain; she was regarded as the moral leader of her nation and her lectures drew large crowds. The British audience, shocked by Wells's presentation of lynching facts and statistics, quizzed her as to the attitude of Frances Willard, "The Uncrowned Queen of American Democracy." Wells could at that time offer no documentation, saying only that the silence of Willard's organization enabled lynching, and Willard's 1890 interview had condoned it.⁶⁵

When Wells returned for a second lecture tour the following year, she carried Willard's 1890 interview with her and printed it in *Fraternity*, the paper of Britain's first Anti-Lynching Society, a group Wells had helped establish on her first tour in 1893. Willard had remained in London during the interim and was still the guest of Lady Henry Somerset when the issue of *Fraternity* appeared in May 1894. Somerset tried unsuccessfully to suppress the issue, even threatening to prevent Wells from receiving any speaking engagements should the issue appear. The day immediately following *Fraternity's* publication, the *Westminster Gazette*, the "leading" London afternoon daily, carried Willard's response. In an interview conducted by her British host, Lady Henry Somerset, Willard explained that her 1890 statements had to do with the ballot, not lynching; she then proceeded to reiterate elements of that 1890 interview verbatim, a tactic that merely reinforced her earlier pronouncements.

In the *Gazette*, Willard for the first time publicly denounced execution without due process of law; however, she also straightforwardly connected American lynching with frontier necessity and British imperialist strategies. She thereby made plain the connection between lynching, empire, and white rule that existed by implication only in her 1890 statements on the ballot:

I do not think [these outrages] originated [in the Southern states] but rather on the borders as we called it between civilization and savagery in the far West; nor do I think these methods are by any means confined to my own country . . . in the early history of Australia and in the gold fields of Africa, as in the gold and silver mines

of the Rockies and Sierras, the people constituted themselves both judge and jury, and woe betide the offender who violated the rough standards of conduct. . . It is difficult for those who hear these things, to understand that they are dealing with sixty-five millions of people scattered over a continent, and it is really much the same as though London was being held responsible for outrages in Bulgaria.

Willard dismisses lynching as an uncouth trapping of America's colonial past. Yet her comparison calls attention to the United States' emergence as an imperial power in such a way as to suggest lynching is not merely a passing custom but rather an ongoing necessity of empire. Somerset endorsed the imperial comparisons, excusing Willard's objections to one man one vote by reminding London readers "that the English refuse practically all participation in the Government to the native races in India. . . . In short, we draw far more distinctly the color-line." The interview concluded with Willard's warm expectation that her British audience "may be trusted to guard my reputation" in the face of Wells's accusations.

Ida B. Wells offered a rebuttal in the next day's *Gazette*. She was quick to note that Willard's concern for reputation took precedence over the wanton racial violence that her comments endorsed. Wells added that it was hypocrisy to bemoan the drinking of southern black men when "there is not a single colored woman admitted to the Southern WCTU." She concluded:

The fact is, Miss Willard is no better or worse than the great bulk of white Americans on the Negro questions. They are all afraid to speak out, and it is only British public opinion which will move them, as I am thankful to see it has already begun to move Miss Willard.⁶⁶

In this London forum, Wells was most generous in her explanation for "Miss Willard's Attitude"; she blamed a "fear of speaking out" and Willard's desire to guard her "reputation." Wells was keenly aware, however, that while perhaps no better or worse than the "great bulk" of white Americans, Willard's opinions were far more influential than most.

In *A Red Record*, printed in Chicago the following year and distributed nationally, Wells provided a much keener critique of the power of white women's speech and the place of white female sexuality, honor, and reputation in the "rapine, shooting, hanging and burning" of black Americans.⁶⁷ Wells's lengthy analysis was the first of its kind, using press accounts and statistics gathered by *white* newspapers to expose the motives behind mob violence.

To make her case, Wells had to debunk and literally reconstruct the sexual narrative inscribed on lynched bodies. She refuted the "threadbare lie" that black men rape white women, and she thereby dismissed the cover story that excused white male violence as a form of chivalrous defense of women's honor. For evidence debunking the rape charge against black men, she pointed to the news record. For evidence refuting the chivalry of white men, she pointed to the record of socially sanctioned violence against black women, or what Wells called "the record, written in the faces of the million mulattoes in the South." Reading this record correctly, no one "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."⁶⁸

For Wells, the existence of the mulatto population was an index to slave rape by white slaveholders and the continued post-Emancipation abuses against black women. In her autobiography, Wells discusses the calculated effect of introducing black female experience into the lynching debate:

All my life I had known that such conditions were accepted as a matter of course. I found that this rape of helpless Negro girls and women, which began in slavery days, *still continued without let or hindrance, check or reproof* from church, state, or press until there had been created this race within a race--and all designated by the inclusive term of "colored." I also found that what the white man of the South practiced as all right for himself, he assumed to be unthinkable in white women.⁶⁹

Wells here directly targets the eugenic discourse of degeneracy and rapid multiplication. A history of white men's coercion, not of black female (or male) degeneracy has multiplied the "colored" race--"a race

within a race." To put this most provocative point another way, *white* male degeneracy is to blame for "the rapid multiplication of the *Negro*."

As described by Wells, the lynching scene does not tell a simple tale of social Darwinian aggression or of (white) civilization's impassioned struggle to mete out justice and protection in the face of barbarity. Nor is lynching a sign of the mayhem produced when degenerate elements of both races collide, when in Frances Willard's terms, "white roughs" meet "dark-faced mobs." Instead, in Wells's depiction, rape and lynching demonstrate carefully organized and executed routines of suppression. The (white) church, courts, businesses, newspapers, reform societies—all are in full (and not always tacit) support of racist violence. This is to say that white "degeneracy" and "rapid multiplication" are practices orchestrated and protected by so-called civil institutions. Rape and lynching of the black population is calculated suppression that enables the economic and political advancement of white elites.

Critics have discussed how Wells's rhetoric inverts the lexicon of "civilized and savage." But her analysis of "white savagery" and white racial violence actually unravels the eugenic discourse of degeneracy and regeneration. If whites are behaving like *savages* and like *savvy businessmen* at the same time, then white racist "savagery" is shown to be a time-worn business practice central to white civilization and white economic progress.

This is why Wells concludes that this kind of coordinated economic and political exploitation cannot be countered by a "civilized race" of black citizens. Bourgeois respectability on the part of African-Americans is simply irrelevant to the violence against them. Instead, violence must be met by an organized race of black "wealth producers": "By the right exercise of *his power as the industrial factor of the South*, the Afro-American can demand and secure his rights." For Wells, the "right exercise" of power means economic leverage used to force the accountability of so-called democratic institutions, especially the leverage of the boycott, but also the ballot and armed confrontation. In the last instance, rifles might protect and achieve what respectability could not.⁷⁰

By pointing to the economic and political function of racial violence, and by bringing black female historical experience into clear view, Wells dramatically illustrates the extent to which current debates

on eugenics and American civilization were contingent on the erasure of black women's experience. The fact of ongoing systemic rape of black women did not enter the calculus for African-American race conservationists or amalgamationists. Among whites and far too many black men, race mixing was believed to be a lower-class phenomenon attributable to black women's low morals. As was the case with Willard and Woodhull, white female eugenicists deliberately promoted this view.

When Wells called attention to the rape of black women, therefore; she not only exposed the behavior of white men, but that of white women also. The "faces of the million mulattoes of the South" were also an affront to the white female's vaunted reputation for virtue. Honor was dubious if virtue meant to blind oneself to unfaithful husbands and grandfathers, and purity was more dubious if purity meant "white" genealogies had to systematically suppress kinship with the brown offspring of slave abuse and incestuous rape. By leveling a rape charge against white men and denying the myth of the black rapist, Wells indicated white women had been tacit partners to the betrayal of their own marriage bonds. More importantly, she charged that white women harbored transgressive sexual desires themselves. Wells wrote:

What I have said and what I now repeat . . . is, that colored men have been lynched for assault upon women, when the facts were plain that the relationship between the victim lynched and the alleged victim of his assault was voluntary, clandestine and illicit.⁷¹

Wells's pamphlet proceeded to back this up with examples of white women who recanted their initial testimony against innocent black lovers. Wells also offered evidence of white women who consented to "clandestine and illicit" relations with black men, yet later, when faced with exposure termed the liaison "rape" in order to protect themselves.⁷² By linking the sanctioned abuse of black females and the transgressive desires of white females, Wells charged the lynching record with a new tension—that between the conflicting and competing constructions of white and black womanhood. This tension invested the lynched body with an entirely new and dangerous meaning—one which Frances Willard saw and refused.

While in London, Willard met Wells's challenge to white female honor obliquely. Yet, back on American turf, Willard raised Wells's

offense more directly, using her 1894 annual address before the national WCTU to do so. In that speech she scolded Wells for "statements" that were handicapping efforts to ban lynching, saying: "In the statements made by Miss Wells concerning white women having taken the initiative in *nameless acts between the races*, she has put an imputation upon half the white race in this country that is unjust."⁷³ Frances Willard's need to defend "half the white race" signaled that her primary allegiance was to her race. Defending *all* white women against this charge of sexual desire indicated how "white female purity," "bodily sovereignty," and "white supremacy" were intimately entwined in Willard's political program. Her words also highlighted the "irony" of a black woman charging a powerful white woman, the moral leader of her nation, with immorality.

Wells was present at this Cleveland convention, helping to prepare an antilynching resolution, which, in the wake of their London spat, Willard, had promised to back. Yet, following the insult of the president's annual address, Wells asked Willard to retract her remarks, and Willard sidestepped the issue. Wells stated:

I had a private talk with Miss Willard and told her she had been unjust to me and the [anti-lynching] cause in her annual address, and asked that she correct the statement. . . . Her reply was that I must not blame her for her rhetorical expressions—that I had my way of expressing things and she had hers. I told her I most assuredly did blame her when those expressions were calculated to do such harm. . . . It is little less than criminal to apologize for the butchers today and tomorrow to repudiate the apology by declaring it a figure of speech.⁷⁴

Wells accused the temperance leader of cunning rhetoric, calculated to do harm. Each orator knew that her own "figures of speech" were deeply rooted in a fight over female citizenship, race privilege, and political priorities. In this private conversation Willard parried Wells's anger by shifting political conflict into the register of proper speech. Wells's sharp rejoinder linked speech to power and violence, underscoring the power of a white woman's word, a significant sub-theme in *A Red Record*. Wells attributed the loss of a resolution against lynching to Willard's remarks at that convention. She wrote:

A resolution against lynching was introduced. . . and then that great Christian body, which in its resolutions had expressed itself in opposition to the social amusement of card playing, athletic sports and promiscuous dancing; had protested against the licensing of saloons, inveighed against tobacco, pledged its allegiance to the Prohibition party, and thanked the Populist party in Kansas . . . wholly ignored the seven millions of colored people of this country whose plea was for a word of sympathy and support for the movement in their behalf. The resolution was not adopted, and the convention adjourned.⁷⁵

Wells's litany of resolutions revealed her interest in the power of the white woman's speech as well as silence. That the debate between Wells and Willard received such careful attention in *A Red Record* pointed to the extent to which Wells was willing to expose the eugenic and imperialist premises latent in the white ideal of "female bodily sovereignty" and to count that feminist project as part of the red record of violence against black persons. In its place Wells's feminism conceived of a collective self-determination based in economic strength; that power alone could secure civil protections for the body.

A study of Victoria Woodhull, Frances Willard, Anna Julia Cooper, and Ida B. Wells indicates that it can, at the least, be deeply divisive and damaging for contemporary feminists to fight for an unexamined and a historical notion of sexual self-determination or bodily rights. We might gauge the contemporary relevance of Cooper and Wells's critique of bodily self-determination by examining, for instance, the extent to which society in general and feminist politics, in particular:

- 1) continue to promote a standard of autonomy and well-being for some that can only be sustained through the efforts of numerous supporting persons, persons who by nature of their supporting role are relegated to a lesser standard of health, wealth, and empowerment, and
- 2) continue to use an ideologically, culturally and racially bound notion of female "freedom" and "autonomy" to promote or excuse the economic, political, and military domination of populations at home and abroad.

While on the one hand, we must assess the white supremacist legacy borne in such theoretical concepts with care, on the other we must deliberately study and build from the theory and strategies of Cooper, Wells, and others who attempted to ground women's empowerment and social justice by other means.

Notes

1. Angela Davis, *Woman Race and Class* (New York: Random, 1981), 117.
2. Ida B. Wells remained an active and influential political figure well into the twentieth century. She married during the course of her career and hyphenated her professional name to indicate that change. Because the writing and organizing discussed here took place under the professional name Wells, the essay reflects that fact.
3. See Stephanie Athey, "Reproductive Health, Race and Technology: Political Fiction and Black Feminist Critiques, 1970s–1990s," *SAGE Race Relations Abstracts* 22.1 (February 1997): 5–29 on the continuing impact of racist and eugenic concepts of self-determination of the body on the fight for reproductive freedom. Historic alliances with the American eugenics movement still quite directly guide the population control agenda of Planned Parenthood International. These alliances indirectly promote a narrow focus on abortion rights in a battle against reproductive regulation that should include contraceptive development and experimentation, prenatal care, infant mortality, sterilization abuse, surrogacy, the race- and class-based distribution of adoption, child care provision and domestic work, access to abortion, and punitive contraception in judicial sentencing. Also Loretta J. Ross, "African-American Women and Abortion: 1800–1970," in Stanlie M. James and Abena P. A. Busia, eds., *Theorizing Black Feminisms: The Visionary Pragmatism of Black Women* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Laurie Nsiah-Jefferson, "Reproductive Laws, Women of Color, and Low-Income Women," in Nadine Taub and Sherrill Cohen, eds., *Reproductive Laws for the 1990s* (Clifton, N. J.: Humana Press, 1989). On discrimination law, see Jennifer Wriggins, Marlee Kline, and Angela Harris on how racist foundations have weakened some feminist attempts to redress sexual coercion and sex discrimination in legal theory. Jennifer Wriggins, "Rape, Racism and the Law," *Harvard Women's Law Journal* 6,, (1983), 103–41; Marlee Kline, "Race, Racism and Feminist Legal Theory," *Harvard Women's Law Journal* 12 (1989), 115; Angela P. Harris, "Race and Essentialism in Feminist Legal Theory," *Stanford Law Review* 42, no. 3 (February 1990), 581–616.

4. I trace the engagement of early black and white feminisms with eugenic thought and look more deeply at the ramifications for contemporary feminist theory and action in Stephanie Athey, "Eugenic Feminisms in Late Nineteenth-Century America: Reading Race in Victoria Woodhull, Frances Willard, Anna Julia Cooper and Ida B. Wells," *Genders* 31 (Spring 2000) <http://www.genders.org>.
5. Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South, By a Black Woman from the South* (1892; reprint, New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 86.
6. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 2.
7. Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).
8. Emilie Townes, *Womanist Hope, Womanist Justice* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), 96.
9. See Ellen Carol DuBois, *Feminism and Suffrage: The Emergence of an Independent Women's Movement in America, 1848-1869* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978); Ellen Carol DuBois, "The Radicalism of the Woman Suffrage Movement, Stanton-Anthony Wing, 1867-1875," in Zillah Eisenstein, ed., *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979); Lani Rakow and Cheris Kramarae, *The Revolution in Words: Righting Women, 1868-1871* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Ruth Bordin, *Woman and Temperance: The Quest for Power and Liberty, 1873-1900* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1990); Joseph Gusfield, *Symbolic Crusade: Status, Politics and the American Temperance Movement* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1966). See Nancie Caraway's critique of Ellen DuBois. She writes: "Indeed, DuBois poses the break with abolitionism as the prerequisite for the emergence of an authentic independent, women's movement in the U.S." in Nancie Caraway, *Segregated Sisterhood: Racism and the Politics of American Feminism* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 244, footnote 95.
10. Joseph Gusfield's *Symbolic Crusade* offers an exception to this trend; he places the broadly conceived temperance movement within the context of late nineteenth-century racism and nativism.
11. Because acquired habits and behavior were believed to alter one's genetic constitution, both behavioral reform and sexual choices had a bearing on reproduction and the quality of the racial stock passed to the next generation.
12. Willard's biographer Ruth Bordin suggests Willard had committed her life to "the woman question" one year prior to the founding of the WCTU in 1874. Temperance provided the right national vehicle for her endeavors.
13. Frances Willard, "How to Win: A Book for Girls," in Carolyn DeSwarte Gifford, ed., *The Ideal of the "New Woman" According to the Woman's Christian Temperance Union* (New York: Garland, 1987), 48-9. A concept of chivalry and "New Chivalry" became important in her work years earlier when Willard was

president of Evanston College for Ladies in Chicago. Willard, *The New Chivalry*, speech given March 3, 1871, typescript.

14 See Bordin, *Woman and Temperance*, 110. Bordin cites the minutes of the 1888 convention, which demonstrate truly slave-like conditions for prostitutes adjacent to Wisconsin pineries. Dr. Kate Bushnell found girls “kept in stockaded dens guarded by bulldogs . . . law officers tracked down escapees, and in one instance a ball and chain was used to keep a girl from running away” (Bordin, *Woman and Temperance*, 141–42).

15. Frances Willard, “Do Everything: A Handbook for the World’s White Ribboners” in Carolyn DeSwarte Gifford, ed., *The Ideal of the “New Woman,”* 50, 101.

16. This change in white women’s discourse of sexual violation and protection—but not the pattern of such violations—is a clue to the ongoing reconfiguration of white women’s political strategy and its reconstruction of “race” in this period. In this scenario of protection, for instance, to describe *who requires* protection, Willard looked outside of the American context and pointed to British prostitution. In designating *protectors*, Willard hails temperance workers as “new abolitionists.” Because the emancipation of “any class” leads to the emancipation of all *the end* to which such protection leads is to an ideal female sovereignty: “woman protected, honored, pure and regnant” over her body, finances, and life’s work.

17 Woodhull did decry the British Contagious Disease Acts or “social evil bills” as an attack on prostitutes, but marriage received her harshest criticism. In a direct attack on the newly formed WCTU, which promoted the sanctity and security of marriage, she reinforced her argument for sexual self-determination as a eugenic project: “If all the women in the country were to join the temperance crusaders they might, for the time, decrease drunkenness; but the moment they should cease their efforts it would return. Now let these women go home and breed no more drunkards and the remedy will be effectual. And so of all other vices and crimes the temperance crusade, then, must begin in the home, in the marriage bed. (Woodhull, “Tried as by Fire; Or, the True and the False,” in Madeleine B. Sterne, ed., *The Victoria Woodhull Reader* (Weston, Mass.: M & S Press, 1974); 29–30.

18. Woodhull, *Tried As By Fire*, 29–30.

19. Cooper, *A Voice from the South*, 24–5.

20. Anna Julia Cooper, “Womanhood: A Vital Element in the Regeneration and Progress of the Race,” in Cooper, *A Voice from the South*, 24.

21. The lecture was delivered before the convocation of colored clergy of the Protestant Episcopal Church in Washington, D.C., in 1886. Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice From the South*, 24–5.

22. Caraway, *Segregated Sisterhood*, 150.

23. Cooper, “Woman vs. The Indian,” in Cooper, *A Voice from the South*, 86.

24. Ibid., 111.

25. Anna Julia Cooper, "Woman vs. The Indian."

26. Cooper spoke plainly about the violence to which black women were prey, and placed this contemporary state of affairs within a history of the violence against black and native peoples from the colonial period and through the Civil War. Thus, the heart of this essay on the racism of women's political and social culture is a history lesson on violence against African and Indian bodies alike.

27. Victoria Woodhull, *Woodhull and Claflin Weekly*, December 30, 1871; cited in "Introduction," Sterne, *The Victoria Woodhull Reader*.

28. In his 1891 article "The Present Problems in Heredity:" eugenicist Henry Fairfield Osborn describes the work of Professor Brooks of Johns Hopkins. Brooks "demonstrates the difference between female and male cells, the former as the conservative vehicles of [racial] characters, the latter as the progressive transmitters of the influences of environment and habit" (357). Just as the example of "sexed" cells shows science taking its cue from the gendered political culture and reformist work of the 1890s, so, too, reformers will enlist science to justify their program of social change. See, "The Present Problems in Heredity," *Atlantic Monthly* 67 (March 1891), 353–64.

29. Emphasis mine. Victoria C. Woodhull, "Tried as By Fire." 15, 24, 29, and 37.

30. Ibid., 15, 40.

31. Ibid., 26. Also see Victoria Woodhull, "Stirpiculture, or the Scientific Propagation of the Human Race," *Victoria Woodhull Reader*, 11.

32. This phrase is used throughout her writing and was common parlance of the time.

33. Woodhull's emphasis was in keeping with the late nineteenth-century shift from studies of "racial types" to an interest in studying trait diversity and variation within as well as among groups. She noted "there are often greater differences between individuals of the same race than between individuals of different races," owing to the great "differentiation of nervous system which separates man from man more effectually than geographic isolation in our modern civilization." (See Victoria C. Woodhull, "The Rapid Multiplication of the Unfit," in *Victoria Woodhull Reader*, 18–9). For a discussion of this shift see Lucius Outlaw, "Toward a Critical Theory of 'Race,'" in David Theo Goldberg, ed., *Anatomy of Racism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 64.

34. Victoria C. Woodhull, "The Rapid Multiplication, 18–9.

35. Ibid., 21.

36. Anna Julia Cooper, "What Are We Worth?" in Cooper, *A Voice from the South*.

37. Richard Dugdale, *The Jukes: A Study in Crime, Pauperism, and Heredity*, 4th ed. (New York: Putnam, 1910). A close look at Cooper's many-layered response to Dugdale takes place in Athey, "Eugenic Feminisms."

38. Cooper, "What Are We Worth?" 236.

39. Ibid., 239.

40 Ibid., 233.

41 Ibid., 284.

42. Ibid., 241. Though using the rhetoric of factory production, Cooper was comparing the making of a human being to the making of a watch. By superimposing "craftsmanship" on mass-production, Cooper reintroduces the notion of "nurture" and education: "the safest and richest investment possible to man." By rendering education as craftsmanship, Cooper granted herself the latitude to promote all varieties of education and yet emphasized the highest levels of education. This is clever diplomacy in an era when Booker T. Washington's philosophy of industrial training was commanding the government's attention and money. Her argument allowed for Washington's views while fully supporting her own philosophy and reputation as principal of M Street High School in Washington, D.C. As Louise Daniel Hutchinson and others point out, Cooper sent a record number of her students on to the most prestigious universities in the states. See her *Anna Julia Cooper: A Voice from the South* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institute Press, 1981); and Mary Helen Washington, "Introduction," in Cooper, *A Voice from the South*, 33.

43. Cooper, "What Are We Worth?"

44. Anna Julia Cooper and Victoria Woodhull made similar arguments for racial solidarity. Woodhull put it like this: "Before we can be quite sure that centralization of wealth and industries is the direction of progress, the bodily degeneration caused in the production must be taken into account as a part of the cost against the value of the utility" (see Woodhull, "The Rapid Multiplication of the Unfit," 29). Where Woodhull argued for racial solidarity founded on the eugenics and woman's essential role in recombining and improving genetic material, Cooper rejected the genetic entirely and called upon the higher classes of blacks to reallocate and improve material resources and infrastructure of the poor.

45. This does not mean that Cooper succeeded in this egalitarian project. Mary Helen Washington, Hazel Carby, and Paula Giddings all commented on the elitism of black women's clubs in the nineteenth century. Washington critiqued Cooper in particular for talking *about* working-class black women and never *to* them as peers in struggle. See, Mary Helen Washington, "Introduction," Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*; and Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: Bantam Books, 1985).

46. Athey, "Eugenic Feminisms in Late Nineteenth-Century America."

47. See "Introduction," in Alfreda M. Duster, ed., *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970). The classic early accounts of this division occur in Robert Allen, *Reluctant Reformers: Racism and Social Reform Movements in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1974), 156-63; Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*,

- Davis, *Women, Race and Class*; and bell hooks, *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981).
48. Ida B. Wells, *A Red Record: Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynchings in the United States, 1892-1893-1894* (Chicago: Donohue and Henneberry, 1895), 80.
49. The NAWSA minutes from their 1893 convention read: "Resolved, that without expressing any opinion on the proper qualifications for voting, we call attention to the significant facts that in every State there are more women who can read and write than all negro [sic] voters; more American women who can read and write than all foreign voters; so that the enfranchisement of such women would settle the vexed question of rule by illiteracy whether of home-grown or foreign-born production." Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*, 124. See also reprints of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, "Revolution" in Lana Rakow and Cheris Kramarae, eds., *The Revolution in Words: Righting Women, 1868-1871*, especially section two, "Aristocracy of Sex." Also see Caraway, *Segregated Sisterhood*, 51.
50. Bordin, *Woman and Temperance*, 56, 57.
51. Jack S. Blocker, "The Politics of Reform: Populists, Prohibition, and Woman Suffrage, 1891-1892" *Historian*, 34, no. 4 (1972), 614-32.
52. Frances Willard, interview, *New York Voice*, October 23, 1890.
53. The discourse of lynching needs to be studied in its relation to the Indian wars of the period. In justifying lynching as a frontier necessity, speakers would seem to be endorsing the genocidal push to close the "frontier" at the same time as they rewrite the South as settler colony putting down an "alien" population—not a population of black workers, teachers, journalists, and business people.
54. Willard, interview.
55. Townes, in *Womanist Hope, Womanist Justice*, discusses the Willard/Wells conflict as a quintessential case study in conflict between black and white womanist/feminist agendas. In *Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism and History*, Vron Ware recounts the hostile response Ida B. Wells provoked when she republished Frances Willard's 1890 *New York Voice* interview implying lynching was a national necessity (New York: Verso, 1992).
56. See Jack S. Blocker on early suffrage criticisms of the temperance movement: "Separate Paths: Suffragists and the Women's Temperance Crusade," *Signs*, 10, no. 3 (1985), 460-76. Her interview also quietly builds a case for temperance reform and women's "home protection ballot." As Willard outlined the intemperate appetites of the "dark-faced" and the foreign-born, their tendency to lust and liquor, the WCTU leader justifies the work of temperance women against these evils.
57. Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *The Memphis Diary of Ida B. Wells: An Intimate Portrait of the Activist as a Young Woman*, ed., Miriam DeCosta-Willis (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 98.

58. Ibid., 180–82.

59. Ibid., 132.

60. Turn-of-the-century lynching has been analyzed variously as a curb on black economic advancement, a means of control over agricultural labor, a community ritual, a re-enactment of myth, and the fevered assertion of white middle-class “manliness” through the literal and figurative emasculation of black males. These lynching analyses are all indebted to Wells who first analyzed the rape narrative in which the varied lynching agenda is encoded. See Angela Davis, *Woman Race and Class*; Davis, “The ‘Weak’ Race,” 83–96; Robyn Weigman, “The Anatomy of Lynching,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 3, no. 3 (1993): 445–69. For the intersection of economic and sexual factors in Wells, see Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, 107–20. Peter O. Peretti and Deborah Singletary, “A Theoretical-Historical Approach to Black Lynching,” *Social Behavior and Personality*, 9, no. 2 (1981), 227–30; David M. Tucker, “Miss Ida B. Wells and Memphis Lynching,” in Darlene Hine, ed., *Black Women in United States History* 4 (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Carlson, 1990), 1385–95; E. M. Beck and Stewan E. Tolnay, “A Season For Violence: The Lynching of Blacks and Labor Demand in the Agricultural Production Cycle in the American South,” *International Review of Social History*, 37, no. 1 (1992), 1–24; Trudier Harris, *Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1984); Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*; Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Mind that Burns in Each Body: Women, Rape and Racial Violence,” in Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell and Sharon Thompson, eds., *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1982), 328–49; Gail Bederman. “‘Civilization,’ the Decline of Middle-Class Manliness. and the Anti-Lynching Campaign of Ida B. Wells, 1892–94” *Radical History Review*, 52 (1992), 15–30.

61. Quoted in Mildred Thompson, *Ida B. Wells-Barnett: An Exploratory Study of an American Black Woman 1893–1930* (Brooklyn: Carlson, 1990), 267–69.

62. Duster, *Crusade for Justice*, 52. Wells herself traveled to Oklahoma to send word via the *Free Speech* as to the opportunities available in the western territory. By one account, as many as two thousand may have left Memphis and at least two ministers packed up their entire congregations for the move to Oklahoma. See David M. Tucker, “Miss Ida B. Wells and Memphis Lynching,” in Hine, *Black Women in United States History*, 1389.

63. See Wells’ entries for Manchester and Liverpool especially, Duster, *Crusade*, 143.

64. Wells, *A Red Record*, 77.

65. Duster, *Crusade*, 202.

66. Lady Henry Somerset, “White and Black in America—An Interview with Miss Willard,” *Westminster Gazette*, May 10, 1894; quoted in Wells-Barnett, *Crusade*, 204–9. Wells’ reply, *Westminster Gazette*, May 21, 1894; *A Red Record*, 85.

67. Wells, *A Red Record*, 84.

68. *Ibid.*, 13.

69. Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells*, ed., Alfreda M. Duster (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 70.

70. For "civilized/savage" rhetoric, see Simone Davis, "The 'Weak' Race," 83–96; Joanne M. Braxton, "Crusader for Justice: Ida B. Wells," in *African American Autobiography*, ed. William L. Andrews (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1993), 90–112; Gail Bederman, "'Civilization,' the Decline of Middle-Class Manliness, and the Anti-Lynching Campaign of Ida B. Wells, 1892–94," *Radical History Review* 52 (1992):15–30. Quoted material is in Wells-Barnett, "Southern Horrors," *On Lynchings: Southern Horrors, A Red Record, Mob Rule in New Orleans* (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 28. Emphasis mine. Strategies for economic retaliation are discussed in Thompson *Wells-Barnett*, 180–81, 186; Wells, "Southern Horrors," 22–4; Wells, *Crusade*, 63.

71. *Ibid.*, 81.

72. *A Red Record* gives examples in which a white woman later admits to "misrepresenting" the nature of the "rape" she charged, or halts a lynching on the spot by declaring herself in the wrong. *Southern Horrors*, published prior to *A Red Record* and without the mass of statistical data that appears in the later pamphlet, relies heavily on similar reports to debunk the myth of the black rapist. See Wells-Barnett, *Southern Horrors*, 9.

73. *Ibid.*, 80.

74. *Ibid.*, 89–90.

75. Wells, *A Red Record*, 87.