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BRAIN AND BRAWN: INDIRECT AND DIRECT ACTIVISM IN RESPONSE TO RACIAL TERROR IN THE LATE 1800S

Jaylah K. Cosby

The summer following the United States' victory in World War I was characterized by a resurgence of racial violence. African American soldiers, motivated by their fight for freedom across the seas, resisted the oppressive conditions for black people in America and the fact that "because of their military service, black veterans were seen as a particular threat to Jim Crow and racial subordination."¹ During the Red Summer of 1919, many white Americans resorted to mob violence and lynching to reinforce the black person's subordinate role in society. In the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)'s *Crisis Magazine*, activist W.E.B. Du Bois urged black people to use both "brain and brawn" against the forces of racism. He wrote, "But by the God of Heaven, we are cowards and jackasses if now that war is over, we do not marshal every ounce of our brain and brawn to fight a sterner, longer, more unbending battle against the forces of hell in our own land."² Black veterans responded by creating "ad hoc self-defense organizations to try to keep white folks from terrorizing their communities."³ However, the practice of using "brawn" was a form of more direct activism used by black people well before the summer of 1919. During the late 1800s black people resisted racial violence, intervened in acts of racial terror, and even made plans for retaliation. To fully understand the black response to racial terror, both direct and indirect forms of activism should be examined during this time in areas across the country, specifically in Jefferson County, Alabama.

Jefferson County during the late 1800s was marked by a boom in the iron industry. Companies like the Coke Company, Tennessee Coal, and Pratt Coal, Iron, and Railroad Company processed iron and other materials while also boosting

other industries.⁴ Before African Americans migrated to the American Northeast, Midwest, and West during the Great Migration, they began to move from rural areas to more urban and industrial cities in the South.⁵ As opportunities to work in steel companies grew, black people from rural Alabama moved to Jefferson County in hopes of finding work and gaining financial freedom. However, continuing to oppress black people and keep them in an inferior position, Alabama and other southern states passed bills known as Black Codes that harshly regulated the lives of black people. The racial dynamics during this time were such that white people, specifically white men, held ultimate power. Some white people chose to punish black people by lynching them for the ultimate crime of "challenging the supremacy of the white race."⁶

The conversations surrounding the efforts of black people to put an end to lynching often involved the indirect form of activism, or "the brain," as Du Bois would call it. The Anti-Lynching Movement was formed and run in large part by African American women. Activists like Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Mary Burnett Talbert, and Juanita Jackson Mitchell were named the Anti-Lynching Crusaders for their efforts.⁷ Wells-Barnett, who was active in the 1890s, along with the other crusaders, described racial terror in the South in her book *Southern Horrors*. Talbert, who was active during the 1910s, was considered "the best-known Colored Woman in the United States" for her organization of the Niagara Movement, a pre-cursor to the NAACP.⁸ She used her influence and connections to raise \$10,000 as the chair of the NAACP's Anti-Lynching Committee.⁹ Mitchell, who was active during the 1930s, focused on youth involvement in the anti-lynching movement by organizing the youth campaign

for anti-lynching legislation. After her urging, the National Broadcasting Company broadcasted fifteen minutes of anti-lynching news over the radio.¹⁰ In Tuskegee, Alabama, Monroe Work, a sociologist and the founder of the Tuskegee Institute's Department of Records and Research, published the *Negro Year Book*, a summation of lynching in the state and around the country. The publication was regarded as the "most quoted and undisputed sources on this form of racial violence."¹¹ Wells-Barnett also recorded lynchings in *The Red Record*¹² and in her newspapers, *Free Speech and Headlight*. In partnership with the NAACP (as one of the organization's founders), she took to investigative journalism to account accurately for the deaths of black men and women by a white mob when in some cases, their deaths were inaccurately labeled as accidents or suicides.¹³ For example, the death of Will McBride in Adamsville, Alabama, would have gone unnoticed had it not been for the NAACP's full report of his lynching in 1923.¹⁴

Some activists such as Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington supported the women of the Anti-Lynching movement and also urged black people to gain political and financial freedom in response to racial violence; other activists, like John Edward Bruce, thought another approach would be more effective.¹⁵ Bruce advocated for physical involvement, declaring, "The man who does not fight for the protection of his wife and children, and fellow brother is a coward."¹⁶ Frederick Douglass argued that getting involved or intervening when a white mob went on a rampage was unwise. Regardless of the danger, though, black people throughout the nation still chose this path, and it resulted in the saved lives of some individuals.

Tom Collins was a man accused of assaulting a prominent farmer's wife in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1886.¹⁷ An insert in *The Richmond Item* reported that Collins was tracked down

in the woods by bloodhounds, and "the pursuers returned from the chases...and decline to say anything about the matter, which is taken as conclusive evidence that the n**** has been lynched."¹⁸ However, in the *Birmingham Iron Age*, it was reported that Collins was "quickly brought back to the city by armed n****s."¹⁹ Lynching not only prompted black people to intervene, but in some cases, it spurred plans to retaliate. In the days leading up to the lynching of Lewis Houston in Birmingham, Alabama in 1883, black citizens in the community "were gathered on the streets discussing the lynching, some of them making threats [that] were overheard...No disturbance occurred, but from the way the n****s talk the matter is not yet ended."²⁰ In the same city, a few years later, the lynching of James Thomas "excited the n**** population greatly, and the refusal of the local magistrate to hold an inquest unless directed by the coroner to do so added to their excitement. About one hundred n****s, it is said, then began to arm themselves and to make threats of violence."²¹

“ Douglass and Bruce would argue that one form of activism held more merit than the other, but Du Bois impressed upon black people to ‘marshal every ounce of our brain and brawn’ to fight racism. ”

Retaliation did not occur only in Alabama's Jefferson County. As an aggressive response to a lynching that occurred in Cleveland, Mississippi earlier in the day, a group of armed

black people rode on horseback into town and “exchanged gunfire with a group of white men.”²² A group of armed black community members in Decatur, Illinois occupied the city’s business district in 1894 to prevent a mob from lynching a black man accused of rape.²³ In 1899 in McIntosh County, Georgia, a black worker suspected of rape was held in the local jail. He was to be transported by the police to another jail in Savannah, Georgia. However, the black community believed he would be lynched on the way, so they armed themselves and surrounded the facility to prevent him from being transported.²⁴ These acts of direct activism proved that there was power in numbers. They occurred all over the United States, and Jefferson County was no exception.

Douglass and Bruce would argue that one form of activism held more merit than the other, but Du Bois impressed upon black people to “marshal every ounce of our brain and brawn”²⁵ to fight racism. Both styles helped to eliminate racial terror and violence. Community organizations saved the lives of terror victims, and lynching publications helped inform the general public about racial terror and spur the creation of anti-lynching legislation.²⁶ Each approach’s success, though, lay in its collective nature. Utilizing brain and brawn only works when communities come together. As Ella Baker, godmother of the Civil Rights Movement, said, “The major job was getting people to understand that they had something within their power that they could use, and it could only be used if they understood what was happening and how group action could counter violence.”²⁷

ENDNOTES

- 1 “Lynching in America: Targeting Black Veterans,” *Equal Justice Initiative* (2017): 2, <https://eji.org/wpcontent/uploads/2019/10/lynching-in-america-targeting-black-veterans-web.pdf>.
- 2 W.E.B. Du Bois, “Returning Soldiers,” *The Crisis*, (n.p.: The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 1919), 13-14.
- 3 Simon Balto, *Occupied Territory: Policing Black Chicago from Red Summer to Black Power* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 111.
- 4 Donna J. Siebenthaler, “Jefferson County,” under “History,” *Encyclopedia of Alabama*, 2007, <http://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/h-1370>.
- 5 Henry Louis Gates Jr., “The African-American Migration Story,” *Public Broadcasting Service*, 2013, <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/african-americans-many-rivers-to-cross/history/on-african-american-migrations/>.
- 6 Howard Smead, *Introduction to Blood Justice: The Lynching of Mack Charles Parker* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), par. 3.
- 7 Caitlin Dickerson, “Overlooked,” *The New York Times*, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/obituaries/overlooked-ida-b-wells.html>.
- 8 Kelvin Muhia, “Mary Burnett Talbert: Civil Rights Advocate, Called “The Best Known Colored Woman in the United States,” *Black Then*, 2019, <https://blackthen.com/mary-burnett-talbert-civil-rights-advocate-called-bestknown-colored-woman-united-states/>.
- 9 Francesca Morgan, *Women and Patriotism in Jim Crow America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 124.
- 10 Thomas Bynum, *NAACP Youth and the Fight for Black Freedom, 1936–1965* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2012), 8.
- 11 Linda O. McMurry, *Recorder of the Black Experience: A Biography of Monroe Nathan Work* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1985).
- 12 Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *The Red Record* (Memphis: 1895). This is a collection of Ida B. Wells-Barnett’s brutal descriptions of actual occurrences of lynching.
- 13 Crystal N. Feimster, “Ida B. Wells and the Lynching of Black Women,” *The New York Times*, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/28/opinion/sunday/ida-b-wells-lynching-black-women.html>.
- 14 Jimena Ortiz-Perez, “Will McBride, July 12, 1923, Adamsville” *Birmingham Watch*, 2019, <https://birminghamwatch.org/will-mcbride-july-12-1923-adamsville/>.
- 15 Stasia Irons, “John Edward Bruce (1856-1924),” *BlackPast*, 2007, <https://www.blackpast.org/african-americanhistory/bruce-john-edward-1856-1924/>. Bruce was an activist and Pan-African-nationalist that lived from 1856-1924. He founded several newspapers, writing under the pen name “Bruce Grit,” and co-founded the Negro Society for Historical Research in New York. He frequently vocalized his strong position on armed self-defense in response to racial terror.
- 16 Herbert Shapiro, *White Violence and Black Response: From Reconstruction to Montgomery* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 41.
- 17 “Tracked Down By Bloodhounds,” *The Richmond Item*, April 22, 1886.
- 18 “Tracked Down By Bloodhounds.”
- 19 “Mrs. Gould’s Assailant Arrested,” *Birmingham Iron Age*, April 23, 1886.
- 20 “The Lynching of Lewis Houston,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, November 1883.
- 21 “Trouble Feared,” *The Montgomery Advertiser* July 4, 1897.
- 22 James L. Baggett, “A Law Abiding People’: Alabama’s 1901 Constitution and the Attempted Lynching of Jim Brown,” *Alabama Review* 71, no. 3 (2018): 200-233, doi:10.1353/ala.2018.0025.
- 23 Karlos Hill, “Resisting Lynching: Black Grassroots Responses to Lynching in the Mississippi and Arkansas Deltas, 1882-1938” (PhD Dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2010), <http://hdl.handle.net/2142/14606>. Other examples listed in chapter 4, “Resisting Lynching,” under the “Armed Resistance to Lynching” section.
- 24 Hill, “Resisting Lynching.”
- 25 Du Bois, “Returning Soldiers.”
- 26 “NAACP History: Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill,” NAACP, n.d., <https://www.naacp.org/naacp-history-dyer-antilynching-bill/>. Missouri Congressman Leonidas Dyer first introduced the Anti-Lynching Bill in 1918. It was passed by the House of Representatives in 1922, but was halted by the Senate. Although the NAACP didn’t initially support the bill, it influenced other anti-lynching legislation promoted by the organization in the 1950s.
- 27 Ella Baker, Interview by Gerda Lerner, *Developing Community Leadership*, Yale University, December 1970.