

Civil Rights Baby: My Story of Race, Sports, and Breaking Barriers in American Journalism

by Nita Wiggins

320 pages

Bound version:

ISBN 978-1-7375805-0-8

E-book:

ISBN 978-1-7375805-1-5

Exclusive content

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Introduction

Fighting the Invisible

I look for the good in all people. I approach others in the workplace believing they will see in me what I look for in them: merit. While I must allude often to racism as I tell my story, I do not believe it motivates every unpleasant act or outcome. I know that sometimes a person of color doesn't get a promotion or a contract simply because the person doesn't deserve it. I am aware, too, that I might not receive respectful treatment at work simply because someone else is unprofessional, resentful, or unhappy.

But.

The fact remains that most of the resistance I received during my twenty-one years on American television came from white men. Some used underhanded, malicious tactics to prevent me from advancing in my field. Even when I complained to superiors about the practices and presented what I believed to be proof, I continued to receive the mistreatment. The same happened to other African American female reporters in my circle, including those who worked in other cities and states. In some cases, the bosses perpetrated these actions and seemed to operate with one goal: to block the path of black females in their world.

I wish such injustices were not part of my life's story, but as we say in the U.S., *It is what it is*. The elusive nature of racism makes mine a hard story to tell—or, rather, a hard case to prove. How do you describe it to someone who does not receive it? How do you prove its presence in another's heart? After all, you can't *see* a motive.

You can, however, feel the effects of a motive. Professional minority women across all industries often must fight for more than job promotions. They must fight for job *survival*. White women, too, fight a battle in professional settings. Though they may usually escape racial resistance, many would admit they routinely face patriarchal and sexist foes.

Return of the Noose

Even with federal laws mandating racial and gender equality in hiring, devious people in the workplace still maneuver to chop the knees out from under the “other” (members of traditionally marginalized groups). The actions of these attackers seem to be an expression of discontent at being forced to work alongside individuals who are not members of the attackers’ groups. Is this the same motivation lynchers harbored decades ago in the United States?

Dictionaries employ stark language to define “lynching,” using expressions such as “extrajudicial mob action” or “execution without legal authority,” and even “informal public execution, usually by hanging.” But dictionaries do not explain the reasons for lynching. My research points to race-based terrorism as the root of the more than 4,000 lynchings of black people, post-slavery, in the United States. The work of the Equal Justice Initiative reveals that race-based lynchings occurred, in many instances, because a respectable black person had achieved a measure of success—and someone was jealous of that success.¹

Of course, in my career experience, no one tried to execute me. Instead, at more than one television station between the years 1986 and 2009, someone tried to kill my dreams. Someone executed judgment against me without first finding out what I knew and what I was capable of doing in my field. Not a literal lynching, true, but an act I believe was born of the same type of jealousy that inspired this shameful legacy.

Hence, an *economic* lynching.

In private torment, even as I presented a professional and pleasant face to the world, I endured the effects of the jealousy, or whatever was the dark motive that drove my tormenters.

For years, I was afraid to speak out about this nightmare. Not anymore. When I began writing this book in 2014, I had arrived at a peaceful and powerful new stage in my life. I had found the courage to write about my experience.

I began finding my courage that year in Paris, France. Doctoral student Doria Dee Johnson, an African American from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, was a guest speaker at Dorothy’s Gallery, an American-culture oasis located in Paris’ 11th *arrondissement*. I was present when Ms. Johnson transported her audience, about one hundred people, back to a detestable place and time

¹ “The lynching of African Americans was terrorism, a widely supported campaign to enforce racial subordination and segregation. *Lynching in America* documents more than 4,400 racial terror lynchings in the United States during the period between Reconstruction (1877) and World War II (1939-1945).” (See www.eji.org.)

in America's race-relations history. Ms. Johnson focused on a crime that had occurred some one hundred years earlier. She began:

"I am the great-great-granddaughter of Anthony and Tebby Crawford, the great granddaughter of George and Annabelle Crawford, the granddaughter of Joseph and Fannie Crawford Brooks, and the daughter of Dr. Charles and Helen Brooks Johnson. My story is about my great-great-grandfather's lynching in 1916 in Abbeville, South Carolina."²

After this intriguing opening, Ms. Johnson began a gripping enumeration. Because her speech took place on September 26, she read the names of those who had been lynched in American history on the date of September 26.

"Charles Mack, lynched, Swainsboro, Georgia, September 26, 1891.

"One unidentified black man, lynched, Lincoln, Oklahoma, September 26, 1894.

"Felician Francis, lynched, New Orleans, Louisiana, September 26, 1895."

Grimaces etched the faces of members of the lecture's audience— French citizens, Americans, people from other countries.

Pausing after each name as if to punctuate the slain one's humanity, Ms. Johnson continued:

"Raymond Bushrod . . . lynched. Hainesville, Kentucky, September 26, 1897.

"John Williams . . . lynched. Mountain City, Tennessee, September 26, 1898.

"One unidentified black man . . . lynched. South Pittsburg, Tennessee, September 26, 1900.

"*Charles Anderson . . . lynched. Perry, Florida, September 26, 1909.*"

The audience had fallen into silence. I imagined Ms. Johnson's delivery pierced each listener to the core, as it was doing to me. But something else happened to me as I listened. An otherworldly, out-of-body quasi-consciousness overtook me. I felt as if I were hovering above each raging historical mob that was carrying out its act of bloody injustice.

"The United States allowed this to go on?"³ a shocked someone in the Dorothy's Gallery audience uttered softly. No one in the audience answered the question; Doria Dee Johnson's litany of names was answer enough.

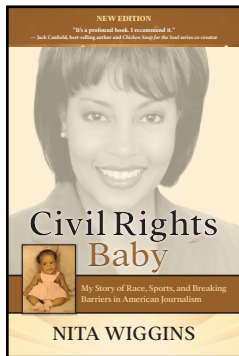
² Historical accounts report that on Saturday, October 21, 1916, in Abbeville, South Carolina, a white mob lynched black businessman and community leader Anthony Crawford. According to the Equal Justice Initiative (www.eji.org), the murder, though committed openly, did not lead to prosecution or conviction for any members of the mob.

³ According to *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror* (2015), released by the Equal Justice Initiative (www.eji.org), the U.S. government and state governments, by not prosecuting the guilty parties, allowed black citizens to be terrorized for decades by the possibility of being lynched.

Excerpted material

Because of this grim reality, I am determined to help effect a change. I know that silence on the part of the mistreated only emboldens those who mistreat. Therefore, with this book, I am no longer silent.

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