

longer needed. When the general culture became permeated with the ways of consumer culture, commercial entertainment, and relaxed heterosocial relationships, there was no need for an island devoted to such activities on weekends.

One theme running through *Coney Island* gets more attention here than in previous scholarship—the history of technology. Most social historians who have been concerned about the relation of the working classes to technological innovation examine changes in the workplace and the work process. But Burns makes the important point that one of the meanings of Coney Island is the transformation of technology, especially electricity, into middle-class and working-class entertainment. The treatment of architecture, though not so venturesome as the work on New York by the Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas, explores a commercially inspired architectural fantasy and inventiveness that would later appeal to some postmodernists, among them those now designing hotels for Walt Disney Productions.

Finally, *Coney Island* heightens one's awareness of a historiographical trend in which it participates. Much, though not all, of the recent scholarship on the emergence of American commercial culture portrays it as corrosive of the constraints of class, gender, and ethnicity. This vision of a liberating capitalism has some truth in it, but there are other dimensions of this transformation that need to be considered and probed more deeply, lest we slide unwittingly into a neo-consensus history of the culture of modern capitalism.

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*Ida B. Wells: A Passion for Justice*. Prod. by William Greaves and Louise Archambault. William Greaves Productions, 1990. 53 mins. (William Greaves Productions, 230 Fifty-fifth St., 26th Floor, New York, NY 10019)

Introducing this installment in the PBS series *The American Experience*, David McCullough notes that Ida B. Wells is the “kind of heroic figure we should all have grown up with in school.” Certainly the drama of her life and her

personal courage make this African-American journalist and leader an engaging figure for film biography. Her life also serves as a magnificent backdrop for addressing many African-American and women's issues from the time of her birth in 1862 to that of her death in 1931. *Ida B. Wells: A Passion for Justice* does a remarkably good job of interweaving the stories of the person and the environment, using a rich array of photographs, interviews, and superbly effective readings from her memoirs and writings by Toni Morrison.

The story is truly remarkable. Born a slave in Holly Springs, Mississippi, Wells experienced the hope and opportunities ushered in by Reconstruction until a yellow fever epidemic took her parents' lives in 1878. At age sixteen Wells refused to let her younger siblings be separated and quit school to support her family by teaching.

In 1884 Wells bit a train conductor who tried to remove her from the ladies' car. After three conductors physically ousted her, she filed suit. When the decision in her favor was reversed on appeal, Wells wrote that she wanted to “gather my race in my arms and fly away with them.” Instead, she wrote accounts of the incident and launched her journalistic career. She wrote weekly columns until she was fired as a teacher and became editor and co-owner of the *Memphis Free Speech*.

Then in 1892 three male friends were lynched, primarily because they had opened a grocery store in competition with whites. Outraged, Wells adopted lynching as her journalistic focus and began to investigate its causes. She soon learned that fraudulent rape charges were frequently used to justify mob violence. In one editorial she suggested that some white women were not raped but willingly had affairs with black men. Whites responded by destroying the newspaper office when she was out of town.

Wells went into exile, not returning to the South for nearly thirty years—until she went back “undercover” to investigate the Elaine, Arkansas, race riot in 1917. Until her death in 1931, she remained a militant voice against lynching and discrimination, was active in the woman suffrage movement, married fellow activist Ferdinand L. Barnett, had children,



Ida B. Wells, who was born in slavery, became a militant voice against discrimination, helped found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and worked for woman suffrage (from *Ida B. Wells*).

helped found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and other self-help groups, started a settlement house in Chicago, was active in Republican politics, wrote pamphlets and an autobiography, and rebuked presidents, Susan B. Anthony, and fellow black leaders for their timidity.

The life of Wells was shaped by both her sex and her color. Her words and actions elicited especially outraged attention because they contradicted stereotypes of women and of African Americans. She even refused to conform to the role of militant black feminist. When Wells married and started a family, Anthony became angry. She told Wells that marriage was "not for women like you — with a special call" and bemoaned her "divided duty."

In recounting the story of this remarkable woman, *Ida B. Wells: A Passion for Justice* imparts much information about African-

American and women's history. Sometimes it seems to try to do too much. The treatment of certain people and events is simplistic and misleading. Some information, such as that about the Ku Klux Klan, seems to be grafted on in chronologically confusing places. Occasionally, the impact of Wells is overstated. For example, the film implies that she almost single-handedly ended lynching by 1896, when in fact it remained a serious problem for two more decades and received the attention of many reformers. Nevertheless, the film's scope makes it useful for general American history courses as well as African-American and women's history courses. It is both engaging and informative.

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