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IDA B. WELLS.

As editor of the Free Speech, a Memphis newspaper, Ida B. Wells-Barnett led a national campaign against the practice of lynching.

The Literary Life of Ida B. Wells-Barnett: Rewriting the Consciousness of a Nation

By Sarah Hildenbrand

Within the last forty years, a resurgence of scholarly interest in Ida B. Wells-Barnett has erupted, likely catalyzed by the long-coming publication of her autobiography, *Crusade for Justice* (1970), by Wells' daughter, Alfreda M. Duster. In her editorial introduction to the autobiography, Duster laments that the "measure of success" Wells achieved in her lifetime "goes far beyond the credit she has been given in the history of the country" (*Crusade* xxxii). While perhaps Wells has still not received her due in the public's historical consciousness for her incalculable and oftentimes revolutionary accomplishments, scholars have reacted to Ms. Duster's plea by publishing the rest of Wells' remaining writings and by supplying a wealth of criticism on her historical roles and social activism. Although some preliminary discussions regarding Wells' rhetorical strategies and contributions to the black literary tradition have taken place, her work as a literary artist remains largely unexplored. Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s book on black literary theory, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (1988), attempts to describe "how richly textured and layered that black literary artistry indeed is," and simultaneously, the dialogue of the African-American culture of which Wells was a participant (*Signifying* xx). By examining Wells' works with the concept of African-American Signification in mind, an opportunity arises to investigate more fully Wells' works and develop a deeper appreciation for them as pieces of historical and artistic literature. Such an analysis places her more definitely among the literary ranks of predecessors and contemporaries, such as Frederick Douglass and W.E.B. Du Bois, and her literary and theoretical descendant, Toni Morrison.

Wells' Life and Work

Wells began her literary career as an investigative journalist, writing candid and blunt editorials and articles for black newspapers, through which she supplied her

opinion on controversial topics such as racial injustice and gender roles. In *The Memphis Diary of Ida B. Wells* (1995), Wells discussed the vehement and passionate nature of her editorials while describing an article she wrote in response to the lynching of a black woman accused but not convicted of the murder of a white woman. Showing the first signs of the fervor she would carry throughout her life's mission against lynching, Wells remarked that she "wrote a dynamitic article to the G[ate] C[ity] P[ress] almost advising murder! . . . It may be unwise to express myself so strongly but I cannot help it & I know not if capital may not be made of it against me but I trust in God" (*Memphis Diary* 102). Despite her concerns that her outspokenness may have been unwise, Wells continued in her efforts as a public voice by publishing more articles for black newspapers such as the *Evening Star* and the *Living Way* and eventually becoming co-owner with Reverend F. Nightingale and J.L. Fleming of the *Free Speech* (Royster 26-27).

Most lynchings at that time were defended by the pretense of Southern chivalry, which explained the lynching of any black man as punishment for the rape of an innocent, white woman. Therefore, while many people, both in the black and white communities, did not necessarily condone lynching, they often passively accepted the practice, feeling that perhaps the "rapist" deserved his due, whether it came through law or mob violence. In 1892, Thomas Moss—an entrepreneur, a father and husband, and a respected friend of Wells accused not of rape but of defending his business against the jealous attacks of a neighboring white grocer—was lynched. This unfortunate episode spurred Wells into the anti-lynching crusade that became her life's mission, beginning with an editorial in which she revealed the absurdity of the rape myth justification: "Nobody in this section of the country believes the old thread-bare lie that Negro men rape white women. If Southern white men are not careful, they will over-reach themselves and public sentiment will have a reaction; a conclusion will then be reached which will be very damaging to the moral reputation of their women" (*Southern Horrors* 52). The white newspapers countered Wells' words with threats: "If the negroes themselves do not apply the remedy with delay it will be the duty of those whom he has attacked to tie the wretch who utters these

calumnies to a stake at the intersection of Main and Madison Sts., brand him in the forehead with a hot iron and perform upon him a surgical operation with a pair of tailors shears" (*Evening Scimitar* qtd. in *Southern Horrors* 52). The threats turned to physical violence as, ironically, the office of the *Free Speech* was demolished by rioters, though Wells luckily escaped harm by being out of town during the attack. After this assault, Wells never returned to the South from fear of her own lynching and continued her work in the North and abroad.

Following her exile from Memphis, Wells unleashed her literary fury against lynching by publishing several pamphlets directed at deconstructing the sexualized racial myths supporting lynching by providing a barrage of facts and her own saucy opinion. *Southern Horrors* (1892), *A Red Record* (1895), and *Mob Rule in New Orleans* (1900) all aimed to disprove the notion that African Americans are a race of rapists, and instead show that they have often been the victims of rape, as evidenced by the number of mulattoes in southern communities. Wells pointed out that what white southerners described as a chivalric defense of their women's purity almost always served as a handy excuse for murder and race suppression. She did not hesitate to express dangerously offensive opinions, such as the concept that some white women may actually choose to have affairs with black men, but when later caught, blame their affairs on rape: "There are many white women in the South who would marry colored men if such an act would not place them at once beyond the pale of society and within the clutches of the law . . . White men lynch the offending Afro-American, not because he is a despoiler of virtue, but because he succumbs to the smiles of white women" (*Southern Horrors* 54). These pamphlets also enumerate the many lynchings that had nothing at all to do with rape, especially those of women and children. Wells' pamphlets, combined with her public speeches, both in the United States and Britain, served as the most persistent and powerful assertions awakening public awareness in the case against lynching.

After publishing *Mob Rule in New Orleans*, Wells devoted less of her time to writing and more to engaging in social activism in the United States, arousing public sentiment in Britain, and attending to her domestic concerns as a wife and mother.

However, nearing the end of her life, Wells decided to return to her pen and began working on her autobiography. Her daughter later named the work *Crusade for Justice*, thus emphasizing the constant theme in Wells' life. Most literary criticism on Wells has been directed at this work, but Jacqueline Royster's article, "To Call a Thing by Its True Name: The Rhetoric of Ida B. Wells," discusses an aspect of Wells' writing that is consistent throughout all her works. In this article, Royster praises Wells for her straightforward assertions and ability to state clearly the facts without bending from fear of criticism or threats, as she called attention to the gross civil inequalities existing in the nation when few others would undertake the task. Royster cites Jacquelyn Mitchell's article, "Three Women: Cultural Rules and Leadership Roles in the Black Community," to conclude that female, African-American leaders have used three rhetorical techniques in successfully transmitting their messages: "-They insist on calling things by their true names./ -They articulate the fears that inhibit others from acting responsibly./ -And they prescribe courses of action that focus not on what others have done to them, but on what the individual can do" (Royster 175). This understanding of Wells' rhetoric is accurate, and by no means should her relentless ability to voice perilously unpopular convictions and produce a brave account of the facts be diminished. Wells often described herself as merely stating the truth. However, it is not only the act of exposing the veiled truths of lynch law and racism that made Wells a successful social activist, but the way she communicated her message.

Joanne Braxton's chapter in *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition Within a Tradition* entitled, "Crusader for Justice: Ida B. Wells," and Akiko Ochiai's article, "Ida B. Wells and Her Crusade for Justice: An African American Woman's Testimonial Autobiography," focus more on *Crusade for Justice* and its relevance as a piece of black literature. Ochiai argues that Wells' autobiography has functioned in African-American culture as "a protest against oppression, as an historical record from an African-American point of view, and as a contribution to the African-American literary tradition" (Ochiai 365). Wells' autobiography certainly meets these qualifications. The title itself, while provided by her daughter after her death, suggests Wells' maintenance of a sense of moral urgency in this writing, continued from her

earlier pamphlets and editorials that urged immediate action and perseverance against racial injustice. In fact, just as Wells was busy in public work which ended abruptly with her unexpected death, *Crusade for Justice* ends mid-sentence, as she was never able to finish the work. As a documentation of history, Wells' autobiography spans the length of her life and exposes valuable insights into early struggles for equality, both in the racial and feminist camps. The autobiography also includes several documents, such as newspaper articles, interviews, and lectures, which supply the historian with a host of avenues into the consciousness of the past.

As a piece of autobiographical literature, both Braxton and Ochiai seem to agree that Wells' *Crusade for Justice* fits under the sub genre of testimonial autobiography. Ochiai describes the difference between the two African-American traditions of testimonial and blues autobiography, as outlined by Elizabeth Shultz. According to Ochiai, "*testimonial autobiography* developed from written narrative (e.g. traditional church testimony)," in which the "autobiographer focuses on the community and the 'self' as a member of the community" (Ochiai 365). Alternately, Ochiai claims "*blues autobiography*" descended from "oral narrative (e.g. traditional blues)," and in this tradition "the autobiographer focuses on the 'self' and the creation of the community through sharing experiences of the 'self'" (Ochiai 365). Both Ochiai and Braxton see Wells as participating in this tactic of subordinating the personal experience to telling the story of the whole community in *Crusade for Justice*. Braxton describes Wells' autobiographical goals as "definition, documentation, and authentication; her story is intended not only as her own but as the story of her people and her times" (Braxton 109). Wells managed this through the technique of memoir, in which the narrative flows as a series of autobiographical vignettes, highlighting transitional experiences in Wells' life that help her define herself: "Wells introduces the idea of identity formation through conflict, a motif that can be linked to the literary strategy of settling accounts, as the autobiographer moves from one psychological turning point to the next" (Braxton 114). By defining herself in these psychological transitions, Wells revealed historical truths about the nature of her people and their struggles, as her vignettes remain focused on memories of race and gender adversity.

As Wells' autobiography attempts to define her identity through a succession of adversarial experiences, Wells concurrently encourages African Americans to define themselves and gather strength in the face of hardship, gradually rising above injustices. The opening pages of the autobiography describe how the excitement experienced by a newly freed people greatly influenced Wells. Enjoying the benefits of Reconstruction in the South, such as a legal marriage for her parents and the opportunity for her and her siblings to attend school, she refers to herself in her autobiography during these years as a "butterfly" school-girl (*Crusade* 16). Wells' birth as a slave and her initial faith in American freedom would prove highly important in positioning her life as an authoritative account of the black experience. However, Wells relates how this illusory life quickly vanished: "I was visiting this grandmother down on the farm when life became a reality to me" (*Crusade* 10). Wells recounts that in 1878, her hometown of Holly Springs fell victim to yellow fever, taking the lives of both of her parents within two days and her baby brother shortly afterwards. Wells insisted that her siblings not be separated into different homes, claiming that her parents would "turn over in their graves to know their children had been scattered like that" and instead assumed full responsibility for them, acting as their sole care provider at age sixteen (*Crusade* 16). While shouldering these responsibilities proved difficult for young Wells, she appears to remember the undertaking as an important contributor to her burgeoning identity, suggesting her belief that such a sense of responsibility and strength would be essential for African Americans seeking to rise in American culture. As Braxton states, Wells "presents her life as a representative and symbolic one" by setting herself as one of the public figures at the head of the race, interacting and participating in the race's common troubles (Braxton 109).

Perhaps Wells' account of her suit against the Chesapeake, Ohio & Southwestern Railroad serves as one of the best examples of her life's emblematic role in her autobiography. Wells reports that after securing a first-class ticket for her usual Saturday evening train ride, she assumed her place in the ladies' car of the train, sectioned away from the rowdiness, drunkenness, or smoking that often occurred in the second-class smoking cars. As the conductor moved through Wells' car collecting tickets, he noticed

Wells reading and asked her to move to a second-class car. At first, Wells ignored his request and continued to read, but as Wells describes in her autobiography, “the moment he caught hold of my arm I fastened my teeth in the back of his hand,” communicating to her readers the importance of tenaciousness and fearlessness in the face of racial discrimination (*Crusade* 18). At the next stop, Wells chose to leave the train rather than move to a second-class car, a decision cheered by the white passengers on board. This incident launched one of Wells’ first struggles for racial equality, as she sued the railroad for refusing to provide her with equal accommodations.

While Wells was able to win her case in the lower courts, the Tennessee Supreme Court, of which four of the five justices were Confederate veterans, declared that Wells would have had equal accommodations in the second-class smoking car, despite the clear evidence supporting otherwise. The state supreme court’s ruling greatly shook Wells’ confidence in law and justice in the United States, as she revealed in her April 11, 1887, diary entry: “I felt so disappointed, because I had hoped such great things from my suit for my people generally. I have firmly believed all along that the law was on our side and would, when we appealed to it, give us justice. I feel shorn of that belief and utterly discouraged (*Memphis Diary* 141). This quote from her diary reveals Wells’ hope that her actions might serve as precedents for her people. While Wells did not win this case, this story testifies to her capacity to represent her people, cementing bonds between her and other African Americans that were forged by shared suffering and failed fights against the South’s unjust laws. Including this story in her autobiography makes her choice to resume her crusade for racial justice even more poignant and meaningful to a reader who might be worn to the point of hopelessness from disappointments.

Naturally, Wells’ autobiography includes an account of the lynching of Thomas Moss and the other People’s Grocery owners. In a chapter titled, “Lynching at the Curve,” Wells delivers a heartfelt memorial to her lost friend and immortalizes his character and dignity: “Everybody in town knew and loved Tommie. An exemplary young man, he was married and the father of one little girl, Maurine, whose godmother I was. He and his wife Betty were the best friends I had in town” (*Crusade* 47).

This narrative especially demonstrates Wells' intention to make her autobiography testimonial. Although this lynching was obviously a major event in Wells' life, she focuses more on telling the story of the men involved and how the lynching affected the black community of Memphis—than on describing her own reaction and feelings in detail. Her absence during the lynching helps make the point: “As said before, I was in Natchez, Mississippi, when the worst of this horrible event was taking place. Thomas Moss had already been buried before I reached home” (*Crusade* 52). According to Braxton, by “recreating this historical event as an ‘act of language,’ Wells elevates it to the equivalent of metaphor,” making this one account of lynching in her memory speak as a representative event for her race (Braxton 116).

These vignettes comprise the first section of the autobiography, along with Wells' description of her exile from Memphis, which led to her acquaintance and friendship with Frederick Douglass, and a large section recording her travels and social work in Europe. *Crusade for Justice* also includes an aspect that Braxton refers to as the “confessional” portion of her autobiography, in which Wells discusses “her experience of marriage and family as it influenced her work and public life” (Braxton 102). While Wells speaks well of her husband and of motherhood in her autobiography, she only mentions these roles in her life as they relate to her social work or to the criticism of others, such as feminist, Susan B. Anthony, concluding that her true love remained journalism: “Having always been busy at some work of my own, I decided to continue work as a journalist, for this was my first, and might be said, my only love” (*Crusade* 242). For Wells, her public persona and the people whom she saw herself as representing maintain priority in her autobiography over her personal and private life.

Despite the importance of providing an accurate history of the African-American experience during Wells' life, neither Braxton nor Ochiai denies that one must take a certain amount of creative license when writing an autobiography. Braxton suggests that Wells participates in a self-mythmaking process in her autobiography, in which her “autobiographical posture is that of a protector of black manhood and a nurturer and defender of black womanhood” (Braxton 104). In this respect, *Crusade for Justice* may partake in more of a literary consciousness than it might outwardly claim by

organizing and subordinating the facts to the purpose of conveying a certain message. Ochiai explains that *Crusade for Justice* “is neither fiction nor totally objective history, but a recreation of history through one particular person,” alluding to Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s term, “fictive,” meaning the “intermediate discourse between history and literature” (Gates qtd. in Ochiai 380). This relationship between factual history and artistic literature that operates within Wells’ writing, especially when understood in the context of Gates’ ideas, opens the discussion for understanding Wells’ work as literature to a host of new possibilities not yet investigated.

Gates’ Theory of Signification

Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* seeks to establish the foundation for critical interpretation of the relatively new genre of African-American literature without necessarily depending on the theories of Western literary criticism. For Gates, literature from the black diaspora does not need to conform solely to the techniques of Western literature; he instead maintains that the writers in these genres have their own literary history and traditions of theory and criticism from which they can create their own distinctive art forms: “If anything, my desire here has been to demystify the curious notion that theory is the province of the Western tradition, something alien or removed from a so-called noncanonical tradition such as that of the Afro-American” (*Signifying* xx). Gates’ discussion focuses on several works of African-American fiction, as well as the early tradition of slave narratives and testimonial autobiography. While Gates does not include a discussion of Wells’ autobiography or pamphlets, an application of Gates’ theories to the work of a woman who did not necessarily consider herself a literary artist may reveal the deep connection between African-American literary techniques and the consciousness of the African-American people.

According to Gates, one of the main problems in creating an authentic black literature is that so many African-American writers have learned to read and write from white texts: “Black writers, like critics of black literature, learn to write by reading literature, especially the canonical texts of Western tradition” (*Signifying*

xxii). Wells fits this description perfectly, as she reveals in her autobiography that she fashioned her literary canon and concepts of literature from Western sources: "I had formed my ideals on the best of Dickens's stories, Louisa May Alcott's, Mrs. A.D.T. Whitney's, and Charlotte Brontë's books, and Olive Optic's stories for boys. I had read the Bible and Shakespeare through, but I had never read a Negro book or anything about Negroes" (*Crusade* 22). This proves a very serious dilemma when one considers the racist criticism against African Americans for being a race of mimickers, completely devoid of originality and creative thought: "The eighteenth century abounds in comments from philosophers such as David Hume in 'Of National Characters' and statesmen such as Thomas Jefferson in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, who argued that blacks were 'imitative' rather than 'creative'" (*Signifying* 66).

Gates explains the challenge that African Americans faced during the Enlightenment, in which a person's worth was based on his or her ability to reason and create. This would be especially important for the writing movement of African Americans, as the argument that they could only mimic and imitate would prove them incapable of the thought required to qualify as legitimate persons instead of objects: "Black people, the evidence suggests, had to represent themselves as 'speaking subjects' before they could even begin to destroy their status as objects, as commodities, within Western culture" (*Signifying* 129). Thus, while supplied with only white literary sources, African Americans faced a desperate need to create something that was new and entirely their own in writing.

From this predicament arises Gates' theory of African-American literature, as well as an understanding of dialogue within African-American culture, the foundation of which rests on the concept of double-voicedness, a combination of black and white styles: "A novelist such as Ralph Ellison or Ishmael Reed creates texts that are double-voiced in the sense that their literary antecedents are both white and black novels, but also modes of figuration lifted from the black vernacular tradition." (*Signifying* xxiii). Therefore, African Americans take their training in white literary methods and motifs and place an African-American twist on them in a process referred to as Signification. The concept of Signifyin(g) arises as one of the more complex, but

brilliantly empowering facets of the black literary tradition. In Western thought, signification means the sound image, such as the written word, associated with the actual object or the signified, excluding the “unconscious associations which any given word yields at any given time” (*Signifying* 49). “Signifyin(g),” as Gates describes, “luxuriates in the inclusion of the free play of these associative rhetorical and semantic relations,” thus thriving around several modes of “rhetorical games,” making African-American literature one of revision, not mimicry. (*Signifying* 49, 48). Gates describes the form of signification in African-American fiction as one of “formal revision or intertextuality” (*Signifying* xxi).

This term of intertextuality applies remarkably well to Wells’ pamphlets on lynching that read like a dialogue between Wells’ own opinions and quotations from mostly white, racist newspaper articles. While one may first read these works and praise Wells for bringing forth the facts, the text would then immediately open itself to criticism of her only being able to quote facts, especially since Wells cites white newspapers. However, Wells’ implementation of quoting and facts works as a brilliant form of Signification and rhetoric in her persuasive pamphlets, as she alternates the figures and documents with her own fiery interpretation of them. Therefore, even when Wells claims that “Southern Horrors” is merely “a contribution to truth, an array of facts,” she can cleverly inject her own controversial opinions in the name of truth and factual evidence (*Southern Horrors* 50).

Wells’ implementation of Signification takes several forms in her pamphlets. One of her most common techniques is to pair an onslaught of anecdotal evidence against a racist article or quote from a white authority. In “Southern Horrors,” Wells supplies several cases in which white women had ongoing affairs with black men and only accused the men of rape when they became pregnant with a mulatto child or when discovered by a husband or neighbor. Wells concludes, “Hundreds of these cases might be cited, but enough have been given to prove the assertion that there are white women in the South who love the Afro-American’s company even as there are white men notorious for their preference for Afro-American women” (*Southern Horrors* 58). Wells then follows her argument with a section devoted to

the white Memphis newspapers, the *Daily Commercial* and the *Evening Scimitar*, and their reasons or, more fittingly, their excuses for lynchings, emphasizing their blatant inaccuracies and racism: “The facts of the crime appear to appeal more to the Negro’s lustful imagination than the facts of the punishment do to his fears. He sets aside all fear of death in any form when opportunity is found for the gratification of his bestial desires” (*Southern Horrors* 63). Wells places entire pages of racist articles within her own work, confident in her ability to condemn the white authors through their own arrogant and prejudiced words.

Wells also repeatedly Signifies on a single word, most often words utilized in southern dialogue that condoned lynching, and promoted white pride and self-importance. In “Southern Horrors,” Wells effectively shames white supremacists and patriarchal idealists with their own jargon in her assessment of the guilt of a white woman involved in an affair with a black man lynched for “rape”: “The woman was a willing partner in the victim’s guilt, and being of the ‘superior’ race must naturally have been more guilty” (*Southern Horrors* 57). Wells even sarcastically highlights the Signified word, “superior,” with quotation marks for added emphasis. One of the most common concepts that Wells Signifies upon in her pamphlets is Christian morality and lawfulness, as white southerners often bragged of their deep-seated, Christian decency, while simultaneously performing some of the most atrocious crimes against humanity. She reiterates this message several times in “A Red Record” alone, as when she describes the mounting number of lynchings that occurred in Alabama without public concern or law enforcement: “It was only a matter of a day’s notice and then went to swell the list of murders which stand charged against the *noble, Christian* people of Alabama” (*Red Record* 135, emphasis added). A more humorous instance occurs in “Mob Rule in New Orleans” in which Wells ridicules a New Orleans police officer for behaving cowardly, again making use of quotation marks when Signifyin(g) on a single word: “It is shown as further evidence of the bravery of some of New Orleans’ ‘finest,’ that one of them, seeing Capt. Day fall, ran seven blocks before he stopped, afterwards giving the excuse that he was hunting for a patrol box” (*Mob Rule* 167).

Wells’ mastery of Signification in her anti-lynching pamphlets brings to mind

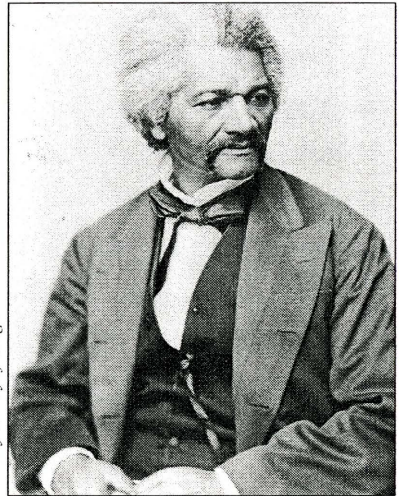
Gates' description of the Signifier as "he who wreaks havoc upon the Signified" (*Signifying* 52). Wells appears to relentlessly pursue this role in her mockeries of white, racist discourse. However, Wells skillfully plays the game of Signification by protecting herself with the defense that she has merely quoted facts given to her by white authorities, absolving herself of fault: "If stating the facts of these lynchings, as they appeared from time to time in the *white* newspapers of America—the news gathered by *white* correspondents, compiled by *white* press bureaus and disseminated among *white* people—shows any vindictiveness, then the mind which so charges is not amenable to argument" (*Red Record* 131, emphasis added). In Gates' chapter, "The Blackness of Blackness: A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey," in *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, Gates describes the exact Signification procedure that Wells performs in her pamphlets: "The Black concept of *signifying* incorporates essentially a folk notion that dictionary entries for words are not always sufficient for interpreting meanings or messages, or that meaning goes beyond such interpretations . . . What pretends to be informative may intend to be persuasive" ("Blackness" 289). In her pamphlets, Wells can appear to operate within the already established racist, white discourse, making her persuasive arguments most effectively through the process of Signification.

Wells, Douglass, and DuBois

For an understanding of Wells' use of African-American literary techniques, such as Signification, in her autobiography, it makes sense to review a predecessor's work from which Wells would be able to learn the autobiographical method. Frederick Douglass emerges as a natural choice because of his role as an African-American leader and writer, his personal relationship to Wells, and the attention afforded to him by Gates as a Signifyin(g) autobiographer. Frederick Douglass and Wells obviously had a personal, as well as a literary relationship, as Wells includes a letter from Frederick Douglass in the Preface to "Southern Horrors," authenticating her work: "Brave woman! you have done your people and mine a service which can neither be weighed nor measured" (*Southern Horrors* 51). Years later, Wells pays

homage to the deceased Douglass in her autobiography by claiming that, “in the death of Frederick Douglass we lost the greatest man that the Negro race has ever produced on the American continent” (Crusade 232). A review of Douglass’ literary objectives and style may lead to a better grasp of the literary techniques Wells employs within her own autobiography.

Frederick Douglass’ slave narrative autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave* (1845), carries on some of the same conventions as earlier slave narratives, such as the use of authenticating letters from white men, which both prefaced the narrative as proof the former slave had indeed written the narrative him or herself and vouched for the truth of the statements within the narrative. Joanne Braxton quotes John Blassingame’s assertion that one of the main functions of African-American autobiography is to serve as “a counterweight to the white historian’s caricature of black life” (Braxton 102). Therefore, one of the most important aspects of historic African-American literature is its perspective, which allows it to provide an authentic account of the African-American



Courtesy Library of Congress

An escaped slave, Frederick Douglass published his famous memoir of life under slavery in 1845

experience without the tainted perceptions of a white author. When Douglass’s preface writer, the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, declares that, “Mr. Douglass has very properly chosen to write his own Narrative, in his own style, and according to the best of his ability, rather than to employ some one else,” he gives authenticating credit to Douglass (Douglass 9). However, the best example of the importance of Douglass being allowed his own voice to tell his narrative occurs in the letter from the abolitionist Wendell Phillips, who recalls a fable in which a lion complained that “he should not be so misrepresented ‘when the lions wrote history,’” and Phillips declares, “I am glad the time has come when the ‘lions write history’” (Douglass 17). Thus, battling the

distortions of the African-American experience supplied by the dominant white press and authors becomes a constant goal for African-American writers.

Wells recognized her duty in this heritage, as well, as her own preface to *Crusade for Justice* reveals. She recounts how a young woman had approached her, telling her that she had given Wells' name at a group meeting at the YWCA as a response to the question of whom they knew of in modern times that most exemplified the qualities of Joan of Arc. The only black woman in the group, the twenty-five year old had been embarrassed, because she could not explain why Wells typified her modern version of Joan of Arc, having only given her name because of its fame. Wells cites this incident as awakening her to her responsibility to add to the "definite or authentic" historic literature of the race, mentioning that "most of it is buried in oblivion and only the southern white man's misrepresentations are in the public libraries and college textbooks of the land" (*Crusade* 45). In a way, Wells' mission had always been to combat the "southern white man's misrepresentations," but this time she would do so in the form of autobiography, by writing for the first time about herself (*Crusade* 5). Also in her preface, she references Frederick Douglass' autobiography as a history of slavery, "written by the Negro himself," and seems to view herself as following in his stead by continuing the account of African-American history in her autobiography with Reconstruction, further affirming the literary relationship between herself and Douglass (*Crusade* 4).

Perhaps one of the most striking aspects of Douglass' autobiography is his reference to and use of blues quality Signification. Recall that Ochiai claimed that blues autobiography descended from "oral narrative" or "traditional blues," and he also lists Frederick Douglass' narrative as an example of testimonial autobiography, along with Wells': "Testimonial autobiography dates back to the antebellum slave narratives of the late 18th century. This tradition originates in slave narratives like Gustavus Vassa's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa* (1789) and Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederic Douglass* (1845)" (Ochiai 365, 369). However, closer examination of Douglass' narrative may disclose a tendency towards blues autobiography missed in Ochiai's critique.

Douglass dedicates a rather large section to the songs of slaves in his narrative,

claiming that while traveling, the slaves would “make the dense old woods, for miles around, reverberate with their wild songs” (Douglass 36). In this portion of the narrative, Douglass discloses the deep connection between blues singing and the pain experienced by the slave: “The thought that came up, came out – if not in the word, in the sound; - and as frequently in the one as in the other. They would sometimes sing the most pathetic sentiment in the most rapturous tone, and the most rapturous sentiment in the most pathetic tone” (Douglass 36). Therefore, for the slaves, song became a freedom of expression, a freedom hidden from detection by slave owners and overseers by either sound or word choice. Gates recognized this gesture and its transformation from the verbal and musical to the written in Douglass’ narrative: “The neologisms that Douglass’s friends created, ‘unmeaning jargon’ to standard English speakers, were ‘full of meaning’ to the blacks, who were literally defining themselves in language, just as did Douglass and other slave narrators” (*Signifying* 67). Douglass makes the point at the end of this chapter that whites often could not hear the Signifyin(g) texture of slave blues music: “I have often been utterly astonished, since I came to the north, to find persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness. It is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake. Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy” (Douglass 38). Therefore, the pain of slavery and the African-American experience, mixed with the concealing aspect of Signification, creates a blues-like quality transmittable from the oral to the written.

Later in his narrative, Douglass gives a reason in addition to Gates’ rationale for why slaves would have to develop the language of Signification. He tells the story of a slave who met a white man on a road. The white man inquired of the slave who his master was and what he thought of him. The slave replied honestly that his master did not treat him well because he worked him too hard, without knowing that the man he was speaking to was actually his master. Douglass records that a few weeks later, the “poor man was then informed by his overseer that, for having found fault with his master, he was now to be sold to a Georgia trader,” the penalty, according to Douglass, “of telling the truth, of telling the simple truth” (Douglass

42). Douglass then claims that “it is partly in consequence of such facts, that slaves, when inquired of as to their condition and the character of their masters, almost universally say they are contented, and that their masters are kind” (Douglass 42-43). However, when speaking literally well of his master, a slave may still mean something entirely different, allowing his or her words to carry a double meaning. Thus, Gates is correct when he claims that “black people have been Signifyin(g), without explicitly calling it that, since slavery,” as the process often “presupposes an ‘encoded’ intention to say one thing but to mean quite another” (*Signifying* 68,82). Therefore, when Wells Signifies upon words such as “Christian” or “superior” in her anti-lynching pamphlets, she follows a rhetorical tradition of double-meaning that traces its origins back to slavery.

However, Signification does not always need to be black Signifyin(g) upon white, nor does it necessarily always imply a negative critique. W.E.B Du Bois was one of Wells’ social activist and literary contemporaries, and his theoretical book on the social rising of African Americans, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), shares an interesting relationship with Wells’ works, as well as with white works, that is different from the forms of Signification previously mentioned. According to Gates, “black texts ‘talk’ to other black texts,” and “this form of double-voiced implies unity and resemblance rather than critique and difference” (*Signifying* xxvi, xxvii). Besides *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, the only other piece of African-American literature Wells mentions in *Crusade for Justice* is W.E.B. Du Bois’ *The Souls of Black Folk*, as she knew Du Bois personally, was one of the women who encouraged and supported him in beginning his work, and attended a reading group that discussed the aforementioned book. While she applauds the work, Wells only refers to its criticism of Booker T. Washington, with which she agreed; Wells does not discuss Du Bois’ concepts of double-consciousness or the veil, both of which, while not named, were certainly important themes in her earlier works and *Crusade for Justice*. Wells also does not seem interested in taking credit for places where Du Bois very likely used her as a resource, such as when he casually refers to a lynching that received attention in Wells’ anti-lynching pamphlets as “the Sam Hose affair” (Du Bois 92). While

Wells' works and *The Souls of Black Folk* do not necessarily signify upon one another, both writers seem to have the others' works in their authorial consciousnesses, and at times, the texts do appear to be in dialogue with one another.

Gates explains these different types of signification as parody and pastiche, in which the literary intention can range from "severe critique to acknowledgment and placement within a literary tradition" (*Signifying* xxvii). Therefore, the relationship between Wells and Du Bois or Wells and Douglass may be one of pastiche, in which one text pays "homage to an antecedent text" in the form of what Gates refers to as "literary echoes" (*Signifying* xxvii). In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois venerates the African-American spirituals that Douglass spoke of in his autobiography, a form of pastiche, by placing lines of music from what he calls "Sorrow Songs" before each of his chapters: "They that walked in darkness sang songs in the olden days – Sorrow Songs – for they were weary at heart. And so before each thought that I have written in this book I have set a phrase, a haunting echo of these weird old songs in which the soul of the black slave spoke to men" (Du Bois 155). On top of the pastiche signification Du Bois takes part in by paying tribute to the Sorrow Songs, he includes above each musical line a quote from an American or European text, embracing the intertextuality of the African-American experience and literature.

However, despite Du Bois' beautiful grasp of the artistry of signification, a notable flaw in *The Souls of Black Folk* is a glaring tendency towards patriarchy. Du Bois only refers to women in the book as teachers, mothers of sons, or victims of sexual assaults, but he consistently uses rhetoric of manhood, with quotes like "the emasculating effects of cast distinctions" and "the rights which the world accords to men, clinging unwaveringly to those great words which the sons of the Fathers would fain forget" all coming from the same paragraph (Du Bois 35, emphasis added). Wells, on the other hand, incorporates her role as a woman into the form and style of her autobiography, using womanhood as one of the overriding themes in her understanding of her crusade. As Braxton points out, "If Du Bois was correct when he asserted that the Afro-American is a kind of seventh son gifted with double consciousness of himself as a black and an American, then Wells acquired a triple

consciousness of herself – as an American, a black, and a woman” (Braxton 137). Therefore, an understanding of Wells always must incorporate some discussion of her role as a woman, as well as an African American.

According to Bell Hooks in *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981) and *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984), black women have a unique position in American society, a role Hooks believes has often been overlooked and remained silently subordinated to other social movements, such as white feminism or male race issues. Black women have been socialized to deny the feminine aspect of their identity, describing racism as the most dominant oppression they face in their lives: “Contemporary black women could not join together to fight for women’s rights because we did not see ‘womanhood’ as an important aspect of our identity” (*Ain't I* 11). Even when women, such as Ida B. Wells, attempted to join their white sisters in the battle against sexism, they often discovered that feminist racism placed a white woman’s needs over those of an African-American woman: “Although I was loath to accept it, I came to the conclusion before our relations ended that our white women friends were not willing to treat us on a plane of equality with themselves” (*Crusade* 283). Therefore, Hooks’ analysis on the double-bind faced by African-American women demonstrates the social difficulties Wells encountered in defending both racial civil rights and feminist issues as a public African-American woman: “White women and black men have it both ways. They can act as oppressor or be oppressed. Black men may be victimized by racism, but sexism allows them to act as exploiters and oppressors of women. White women may be victimized by sexism, but racism enables them to act as exploiters and oppressors of black people” (*Feminist Theory* 14-15).

In the late portions of her autobiography, Wells discusses in fuller detail her relationship with the feminist movement in America. She discovered that the suffrage movement did not have as its goal the suffrage of all women, as it failed to consider African-American women and their interests equal to white women and their concerns: “When I saw that we were likely to have a restricted suffrage, and the white women of the organization were working like beavers to bring it about, I made another effort to get our women interested” (*Crusade* 345). Wells even cites a case

in which, Susan B. Anthony, questioned Wells if it had been wrong to ask Frederick Douglass not to attend one of their feminist conferences in the South so as not to offend the Southerners present. Wells records, "I answered uncompromisingly yes, for I felt that although she may have made gains for suffrage, she had also confirmed white women in their attitude of segregation" (*Crusade* 230). Wells founded the Alpha Suffrage Club, an organization dedicated to the suffrage and political participation of African-American women, and it was astonishingly effective in its efforts of using the elective power of women to bring black candidates to political power. However, just as Hooks relates in her books on feminist theory, Wells explains that the men of the black community were quick to forget their women: "Thanks to the loyalty of the women, Mr. DePriest won out hands down. But it was not long before we found that he had quite forgotten those who had helped him to win" (*Crusade* 348). Thus, *Crusade for Justice* superbly displays Hooks' concepts of the double-oppression faced by African-American women, as Wells testifies to the inequity she faced from both camps of social activism.

In describing in her autobiography a white woman who was asked to represent the issues of black women on the original Committee of Forty, the founding committee of the NAACP, after Du Bois had intentionally removed Wells' name from the original list, Wells criticizes the woman for mingling with and learning the needs of black men, but not black women: "She has basked in the sunlight of the adoration of the few college-bred Negroes who have surrounded her, but has made little effort to know the *soul of a black woman*; and to that extent she has fallen far short of helping a race which has suffered as no white woman has ever been called upon to suffer or to understand" (*Crusade* 328, emphasis added). This stands as perhaps one of the most profound statements in Wells' autobiography, and its importance seems to have been overlooked by critics thus far. First, Wells highlights the main argument of Hooks' works, namely that gender and race are inextricably linked; one cannot rightly advocate equality for one without maintaining justice for the other. Perhaps the most interesting part of this quote, however, is that Wells refers to the "soul of a black woman" when describing her displeasure with the choice that Du Bois made in altering the list of the Committee of Forty. In this case, just a

little bit of Signification, a slightly altered reference to Du Bois' book, conveys both an important message about the black woman's role in the civil rights movement, as well as a sly criticism of Du Bois' failure to comprehend the significance of this role, both in his political decisions and his literary work. Wells' Signification seems to suggest that *The Souls of Black Folk* really only referred to the souls of black men.

Wells and Morrison

With Wells' feminist rhetoric resembling the ideals of late twentieth century feminists, it follows that her works should not only be compared to those of male, African-American writers but also to female, black authors. Toni Morrison's *The Song of Solomon* (1977) serves as an appropriate work for this task for several reasons. Firstly, the novel functions as an excellent example of female, African-American literature and utilizes many of the same techniques in a work of fiction as Wells' *Crusade for Justice* does. Also, as has been illustrated by the applicability of Wells' works to the theories of Gates and Hooks, Wells compares favorably to her intellectual successors. Weighing Wells against Morrison may result in more securely placing Wells within the African-American tradition of writing, from the beginnings, represented by the slave narrative of Frederick Douglass, to great, imaginative novels, such as *Song of Solomon*.

From the very beginning of the novel, *Song of Solomon* makes no pretenses about being a book taking part in several forms of Signification, with this concept perhaps being the novel's most prevalent art form. Even the name of the street in which the story initially takes place has value. Morrison describes that the residents of the street once called it "Doctor Street," as an African-American doctor lived on that street, but "some of the city legislators, whose concern for appropriate names and the maintenance of the city's landmarks was the principal part of their political life" declared that the street "would always be known as Mains Avenue and not Doctor Street" (Morrison 4). Morrison describes the public's Signifyin(g) reaction to the notice: "It was a genuinely clarifying public notice because it gave Southside residents a way to keep their memories alive and please the city legislators as well. They called it Not Doctor Street" (Morrison 4).

This humorous Signifyin(g) gesture might naturally bring to mind the defiant Signification of words, such as "Christian," that occurred in Wells' anti-lynching pamphlets. Wells also continues this method of Signifyin(g) in *Crusade for Justice*, especially in her comparisons of Britain to America, in an attempt to shame Americans in their inability to live up to their ideals: "But primitive as are these railway carriages, I as a Negro can ride in them free from insult or discrimination on account of color, and that's what I cannot do in many States of my own free (?) America" (*Crusade* 172). Both Morrison and Wells' Signifyin(g) passages mock a standard set by white authority. In Morrison's case, white legislators attempt to exert control by dictating official street names, but the language of the black community eludes them. Wells, on the other hand, exposes white hypocrisy by Signifyin(g) on the word "free" and contrasting the reality of this idealized American word with the freer truth of a monarchical society, thereby shaming America by using its own language against it.

The most notable form of Signification in *Song of Solomon* is the re-creation of myth from an eclectic mix of origins, including Classical, Christian, Folk, African, and African-American myths. Morrison's work becomes a prime example of Gates' concept of intertextuality, as the text interweaves myths from different cultures and updates, twists, and flavors them to fit Morrison's tale. Morrison alerts her readers that this will be a story of Signification, as the main character, Milkman, is characterized as having a limp due to one leg being shorter than the other, a reference to Esu-Elegbara, the African figure for language interpretation between the gods and man, who was often depicted as having legs of different lengths: "His legs are of different lengths because he keeps one anchored in the realm of the gods while the other rests in this, our human world" (*Signifying* 6). This reference implies a series of other myths, as well, and Morrison has no trouble intermixing these different myths, as the texture of the African-American existence is one of mixture and re-creation.

One of the other important motifs related to Milkman and his limp is that of flight. Morrison incorporates several legends of flight going back to Dedalus and Icarus from ancient mythology to the myth of the flying Africans in African-American mythology. According to this story, some slaves were able to fly, but in the myth that Milkman hears

about his ancestor, the father leaves behind his slave family: "Some of those Africans they brought over here as slaves could fly. A lot of them flew back to Africa. The one around here who did was this same Solomon, or Shalimar – I never knew which was right . . . But anyways, hot stuff or not, he disappeared and left everybody. Wife, everybody, including some twenty-one children" (Morrison 322). To fly back to Africa, the man had to let go of his family and all that he loved for freedom, as is expressed early in the novel, "Ain't love heavy?" (Morrison 26). Although Milkman dreams from the beginning of the novel of being able to fly, his revelation only occurs when he is able to abandon his dream of constantly deserting those he cares about and both by uniting himself with both his roots and by understanding his responsibility to the people in his life "He found himself exhilarated by simply walking the earth. Walking it like he belonged on it; like his legs were stalks, tree trunks, a part of his body that extended down into the rock and soil, and were comfortable there – on the earth and on the place where he walked. And he did not limp" (Morrison 281). Morrison offers both parody and pastiche of these African-American myths by critiquing the sexist and selfish aspects of them but glorifying their beautiful and lasting symbolic longings in her people's consciousness.

Proof of the pervasiveness of these myths comes from glancing at both Douglass and Wells. When Milkman has his epiphany, he is compared to a tree extending its roots far into the ground. In his narrative, Douglass depicts a scene in which a slave had given him a simple plant root but promised its ability to protect him from his master killing him. Later, Douglass describes a transforming experience in his life when he fights back against his master and defiantly avoids being whipped or killed, crediting the root with the alteration in his character and strength: "I could have attributed the conduct to no other cause than the influence of that root; and as it was, I was half inclined to think the *root* to be something more than I at first had taken it be" (Douglass 102). Here, Douglass artfully interjects a mythic Signification, as the concept of the power of returning to one's roots, such as one's African ancestry, has always been an important idea in African-American thought. Douglass does not blatantly describe the power of ethnic pride in one's heritage but instead uses the

story of a magical root to convey his message.

Morrison was also not the first to Signify on the story of the flying Africans, as Wells alters the myth in her private Memphis diary. When describing her disappointment and the blow she sees not just herself but her whole race taking when she loses her suit against the Chesapeake, Ohio & Southwestern Railroad, Wells divulges in her feelings in her diary: "I feel shorn of that belief and utterly discouraged, and just now if it were possible would gather my race in my arms and fly far away with them" (*Memphis Diary* 141). This passage provides fascinating proof of the deep infiltration of Signification in African-American culture, as Wells did not record this statement for the public, but only for her own private use. Wells makes two distinct changes in this act of Signification. First, she alters what was traditionally known as a male role to that of a female, motherly role of gathering the children of Africa in her arms and flying away with them. Second, the myth, as described by Morrison, required leaving behind others when flying, as the weight of love would prohibit one from leaving the ground; for Wells, however, the dream of flight necessarily includes carrying the entire race along with her. This Signified understanding of herself proves important as she begins developing the myth of her life in her autobiography.

As mentioned before, Morrison does not limit her intertextuality to African and African-American myths but allows her novel to span a wide range of cultural influences. References include fairy tales and fables, such as those of Rumpelstiltskin, Goldilocks, and Hansel and Gretel; ancient classical myths, such as those involving Circe and Dedalus and Icarus; and Christian citations, such as naming women in the novel after Biblical characters, like Corinthians, Hagar, Ruth, and Pilate. None of these allusions fit exactly, but the myths are often more changed to fit Morrison's purpose than kept the same. Perhaps Pilate is the best example of the liberty Morrison takes when re-appropriating myth, as the nurse at Pilate's birth describes the absurdity in the random name chosen by Pilate's father: "No. Not like no riverboat pilot. Like a Christ-killing Pilate. You can't get much worse than that for a name. And a baby girl at that" (Morrison 19). The man who ordered Christ's execution not only becomes a black woman in Morrison's

novel, but Pilate also is one of the most wise and nurturing characters in the book, helping Milkman to finally understand transcendence without leaving behind loved ones: “Now he knew why he loved her so. Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly” (Morrison 336). Morrison makes these myths her own by taking pieces of literature from several cultures familiar to her own people and developing her own new myth out of a combination of the old ones.

Wells’ *Crusade for Justice* also takes place in this mythmaking tradition by re-appropriating familiar myths from European and Christian heritages to give weight to Wells’ myth of self. Wells’ role as a mother becomes an important aspect of her autobiography, as she discusses the difficulties of balancing public and private life in the chapter, “A Divided Duty.” Wells honors motherhood as “one of the most glorious advantages in the development of their own womanhood,” and from the perspective of an aging mother, develops motherhood into a theme of her autobiography (*Crusade* 251). Wells’ reference to Joan of Arc in her preface suggests Wells’ attempt to mythify her crusade by taking the European legend of Joan of Arc and Signifyin(g) it to make Wells the providential heroine of African-Americans. Recall that Braxton describes Wells’ “autobiographical posture” as that of “a protector of black manhood and a nurturer and defender of black womanhood” (Braxton 104). Here, Wells appears to be reaffirming her private wish in her diary of being able to gather her people in her arms and fly away with them, asserting her personal myth of being the protective mother of her race in her autobiography.

Wells not only positions herself as a historical heroine through her reference to Joan of Arc, but she also gives religious approval and divine right to her mission by referring to herself as a Moses figure, often using the description of needing the race to “hold up the hands of those of us who were doing the pioneer work,” (*Crusade* 254). Wells’ familiarity, friendship, and acquaintance with people who had overcome odds that suggested divine intervention, such as Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass, make this religious literary tactic unsurprising. However, this reference should not be overlooked for its importance as an act of Signification. Wells revises the myth of Moses needing his hands held in the air so that the Jews may win their battle and

makes herself the race leader that needs the support of all African Americans in order to win the fight against lynching and other forms of racism.

Conclusion

Although Royster claims that Wells' technique consists of an insistence on calling things "by their true names," despite the truth of describing Wells as candid and straightforward, the evidence seems to tell a different story (Royster 175). Ochiai and Braxton's declarations that Wells depicts her life as a symbolic representation of the experience of her entire race and claiming that this justifies her work as testimonial in nature prove to be only part of Wells' authorial technique. Surprisingly, all these literary criticisms leave out a discussion of Signification, despite its importance to both the African-American culture and literary tradition. Although Gates recognizes Douglass as a blues autobiographer, he overlooks Wells as a possible successor. However, Wells appears to be participating in the tradition of Signification throughout all her works, from her anti-lynching criticisms in her pamphlets to her appropriations of different myths in her autobiography. She takes part in both parody and pastiche traditions, especially in her literary relationship with Du Bois, in which she both praises him and offers a critique similar to Hooks' feminist argument by revealing Du Bois' tendency towards a patriarchal discourse. When comparing Wells to a female African-American novelist, the two appear to be taking part in the same traditions of Signification through recreating myth. Having endeavored to communicate a message of social change to America by participating in the African-American practices of rewriting and revision, it only seems appropriate that Wells should find a place for herself among the literary ranks of Douglass, Du Bois, and Morrison.

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