

# View from Somewhere Ep 3: The Half Truth About Lynching (Nov. 5 publish)

## **EPIISODE 3 CREDITS:**

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## **EPIISODE 3 LINKS:**

[Freedom Lifted](#) Civil Rights Tours and Social Justice Trainings

[Equal Justice Initiative Lynching Memorial Project](#)

[1918 Lynching of George Taylor](#) information page

[The 1619 Project](#) and [1619 Podcast](#) with Nikole Hannah-Jones

[Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells](#)

[Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases](#) by Ida B. Wells

[To Tell the Truth Freely: The Life of Ida B. Wells](#), by Mia Bay

[Just the Facts: How “Objectivity” Came to Define American Journalism](#), by David T. Z. Mindich

[The View from Somewhere: Undoing the Myth of Journalistic Objectivity](#), by Lewis Raven

Wallace (available now!)

[View from Somewhere Launch Event](#) at the Pinhook in Durham (be there!)

[Hope is a Discipline buttons](#) to benefit Mariame Kaba’s organization, Project NIA

## **MUSIC (in order of appearance):**

- **Dark Water** by Podington Bear
- **Tango Mécanique** (The View from Somewhere Theme Song) by Kirk Pearson and Julian Korzeniowsky
- *Variation Three, Solo Strings* by Dogbotic, Original Music for *The View from Somewhere*
- *Chill Percussion + Bass* by Dogbotic, Original Music for *The View from Somewhere*
- **Dread** by Podington Bear
- *Chill Percussion + Bass* by Dogbotic, Original Music for *The View from Somewhere*
- *Variation One, Percussion* by Dogbotic, Original Music for *The View from Somewhere*
- *Accordion Vamp* by Dogbotic, Original Music for *The View from Somewhere*
- **Vanagon** by Podington Bear

- *Variation One, Bass + Accordion by Dogbotic, Original Music for The View from Somewhere*
- **Cracked Nut Suite** by Podington Bear
- *Accordion + Percussion by Dogbotic, Original Music for The View from Somewhere*
- **Driftwood** by Podington Bear
- *Chill Vibe + Snap by Dogbotic, Original Music for The View from Somewhere*
- **Wetland** by Podington Bear
- **Gymnopedie** by Podington Bear
- *Tango Mécanique, Electro Variation by Dogbotic, Original Music for The View from Somewhere*

## TRANSCRIPT:

**Ramona Martinez:** This is the View from Somewhere podcast -- I'm producer Ramona Martinez. On the last episode, we talked about how Black Lives Matter changed the coverage of police shootings. On this episode, we'll talk about the history of lynching, Ida B. Wells, and what journalistic "balance" means in a racist culture. There are some descriptions of racist violence in here. Also, this podcast is serialized, so we suggest listening from the start.

A final note—the View from Somewhere is on tour. We'll be in Durham November 7, Chicago November 12 to 14th, and New York November 19 to 22nd. Find out more at [viewfromsomewhere dot com](http://viewfromsomewhere.com).

### [ambient road sounds]

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** I live in North Carolina, on a two-lane highway outside Durham—every time I leave my gravel drive, I pass by a beat-up skeleton of a country store...the weathered wood sagging...You can feel that there are stories all over this place. So many of them untold...and some of them, not supposed to be told...

**Shannon Hardy:** I mean, I stand here and I feel like I'm getting stink eye as people drive by because I'm out here stirring things up.

**Lewis:** This is Shannon Hardy, a local middle school teacher—and we'll get to why she's getting stink eye in a minute...I'm talking to her on the shoulder of a country road by a stand of pines in Rolesville, a small town about 45 minutes from Durham. She points at an old farmhouse with white pillars out front...

**Shannon:** This is the house where Ruby Rogers lived and her husband, and she was really young...

**MUSIC:** Dark Water/Podington Bear (Fathomless Ambient)

**Lewis:** The story we're here for today, that's not supposed to be told, starts in 1918, with Ruby Rogers, a young white woman with a husband who traveled a lot...

**Shannon:** Her parents didn't approve of her marrying her husband who was much older than her. She was alone on the farm a lot she... He came home apparently and she said she was allegedly raped or attacked and beaten up.

**Lewis:** She said the man who did this was a stranger. And she said he was black.

**Shannon:** And the community brought three black men to her over a number of days through a week. And she said, every time, no, that's not him. No it's not him, and then the fourth man was George Taylor.

**Lewis:** George Taylor, a guy from a couple towns away.

**Shannon:** According to the newspaper articles, she never was like, yes, this is him.

**Lewis:** She just said it could have been him. But when the sheriff's deputies left the Rogers house with Taylor, four hooded men snatched him away and dragged him down to the creek nearby. That night they tortured and then lynched him in front of hundreds of white people, and left his mangled body in the creek bed.

## **MUSIC OUT**

**Lewis:** Hardy's been working with local middle and high school students to find out more about George Taylor's story, as part of the Equal Justice Initiative's lynching memorial project. The students' goal is to build a memorial... local news media and government had basically buried the story...

**Shannon:** Other than the few articles we found then there was no information about this lynching that happened 100 years ago. So we spend a long long time, about nine months, researching and find doing local interviews of elders, and deeds of records to find out the real story.

**Lewis:** The headline of a Durham Morning Herald article in November 1918 says it all: It just reads: "Was to be expected." The news article explains that George Taylor's lynching was to be expected, and so was the silence afterwards—the author found it unsurprising that even though hundreds of people saw the lynching, no one would say who did it. The sheriff's investigation concluded just over two weeks later with no results. When Hardy's students went looking for more details...it was almost like it never happened.

**Shannon:** It's just silence out here about it. Nobody wants to talk about hard history...

**Lewis:** When they reached out to the Wake County sheriff's office, the sheriff declined to talk. Her middle school students were surprised.

**Shannon** (talking about students): They felt discomfort up here when we were working on things realizing that it makes the community uncomfortable, it's not resolved or reconciled. I think that's probably the most important thing they learned, is that this really hard history that's 100 years old that hasn't since spoken about for all this time isn't reconciled. And that's what's so important about Ida B. Wells...

### **Cue theme music**

**Lewis:** This white school teacher is getting stink-eye for just talking about lynching today...and that's *nothing* compared to what Black people confront when they bring attention to these stories. In the late 1800s, Ida B. Wells, a Black investigative journalist, created the lynching beat. This is the View from Somewhere, a podcast about journalism with a purpose. I'm your host Lewis Raven Wallace. Today on the podcast, the story of Ida B. Wells, and how she uncovered the truth about lynching. We also hear from Nikole Hannah Jones—Ida Bae Wells, on Twitter —about the blurred lines between journalist and activist, and what it means to uncover systemic racism, today. Plus, the murky origins of objectivity.

Turns out white silence, lynching, and quote-unquote objective journalism are all connected. ALSO: Racist goggles. Find out what THAT means by sticking around.

### **Theme music fades**

**Lewis:** Last week, I talked about covering Black Lives Matter in Ohio and my questions about how my whiteness influences my own view of what's important and true. But while the Black Lives Matter movement was shifting my view, I also started looking into this big underlying question...where did the idea of objective journalism come from in the first place? And *that* was actually how I first learned about Ida B. Wells' coverage of lynching...

So picture this. A 21-year-old Black woman, riding in a train car, 1883. The white conductor comes by taking tickets...and tells her she has to move, to the Black car up front. This is the ladies car, meaning, *white* ladies. When she refuses, he grabs her.

### **MUSIC: VFS\_V3 Solo Strings**

**Ida Voiceover:** He tried to drag me out of the seat, but the moment he caught hold of my arm I fastened my teeth to the back of his hand. I had braced my feet against the seat in front, and as he had already been badly bitten he didn't try it again by himself. He went forward and got the baggageman and another man to help him and of course they succeeded in dragging me out.

**Lewis:** Wells describes all this in her autobiography...as she was dragged out of the train car, the white ladies watched and applauded. She got off the train, found a lawyer, sued, and won.

### **MUSIC: VFS\_Electro Percussion**

**Ida Voiceover:** I can see to this day the headlines in the Memphis Appeal announcing *Darky Damsel Gets Damages*.

**Lewis:** Though the railroad appealed and she had to give those damages *back*. Anyhow, point being, Ida B. Wells was a badass.

**MIA BAY:** She is a tremendously energetic, strong minded young woman.

**Lewis:** This is Professor Mia Bay, author of *To Tell the Truth Freely: The Life of Ida B. Wells*. Wells was born into slavery in 1862, and spent her teens taking care of her five younger siblings. In her 20s, she moved to Memphis and became part owner and editor of a black newspaper, the Memphis Free Speech.

Then in 1892, something happened...

**MUSIC: Dread/Podington Bear (Foreboding)**

**BAY:** She had been traveling to promote her newspaper but when she came back she found...black Memphis completely terrorized...

**Lewis:** After a gnarly street fight, white men had lynched three black men. The three men, Will Stewart, Calvin McDowell, and Thomas Moss, were co-owners of a grocery store, the People's Grocery, and Moss was one of Wells' close friends. **Something** stood out to her about *why* her friends had been lynched...

See, at the time, there was a standard story told in the white-run media about lynching. It sounded a lot like the George Taylor story in Rolesville...

**BAY:** ...that lynchings were necessary to keep black men in line, that they were often about disciplining men who had been criminals, or men who had raped women.

**Lewis:** There was this idea that black men were succumbing to their supposedly primitive nature with white women...they were criminals...and so lynching might have been ugly...but just as the Durham Morning Herald had written: It was to be expected.

**BAY:** The local white newspapers, wrote in support of lynchings and kind of talked the sort of standard line about how black people had to be disciplined and black men you know were rapists.

**Lewis:** Even Wells had assumed that people who were lynched had generally done something illegal first. But it was super clear that all this didn't apply to what had happened to her friends in Memphis. The three men were the co-owners of a grocery store, and that was new competition for local white grocers. The local white grocer led the charge against them.

**BAY:** So she began to research why lynchings actually took place.

**MUSIC: VFS Chill Percussion\_Bass**

**Lewis:** She went to places where lynchings happened, and she talked to people. She compiled data from newspapers. Not only did she count lynchings, but she counted how many had happened in response to an accusation, how many of those accusations may have been fabricated, and how many were in response to no crime at all. She even hired white private investigators in some cases. In her autobiography, *Crusade for Justice*, Wells wrote about her findings...

**VOICE OVER: <<IDA B WELLS:** They had committed no crime against white women. This is what opened my eyes to what lynching really was.

**MUSIC: VFS\_V1 Percussion**

**VOICE OVER: IDA B WELLS:** An excuse to get rid of Negroes who were acquiring wealth and property and thus keep the race terrorized, and 'keep the nigger down.'

**Lewis:** As she was learning all this, in 1892, Wells wrote an editorial that said...

**VOICE OVER: <<IDA B WELLS:** Nobody in this section believes the old threadbare lie that Negro men assault white women. If Southern white men are not careful they will over-reach themselves and a conclusion will be reached which will be very damaging to the moral reputation of their women.

**Lewis:** She was traveling when this particular editorial came out, but she got word that if she returned to Memphis, *she* would be lynched. After a mob in Memphis trashed her newspaper office, friends in New York implored her not to go back...

**VOICE OVER: <<IDA B WELLS:** Because I saw the chance to be more of service to the cause by staying in New York than by returning to Memphis, I accepted their advice, took a position on the *New York Age*, and continued my fight against lynching and lynchers. They had destroyed my paper, in which every dollar I had in the world was invested. They had made me an exile and threatened my life for hinting at the truth. I felt that I owed it to myself and my race to tell the whole truth.

**MUSIC TRANSITION: VFS Bumper\_Accordion Vamp**

**Lewis:** Wells took *huge* risks by telling the whole truth as a young black reporter. And as a white reporter trying to figure out my own role now, it stands out to *me* that even though it was less risky for them, the white press *didn't* bother to ask these same questions. The problem wasn't just white silence, but also actively racist coverage, and a lack of rigor from even well-intentioned white reporters...

This reminded me so much of what I saw during the rise of Black Lives Matter...supposedly "objective" news outlets had just failed to investigate this HUGE ongoing story about state-sanctioned violence

against Black people. Reading these stories about lynching was like looking in a creepy mirror, the past reflecting back the present.

**MUSIC: Vanagon/Podington Bear (Brooding)**

**Lewis:** Black people were criminalized. Then, and now. Back in the 1890s, the New York Times had an apologetic take on lynching. It was bad, yes. But so was rape.

**David Mindich:** What we saw in the 1880s, and 1890s, was that the white mainstream newspapers were using all the trappings of objectivity all the elements of objectivity to paint a picture of lynching.

**Lewis:** David Mindich is a journalism historian at Temple University. He says this gaping chasm between the white story about lynching, and the *real* story about lynching gets shielded by the notion of “objectivity.” People weren’t actually using that word yet, but starting in the mid-1800s, lots of white papers were trying to be more nonpartisan and balanced...

**Mindich:** However they were also using their racist baggage, right? They were also bringing their racist lens, their racist goggles, to the to the question of lynching...and there was no accuracy about the story in the 1880s and 90s.

**Lewis:** He says white writers at the time just couldn’t imagine Black men as innocent, or imagine that white women might have *consensual* relationships with them.

**Mindich:** So there were a whole bunch of racist elements that were getting in the way of telling a truthful story.

**Lewis:** Racist elements getting in the way of telling the truth. That also reminded me of Black Lives Matter. When a Black person was shot by police, white journalists “balanced” the story by giving a police perspective—usually, criminalizing the person who’d died, explaining why it was justified. When a Black person was lynched, the story was “balanced” much the same way, explaining why the lynching was justified...

Was history repeating itself? Or was it just...still there...that same white genteel complicity, disguised as balanced news reporting?

**MUSIC: VFS Bumper\_Accordion Vamp**

**Lewis:** My understanding of *all* these questions changed when I read David Mindich’s book, *Just the Facts*. He explains that in Ida B. Wells time, in the 1890s, the whole *idea* of balance in journalism was still pretty new—and changing fast.

**MINDICH:** Journalists were among the most partisan people in America...in the 1820s and early 1830s.

**Lewis:** For a lot of the 1800s, a journalist slash activist, or an editor slash political candidate, was relatively normal.

**MINDICH:** There were people who were newspaper editors but there were also planning riots. And they were also encouraging election violence and election fraud.

**Lewis:** Many newspapers were straight-up funded by political parties.

**MUSIC: VFS\_V1 Bass Accordion**

**Lewis:** But from the 1830s on, boatloads of immigrants were coming to the U.S., literacy was on the rise. And the newspaper industry responded by creating a new kind of urban publication, the penny paper—not funded by political parties but by sales and advertising.

**MINDICH:** And to do so they had to shed their partisan baggage and try to sell as many papers as possible, and sell advertisements. And to do so they had to become politically independent and rely on trying to reach a broad audience rather than just one political party or another.

**MUSIC OUT**

**Lewis:** Mindich says what we now call “objectivity” developed because of this new business model. Journalists were trying to be more detached, non-partisan, balanced, and also more factual.

**MINDICH:** Instead of relying on, let's say, a religious world view, or superstitions, or beliefs, journalists began to care more and more about empiricism, the, the first hand investigation of the world around them.

**Lewis:** But all this happened gradually...some journalists tried to be factual, but weren't at all nonpartisan or balanced. And just like today, these values meant something really different depending on who you asked. Which is what brought Mindich to write about lynching and Ida B. Wells...

**MUSIC: Cracked Nut Suite/Podington Bear (Liquid Gold)**

**MINDICH:** The process of professionalization and objectivity that was occurring through the white press in many cases was inappropriate in the African-American press because the African-American press needed to tell a story and be advocates for a perspective that wasn't being told at all in the mainstream press.

**Lewis:** Led by Ida B Wells, the black press was trying to get the word out...

**MINDICH:** ...that African-Americans were being lynched for as part of economic terrorism as a way to intimidate business people and perpetrated through a great lie that African-Americans were somehow culpable when in fact they were innocent victims. So she really did a huge service to journalism by



actually going from town to town and investigating. In that in that way she's less of an advocacy journalist, than just a journalist someone who's...who's out there uncovering truths. The advocacy part however comes because she was telling a story that the white press was unwilling to tell.

**Lewis:** So then, a lot like now, complicity with white supremacy in the white press was depicted as neutral...while telling the truth, what Wells did, was considered activism.

#### **MUSIC: VFS\_Bumper\_Accordion\_Percussion**

In 1893 the New York Times editorial page called her a quote “slanderous and nasty-minded mulatress,” and suggested *she* was fabricating facts...It was becoming more and more clear that the whole idea of "balance" in journalism has *always* been racialized...that white racist goggles are *so* often part of determining what balance is. To Wells, real journalism meant telling the stories that the white press was unwilling to tell...

#### **MUSIC: Driftwood/Podington Bear (Thoughtful)**

**HANNAH-JONES:** What I think about most when I think of her is the tremendous amount of courage and moxie that it took for a black woman who is reporting in a time when Jim Crow law is being implemented, when Black people are losing whatever rights they got following the end of slavery...

**Lewis:** This is Nikole Hannah-Jones. A reporter for the New York Times Magazine, the winner of the Macarthur genius grant, and a co-founder of the Ida B. Wells Society for investigative journalism...

**HANNAH-JONES:** She was going into communities where a black man had literally just been strung up and lynched and she was asking questions and reporting those stories. And that's just an incredibly amazing thing to think about.

#### **MUSIC OUT**

**Lewis:** Wells is a really inspiring journalist with a clear cause. I reached out to Hannah-Jones because she seems like somebody TODAY who does journalism with a clear cause—a similar cause to Wells, exposing and analyzing racism.

**HANNAH-JONES:** My goals as a journalist right now are to really expose the inner architecture of racial inequality. To show that it's not merely a legacy of the past, though the past is clearly very important in my work, that it's not merely coincidence.

**Lewis:** And she works at the New York Times...Wells' nemesis. But she says she doesn't believe in objectivity.

**HANNAH-JONES:** So, when I report on school segregation it's very clear that I think the segregation of black children is immoral. And that it's unjust. I don't find it useful to pretend we have no thoughts on

the things that we cover. I always say, the only things you don't have opinions on are things that you don't know enough about to form an opinion.

**Lewis:** When I first heard Hannah-Jones on the radio, she was talking about the historical roots of housing segregation...and she was the first reporter I'd heard really talk about underlying cause of the problem, not just the symptoms. The architecture of racism. Which made me think it was possible to report that way. But it's also really hard, so I really admire her, and I also have to ask... how did she get so good at that?

**HANNAH-JONES:** To do it well you have to study it pretty obsessively. And one thing that I think I hear a lot is people think there's some magic thing about being black that makes you good about writing about race. Being black certainly allows you to see stories, I think that being white, it's not as easy to see. But, I am good at this because I study it a lot. I read all the time on these issues. I'm looking at data on these issues, I'm talking to academics. And you can't write about something that you're not aware of and you can't write well about something that you only have a cursory knowledge about.

#### **MUSIC: VFS\_Chill\_Vibe\_Snap**

**Lewis:** You can't write about something you're not aware of—that's the racist goggles. White people like me might just *not see* what's right in front of us...but Hannah-Jones is also talking about something I believe in strongly, something that can be an antidote to racism: *rigor*. The hard work of looking deeper and deeper—not ignoring our own biases, but using fierce inquiry to overcome them. On that note, she says even though she's not into traditional objectivity, she does still believe in checking your damn facts.

**HANNAH-JONES:** Is your reporting accurate? Can anyone dispute the facts of your reporting, and is your reporting fair? Have you fairly represented the views of the various sides that you're reporting on?

**Lewis:** But she sees other facets of objectivity, like trying to be detached or neutral, as a myth. Still, today in journalism many people *do* draw a clear line drawn between reporting and activism. Not Hannah-Jones.

**HANNAH-JONES:** I am no more an activist than anyone who is a journalist is an activist. So when we say that our role as journalists is to speak truth to power to expose the way the powerful work against the vulnerable to safeguard the First Amendment. That is all activism.

**Lewis:** I keep returning to this idea that white people, white journalists, are often activists...for the status quo, for keeping things as they are. Then, and now...

**HANNAH-JONES:** I think white journalists' obsession with objectivity comes from being a white person in a white dominated country in which all of the laws were in the favor of whiteness.

**Lewis:** So maybe instead of “objectivity” or balance, we need more of the kind of thing Hannah-Jones does. The kind of thing Ida B. Wells did in the earliest days of objective journalism. Rigorous activist journalism that smashes through the racist goggles.

**HANNAH-JONES:** I'm not an optimistic person when it comes to these things so I don't think suddenly you know white people will realize that this whole structure needs to be destroyed. But at least they can no longer pretend that they don't know and that we're not making choices. So that's kind of what I see as the purpose of my work.

**MUSIC:** Wetland/Podington (fades in)

**Lewis:** Ida B Wells created the most thorough record of lynching during its peak. Hundreds of people were lynched each year in the 1890s...more than 4000 by the end of the Jim Crow era. But just knowing about stuff doesn't always lead to change. Hannah-Jones started out reporting on the Durham public schools, back here where I live. A school system that's *still* super segregated. And George Taylor—the man who was lynched near here—he was killed more than 20 years after Wells started her investigations.

**MUSIC CUE:** Gymnopedie 3

**Lewis:** My friend Mariame Kaba often says “Hope is a discipline.” I'm also not an optimistic person, but I do have discipline...I keep working, telling stories...often, stories about racism and institutional oppression. So on some level, racist goggles and all, I *have* to think that telling these stories matters...I have to keep looking for them, trying for the rigor it takes to work through my own limitations as a white, class-privileged writer. And maybe staying hopeful, for me, means acknowledging the ways “objectivity” has been used to protect white supremacy and white complicity.

When I leave Rolesville to drive home from where George Taylor was lynched, I go right past a former forced labor camp — a plantation. Hundreds of people lived and died in slavery there, just a few miles from my house. When we drive out to I-85, we drive over thousands of invisible, unmarked graves. I think about all the stories untold, because the people who were fighting to tell those stories lost that time around. Because there weren't enough Ida B. Wellses, or enough people defending her.

**MUSIC:** VFS Electro Full

Next time on the View from Somewhere podcast.

**TAPE CUT:** They did that during the McCarthy era. They would basically get rid of people who they thought or suspected were leftists and then say it was just objectivity. You know this stuff goes way back as far as a tool that was being used to control people's off-duty lives.

**Lewis:** What happened to activist-journalists like Ida B. Wells after objectivity really took hold. And, the rights of journalists as workers. It's gonna be a good one...

This podcast is created by me, Lewis Raven Wallace, and distributed by Critical Frequency. Our voice actor for this episode was Joli Milner who played Ida B. Wells. Huge thanks to our editorial consultant, Carla Murphy, who is a total genius; we also got wonderful editorial feedback from adwoa gyimah-brempong, Sarah Cross, and Naome Jeanty.

This episode was supported by Freedom Lifted, which offers customized civil rights tours and social justice trainings to youth and adults. The name “Freedom Lifted” speaks to the elevation of the unseen work and collective action for social justice and social change—go to Freedom Lifted dot com to book a training or a tour for your group. I have done one of these tours myself and they are totally amazing.

Aaaand. Last but not least, our fearless producer is Ramona Martinez, hey Ramona!

**RAMONA:** Hey Lewis! Our original music is by Dogbotic, and additional music by Podington Bear. Thanks to Billy Dee for our logo and WUNC and Hideo Higashibaba for recording help.

And hey, did you know you can get Lewis’s book, *The View from Somewhere*, to read up on all of this and more—it’s available through your local bookstore, or at [www.viewfromsomewhere.com](http://www.viewfromsomewhere.com). Finally, a huge thank you to everyone who donated to our Kickstarter. This show could not have happened without you.

And, tell everyone you know about the View from Somewhere! You can boost our signal by reviewing us in the iTunes store. See you at the rally!

**Theme music ends**

**Lewis:** I’m trying to put my air quotes on everything. Subtly. I felt good about it, like I was like, “balanced, you assholes. Nice try!”