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Association for the Study of African American Life and History

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Plenary Session

**Mightier than the Sword:
Conversations on the Life and Legacy of Ida B. Wells-Barnett**

“Ida B. Wells-Barnett and the Carceral State”

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I am truly humbled to be here with my distinguished colleagues and all of the people in this room. I would like to thank Cheryl Hicks very much for inviting me to this participate in this session. I would also like to take a moment to acknowledge and recognize my beloved friend and co-author, Avel Louise Gordly who is here with me today. Some of you met her at the author’s signing last night. Ida B. Wells-Barnett ran for state senate in Illinois in 1930 and lost; Avel Gordly ran for state Senate in Oregon, and won and served in the legislature with distinction for a total of 18 years. Since this is our first time at ASALH, I want to thank everyone who has made us feel so welcome . It has also been a special pleasure to reconnect with Prof Paula Giddings. Twenty years ago, at a Berkshire conference in 1993 at Vassar College in New York State, I sat on a panel for the first time, and with her. What a delight that things have come full circle to new beginnings. I must also say a special word of thanks to Michelle Duster for her warm embrace this meeting. The generosity of your family to me over the years has been a precious gift. I will continue to work to honor and be worthy of that gift in all that I do with history.

My remarks today are entitled “Ida B. Wells-Barnett and the Carceral State.” I want to focus on the carceral state—that is, the government functions of ‘confining, surveillance and punishment’—in order to engage with some of the recent scholarship on race, policing, and imprisonment in the United States.¹ These are topics that Wells-Barnett had a great deal to say to us about a hundred years ago, especially, of course, as related to lynching. I’d like to suggest that her work’s connection to prison reform, probation work, and advocacy for inmates back in the progressive era addresses the contemporary crisis around race and mass incarceration in important ways.

My book, *Ida B. Wells-Barnett and American Reform*, today over a decade old, did not set out to explain lynching, mobs, or the criminal justice system, per se. When I started that project around 1990, there were experts on lynching in and outside the academy, mostly in the sociology field. Instead, what I wanted to explain was...and I had to reread my preface to remind myself exactly...what happened to the ‘historical belief that women could be a unique force for racial healing in this country.’ That is, I was interested in the connections between gendered activism and social justice, especially racial justice. But the thing is, I did not write that book, Crystal Feimster did and I commend her scholarship to you most heartily. What I did write about—that is, where the evidence lead me—was how IBWB’s analysis and ideas were selectively adopted within new social and political movements called “progressive era reform” and what that selectivity tells us about the distribution of power in our society. I argued that some of her more radical ideas were ignored—like her insight that a movement against the rape of black women was necessary to an antilynching movement because sexualized violence against black people was linked in this country. Some of her other key insights, however, were appropriated, especially the

¹ Marie Gottschalk, “Hiding in Plain Sight: American Politics and the Carceral State” *Annual Review of Political Science* Vol. 11: 235-260 (2008) Vesla M. Weaver and Amy E. Lerman, “Political Consequences of the Carceral State,” *American Political Science Review*. 104 (2010) 4: 817-833. See also Heather A. Thompson, H.A. 2010. “Why Mass Incarceration Matters: Rethinking Crisis, Decline, and Transformation in Postwar American History” *JAH* 97 (3): 703-734.

notion that lynching expressed outrage on the part of white men across class against black men (and others) who asserted political, economic and social equality in U.S. society. This idea of IBWB's became a kind of 'new truth' for activists even as she herself was nudged to the sidelines of the nationally coordinated efforts to redress racial injustice in both the National Association of Colored Women and, later, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

Today I'd like to shift focus again, to the carceral state, by retelling a story that Wells-Barnett told in her autobiography, Crusade for Justice in order to revisit and maybe reweave some of these threads about racial violence, power, and the state. To do this retelling, I'm going to borrow the framework of an outstanding historian and scholar Khalil Gibran Muhammad, whose book, The Condemnation of Blackness, is a brilliant study of race, crime and urban America in Wells-Barnett's time period. Dr. Muhammad's argument is that during the 1920s, a young cohort of sociologists, many of whom were based in Chicago, critically reframed the so-called "Negro Problem" of the day and its acute association with issues of criminality. In particular, they turned the tables on the statistics used to make this link and instead asserted that there was a "policing problem instead of a crime problem" where black people were concerned in the U.S.² Dr. Muhammad acknowledges Wells-Barnett as an important antecedent to this new generation's efforts to call out the bias, discrimination and often malicious intent in the policing and punishment of black people. And his work opened my eyes more clearly to the radicalism of IBWB thinking about the state and strategies for action and engagement.

The radicalness I want to reacquaint us with this evening is expressed in Wells-Barnett's decision in 1910 to get a black man named Steve Green out of the country and into Canada in order to avoid the

² Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 235. See also Shaun L. Gabbidon, Helen T. Greene, and Vernetta D. Young, *African American Classics in Criminology & Criminal Justice* (Sage, 2002) and Helen T. Green and Shaun L. Gabbidon, eds. *African American Criminological Thought*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000).

justice system altogether. This stance she never admitted to publicly at the time. Instead, she told Green's story some twenty years after the fact, in her autobiography, as a story about a racially biased prison system in order to help readers learn about how it worked and how to resist it. In addition to Wells-Barnett's autobiography there exists documentation of some of the debate, even consternation, among activists about what to do about Steve Green. Most historians—including me—who have commented on the Green case assign its main significance to a larger "growing pains of the NAACP" story, rather than tie it back to any commentary the racist functioning of carceral state itself.³ Dr. Muhammad's work changed my mind about this by heightening my consciousness of what gets said, counted, and measured in instances of African Americans' contact with the justice system.

Steve Green was a sharecropper in Jericho, Arkansas who, in harvest time in 1910, left the farm where he worked for better terms of labor within Crittenden County in the eastern part of the state.⁴ Upon hearing of Green's plans to migrate, his landlord, a man named Siedle, threatened to kill Green should he leave the premises. Discovering Green at work on another farm, Siedle shot Green, who managed to run—with three bullet wounds in his body—to his cabin, grab his gun and return fire, killing his attacker. Green then fled Arkansas to Mississippi, where friends raised money to send him north. Back in Arkansas, officials got a lead on Green's destination and mobilized Chicago authorities, possibly by telephone. In the city, "an informant" tipped off local police, who picked Green up on a trumped up petty crime charge. At the central jail on Harrison Street in the downtown loop, abusive "third degree" tactics, including deprivation of food and water, were used on Green to extract confession of murder.

³ "Although the Crisis does not give credit to her, it is clear that Mrs. Barnett managed the Steve Green case in Chicago." Alfreda M. Duster, ed., Crusade for Justice, 335. "New York officials failed to contribute or publicly credit her effort to aid a black refugee from Arkansas named Steve Green, who had fled the country to avoid a lynch mob. Schechter, Ida B. Wells and American Reform, 142; See also Giddings, A Sword Among Lions, 496 and Bay, To Tell the Truth Freely, 287

⁴ Sources are inconsistent on this point.

Green knew he would be lynched if he returned south and when the extradition papers came through from Arkansas to Chicago, he attempted suicide. As the Defender put it, Green would face “uncertain trial, but certain death” back in Arkansas.⁵

Wells-Barnett learned from the newspapers that Steve Green had attempted to end his life in jail. Moved to intervene, she made some phone calls and learned that Green had been already sent back south by authorities. Nonetheless, she and local activists sprang into action. Attorney Edward H. Wright, a local black lawyer and political associate of the Barnetts, investigated and found an irregularity in the extradition papers. In a highly publicized proceeding in circuit court, Wright and a colleague, William Anderson, persuaded Judge Richard Tuthill to issue a writ of habeas corpus on the notion that Green was being unjustly deprived of his liberty. The writ challenged Arkansas’s custody of Green, news of which was conveyed along the rail lines to southern Illinois just before Green crossed the state line by train. According to the press, “every method known to modern ingenuity was put into effect to intercept the prisoner before crossing the line of the State” of Illinois, including “telegraph, telephone, and wireless telegraphy.”⁶ The person who responded to the telegraphy—and the reward incentive secured by Wright—owed the Barnetts and Governor of Illinois, Charles S. Deneen a favor: Sheriff Nellis of Cairo. Nellis had replaced another white law enforcement official who had been removed under the Illinois Anti-Mob Violence Act. This bill was passed in 1905 through the advocacy and political pressure of the Barnetts—and the Chicago Bar Association—and enforced by Barnetts in particular after a terrible downstate lynching in Cairo in 1909, just a year before Green’s situation exploded.

⁵ “Steve Green Liberated,” Chicago Defender, 24 September 1910, p. 1. See also Karlos Hill, “Resisting Lynching: Black Grassroots Responses to Lynching in the Mississippi and Arkansas Deltas, 1882-1938” (PhD diss., University of Illinois: Urbana Champagne, 2009.)

⁶ “Attorneys William G. Anderson and Edward H. Wright Won One of the Greatest Legal battle of their Lives,” Chicago Broad-Ax, 24 September 1910, p. Leaving nothing to chance, Wright had persuaded the state’s attorney’s office to “offer a reward for the return” (Crusade for Justice, 335) of Green to Chicago and raised additional reward money himself from private contributions to “increase” it (Giddings, 495).

Upon return Green's return to Chicago, Wells-Barnett and her associates kept him, in her words, "hidden away," as they surmised that Arkansas officials would soon petition the Illinois governor again for extradition of Green. The excitement around the writ proceedings in Chicago was intense — Broad Ax said it "rival[ed]...the old underground [railroad] scenes of a half century past" —and journalists cheered the accomplishments of the defense committee, including Wells-Barnett and the attorneys. Yet once Green made it back to Chicago, a cone of silence begins to descend on the case. In late September, Green gave personal testimony at Quinn Chapel, AME church to raise money and support; but the event was reported quietly: no pictures, no direct testimony from Green, no details, no embellishments. And, Wells-Barnett's autobiography describes local activists huddled in a private meeting at home as they conferred on a strategy.⁷ "A collection was taken and placed in my hands," she wrote of this gathering, "and I was ordered to get Green out of town, since the governor would have no choice in honoring a properly presented requisition."⁸

Once Wells-Barnett and her colleagues decide to protect Green, most of the evidence of his whereabouts is in private correspondence rather than public documents. Green's situation was picked up by the Washington DC media and the news apparently stirred New York activists around the NAACP, barely a year old, to try and gain some traction on the case. In mid-October, Oswald Garrison Villard wrote to Joel Spingarn in New York, and quoted a Wells-Barnett letter: "Steve Green was started to Canada a week ago today" (October 12, 1910).⁹ She further stated to Spingarn that she could not "give... any detailed information as to the movements of Steve Green because our Committee has

⁷ Broad Ax, 1 October 1910.

⁸ Crusade for Justice, 337. By claiming that she was "ordered" by the ad hoc Green defense group in Chicago, Wells-Barnett mutes her own agency. Of course maybe she was "ordered," though that cuts against her usual approach. Then again, perhaps only retrospectively was it important to blunt the radicalness of the act by suggesting that it was someone else's idea.

⁹ Villard to Spingarn, 19 October 1910, Joel E. Spingarn Papers.

decided that there is danger in too much publicity.”¹⁰ The last media report on Green I have found is in The Crisis in November 1910, in which Du Bois makes no note of the legal question marks around the case in favor of testimony in Green’s “own words.” This narrative provides details of the events leading up to the confrontation with Siedle in Arkansas, the gun fire, the escape to Mississippi then to Illinois, the writ secured by Ed Wright in Chicago, and Green’s near return south but for the intervention of Sherriff Nellis.¹¹ Wells-Barnett and Du Bois both noted that Steve Green was “illiterate.” “He can not read or write,” Wells-Barnett wrote to Spingarn, “so we do not know for certain whether he has reached his destination and we are afraid to inquire”¹² Given the still relatively elite status of telephones, Green might not have been able to keep in contact that way, though this deserves further investigation. State legal documents also warrant exploration, as it is not clear Arkansas made a full attempt to recover Green, though Wells-Barnett tells us in Crusade for Justice that “the [Arkansas] sheriff gave [the search] up as a hopeless job.”¹³

So what to make of the Steve Green story? Wells-Barnett certainly drew her contemporaries’ attention on paper to how New York activists tended to downplay the value of work in Chicago and her claim to leadership.¹⁴ But what is she NOT saying? Where is Steve Green? What are the details of the Chicago activists’ plans? Could it be that Steve Green was escaping everyone, and decided to roll the

¹⁰ Edward Wright to JES, 17 October 1910, JES Papers.

¹¹ “Steve Green’s Story,” The Crisis, November 1910, p. 14. This article mentions a Green’s birth in Tennessee and his marriage to an Arkansas woman in the 1880s which I believe I have confirmed. Ancestry.com. *Arkansas, County Marriages Index, 1837-1957* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011. Accessed on September 13, 2012.

¹² Villard to Spingarn, 19 October 1910, op. cit.

¹³ My search of the finding aids of the Donaghey papers at State Archives and University of Arkansas yielded nothing, as did the Charles S. Deneen collection at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library in Springfield. See Crusade for Justice, p. 377.

¹⁴ Schechter, *Ida B. Wells-Barnett and American Reform*, 142.

dice and run to Canada himself, without aid by reformers? These details are less accessible to historians in the archival record—at least as far as my research has gone. But maybe this, too, is purposeful. By keeping the Chicago deliberations out of the media, out of correspondence, and out of the autobiography, Wells-Barnett continued to shield Green. And in Du Bois's case, rather than ignoring or minimizing Wells-Barnett's leadership, maybe he bought her and Green some time. Perhaps even unwittingly, Du Bois gave her cover to try and save Green's life. Some 17 years after the fact, Wells-Barnett wrapped the tale in a kind of parable: "The last I heard of him he was still here in Chicago," she wrote. "He is one Negro who lives to tell the tale that he was not burned alive according to program."¹⁵ Indeed, maybe it was only his story to tell in the end.

Muhammad's work also opens up some further dimensions of the case in light of the workings of a racially biased carceral state.

First, Steve Green's landlord asserts control over his tenants to the extent of TAKING HIS LIFE rather than countenance economic choice-making and mobility by his tenants/employees. This authoritarian control over black workers has its roots in slavery and, as Muhammad's book points out, feeds the law enforcement patterns of convict lease, vagrancy, and "work or fight" statutes that compel the labor and restricted the mobility of black citizens according to white whims and needs. As Muhammad recently points out in interview with Bill Moyers, these practices also form the precedent and the roots of "stop and frisk" protocols used by today's law enforcement.¹⁶

Second, self-defense is essentially unthinkable under white supremacist logic. This logic produces a perverse situation in which self-defense for an African American protagonist is literally

¹⁵ Crusade for Justice, 337.

¹⁶ 22 July 2012, "Confronting the Contradictions of America's Past," accessed on 1 September 2012. <http://billmoyers.com/episode/full-show-confronting-the-contradictions-of-america%E2%80%99s-past/>

suicide, and, by a further tortured logic, suicide becomes the only way to reclaim one's body from that situation. The connections between race, mental health and incarceration remain as urgent today as ever.¹⁷

Third, and here Muhammad's work is again key, Wells-Barnett describes the informal and shadowed dimensions of the carceral state's operation. The use of informants is a muted but important part of Green's story as is the use of the "citizens' arrest." In the dramatic scene at the Illinois state line, Wells-Barnett does not call out Nellis's identity—which is unusual for her as a seasoned politician, for whom knowing who was on her side of a particular dispute was absolutely essential. Instead, she renders the interception of Green on the train car more anonymously, as a "man" who approached Green on the train and announced: "I arrest this man in the name of the great state of Illinois."¹⁸ Theoretically, any citizen can make a "citizen's arrest," yet who actually feels empowered to exercise this right and whose exercise of that right is enforceable has much to do with this society's status categories and designations, including "race."

My point here is that in Ida B. Wells-Barnett's story about Steve Green, her silences as much as her words tell us much about the delicate trip wires facing African Americans tangling with the carceral state. Twenty years after the Green case, Wells-Barnett was more characteristically blunt on the issue of policing. In the Chicago *Daily News* in 1930, she declared that Chicago's "colored citizens" had witnessed several "object lessons of police 'incompetence or worse'" in shootings of at least four black people, including a sixteen year old boy who was repeatedly shot by officers in his home. "These victims," she wrote, "murdered on the Chicago streets in broad daylight, were black and poor and with

¹⁷ See Avel L. Gordly, *Remembering the Power of Words: The Life of an Oregon Activist, Legislator and Community Leader* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2011) and Heather Ann Thompson, *Whose Detroit? Politics, Labor and Race in a Modern American City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).

¹⁸ Crusade for Justice, 336.

no organization behind them, and it seemingly was not worthwhile to hold the police department to account for outrages against them.”¹⁹ As my co-panelists’ work has borne out in different ways and Dr. Muhammad’s further underscores, Ida B. Wells-Barnett worked her entire life to change these conditions for the better. So must we.

Thank you.

¹⁹ “Murder in Chicago,” The Crisis (August 1930), 282.