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Revealing the Predecessor to “Black Lives Matter”: Untold History of African American Women in the 1900s

Britini Victoria Williams

From the race riots in 1917 to Black Lives Matter in 2015, American people have historically espoused a male-centered narrative that has diluted women’s efforts as political revolutionaries and organizers for change. This paper combats the invisibility of women—particularly women of color—in radical movements. African American women at the forefront of social and political movements today is not novel, but rather stems from an undisclosed history. In this paper, I re narrate an anti-lynching history with a conscious focus on women’s efforts that brought discussion about the passage of the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill in 1922 to prove that Black women have always contributed to preconditions necessary for organizing. In St. Louis Missouri during the 1920s African American Club Women fought for the passage of the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill, while in 2014 Umaara Iyanaas Elliott and Synead Nichols—both African American women—planned a 50,000 person march to promote Black Lives Matter after the murder of two African American males.

First, I will explain the passage of the Dyer Bill and the state of Missouri during the early 1900s. Then, I will discuss how African American clubwomen organized to become the National Association of Club Women (NACW) by focusing on two key actors: Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Mary Church Terrell. Lastly, I will connect the experiences of national organizing in the 1900s to national organizing today by focusing on the Millions March.

Setting the Scene

The 1900s were a *national* era of Jim Crow, a time when whites and people of color were legally separated in public places including on transit and in schools. Blacks and whites lived in separate neighborhoods. Many believed that only those in southern states were affected by Jim Crow, but this is untrue. In fact, some of the most horrific race riots occurred in northern states like Missouri. Exemplary of race-based hate crimes

committed in this era, on July 1, 1917, white assailants drove through a Black neighborhood firing shots at Black people. Later that evening, two officers in plain clothes went to check out the situation in a similar vehicle as the white assailants. The residents opened fired on the officers, whom they mistook for the shooters, killing them. Whites retaliated in what would later be known as the East St. Louis mob attacks. On this day it is believed that 48 died, with all but nine being Black. In his book *Race Riot at East St. Louis*, late historian Elliot M. Rudwick estimates that the actual death toll number was closer to 100.¹

Missouri and the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill

The Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill was formed by Leonidas Dyer, Republican congressman of St. Louis, Missouri who experienced first-hand some of the worst race riots in St. Louis and in the country. This bill was the first national legislation to confront lynching, hold mob members accountable, and put forth the idea that lives of Blacks should be valued.

The 1917, race riots were among the worst in U.S. history. They were a result of European immigrants and Black migrants who moved to places like Missouri and other Midwestern states in search of employment in a population shift known as The Great Migration.² This intermixing of Blacks and whites sparked violent confrontations of one which was mentioned above and resulted in the lynchings of numerous Blacks. Lynching was a way to reassert white supremacy. According to biographer William B. Hixon Jr., “lynching...was the work of mobs acting outside the law, and, insofar as the Court had spoken on such violence at all,

¹ Gross, Shera. "Deadly 1917 Riot Mostly Forgotten : Unrest: Seventy-five Years before Los Angeles' Disturbances, 48 Died in East St. Louis Racial Attacks. A Survivor Says, 'It Was Just like War.'" *Associated Press*. LA times, 14 July 1992. Web.

² “Lynching in America: Statistics, Information, Images,” Lynching Statistics, accessed December 1, 2013

seemed to be murder, no less but no more.”³ Lynching by white mobs was not only both socially and legally permissible, but condoned. Within this framework, something needed to be done on the judicial level to account for the murderous crimes being committed by white mobs. As a response to the lynchings, Representative Leonidas Dyer introduced H.R. 11279 on April 18, 1918 with the consultation of the NAACP and legal advisors. The bill would “protect citizens of the United States against lynching in default of protection by the States.”⁴ He argued that the states’ refusal to prosecute lynchers violated the Fourteenth Amendment rights of Black people. To justify passing a bill that imposed federal regulation over social policy, he cited the examples of the Eighteenth Amendment (prohibition) and child labor laws. If the protection of what a citizen can legally drink, and the age and conditions under which a child can legally work can be federally mandated, so too could Black lives be protected.

Between 1886 and 1920 there were over 2,000 documented lynchings in America, with highly concentrated numbers in Missouri. Missouri and many southern states were to be held accountable for the violence perpetrated by their residents. Thus, the Bill stated that a state or city official that failed to protect their Black citizens from lynching could be fined \$5,000 or face up to 5 years in prison. It mandated that lynching perpetrators (anyone who participated in a lynching) would face a minimum of 5 years in prison. In addition, the county in which the lynching took place would have to pay \$10,000 to the victim’s family. If the victim was taken from one county but killed in another, both counties were to be held responsible. Lastly, the bill sought to

address fair courtroom proceedings by excluding supporters and lynch mob participants from juries.⁵

Though the bill is named for him, Dyer was neither alone nor the primary advocate of this anti-lynching bill. African American Clubwomen were pursuant of anti-lynching in all states, and the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill was one for which the Clubwomen advocated.

African American Clubwomen on Anti-Lynching Legislation

African American women formed local women’s clubs to promote anti-lynching, which resulted in the formation of the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs (NACWC) in July 1896. Given their social standing and de facto regulations, women had to operate in spaces separate from men, granting them opportunities to form their own clubs. In large part, African American Clubwomen were well educated and belonged to the Black middle class. These women organized for change, using their education and status as a means to accomplish goals they set forth. However as they suffered both from societal racism and sexism, African American women and their organizing efforts often went unnoticed. On the other hand, the efforts of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People’s (NAACP) were widely documented and prolonged in public discourse.

The women of the NACWC were highly involved in forming and operating the NAACP. Women like Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Mary Church Terrell, and many others held executive positions in the NAACP and were both founders and members of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW). Due to this overlap, African American women pushed to eradicate lynching by calling for the implementation of federal anti-lynching bills.

One of the notable engagements African American Clubwomen participated in was

³ Hixson, Jr. William B. "Moorfield Storey and the Defense of the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill." *The New England Quarterly* 42.1 (1969): 65-81. *JSTOR*. Web. 02 Mar. 2015.

⁴ "Anti-Lynching Legislation Renewed US House of Representatives: History, Art & Archives." *Anti-Lynching Legislation Renewed*. N.p., n.d. Web. 02 Mar. 2015

⁵ "Anti-Lynching Legislation Renewed US House of Representatives: History, Art & Archives." *Anti-Lynching Legislation Renewed*. Web. 02 Mar. 2015

promoting anti-lynching on a national scale. They saw lynching as an oppressive force and as a means for whites to erase economic competition with Blacks. This came in the form of making sure Blacks did not have jobs and did not date whites to usurp white families' wealth. Thomas Moss, a Black man, was lynched in 1892 for defending his business after it has been attacked by local whites in Memphis. If Black people were lynched, the logic went, they would not get in the way of whites. Under Jim Crow, white supremacy of the U.S. did not value Black peoples' lives. The women believed in promoting moral respect across racial lines in order to end lynching. In order to do so, they used their social programs to teach African American women the desire for self-betterment in order to change whites' opinions on Blacks. They did not challenge the traditional roles of Black women by arguing that the home and the domestic sphere is what they knew, thus their members could connect in "believing that it is only through the home that a people can become really good and truly great, the N.A.C.W. shall enter that sacred domain to inculcate right principles of living and correct false views of life."⁶ 24 They used the social domain for strengthening Blacks. The women believed social uplift would then result in whites' ceasing to question the value of a Black life.⁷ The Clubwomen made a conscious effort to focus their work within the social sphere because this was the site of their expertise.⁸ In this they defended the character of Black women. For example, Ida B. Wells-Barnett made sure to expose the facts of lynching through her journalism in newspapers and pamphlets. The Clubwomen looked to the Dyer Bill as an opportunity to end lynching on a national scale. They, however, could not do so without the formation of a national organization that would strengthen their collective voice.

⁶ Kinser, Amber E. "In Union There Is Strength." *Motherhood and Feminism*. Berkeley, CA: Seal, 2010. 50-51. Print.

⁷ Jim Crow segregation taught that black life was not valued.

⁸ Amii Larkin, "The Application of Critical Race Feminism to the Anti-Lynching Movement

Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Mary Church Terrell

Ida B. Wells and Mary Church Terrell are two of the most well-known NACW members. They both founded this organization and promoted a national anti-lynching effort. Ida B. Wells was a Chicago resident who actively fought anti-lynching through her journalism.⁹ She provided what many historians would argue to be the most thorough analysis of lynching at the time. Her scholarship accorded Wells-Barnett international fame after 1892, when she traveled across America and England to speak on anti-lynching. Wells-Barnett deduced that lynching was in fact a result of trying to drive out Black workers in order to reduce economic competition, rather than the standard accusation that Black men were rapists.¹⁰ Attorney Amii Larkin Barnard writes, "Black women's experience with white sexual violence gave them a unique perspective which allowed them to see through, or deconstruct, the "protection of white womanhood" justification for lynching."¹¹ Black women saw through deliberate rape schemes that aimed to annihilate Blacks. Wells's data showed that between the year 1900 and 1901, out of the 117 lynching victims, only 18 had been charged with rape.¹² It is common argument among most historians that many victims who were lynched were actually political activists, labor organizers or black men and women "who violated white expectations of black deference."¹³ Wells-Barnett

⁹ Not only did Wells work become recognized through journalism, but she encouraged others to fight segregation through protest and boycotts. Amii Larkin, "The Application of Critical Race Feminism to the Anti-Lynching Movement: Black Women's Fight Against Race and Gender Ideology, 1892-1920" *UCLA Women's Law Journal* (1993), accessed December 1, 2013

¹⁰ Black men were not the only people who were lynched, but given the topic of this paper I will only discuss lynching as it was performed on black men. Lynching was justified for black men because they were believed to be danger to white women.

¹¹ Larkin, "The Application of Critical Race Feminism to the Anti-Lynching Movement"

¹² Gaines, *Uplifting The Race*, 85-86.

¹³ Manfred, Nicholas. "Constitutionality." *Leonidas Dyer & the Dyer Bill*. Web. 02 Mar. 2015.

was able to collect this data with help from fellow African American women who led the investigative work behind the scenes to compile data on lynchings that had been occurring on a state-by-state level. Significantly, the lynchings they accounted for were only those officially reported; a large amount of lynchings were not documented. Wells-Barnett was candid in her work, which earned her much respect and also made her a target. She was radical for her time, which is what was needed to progress the anti-lynching movement. Wells-Barnett argued that "our country's national crime is lynching. It is the creature of an hour, the sudden outburst of uncontrolled fury, or the unspeakable brutality of an insane mob."¹⁴ Through coalition-building with women like Mary Church Terrell, Wells-Barnett devoted herself to fighting these egregious crimes.

Mary Church Terrell was a school teacher and an organizer for the Republican party from Memphis. Her father was a former slave who became an investor in real estate and was the South's first black millionaire. She attended Oberlin College, and wrote in her autobiography, "all during my college course I had dreamed of the day when I could promote the welfare of my race"¹⁵ (93, Watson). Shortly after college, she became a teacher and got married. Her marriage forced her to quit her job because at the time married women were not allowed to work. During this phase in her life, she became heavily involved in women's rights. She was a founder and the first president of the National Association of Colored Women. Terrell remained an activist until she died. At ninety years of age she continued to confront and protest Jim Crow. Like Wells-Barnett she was a journalist, with a focus on the lives of Black Women. In "From a Negro's Point of view" she wrote: "Instance after instance might be cited to prove that the hostility toward the negro in the

South is bitter and pronounced, and that lynching is but a manifestation of this spirit of vengeance and intolerance in its ugliest and most brutal form."¹⁶ (101, Price) The topic of lynching was close to home to Terrell. Terrell was a great friend of Thomas Moss, and it was his death that spurred the great activism in her.

The two women's lives paralleled each other in many ways. They were born a year apart from each other, and both were daughters to former slaves. They both received higher education and became writers. Wells-Barnett and Terrell lived in Memphis in the 1880's. At one point or another they were forced to end their careers, which helped begin their lives of advocacy. During one summer, Wells-Barnett was in California and did not have funds to return back to Memphis for the start of the school semester. She wrote to Mary Church Terrell's father asking for transportation money as he was the only Black man she knew who could finance her return, and Robert Church sent her the money. Wells-Barnett and Terrell had met only once before they worked in coalition together, as they hailed from different class and geographic backgrounds:

The rude awakening sent Wells and Terrell on a course that changed both their lives. Their approaches were different--symbolized by Wells purchasing a pistol, situated as she was within the belly of the beast, while Terrell, no doubt wearing her accustomed white gloves and expensive strand of pearls, went to the White House. Each would be effective in her own way; but Wells's radical response would have a more immediate impact. (22, Giddings)

Wells-Barnett published an article that detailed lynchings around the country comprised of shocking figures. In 1892, Black women came to Wells' aid to help her publish this article in booklet form. They planned a testimonial booth that was

¹⁴ Ida B. Wells-Barnett, "Lynch Law in America," *The Arena* 23.1 (January 1900): 15-24.

¹⁵ Watson, Martha. *Lives of Their Own: Rhetorical Dimensions in Autobiographies of Women Activists*. Univ of South Carolina, 1999. Print.

¹⁶ Rice, Anne P. *Witnessing Lynching: American Writers Respond*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2003. Print.

held in New York City's Lyric Hall, which became a historic event in which two hundred and fifty Black women showed up to honor Wells-Barnett. Wells-Barnett and Terrell did a lot in their communities, but they had to look outside Memphis to address lynching as a national endemic. Together the women established the NACW.

National Association of Colored Women

Wells-Barnett and Terrell, along with Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin,¹⁷ conceived of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) in order to make a greater unified difference to better the lives of Blacks. Clubwomen of the National Federation of Afro-American Women and the Colored Women's League joined together to form the NACW on July 21, 1896, in Washington, D.C., "influenced by the common denominator of sexual oppression." (22, Jones) The merging of women's clubs and the efforts of national organizing allowed for centralized thought and unified purpose of women's clubs, resulting in powerful advocacy and activism as described by scholar Mary Jane Brown:

[Ida B. Wells] and Mary Church Terrell, teacher, lecturer, and fierce advocate of the anti-lynching cause, were involved actively in the formation of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) clubs, whose members endorsed federal anti-lynching legislation and joined that fight under the banner of the NAACP...From its inception, the NAACP relied heavily on women in developing the association and as anti-lynching crusaders.¹⁸ (85-86)

The NACW was comprised of African American Clubwomen who used their economic and educational status as a catalyst to contradict the

stereotypes of women of color, and educate broader society on anti-lynching. These stereotypes surrounding women of color motivated the women of NACW to refute damaging tropes of Black women. They used their power to serve and better the lives of women of color by creating social work programs and implementing school programs on a national scale. This concept of club organizing was not new for the African American community at the time, as members of the community frequently organized in churches.¹⁹

The women held their first meeting at the 19th street Baptist Church in Washington, D.C. with 25 states represented, 5,000 members, and 73 delegates in attendance to the Founder's Meeting. The women chose "Lifting as We Climb" as the organization's motto, whereupon the women vowed to be the leaders of racial uplift amongst the black community. Mary Church Terrell was elected as the first president of the NACW. Together the women of the NACW responded specifically to the needs of their community. They introduced women's shelters in urban areas that focused on social work in order to help integrate women who were moving as a result of the Great Migration. The women later focused their agendas on anti-lynching.²⁰

In 1904, around two hundred African American women met for their fourth NACW biennial convention in St. Louis, Missouri. This location was chosen in honor of the World's Fair and the establishment of the St. Louis Association of Colored Women, which was made up of twenty-four St. Louis women's clubs. World's Fair organizers gave official welcomes to the women of the NACW convention, which was challenged as Clubwomen observed racist practices in the fair. Margaret Murray Washington, a NACW delegate, reported from the fair back to the NACW that white people and Black people were not allowed to

¹⁷ President of the Woman's Era Club

¹⁸ Brown, Mary Jane. "Advocates in the Age of Jazz: Women and the Campaign for the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill." *Peace & Change* 28, no 3 (July 2003): 378-419. *EBSCO MegaFILE*, EBSCOhost (accessed December 1, 2013)

¹⁹ Among the church there were music clubs, literary clubs, and others.

²⁰ Amii Larkin, "The Application of Critical Race Feminism to the Anti-Lynching Movement

use the same water fountains, nor were they allowed to share the shade. Due to these overtly racist acts, the women of the NACW decided to boycott the fair.²¹ Taking this stance was one of the ways the NACW women organized for change. The women who attended the convention were instrumental in developing a plan for racial uplift. Although the NACW's efforts were progressive and recognized by the state of Missouri, the Black community continued to endure violent repression for simply residing in Missouri.

National Organizing

Organization on a national scale was important to the anti-lynching movement and to the passage of the Dyer Bill. One-way Blacks took to spreading their messages of anti-lynching and desegregation was through newspaper publications. The *Broad Axe*, a Chicago-based Black newspaper founded by Julius F. Taylor in 1895, largely covered lynchings that occurred in the United States during World War I. In 1912, Taylor joined with the publishers of the *Chicago Defender*, *Chicago Illinois Idea*, and the *Illinois Chronicle* to promote the strength of African American literature and to create a central spot for African Americans' concerns. Mass support and national congregation was important to the Black community. One article published in the *Broad Axe* expressed the importance of togetherness in effectively passing the Dyer Bill:

We, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, in mass meeting assembled, appeal to the United States Congress to take drastic action in order that lynching may be stopped absolutely and forever and by the power of the Federal government. The states will not and cannot act. They stand helpless before

the mob and confess openly their helplessness.²²

The NAACP made it clear that resistance against lynching must be carried out at the national level because states alone could not get rid of the mobs. Lynching was a national problem that concerned and involved all citizens of the U.S. The similar pushbacks that affected the NAACP also affected the African American Clubwomen. Locally, the women could not affect as great a change as they could nationally. The "Silent March" was an event hosted by the NAACP in which 10,000 people paraded in New York City after the brutal race riots in St. Louis. This was the first mass demonstration carried out by African Americans; it would not be the last. Today, in 2015, one of the most recent organizing done by African Americans also in New York City was the Millions March.²³

This Bridge Called Black Feminism

Today, we label Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Mary Church Terrell as feminists of their generation. Soon to follow in their steps would be Assata Shakur, then Umaara Iynaas Elliott, and Synead Nichols. These are names that must never be forgotten for their work in uplifting Black lives through *climbing*. Umaara Iynaas Elliott, currently 19-years-old, and Synead Nichols, 21-years-old, are the revolutionaries of *my* generation. These women organized The Millions March in New York City in 2014, which quickly became a National Movement. In an interview with *Feministing*, a blog by and for young feminists, they said, "We have people in Oakland, Denver, Texas, L.A., and Boston. That's the great thing about this movement—getting people from across the nation who are in solidarity with Ferguson and New York and Ohio, where Tamir Rice and John Crawford were

²² "N. A. A. C. P. Mass Meeting Urges Congress To Pass Dyer Bill." *Broad Axe* [Chicago, Illinois] 14 Jan. 1922: 2. Print.

²³ Simpson, Craig. "Before 1963: The 1922 Silent March on Washington." *Before 1963: The 1922 Silent March on Washington*. Washington Area Spark, 06 Feb. 2013. Web. 02 Mar. 2015.

²¹ Arthelda M. Busch, "Lifting as we Climb," *Gateway Heritage*, Spring 2014

gunned down. That was really something that we wanted, to have people be aware of what's going on."²⁴ Like Wells-Barnett and Terrell they recognized the power in starting a movement that would take off in cities around the country.

African American Clubwomen were crucial to the survival of the Black community. Gaines writes, "The black women's club movement provided a crucial institutional base and audience for the work of black women intellectuals and activists within the culture of racial uplift and political activism and protest before the reside of Washington and Du Bois"²⁵ (130-132, Gaines) Today, the African American Feminist fulfills the role of the African American Clubwoman.

bell hooks argues that Black women's economic and political status provides them with unique experiences that offer a material reality that is not experienced by other groups, in turn creating a distinctive Black feminist thought relating to that material reality.²⁶ In the Feministing interview, Elliot says, "As Black women, we are thinking about our sons and our daughters who we don't want to fall victim to racial profiling. It comes back to that. As Black women, we want a safer world for our children. So why not fight for your future offspring?"²⁷ Elliot's sentiment essentially echoes hooks' theory of Black feminism.

Conclusion

Despite the NACW's, NAACP's, and President Warren G. Harding's support of the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill, the bill was never passed due to the large white, southern Democratic block. One of the oppositions from Virginia, Representative R. Walton Moore, stated that, "in Virginia, instances of mob violence resulting in homicide have become

so infrequent that we can regard lynching as practically a thing of the past in that State...Legislation of this kind is more than apt to increase the offenses that we all desire to do away with." He believed that the nation should not have been concerned with lynching because it was a thing of the past. Rather, he believed that the lawmakers should have been focused on mob violence. To Dyer and many other supporters of the bill, mob violence and lynchings were intertwined. Furthermore, opponents to the Dyer Bill argued that the Fourteenth Amendment applied to the state level rather than a national level. "Nevertheless, this initial campaign for anti-lynching legislation is significant not only because it helped set the pattern the Association would later follow in lobbying in Congress, but because it marked a new statement of the responsibility of the Federal Government to protect the civil rights of its citizens."²⁸ (67 Hixon) Even though their efforts to pass the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill failed, some people in the Black community regarded their defeat as a victory because the U.S. government acknowledged that lynching was a nation-wide problem, and that African American women and men would not stop fighting for justice until it was reached.

In 2014, it was not until *after* the non-indictments of Daren Wilson, killer of Michael Brown, and Daniel Pantaleo, killer of Eric Garner, that the Millions March was organized as a sign to show that Blacks and other minority races were angry about the justice system's decision to not indict these killers. To illustrate how widely-known both the structural injustices and oppressed peoples' awareness of these injustices are, writer Shera Gross stated, "President Obama, speaking in Washington, said the decisions in New York and Missouri highlighted the frustrations that many African-Americans have harbored about a legal system that has a long history of discrimination

²⁴ Bobadilla, Suzanna. "THE FEMINISTING FIVE: SYNEAD NICHOLS AND UMAARA IYNAAS ELLIOT." *Feministing*. N.p., Jan. 2015. Web. 2 Mar. 2015.

²⁵ Gaines, *Uplifting The Race*, 130-132

²⁶ Hooks, Bell. *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center*. Boston, MA: South End, 1984. Print.

²⁷ Bobadilla, Suzanna. "THE FEMINISTING FIVE: SYNEAD NICHOLS AND UMAARA IYNAAS ELLIOT." *Feministing*. N.p., Jan. 2015. Web. 2 Mar. 2015.

²⁸ Hixon, Jr. William B. "Moorfield Storey and the Defense of the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill" *The New England Quarterly* 42.1 (1969): 65-81. *JSTOR*. Web. 02 Mar. 2015.

against black people.”²⁹ Could the history that President Obama is addressing link back to the St. Louis mob attacks and the frustrations of the non-existence of the passage of the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill? Nancy L. Grant, a history professor at Washington University in St. Louis suggests that even “if memories of the riot have faded, many of the factors behind it have not.”³⁰ This history of African American women organizing for justice is an integral part of a long legacy of anti racism and anti oppression activism in the United States. Stories of women of color that are so frequently erased in national memory must be told.

²⁹ Barker, Al, and J. David Goodman. “Wave of Protests After Grand Jury Doesn’t Indict Officer in Eric Garner Chokehold Case.” *New York Times*. New York Times, 3 Dec. 2014. Web. 2. Mar. 2015

³⁰. Gross, Shera. "Deadly 1917 Riot Mostly Forgotten : Unrest: Seventy-five Years before Los Angeles' Disturbances, 48 Died in East St. Louis Racial Attacks. A Survivor Says, 'It Was Just like War.'" *Associated Press*. LA times, 17 July 1992. Web.

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