

## Reviews

*Ida B. Wells: A Passion for Justice*, a film written and directed by William Greaves. New York: William Greaves Productions, \$595.00 16 mm, \$125.00 video, \$60.00 rental.

*Ida B. Wells-Barnett: An Exploratory Study of an American Black Woman, 1893-1930* by Mildred I. Thompson. Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Publishing, 1990, 289 pp., \$65.00 hardcover.

*The Selected Works of Ida B. Wells* edited by Trudier Harris. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991, 322 pp., \$32.50 hardcover.

**Melba Joyce Boyd**

All three of these works about Ida B. Wells, the journalist and activist known internationally for her fight against lynching, explain how legislated discrimination and racial terrorism beset the Reconstruction Era and how Wells responded to these circumstances. The film *Ida B. Wells: A Passion for Justice* provides a general historical outline of Wells's era and integrates her voice and those of contemporary authorities into the telling of her story. The Wells biography by Mildred Thompson is detailed and intricate and therefore provides more insight into historical dynamics than the other two works; this text also includes some primary materials—essays and even a short story by Wells. *Selected Works* contains an overview of Wells's life by Trudier Harris and original writings by Wells; the selections do not extend beyond 1900 because the book is a part of the Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers series.

*Ida B. Wells: A Passion for Justice* has received many film awards, including First Place Documentary award from the Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame, the Silver Apple at the National Educational Film and Video Festival, and the Silver Plaque at the Chicago International Film Festival. The sixty-minute film opens with a discussion of the Civil War and the birth of Ida B. Wells into slavery in 1862 in Holly Springs, Mississippi.

Historical photographs, drawings, and authentic documents provide the visual imagery as the narrator informs the audience of dates and places that move the history forward. The film traces the key events that challenged Ida B. Wells, especially her suit against Jim Crow seating and the Chesapeake, Ohio, and Southwestern Rail Road Company and her early

work with the *Free Speech* newspaper. Wells's articles about the tragic lynching of three of her friends in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1892 so offended the white citizenry that the newspaper's press was destroyed and she was exiled from Memphis and the South. The fight against lynching became her special crusade for justice, and this issue henceforth directed her pen and lectures. With prominent activists of the times, such as Frederick Douglass, Frances Harper, and Susan B. Anthony, Wells condemned lynching as a tactic to repress the political, social, and economic ambitions of Afroamericans.

When author Toni Morrison reads from Wells's autobiography, *Crusade for Justice*, the film experience becomes more personal. The voice of Ida B. Wells embodied in Toni Morrison conveys the vitality of Wells's literary style, which characterizes the tenacity and the strength of the woman. Excerpts from Wells's autobiography, articles, and essays also function as transitions from setting to subject. Moreover, Morrison reading Wells suggests a literary legacy in black women's history.

A series of interviews with prominent historians, including Paula Giddings, John De Mott, Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, and David Tucker, places Ida B. Wells in historical context. What is especially effective about these interviews is that the descriptions of events are enhanced by critical analysis and feminist insight. The historians explain how Jim Crow legislation and lynching enforced subjugation of black people, and how Ida B. Wells was personally affected and politically motivated by these dynamics. The discussions also consider the sexist attitudes of the black community and its ambivalence about women activists.

The film includes a brief interview with Troy Duster, a professor of sociology and the grandson of Ida B. Wells. Dr. Duster's interview includes personal reflections that underline his grandmother's strong character and radical convictions. Through him, family oral history is infused into the film's narrative.

If there is one thematic incongruity in the film, it is the narration. Since the man behind the voice, Al Freeman, Jr., is never shown in the film, the narration hovers over the film like an omniscient eye. Consequently, even though this is a film about a black woman from the past, the subliminal effect of the male voice, which gives the first and the last words on the subject, suggests that the larger intelligence and the broader view of history is male. Possibly, the interviews could have been extended to include these scripted historical accounts supplied by the narrator. Additionally, the film could have opened and closed with comments in Ida B. Wells's own voice.

The film does, however, maintain throughout the perspective of Wells as its primary focus. It provides an excellent introduction to her life and even conveys that life's complexity by relaying the conflict between radicals

and conservatives; male domination vs. women's rights; and the private vs. the public life of Ida B. Wells.

Mildred Thompson concludes her historical study of Wells with a comment about the film: "[Wells] would have been excited and pleased at this acknowledgment of her place in history" (130). Thompson's book is a part of the comprehensive series *Black Women in United States History* edited by Darlene Clark Hines. *Ida B. Wells-Barnett: An Exploratory Study of an American Black Woman, 1893-1930* contains a valuable analysis of Wells's life and times and should be considered a seminal text. Its creative structure is the strongest dimension of the work, as Thompson juxtaposes comments from particular personalities of the times with Wells's perspectives and analyzes Wells's philosophical and political positions in context.

Thompson takes a traditional scholarly approach, as the book was initially written as her doctoral dissertation. Unfortunately, Thompson's attempt to "objectify" Wells's autobiography tends to make her misconstrue Wells's radicalism. Thompson often characterizes her from the perspective of Wells's political critics, referring to her as an "extremist." This subjective term is derived from the prevailing conservatism that alienated Wells and dominated black politics at the turn of the century. Hence, Thompson concludes: "Ida Wells-Barnett was a militant civil rights activist during most of her adult life, but in her mature years . . . was out of step with her time, attuned to a drummer whom she had heard earlier, a drummer whose beat would not be heard again for another generation" (9). Others might conclude that Wells was in step, or at least more heroic than extremist, because she extended the progressive vision of the nineteenth-century radicals despite the political digressions of her peers.

Thompson does, however, provide the necessary information for understanding Wells's marginal position during the latter years of her political life. While other biographers merely mention her refusal to compromise her principles, Thompson explores the ins and the outs of her relationships with Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. DuBois, and Hallie Q. Brown, all of whom felt that Wells's political strategy was too confrontational.

Throughout her activist years Wells was criticized for "speaking out like a man." To some extent Wells was sensitive to this opinion, but in the final analysis she refused to temper her style to the narrow perceptions of a growing conservative climate. Her class consciousness exceeded the more bourgeois motivations of the women's organizations and the Chicago black elite. Indeed, her work with the Ida B. Wells Club and the Negro Fellowship League focused on the needs of poor black people and engaged practical problems like employment, food, housing, and education.

The essays by Ida B. Wells that follow Thompson's biography cover such topics as lynching, migration to Africa, Booker T. Washington, and

the American Centennial. There are enough essays to give a strong sense of Wells's voice and literary skill, but *The Selected Works of Ida B. Wells-Barnett* is much more extensive. It includes all of the chapters from the pamphlet "The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition" (1892) (including prefaces in French and German); "A Red Record: Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynching in the United States, 1892, 1893-1894"; and "Mob Rule in New Orleans: Robert Charles and His Fight to the Death" (1900). These essays are essential, and *Selected Works* thus fulfills an important need in reprinting them. As in the case of Thompson's book, however, the expensive price tag will send the mass reading audience to the library for a copy. If it were not for the cost of these hardcovers, they would make excellent textbooks.

*Selected Works* also contains an overview of Wells's life by Trudier Harris. The overview gives historical background, discusses biographical issues, and touches on the nuances of Wells's political conflicts with prominent "race leaders." Because the Schomburg series is a literary collection, Harris gives appropriate attention to Wells as a writer. Aligning Wells with Frances Harper, Charlotte Forten, Harriet Jacobs, Ann Plato, and Phillis Wheatley, among others, allows Wells's historical and political insight to be valued as cultural expression and appreciated as literature.

The essays of Ida B. Wells carry the breath and fire of her radicalism. Unlike the more pretentious Victorian prose that resulted from the constraints of convention, Wells's direct and impassioned language is appropriate to her tasks and themes. What hindsight gives our contemporary reading of Wells is the knowledge that her writing and her political thought were linked to the nineteenth-century rhetorical style of black women radicals like Frances Harper. In fact, Harper chose the name of the main character in her 1892 feminist novel *Iola Leroy, or, Shadows Uplifted* on the basis of Ida B. Wells's pen name, Iola. Likewise, Harper's essays and speeches focused on political issues, especially abolition, women's rights, and lynching.

Reading Ida B. Wells also supplies an ideological context for our contemporary setting because she reveals how race hatred is linked to historical guilt and how oppressive beliefs and deeds are enacted to deny responsibility. Her analysis of lynching moves us to an understanding of the critical issue of miscegenation, and why patriarchal rule depends on the control of women.

Furthermore, Wells's perspective and system of analysis can and should be extended to contemporary social issues that confound the public, for example, the case of Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill. Thomas's collusion with the Republican administration should be linked to Booker T. Washington's complicity with white racists, while Anita Hill's treatment by the Senate committee during the judicial hearings should be considered

symbolic of the disdain Americans exhibit when a black woman publicly defends her integrity and defies male power. Ida B. Wells illuminates how race and sex formulate a class reality in this country:

The utterances of leading white men show that with them it is not the crime but the class. Bishop Fitzgerald has become apologist for lynchers of the rapists of white women only. Governor Tillman, of South Carolina, in the month of June, standing under the tree in Barnwell, S.C., on which eight Afro-Americans were hung last year, declared that he would [“]lead a mob to lynch a negro who raped a white woman.” So say the pulpits, officials and newspapers of the South. But when the victim is a colored woman it is different. (Harris, 26)

*The Political Economy of Gender: Women and the Sexual Division of Labour in the Philippines* by Elizabeth U. Eviota. London and New Jersey: Zed Press, 1992, 256 pp., \$55.00 hardcover, \$19.95 paper.

**Leonora C. Angeles**

The strength of Elizabeth Eviota's work lies in its historical account of women in the Philippines, spanning more than four centuries, and its theoretical analysis of the intersection of sex and political economy in the sexual division of labor. Nowhere in the book does Eviota see Filipino women as an already constituted and coherent group “oppressed” by colonialism or patriarchy. They are seen instead as subjects existing within social relations, gaining their identity, constitution, construction, and reconstruction through the historically specific and culturally determined structures and forms of family, kinship, marriage, class, state policies, and ideologies in the Philippines.

Eviota devotes particular attention to the family, the Catholic church, and the state as the three institutions that have hitherto played a central role in shaping the roles of Filipino women. Marriage and the family are analyzed by Eviota as one of the main loci of women's oppression. A discussion of women's position within the Filipino family would not be complete without a critique of the popular assertion that Filipino women have real power in the home since they hold the family purse and make the domestic decisions. Eviota sees this assertion as part of the ideology of compensation, an ideology attempting “to compensate a gender that has been marginalized from production” (151). What it really undergirds is “men's ability to shed their responsibility for housework and child care, manifested through handing over a part or much of their earnings” (152).