

**IDA B. WELLS' *CRUSADE FOR JUSTICE*: TRANSGRESSIVE AFRICAN  
AMERICAN WOMANHOOD ANDRE-TELLING OF PERIPHERAL  
EXPERIENTIAL HISTORY**

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**Abstract**

Ida B. Wells's autobiography *Crusade for Justice* is a radical revision of notions of autobiography by an African American woman in late nineteenth and early twentieth century America. It articulated a "politics of location", simultaneously anchored in a collectivity and exceptional individualism, pioneering a novel rhetorical strategy of an autobiographical manifesto. Consigned to oblivion after her death in 1931, her autobiography *Crusade for Justice* could be published in 1970 only through the initiative of the African American historian John Hope Franklin by the University of Chicago's book series project on Negro American Biographies and Autobiographies. Writing her life narrative in the late 1920s, she articulated a first- of- its- kind modern African American female subjectivity, a subjectivity based on social activism and community building. Her text is a unique blend of individualism and representation of communal consciousness marked by struggles around race, gender and social positionality where race did not always connote class.

*Keywords: autobiography, anti-lynching, radical consciousness, African American*

**Introduction**

Ida B. Wells' autobiography *Crusade for Justice* included a new vision and critical consciousness in narrating the life events of African Americans – overtly political and pressuring the boundaries of the dominant discourse. As Stephen Butterfield states, "All her life, Ida B. Wells fulfilled the role of vigilant sentry for the rights of her people, determined not to abandon the post even if she herself were abandoned." (1974, p, 202) Her narrative emphasizes the power differences between the white dominant race and the African Americans and is a radical revision of notions of autobiography as exclusively the product of autonomous free individualism and, thus, articulates a collective discourse of situation or "politics of location".<sup>i</sup> As Audre Lorde had declared, 'If we don't name ourselves we are nothing'(Interview", 1980)<sup>ii</sup>. Lorde's words echoes the articulation of this "we" in Ida B. Wells's *Crusade for Justice*. In the words of Jeanne Perreault it is 'a "we" that situates her clearly among those who are vulnerable to being named from the outside and thus, paradoxically, created for others' purposes while being eliminated for their own.'(*Women Autobiography Theory*, 1998, p.192) Her narrative steps out of the slave narrative convention which, notwithstanding its resisting subtext, had to supplicate before a white readership and provide proof of its authenticity through the attestation of a white well-known personality. Ida B. Wells voiced the need for a much radical stance against racism by stepping out of such narrative conventions and crafting her autobiography *Crusade for Justice* as a documentation of "the facts of race history which only the participants can give"(Wells, 1970, p, 5) and pioneered a novel and innovative rhetorical strategy of telling the truth 'as it is' and backing up

her claims through the insertion of information and statistics from already published newspaper articles by whites and through her own first-hand investigations to uncover the truth and, thus, silencing doubts as to the accuracy or validity of her claims. It embraces the definition of ‘feminist autography’ whereby the ‘I’ and ‘we’ are textual enactments of critical inquiry and are “territories to be claimed and disclaimed, as constructions or as essences.”(Perreault, 190) Writing her life narrative in the late 1920s, she articulated a first- of- its- kind modern African American female subjectivity, a subjectivity based on social activism and community building. It is an attempt at creating and writing an emancipatory ‘I’ which is imbricated by subjectivity, textuality and community. Born before the Civil War on 16<sup>th</sup> July 1862<sup>iii</sup> to slaves Jim Wells and Elizabeth Warrenton and reared during the Reconstruction era, Wells-Barnett belonged to a generation for whom slavery was not a far off distant past but also who came of age at a time of sweeping social and political changes in the United States of America and experienced emancipation the way the previous generations had never experienced it before. The period between 1870 to 1920 witnessed rapid and dramatic social and political privileges for women as a result of greater access to education, public activism and women working out of the domestic sphere for wages which culminated with the Nineteenth Amendment to the constitution granting full suffrage to women in 1920. A limited number of educated African American women tapped into this “Woman’s Era” despite the violence and exclusion inflicted on them during this period and Ida B. Wells-Barnett’s subjectivity falls into this distinctive tradition of modern African American women’s activism in the face of fierce opposition over race, gender and location. It was a tradition often overlooked and silenced within the discourses and practices of white female activism and African American politics until the 1970s in the United States of America where another social upheaval wrought by the Black Nationalist Movements of the 1960s and 1970s and the Women’s Movement would create an awareness among the African American women to uncover this distinctive tradition and bring to light this hitherto forgotten discourse.

### **Slave Legacy and Reconstruction Era**

The first eight chapters of her Narrative give an account of her slave legacy and her gradual transformation from a primary school teacher to a fiercely outspoken journalist and social activist in Memphis. The narration of these initial years of her life, tracing her parents’ slave lineage and their life after emancipation, is a subjective rendering and documentation of the Reconstruction era as it affected the individual lives of the Wells family and other African Americans of the time with slavery still not a distant past,

‘ My father [called Jim] was the son of his master, who owned a plantation in Tippah County, Mississippi, and one of his slave women, Peggy... When young Jim was eighteen years old, his father took him to Holly Springs and apprenticed him to learn the carpenter’s trade, which he expected him to use on the plantation.’

(Wells, 1970, p. 8)

Encoded in this narration is the inescapable history of the colonization and violation of the black female body, a body which functioned as the vessel for reproducing “chattel” for the system (since children followed the mother) and for shielding the “proper”, sexually repressed white woman from the uninhibited sexual desires of the white man, both strategies for maintaining colonial relationships of power.(Sidonie Smith, 1993, p. 40 )Wells makes it very obvious that the specificity of the slave women’s position and location in an oppressive chattel slavery

owning socio-economic system made it impossible for slave women to be included in the “cult of true womanhood”. She unabashedly mentions the family’s origin from such illicit sexual exploitation of slave women. As Nellie McKay states, ‘While one cannot overestimate the damaging effects of black and white, male and female dominance on black women’s agency, the group turned away from absolute victim status by rejecting other-determined and unachievable (for them) models of womanhood to shape its identity out of its own self-definition..’( *Women Autobiography Theory*, 1998, p. 100) Her narrative also testifies to the inhumanity and physical violence perpetuated on slaves by slave masters,

‘ My mother was cook to old man Bolling, the contractor and builder to whom my father was apprenticed. She was born in Virginia and was one of ten children. She and two sisters were sold to slave traders when young, and were taken to Mississippi and sold again...’

(Wells, 1970, p. 8)

‘She [mother] used to tell us how she had been beaten by slave owners and the hard times she had as a slave.’

(Wells, 1970, p. 5)

The narration of these aspects of personal history was expressly meant as a public performance to enlighten the white mainstream and the future generation of Blacks against the brutality and inhumanity of the system of chattel slavery. As Sidonie Smith had stated, ‘Autobiographical writing is always a gesture toward publicity, displaying before an impersonal public an individual’s interpretation of experience’.(*Subjectivity, Identity and the Body*, 1993,p.159) Significantly, it is through experience that subjects are constituted, and bringing into focus the experience of peripheral subjects exposes the oppressive societal mechanisms at work. It does not mean an acceptance of experience as uncontested evidence and peripheral identities as self evident but provides the ground for examining dominant exclusionary discourse and practices. A marked contrast to the life experienced by her parents was offered to Ida B. Wells and her siblings who grew up during the **Reconstruction Era** immediately after the Civil war, ‘Our job was to go to school and learn all we could. The Freedmen’s Aid had established [in 1866] one of its schools in our town – it was called Shaw University then, but is now Rust College. My father was one of the trustees and my mother went along to school with us until she learned to read the Bible. After that she visited the school regularly to see how we were getting along. A deeply religious woman, she won the prize for regular attendance at Sunday school, taking the whole brood of six to nine o’ clock Sunday school the year before she died.’

(Wells, 1970, p. 9)

It’s a homage to “true black womanhood”, in the personage of her mother, who focused her attention on survival and upliftment of the family and, in the process, the entire black community; it’s a depiction of a black female self that is pro-active in claiming agency over their own lives. Wells constructs an identity of “true black womanhood” focused on survival of the self and race despite the oppression of race, class and gender; an alternative model which focused on the black female delving into their own resources and ingenuity to find power within their oppressed selves.

### “Autobiographical Manifesto”

Women writing as resisting autobiographical subjects invent novel resisting literary forms to disrupt the traditional writing practices for which Sidonie Smith uses the term “autobiographical

manifesto”. Smith states that, ‘In this move the autobiographer positions herself as the subject of traditional autobiography: that is, she mimes the subjectivity of universal man... Yet there is another side to this mirroring, the nitrate of mimicry, for something maybe exposed here: an unauthorized speaker positions herself in the locale of the universal subject, thereby introducing a menacing suspicion of inexact correlation between representations.’ (*Subjectivity, Identity and the Body*, 1993, p.155) Wells assumes the persona of a crusader in a long march towards racial and gender justice and her text is a purposeful political and autobiographical act. Through this “autobiographical manifesto” Wells ‘confronts the ghost of the identity assigned her by the old sovereign subject, what Paul Smith terms the ideological “I”, a fixed object position representing culturally intelligible and authorized performances of identity.’ (*SIB*, 1993, p. 158) Wells’ rendition of experiential history of the **Reconstruction Era** in the United States of America from the African Americans’ perspective was meant as a documentation against “a lack of authentic race history of Reconstruction times written by the Negro himself.” (Wells, 1970, p. 4) It was intended to “fire the race pride” (Wells, 1970, p. 4) of young African Americans through their knowledge of “The gallant fight and marvelous bravery of the Black men of the South fighting and dying to exercise and maintain their newborn rights as free men and citizens, with little protection from the government...”. (Wells, 1970, p. 4). *Crusade for Justice* is Wells’ “autobiographical manifesto” (Smith, 1993, p. ,433) wherein she confronts “the southern white man’s misrepresentations [of the Reconstruction era and identity constructions of the African Americans]..in the public libraries and college textbooks of the land” (Wells, 1970, p. 5) and “purposefully locates herself as a subject, leaving behind the object status to which cultural identities have confined her.” (Smith, 1993, p. 158) Wells’ narrative marks a shift in the discourse on the subjectivity of African Americans from one of authenticating one’s humanity, hence, capacity for intelligence, through the attestation of a white patron to a sophisticated and dialogic rendition of a resisting subject where the authentication is carried forward by the author herself through the presentation of external subtexts. These subtexts were in the nature of newspaper headlines, excerpts from letters, diaries, travel journals and reviews and demonstrates the changing nature of authentication in the literary works of African Americans post the Civil War. In validating her image as a crusader Wells quotes extracts where another person, or newspaper reports commend her achievement which lends credibility and authority to her narration- ‘*The Afro-American Press*, published in 1891 by I. Garland Penn, who is now and has been for years secretary of the Freedman’s Aid Society of the Methodist Episcopal church:

Miss Wells’ first article was a “write-up” of a suit for damages at the request of the editor of the *Living Way*, and to which she contributed for two years. This introduced her to the newspaper fraternity as a writer of superb ability and demands for her services began to come in.

T. Thos. Fortune of the *New York Age*, after meeting her at the press convention, wrote of her: She has become famous as one of the few of our women who handle a goose quill with diamond point as easily as any man in newspaper work. If Iola were a man she would be a humming independent in politics. She has plenty of nerve and is as sharp as a steel trap....

In summing up her character as a writer we can but say Amen to what Miss Lucy W. Smith says of her in the following:

Miss Ida B. Wells, “Iola” has been called the Princess of the Press, and she has well earned the title.

(Wells, 1970, pp. 32 – 33)

The Self articulated in *Crusade for Justice* is that of a crusader challenging the race and gender based inequalities and injustices and the containment strategies imposed on Blacks and Black women in particular and engages with the contemporary politics marked by struggles around sex, race and positionality in the then society of the United States of America. An early instance of this defying spirit is her decision to take care of her five younger siblings instead of allowing them to find homes in different families against the wishes of elders after the death of her parents during the yellow fever epidemic in Holly Springs. To this end she stops going to school and instead finds a job as a schoolteacher, an action which ignites rumours in her community that her decision to live alone was motivated more by her desire to have liaisons with white men. Her exceptional individualism and courage is evident when she defies the community’s expectations of a woman’s role as belonging in the sphere of domesticity and a hint that her activist spirit to stand by her convictions and ideals later in life were inherent in her even at that early stage of her life. Also, writing her life narrative was a crucial tool of self-defense and self-affirmation against sexual slander inflicted on her by her own community and is a revelation of the contemporary gender challenges she experienced in her role as a wage-earning social activist African American woman during the turn of the twentieth century American society. In order to acquire the authenticating authority in her narration she grounded her social commitments to her profound inspiration in her Christian faith. The Christian leitmotif apparent throughout the text is that of a Christian soldier or crusader tirelessly waging a war against a racist oppressive society. It is not only a strategy of adopting a morally high ground and a greater possibility of acceptance of her stance by the white mainstream public but also a strong sense of identification with Christian morality instilled upon her by her former slave mother and hence, her

crusade is not only a political one, against lynching, but also a personal one of vindicating her and her slave mother’s honour and the “many southern girls who had been traduced by lying tongues.” (Wells, 1970, p. 45) She narrates the incident of how a minister of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in Vicksburg, Mississippi, tried to malign her reputation by mentioning that his wife had found a torn letter addressed to Wells in the wastebasket of their home while she was staying there during her visit to Vicksburg and which showed that she had lost her position in Memphis, which was something very suspicious. He also took great pains to harp on the good qualities of Northern African American girls and, thus, insinuating against the morality of Southern ones, a notoriety imposed through the legacy of slavery. Ida B. Wells confronted this church pastor and made him tender an apology to her personally, and also from his pulpit, the following Sunday as his false insinuations had passed beyond the boundary of his town and harmed her reputation. She confronted this minister to defend her honour and the honour of all Southern girls who were victims of this legacy of slander and sexual violence and, thus, makes a powerful intended statement of inspiration for such women of the next generation. Her strength of character and determination to right wrongdoing is reflected in her words,

...I told him that my good name was all that I had in the world, that I was bound to protect it from attack by those who felt that they could do it with impunity because I had no brother or

father to protect it for me. I also wanted him to know that virtue was not at all a matter of the section in which one lived; that many a slave woman had fought and died rather than yield to the pressure and temptations to which she was subjected. I had heard many tales of such and I wanted him to know at least one southern girl, born and bred, who had tried to keep herself spotless and morally clean as my slave mother had taught me.

(Wells, 1970, p. 44)

In continuance of this pattern of challenging injustice and inequality, Wells' first brush with Civil Rights activism occurred when, as a schoolteacher in Shelby County, Tennessee, she had to commute on a regular basis from school to her home in Memphis. One day she was asked by the conductor of the railway car to move to a smoker meant for 'colored' people and when she refused, the conductor tried to drag her out but she bit his hand and resisted being shifted out. In the meantime, the conductor secured the help of the baggage-man and another man in dragging her out and was applauded by the white ladies and gentlemen for this action. Finally, she agreed to get off at the first station rather than get inside the smoker car. Wells sues the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad Company and is awarded damages of five hundred dollars but later this ruling is overturned by the Supreme Court when the Company appeals against it and Wells was asked to pay court costs. The narration of this episode is not only a record of her first bold foray into the world of Civil Rights activism but also a first person experiential account of the Jim Crow laws abrogating Black political rights, started during the last two decades of the nineteenth century, and the new social and political structures of social control – the state legislatures and courts – that covertly thwarted and denied all the rights bestowed on the African Americans after the Civil War during the Reconstruction period and the enforced inequality and segregation imposed on them through these laws. Among the most inhuman atrocities inflicted on the African Americans during this period was "lynching" or public hanging by a white mob of an African American accused of an assumed crime. It was one such lynching in Memphis that changed the whole course of Wells' life as a contented journalist, to that of a lifelong activist against lynching. She felt obliged to enlighten the American public and the world at large to the brutal truths behind such acts and her narrative testifies as personal witnessing the real hidden truths behind such atrocities. She testifies through her first-person narrative account that among the three men, Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell and Henry Stewart, she had personal and familial interactions with Thomas Moss who was "An exemplary young man, he was married and was the father of one little girl, Maurine, whose godmother I[Wells] was. He and his wife Betty were the best friends I had in town".(Wells, 1970, p. 47) They were all law-abiding, hardworking African American men with an entrepreneurial spirit and had decided to open a grocery store to earn a better living and were well respected in their community. This grocery store rivaled the only grocery store available in their area so far which was owned by a white man. A fight had ensued between some "colored boys" and "white boys" over a game of marbles and one of the fathers of the white boys happened to be the owner of the white grocery store who grabbed the opportunity to draw the "colored" grocery owners into this fight between the parents of the "colored" and "white" marble-playing boys. In the ensuing fight the white grocery owner threatened to clean out the People's Grocery Company on the coming Saturday night. In anticipation of that the "colored" grocery owners stationed some armed men on that fatal Saturday night to ward off any attack by the white grocery owner. Shots were fired by the "colored" armed men as they saw some white men stealing through the rear door of the grocery

store. Three of the white men were wounded and the others fled and raised an alarm. The next day the white newspapers had lurid headlines about law officers being wounded in discharging their duties of rounding off criminals who were drinking and gambling in the People's Grocery Company owned by the three "colored" men. The white owned newspapers whipped up a frenzy about "Negroes" shooting white men and the People's Grocery Company as being "a low dive in which drinking and gambling were carried on: a resort of thieves and thugs." (Wells, 1970, p. 49) Through personal testifying Wells inserts her comment and brings to light or makes manifest an alternative knowledge located in the margins:

So ran the description in the leading white journals of Memphis of this successful effort of decent black men to carry on a legitimate business... The tale of how the peaceful homes of that suburb were raided on that quiet Sunday morning by police pretending to be looking for others who were implicated in what the papers had called a conspiracy, has been often told. Over a hundred colored men were dragged from their homes and put in jail on suspicion.

(Wells, 1970, p. 49)

Wells' attempt to bring to light the true story behind the lynchings through her newspaper *Memphis Free Speech* was met with equal vandalism and her office and press were ransacked and a warning pasted on the premises that any attempt "to publish the paper again would be punished with death" (1970, p. 62) when she was out of town and on a visit to New York. Her friends and well-wishers forbade her from going back to Memphis and, so, she determined to carry forward her crusade against lynching and the lies that lay hidden behind it through her writings as a newspaper woman. So through the persona of the "Exiled", Wells in her second innings as a newspaper woman in the *New York Age* carries forward her agenda of "talking back" and setting the record straight; alongside that she pioneered an innovative activism wherein she "began an investigation of every lynching I [she] read about." (1970, p. 64) Her text engages critically on a retrospective note with the white dominant ideological system pressing specific identities on African Americans and is a public stance on behalf of purposeful deflections and is an intervention against oppressive culturally authorized fictions as "autobiographical writing is

always a gesture toward publicity, displaying before an impersonal public an individual's interpretation of experience'. (Smith, 1998, p. 159). Wells' investigation of every lynching threw up startling facts where most of the accusations of rape against "colored" men were actually illicit relations between a "colored" man and a white woman. The legitimacy of these new or alternative knowledge is authenticated by the narrator's assertion that she too 'like many another person who had read of lynching in the South, I had accepted the idea meant to be conveyed – that although lynching was irregular and contrary to law and order, unreasoning anger over the terrible crime of rape led to the lynching; that perhaps the brute deserved death anyhow and the mob was justified in taking his life.'

(Wells, 1970, p. 64)

This assertion projects an autobiographical persona of an unprejudiced and unbiased person and contributes to the authenticity of the truths revealed during the investigation. This investigation becomes the occasion for the analyses of the social, psychological, economic and political causes behind lynching and the least probable cause among them was the rape of a white woman. She asserts that the Memphis lynching of Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell and Lee Stewart 'opened my eyes to what lynching really was' (Wells, 1970, p. 64) because 'they had

committed no crime against white women.’(Wells, 1970, p. 64) She comes to the conclusion that it was ‘an excuse to get rid of Negroes who were acquiring wealth and property and thus keep the race terrorized and “keep the nigger down.”’ (Wells, 1970, p. 64) She narrates instances from Tunica County and Natchez in Mississippi that the lynchings of Negro men which she investigated were actually due to these Negro men’s illicit liaison with white women and were termed as rape to save the women’s reputation. In Chapter 9 aptly titled *To Tell The Truth Freely* she articulates an oft known but silenced fact of the rape of African American slave women ‘and had been as long as the two races had lived together in the South. This was so much a fact that such unions had bleached a large percentage of the Negro race, and filled it with the offspring of these unions.’(Wells, 1970, p. 69) Her analyses offers a pioneering gendered counter-public and a critique of the hypocrisy involved in the white men’s cultural values wherein

‘the white men of the South practiced as all right for himself, he assumed to be unthinkable in white women. They could and did fall in love with the pretty mulatto and quadroon girls as well as black ones, but they professed an inability to imagine white women doing the same with Negro and mulatto men. Whenever they did so and were found out, the cry of rape was raised, and the lowest elements of the white South was turned loose to wreak its fiendish cruelty on those too weak to help themselves.’

(Wells, 1970, p. 70)

It is a shearing critique which turns on its head the imposed subjectification of Black men as fiendish rapists and instead finds common ground between Black men and white women as the victims of

white patriarchy. Her conclusions articulate the emergence of a critical consciousness and it’s testifying through the written word a combative dramatizing of conflicting as well as conflating encounters with ascribed identity, embodied self and subjectivity of the African Americans in nineteenth century America:

The more I studied the situation, the more I was convinced that the Southerner had never gotten over his resentment that the Negro was no longer his plaything, his servant, and his source of income...

I found that in order to justify these horrible atrocities to the world, the Negro was being branded as a race of rapists, who were especially mad after white women...

(Wells, 1970, p. 71)

Wells’ declarations not only challenged and subverted the white patriarchal racial and gendered status quo but also questioned the assumed chastity and morality of white women. Hollie Pich states, “In producing an alternative discourse on race and manhood, Wells redrew the boundaries of the debate and forced whites to engage seriously with lynching.” (2015, p. 61) Wells’ articulations emphasized the cultural constructions of identity and furnished proofs as to how dominant white ideological power structure ascribed abnormative status on African American subjects. Her narrative is as much a product of the contemporary culture and the individual author’s experience and subjectivity and, thus, her contestations are an alternative “account of the world as seen from the margins, an account which can expose the falseness of the view from the top and can transform the margins as well as the center.”(Hartsock, 1990, p. 171) According to Sidonie Smith one of the seven constituents of a manifesto is ‘to bring to light, to make manifest (literally struck with the hand)’(SIB, 1993, p. 158) and Wells’

autobiography does exactly that ‘since awareness of the pressures to repeat certain cultural identifications is the ground of resistance to repetition, the difficult road to a liberatory autobiographical practice lies through the terrain of cultural critique.’(SIB, 1993, p. 158)

Wells as an “exile” launched a vigorous antilynching campaign which culminated with her becoming a public speaker at different forums organized by the “colored” women’s clubs in the North and her transatlantic voyage to Great Britain to arouse public opinion against lynching. This network of women’s clubs was her initial springboard to garnering public opinion against lynching and is a testimonial record of the tradition of collective activism and community building prevalent among African American women despite the violence and exclusion faced by them from many quarters. Ida B. Wells narrates in her autobiography how coloured women’s groups of New York and Brooklyn rallied around her to facilitate her first testimonial speech on the reality of lynching :

...About two months after my appearance in the columns in the *New York Age* , two colored women remarked on my revelations during a visit with each other and said they thought that the women of New York and Brooklyn should do something to show appreciation of my work and to protest the treatment which I had received. They thought they could get other friends together to talk over the idea. These two women were Mrs. Victoria Earle Matthews of New York and Miss Maritcha Lyons, a Brooklyn schoolteacher.

The meeting was held and the idea adopted with enthusiasm. This led to further meetings, which grew in interest and numbers until no house was large enough to hold those who came.

(Wells, 1970, p. 78)

The resounding success of this testimonial speech encouraged the women to form an organization which they called Women’s Loyal Union. This testimonial speech of Ida B. Wells led to her being invited for further anti-lynching public speeches. Mrs. Ruffin of Boston, a white lady and a member of the foremost clubs among white women in Boston, became a member of the newly formed club named Woman’s Era Club by coloured women and arranged for Wells to speak to other women’s groups. It also gave her access to white audience and counter the Southern white fiction that lynching was basically employed to curb the bestial propensities of black men.

Chapter 12 to Chapter 15 describes her travel to Britain in 1893 for the first time to reach out to an international white community who could influence public opinion and exert considerable pressure on the government to take anti-lynching measures. The language employed is candid and direct, appealing for justice and social change,

The beginning of my share of the work was a drawing-room meeting of the local celebrities in Mrs. Mayo’s home, where, after explanations, the audience formed itself into a membership of our new society. When introduced to speak, I told the same heart-stirring episodes which first gained for me the sympathy and goodwill of my New York friends. The facts I related were enough of themselves to arrest and hold the attention. They needed no embellishment, no oratory from me.

(Wells, 1970, p. 90)

She backed up her claims with statistical methodology employing the new techniques of investigating social phenomena to make it irrefutably convincing. This section is replete with references and reprints of articles from newspapers and magazines with glorious accounts of her antilynching campaigns in Great Britain,

‘And this from the *Edinburgh Evening Gazette* of 1 May 1893:

Apropos of the recent visit to Aberdeen of Miss Ida B. Wells, the American Negro lady who addressed a meeting last Monday evening in the Ball-Room, Music Hall Building, a correspondent writes me as follows:

Miss Wells has been in Edinburgh since Thursday night. On Friday afternoon she addressed an influential meeting in the Bible Society Rooms, St. Andrew Square. Today, Saturday, she spoke to a drawing-room meeting convened in the Free Church Manse, Kirkliston (Rev. Mr. Lendrum) and afterwards to a crowded assembly in the hall of the Carubbers’ Close Mission. She has everywhere been heard with deep attention and interest, and has evoked unanimous expressions of sympathy. ... ‘

(Wells, 1970, p. 92)

Chapter 16 – 26 narrates her second visit to Britain in 1894 and during this trip she was hired as a regular paid correspondent of a daily paper *Inter-Ocean* in the United States. Probably, the first African American woman to be employed so.

These published newspaper headlines, articles, quotations, reviews and correspondence between Wells and her supporters are inserted so that the coordination and management of the authentication is entirely in the hands of the author and, thus, is an effective intervention in deflecting the dominant culture’s authorized fictions. As Sidonie Smith states, ‘Critique in this instance is motivated by the autobiographical subject’s desire to contest dominant discourses surrounding the subject, discourses through which the subject is objectified in strategic difference making and rendered abnormative.’ (*SIB*, 1993, p. 161) At the same time, it is testimonial in nature adhering to the official discourse of being a form of evidence in which a witness testifies or affirms something for the purpose of establishing a fact; it is also testimonial in the form of Geneva Smitherman’s definition of the term, ‘a ritualized form of ... communication in which the speaker gives verbal witness to the efficacy, truth, and power of some experience in which [the group has] shared.’ (*Talkin and Testifyin*, 1996, p. 58) Thus, Wells weaves into her narrative a degree of multivocality (exposed as they are to competing and complementary discourses) despite speaking through the discourse of the “Other”. As Mae Gwendolyn Henderson states, ‘Black women’s writing speaks with what Mikhail Bakhtin would describe as heterological or “centrifugal force” but (in a sense somewhat different from that which Bakhtin intended) also unifying or “centripetal force”.’ (Henderson, 1998, p. 348) Thus, her narrative is an emphatic personal-cum-political manifesto geared towards an emancipatory and egalitarian impulse and engages with both dominant and peripheral discourses.

### **“Restaging Subjectivity” and Dialogic Voice**

The narration of Ida B. Wells’ life story is an occasion for restaging subjectivity and the insertion of specific subtexts provides a sophisticated and dialogic narrative voice to the text. Wells’ narrative also probes the conflicts and contradictions that she faced from the whites and her own community as a wage-earning social critic and political activist who did not conform to the race and gender expectations of the period. Chapter 26 narrates an incident whereby after her return from Great Britain her anti-lynching initiative was thwarted and rejected by the male-dominated African American clergy in Philadelphia as she narrates that ‘the Reverend Dr. Embry objected to the resolution’s passage on the ground that they ought to be careful about endorsing young women of whom they knew nothing – that the A.M.E. church had

representative women who ought to be put before the public and whom they could endorse unhesitatingly.’ (Wells, 1970, p. 222) In defense of this negative reaction from the African American clergy who felt she was moving so out of her “place”, Wells links her political and social commitments to a profound inspiration from her Christian faith as she retorts, ‘ “Why , gentlemen,” I said, “ I cannot see why I need your endorsement. Under God I have done work without any assistance from my own people. And when I think that I have been able to do the work with his assistance that you could not do, if you would, and you would not do if you could, I think I have a right to a feeling of strong indignation.

(Wells, 1970, pp. 222 – 223)

Subsequently, Wells narrates her disillusionment with the opposition directed against her from within her own community and from the whites in her vision of creating a broad-based social movement in ending lynching. The thwarted attempts of her antilynching campaign led to her forming a coalition of women’s clubs as African American women were excluded from most political and official roles in society. Very much influenced by the women’s clubs in England she encouraged the formation of the Woman’s Era Clubs in Boston and Chicago. In 1893 the Chicago Woman’s Era Club was renamed the Ida B. Wells Club in her honour. She was not only an active participant in struggles against inequality based on race but also based on gender and realized early on that women’s suffrage, especially African American women’s suffrage, was the key to social equality regardless of sex or race. She was instrumental in organizing the first African American women’s suffrage club in Chicago in 1913 – the Alpha Suffrage Club - to bring to fruition the promise of African American women’s empowerment. During 1927, Wells joined the National League of Republican Colored Women’s Clubs and also established the Third Ward Political Club. Though women – especially African American women – were excluded from most public positions during that time it was through the organizational power of these clubs that they were able to engage in an active political life. As a community activist she founded the Negro Fellowship League when she discovered the exclusionary racist practices of the YMCA to provide accommodation, employment and social activities for young African American men fleeing the South in search of better opportunities in the North. The support that her Alpha Suffrage Club provided to African American political candidates led to many electoral victories and brought awareness among them to the necessity of engaging with the political system. She was also a co-founder of the Niagara Movement with W. E. B. Dubois which later became the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Thus, Wells projected a subjectivity worth emulating for other African American women and the contribution that they can make in the realm of politics. The narrative also records the frustrations and resistance she met as a wage-earning woman, social critic and political activist for her community and women, and articulates a self refusing to be confined to the gender expectations of her time to be a proper lady or to be labeled a “Negro Adventuress”. It provides testimony to an emerging intellectual and social engagement among African American women that could never be imagined or seen before, emphasizing the way race and gender intersect to relegate African American women not only to the margins of white mainstream society but also within the African American community. As Mae Gwendolyn Henderson states, ‘If black women speak a discourse of racial and gendered difference in the dominant or hegemonic discursive order, they speak a discourse of racial and gender identity and difference in the subdominant discursive order. This dialogic of difference and dialectic of

identity characterize both black women's subjectivity and black women's discourse.'(1998, p. 346)

Wells' autobiographical voice speaks in a multiplicity of parole to enunciate her complex subjectivity – an African American racial subject, an African American woman, an educated and professional African American woman (a rare subjectivity for her contemporaries), a journalist, publisher and anti-lynching activist who is a public persona – to a diverse audience in America and abroad about the specificity of her experiential history 'in a racist and sexist society where to be black and female is to be, so to speak, "on trial".'(Henderson, 1998, p. 346) These multiple selves seem disjointed with gaps, ruptures, limits and transgressions which Teresa de Lauretis calls "disidentification"(Lauretis, 1990, pp. 125-127) through the awakening of a critical consciousness and when this disidentification is made visible in the autobiographical text, the autobiographical narrator assumes the persona of a resisting performative subject. Susan Stanford Friedman aptly describes it as, 'alienation from the historically imposed image of the self is what motivates the writing, the creation of an alternate self in the autobiographical act. Writing the Self shatters the cultural hall of mirrors and breaks the silence imposed by male speech.'(Friedman, 1998, p. 76) Wells' narrative signifies the complex social, historical and cultural positionality of African American women whereby her subjectivity speaks through an interlocutory or dialogic voice. These interlocutory or dialogic voice not only articulates the "Otherness" within a racial and gender group but also homogeneity within a racial and gendered grouping. Thus, her autobiographical voice speaks in a "simultaneity of discourse", a term used by Barbara Smith to define the unique narrative strategies of African American writers. As Mae Gwendolyn Henderson states, 'the complexity of these simultaneously homogeneous and heterogeneous social and discursive domains out of which black women write and construct themselves (as blacks and women and, often, as poor, black women) that enables black women writers authoritatively to speak to and engage both hegemonic and ambiguously (non)hegemonic discourse.'(WAT, 1998, p. 346) Thus, Wells' autobiography not only attempts at rendering an alternative experiential history but also subtly voices several contradictory codes simultaneously.

### **The Autobiographical "I" Balancing Collectivity and Individuality**

The Self crafted in *Crusade for Justice* is that of an exceptional woman underlining the exceptional courage and tenacity needed to carry on her crusade against racial and gender injustices and, thus, emulates the tradition of men's autobiographies like Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* and Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Also, the rhetoric adopted by Wells eschewed sentimentality and humility as was the tradition in women's life writing until that time and espoused a rhetoric of objectivity grounded in well-researched facts supported by publications in newspapers and was thus meant as a public manifesto on behalf of her race and sex and, as such, elements of her personal life and consciousness are sparsely articulated. It is a conscious crafting of a public self 'To speak as one of a group, to speak for a group' (Smith, 1993, p. 161) but an "I" though anchored in a collectivity is also the record of the extraordinary achievements of an African American woman who remapped social possibilities. Thus, her text is a unique blend of individualism and representation of communal consciousness marked by struggles around race, gender and social positionality where race did not always connote class positionality. But in probing the text further we realize that the Self depicted in the narrative despite abandoning the dominant culture's racist and sexist demand

for bodily fixity around the matrix of sex, race and class positionality yet needed the validation from a white discerning public. As such, sixteen chapters of her narrative from Chapter 10 to Chapter 26 representing her two antilynching campaigns in Great Britain one in 1893 and the other in 1894 are highlighted through extracts from newspaper clippings, correspondences from her supporters and her public speeches there and act as the validating authority authenticating her text. As an unmarried African American professional woman during the early part of her life, she needed validation from a reputable male figure to authenticate her statements about lynching during her public speeches in Great Britain. Wells had to carry and furnish Frederick Douglass's letter of authentication during her tour of Great Britain as a testimony to her character and her facts about lynching in the United States of America. Engaging with the dominant ideological system's pressing negative identities on Black women, Wells grounded her autobiographical self on the Christian religious tradition of communal service and positioned herself as a chaste and obedient daughter, mother and later wife to make her resistance to oppressive racist and sexist practices appeal to a white discerning audience and what makes it convincing is her intense belief in her religious faith for salvation and community betterment. As Nellie Y. McKay states, 'Early black autobiographers appropriated the master's tools to write themselves into being and their community into freedom (Werner, 204). Using the white oppressor's language and black cultural tropes (like masking), they transformed the racially inferior, abstract African self of the master's text into the ultimately triumphant black experiential self.' (WAT, 1998, pp. 96 – 97)

Implicit in Wells' narrative is the contemporary culture's association of the African American with his/her body and with uninhibited sexuality. This assignment of an ascribed identity content result in Wells's elision of the body as a natural part and parcel of her subjectivity and an overt erasure of her intimate self in pursuit of negating the negative markers of her gender-marked racial identity by the dominant discourse. Thus, Wells situates her subjectivity as a venerable embodiment of Christian womanhood and speaks directly to a white-middle class audience and is constrained to seek their sympathy and approval so that they identify with her antilynching crusade and share common ground on the basis of their Christian piety. The speaking "I" in the narrative is an agent provocateur transmitting a politically and economically motivated message. It is an overtly unidimensional public "I" shorn off the intimate personal selves but also dialogic in its engagement with self-portraiture as it is grounded in a communal history and culture with others of her race and sex and also confrontational and contestatory in resisting racial and gender biases. In the words of Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, 'One discovers in these writers a kind of internal dialogue reflecting an *intrasubjective* engagement with the *intersubjective* aspects of self, a dialectic neither repressing difference nor, for that matter, privileging identity, but rather expressing engaging with the social aspects of self ("the other[s] in ourselves").' (WAT, 1998, p. 349) Wells' autobiography is a unique and fluid blend of the articulation of collective/relational model of women's and minorities' life writing and the Georges Gusdorf's model of singularity and unique individualism pervasive in white male autobiography. Her text evokes a sense of self that exists within the context of her belonging to the African American race and being female and her deep sense of awareness of gender and racial oppression in the contemporary culture, which she shares with her community. Bernice Johnson Reagon considers African American women's autobiography as "cultural autobiography" because 'We are, at the base of our identities,

nationalists. We are people builders, carriers of cultural traditions, key to the formation and continuance of culture". (Reagon, 1982, p. 81) *Crusade for Justice* articulates a group consciousness, a reclamation of identities and formulation of new narrative strategies very much in consonance with the in-group in an interdependent existence. At the same time, it projected a dual and contradictory impulse of restaging an unconventional, individualism that was transgressive for her contemporaries. What is obvious is that both these identity projections were equally pervasive and dominant and constructed through conventional motifs to attenuate the transgressiveness.

### Conclusion

Articulating transgressive experience means a way of talking about what happened, of establishing difference and similarity, and is always contested and, therefore, always political, especially in the African American context. Her narrative focuses on the historical moment of her life, a life dedicated to the "crusade for justice" for her people. Her struggle for equal rights for her people is an extension of her personal quest for equal rights. Wells' narrative remapped the social possibilities for an African American woman in late nineteenth century and early twentieth century America, and, at the same time, demonstrates the impossible barriers of race and gender expectations on Afro-American women. As such the autobiographical "I" of her text is mostly unidimensional grounding her subjectivity to the Christian religious tradition of communal activism – a crusader – privileging racial and gendered subjectivity and shorn of the more intimate personal selves. Autobiographical texts are as much a product of the contemporary culture as the product of the individual psyche and action of the author. In this sense, the Self, constructed and projected, in the narrative is also an interpellated subject of the ideology that sustains the social and cultural institutions of the time because the ideological state apparatuses (ISA), to use the phrase of Louis Althusser (*Essays on Ideology*, 1984, p. 18) covertly works to conform and socialize her understanding of herself to the ideology of the dominant discourse. In the words of Smith & Watson, "Autobiography" becomes one such literary institution in the West. It has its traditions (or history); it participates in the economics of production and circulation; and it has its effects – that is, it functions as a powerful cultural site through which the "individual" materializes." (WAT, 1998, p. 21) Simultaneously, the narrative is transgressive in that it gives the reader glimpses of emancipatory maneuvers through language and narrative techniques to resist ascription of identity and subjectivity and negotiate a discursive space in the text. It is obvious that Wells' subjectivity is discursively produced and is constrained by the hegemonic ideologies operating during her time and her autobiographical self is formulated at the interstices of a humanist ideology, Cartesian philosophy, Christian theology, racist and sexist ideology.

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### Notes

<sup>i</sup> Adrienne Rich, essay "Notes Towards a Politics of Location"

<sup>ii</sup> Audre Lorde, "An Interview with Karla Hammond." *American Poetry Review* (March/April 1980): 19

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