To lynch, regardless of the techniques employed, is to use terror or the threat of torture as a control mechanism. To question this practice of unmitigated denial of due process can be construed as a willingness to die for what one believes. It is quite possible that Ida B. Wells expected to encounter opposition when she questioned the veracity that “Southern apologists justify their savagery on the ground that Negroes are lynched only because of their crimes against women.”\(^1\) Her assessment about lynchings ascribed to black men’s interactions with white women antagonized Memphis’s leading white citizens. In her editorial response to the 1892 Memphis lynching, Wells suggested that a review of the facts indicates that individuals, especially white men, might want to reconsider the relevancy of rape to justify lynching. Beside the fact that white men rape black women at their discretion without risk of retaliation or fear of criminal conviction,\(^2\) Wells suggested that many of the white women who cry rape are engaged in consensual relations with black men. Aside from the fact that her evidence showed that rape “committed by white men against Negro women and girls, is never punished by mob or the law,”\(^3\) she also disputed the allegation that suggested that “Southern white women have been slandered because, in defending the Negro race from the charge that all colored men, who are lynched, only pay penalty for assaulting women.” As Wells’s analysis makes clear, however, “it is certain that lynching mobs have not only refused to give the Negro a chance to defend himself, but have killed their victim with a full knowledge that the relationship of the alleged assailant with the woman who accused him was voluntary and clandestine.”\(^4\) Contrast
this with John Nerone’s analysis on violence against the African-American media that reveals that “assertive African-American newspapers were attacked, by mainstream whites, especially in the South, for challenging white hegemony; consistent with prolynching arguments, the crucial rhetorical justification for violence was the rape of white women.” If this is the case, Wells’s account of the correlation between the social construction of gender and lynching also suggests that a deconstructive analysis of the “myth of womanhood,” which is perhaps best described as a fatal attraction to white women, is warranted.

Scholar and civil rights activist Angela Y. Davis’s work on women, race, and class is helpful to anyone who wants to understand the ramifications associated with practices that foster a sense of white female deification that are contingent on human objectification. Davis unabashedly asserts that

[r]acism has always drawn strength from its ability to encourage sexual coercion. While Black women and their sisters of color have been the main targets of these racist-inspired attacks, white women have suffered as well. For once white men were persuaded that they could commit sexual assaults against Black women with impunity, their conduct toward women of their own race could not have remained unmarred. Racism has always served as a provocation to rape, and white women in the United States have necessarily suffered the ricochet fire of these attacks. This is one of the many ways in which racism nourishes sexism, causing white women to be indirectly victimized by the special oppression aimed at their sisters of color.

In a 1993 essay “The Anatomy of a Lynching,” Robyn Wiegman addresses the circumstances from which gender segregation emerged. I concur with her position that

the nineteenth century’s determination of public and private along strict gender lines thus provided a definitional structure through which social space and familial roles were shaped for a population no longer denied the right (and privilege) of maintaining family bonds. But while the patriarchalization of the black family served to institutionalize it within the gender codes prevalent in white bourgeois ideology, thereby securing the black family to the formal dimensions of white social behavior, many whites were decidedly threatened by the definitional sameness accorded former slaves. The loss of one patriarchal organization of social life—that of slavery—and its replacement by