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ENGL 428A

December 5, 2024

Final Paper

In my initial reading and response to MMR #10, I focused on the purpose of Ida B. Wells-Barnett’s writing as being a rhetorical one. Due to the vivid descriptions of the injustices, such as lynchings, floggings, and segregation, that were occurring I placed my emphasis on how she was able to understand her audience and appeal to them through the development of her argument. While this was not the most important aspect of her writing, the impact it would have on the future became overwhelmingly apparent during my second reading of *Southern Horrors*: “Lynch Law in All Its Phases”. After rereading her narrative, I argue that Ida B. Wells wrote with the intent to warn America that race and gender-based constructs resulted from economic and political agendas. Such “threadbare lies” (726) perpetuated long after Wells’ scathing reporting about lynching and into the nineteenth century. We can see the evidence of these ideologies continued in Ava DuVernay’s film “13th”. Notably, several passages from Wells’ text and DuVernay’s film support my argument about the representations underlying economic and political agendas fueled by such violence as lynching and incarceration of Black people.

During 1892, lynchings were occurring on a broad scale in multiple states but were seen largely in the deep South. Wells utilized her own articles from the *Free Speech* editorial following the lynchings that occurred in Memphis, Tennessee, to support her claims that lynchings were used as a means of control following the abolishment of slavery. Moreover, she maintained that white women were not raped, but perhaps having affairs with black men. “Eight Negroes lynched since last issue of *Free Speech*…. Nobody in this section of the country believe the old threadbare that Negro men rape white women…. a conclusion will then be reached which will be very damaging to the moral reputation of *their* women” (726). Here, Wells exposes her drive to educate the public on why the lynchings are occurring, while simultaneously demonstrating how constructs such as race and gender resulted in “a growing disregard of human life” (728). The emphasis on “*their*” is done with an intentionality that reflects signification. Without directly stating it, Wells was able to assert that while the white man’s intention may be to criminalize black men, it would ultimately be the reputation of white women that would be diminished because of these false allegations. Accordingly, Wells uses the term “threadbare” to depict the level of transparency these lies have reached throughout the country. These claims have become baseless and have been long overused to justify the rampant lynchings.

These horrors were told in the “13th” as well, sharing that a “Chicago Negro boy, Emmett Till, is alleged to have paid unwelcome attention to Roy Bryant’s most attractive wife” (8:46) which resulted in his untimely death in 1955 by lynching. This atrocity emulates what was occurring during Ida B. Wells time, but *63 years* after the publication of *Southern Horrors*. Often, one of the most common “crimes” associated with African American men was that they were having “unwanted affairs” with white women, who when their husbands found out, would claim that they were sexually assaulted. During this time, there was no forensic evidence that could defend one way or another if a sexual relation even occurred; however, most white, racist, men did not need any proof to confirm their true desires to dominate and abuse black men as a means of control and enslavement through imprisonment.

In the 1988 election where George HW Bush only defeated his running mate, Michael Dukakis by campaigning off the idea of creating a safer America by utilizing the case of Willie Horton, a black man who was convicted of rape and murder, which resulted in increased social disruption and fear of not only the black man, but also a president who would not take imprisonment “seriously”. As alluded to in Ida B. Wells work, the “13th” broaches “the record is far more marked by white rape against black women” (33:37), which further proves what Wells argued in 1892. The likelihood that the original sexual assault allegations were fabricated were far more probable and used for political, economic and suppressive agendas.

This control and discrimination persisted through the 1920s with the Ku Klux Klan, the civil rights movement through segregation, and now in the 21st century through incarceration, homelessness, and police brutality. Specifically, in the 1920s the video references that several African Americans were being hung by mobs “under the idea that they had done something criminal” (7:50). The narrator goes on to describe these acts as “acts of terrorism” and when modern day historians reference the country moving to the west coast for new economic opportunities, the truth behind this was that African American people were attempting to seek asylum from this form of terrorism (8:10).

Similarly, during the Civil Rights era, additional measures were taken to control the African American population after lynchings and abuses were made illegal. Jim Crow laws were passed “that regulated African Americans to a permanent second-class status” (9:25). Like Ida B. Wells who was outlawed for her journalism, civil rights activists Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks were also criminalized for their pursuit of liberty and equality under the oppression of segregation laws. Moving forward into the 21st century, it can be seen how racism and the prison system are influencing people’s ability to live past a prison sentence. Once released back into society, if an individual has been convicted of a felony it impacts their ability to find jobs, housing, or even apply for food stamps. Additionally, it restricts an individual’s right to vote and “nearly 30% of the black male population in Alabama today has permanently lost their right to vote as a result of a criminal conviction” (1:17:17).

Race and gender have become political devices that are used to create polarization within a country that needs to be educated on the re-humanization of an entire population. Wells did far more than just report on the savage injustices occurring across the country, she pinpointed the motivation behind these acts. “Becoming increasingly committed to showing that economic and political justifications more than rape spawned lynching, Wells was uncompromising in uncovering the brutality and in urging progressive Americans to bring about much-needed changes” (724). Ida B. Wells, in many ways, warned the country and the white supremacist that if they continued down this path of unlawful criminalization, brutalities, and oppression, that the next time they would be met with the preparation to retaliate against these injustices.

Wells illustrates these warnings by underscoring that if the black community does not take measures to defend themselves, they will continue to be brutalized and abused by a system that has been formed with the intent to isolate and dominate their pursuit of true liberty. Wells declares in her work that the only way for African Americans to fight this battle of unjust lynchings is to be prepared to protect themselves. She proceeds to tell a story where “the only case of proposed lynching did not occur…” (730) was in Jacksonville, Florida because the men armed themselves to prevent it, and used their weapons in self-defense. Discussing a separate injustice, one that Wells had experienced herself, and was not alone in this experience, was the segregation occurring on the railroads. Wells depicts a strategically formulated contention that many African Americans were being forced to ride in separate train cars than their white counterparts. When the cases were taken to court, the state had been receiving so much funding for their railroads due to the amount of paying passengers they had acquired from the black community, that they could “fight all the suits brought against them” (730). To counter these injustices, Wells tells the African American people to stay off the railroads because it would result in the law being repealed, like the advice given by Martin Luther King Jr. with the bus boycott in Montgomery bus boycott. Wells enhances these declarations stating that “The appeal to the white man’s pocket has ever been more effectual than all the appeals ever made to his conscience” (730). Once again, a new socioeconomic construct was not only being placed on the African American population, but the desire for wealth took precedence over human rights. Unfortunately, some of these injustices and principles of racism, segregation, and discrimination have evolved over time to fit the white man’s agenda even long after Ida B. Wells time and into the 21st century.

The rippling affect that played out because of oppression that was never fully addressed post Antebellum era, despite Wells’ greatest efforts, have accumulated into several, modern day, forms of discrimination. Ava DuVernay depicts just how detrimental the impact of slavery was on the American world, African American people, and how society has adjusted to deploy a prison system designed to maneuver entire populations how the government sees fit. “The United States is home to 5% of the world’s population but 25% of the world’s prisoners” (0:20). This statistic is incredibly alarming as the narrators further develop the idea that in a country that is supposed to be “the land of the free” is the most heavily incarcerated country in the world. The facts speak for themselves. The 13th amendment was created to abolish slavery; however, “there are exceptions, including criminals” (2:18). This amendment was established for several reasons, one likely being control, but also that slavery was an “economic system” (3:00) and when it was abolished it left many of the Southern states in economic turmoil.

Unfortunately, even today “it seems that in America, we haven’t so much ended racial caste, but simply redesigned it” (1:17:45). Police brutalities and forms of discrimination are still occurring that are rooted in slavery and Postbellum era when Ida B. Wells first asserted these contentions. Wells’ writings were more than just engaging and well-developed investigative pieces; they were warnings to the African American people and to the country. Now, the only things that can be done to remedy the long-lasting discriminatory nature of the US government and incarceration system is to “shock people into paying attention” (1:29:20). Wells did this through her writing in 1892, and now modern society has the opportunity to continue to display the brutalities that have long been silenced through education and media so that we can humanize all races to the fullest extent.

Works Cited

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