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AN AMERICAN NIGHTMARE: IDA B. WELLS-BARNETT AND GOTHIC  
AMERICA

by

Jasper D St Bernard II

A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Philosophy

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To Ida B. Wells-Barnett's brilliance and all the others on whose shoulders I stand (to whom this project pales in showing that appreciation).

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## Abstract

This portfolio attempts, through the examination of her literary and social/political environment, to position Ida B. Wells-Barnett within the longer tradition of black writers who utilized the gothic to make sense of the black experience in America. It was through this means that these writers attempted to reflect back to this nation the horrific nature of black oppression. The first chapter interrogates where Wells-Barnett lands in this line. She was born toward the end of legal enslavement and came into her writing career during an era of racialized violence that many hoped, she argued, would reestablish, or maintain, the racial hierarchy established during enslavement. This desire was inextricably tied to that racial hierarchy, maintaining an horrific environment. Thus, Wells argues that lynching, in all its horror, was a sign of a gothic world. The second chapter focuses on the relationship between the practice of lynching and monstrosity. Monsters are an essential figure of the gothic. It is, thus, reasonable to expect them to ‘appear’ in relation to lynching. However, to understand that relationship one must be able to ‘read’ them. This chapter engages her early long-form pamphlets—*Southern Horrors* and *Red Record*—with an eye toward understanding her reading of those monsters. Through this reading Wells reveals that the myths/‘excuses’ used to justify lynching created a system of rationalization that transcended any ‘facts’ or ‘truths’ regarding lynching’s utilization. In other words, there were rationales used that did not match the lived experience of the victims or perpetrators of the practice. Through her reading Wells revealed that the epistemological frameworks of her day were inverted, the ‘truth’ she was committed to shedding light on. The third chapter examines Wells-Barnett’s understanding of the relationship between the gothic and the law. She revealed that there was actually an ‘unwritten’ law that was lurking underneath the legal systems of her day. The

‘spirit’ of this law reached back to enslavement, of which lynching was an expression. Wells-Barnett’s interpretation of this ‘unwritten’ law raises important questions about how much of the gothic remains in this nation.



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## Introduction

### I. General Introduction

This project evolved some from its original intent. It emerged out of noticing one day several ‘horrific’ references in Ida B. Wells-Barnett’s early writings. From her selections of titles (e.g. *Southern Horrors*, *Red Record*) to the descriptions of some of the lynchings within those texts (e.g. the lynching of Henry Smith in *Record*). One of the important tropes that I noticed was Wells’s revelation that the intention was to turn the lynching victims of her time into ‘monsters’ in the eyes of the onlookers. Running Wells’s analysis up against theorists from the developing school of ‘monster studies,’ some interesting questions emerged. I became uninterested in attempting to undo the rhetorical weight of the classification (a move I do not take Wells to be taking), but instead attempted to see what happens when the label is allowed to (temporarily) rest on the lynching victim. In other words, ‘monsters’ are deliver messages to those they appear to. These messages, when taken seriously, provide interpretive lenses for better understanding the world they appear in and those who take themselves to be afraid, repulsed, desirable (and desire), and/or the ones who can (and should) destroy the monster. Jeffrey Cohen argues monsters are ‘glyphs’ in need of ‘hierophants’. It takes a certain level of insight, and willingness, to properly read the monster. I took Wells-Barnett to be such an individual. Thus, I read her analysis as a chronicle (cf. hieroglyphics) of the ‘monsters’ associated with lynching.

As the research for this project continued to round out I was led to Toni Morrison’s, *Playing in the Dark*<sup>1</sup>. In that text it became more and more apparent why these tropes and themes ap-

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<sup>1</sup> Thank you Dr. Stewart for the nudge.

peared in Wells's writings on lynchings. Morrison notes that, above any genre, the literature that both influenced, and was influenced by, America's development—socially, politically, and culturally—was gothic/romantic literature. These texts came to function as a two-way mirror where the nation fought its 'demons' and 'monsters' so that, in the 'real world' it could continue to convince itself it was on a natural trajectory of progress. The gothic, maybe more importantly, also began to play a crucial role in the writings of black authors of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in America. Turning to such theorists as Maisha Wester and Teresa Goddu revealed that these emerged because the lives they were a reflection of were being lived out in a gothic/horrific world. In other words, while these individuals were a part of communities who built havens for the nurture and protection of their internal lives (and those of the community), these individuals were nevertheless confronted with an environment imbued with horror (e.g. brutal torture, being trapped, sexual abuse, death, etc.). To relay their experience in this world, was to relay a gothic experience.

While there were (seeming) systemic changes in the world in the 1860s (e.g. legal emancipation), the gothic environment continued. This seems clear when one surveys many of the writers who continued to relay their experience(s) in the late nineteenth century onward. Thus, it is not ironic, I argue, that Wells, living through and analyzing one of the darkest times in America history is one in whose writings the gothic can be seen. The lynching era was filled with scenes that could appear in any of the gothic novels of its era. There were moments, for instance, of such things as beatings, immolations, etc. There were also kidnappings, with the victims being stolen away to wilderness settings among 'faceless' mobs. Wells's analysis also revealed the role sexual assault (a major theme of early American gothic texts) played both a mythological and

strategic role in undergirding the practice of lynching. Thus, I take Wells-Barnett to be a continuation of a longer tradition of writers who attempted, through the gothic, to work through and reflect back a truer sense of the social/political development of the nation back to the nation. The value of her analysis is inestimable. Wells was writing at a time when many, black and white, were willing to buy, or at least countenance, the myths that were attempting to settle in order to make lynching a reasonable, and thus useful, institution in America. I highlight Wells's courage not to be deterred by the myths which allowed her to introduce a critique of lynching, and other forms of racial violence, that had an indelible impact on the trajectory of the practice of lynching. So, this project is part excavation, part analysis, but the largest part appreciation. As someone who lives in the wake of her shining critique of lynching, I am indebted to her unwillingness to let anything discourage her desire to 'shine the light of truth' on lynching.

Each chapter, then, is an attempt to explore some aspect of this pursuit. None of the chapters even begin to exhaust the theme they embark on. The through-line that connects the three chapters is the relationship between the gothic and Wells-Barnett's analysis of lynching. The first chapter is an attempt to reveal the motivations behind the project. I take there to be good reasons to apply this gothic lens to Wells. This chapter attempts to uncover this while also connecting her to the larger unfolding of the relationship between the gothic and the American project. The second chapter hones in on her analysis of the lynching victim as 'moral monster.' Focusing mainly on her first two major works, I interrogate what Wells took these monsters to be telling her about the institution of lynching, and thus, the nation that depended on these practices (or quietly looked on as they were utilized). The third chapter interrogates Wells-Barnett's conceptualization of the 'unwritten law'. Wells-Barnett saw lynching as a manifestation of a conflict between two

forces (the written and ‘unwritten’ law). To her, and many others’s, horror it seemed as if the latter was (re)gaining the day, purporting absolute supremacy over the regions in which lynching was practiced, an influence that seemed as if it would all but spread over the entire nation.

## I. Chapter summaries

*Chapter 1: ‘I have made a beginning. I know not where or when the ending will be’: Ida B. Wells, writing, and the gothic.*

In the first chapter I examine Ida B. Wells-Barnett’s relationship to her literary environment in the 1880s-1890s. I take this to be an important step in getting the most out of her early anti-lynching work. This context influenced Wells, and she was able to, I argue, reassemble and reformulate that lens in order to craft a singular voice that shine a critical light on the trends and trajectories of her social political environment.

Following Toni Morrison’s lead as laid out in her incredible work of literary criticism, *Playing in the Dark*, I take serious the relationship and interaction between the social/political development of America and the nation’s literary developments. Morrison argues that the primary genre of literature in the early stages of the nation was Gothic (Romantic) literature. This creates a conundrum for Morrison when that literature is juxtaposed with the general tenor of how the nation talked about itself and its future. The latter was usually conveyed expectations of a bright future. The former was filled with tropes that were dark and foreboding. It was the literature, Morrison argues, where America was able to work out its fears and anxieties, while being able to keep up the pretenses of optimism outside the text. The text explored the terrible/horrific

elements that resided in notions of freedom. Morrison informs us that there was a figure that helped, maybe more than any other, with the explorations and examinations of these concepts: the ‘American African.’ This figure—a “fabricated brew of darkness, otherness, alarm, and desire” (Morrison, 1992, p. 38)—gave the American imagination the runaway to play with, experiment on, ignore, etc., all in the name of remaining safe and secure in the self-assurances vital to its continued progress. It is crucial, Morrison makes clear, to remember that this figure was a “figment of the [American] imagination” (Morrison, 1992, p. 38). But this did not diminish its effectiveness, in fact it was easier to manipulate because of this. Morrison argues, “No early American writer is more important to the concept of American Africanism than Poe” (Morrison, 1992, p. 32). Thus, I explore one of his early short stories, “Black cat,” and draw out some of the elements of the story that reflect many of the fears, desires, and anxieties at work in the mid-nineteenth century. The practice of enslavement brought with it many of these frustrations to the national mind, and these are very apparent in this story (and many of the stories that are considered Gothic literature).

I then turn to the relationship between the enslaved and formerly enslaved and this literature (and, thus, the national mind). I explore how the gothic is taken up, broken apart, critiqued and challenged, and reapplied through/in the slave narratives. Literary theorist, Maisha Wester, notes that these writers “appropriate[d] and revise[d] the genre’s tropes in unique ways to both speak back to the tradition’s originators and to make it a capable and useful vehicle for expressing the terrors and complexities of black existence in America” (Wester, 2012, p. 1-2). Wester, and Teresa Goddu identify some of the seminal figures of this tradition: Henry Bibb, Harriet Jacobs, and Frederick Douglass. In the chapter I explore two of these texts (Jacobs’s, *Incidents in*

*the Life of a Slave Girl*, and Douglas's, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass and My Bondage, My Freedom*) to excavate these gothic tropes and themes with the hope of understanding how they aid these writers in making sense of their experience during enslavement. I take these textual developments to be telling the reader important things, not just about the life of the writer, but the nation in which they were in bondage. Exploring these texts also prepares one to be able to see how the 'spectre of slavery' will continue to haunt both the literature and mind of the nation moving forward. Wester identifies a literary tradition that followed in these gothic steps. She notes that such writers as W. E. B. Du Bois, Ralph Ellison, Ann Petry, and Richard Wright utilized these tropes and themes to help them make sense of what it meant to live in post-bellum America.

Following this lead I interrogate if Ida B. Wells also was in this tradition. Taking a survey through her writing career, I submit that, even though she makes a major shift into non-fiction/journalistic writings, that this is a fitting place to position her writing. It is worth noting, I argue, that, while she wrote several early articles, Wells had an early desire to write a novel. This intention is interesting when reading it against the literature Wells was most familiar with in her teenage/young adult years (e.g. Charles Dickens, Louisa May Alcott, and Charlotte Bronte). Most of the writers listed in her diary and autobiography were gothic writers—the same genre identified by Toni Morrison. This influence, I argue, is meaningful. Wells developed as a writer under the looming specter of lynching. It was lynching that shifted the emphasis and trajectory of her writing. Because of the gothic nature of lynching, many of the tropes and themes associated with the genre can be found in her antilynching writing. In order to demonstrate this, focusing on primarily her early texts *Southern Horrors* and *Red Record*, I excavate these to identify where

these tropes and themes emerge and how they are reflective of the brutal institution that was lynching. The scene was horrific, and one of the main goals of these, according to Wells, was to instill this horror in those who were left in its wake, while also instilling important lessons of self-assurance and self-security in the white onlookers. This dual messaging is similar to the difference between the messages conveyed in/through the white and black gothic.

More than merely literary analysis the gothic text has important implications for how one can better understand the social/political development of this nation. The gothic through writers like Poe, Milville, etc., functioned as a mirror, albeit warped, which became a critical avenue through which America could work through issues surrounding its authority, and what it wanted to tell itself about that identity. The black gothic spoke back to this process in crucial ways. From the shadows it was able to hold up a different mirror relaying that, more truthfully, that identity was being worked out in horrific ways. This did not end with the legal emancipation. Instead, it shifted in important ways, ways that continued to be tracked by black writers who continued to employ the gothic to reflect those ways back to the national mind. One of, if not, the most critical contributors to this project in the nineteenth century was Ida B. Wells.

## *Chapter 2: Ida B. Wells, the hierophant*

In this chapter I interrogate how the ‘truth’ was an important leitmotif for Wells throughout her writing career. She was inspired to investigate the root causes of lynching after the brutal execution of her friends Thomas Moss, Calving McDowell, and Will Stewart. Her press—the *Free Speech*—was destroyed in the wake of an editorial chronicling her early discoveries. Wells identified the cause of the destruction of her press as a reaction to her ‘hinting’ at the truth. Not



to be dismayed, Wells reflecting on that period of her life in her autobiography, *Crusade for Justice*, proclaims that, out of a sense of duty, she went from ‘hinting’ at to telling ‘the whole truth’ about lynching. In light of her emphasis on the truth, this chapter focuses on the epistemological aspects of lynching. In other words, I focus on the epistemological demands of lynching—and the ‘monsters’ utilized to justify it—on those observing the practice (both then and now).

Wells identified the justification of lynching as a major element that vitalized the practice. In the *Red Record*, Wells relays the story of the development of the practice of lynching from (legal) emancipation until her day. Over the course of that time there three eras or junctures of the rationalizations used to justify lynching. The demand for these, according to Wells-Barnett, came from ‘nineteenth century civilization’ growing weary with the implementation of lynchings in the South. Thus, in order to continue to be able to practice this racial violence with a ‘good conscience’ the perpetrators needed to offer ‘good reasons’ for it. I briefly examine the first two excuses, but focus on the third—the alleged increase in black men sexually assaulting white women—primarily because, of the three, it was the most effective excuse. Wells argues that through this excuse black men were being “painted” moral monsters. This caused me to look at the epistemological implications, then, of both lynching and those ‘monsters’ being used to justify it. One’s understanding of lynching, I submit, hinges on their understanding of what the monster is telling them about its practice.

Utilizing the lenses of Patricia Hill Collins, Kristie Dotson, and Charles Mills in this chapter, I attempt to employ a more “holistic epistemology” to confront the practice of lynching (see Collins, 2000, p. 289). These writers attempt to move away from the examination of the ‘solitary’ figure contemplating from (and in) a vacuum, to the consideration of an individual who

emerges out of a social world with others who they have to think with/alongside. These environments, Mills asserts, are not idyllic paradises where all are equal and in harmony. Instead, these environments are usually structured around systems of oppression. Thus, Collins pushes us to understand how power works from within these environments in order to better understand them. These environments are framed by/through things like hierarchies, abuses, etc., that give them their shape. These elements, then, become the ‘commonsense’ that many, if not most, of its members use to navigate that world. However, the ‘commonsense’ is never quite settled completely (regardless of what those how are attempting to use power to their own ends suggest) and is constantly in need of justification. Here in this nation, this ‘commonsense’ results in (or is the result of) what Mills refers to as an ‘inverted epistemology.’ This inversion impairs how those being governed by it identify what constitutes ‘facts’, justification, the ‘truth’, etc.. Because of the correspondence between lynching and its social environment’s ‘commonsense’ it is crucial, to keep at the forefront the epistemological in any discussion of lynching (or any other form of racial violence). Wells found herself grappling with the practitioners of the ‘inverted’ within the epistemological as she attempted to declare the ‘truth’ about lynching.

I highlight how it was clear that Wells-Barnett was aware of the weight the epistemological played in the practice of lynching in/through her writing. She was self-aware of the fact that she was writing at a time where there were forces attempting to justify the ‘commonsense’ of the use of this brutal tool of coercion, a time where the question was still very much up in the air (regardless of their professed certainty). In order to demonstrate this I first turn to *Record*. I focus on the first chapter because I take it to be her attempt to lay bare the terms of the conflict. In it she reveals the war that is raging over exactly what the ‘truth’ is regarding lynching. Through her

examination of the three ‘excuses’, Wells is able to peel back the layers of what lynching was actually about (or, the ‘facts’ of lynching): the (re)subordination of black people in America reminiscent of enslavement. Each ‘excuse’ (justification) offered was an attempt to conceal this hope. As stated above, the most efficient rationalization was the third excuse. Through it, the perpetrators of lynching made the implicit argument that the only check on the bestial morality of black men was the paternalistic jurisdiction of the white enslaver. Black men (and, thus women and children), it was argued, lost their awe for their caregivers and thus lost their (moral) bearings. Now unleashed, the only other way to deal with them, it was claimed, was the swift, and brutal, destruction of those who stepped out of line. This excuse was powerful enough, Wells-Barnett lamented, to rob black people of any access to human sympathy, justifying the horror inflicted on them.

### *Chapter 3: Trapped: Ida B. Wells-Barnett and ‘unwritten’ law*

In this final chapter I interrogate the relationship between the gothic and the law in the analysis of Wells-Barnett. Wells recounts that, as a result of the lynching of Moss, McDowell, and Stewart, she and the larger black community of Memphis was startled out of an implicit trust in the ‘majesty’ of the city’s laws (Wells, 2014c, p. 98). Her subsequent investigation of the lynching revealed a horrific truth: the ‘unwritten’ law survived (legal) emancipation and continued to thrive. The basic premise of that law was the declaration that this nation was, ‘a white man’s government,’ in which the only proper position of black people was subordination. Thus, black people found themselves trapped in a situation where the newly written laws that feigned providing them the right to a new social/political position, in actuality, could not/refused to pro-

tect them from the specters of the past. Finding themselves in an environment haunted by the dispositions that generally governed the interactions between black and white during enslavement, they found themselves in a land that, while seemingly new, was in many ways the same.

This chapter is filtered through the gothic lens of the law. Figurations and contemplations of the law serve an important function in many of the early gothic texts. Usually the law is conveyed as a labyrinth/haunted house, images through which questions of crime, ownership, inheritance, and the effects of these on individuals are explored. Alongside the analysis of Ida B. Wells, I attempt to apply these images of entombment to the lived experience of black people in America during the late 1800s-early 1900s. During enslavement black people were trapped in a ‘paradoxical’ position under the law. In one breath they were deemed mere property, and thus, could not actively participate under the law (e.g. they could not bring suit when wronged by their enslavers, they could not testify, etc.). This placed them largely at the whim(s) of white people. Yet, they were not always deemed property. If they were to commit a ‘crime’, it was then that they were acknowledged, on some level, as human, in order to justify their punishment. To understand this paradox from the inside, I turn to the testimony of Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass. Both provided these testimonies while on the run from these environments, and offer vivid (and gothic) depictions of the ‘monstrous’ relationship between enslaver and enslaved. This relationship’s monstrosity was not merely manifested in the associated physical torments, but were (arguably, primarily) in the psychological struggle that raged within the mind of the enslaved as they tried to navigate this labyrinth.

With this backdrop I turn to Wells-Barnett’s analysis of the law after legal emancipation. Again, she identified the ‘unwritten’ law motivating the continual violation of black people.

Thus, black people found themselves vulnerable to the whims of white people throughout the nation, similar to the times of enslavement. I rehearse here (again) the three phases of excuses offered for lynching's justification. However, the emphasis is different here. While in the second chapter I focus on the epistemological aspects of these developments, in this chapter I explore them in order to establish Wells-Barnett's understanding of the relationship between the written law (and its alleged protections for black people) and the rationalizations of white people (justifying the reign of the 'unwritten' law). I submit that one can find themselves at a loss when considering how easily the written law was subdued into silence. In this section I primarily explore Wells's analysis of this interplay between the laws through a critical exchange between her and Jane Addams at the turn of the century. Addams wrote an article, "Respect for Law," that is instructive because of its attempt to critique lynching while conceding the premises at the base of the myth of the third excuse. Wells's critique of that article ("Lynching and the Excuses for It") reveals how an argument like Addams, no matter how well-intentioned, was doomed to fail. The (alleged) monstrosity of the lynched under the jurisdiction of this excuse overwhelms any attempts, no matter how reasonable/sound, to discourage its usage in the eyes of its perpetrators.

I close the chapter by exploring a case study of this complicated relationship between the written and unwritten laws as explored in Wells-Barnett's, *Mob Rule in New Orleans*. In the text she rehearses the story of Robert Charles. Charles, after shooting a police officer in self-defense and subsequent escape from the scene, sparks a manhunt which stretched over the next few days. Out of frustration with their inability to locate Charles, several mobs manifested in the city that went on to torment, abuse and kill many other black people (none of whom were involved with Charles or his crime(?)). The story ends with Charles dying in a hail of gunfire amidst a mob. I

end here because out of Wells-Barnett's framing of the story unfolds important questions and problems related to trying to understand the law. Throughout the text Charles is identified as the 'hero' of the story; meanwhile Wells is attendant to the framing of Charles as 'monster' in the local newspapers. Wells-Barnett's counter-framing is a critical contribution to her understanding of not just Charles, but the law(s) of nineteenth century civilization. Through this story Wells relays how, lurking under the law, there was a spirit (disposition) that could overtake it at any moment. None of those who beat, tortured, or killed black people in New Orleans during the reign of the mob were held accountable, even after things calmed down. In *Record*, a few years before *Mob Rule*, Wells noted that this interaction between the 'unwritten' law and the written law placed the 'white man's government' on trial; she wondered if the written law would prevail or the 'unwritten' law (what she deemed as anarchy/lawlessness) would reign supreme. Rather than looking merely at the social conditions and professions of those who have a vested interest in 'painting' things a certain way, I suggest we follow Wells's lead and read instead the 'monsters' our culture continues to produce. What do these monsters that continue to lurk and haunt this nation mean? What are they trying to tell us about the status of the 'unwritten' law today (and the results of the ongoing trial)?

## Chapter 1:

**‘I have made a beginning. I know not where or when the ending will be’: Ida B. Wells, writing, and the gothic.**

I.

*‘Mrs. Barnett ... Won't you please tell me what it was you did ...’*

Writing was always a crucial element to, if not the foundational element of, Ida B. Wells-Barnett’s activism. The written word had a major impact on her world and personal life. For instance, on two different occasions reaction(s) to what she wrote cost her her livelihood. A different time her writing almost cost her her life. However, the written word was of such value to Wells-Barnett that she refused to let her pen be silenced (Duster, 1970, p. xix). Late in her life (January, 1930) Wells-Barnett attended a Negro History Week meeting held in Chicago. The group was discussing a book recently written by Carter G. Woodson. This book was reflecting on various aspects of the work toward black liberation across American history. Yet, no mention was made of Wells-Barnett’s antilynching campaign which she had been waging for over the previous three decades. In this omission she realized “her worst suspicions were confirmed”—that “her place in [American] history was hardly assured” (Giddings, 2009, p. 1). At this point in her career, aside from waging a singularly important ‘crusade’ against lynching, Wells-Barnett had a role in co-founding the group that would go on to become the NAACP, organized the Negro Fellowship League in Chicago, established the only black women’s suffrage club, and had run for a state senate seat. Her work brought her into contact with some of the greatest theorists and ac-

tivists in the nation, including Woodson himself. Even still, she could not be assured of erasure. Wells-Barnett anticipated this reality and sought to counter it by writing her autobiography. Giddings notes that she “quickly realized that if she was going to establish her place in history, she had better chronicle her own life.” This marked her as the first black woman political activist to attempt a feat of this kind (Giddings, 2009, p. 2).

There was another reason for her penning her autobiography. Around the same time of this public omission, Wells-Barnett ran into a young black woman who inquired what it was she did exactly. The young woman was recently at a YWCA vesper service where everyone was asked to tell the group about a person who had characteristics that echoed Joan of Arc’s. The only black attendee of this meeting she offered Wells-Barnett as an option. However, when asked how Wells-Barnett measured up to Joan of Arc she could not give a satisfactory answer. Thus, she asked Wells-Barnett, “Won’t you please tell me what it was you did, so the next time I am asked such a question I can give an intelligent answer” (Wells, 1970, p. 3)? In response to this request Wells-Barnett began to write. In the preface she gives two reasons for writing that unfolded from this interaction. First, so there would be a ‘record’ to ensure future generations would not forget “how the agitation against the lynching evil began” (Wells, 1970, p. 4). She also hoped to combat the fact that young people (like the woman in the interaction) had “so little of our race’s history recorded” (Wells, 1970, p. 4). She hoped her autobiography could be a remedy. Thus, for Wells-Barnett these two features—the personal and the historical—converged in her autobiography. She believed she lived in, and through, a critical transitional period in American history, of which her own life was an embodiment (reflection). Thus, she was aware of a broader propensity in this nation to forgetting, in the name of remembering. “The history of this entire



period which reflected glory on the race should be known. Yet 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" (Wells, 1970, p. 5). This was why a (better) 'record' was needed, and she felt she could no longer wait on someone else to do it. In actuality, she was especially suited to record. What motivated her was the fact that moving forward black youth "are entitled to the facts of race history which only the participants can give, I am thus led to set forth the facts ..." (Wells, 1970, p. 5).

Her autobiography was a culmination of a prolific and dynamic writing career that had stretched over decades. Wells-Barnett was a part of a long tradition of black writers who attempted to use the written word to make sense of, and protect, black life in America<sup>1</sup>. An important aspect of this literary corpus is the conveyance of the horrific features of black life in this nation. Interestingly, the primary form of text in America at the time was the gothic text. Maisha Wester (2012) proclaims, "The very life of a slave is also inevitably a gothic existence" (p. 35). The gothic genre, then, presented itself as a well-fitting glove for the written portrayal of their lives. In this chapter I argue that Wells-Barnett followed this trajectory of writers. She attempted to make sense of black life in postbellum America. She was confronted with the reality that, in many critical respects, black life remained gothic. Thus, the gothic remained a meaningful form through which to present black life in this nation. Because the gothic employed many tropes

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<sup>1</sup> There are textual clues that suggest Wells-Barnett was aware of her connection to this longer tradition. For instance, she begins the narrative of her life with the well-trod phrase, "I was born ..." (Wells, 1970, p. 7). She then moves into a description of her parentage. These are both literary tropes employed by writers of slave narratives. It is interesting that she saw a major function of her autobiography as a narrative of Reconstruction and yet evokes (or pays homage to) the slave narrative as her starting point. I argue throughout this chapter that America is haunted by slavery. Wells-Barnett seems to be acknowledging this in the opening pages of her own story. Thus, it seems reasonable to surmise that, if she understood her life to be a reflection of the greater ongoing story of America, she understood America was haunted by the specter of enslavement up through her life as well.

adopted from what those authors perceived enslaved life to be, it only makes sense that these would turn up in, and be redeployed and reappropriated by, black writing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In order to demonstrate this I need to define the American gothic. I do that by unpacking the development of this literature as Toni Morrison relays in her groundbreaking literary analysis, *Playing in the Dark*. I begin here because Morrison makes a critical link between the literary development and social/political development in this nation (a move that resonates with Wells-Barnett's understanding of the relationship between her writing and her lived experience). I then turn to the black response to this interrelationship. I attempt to interrogate where and how the gothic emerges in early black writing. A crucial part of my argument is the belief that, following Morrison, the literary is inextricably tied to the 'real' world. I try to resist a chicken/egg argument, but instead want to keep on the forefront at all times the understanding that they reflect each other. Thus, when I refer to these writers as 'gothic writers' I mean that they put to paper what was, largely, a gothic life. I end by trying to position Wells-Barnett in this long tradition. An examination of her early literary career reveals that she initially wanted to be a novel writer, and drew much inspiration from the gothic literary tradition. However, her life was disrupted and she made a turn to non-fiction writing, but this turn did not mean she abandoned the gothic. It seems to me that this was not a move that made sense because the gothic continued to haunt her life, in the form of ongoing racial violence reminiscent of the antebellum world. In other words, the gothic world remained, and Wells-Barnett's writing acknowledged this fact. Thus, when I suggest that Wells-Barnett is a 'gothic writer', what I take that to mean is that she wrote in a way that reflected our experience in America—which was inherently gothic.

## II.

*“...the subject of the dream is the dreamer”* (Toni Morrison)

In this section I explore how America's literature is a fundamental element of the nation's development. In her foundational work of literary criticism, *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison explicates the relationship between this literature (Gothic Romance) and America's national narrative. According to Morrison there is an inextricable link between the two, and this link reveals how America thought about (and continues to think about) itself. Morrison's reading of the American gothic is helpful because of what it can tell us about the connection between the concrete experience of the development of this country and what those who were participating in this development thought this nation was. I will first turn to Morrison's explication of the window into this national self-reflection—the American Dream. I will then explore what America's national literature tells us about both these ideals and the actual development of this nation. In order to do this I will identify the main tropes and themes of this literature, and arguably its premier exemplar, Edgar Allan Poe. The hope is to establish that one cannot have a meaningful understanding of the story of this nation without a grasp of this literature.

From its earliest days America attempted to distinguish “itself by, and understood itself to be, pressing toward a future freedom, a kind of human dignity believed unprecedented in the world” (Morrison, 1992, p. 33). This purported inevitability was embodied, according to Morrison, in the ‘American Dream.’ It was through this ‘Dream’ that all of the country's aspirations and desires were explored. Packar-Kinlaw (2013) notes, “Although the American Dream has evolved and has, at times, seemed elusive, it nonetheless remains an important aspect of our na-

tional culture and ethos” (p. 16). In other words, it is basically the air that its champions breathe. It guided the individual’s decision-making, as well as provided the rules for belonging. J. A. Leo Lemay (1978) argues that there are five constitutive elements to the dream. The first, he argues, can be summed up in the well-known anecdote (or hope?), “the rise from rags to riches” (p. 23). This may be the most fundamental of all because it portrays “... the view of life in America as possibility” (Lemay, 1978, p. 23). A second element emerges out of an individualistic philosophy that helps give the dream shape. It is the understanding that the individual is free to act (as opposed to forces outside of their control). Another element, closely related to the former. Also drawing from an individualist philosophy the dreamer is convinced that their individual life is powerful enough to impact and influence the(ir) world. This philosophy draws from the hope of the previous element. “Before anyone can achieve any measure of competence, much less extraordinary success, in any field,” Lemay (1978) notes, “it is necessary to believe in the possibility of accomplishment” (p. 26). A fourth element is the commitment, through their personal choices, to “... the rise from impotence to importance, from dependence to independence, from helplessness to power” (Lemay, 1978, p. 24). The final element is the hope, really the expectation, of a ‘better world.’ This world, a world accomplished through the potency of the individual’s will and actions, will be “free of the ills of the old, existing world” (Lemay, 1978, p. 25). Above all, the current of ‘hope’, runs under this “national ethos;” even though the dream can take different form depending on who is expressing it, this fundamental principle is what holds the many different expressions together (Packard-Kinlaw, 2013, p. 3). James Adams identifies the most important part of this hope is its unwillingness to die, or be killed by any of the real-world circumstances that have confronted it. Any panic, whether economic, ecological (e.g. tornadoes

and earthquakes), war, peace, etc., has been unable to fully kill it. Adams (1931) argues, “The only finger which has beckoned has been that of a hope-filled future” (p. 214).

This ‘Dream,’ this ethos, was the bond that “... has united and characterized the American people since our beginnings” (Packer-Kinlaw, 2013, p. 3). Morrison argues that the shape of this dream was most clearly revealed in those migrating to this country during the early developmental stages of this country. They arrived clinging to the promise of the possibility of the replacement of the ‘dark’ times they experienced in the ‘Old World’ (Europe) that they were fleeing from. The oppression they experienced came in many forms (e.g. poverty, imprisonment, etc.). Morrison argues, that they were primarily seeking deliverance from “license”—a society they perceived to be “unacceptably permissible, ungodly, and undisciplined” (Morrison, 1992, p. 34). Thus, they arrived in this ‘New World’ with the hope to find themselves in an environment that “would provide new raiments of self” (Morrison, 1992, p. 34). They desired a new life, a clean slate, and, as a consequence, a brighter future. They were bonded by/through both dismal past (and all the despair it encapsulated) and the prospects of an immeasurable future. “It was a promise genuinely promising” (Morrison, 1992, p. 34). They could arrive here with this hope because it found its echo in the ‘American Dream’. To obtain this new life, however, would not be without its costs. On one hand they carried a risk of smuggling much of the darkness from their ‘old’ world. On the other, the possibility of the unbridled future offered through the dream came with a specific set of demands. They would have to submit to being reformed by a set of “cultural mechanics” in order to find a home in this ‘new’ world (Morrison, 2017, p. 48). In order to participate in the dream, and benefit from all it offered, the new arrivals must submit to the project of the formation of a (the) ‘new white man.’ They were offered whiteness as a seal of

their acceptance of the terms. In order to take on this new garb, to become Americans, Morrison contends, “they must sever or at least greatly downplay their ties to their native country” (Morrison, 2017, p. 17). They did not have to abandon every aspect of their identity in order to achieve this new status, but what was held on to must be placed at the disposal, or within the context, of this American whiteness. Thus, the ideals of whiteness, freedom, and the future all converged in the dream, in what it meant to be American. The possibility of their realizing a bright future in this ‘land of light’ was dependent on their submission to this lullaby.

There were four important consequences to accepting this formation, submitting to the project of this ‘new’ white man. Each of these had an important bearing on their self-understanding. First there was autonomy, or a “much championed and revered ‘individualism’” (Morrison, 1992, p. 44). There was also authority—a self-vindicated control; the third was newness (or innocence). And the final consequence was absolute power. The final element enhanced their sense of authority and resulted in a sense of a “romantic, conquering ‘heroism’” (Morrison, 1992, p. 44). With this heroism came the problem of how to responsibly (and over whom one could rightly) wield that power. The search for these answers made the first three possible. In other words, there is a circular relationship between the four aspects of this identity. This tension raised several critical questions. Over whom is (can/should) this absolute power held? Is there anyone this absolute power can/should be withheld from? How, and to whom, should this power be distributed? This identity could not be worked out in a vacuum. “It was not possible. And it did not happen” (Morrison, 1992, p. 50). It needed a backdrop (or a reflective surface) against which it could construct and organize itself.

This ‘American’ construction was not without a background, the background was itself constructed—the ‘American African.’ ‘American Africanism,’ Morrison informs, is “a fabricated brew of darkness, otherness, alarm, and desire that is uniquely American” (Morrison, 1992, p. 38, emphasis added). Their invention served an important purpose. These fabrications were invested with connotations and denotations that would signal important things about both the inventions and those who invented them. It is critical to note that this meant that these ‘American Africans’ were a “figment of the imagination” of their creators (Morrison, 1992, p. 38). It was generally on this canvas that (American) whiteness became legible. It was also on this backdrop that America (the nation) took shape and came to find out who it was. This co-constitutive relationship marked, from its earliest stages, the experiment in democracy conducted by this nation. This reciprocal relationship between ‘darkness’ (the ‘American African’) and ‘light’ (the ‘new’ white American (man)) set America apart. These two poles were in tension with each other, a tension that was critical to the formation of the nation.

Morrison argues that, “absolute power called forth and played against and within a natural and mental landscape conceived of as a ‘raw, half-savage world’” (Morrison, 1992, p. 45). This ‘raw, half-savage world’ was composed of the black (dark) and indigenous populations. Through/against these populations the consequences of the formation of this ‘new’ white man could be worked out and maintained. The Africanist presence, Morrison notes, was “potent and ego-reinforcing ... convenient in every way, not the least of which is self-definition” (Morrison, 1992, p. 45). Engaged with these populations the ‘new’ white man—and all the dreamers who desired to link themselves to him—convinced himself that he was on the path of progress. It was through the ‘savage’ that he assured himself he was ‘civilized,’ and thus, was not the savage.

The interplay between these presences created the distinctive environment that was the ‘New’ World. In this world there were those who took themselves to be ‘free.’ They knew this was the case because they knew they were not the ‘unfree.’ These ‘unfree’ were the “echo, shadow, and silent force” of this nation (Morrison, 1992, p. 48). Their presence had a direct influence on the shaping of the nation, its legal framework (e.g. the Constitution), and its broader culture. In reality, it was the legal and cultural position of this darker population that was “the most explosive issue in the nation” (Morrison, 1992, p. 50). This position was also its “most glaring cultural contradiction” (Goddu, 1997, p. 132). The problem was that it was through this backdrop that America—and all the dreamers—was also learning itself from it.

Thus, the condition of the unfree needed to be carefully managed. This management came in two ways. On one level it was managed through brutal and violent treatment, a treatment that intended to keep the American Africans in their place. Thus, violence was the main principle governing the tension between the American African and white presences. It was also an important means of self-knowledge for the latter. Morrison argues, “This new white man can now persuade himself that savagery is ‘out there’” (Morrison, 1992, p. 45). The other form of management was the attempts to romanticize it. The hope was that this method could justify the relationship between enslaver and enslaved. If it could be justified, it could possibly minimize the need for force. If rationalization could be accomplished this could possibly allow for “a seamless commitment to the status quo” (Morrison, 2017, p. 8). One important result of this was a moral framework where the darkness and light could settle into their respective (and proper) positions. The white American was in a “desperate attempt to confirm one’s own self as normal” (Morrison, 2017, p. 29). In order to accomplish this their dark counterpart could not be normal as well.



Instead they were fabricated as ‘savage’ and ‘inhuman’. Through this massaging those chasing (and, therefore, buttressing) the ‘Dream’ would come to accept their proper place in the world. However, despite these reassurances—which came through both violent practice and romanced theory—the questions were never fully settled. Therefore, an unshakeable anxiety remained. It could never be settled that it was not certain that “in fact the definition of the inhuman describes overwhelmingly the punisher” (Morrison, 2017, p. 29). Because the ‘darkness’ and ‘light’ were so intertwined, the harder the latter worked to subdue the former (e.g. attempts to demarcate those that represented that darkness as ‘savage’, ‘brutes’, etc.) the more difficult it was to escape a sense of a reciprocal capture. In other words, “the definition of the inhuman describe[d] overwhelmingly the punisher” (Morrison, 2017, p. 29). However, the light did not always grasp this. This obliviousness seems to be a critical part of the ‘new’ white man’s sense of self; the inability to perceive what their treatment of the black presence was telling them about themselves was a foundational part of who they were. They positioned themselves as “backgrounded by savagery” (Morrison, 1992, p. 44). However, they could not (would not?) see the savage treatment it took to maintain this background as having any reflection on themselves. This inability (unwillingness?), combined with an anxiety-ridden hope to maintain their own humanity, only strengthened their attempts to contain the darkness.

This American struggle between ‘light’ and ‘darkness’ was waged in multiple arenas. One of these spheres was within the pages of its national literature. Morrison claims that few, if any, writers are able to escape their environment. It is because of this that most writers “end up describing and inscribing what is really on the national mind” (Morrison, 1992, p. 15). As a consequence, she argues, that this nation’s literature “is especially and obviously revelatory in expos-

ing or contemplating the definition of self whether it condemns or support the means by which it is acquired” (Morrison, 2017, p. 5). She notes that authors are aware of this revelatory capacity and through their writing “fight secret wars” and “limn out all sorts of debates blanketed in their text” (Morrison, 1992, p. 4). Thus, when reading the literature of early America one can glean a sense of the struggle of its ‘Dream’ being worked out. “Since its beginnings, American literature has served as a chronicle of the American Dream, and some of the nation’s most revered texts provide strikingly forthright portraits of individuals pursuing and living the dream” (Packard-Kinlaw, 2013, p. 41). One of the major themes, then, one can see in/through the text is construction and framework of the ‘new’ white man. So, the national identity was being largely worked out in/through its literature. Many of the characteristics that would be upheld and maintained as fundamental to the nation’s sense of self were experimented with and puzzled out in/through its literature (e.g. individualism, (proper) masculinity and femininity, innocence and guilt, civilization and barbarity/chaos, and other moral problematics). It was through these stories that the “problems and blessings of freedom” were contemplated and solidified (Morrison, 1992, p. 7).

The struggle between blackness (‘darkness’) and whiteness (‘light’)—on which ‘freedom’ hinged—was arguably the main theme of this national literature. This space, above all else, allowed for “an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious” (Morrison, 1992, p. 17). The American Africanist presence that was being worked out, both inside and outside of the text, was reflexive in nature. It was a ‘shadow’, “a dark and abiding presence that moves the hearts and texts of American literature with fear and longing” (Morrison, 1992, p. 33). This literary darkness was both an overwhelming and pliable presence in the text. This presence ‘haunted’ the literary body of early

America, a presence that was seemingly impossible to exorcise, though it is unclear if an exorcism was desired. It was something the text both could not do without, and, also needed to subdue. Thus, light came to be seen as the remedy for the darkness. This created an interdependent relationship between the two elements. This interdependence is complicated however, because, as Morrison argues, whiteness (light) is essentially ‘parasitical.’ What these writers attempted to interrogate, and at important times bury, was the sense that whiteness is itself “mute, meaningless, unfathomable, pointless, frozen, veiled, curtailed, dreaded, senseless, implacable” (Morrison, 1992, p. 59). However, the true nature of this relationship was often concealed in/through the text. If it is true that the text reflected the real world, or that it was through the former that the latter made sense of itself, then it stands to reason that the relationship in the text was similar to its counterpart in the real (or actual) world. So, there was a coterminous construction of the ‘new’ white man in the text—alongside the fabrication of the American Africanist presence—and under the shadows of the debates of enslavement. “American literature,” Morrison (1992) clarifies, “could not help being shaped by that encounter” with the Africanist presence (p. 47). This was just as true for the social/political environment of the country.

American literature was employed to help resolve many of the mysteries that were developing in the social world between whiteness (‘light’) and the American African (‘darkness’). The literary contribution was critical to the construction of the American African, and the connotations and denotations that would enable its visibility—and the securities to the nation that accompanied this visibility—were arranged and maintained within the text as well. It was through this struggle that “the elaboration of the quintessential American identity” was attempted (Morrison, 1992, p. 44). The American African thus potentially became America’s best kept secret and

an indelible part of its identity (both imagined and ‘real’). The image of a darkness that needed to be constrained and tamed—what was definitely not who they were—became “a dark and abiding presence” played within the (white) American literary imaginations, a presence that hovers over much of the literature even when it is not explicitly evoked (Morrison, 1992, 44).

Morrison identifies the American Gothic (Romantic) as the foundational literary genre of this nation. She argues that the early American Gothic was closely associated with the American imagination. It was a “playground” through which a “uniquely American prophylaxis could be played out” (Morrison, 1992, p. 36, 38). In other words, it was useful in helping America deal with a specific dis-ease of that imagination. This preventive measure had two aspects—external and internal. Through the gothic the authors were attempting to confront “very real, pressing historical forces and the contradictions inherent in them” (Morrison, 1992, p. 36). But the problems were not all coming from the outside world. These authors, through/in the gothic, also were attempting to explore the “anxiety imported from the shadows of European culture” (Morrison, 1992, p. 36). Thus, there was an intimate link between the American psyche—both individual and collective—and the American gothic. The genre provided a safe space for dealing with the fears associated with the pressures of an ever-developing nation. The nation needed this space despite the professed hope (presumption) in a ever-bright future. There was much at stake for both the internal and external life in the nation. One of the key questions at play was the dark side of freedom. The struggle was with “the *terror* of human freedom—the thing they coveted most of all” (Morrison, 1992, p. 37, emphasis added). The fear of losing (or, not being able to obtain) freedom was linked to other troubles: questions of alienation, abandonment, failure, impotence, incapacity, the unbounded (a ‘wild’ Nature/nature), the loss of ‘civilization’, and ‘sav-

agery’/‘barbarism’ (the flip side of civilization’s coin). These attempts to grapple with the ‘real’ world can be seen in the American Gothic text.

It is important to highlight how this literature was linked to the project of the development of this ‘new’ (American) whiteness, and how the builders attempted to make the project make sense to themselves. This provides an important explanation for why this American gothic held such a esteemed place in America. It was the canvas through which America could “fight, engage, and imagine their demons” (Morrison, 1992, p. 36). As stated above, much of the collective imagination as this literature was taking form was consumed with the idea of progress and development. The ‘dream’ that governed this corporate vision—at least as it communicated itself—suggested that the future was bright. It was this brightness that drew many to its shores, who arrived ready to basically abandon their past in order to access their portion of this dream. This willingness was maintained even in the face of the fact that their identities, histories, etc., needed to be dimmed, or even shelved, for the sake of this new dream. The literature of this time chronicled this dilemma. In it one can discern a record of this process with all its aspirations and anxieties. Yet, with all this hope in the air, one could wonder about the connection between the tone of this literature and the tone of the portrayal of what was happening as a result of the pursuit of the dream. Morrison notes, “. . . it is difficult to read the literature of young America without being struck by how antithetical it is to our modern rendition of the American Dream” (Morrison, 1992, p. 35). With all the potential in the world, and a belief that they were on a trajectory that would naturally arrive at this potential, “it is striking how dour, how troubled, how frightened and haunted our early and founding literature truly is” (Morrison, 1992, p. 35). While the dream seemed to all but ensure unavoidable progress, the ‘shadow’ that was cast over

it was long. The literature, through which was impressed reflections on the implications of this dream, and the identities that were forming around it, was one “of darkness and the grotesque in a land of light and affirmation” (Fiedler, 1960, p. xxiv). How can we make sense of this?

It was no coincidence that this type of literature emerged during the early days of the nation. “Between the [gothic] novel and America,” Fiedler argues, “there are peculiar and intimate connections” (Fiedler, 1960, p. xvii). Due to this intimacy, through the gothic novel there is provided a lens that allows for a better read of early America. This lens is in itself, however, difficult to define. Not only does the unqualified genre ‘gothic’ resist simple classification, but the qualification (‘American’) further complicates the task. Barriers to an easy categorization emerge when one tries to determine the particular place, time, and specific authors that constitute the genre. However, there are patterns that allow the edges of the genre to come to view. Fiedler notes, “There is a pattern imposed both by the writers of our past and the very conditions of life in the United States from which no American novelist can escape, no matter what philosophy he consciously adopts or what theme he thinks he pursues” (Fiedler, 1960, p. xi). In other words, it was difficult, if not impossible for these authors to escape what was on the national mind. One of the critical things on the nation’s mind that provides a contour for this genre, as Morrison identifies, is the questions of what to do with the American African, and just how much that presence means to the nation’s own sense of self. She claims that “the very manner by which American literature distinguishes itself as a coherent entity exists because of this unsettled and unsettling population” (Morrison, 1992, p. 5-6). A large part of the shape of the genre, then, can only be made sense of in conversation with the conditions out of which it emerged. Goddu argues that the gothic is the “repressed side of the national narrative” (Goddu, 1997, p. 26). Or, that narra-

tive's development was largely reflected (albeit, warped<sup>2</sup>) in important ways in/through the gothic text.

In order to clarify what is meant by 'gothic' (particularly its American rendition) for the remainder of this chapter, I turn to a brief section where terms will be demarcated and certain aspects of the genre identified. This is a necessary step because of how nebulous a term it can be. This will not be done to conceal the work Morrison has done as discussed above, just to flesh out how I will be using the term alongside her elucidation of the genre.

When attempting to circumscribe the gothic it is important to acknowledge that there is no "single, straightforward answer" (Spooner and McEvoy). This is true for its American sub-genre. However, while there may lack a 'straightforward' answer there are "distinguishing features" that can help narrow the scope (Stankovic, 2021, p. 107). One way to narrow is to look at how a given culture defines its borders, and the apprehensions and plans in dealing with if/when/how these are traversed. These considerations are helpful because every community develops a series of gothic "tales and traditions" that aid in educating its members regarding these issues (Weinstock, 2017, p. 2). Thus, these narratives become important mechanisms for socialization. It is worth noting that these also become channels through which these members can imaginatively and safely explore worlds that do traverse these borders, while still remaining 'good' members of the community. They can "... read breathlessly or hold our hands over [their] eyes while peeking through our fingers as the Gothic hero or heroine confronts the horrifying monster

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<sup>2</sup> This warping seems natural because of what the national narrative is unwilling to admit to itself about itself. One can see this in Morrison's discussion of the function of the Africanist presence (or darkness) in this corpus. Although this presence was no less fabricated than the stories themselves, it is their construction that offers much insight about its creator/counterpart—whiteness. Thus, this whiteness is no less invented. This is no less true of its 'real' world image. It is the collective unwillingness to admit and deal with this fact of invention that makes this process so dangerous.

or uncovers the dark history of murder, incest, and/or usurpation on which the present order rests” (Weinstock, 2017, p. 2)<sup>3</sup>. While there are narratives/stories that can be gothic in toto, there are also versions that are “littered with Gothic topoi” (Wester, 2014, p. 169). Therefore, a text not classified as ‘gothic’ in order to contribute to this larger conversation. Some of the ‘topoi’ that can appear in texts include (not an exhaustive list): curses, prophecies, the subterranean, paintings, veils, graves, returns from the dead, hauntings, ghosts, confinements (entombing), live burials, visions, and conspiracies (see Wester, 2014, p. 169). Interestingly, many of these match the nineteenth American psyche as demonstrated by Morrison in *Playing in the Dark*. She argues that these American fears can be summarized “... in short, [as] the terror of human freedom—the thing they coveted most of all.” These bugaboos of the national mind included the fear of being outcast, failure, powerlessness, “boundarylessness,” nature (appearing as mysterious, unbridled, and threatening), the absences/loss of ‘civilization’, loneliness, and aggression (Morrison, 1992, p. 37). It is this dark imagery is what I will be referring to when evoking ‘gothic’ throughout the rest of this chapter (while trying to avoid any unnecessary limitation of the terms bounds).

While there is some variance across time and text, there is a broadly general formula that gothic narratives adhere to. Sedgwick (1986) argues that once one is told they are reading a gothic text they can “... predict its contents with an unnerving certainty” (p. 9). There are themes, scenes, interactions between characters, and rhythms that can reasonably be anticipated once one comes to believe they are reading a gothic text. The plot usually hovers around a handful of ar-

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<sup>3</sup> The American community is no different. Fiedler argues that the atmospheric conditions of the gothic “possess[ed] early American] fiction.” And goes so far to claim, “Until the gothic had been discovered, the serious American novel could not begin; and as long as that novel lasts, the gothic cannot die” (Fiedler, 126). This suggests another way to read the relationship between the gothic and the nation was that the former provide ‘tales and traditions’ that helped guide the negotiation of the boundaries of the developing nation. In other words, the gothic aided in policing the borders of the maturation process of the ‘new’ (American) white man and the dream that governed his growth.



chetypes: a “trembling” heroine or ‘impetuous’ hero (who is bungling and often falls just short of deliverance) attempting to foil and/or escape a villain. The villain is “tyrannical” and is usually of the same generation as the protagonist (although they can be older) (Sedgwick, 1986, p. 9). Their goal is to imprison the protagonist. If the protagonist is the heroine, the villains plan most likely involves the sexual violation of the heroine (and the plan will usually result in her death). The settings come standard. When the protagonist is not trying to navigate some labyrinthian castle or house (often in ruins), the setting is in a ‘wild’ landscape. In her exploration of the gothic text, Sedgwick adds some topoi (that are important for this chapter): religious figures (e.g. priests and monks) and institutions, nocturnal landscapes and dreams, the discovery of obscure family ties and histories (e.g. possibilities of incest), cannibalism, the “unspeakable,” the “poisonous effects of guilt and shame,” civil insurrections and fires, the “charnel house” and the “mad-house” (Sedgwick, 1986, p. 9). Some analysts who read the gothic critically suggest that the plots and characters are related with such hyperbole that this suggests they can (or actually do) “... become symbols, ideas, passions” (Carter, 1981, p. 133). Oates goes so far to suggest that the gothic nudges the reader to invest “... all things, even the most seemingly innocuous ... with cosmological meaning. Is there nothing in the gothic imagination that can mean simply—‘nothing’” (Oates, 1996, p. 2)? The answer to this question seems no when considering the origin and context of the American iteration of the gothic. If the authors are grappling with, or reflections of/on, the ‘national mind,’ then this suggests it is reasonable to read with the intention of sussing out the meaning invested in the characters, themes, and plots employed by these authors.

To illustrate this I want to briefly focus on four recurrent themes that appear across many American gothic narratives: time, power, control, and the negotiation of boundary between reali-

ty and perception. Sedgwick notes, “The chief incidents of a Gothic novel never go far beyond illustrating these few themes, and even the most unified novel includes most of them” (Sedgwick, 1986, p. 10). Time—the nature of the relationship between the past, present, and future—plays a crucial role in the gothic. In these narratives lie attempts to theorize “... a particular sense of the past” (Fiedler, 1960, p. 118). The past, in the gothic, continually encroaches on (our sense of) the present. In other words, the present is where the decisions of the past are reaped. This, some argue, is the gothic’s most pressing issue. It is through the gothic that we can reflect on “... the inescapability of the past in the present” (Smith, 2009, p. 274). Closely related to the contemplation of time is the reflection on power. Weinstock (2017) argues that the gothic theorizes power as “... who is allowed to do what based upon their subject position within a particular society at a specific moment in time” (p. 2). Many of the anxieties that haunt the American imagination (e.g. freedom) is wrapped up in the question of power. The text often ruminates (for the reader) about the moments when one is confronted with forces—human or otherwise—that they cannot prevent being overcome by, moments “of human insufficiency” (Weinstock, 2017, p. 6). Any given society works out the parameters of power. That society determines, and polices, who can do something, when they can do it, and for how long. Thus, the gothic text’s reflections on power must be read through the culture in which it was produced. The grappling with these forces has important bearing on ideas of how much control one has over themselves, and how much control can be yielded in their world. There are two major ways the gothic explores this question. The first is a narrative where the characters are confronted with impersonal forces. These can be internal to the characters (e.g. unconscious desires or irrational impulses) or manifested in their external world (e.g. a villain, monster, etc.). When they are internal forces/pres-

tures, they often appear to the characters in such a way that seems like they ‘out in the world’.

What these forces have in common is that they propel the characters (and readers) to wrestle with the suspicion that “... one may wish to believe oneself free but in fact all human activities are determined, from the perspective of the deity, long before one’s birth” (Oates, 1996, p. 2). This force that is determining outcomes does not necessarily have to be a deity, but can be an impersonal or natural force as well.

Another important theme across gothic texts is the boundary line between reality and perception. These narratives often reflect on the fact that the boundary between what we can be sure is ‘real’ and what merely imagine the world to be is “slippery” (Broneen, 2009, p. 113). The gothic is largely consumed with the rational, irrational, and non-rational. All of these have a major stake on the human and their sense of self. Much of the darkness of these stories is predicated on, according to Carter, the “perennial human desire to believe the world as fact” (Carter, 133). In this battle to be able to verify what is real, again, suspicions lurk. For instance, the characters (and the readers?) often cannot shake the feeling that there are “subterranean areas [which lurk] behind everyday experience” (Carter, 1981, p. 133). Thacker argues, “It’s all in your head. It really happened. These mutually exclusive statements mark out the terrain of the horror genre. And yet, everything interesting happens in the middle, in the wavering between these two poles ...” (Thacker, 5). He argues that the gothic challenges the hubris of the self-assurance that the world is as we take it to be. The characters, when confronted with the irrational/non-rational, take great pains to fold what is encountered into some sort of sense. This drive is driven by the basic expectation, or desire, that everything fit into the categories and systems that structure the sense of the world, with the hope of it “becoming quite unexceptional and normal—even

banal” (Thacker, 2015, p. 7). The gothic does not desire to issue these assurances however. Instead it continually brings the reader to those “brief moment[s] of absolute uncertainty—when both options seem equally plausible and implausible, when neither thought can be accepted or rejected, when everything can be explained and nothing can be explained” (Thacker, 2015, p. 7). It is in this moment that the gothic thrives because it is one of the major sources of unease. And it is the evocation of unease in the reader that is the “singular moral function” of the gothic (Carter, 1981, p. 133, see also Mulvey-Roberts, 2009, p. xxii). While fear comes in many forms, one of the primary forms the gothic is concerned with is the fear of the unknown (and its ultimate uncategorizability), or to the “perverse attraction to the creeping horrors of the imagination” (Mulvey-Roberts, 2009, p. xxii).

The narratives of Edgar Allan Poe offer an important example of the above theorizing of the gothic. Oates argues that Poe is America’s “premier” gothic writer (Oates, 1996, p. 4). Stankovic (2021) adds that many of the themes and topoi so familiar to the American gothic are arguably at their most conspicuous in Poe’s stories. Stankovic (2021) argues that Poe’s stories are a clear example between the gothic text and the ‘national mind’ (p. 109). He claims, “Poe’s stories are thus an excellent example of how Gothic tradition participates in the exploration of American past, creating a context characterized by two opposing tendencies — to confront the monstrous aspects of history on the one hand, and to repudiate them on the other” (Stankovic, 109). The arena Poe is most fascinated with is the mind. The minds under Poe’s examination are usually “haunted,” and are, as a result, at some stage of disintegration (Fisher, 2009, p. 67-68). Confronting forces that are beyond the rational reach of the character, the mind becomes a battleground and source of terror, anxiety, despair, and agony. This often does not just effect the

character under examination but has a reverberating effect often destabilizing the narrative itself. The reader is usually faced with the prospect of trying to determine what exactly can be trusted in the narrative. The answer often seems to be, nothing. Thus, the lines blur suggesting an “ultimate indeterminacy” between things whose boundaries are often taken for granted (e.g. self|other, real|illusion, dream|reality, etc.) (Stankovic, 2021, p. 112). The labyrinthine and subterranean that is often associated with the castle/haunted house in the gothic is transferred to the inner workings of the mind. Dern notes how Poe attempts to entomb the “ever-present ‘I’” in an “intricate ‘arabesque’ structure of illusion, misperception, perversity, and grotesque self-torture” (Dern, 2017, p. 164). Thus, Poe is identified by many as the gothic writer exemplar. He masterfully weaves the major gothic topoi pushing the reader to question everything. With Morrison we can ask Poe, as a model of the gothic and its channeling of the American ‘national mind’ in the nineteenth century, why so dark?

One route to engaging this question is to examine the role of the American African—the ‘darkness’—in Poe’s narratives. Morrison (1992) argues, “No early American writer is more important to the concept of American Africanism than Poe” (p. 32). She points to, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, as a premiere example of this. Fiedler highlights this text as well as a noteworthy example of a gothic writer working through the fears in the white American mind particularly associated with the American Africanist presence. He argues, “Insofar as Gordon Pym is finally a social document as well as a fantasy, its subject is slavery . . . Poe’s novel is surely the first which uses gothicism to express a peculiarly American dilemma identifying the symbolic blackness of terror with the blackness of the Negro and the white guilt he embodies” (Fiedler, 1960, p. 378). The treatment of both the ‘dark’ and ‘light’ characters in the story offer solid evi-

dence that Poe is grappling with the relationship between the American ('new') white man and the American African. For instance, the main character comes to encounter a 'brawny, muscular, and jet black' community with 'thick and woolen hair' and 'thick and clumsy lips' at an important juncture in the story. They then enact many of the stereotypes that haunted the 'shadow' (as it haunted the larger nation) at the time. Even though the term 'Negro' (or any of its counterparts) is never evoked in the story, it seems like a reach to suggest he has anyone in mind other than this population. Also, The book ends with the protagonist entering a 'pure' whiteness. However, this is not the only narrative Poe dives into these themes and the larger ideas they represent. Morrison and Fiedler give significant time to Arthur Pym. Instead, I turn to his short story, "The Black Cat," in order to briefly explore how these themes were engaged by Poe.

"The Black Cat," Oates argues, "demonstrates Poe at his most brilliant" (Oates, 4). Of the four major themes mentioned above three—power, control, and the boundary between fact and imagination—are readily available. If one reads the story interrogating the text for the American Africanist presence the fourth—the past and its bearing on the present—comes to view as well. The story introduces the reader to a nameless narrator giving his final confession the day before his execution. He has been accused of murdering his wife, although as the story progresses there is little mystery that he did it. He initially shared an idyllic home with her and his many pets (some birds, fish, rabbits, a dog, a small and a monkey). The focus of the story is on the black cat (Pluto) who came under his reign. Their relationship was steeped in ambivalence. There was an appreciation the cat's majesty—"a remarkably large and beautiful animal, entirely black, and sagacious to an astonishing degree" (Poe, 1996, p. 79). But there also was a brooding suspicion that there may be more to the cat than meets the eye. The narrator's wife would repeat the legend

that black cats are “witches in disguise.” Granted, the narrator claims he did not really believe the latter, however it was something that happened, on his last day of life, “to be remembered” (Poe, 1996, p. 79). Regardless the cat was the narrator’s favorite, and the cat seemed to return the feelings, and this perceived exchange of sentiment lasted several years. However, due to struggles with alcohol, according to the narrator, their relationship became frayed. Although, the narrator assures, he was treated better than the other animals. It did not help that Pluto became “somewhat peevish” in his old age (Poe, 1996, p. 79). Their relationship took a turn when one night when the narrator, after perceiving what he took to be the cold shoulder from Pluto, grabbed the cat roughly, who, frightened, bit him in return (not hard). The narrator claimed to then have “lost” himself to a “fiendish malevolence” and reacted to the bite by gouging one of Pluto’s eyes out (Poe, 1996, p. 80). The next morning, sober, he was met with “a sentiment half of horror, half of remorse, for the crime” of harming Pluto in that way (Poe, 1996, p. 80). This pushed him to drink some more to avoid having to remember his treatment of the cat. This only enhanced the terror Pluto felt toward the presence of the narrator. The narrator eventually succumbed to a “spirit of PERVERSENESS” that “urged [him] to continue and finally to consummate the injury I had inflicted upon the unoffending brute” (Poe, 1996, p. 80). This ‘spirit’ drove, according to the narrator, to “[slip] a noose about its neck and hung it to the limb of a tree” (Poe, 1996, p. 80). He offers a window into the rationale for this treatment of Pluto,

One morning, in cold blood, I slipped a noose about its neck and hung it with the tears streaming from my eyes, and with the bitterest remorse at my heart; — hung it because I knew that it had loved me, and because I felt it had given me no reason of offence; — hung it because I knew that in so doing I was committing a sin (Poe, 1996, p. 80).

Later that night, his house burned down completely. In the ruins of the home against the wall on which his bed rested he saw “as if graven in bas-relief upon the white surface, the figure of a gigantic cat. The impression was given with an accuracy truly marvellous [sic.]. There was a rope about the animal’s neck” (Poe, 1996, p. 81). He hoped to find a replacement cat in his despair. One night, under a drunken stupor, he found another black cat—or at least the cat found him. This cat was like the former in every way except for a “large, although indefinite splotch of white” on his chest. This cat met his affections with favor and followed the narrator home. With time, however, an “unutterable loathing” emerged within him for the new black cat. He began to feel suffocated by the cat’s pertinacious affection for him. In the narrator developed a longing to kill this cat, but he was hampered by both the memory of what he did to Pluto and complete dread of the second cat. One of the sources of dread was that the white blotch—originally indefinite—came to take on the shape of the gallows. This revelation caused the narrator to lament,

And now was I indeed wretched beyond the wretchedness of mere Humanity. And a brute beast — whose fellow I had contemptuously destroyed — a brute beast to work out for me — for me, a man fashioned in the image of the High God — so much of insufferable woe! Alas! neither by day nor by night knew I the blessing of rest any more! During the former the creature left me no moment alone, and in the latter I started hourly from dreams of unutterable fear to find the hot breath of the thing upon my face, and its vast weight — an incarnate nightmare that I had no power to shake off — incumbent eternally upon my heart (Poe, 1996, p. 83)!

This only increased his anger toward the cat. One day while attempting to walk into the basement the cat was trailing him and almost caused him to fall down the stairs. In a fit of rage the narrator took up an axe with the intention of killing the cat. His wife, however, came to the cat’s defense. This pushed the narrator “... into a rage more than demoniacal, I withdrew my arm from her grasp and buried the axe in her brain” (Poe, 1996, p. 84). She died instantly. In despair he creates a grave site for her in the basement. He then searched to kill the only witness to the



crime, but to no avail. This did give him some sense of solace; the night after burying his wife behind a wall in the basement he noted, "... thus for one night, at least, since its introduction into the house, I soundly and tranquilly slept; aye, slept even with the burden of murder upon my soul" (Poe, 1996, p. 85). He was able to keep this sense of tranquility,

The second and the third day passed, and still my tormentor came not. Once again I breathed as a free man. The monster, in terror, had fled the premises for ever! I should behold it no more! My happiness was supreme! The guilt of my dark deed disturbed me but little. Some few inquiries had been made, but these had been readily answered. Even a search had been instituted — but of course nothing was to be discovered. I looked upon my future felicity as secured (Poe, 1996, p. 85).

On the fourth day the police came to investigate. This brought no anxiety to the narrator because he believed he had completely concealed his crime. As he toured the home with the officers he "... quivered not in a muscle. My heart beat calmly as that of one who slumbers in innocence" (Poe, 1996, p. 85). Leaving the basement with the police, in full self-assurance, the narrator tapped the wall behind which he entombed his wife. The wall gave way and her corpse was revealed. The story ends with a description of the voice that met him in response to his knocking,

I was answered by a voice from within the tomb! — by a cry, at first muffled and broken, like the sobbing of a child, and then quickly swelling into one long, loud, and continuous scream, utterly anomalous and inhuman — a howl — a wailing shriek, half of horror and half of triumph, such as might have arisen only out of hell, conjointly from the throats of the damned in their agony and of the demons that exult in the damnation (Poe, 1996, p. 86).

This voice reminded him of the terror that cat once brought to him. In his final testament, he recalls his wife's theory about the original black cat. If that cat was not a witch, the narrator was certain his replica ("the monster") had "seduced [him] into murder" (Poe, 1996, p. 86).

A few reflections can help reveal how this story is the epitome of the gothic, and what it can say about the expression of the national anxieties that were confronted through these texts. The themes of power, control, and the boundary between fact and imagination are important leitmotifs running throughout the short story. Power—as the determination of who is allowed, based on their social position, to do what and to whom—is an important contemplation in the text. The narrator sets the stage of the story within the tension of “the most wild yet most homely narrative” (Poe, 1996, p. 78). This connection between the unbridled and threatening (a critical part of “so many gothic tales” (Smith, 2009, p. 271) and a domesticated space known for ordinariness and the mundane is a vital element undergirding the story. In this setting the gothic ‘nightmare’ invades the home (Smith, 2009, p. 271). Once introduced the narrator’s authority over this domestic space must be re-established. This authority is signaled through this edenic type space of which he has dominion. Of all the submissive subjects of his kingdom, the black cat becomes an ominous figure. As long as the relationship remained affectionate from the narrator’s perspective there was peace in the kingdom. It is in this interaction that the theme of control comes to bear.

It was the black cat’s refusal to reciprocate that affection one night, even though it was in light of the cat’s fear for its own safety, that brought on violence from the narrator. The narrator killed the black cat as a response to the slight. This expression of control re-established dominion in the home, albeit a regretful and depressed one. In common gothic form the narrator found himself confronted with the “poisonous effects of guilt and shame” (Sedgwick, 1986, p. 9). In the wake of the first cat’s brutal destruction a second cat appeared. The cat found favor with both, but it was short-lived with the narrator. This mutual affection was maintained with his wife caus-

ing the narrator to “establish [in his mind] a connection between” the two (Dern, 2017, p. 169). This connection was deemed an emotional one, which threatened the serenity of their home. “By his own admission, the narrator’s disposition changed markedly, but his wife retained the ‘humanity of feeling’ that was once his ‘distinguishing trait’” (Dern, 2017, p. 171). The prospect that this was Pluto reincarnated, a thought the narrator could not completely reject, was a terrifying possibility, especially if the wife was in collusion with him. This potential loss of control caused the narrator’s hatred of the cat to extend to his wife. How could he bear this conspiracy against himself in his own (once peaceable) kingdom? The final straw came after the narrator finally worked up the nerve to attempt the destruction of the second cat. Her attempt to protect the cat (her new “great favorite”) demanded she suffer the fate initially intended for the cat. This was the cost—ultimately, everything—of control.

Poe’s story also highlights the horrifically blurry border between fact and perception/ imagination. While the story begins with clarity it ends ambiguously. The reader is introduced to the story with the assurance of the crime and who was guilty of it. The narrator makes no attempt to obscure this fact. Thus, the real problem presented before the reader is the identification of the narrator’s rationale for committing such a heinous crime. The narrator introduces himself to the reader declaring,

My immediate purpose is to place before the world, plainly, succinctly, and without comment, a series of mere household events. In their consequences, these events have terrified — have tortured — have destroyed me. Yet I will not attempt to expound them. To me, they have presented little but horror — to many they will seem less terrible than baroques. Hereafter, perhaps, some intellect may be found which will reduce my phantasm to the commonplace — some intellect more calm, more logical, and far less excitable than my own, which will perceive, in the circumstances I detail with awe, nothing more than an ordinary succession of very natural causes and effects (Poe, 1996, p. 78).

Thus, the reader is introduced to the true mystery, the narrator himself. Like many of Poe's other unreliable narrators, he attempts to reassure "the reader of his sanity" (Dern, 2017, p. 165). Both the reader and narrator are faced with this obscurity. The narrator, in fact, is enlisting the aid of the reader to help figure out why this happened. The hope is that they are able to establish the events on rational grounds. His attempts, after all, have come up short. Is the reader content that a 'spirit of PERVERSNESS' was enough to justify his brutal treatment of the black cat? The narrator suggests that the reader may be familiar with this spirit. "Yet I am not more sure that my soul lives," the narrator states, "than I am that perverseness is one of the primitive impulses of the human heart — one of the indivisible primary faculties, or sentiments, which give direction to the character of Man" (Poe, 1996, p. 80). Thus, on some level lower/antecedent to rationality may be the answer to the question. This may not solve anything, however, but only intensify the horror of his story. The horror may rest "... not that one is insane, but that one is not insane. At least if one is insane, the strange, terrifying 'it' can be explained in terms of madness, delirium, melancholia ..." (Thacker, 2015, p. 4). But what if it is something more fundamental? What if this perverseness is at the base of even the reader's humanity? What is at stake in these questions is the potential destabilization of "our most basic presuppositions about the world (especially the world for us as human beings)" (Thacker, 2015, p. 4-5). Granted, all the reader has is the narrator's perspective. The story does not offer an angle against which to check the narrator's story. The second black cat may not even be real. This, the inability to tell the difference between reality ("It really happened.") and perception ("It's all in your head."), Thacker argues, is a primary source of the horror of this story (Thacker, 2015, p. 5).

What about the theme of time (the relationship between the past and the present) that is so fundamental to the gothic text? This theme emerges when one focuses on the relationship between the black cat(s) and the narrator. There is good reason to read this interaction as a reflection on the connection between the 'new' white man and the American Africanist presence. "No early American writer," Morrison (1992) identifies, "is more important to the concept of American Africanism than Poe" (p. 32). Fiedler confirms this, but focuses on Gordon Pym to establish this fact. He argues that this novel was "surely the first which uses gothicism to express a peculiarly American dilemma identifying the symbolic blackness of terror with the blackness of the Negro and the white guilts he embodies" (Fiedler, 1960, p. 378). I maintain that, published five years later, "The Black Cat" is just as absorbed with this dilemma. Lesley Ginsberg also reads this story as a commentary on the association between enslavement and America. If we read the domestic space as a setting reflecting America, then the commentary gets interesting. Morrison identifies the two ways slavery is accommodated: through romanticizing it, and, if that does not work through the utilization of brute force. We see both implemented by the narrator in the story. In the beginning the narrator believed himself to be in an affectionate interrelation with Pluto. As long as they maintained this spirit of correspondence there was no need for "[c]ontrol, benign or rapacious" (Morrison, 2017, p. 10). Pluto was given free(?) reign of the house, able to move without coercion (although, it seems important to note that the narrator took Pluto's willingness to follow him around as the sign of affection). This attempt to "romanticize dependency" was one of the primary defenses of slavery during this same period. It was professed that the (good) slave 'loved' their master. Their purported docility was communicated their gratefulness (Ginsberg, 1998, p. 105). Hartman, argues that the patriarchal family within the system of enslave-

ment—the ‘father’, ‘mother’, ‘children’, and ‘slave’—found its foundation in “duty, status, and protection” (Hartman, 1997, p. 89). It was incumbent on the ‘father,’ as the “armor of affection and benevolence” to guard the home (Hartman, 1997, p. 89). Everyone could feel at home as long as he fulfilled his role, and it was reasonable for him to expect affection under these terms. “Literally,” Hartman notes, “the forces of affection bound the interests of the master and those of the slave in a delicate state of equilibrium” (Hartman, 1997, p. 89). This ‘delicate state of equilibrium’ held together the narrator’s home at the beginning of the story. The narrator reminisced,

Pluto — this was the cat’s name — was my favorite pet and playmate. I alone fed him, and he attended me wherever I went about the house. It was even with difficulty that I could prevent him from following me through the streets” (Poe, 1996, p. 79).

As it was in enslavement, as long as a “family romance” could be fabricated three things could be true: mutual affection could hold off coercion, subjection can continue to masquerade as equality (freedom), also submission ensured happiness and harmony. The (white) wife played a crucial role in all of this. Her resignation to the terms ensured the ‘family’ could maintain its integrity. This is why the narrator must have taken it so hard at the ‘betrayal’ involved in his perception that her affections were more aligned with the second black cat’s than the narrator’s.

This helps clarify why the narrator reacted so harshly when Pluto broke with the terms that one evening. In refusing to return affection, even by biting the narrator (his owner?), he revealed that limits of the romance. Morrison informs us that when romance does not work, coercive control through brute force must be implemented (e.g. whipping, etc.). Under this rationale Pluto’s bite, no matter how slight, could only be met with a savage punishment. Thus, he had to do something as terrible as plucking Pluto’s eye out. Once Pluto’s ungratefulness continued the only eventual recourse was to kill him. I need to be clear on what I mean by reasonable here.

Within the system, as within the narrator's 'kingdom', it makes sense to treat Pluto (and his wife) the way he treated them. But how do we make sense of his treatment of the second cat? This is, admittedly, a more difficult task. The second black cat (Pluto reincarnated? Pluto's ghost? A figment of the narrator's imagination?) sought to seemingly establish an affectionate relationship with the narrator. What would cause him to turn on this second cat? Dern observes, "... the second cat's 'loathsome caresses' reinvigorated the narrator's feeling of irritation—this time because the narrator viewed the second cat's affection as mockery, which caused 'disgust and annoyance' to grow into 'the bitterness of hatred'" (Dern, 2017, p. 174). The narrator admits that he hung Pluto because the 'love' the latter had on the former failed. Dern (2017) argues, "... Pluto had stopped loving the narrator before the hanging, the removal of the cat's affection serving as a catalyst for the narrator's 'deadly sin'" (p. 174). The narrator's incredulity of this loss of love is curious here. Pluto had good(?) reason to avoid the narrator after their interaction that cost him his eye. However, this seems to go largely unacknowledged by the narrator. His affection, his gratefulness, should be able to transcend the maltreatment. This incapacity of Pluto's love was enough to bring about his demise. Could it be that the narrator was afraid of repeating this same course with the second black cat? Is his violence toward the cat, and his unwillingness to submit to its affections a sign of this unwillingness? Ginsberg argues that the intoxication the narrator struggled with was not alcohol but, like so many of the enslavers of the nineteenth century, power. It was the "intoxication of absolute power [that] bred the intemperate abuses for which slaver was infamous" (Ginsberg, 1998, p. 106). This intoxication seems to explain why both black cats were mistreated so brutally by the narrator.

“The Black Cat” reveals, through this gothic lens, both the role the “shadow” (Africanist presence) plays in the self-definition of the ‘new’ white man and how oblivious the latter could be to this process. Morrison argues that the Africanist presence was a “potent and ego-reinforcing presence” reinforcing the construction of the American project of the ‘new’ white man. Through this presence this white man could delude himself into thinking that “savagery” was outside of himself, and he could continue on his natural trajectory to ‘civilization’ (Morrison, 1992, p. 45). For instance, the brutal treatment of the enslaved was no sign of an internal brutishness. Any resistance to this treatment was also a sign of their internal irrationality and brutality. He was also able to convince himself that the violence inflicted was ‘reasonable’ (he had to keep the ‘brutes’ at bay) and even ‘civilized’. Thus, as long as he clung to the status quo he could be assured that he remained safe from the ‘darkness.’ This rationalization was apparent in the narrator’s excuse for the violence committed against Pluto after the cat bit him. He professed, “The fury of a demon instantly possessed me. I knew myself no longer. My original soul seemed, at once, to take its flight from my body; and a more than fiendish malevolence, gin-nurtured, thrilled every fibre of my frame” (Poe, 1996, p. 80). Even though he acknowledges that what he did to Pluto was a “damnable atrocity” it never resulted in his accepting culpability. The text ends ambiguously with him never taking accountability for his actions. Whether the second black cat is an hallucination, a ghost, or Pluto reincarnated, the narrator is sure that this entity “cunningly worked the narrator’s destruction, seducing him into murder ...” (Dern, 2017, p. 168). Through this seduction his house has become a charnel house, a fitting description of the nation haunted by enslavement.



It is difficult to determine if this is a proslavery or antislavery text. However, it is useful in that it effectively reveals the mindset of the ‘new’ white man. It shows the lengths to which these would go in the pursuit of the ‘American Dream.’ The story ends in a haunting, a haunting that resulted in the narrator’s ultimate demise (we assume). The story ending with him recalling what it was like to, and directing the reader to, look the black cat in the eyes is terrifying. But, it is important to note this entire story is from the perspective of the unnamed narrator. But is this the view that gives the clearest perspective of the gothic environment that is this nation?

This section rehearsed the concurrent emergence of the American gothic and the nation (as personified in the ‘new’ white man). This intimate relationship explains why the gothic was, as Toni Morrison argues, the foundational literature/text of this nation in its early stages. It was a reflection of the national imagination, one of the most meaningful mechanisms through which the nation attempted to make sense of itself. This could not be accomplished without the fabrication of a ‘darkness’ a background through which its ‘light’ could come into relief. This darkness took primary form in the presence of the American African. The American African was a concocted approximation of a population that was currently experiencing an imposed bondage—both literarily and socially. This group, then, haunted both America’s political and literary life. “Nothing highlighted freedom,” Morrison notes, “if it did not in fact create it—like slavery” (Morrison, 1992, p. 38). This explains why the literature was so dark. “It cannibalized slavery for many of its metaphors,” Goddu adds, “and drew on its social conflict and impending crisis for its terror” (Goddu, 2016, p. 74). Thus, on both levels—political and literary—the experience of the Africanist presence, their enslavement, “enriched the country’s creative possibilities” (Morrison, 1992, p. 38).

But the reflexive nature of the relationship between America's literature and reality raises a problem. The shadow cast through America's deployment of blackness/darkness in this way had a negative result; it shaded much of America's view of itself. The white imagination/mind deluded itself into believing that the enslaved population had "offered itself up" for these reflections on this new American self. What they were looking at through these eyes was not the actual population. Thus, it is crucial to realize, as Morrison claims, that these particularly American stories were never written for (or on behalf of) black people (Morrison, 1992, p. 16). The dream, then, that was being worked out through these texts was never intended to be offered to black people. The freedom, power, innocence, and the like that was reflected in the dream did not, and would (could?) not, apply to them.

Yet, with all of the promised brightness, darkness remained—both textually and in the world. It was a darkness, however, that the white imagination had all but inoculated itself from—at least in its own mind. In the next section I examine the other side of this coin. In order to do this it will examine the (black) American gothic that was developed alongside its white counterpart in the nineteenth century. Just as in the (white) American gothic literary whiteness (light) and blackness (darkness) were reflexive in the black (American) gothic as well. I argue that the black version of the gothic has important things to say to both literary and political whiteness. It provides an opportunity to see things from Pluto's perspective (as opposed to viewing Pluto through the eyes of a narration that has a vested interest in seeing things a certain way). The dark side of the 'American Dream,' in all its imagined glory, and those it was creating, was brought to light in/through this black gothic text.

### III.

*But we do have in the Negro the embodiment of a past tragic enough to appease the spiritual hunger of even a [Henry] James; and we have in the oppression of the Negro a shadow athwart our national life dense and heavy enough to satisfy even the gloomy broodings of a Hawthorne. And if Poe were alive, he would not have to invent horror; horror would invent him. (Richard Wright)*

*'Not a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief' (Toni Morrison)*

This section of the paper will concentrate on black (often referred to as 'African American') gothic literature. The conflation of 'black' and 'dark' on the surface level of the gothic texts can cause one to see the reference 'black gothic' as redundant. However, this qualification is important because it distinguishes the two early forms of American gothic literature in this paper. The two gothics are not the same, but do speak to each other. While it is true that essentially the conflict between darkness (black) and light (white) is the gothic's "most striking and constant symbolic opposition" (Goddu, 1997, p. 74.), the nature of this conflict, and who is represented by the symbols, differs between the black (African-American) and white (Anglo-American) gothic in salient ways. The previous section explored how the latter was employed to help white America make sense of the 'new' white man. Even though the darkness he found himself up against was terrifying, it nonetheless useful. Thus, it was a necessary conflict. It was through this conflict that he came to know himself. It was also through through this self-knowledge that those that dreamed alongside him came to know themselves as well. This conflict was not read the same by everyone though. There were some authors how utilized this darkness to 'speak back' to this 'new' white man. This form of the gothic was utilized by many black writers in early America to

explore their understanding of the nature of the conflict between ‘light’ and ‘dark’. Many of the early slave narratives, for example, were either structured by the gothic or enlisted gothic elements to convey their perspective of the nature of enslavement. These writers found themselves, like their white counterparts, writing in a “highly and historically racialized society” (Morrison, 1992, p. 4). Both writers, then, were constrained by the same conditions. Even though this is true, however, the results often differed widely.

The white gothic writer seemed at times to be unaware of how closely their work reflected their actual world. Morrison argues that there were corners of their mind “held off and away from the reach of the writer’s imagination” (Morrison, 1992, p. 4). Fiedler suggests, for instance, that this gothic world was often engaged as a world of pretend through which the author could experiment with its horrors from a distance. At least they could convince themselves there was a distance. This approach allowed their reader a similar consolation. Their time in this world did not could be nothing more than “good clean fun.” Fiedler contends,

Our literature as a whole at times seems a chamber of horrors disguised as an amusement park ‘fun house,’ where we pay to play at terror and are confronted in the innermost chamber with a sense of inter-reflecting mirrors which present us with a thousand versions of our own face (Fiedler, 1960, p. xxi-xxii).

This dissonance—horror/gothic as both reflective and concealing and/or innocent, good fun—is critical; yet, it is not a tension that my project seeks to resolve. One important reason why I refrain from any attempt like that is because it seems that this tension is critical to the gothic—or at least its American iteration. Fiedler notes that, despite attempts to convince ourselves otherwise, the reader is never truly settled that these “bugaboos” are fake, or the world all that humorous (Fiedler, 1960, p. xxi). The darkness seems too familiar, too haunting, to be merely an illusion.

This was largely not a consideration in the gothic as it was framed by black authors. For them the darkness was all too real.

Black gothic writers did not approach the gothic in the same way their white counterparts did. According to Maisha Wester, these writers “appropriate[d] and revise[d] the genre’s tropes in unique ways to both speak back to the tradition’s originators and to make it a capable and useful vehicle for expressing the terrors and complexities of black existence in America” (Wester, 2012, p. 1-2). Thus, it is a bit more complicated than saying that the black gothic is merely a flip side of the coin. Instead, the black (use of the) gothic translates and clarifies the white rendition. These black authors critique the world(s) formulated in/through the white gothic through their own constructions (Wester, 2012, p. 2). “Such reconfiguration,” Wester explains, “implies black claims to the genre: by reconfiguring the genre, shifting the signifiers and signified away from their meanings in the Anglo tradition, black writers introduce profound variations that make the gothic something new” (Wester, 2012, p. 28). Through these new creations the black gothic is able to reveal that the terrors that appear in the white gothic are more than pretend. Fun house mirrors often distort the image; the black gothic reconstructs these reflections bringing these (back) into sharp(er) relief.

The slave narratives are a primary example of how the black gothic speaks back. At the risk of being accused of hyperbole or fictionalization of their experience the enslaved, their formulations revealed that “the sensibility of [the] slave owners is gothic” (Morrison, 2017, p. 30). For instance, the enslavers treated the enslaved brutally in order to remind themselves of who they were, and to maintain the line that sequestered them. Through these means they convinced themselves they were not the barbaric ones. According to them, their treatment of the enslaved

was, after all, necessary. Through their handling of the enslaved they declared, “I am not a beast! I torture the helpless to prove I am not weak” (Morrison, 2017, p. 30)! The white gothic text was an arena in, and through, which this debate raged. Morrison notes, “These contradictions slash their way through the pages of American [gothic] literature” (Morrison, 1992, p. 46) However, the dispute often unfolded in ways that masked it. Through the implementation of gothic tropes and themes the slave narratives worked to unveil or expose these (self-)delusions.

Through the elements of the gothic the slave narratives revealed that, in actuality, the reality of the enslaved was itself gothic. For example, their day-to-day lived experience was constituted by such things as whippings, murder, suicides, traps, torture, and the like. These were things that also showed up in the gothic texts written by white authors in America. Thus, there was an eerily intimate relationship between the elements that made up gothic plots in white gothic literature and the experience of the enslaved (who at times would also appear in those same texts as representatives of those texts’ ‘darkness’). This, at times, makes it difficult to tell the difference between the two worlds. “Slavery provide[d the] American Gothic with its tools of terror as well as its anxiety and dread . . . [the American Gothic] derives its force not from an imaginary and generalizable source but from the actual atrocities of slavery. . .” Goddu (2007) observes (p. 65). In their redeployment of the gothic tropes, the enslaved and formerly enslaved writers had “recourse to gothic ideological tropes, exercising them as rhetorical asides upon an already gothic plot” (Wester, 2012, p. 35). They understood that the horrors they, and other black people in America, faced were not merely fabricated, mere tropes through which textual worlds can be constructed. And, since it was through these types of texts America was attempting to explore itself, the black gothic, through its reflection(s), had the potential to undermine these con-

templations and the myths they buttressed. It was through the black gothic of the slave narratives that revealed that both the white gothic and American history was haunted. This unveiling had critical things to say about, and to, the ongoing development of the ‘new’ white man. Thus, by articulating that their reality was in fact gothic, the writers of the slave narratives challenged the self-identity of young America, suggesting that its ‘Dream’—a vision that governed its development was, in fact, a nightmare.

It was the experience of the enslaved, then, that had the potential to shed a crucial light on the development of the country. This could be the case, however, only if it was read correctly. For instance, much of the debate about slavery in the early stages of this nation—a fundamental discourse—took place from its outset. An ‘inside’ view of the reality enslavement was needed in this debate. The system of enslavement was “a system of merciless horrors, a diabolical dungeon of bondage” (Wester, 2012, p. 35). In other words, it produced a gothic life for the enslaved. Thus, by rehearsing this life through the text these authors hoped to give voice to the broader, ongoing, experience of the enslaved. Wester explains,

Long dead ancestors continue to haunt society beyond their time and lives. Slavery here becomes an institution haunted by ancestors who reach beyond the grave to ‘enforce drudgery’ alongside their current descendants. Haunted by the dead and built upon torment, slavery proves the fitting sight for any gothic novel. The lives, struggles, and complexities of the beings suffering within the institution reinforce the gothic as a mode of reality (Wester, 2012, p. 66).

These authors were able to communicate that the source of the horror was not somewhere ‘out there’, but emerged out of the nature of the relationship between the enslaved (black/darkness) and their enslavers (white/light) itself. It is important to remember here that the image of the darkness in the white American gothic was fabricated. The American Africanist presence in the text was not representative of the black presence in the world because the former was filtered,

and then (re-)constructed, through the white imagination. This placed a strict limitation on what they could actually learn about the lived experience of black people in the nation. This made the “seizing” of the gothic by black authors critical because it allowed them to “write back ... and revise” these conjured constructions (Wester, 2012, p. 28). This became a means through which they could hold up a mirror to the white imagination, and the world it was constructing. The white presence in these black texts, which also utilized the gothic, was not the result of mere imagination. The grasping at ownership of the black body by this white presence, for instance, marked their appearance as horrific. The American Dream seemed to demand the ‘new’ white man take on perspectives like this, an to approach to life which produced “horrific realities for black subjects” (Wester, 2019, p. 54). If Morrison is correct that “the subject of the dream is the dreamer,” then this reappropriation of the gothic by black writers held the potential to turn the gaze back on the dream itself (and thus, on the dreamer). To enter the world of the black gothic, then, could introduce subjects of the white gothic to a new subjectivity altogether. The black gothic presented the dream(s) they dreamt as the source of their anxiety and horror. Thus, new dreams were needed for the darkness to subside.

Wester notes that emblematic iterations of these kind of uses of the gothic by early black writers’ can be found in Henry Bibb’s, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave*, Harriet Jacobs’s, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, and Frederick Douglass’s first two autobiographies (*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and *My Bondage, My Freedom*). A few examples of these can demonstrate that (formerly) enslaved authors utilized the gothic in their demonstration of their lives under enslavement’s jurisdiction, how the gothic was utilized, and what it could accomplish in these narratives. In a speech delivered in the latter part



of 1850 called, “Nature of Slavery,” Frederick Douglass attempted to relay to his audience what life was like under the auspices of enslavement. In the speech he made sure to assure the audience that he had the authority because of his inside position as a formerly enslaved person (who legally was still very much under its jurisdiction and was, therefore, not safe). He identifies the system of slavery as a “hydra-headed monster” that gives birth to the “monstrous relation” between ‘master’ and ‘slave’ (Douglass, 2014a, p. 354). It was an environment, he argues, with “baneful peculiarities” (Douglass, 2014a, p. 354). Douglass attempted to demonstrate the gothic nature of enslavement in his *Narrative* a few years earlier. While enslaved by Captain Anthony, he was under the watch-care(?) of his overseer, Mr. Plummer. Plummer, Douglass recalls, “was a miserable drunkard, a profane swearer, and a *savage monster*” (Douglass, 2009, 18-19). After describing the characteristics that made Plummer monstrous, he compared him to his ‘master’ Captain Anthony. Douglass (2009) recalls,

He always went armed with a cowskin and a heavy cudgel. I have known him to cut and slash the women’s heads so horribly, that even master would be enraged at his cruelty, and would threaten to whip him if he did not mind himself. Master, however, was not a humane slaveholder. It required extraordinary barbarity on the part of an overseer to affect him. *He was a cruel man, hardened by a long life of slaveholding. He would at times seem to take great pleasure in whipping a slave. I have often been awakened at the dawn of day by the most heart-rending shrieks of an own aunt of mine, whom he used to tie up to a joist, and whip upon her naked back till she was literally covered with blood. No words, no tears, no prayers, from his gory victim, seemed to move his iron heart from its bloody purpose. The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped; and where the blood ran fastest, there he whipped longest. He would whip her to make her scream, and whip her to make her hush; and not until overcome by fatigue, would he cease to swing the blood-clotted cowskin.* I remember the first time I ever witnessed this horrible exhibition. I was quite a child, but I well remember it. I never shall forget it whilst I remember any thing. It was the first of a long series of such outrages, of which I was doomed to be a witness and a participant. It struck me with awful force. It was the blood-stained gate, the entrance to *the hell of slavery*, through which I was about to pass” (p. 18-19, emphasis added).

The torturous treatment, shrieks heard from a distance, the heartlessness of the barbarous figure, and the like, are all elements that appeared in gothic texts written by Anglo-American writers of this same era. Plummer was not singular in his monstrosity however. He was, according to his narratives about his experience, surrounded by barbarity. The reader was also introduced to, for instance, Mr. Severe (whom Douglass decades was “rightly named”), who was not just cruel, but took “pleasure in manifesting his *fiendish barbarity*”—a barbarity that could not even be softened by the tears and pleadings of children (Douglass, 2009, p. 23-24, emphasis added). In the face of this darkness Douglass (2009) laments, “I wish I could commit to paper the feelings with which I beheld it” (p. 18-19). Even though faced with this seeming impossibility he did not stop attempting to ‘speak the unspeakable’. In “Nature” he warned that the view of life that vitalized the “monstrous relation” was contagious. Douglass forecasts that if the nation continued to let the hydra reign it would ultimately be condemned: “Nature must cease to be nature; *man must become monsters*; humanity must be transformed; christianity must be exterminated; all ideas of justice and the laws of eternal goodness must be utterly blotted out from the human soul ...” (Douglass, 2014a, p. 360, emphasis added). It is an unavoidable fact that the gothic played a role in Douglass’s demonstration of his lived experience as an enslaved person. Douglass attempted to use the language to turn the mirror on that very system of enslavement. The system itself was monstrous, and this monstrosity enveloped anyone who attempted to maintain the gothic environment that was enslavement. He was not alone in this framing.

Harriet Jacobs also employed gothic tropes and themes to make sense of her experience during enslavement. She identified several gothic tropes as fundamental to the experience. There are several that she highlights that are important to take note here. While she gives space to bar-

barous tortures that are generally familiar to the reader (e.g. whipping), she also identifies treatment that was geared at, and had particular effect, on the internal workings of the enslaved person. Thus, along with sexual predation, she marked the ‘perversion’ of the ‘natural feelings of the human heart’; these are employed with the hopes of the ‘corruption of innocence.’ This treatment was so compelling that ‘Linda’ (Jacobs) chose imprisonment—living in a crawl space—over remaining subject to such treatment. After spending some time abroad she remarks on her feelings returning to America by boat. She recalls, “We had a tedious winter passage, and from the distance *spectres* [sic.] *seemed to rise up on the shores of the United States*. It is a sad feeling to be afraid of one’s native country” (Jacobs, 2000, p. 206-207). She spends particular focus in her text on ‘Mr. Flint.’ A common trope in the gothic is the distressed and pursued maiden. She is often conveyed as trapped in a house/castle confronted with the task of trying to avoid the persistent and wicked pursuits of a male figure who wants to violate her—usually sexually. Jacobs (2000) had a similar experience,

He peopled my young mind with unclean images, such as only *a vile monster* could think of. I turned from him with disgust and hatred. But he was my master. *I was compelled to live under the same roof with him*—where I saw a man forty years my senior daily violating the most sacred commandments of nature. He told me I was his property; that I must be subject to his will in all things. My soul revolted against the mean tyranny. *But where could I turn for protection?* No matter whether the slave girl be as black as ebony or as fair as her mistress. In either case, there is no shadow of law to protect her from insult, from violence, or even from death; *all these are inflicted by fiends who bear the shape of men* (p. 30, emphasis added).

While the standard gothic text usually ends in the death of the maiden at the hands of her pursuer, Jacobs shifts that narrative some. However, her ‘escape’ ends in great cost to her—she has to spend a long time entombed, not in a subterranean lair, but in a makeshift attic/loft which was

added to a shed on her grandmother's property. She was provided little to no room in this space (nine feet long by seven feet wide by three feet high (at its apex)). Recounting her time under these conditions she remembers,

There was no admission for either light or air. ... The air was stifling; the darkness total. A bed had been spread on the floor. I could sleep quite comfortably on one side; but the slope was so sudden that I could not turn on the other without hitting the roof. The rats and mice ran over my bed; but I was weary, and I slept such sleep as the wretched may, when a tempest has passed over them. Morning came. I knew it only by the noises I heard; for in my small den day and night were all the same. I suffered for air even more than for light (Jacobs, 2000, p, 128).

In this miserable position, she did have one gleam of tempered light—the voices of her children. She could only hear them though. These voices could not completely dissolve the despair she was experiencing. In this continual and “oppressive” darkness she was not provided much space to move. It was largely no different than a tomb. However, regardless of how miserable her lot was here, she concedes, “Yet I would have chosen this, rather than my lot as a slave, *though white people considered it an easy one*; and it was so compared with the fate of others” (Jacobs, 2000, p. 128). Her recollection here is fascinating. She acknowledges that there is more than one way to view what she understand to be a gothic experience. A gothic world, then, does not seem to be *objective* in its presentation. In the eyes of some it seemed outlandish to choose the attic. However, this was a reasonable decision for Jacobs. Thus, there is a subtle—or maybe not so subtle—argument being made here. Like Douglass, Jacobs is warning that being steeped, and having a vested interest, in the system of slavery and its various mechanisms has its rewards. In other words, one's view becomes altered, even monstrous. Weinaur (2017) argues that Jacobs's narrative transforms “the nation itself into the true Gothic villain” (p. 94). Like Jacobs (2000),

the nation was “in the powerful grasp of the demon Slavery.” Her gothic places a demand on the reader to choose if they wanted to side with the ‘darkness’ or resign to the “monster” (p. 60).

Through the utilization of gothic tropes many black writers of the of the 18th century attempted to convey their experience under the clouds of enslavement. With their pens they attempted to paint “[g]raphic descriptions [that] emphasize[d] the horror of slave reality” (Wester, 40). There was a potential problem in taking this method. A superficial reading could induce in the reader a sense of *deja vu*. Many of these scenes seemed to have their parallel in the fictional gothic discourse of the time. Goddu argues that it was the “spectre of slavery” that haunted the gothic texts. This, she argues, grounded these texts “in the every day realities of chattel slavery” (Goddu, 1997, p. 63). Thus, the houses of bondage, brutality and tortures, helpless maidens and evil villains, questionable bloodlines and “stolen birthrights”, the spectacle of violence, etc., found their sense of realness in the lived experiences of the enslaved. It was the enslaved that could not escape their entrapment, abuse, despair and suffering through the mere turning of the page or closing of the book. “Fictional descriptions of torture and torment, committed by villains and savages, become real and regular in the narratives” (Wester, 40). It seems reductive to turn the relationship between the Anglo-American gothic and the African-American gothic into a chicken-or-egg argument. There are influences from Europe that influence the shape these American texts took<sup>4</sup>. But it is critical to acknowledge that the Anglo gothic is haunted. Haunted by genuine experiences of real people. This is easily seen in Poe, Melville, Hawthorne, etc. This acknowledgement seems a safeguard from a simplistic reading of the gothic as it ap-

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<sup>4</sup> It is important to note, though, that it has been argued that even the English gothic (e.g. *Frankenstein*) was influenced by enslavement as well (see, Malchow, H. L. *Gothic Images of Race in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, and Wester, *African American Gothic: Screams from Shadowed Places*, ch. 1).

pears in the narratives of the enslaved. They were not desperate to manufacture or fabricate a gothic motif in order to motivate the comprehension of their experience as gothic. On the contrary, it was their experience that was by its very nature horrific. Any endeavor to articulate this experience, to give voice to the unspeakable, would draw the reader's attention to a gothic world.

Even if the experience of the enslaved preceded the Anglo gothic temporally, graphically (, and experientially?), to have these experiences conveyed in a cast similar to a familiar genre still presented problems. For instance, this familiarity still "... had the potential to dematerialize those horrors by turning an historical reality into a imaginative effect" (Goddu, 2014, p. 73). It is important to remember the context in which this is happening. It was through this form of fiction, Morrison argues, that America (especially the 'new' white man) was trying to work out its own identity. Thus, if the enslaved were not careful, their narratives could be reduced to another form of object lesson for this audience. These gothic tropes and themes were malleable after all. They had even been deployed in proslavery attempts to make sense of their own horrors of being overthrown by the slaves (cf. Poe's, "Black Cat"). Insurrections like those inspired by figures like Nat Turner were gothicized to make a certain thing clear—only the docile slave was safe (Wester, 2012, p. 19). This demonization, alongside the identification of 'blackness' with 'darkness' and thus the source of dread, problematized any use of the gothic for anything other than to establish the moral claim that 'white(ness)'—which had come to be understood as what was represented by 'light'—should prevail. This had a subsequent association. "Whether through coding monsters as dark or through depictions of rebellious slaves as bloodthirsty fiends, the Gothic, in demonizing blackness," Goddu (2014) argues, "also dehumanized the slave" (p. 73). While I do not deny this was the case, I highlight that it was the case, because it was the desired case. It is un-

clear to me how it could hold true that the ‘reality’ of the slaves’ moral degradation, and thus necessary bondage, was made clear through the gothicization of their agency *and* the gothic experiences of the enslaved were somehow fictionalized. How can the gothic both make something real and fictionalize that same thing—i.e. enslavement? How could it departicularize or dehistoricize the specific experience of an enslaved writer, while, at the same time, particularize or concretize the portrayal of a slave by someone who did not have that experience? These questions are complex, and to explore them may push beyond the intention of this chapter, but they are questions I think should be allowed to breathe here, albeit briefly. They seem to suggest an important consideration about the reception of the gothic. There was a *desired* affect that drove, I submit, its reception. At the end of the day, the ‘darkness’—that which impeded the progress of the dream—could never come to represent the subjects of that dream.

Another issue that arises with the expression and reception of the testimony of the enslaved is the problem of empathy. Saidiya Hartman (1997) argues, “At issue here is the precariousness of empathy and the uncertain line between witness and spectator” (p. 4). This makes empathy, especially when confronted with the testimony of the enslaved, something that cannot just be blindly trusted. And yet, this testimony seems to be a response of an unavoidable demand to bear witness to the brutal nature of experience. Spectacle is a driving force in the gothic, and this is no less true in enslavement. But, enslavement is also built on a desire to place that spectacle in the background—a seeming contradiction—in/for the eyes of the brutalizer. Or, at least, the goal is to reconstruct the brutality making it necessary. Morrison referred to this as the ‘romanticization’ of enslavement. This happened both in the world and in the text. Thus, if empathy arose from concern for the person being unjustly treated, the slave presented a slippery target.

The intention was for the violence visited on the slave to become part and parcel with the world, making it the status quo. A commitment to this status quo, Morrison (2017) argues, demanded its “divorce from moral judgment” (p. 8). This displaced the culpability onto the slave. They must deserve this violence. Morrison (2017) argues that this created a mentality within the enslavers, and their sympathizers, that was, in itself, “gothic” (p. 30). How, then, could an enslaved person write about their gothic experience in a way that could/would penetrate an already gothic mind-set? To present the brutal scene to a medium that already has mechanisms in place to assimilate the violence so that it would ‘make sense’ was the peculiar, and seemingly insurmountable, challenge faced by these enslaved (and formerly enslaved) writers.

Hartman also raised another potential problem with empathy: there is an easy slide into a narcissistic identification with its object. According to Hartman many conclude that identification with the object precedes the capacity (or willingness?) to empathize with that object. There is a danger with identification however. The ‘I’ can easily take the place of the object (in the mind’s eye). This slide toward substitution, Hartman argues, transcends the motives of the reader. It reveals the “precariousness of empathy and the thin line between witness and spectator” (Hartman, 1997, p. 19). It can happen to the individual who is truly trying to understand the object of suffering. But it limits what can be understood. If it takes identification to empathize, and identification is placing oneself in the position of knowing how it feels (because they must be in that position in order to feel), the identifier can easily take the (imagined) place of the object. The hopeful empathizer becomes a “proxy” to the suffering object; acknowledgement of the pain cannot exceed the imagination. The problem is that, if to identify is to empathize, this process demands that the object all but slip from the empathizers grasp. This, ac-



according to Hartman, is empathy's 'double-edgedness': "... in making the other's suffering one's own, this suffering is occluded by the other's obliteration" (Hartman, 1997, p. 19). It is important to not that the object identified is *imagined*—it is not the actual person. Thus, empathy demands that this remain the case, this person can not come to the identifier's view; this would threaten the empathy (and any moral value drawn from one's sense that they have empathized). In order for empathy to be maintained, on these terms, the "space of the other" must be reduced (and even hedged/entombed) and the "self" put in its place (Hartman, 1997, p. 9-20). In the face of empathy's ambivalence Hartman takes a specific route in, *Scenes of Subjection*. Instead of focusing on the spectacle that is brutality, she focuses on "those scenes in which terror can hardly be discerned" (Hartman, 4). But her argument is not to suggest terror is not in these scenes, even though its discernibility is usually ignored or mitigated by onlookers. Instead she is challenging the proposed sense of a desire to empathize by holding up this desire's need for spectacle. She attempts to "[defamiliarize] the familiar" with the hope of "[illuminating] the terror of the mundane and quotidian rather than exploit the shocking spectacle" (Hartman, 1997, p. 4). Thus, it seems like Hartman is trying to get the reader to realize that terror hides in unfamiliar places, not merely in the spectacular. In actuality, this may be a sense of terror/horror—that it lurks and cannot be relegated to the spectacular. This challenges any attempts to hide the horror in the spectacular—that which is often treated as anomalous, out of the ordinary, or extraordinary. This allows one to grapple with this 'darkness' as something outside of them. It is a shame that this object of empathy was overcome by this darkness, but there is more light than dark. It is the light that is familiar. By exploding this artificial division, by showing the terror in the familiar, there is a chance the view can come to take on a view of things that is not contrived. The 'familiar' is a

product of the same imagination driving empathy, but Hartman seeks to show that the threat lurks even in the ‘familiar’. This is a gothic notion, at least how the gothic appeared in narratives like *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Haslam (2016) argues, “Jacobs uses the gothic to figure, but not cover over, the actual violence and traumas of slavery ...” (p. 55). Jacobs, like Hartman, showed how the mundane provided no protection for the enslaved. Monsters lurked in the house and out in the field. She testified that she finally found solace from the monster in the swamp and garret (even though they had their corresponding miseries).

To conclude this section, I argue that it may be wrong-footed to ask about the effectiveness of the gothic as used by the enslaved because the reception of it, for many white Americans, was rigged from the start. Goddu argues that the answer(s) to this question of effectiveness “... are never uniform and must be considered one text at a time” (Goddu, 2014, p. 74). This may be true but, I submit, this question cannot be properly engaged without keep at the center of the evaluation the environment out of which these testimonies emerged and were received. The two problems mentioned above—the fictionalization/departicularization of their (historical) testimony and the potential shortcomings of empathy—have something in common: the white American reader. There was a dissonance that reader was confronted with, a dissonance that was often self-inflicted and willful. America was being held together by a dream. This dream promised inevitable progress under certain terms. Some of these terms involved the persistent subjugation of the individuals the authors of these narratives represented. One could not afford to accept their framing of the world (as gothic) and hold on to their place as dreamers in “a land of light and affirmation” (Fiedler, 1960, p. xxiv). This reveals an interesting tension. Morrison wonders how a nation so convinced of its relationship to light and progress could produce a national literature

that is largely so dark. Goddu intensifies this pondering when arguing that it is actually the Anglo-gothic that constructs its literary worlds through materials borrowed from the experience of the enslaved. “The cruelties of slavery as well as the fear of slave revolt create the Gothic’s strange brew of fear, retribution, and resistance” (Goddu, 2014, p. 72). So, it makes sense to be concerned with the dehistoricizing of these experiences within these texts. However, the enslaved were drawing from their own lived experiences, experiences that did not need to be ‘made up’ into a gothic/horrific frame. Richard Wright argues about black writing in the post-emancipation world (even though I take this to be just as true for those writing in the antebellum world),

But we do have in the Negro the embodiment of a past tragic enough to appease the spiritual hunger of even a [Henry] James; and we have in the oppression of the Negro a shadow athwart our national life dense and heavy enough to satisfy even the gloomy broodings of a Hawthorne. And if Poe were alive, he would not have to invent horror; horror would invent him’ (Wright, , emphasis added).

The reason these gothic authors would have to be invented is because the horrific world demands them. This is why the relation of their (mundane) experience was enough for the enslaved and formerly enslaved writers. If the worlds constructed by Poe, James, and Hawthorne were gothic, the lives out of which many of these themes drew inspiration from must be as well. I take the enslaved to be aware of the potential pitfalls in which the reception of their narrative could fall.

“While aware that the Gothic could cut both ways,” Weinauer (2017) argues, “... the narratives of Douglass, Jacobs, and others nevertheless draw readily and in many respects *subversively* on its tropes” (p. 93). To be clear, it is not clear to me if the subversive adoption was intentionally carried out by the writer (e.g. taking Poe and reworking him), or if it was subversive because it was realized in a real experience, as opposed to largely a product of the imagination. It seems clear that if Poe’s black cat wrote his story from his perspective it would subvert the short story

as conveyed to the reader through the perspective of the nameless narrator. Would Pluto have to construct his experience at the whims, affections(?), and ‘love’(?) of the narrator? Or would it be enough to explain what life in that house was like? If the reader took Pluto’s account, not merely empathizing with him, would it be understandable why he scratched his narrator that day? The black writers of these gothic texts who “... write back to it, and revise it [illustrate] an awareness of its perils and a will to (re)possess it and neutralize its dangers, *relocating the sense of horror in the very issues of ownership and (dis)possession* at play in the process of writing the gothic” (Wester, 2012, p. 28). They are not unaware, I believe, of how their texts could be misappropriated. But this was no less true of their lives. It seems like the risk of testifying was worth it, their lives demanded it. Thus, the tension raised by these potential problems never goes away. This is the peril of black life in this nation. For this reason I make no attempts to resolve it. It is important to acknowledge, but the presence of the problems, I submit, does not diminish the reality, or potential effectiveness, of the presence of gothic tropes and themes within these narratives. By revealing they all lived—enslaved and enslavers alike—in a gothic world, one veiled/covered over by a mass dream, a dream that drew life from the brutal treatment, oppression and death of the former, they hoped to “reverse [the] gaze at their masters” (Wester, 2012, p. 50). This had to potential to turn a mirror back on the white imagination and the world it was constructing (a construction that included images of the enslaved). In contrast, the white presence in these narratives was not the result of mere construction. The grasping at ownership of the black body, for instance, marked this presence as horrific. This approach emerged out of the dream itself and produced “horrific realities for black subjects” (Wester, 2019, p. 54). If Morrison is correct that “the subject of the dream is the dreamer,” (Morrison, 1995, p. 17) then the gothic lens of these texts

could possibly turn the gaze back on the dream itself. To enter the gothic world of these black authors was to potentially be exposed to the perspective of a new subjectivity. The black gothic seems to be arguing that the anxiety and horror that haunted the white imagination had its source in the dreams it dreamt, and that new dreams may be needed for the darkness to subside. Maybe through this reversal the darkness could be dispelled and the world changed.

On paper, the world did change. America would experience a devastatingly horrific war, with one major result being the legal emancipation of the formerly enslaved. Although it seems like the emancipation of the enslaved in the 1860s should have marked the end of the usefulness of the gothic as a lens to make sense of the experience of blacks in America (their bondage and dispossession which was a source of horror was, after all, declared legally over), black writers continued to see an ongoing correspondence between the gothic (its tropes and themes) and their lived experience in America. In other words, their past seemed to continue to haunt them and the nation. The gothic environment of violence (darkness?) that pervaded their world prior to the Civil War remained after their legal emancipation. As long as this environment remained, the gothic remained a reflection of it, and a useful means of reflecting on it. Reading these postbellum texts against their predecessors, Wester notes that slavery remained a “living specter” which hovered over the texts of these black authors (Wester, 2012, p. 68). She identifies that this haunted turn to the gothic by these later black writers is exemplified in such authors as W.E.B. Du Bois, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, and Ann Petry. While some mention is made of Ida B. Wells-Barnett by Wester, this project seeks to expand on her contribution to this postbellum engagement with the gothic. Gothic tropes and themes can be seen throughout Wells-Barnett’s corpus, especially her analysis of the rampant violence against black people. Gothic tropes were par-

ticularly useful, she seems to be telling us, in shining a ‘light’ on America’s turn to the practice of lynching which only escalated from the late 19th through the 20th centuries. Wells suspected in, *Southern Horrors*, that because of the dogged commitment of the American south to the idea that ‘the white man must and will rule,’ “There is little difference between the Ante-bellum South and the new South” (Wells, 2014a, p. 76). If it is the case that the gothic was a useful literary mode for expressing the lived experience of the enslaved, it stands to reason that, if the ‘new’ South was similarly gothic in character, this lens did not lose its salience for a writer like Wells. The next section, then, reads Wells within this tradition of black writers. To demonstrate this I will first examine Wells’s early literary influences. I will then turn to her lived experience and how that altered her writing career by ‘rudely awakening’ her to the reality of black peoples’s general vulnerability to brutal violence. I will then briefly explore how these tropes appear in her early writing, paying particular focus to *Southern Horrors*, written in 1892, and, *Red Record*, written in 1895. I will conclude by arguing that the gothic does not appear coincidentally, but emerged for the same reason it did in the writings of her forebears.

#### IV

*Don’t tell a lie on me/I won’t tell the truth ‘bout you.* (Kendrick Lamar)

As discussed earlier in this chapter, one of the major themes of the American gothic was the battle between ‘darkness’ and ‘light’. The slave narratives, as demonstrated in Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass, invert what was usually expected in the formulation of this battle through the relation of their experiences within the throes of the system of enslavement. This

brings this battle into a sharper relief than their Anglo-American counterparts. Through these attempts to ‘speak the unspeakable’ their narratives had the potential to reveal those parts of the white consciousness to the surface that were generally inaccessible, or repressed. The narratives and myths that were at the foundation of the ongoing development of this nation (e.g. that it was civilized and naturally progressing toward greater and greater light) were dependent on this inaccessibility/repression. In this section I position Wells-Barnett as a continuation of this tradition of revelation. She also exposed the nature of the gothic experience imposed on black people in this nation, an imposition that continued after the legal emancipation of black people. Through her chronicling of the struggle between black life and systematic violence and oppression (e.g. lynching) revealed that America remained a haunted nation regardless of what it was telling itself, and the ‘civilized’ world, about itself. I will begin this section by reviewing her early writing career. Her writing, I argue, was heavily impacted by what she read in her youth. She is usually classified as a journalist; while I do not argue with this classification, I argue that examining Wells’s literary background and influences will broaden how one understands the kind of writer she was—the kind of writing she brought to journalism in other words. For instance, she did not begin with journalistic writing, but originally set out to be a novelist. This intention, however, was disrupted by real world events that altered her writing career. I argue that while the form of her writing may have shifted dramatically, the nature of her writing did not change. In other words, what she was trying to pursue through her writing remained consistent. This consistency, I argue, demanded that the gothic remain a critical part of her reflections that she put to paper. Although the form does shift in important ways, the attempt will be made to show that reading her as a gothic writer—even if not one in the fullest sense, nevertheless as a writer who could not

avoid grappling with the gothic as she tried to address black life in America at the time. I demonstrate this by briefly surveying the appearance of several of these gothic tropes that emerge in *Southern Horrors*, her first major work, and continue to appear in her writing throughout the rest of the nineteenth century.

Paula Giddings, in her biography of Ida B. Wells-Barnett's life, *A Sword Among Lions*, notes that in 1886 it was "predicted that the 'Great American Novel' would be written by a black woman because of her unique experiences and perspective" (Giddings, 2009, p. 104-105). She speculates that this was something Ida B. Wells would have been aware of and had taken to heart. Yet, during this same period her confidence in her writing ebbed and flowed. She had already begun her publishing career having written several articles. However, during this same time she recorded in her diary apprehensions regarding her writing and its effectiveness,

I think sometimes that I can write a readable article and then again I wonder how I could have been so mistaken in myself. A 'glance at all my 'brilliant?' productions pull on my understanding, they all savor of dreary sameness, however varied the subject, and the style is monotonous. I find a paucity of ideas that makes it a labor to write freely and yet—what is it that keeps urging me to write notwithstanding all (Wells as cited in Decosta-Willis, 1995, p. 100)?

This tension is fascinating. She felt compelled to write and yet once finished she worried the writing was a deficient or inadequate expression of what compelled her. "But," Giddings notes, "if she was insecure about her abilities to render the period's florid, classic-inspired phrases, she had confidence in her powers of observation and the kind of writing that the community as a whole both wanted and needed" (Giddings, 2009, p. 76). Wells was maturing as a writer during a time in this nation when the debate raged about the legitimacy of the enslavement of black people, and their place in the country after their legal emancipation. Some understood the fate of this country at stake in the heart of these debates. Thus, despite her misgivings, if Giddings is right,



this was a moment where someone with Wells's perceptiveness—her “powers of observation”—were desperately needed.

Wells accepted this summons to addressing this controversy. It can be argued that this was the case because she found herself thrown into the fray experientially. For instance, Wells was forcibly, and illegally, removed from a train after refusing to move to the smoking car despite having bought a first class ticket. After suing the train company, initially winning her claim in court, the verdict was overthrown in a court of appeals, all she was left with covering the court fees. This, I argue, began her disillusionment with the world she found herself in. The challenge to her presumed place in the world (as displayed by her sense of security in her purchased ticket), and the fact that she could find no ultimate recourse in the face of this affront, deeply frustrated her. Reflecting on the verdict in her diary Wells laments,

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, and just now, if it were possible, would gather my race in my arms and fly away with them (Wells as cited in Decosta, 1995, p. 140-141).

Wells did not consider this violation merely a personal one. Instead, she saw her case wrapped up in the larger struggle of her people and their place in this country. What could be done? She ends this reflection in her diary with a prayer: “O God, is there no redress, no peace, no justice in this land for us? Thou hast always fought the battles of the weak and oppressed. Come to my aid at this moment and teach me what to do, for I am sorely, bitterly disappointed” (Wells as cited in Decosta, 1995, p. 141, emphasis added). The answer to this prayer came through the employment of her pen.

The kind of writer Wells would become was heavily influenced by her early education. By her account, her education was limited before she became a teacher in the early 1880s. For reasons that are not made completely clear Wells was “forced” to leave her university training at Rust College before she was able to complete her secondary school degree (Decosta-Willis, 1995, p. 50). Wells always regretted this and remained troubled by an acute consciousness of “the gaps in her educational training” for many years (Decosta-Willis, 1995, p. 50). In her autobiography she confessed that her preparation for teaching did not include ‘normal training’ (e.g. algebra, natural philosophy). “Although I had made a reputation in school for thoroughness and discipline in the primary grades,” she recounts, “I was never promoted above the fourth grade in all my years as a teacher” (Wells-Barnett, 1970, p. 31). Despite this lack of formal education she maintained a vested interest in reading; in her autobiography Wells-Barnett reminisces how she was a “voracious reader,” reading “all the fiction in the Sunday school library and in Rust College” (Wells, 1970, p. 21). While teaching in Holly Springs, reading remained her main “diversion” to pass the time. “I used to sit before the blazing wood fire,” she recalls, “with a book in my lap during the long winter evenings and read by firelight” (Wells, 1970, p. 21). She also made sure to note what she read during this period. She read the Bible completely, much of Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, Louisa May Alcott, and Charlotte Brontë<sup>5</sup>. It is important to note the degree to which her early reading was influenced by the gothic. It is also noteworthy that she ob-

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<sup>5</sup> For the purposes of this chapter I want to flag here that the latter three are largely considered gothic writers. For Dickens, for instance, see Eleanor Salotto, *Gothic Returns in Collins, Dickens, Zola, and Hitchcock*, Ian Duncan, *Modern Romance*, and *Transformations of the Novel*, James M. Keech, “The Survival of the Gothic Response,” and R.D. McMaster, “Dickens and the Horrific.” For Alcott, see Elizabeth Lennox Keyser, “Louisa May Alcott: Contradictions and Continuities,” Sarah Elbert, *Louisa May Alcott on Race, Sex, and Slavery*, Monika Elbert and Bridget M. Marshall, *Transnational Gothic Literary and Social Exchanges in the Long Nineteenth Century*. For Brontë, see Emily Rena-Dozier, “Gothic Criticisms: ‘Wuthering Heights’ and Nineteenth-Century Literary History,” Donna Heiland, *Gothic and Gender: An Introduction*, Christina Crosby, “Charlotte Brontë’s Haunted Text,” Alexandra Warwick, “Victorian Gothic,” and Alison Milbank, “Gothic Femininities,” (*The Routledge Companion to Gothic*). This is not an exhaustive list.

serves that before leaving for Memphis to pursue better teaching opportunities she “never read a Negro book or anything about Negroes” (Wells, 1970, p. 22). Thus, the gothic she was exposed to at this stage in her life was wholly the Anglo-American gothic—and all its constructions, thematizations, and narratives. Once arriving in Memphis she did not abandon her reading habits. The corpus she continued to devour included authors associated with the Anglo-American gothic (e.g. Albion W. Tourgee and Sir Walter Scott). Wells notes in her diary that she was particularly drawn to Tourgee’s, *Bricks without Straw*, both because of its content—the Reconstruction “era of Negro freedom” and its relationship to American history—and its method. She noted that Tourgee was “actuated by a noble purpose and tells some startling truths” (see Decosta-Willis, 1995, p. 51-52). An examination of the relationship between history, the gothic, ‘truth’, and race relations in America would be found throughout Wells-Barnett’s writing career. Reconstruction was an important phase of American history through which she explored this relationship. For instance, in the introduction of her autobiography Wells declares one of the main purposes in writing it,

It is therefore for the young people who have so little of our race’s history recorded that I am for the first time in my life writing about myself. I am all the more constrained to do this because there is such a lack of authentic race history of Reconstruction times written by the Negro himself. . . . because our youth are entitled to the facts of race history which only the participants can give, I am thus led to set forth the facts contained in this volume which I dedicate to them” (Wells, 1970, p. 4-5).

This suggests that Wells understood there to be a critical link between the personal and the political, a reflection she records looking back attempting to make sense of her overall career. Wells-Barnett is arguing, then, that these forces—the gothic, history, race (and racialized violence), etc.—converge, not ‘out there,’ but in her life. Her experience, in other words, was a snapshot of the

larger political picture. The ‘facts’ of the historical moment were on display in (could be seen in/through) Wells’s life, a display she felt compelled to record. In other words, it will be argued, her writing, like the gothic genre, was ‘haunted’ by America’s history<sup>6</sup>. There was a clear link, then, between Wells’s early reading materials and the development of her own writing. Paula Giddings (2009) argues that, in this early stage, Wells “believed she needed such guidance to attain the ‘literary graces’ she yearned for and which she measured against the books she was reading” (p. 88). There is evidence she learned, or at least attempted, to implement these ‘literary graces’ throughout her writing career.

Inspired by much of her early reading, I argue, Wells attempted to write a novel. According to Giddings, Wells held the belief that “the creative process was liberating, both for herself and for society at large” (Giddings, 2009, p. 87). For instance, she expressed the belief that Harriet Beecher Stowe’s, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, had an effect, albeit indirect, on bringing an end to slavery. The desire to make a similar kind of impact may have been what motivated her attempt to develop a novel. She made this attempt while working through the legal ordeal surrounding her treatment on the train (1886/1887). There were two different attempts made—one a solo attempt and one co-authored with a friend named Charles Morris, a fellow journalist from Louisville (Decosta-Willis, 1995, p. 53, see also Bay, 2009, p. 70-71 and Giddings, 2009, p. 104). Morris encouraged her that if she were able to write a novel that was “classical, representative and standard” it would gain her honor and respect (Decosta-Willis, 1995, p. 35). Wells, however, doubted herself. She felt she lacked the knowledge and/or capacity to write a book like the one

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<sup>6</sup> The haunted-ness of the Anglo-American gothic was explored in an earlier section. The American gothic from its earliest stages was a method/means of self-reflection. On a personal and national level gothic literature revealed that the “final horrors . . . are neither gods nor demons, but intimate aspects of our own minds” (Fiedler, 1960, p. xxxiv, emphasis added). In this version of the gothic we see attempts to explore the ‘national mind’, albeit these times are not always marked with self-awareness.

she was being encouraged to write. She trembled, “The stupendous idea of writing a work of fiction causes me to smile in derision of myself at daring to dream of such a thing. . .” (Decosta-Willis, 1995, p. 35-36)<sup>7</sup>. Nevertheless, she found Morris’s confidence encouraging and continued to push ahead with the novel’s development. The development made it as far as a sketch of the plot, and makes mention of the hopeful character development before record of it disappears from her diary. In a diary entry later that same year [9/1/1886] she argued that she was beginning to get a handle on how to stitch together the elements of a story. Yet, she still continued to struggle with the writing. “I can see and portray in my mind,” she reflected, “all the elements of a good story but when I attempt to put it on paper my thoughts dissolve into nothingness” (cited in Decosta-Willis, 1995, p. 101). She was able, according to her diary, to get as far as the development of the protagonist of her story—a heroine. Wells promised earlier in her journal [1/26/1886] that she would outline this heroine in a future entry, but, for reasons that are unclear, never got around to it (see Decosta-Willis, 1995, p. 36). While she struggled with writing, Morris mailed her an outline of the novel they were co-writing. However, she was displeased with its progress. After receiving the outline she recorded in her journal [9/4/1886], “. . . I am not much attracted—it is too much on the style of other novels—rather sensational” (Wells as cited in Decosta-Willis, 1995, p. 101). Even though she was weary of the propensity of these overly sensational accounts

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<sup>7</sup> It is interesting that she, according to her diary, had not yet connected her reading material as potential source material for the novel. I am trying to address the fact that the writing of the novel points toward the kind of things she would write about when she makes the more full turn toward journalism. The similarity in themes between the gothic and her own writing in her first major text (*Southern Horrors*)—which will attempt to demonstrate these connections—will be explored in the next chapter.

to departicularize or dehistoricize the accuracy of the characters, especially female characters<sup>8</sup>, it seems reasonable to speculate that this novel would have had some gothic influence, or at least been in conversation with gothic literature.

While there is no definitive answer regarding what happened to the novel, there are possible reasons. Wells was developing these texts around the same time she was experiencing stagnation in relation to her career prospects. She reached a ceiling in respect to teaching due to her own educational limitations and her use of her pen to critique Memphis city schools<sup>9</sup>. It was here she turned to journalism. Mia Bay notes that this turn toward journalism, away from novels, was because "... fiction must have seemed even more unlikely than journalism to offer her a career path" (Bay, 2009, p. 71). While the odds were slim for any success for a black woman writer during this period, they were even slimmer for a black woman who wanted to write fiction at the time. However, there may have been a deeper reason for this turn. Wells believed that "newspaper work" provided her "an outlet through which to express the real 'me'" (Wells, 1970, p. 31). From its earliest stages, then, Wells took there to be an intimate connection between writing and one's self. This connection seemed to be something she was aware of even while sketching out her novel. Bay argues that her "diary suggests that the novel she contemplated writing would have been all but true to life" (Bay, 2009, p. 71). This, she argues, becomes clearer when one

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<sup>8</sup> An example of this is seen in her critique of *Les Miserables* recorded in her diary [7/29/1887]: "It is a very touching thrilling story, but the description is somewhat tedious. It is like climbing mountains & crossing valleys to read some of it. But the hero is grand, a truly miserable old man and I cannot forgive his daughter for forgetting him. *I do not like his heroine—she is sweet, lovely and all that, but utterly without depth, or penetration—fit only for love, sunshine & flowers*" (Decosta-Willis, 1995, p. 151). Thus, any writing that would flatten the female characters would be one that Wells was committed to avoiding at the outset of the project. While this is not an inherent flaw of gothic writing, it is a pitfall that is often succumbed to by some gothic writers. It is important to remember also that it was through the utilization of gothic tropes and themes that writers like Jacobs were able to give the reader a glance of an interiority that, in her lived experience, there were active attempts to stamp out.

<sup>9</sup> see Wells, 1970, p. 35-37.

sees the stories Wells was recording in her diary that she stored for potential raw material for her novel. These true stories were iterations of the gothic world she found herself living in. However, she would come to determine that many of these plot points would be better articulated through journalistic mediums.

Two critical moments that deeply impacted Wells-Barnett, while she was still early in her journalistic career, happened in 1889. These were a major source of her shift from any attempts at fictional writing to a career in journalistic (non-fiction) writing. Both of these events also directed her attention to the particular issue of lynching, a target which set her on a new trajectory that would mold both her and her writing moving forward. The first was the lynching of Eliza Woods. Eliza was accused of poisoning the white woman who employed her. Without trial, or any such pretense, she was lynched. There were two pieces of “purely circumstantial” evidence offered to seal her culpability—(1) the dead woman’s body was found with arsenic in her stomach and (2) there was a box of rat poison found in Eliza’s house. Giddings notes, reviewing the language used in conveying this story in the papers at the time, notes Eliza was framed as a ‘black creature’ and ‘female devil’ who was guilty of ‘killing an esteemed Christian lady’ (Giddings, 2009, p. 117). In response to this horrific murder(?) a mob composed of at least a thousand people—which is said to include black men and women—arrived to lynch Eliza. She was taken out of the county jail by the mob, stripped naked, and hung there on the courthouse yard. To add insult to injury some from the mob took guns and shot many bullets into her already dead body. Eliza was left hanging there, exposed, for continued display. There were several elements of this ordeal that struck Wells-Barnett as “remarkable” (Giddings, 2009, p. 117). There was the gender of the victim of the lynching, the biracial composition of the lynch mob, and the way this lynch-

ing seemed to be a prelude to times that would only get darker. Shortly after Eliza's execution at the hands of the mob it was discovered that she was, in fact, innocent. Wells-Barnett took up her pen to write what she identified as a "dynamitic" response to this discovery. She tried to relay, on paper, the sense of indignation she had been carried to after reading an article that related such a "great outrage." When reflecting on her own rage-filled response she worried, "It may be unwise to express myself so strongly but I cannot help it & I know now if capital may not be made of it against me but I trust in God" (as cited in Decosta-Willis, 1995, p. 102). There are two important implications here. First, this is further evidence that Wells understood there to be an intimate relationship between writing and self. Her response to the lynching of Eliza was not a detached reflection on the event. And she suspected that the kind of ire demonstrated in the lynching could be turned on her as a response to her written reflection. This would be confirmed only a few years later when she found herself under threat of death and exiled for reporting on the lynching of Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell, and Will Stewart. The other implication can be found in the surrounding diary entries. The above entry comes just three days after an entry about her attempts to write 'good' stories—this reference to 'stories' I assume is in connection to the novel she was trying to work out—and it comes the same day she expressed frustration with the novel she was working on with her friend Charles Morris because she wondered if it was too 'sensational'. That same day, the gothic irrupted into her life, interrupting and complicating her work on her novel. This relationship between 'facts', the 'sensational', the horrific, and the 'truth' (as they related to lynching), would be something Wells would continue to work through as she wrote her larger tomes, *Southern Horrors* and *Red Record*.



The second major event of 1889 was her attendance of the meeting of the National Colored Press Association (NCPA). Of the many impressionable moments she experienced there the most important was a presentation given by John R. Mitchell. Mitchell was the vice president of the association at the time and was known to be one of the black press's most militant editors (Giddings, 2009, p. 153). He had already begun to use his pen to raise a voice against the growing tide of lynching and was in charge of the NCPA's 'Committee on Outrages'. A large part of his speech was dedicated to memorializing the victims of lynchings of the previous two years by recalling aloud their names—numbering more than 200. Giddings observes, "The poignant roll call made Ida envision not so much their manner of death as the ignominious shame and terror that accompanied it" (Giddings, 2009, p. 153). Wells recounted after hearing that speech,

Any one listening to the burning words and earnest delivery of John Mitchell, Jr., the man who has devoted himself to this particular phase of the 'Negro Question,' must feel some throes of indignation and bitter feeling rise within him. My eyes filled with tears and my heart with unspeakable pity, as I thought of The Richmond Planet's list of unfortunates who had met such a fearful fate. No requiem, save the night wind, had been sung over their dead bodies; no memorial service to bemoan their sad and horrible fate had before been held in their memory, and no record of the time and place of their taking off, save this, is extant; and like many a brave Union soldier their bodies lie in many an unknown and unhonored spot (Wells as cited in Penn, 1891, p. 186).

As a result of this wake Wells acquired the belief that the work of memorializing the victims of lynching was critical and expressed hope that it would continue and broaden. Someone would need to join Mitchell in this imperative. She expresses a worry that, without this work, many of their names would "die in the empty of a shadow" (noname, 2016). If their deaths become overshadowed, shrouded in darkness, forgotten, then there was a good chance the "ignominious shame and terror" associated with those deaths could fade or become concealed as well. The op-

portunity for Wells to take up this work arrived shortly after the meeting. She was approached by Taylor Nightingale who asked her to become editor of the *Memphis Free Speech & Highlight*. She would negotiate this offer into an equal partnership with Nightingale and J.L. Fleming becoming “the only black woman of record to be an editor in chief and part owner of a major city newspaper” (Giddings, 2009, p. 154). It was from this position that Wells was able to achieve a greater sense security regarding her burgeoning writing career. It also provided her greater opportunities to express the ‘real’ her. However, the gothic environment that haunted her forebears would continue to haunt Wells’s experience as well, a haunting that would reveal itself in her writing. Wells’s subsequent writing was largely absorbed with a direct confrontation with, and the task of naming, this specter.

Wells-Barnett’s engagement with, and utilization of, the gothic survived her transition from attempting to write a novel to a more journalistic approach. In order to demonstrate this I will briefly trace the appearance of a few of these gothic tropes as they appeared in her writings. This is not an exhaustive list of these appearances, but the goal is to show how the gothic functioned in Wells-Barnett’s corpus—as an attempt to invert the lens making more visible the fact that the world remained gothic after the legal emancipation of black people in this nation.

A major trope of the gothic, according to Eve Sedgwick, was that “wild and nocturnal landscapes” were a location where haunting and terror took place (Sedgwick, 1986, p. 9). Many lynchings took place at night in unpopulated areas (e.g. forests). This was true of the infamous lynching of Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell, and Will Stewart in Memphis in 1892. This lynching was a fundamental turning point that “changed the whole course” of the life and career of Wells (Wells, 1970, p. 47). I suspect that this event was one of the primary influences that sus-

tained Wells's transition to journalism. She recounts that this lynching was a "rude awakening" which, after inspiring her investigation of the true motivations and mechanisms of lynching, set her on path to a deeper understanding of its nature (and the nature of the myths/narratives used to justify it) (Wells, 2014c, 99). While lynchings are often depicted and recollected as spectacle lynchings in broad daylight, many happened in the still of the night. Moss, McDowell, and Stewart were kidnapped from a jail around 2/3 A.M., taken to a field, and shot to death. A major part of what made these executions so horrific was that they were committed by phantoms/specters—a 'faceless mob' of 'unknown parties'/'persons unknown.' And yet, in true gothic form, the accounts of these brutal executions were recorded (much like many of the 'found' documents that litter many gothic novels, e.g. Walpole's, *Castle of Otranto*, or Stoker's, *Dracula*). Many of the black community members read this lynching as a signal to arm themselves for the sake of protection (and to avenge the death of the three men), however they soon learned that this would be difficult to accomplish. Wells recounts, "... no house would sell a colored man a gun; the armory of Tennessee Rifles, our only colored military company, and of which McDowell was a member, was broken into by order of the Criminal Court judge, and its guns taken" (Wells, 2014c, p. 101). Thus, they found themselves surrounded by a faceless force and environment that provided them no sense of safety or security. Wells read this scene as gothic, one that induced a sense of horror for all of the black people in Memphis—this was the lesson. Wells summarizes,

I have no power to describe the feeling of horror that possessed every member of the race in Memphis when the truth dawned upon us that the protection of the law which we had so long enjoyed was no longer ours; all this had been destroyed in a night, and the barriers of the law had been thrown down, and the guardians of the public peace and confidence scoffed away into the shadows, and all authority given into the hands of the mob, and innocent men cut down as if they were brutes—

the first feeling was one of dismay, then intense indignation” (Wells, 2014c, p. 101).

Much of the horror arose from the fact that all the mechanisms of protection were “on the side of the mob and of lawlessness” (2014c, p. 102).

The horror intensified as Wells learned about the means through which this environment was justified. Black men were being framed through gothic means which demanded their brutal treatment. What was frightening was how flimsy the excuse was. This is a longer excerpt, but it captures the vertigo that seemed to be the inevitable result of trying to make sense of this world:

The lynching of three Negro scoundrels reported in our dispatches from Anniston, Ala., for a brutal outrage committed upon a white woman will be a text for much comment on “Southern barbarism” by Northern newspapers; but we fancy it will hardly prove effective for campaign purposes among intelligent people. The frequency of these lynchings calls attention to the frequency of the crimes which causes lynching. The “Southern barbarism” which deserves the serious attention of all people North and South, is the barbarism which preys upon weak and defenseless women. Nothing but the most prompt, speedy and extreme punishment can hold in check the horrible and bestial propensities of the Negro race. There is a strange similarity about a number of cases of this character which have lately occurred. ... In each case the crime was deliberately planned and perpetrated by several Negroes. They watched for an opportunity when the women were left without a protector. It was not a sudden yielding to a fit of passion, but the consummation of a devilish purpose which has been seeking and waiting for the opportunity. This feature of the crime not only makes it the most fiendishly brutal, but “it adds to the terror of the situation in the thinly settled country communities. No man can leave his family at night without the dread that some roving Negro ruffian is watching and waiting for this opportunity. The swift punishment which invariably follows these horrible crimes doubtless acts as a deterring effect upon the Negroes in that immediate neighborhood for a short time. But the lesson is not widely learned nor long remembered. Then such crimes, equally atrocious, have happened in quick succession, one in Tennessee, one in Arkansas, and one in Alabama. 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” (Wells, 2014a, p. 72).

Here we see the ‘wild’ and ‘nocturnal’ evoked as a means to portray the bestial nature of black men. Their desires for physical gratification, so it was claimed, outranked even desire to survive. It followed that it only made sense to deal with this dark and predatory element through brutal means. They had to protect their families after all. This justification allowed for these brutal executions to come out of the darkness and be committed in the broad day. Wells frets, “It has left the out-of-the-way-places where ignorance prevails, has thrown off the mask and with this new cry stalks in broad daylight in large cities, the centres of civilization, and is encouraged by the ‘leading citizens’ and the press” (Wells, 2014a, p. 71). It is important to note how Wells formulates this development as a hopeful counterweight to the portrayal of black men as bestial rapists. She challenges the mythologizing of black men as roving predator by pointing the reader to the horrors that have developed the audacity to no longer remain in the shadows<sup>10</sup>.

Two other important tropes that Wells-Barnett shares with the gothic text is the “charnel house” and the “madhouse” (Sedgwick, 1986, p. 9). The charnel house is an edifice (e.g. a habitation, a vault, etc.) in which dead bodies, or parts of dead bodies, are stored. The gothic imagery is clear. In Wells’s early analysis of lynching, in recording the “awful death-roll that Judge Lynch is calling every week,” she identifies the nation as a charnel house (Wells, 2014a, p. 58). As stated above the faithful identification of this roll was a crucial part of the fight for her. She did not

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<sup>10</sup> It was difficult to fit this within the flow of the paragraph. It is covering similar ground, but it effectively employs different gothic articulations and is another evidence of her commitment to the employment of these tropes and themes in the attempt to make sense of lynching:

The conditions which led to a memorial to Congress and a visit to the President of the United States by this body still obtain in this country since last you met, the outrages which prompted that memorial have increased; the lyncher has become so bold, *he has discarded his mask and the secrecy of night*, has left the out-of-the-way village and invaded the jails and penitentiaries of our largest cities, and hung and tortured his victims on the public streets. Not content with this, Arkansas furnishes the spectacle of a woman vindicating her honor (?) by setting fire to a living being, who, *as the flames lick his burning flesh, dies protesting his innocence to the crowd of 5000 that looked on and applauded the act in ghoulish glee* (Wells, 2014b, p. 89, emphasis added).

identify this “painful duty” as merely her own, but responsibility of everyone. The record was important because it revealed “far too serious is the condition of that civilized government in which the spirit of unrestrained outlawry constantly increases in violence, and casts its blight over a continually growing area of territory” (Wells, 2014d, p. 228). This spread ensured an intensification and emboldening of the brutal execution of black people. Wells, then, is placing her faith here in the light (exposure) to dispel the darkness. What is difficult to grasp, again, where the vertigo sets in, is the fact that these actions were being done in the light. Is this what made lynching such a gothic phenomenon?<sup>11</sup> This kind of delirium—where what should be certain is cloaked or shrouded in mystery—is a theme that runs throughout the Anglo-American gothic (e.g. Poe). These executions were so bold that they did not even need to ascribe to the excuses offered to justify them—a critical takeaway from Wells-Barnett’s investigation of the record in *Southern Horrors* and *A Red Record* (a conclusion that continues to haunt her work through the turn of the century). There was one story that continued to haunt Wells throughout her work—the terrifying execution of Eliza Woods. Originally recorded in her diary, and ‘dynamitically’ responded to initially, Wells-Barnett continued to bring her up as an example of the horrific atrocity that lynching was. For instance, she rehearses this brutality seven years after (“Lynch Law in All its Phases” (1893)) and again seven years after that (“The Negro’s Case in Equity” (1900)). She adds an interesting detail in these latter recountings. It was important to Wells, as recorded in her diary, that the facts exonerated Eliza, albeit too late (this was the source of her fury when she

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<sup>11</sup> It is worth noting that this gothic influence can be seen before cracking open any of the early Wells texts. Sedgwick claims that when wondering if a text is gothic in nature “... you can tell that from the title ...” (Sedgwick, 9). If this holds, some of Wells-Barnett’s texts can be identified as gothic in this way (e.g. *Southern Horrors*, *A Red Record*). And these titles, when read against other subsequent articles and pamphlets, seem to suggest that the gothic remained an important influence in her writing (e.g. “Lynch Law in America,” *Mob Rule in New Orleans*, *Lynch Law in Georgia*). The titles of the early texts, and their contents, seem to set the stage for the gothic environment that continued to hover through the end of the nineteenth century through the turn of the twentieth.

initially learned of the story). In the later retellings she ties the fate of Eliza to the husband's of the 'good Christian woman' who died. "That white woman's husband has since died," Wells-Barnett informs the reader, "in the insane asylum, a raving maniac, and his ravings have led to the conclusion that he, and not the cook, was the poisoner of his wife" (Wells, 2014g, p. 405). His story ended, similarly to characters like Poe's unnamed narrator in "Black Cat." Haunted by the facts, his life ended ignominiously.

The contemplation of power is also a critical theme that appears throughout the gothic. Weinstock (2020) defines power (within the gothic text) as "... who is allowed to do what based upon their subject position within a particular society at a specific moment in time" (p. 2). Within the Anglo-American gothic, Weinstock (2017) notes, "almost inevitably shade toward being allegories of human insufficiency as protagonists confront specific manifestations of broader cultural forces" (p. 6). The way these forces manifest does not consistently appear the same way in every text. Their appearances are structured and governed by "the configuration of the society that births it and which it reflects" (Weinstock, 2017, p. 3). Thus, the gothic here in America grapples with a darkness that reveals specific "pathological levels of American history" (Stankovic, 2021, p. 110). One of the metaphorical tropes through which power is contemplated, and negotiated, is the distressed heroines desperately trying to avoid consumption by the gothic villain. This symbol has often functioned as a means to deal with the horrors of miscegenation. Crow argues, "A core Southern nightmare has been the pollution of white bloodlines, most commonly through race mixing ..." (Crow, 2017, p. 152). The alleged fear is the regression of these bloodlines, and the individuals and families that are grounded in them. The Anglo-American gothic emerged at the same time as this fear was gaining real momentum. The question of the management of these

bloodlines runs concurrently with the management of the enslaved. Because convergence remained a dangerous possibility, there were dogged attempts to keep things separated. Thus, Edwards argues, “ancestral knowledge and proof of pure bloodlines was an anxious necessity” (Edwards, 2003, p. xxv). Within the American gothic the specter of enslavement, general apprehensions regarding race, and the inability to keep these races distinct all meet—and it is this confluence that separates it from other iterations of the gothic (Weinstock, 2020, p. 9). This gothic expresses the fears that emerge out of this confluence. The white damsel becomes an important figure, both textually and in the ‘real’ world, through which the relationship of these anxieties is explored. Her dangers, then, did not remain on the text alone. Actually, she rarely could find protection in the textual world. There was more of an opportunity in the ‘real’ world. The ‘new’ white man staked his credibility in his ability to do so. Wells’s investigation of lynching revealed that the myth of the necessity to protect her that provided the most effective veil for the cruel oppression of black people in America.

Attention is often focused on Wells’s indictment of the thread-bare lie and how this exposed the myth. Thus, they focus on how the lie effected—and continues to effect—black men. However, one cannot fully grapple with, or hope to dispel, the American gothic darkness through this one-tiered approach. This was not Wells’s method. Like Jacobs, Wells identified how the myth affected black women as well. Not only were they also lynched, alongside black children and men, but the lie also entombed them. Angela Davis notes that the myth of the propensity of sexual abuse by black men toward white women—the distressed damsel—was intimately connected to, and supported by, what she called, the ‘historical knot.’ This knot, she argues, inextricably tied black women and black men together in one common mythological predicament. In



other words, Davis claims, "... the mythical rapist implies the mythical whore" (Davis, 1983, p. 480). The myth demanded the logical conclusion that, if the black man possessed (or were possessed by) an insatiable sex drive, there must be an equivalent sex drive controlling the black woman. Thus, the myth worked to justify both the general brutalization of black men and the continued abuse of black women. Wells's keen awareness of this knotted-ness is apparent in her early lynching analysis. For instance, she reveals how the gothic mythologizing being imposed on black women and men entombed them in such a way that neither could escape its implications. While it justified the practice of lynching (and other racialized violences) under the pretense of this being the only means of keeping the insatiable sexual hunger of black men at bay. And, again, it was powerful enough to mask the overwhelming accusations that brought black death that had nothing to do with this pretension. This knot also basically muted any suggestion of sexual abuse perpetrated on black women. Throughout *Southern Horrors* Wells draws attention to the latter (without losing sight of the former). Within the context of chronicling brutal lynchings which were justified by the myth, Wells inserts stories that call into question the veracity of that concern, all centering on the sexual abuse of black women. For instance, Wells submits,

Last winter in Baltimore, Md., three white ruffians assaulted a Miss Camphor, a young Afro-American girl, while out walking with a young man of her own race. They held her escort and outraged the girl. It was a deed dastardly enough to arouse Southern blood which gives its horror of rape as excuse for lawlessness, but she was an Afro-American. The case went to the courts an Afro-American lawyer defended the men and they were acquitted (Wells, 2014a, p. 67).

This is one of several accounts which raise critical questions. These moments of atrocity were to anomalous (or out of the 'ordinary'). Instead they were a relic of a not so old past. "Such relationships between white men and colored women were notorious," Wells argues, "and had been

as long as the two races had lived together in the South” (Wells, 1970, p. 69). Also, she notices, the evidence for this is available. Even if the ‘record’ was not faithful in chronicling this, there were many living and breathing in the South carrying the evidence in their body, or better put, they were the evidence. Wells refers to these individuals as ‘mulattoes,’ ‘quadroons,’ and ‘octoroons.’ These individuals challenged the veracity of the purported fear of miscegenation/blending among the races. This intermingling, Wells argues, was a tale as old as the proximity of the two races. Pointing to the slave narratives as evidence of this, Wells notes that white fathers have been confronted with the task of figuring out what to do with these offspring for centuries. Things in postbellum America, however, had taken a darker turn. One problem was that now that the economic interests in black life had largely vanished, many of these individuals were now generally disposable. But, interestingly enough, the side of the coin suggesting the hyper-sexualization of the black woman could be found on both sides of legalized emancipation. According to Wells (2014d), the myth of the insatiable desire of the black man was a new thing—crafted in order to justify the continued oppression of the newly ‘freed’. However, in contrast, Wells argues, “I found that this rape of helpless Negro girls and women, which began in slavery days, still continued without let or hindrance, check or reproof from church, state, or press until there had been created this race within a race—and all designated by the inclusive term of ‘colored’” (Wells, 1970, p. 70). It is worth noting that Wells did not think that all of these pursuits were pernicious or ill-intentioned. Some of these were the results of a genuine expression of love. Nonetheless, this was something unfathomable when considering the same possibilities between black men and white women. Through drawing notice to the inextricable tie between the myths surrounding black sexuality, and the way it attempted to bury their social/political possi-

bilities—often resulting in literal death, Wells inverts the standard gothic lens. Wells challenges her reader to divorce the textual depiction of the distressed damsel from their interpretation of the lynching site. She does not condemn the white woman, or dismiss that she may in fact be in peril in the way this gothic world is structured. However, that danger is not coming from the source the myth is proposing. There are real mechanisms that have a bearing on the potential limitation(s) of her agency (e.g. she does not have the freedom to invite the affections of a black man without harassment). But, Wells seems to be suggesting, the call is coming from in the house. This is a familiar gothic trope as well. Ultimately, Wells’s exploration of the relationships—fabricated, coerced, or freely chosen—between black women and black men (and their mythological counterparts), white women and white men (and their mythological counterparts), and other possible connections problematizes the standard gothic lens. A lens that fed, and at times even justified, the horrific and brutal status quo.

One of the central figures of the gothic is the monster, and these figures hold an important role in Wells-Barnett’s analysis of lynching. Monsters, which can come in many different forms, carry a “mark of horror”. They are a reflection of the cultures in which they appear, which is why their appearances vary (Weinstock, 2020, p. 1). Thus, the monster appears as “... an embodiment of a certain cultural moment—of a time, a feeling, and a place” (Cohen, 1996, p. 4). According to this view of monsters, all of the culture’s horrors, worries, unease, speculations and desires collide in the monster. These are the source of the monster’s life, and, in turn, the monster animates them and gives them visibility through its appearing. Because of the monster’s constitution—its cultural elements which constitute it—suggest that the monster is a stand in for, or a sign of, the culture in (or out of) which it appears. For this reason, the monster exists “only to be

read” (Cohen, 1996, p. 4). Cohen uses the metaphor of a (hiero)glyph, signs/symbols that can only be read (properly) with the right interpreter (a hierophant). Any glyphs can read, but only certain interpreters can convey the real understanding of the glyph. Weinstock argues, “Monsters from this perspective remain, as they have been for millennia, texts in need of interpretation” (Weinstock, 2020, p. 26). Getting the correct reading is critical because these glyphs embody messages/narratives that have something to say regarding, and to, their cultures. But, because the origin stories of the monster can vary, it is dangerous to import an interpretation from another monster’s appearing. This method runs the risk of misapplication, and this can have detrimental effects on the understanding of the culture that brought about its existence. This is true of American monsters. Which is why, Poole argues, “American history can best be understood through America’s monster” (Poole, 2011, 69-70). In order to understand these monsters, though, we need the right hierophant. This is because this history, and the culture it articulates, is generally repressed or reworked in the name of the dream. America does not want to know itself, as much as it wants to cling to what it wants to believe about itself. I argue that Wells-Barnett is one such hierophant. Monsters appear in her writing, I submit, because she could read them properly. She shows no signs of mystification in her confrontation with them; in other words, not only could she read them, but thought this interpretation was critical to understanding what was truly at stake with the practice of lynching.

The ‘monster’ plays an important role in Wells-Barnett’s telling of the story of lynching in *Red Record*. The term ‘monster’ appears three times in the text and weaves an important narrative about the true nature and motivations of lynching. In the first chapter (“The Case Stated”) Wells-Barnett unfolds the development of race relations in the South since the legal emancipa-

tion of black people. Attributing the framework to Douglass, it structures the time between 1865-1895 into three distinct phases. Each phase centers around the excuse given to justify the brutal violence inflicted on black people. The rationale for the violence is the desire to regain control over the formerly enslaved “body and soul”—to recapture the time when they were both (perceived to be) “subservient and submissive” (Wells, 2014d, p. 222). These excuses, Wells-Barnett claims, were provided to mask the barbarity of lynching. America, post legal enslavement, was haunted by the terror the day when the nation no longer belonged to the (‘new’) white man. The claim was that this government was a clear manifestation of ‘civilization’. Thus, when “nineteenth-century civilization” came calling for why this nation could participate in such a ruthless practice as lynching, the nation needed to justify itself (Wells, 2014d, p. 222). The first two excuses—the specter of insurrection and the fear of political takeover, respectively—revealed a purported fear of the horror of being consumed by ‘darkness’. The third excuse, according to Wells-Barnett, was the most diabolical, and most effective, of the three. There was a new necessity, the nation needed to deal with the sudden outburst of the sexual abuse of white women by black men. She describes the effectiveness of this excuse,

Humanity abhors the assailant of womanhood, and this charge upon the Negro at once placed him beyond the pale of human sympathy. With such unanimity, earnestness and apparent candor was this charge made and reiterated that the world has accepted the story that the Negro is a monster which the Southern white man has painted him (Wells, 2014d, p. 224).

The particular effect of this excuse was how it impacted the perception of black people. It was difficult (impossible) for a ‘civilized’ person to manifest the moral courage to cry out against the savagery of the practice of lynching, even if it was “the certain [precursor] of a nation’s fall” (Wells, 2014d, p. 224). This seems logical, monsters are not sympathetic figures. It did not

seem worth it to risk one's humanity in defense of the monster, an accusation that may surface in a critique of the justice of lynching in the punishment of these moral monsters. Wells-Barnett took the risk in this text. In order to defend the accusation of monstrosity she turned to the record of black people during this period regarding this particular attitude. There was no demand for this alarm, Wells argues, at any point leading up to the 1890s. The proof of this was that it had never come up. This "silent" record, then, was critical in reversing "the world adjudg[ing] the Negro a moral monster" (Wells, 2014d, p. 228). This reversal would not be without effect. If this excuse was offered to justify the cloak of 'civilization' while clinging to the lynching of black people, then what happens to the (self-)identification if the excuse is gone?

Wells-Barnett confronts this dilemma in subsequent chapters through her recounting of various lynchings that had taken place. She charts the statistical record of the previous year—as recorded by white people—in the second chapter ("Lynch-Law Statistics"). Then she turns to narratives of various lynchings in subsequent chapters (3-6). In one of the first stories, drawing largely from local newspaper accounts, Wells-Barnett rehearses the lynching of Henry Smith (Paris, Texas, 2/1893). Henry was accused of violating a four year old girl named Myrtle Vance. News of the accusation sent the area into a "wild frenzy of excitement." A manhunt ensued and he was eventually captured; the city "was wild with joy" when they received news that the "brute" had been captured. Thousands came from the surrounding area—"on train and wagons, on horse, and on foot"— "and the word passed from lip to lip that the punishment of the fiend should fit the crime." The fitting punishment according to these 'civilized' Americans? They believed he should be burned alive. Wells-Barnett notes that "everything was done in a business-like manner" (Wells, 2014d, p. 242). The infrastructure of the city (e.g. schools, business, gov-

ernment) were all suspended to ensure that all could be in attendance. Although initially denying culpability, Henry would later confess, but only after being kept overnight under heavy guard. The next day he was delivered to the “surging mass of humanity 10,000 strong.” Wells-Barnett cites,

The negro was placed upon a carnival float in mockery of a king upon his throne, and, followed by an immense crowd, was escorted through the city so that all might see the most inhuman monster known in current history. The line of march was up Main street to the square, around the square down Clarksville street to Church street, thence to the open prairies about 300 yards from the Texas and Pacific depot. Here Smith was placed upon a scaffold, six feet square and ten feet high, securely bound, within the view of all beholders. Here the victim was tortured for fifty minutes by red hot iron brands thrust against his quivering body. Commencing at the feet the brands were placed against him inch by inch until they were thrust against the face. Then, being apparently dead, kerosene was poured upon him, cottonseed hulls placed beneath him and set on fire. In less time than it takes to relate it, the tortured man was wafted beyond the grave to another fire, hotter and more terrible than the one just experienced (Wells, 2014d, p. 243).

This is a truly gothic scene. It revealed the lengths to which a group could (would) go to vanquish the monster. Many of the attendees never wanted to forget the “memorable event” carried away relics; they did not leave much, if any, of the scene (even the charcoal was taken) (2014d, p. 249). This horrific execution did not satiate the perpetrators. Shortly after they also lynched William Butler. He was not accused of anything. The lynching was retribution for the suspicion that he had information about the location of Henry during the previous manhunt, despite assurances that he did not have any information. He was punished, Wells-Barnett declares, “as a partial penalty for the original crime” (Wells, 2014d, p. 249). Thus, even association with a ‘monster’ was monstrous enough to warrant this horrific treatment.

Wells-Barnett’s identification of the excuses given for lynching as justifications for the practice shed an important light on the narratives that followed. The gothic practices of hanging,

torturing, immolating, burning, etc., all challenged the labeling of black men as monstrous. These practices were perpetrated against thousands of men, women, and children. Wells-Barnett closes the text with a qualification. She does not claim that all of the victims of this horrific treatment were innocent. After all, she clarifies, “[w]e have associated too long with the white man not to have copied his vices as well as his virtues” (Wells, 2014d, p. 307). Wells-Barnett was attempting, instead, to undo the effectiveness of the painting as monster. The horror it enabled (and concealed) could only be undone if the mask could be torn away. In this defense Wells-Barnett reverses the lens. It was not black men that were monsters (this, the record bears out), but it was the excuses—based on nothing more than the imaginations and desires of this ‘civilized’ nation—made to justify the lynch mob’s behavior that was actually ‘monstrous.’

Wells-Barnett’s reading of the monster challenges the idea that monsters are merely a reflection of the “deepest anxieties which torment the human psyche” (Stankovic, 2021, p. 109). The true anxieties were concealed. If one reads that era as a gothic text there is an interesting irony that unfolds. Gail Bederman explains that during this era there was a mythological connection being forged between ‘civilization’ and white womanhood and manhood. This notion of ‘civilization’ required both a “pure” womanliness—as symbolized by the white woman—and an “upright” manliness—as embodied by the white man. What was critical about this association was that “it worked as a synecdoche” (Bederman, 1995, p. 410). Thus, referencing either ‘the white woman’ and/or ‘the white man’ was also evoking ‘civilized’/‘civilization.’ It was believed that ‘civilization’ needed to be protected. There were counterparts to ‘the white man’ found in the ‘black’ and ‘red’ man. These were less than ‘civilized’ (e.g. ‘savage’). This reveals the power in painting black men as “moral monsters”. In their alleged abuse of white women, they were



threatening ‘civilization’ itself. The familiar gothic trope of the distressed (white) woman had come alive. Thus, the ‘white man’ takes the position of the hero in “resolutely and bravely avenging the (alleged) rape of pure white womanhood” (Bederman, 1995, p. 415). Wells-Barnett saw through these synecdoches, without denying their power, and worked to divorce the mythological from the actual in *Record*. She argues that her goal was never to decry white womanhood, per se, but to identify the horrific ends that resulted from the elevation its abstraction. She notes that it was not to the detriment of black men (and women) alone, but also was damaging to actual white women. She argues, “... it is their misfortune that the chivalrous white men ... in order to escape the deserved execration of the civilized world, should shield themselves by their cowardly and infamously false excuse, and call into question that very honor about which their distinguished priestly apologist claims they are most sensitive” (Wells, 2014d, p. 226). It is important to note that this quote does not employ any of her trademark scare quotes or parentheses (i.e. (?)). It was clear to Wells-Barnett that this alleged desire to protect white womanhood (and thus, ‘civilization’) was betrayed by their treatment of those tangled in the “historical knot.” “True chivalry respects all womanhood,” she asserts, “and no one who reads the record, as it is written in the faces of the million mulattoes in the South, will for a minute conceive that the southern white man had a very chivalrous regard for the honor due the women of his own race or respect for the womanhood which circumstances placed in his power” (Wells, 2014d, p. 226). Wells-Barnett attempted to remove all grounds for the justification found in the monsterization of black men. In the first chapter she questions why it was never suggested that white women were in need of this protection prior to this historical moment. White women who were left unguarded in the South during the Civil War were never understood to be under threat by monsters. The white

women who went south after the war to teach the formerly enslaved to read were never under threat by monsters. However, they were not necessarily safe. Wells-Barnett recounts,

... these young women braved dangers whose record reads more like fiction than fact. They became social outlaws in the South. The peculiar sensitiveness of the southern white men for women, never shed its protecting influence about them. No friendly word from their own race cheered them in their work; no hospitable doors gave them the companionship like that from which they had come. No chivalrous white man doffed his hat in honor or respect. They were "Nigger teachers"—unpardonable offenders in the social ethics of the South, and were insulted, persecuted and ostracised, not by Negroes, but by the white manhood which boasts of its chivalry toward women" (Wells, 2014d, p. 211).

Thus, the purported fears which found their alleged root in the black man were nothing more than illusions. Illusions that had a monstrous effect on the actual lived experiences of black women, men, and children (as well as white women). These 'moral monsters,' then, "became a part of white supremacy's mythology of power ... assertions of racial power" (Poole, 2011, p. 284). Cohen notes that monsters "are never created *ex nihilo*" (Cohen, 1996, p. 11). Instead of emerging out of nowhere they are constructed. When reading the emergence of these American monsters during this period through the lens of the synecdoche, one can see the anxiety they represented—the flimsy nature of their (white) civilization. These monsters revealed that only a certain kind of person was allowed to participate in this 'civilization.'<sup>12</sup>

Wells-Barnett's reading of the monster leads to the emergence of two other important gothic tropes that can be seen in her writing: the haunting of the past and the unease of the gothic. First, Wells-Barnett clarified for the reader how that period of time (1866-1900) was haunted by the specter of slavery. She argues, for instance, in *Record* that much had not changed in the

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<sup>12</sup> It is not hard to see this when reading this process of 'painting' the monster against the previous excuse. That excuse was less subtle than the third. It openly declared that this nation is 'a white man's government' which could only rightly be ruled by white men. The third excuse is a veiled extension of the second.

attitude toward black people between 1895 and legal enslavement. “In the days of slavery,” she reminisces, “it was held to be a very serious matter for a colored person to fail to yield the sidewalk at the demand of a white person, and it will not be surprising to find some evidence of this intolerance existing in the days of freedom” (2014d, p. 257). However, some things had changed. During enslavement—when the enslaver believed he owned the enslaved “body and soul”—there would be some kind of physical punishment for such an infraction. During the time when Wells-Barnett was writing, in contrast, an offense like this could cost the offender their life. The attitude had not changed across time according to Wells. A couple years earlier in an article entitled, “Lynch Law in All its Phases,” Wells argues, “The very same forces are at work now as then. ... They were conquered in war, but not in spirit” (Wells, 2014c, p. 111). Many white Americans had a difficult time moving on. Lynching, then, was a means to convince everyone into lockstep with that past. Wells-Barnett carried this suspicion throughout her writing career. In her autobiography, written three decades later, she gave it voice one last time. Reflecting on her decades long investigation of lynching she confirms: “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” (Wells, 1970, p. 70-71). In gothic form Wells-Barnett linked the past to the present. One could even argue that the future was linked here as well. This gothic environment, begun during enslavement, would continue to hover over this nation as long as the attitude that grounded it was maintained. This possibility, Wells-Barnett hoped, produced a sense of unease.

The “singular moral function” of the gothic text is “provoking unease” (Carter, 1981, p. 133, see also Mulvey-Roberts, 2009, p. xii). The primary goal of the text is to evoke fears held in

the mind reader. This idea that the past is not gone, but continues to haunt is one of the main mechanisms to accomplish this. To be stuck in time is supposed to be frightening. But, what if one desires that past? It seems clear that certain readers would confirm Wells-Barnett's point that the past was haunting them. But it also seems clear that this was not necessarily a point of frustration. Wells-Barnett, I argue, confronted this potential reading through ending many of her texts in a way similar to many gothic texts—they are left open-ended. Wells-Barnett avoids offering much of an ending in texts like *Horrors and Record*, do not end with any assurances. To be clear, Wells-Barnett seems to be clear that the trajectory did suggest that things could end in “anarchy” and “lawlessness.” But these were the very things represented and desired by the lynch mobs. The question that was most pertinent when she was writing was would they prevail? At the end of *Record* she appeals,

Think and act on independent lines in this behalf, remembering that after all, it is the white man's civilization and the white man's government which are on trial. This crusade will determine whether that civilization can maintain itself by itself, or whether anarchy shall prevail; whether this Nation shall write itself down a success at self government, or in deepest humiliation admit its failure complete; whether the precepts and theories of Christianity are professed and practiced by American white people as Golden Rules of thought and action, or adopted as a system of morals to be preached to the heathen until they attain to the intelligence which needs the system of Lynch Law (Wells, 2014d, p. 309).

The outcome of this trial would be determined, not by some author of a fictional gothic tale, by the reader. This appeal challenged them to interrogate their view of things. Was the scene as brutal and savage as Wells-Barnett suggested? It's one thing to be haunted, it's another thing to be haunted and realize that this is the case. These ghosts threatened to destroy everything. To leave this open in this way disrupted any sense of natural progression—a sense that sat at the foundation of the ‘American Dream’. One could not be at ease with the expectation that things will au-

tomatically work out. It is interesting that in the beginning of *Crusade for Justice*, Wells-Barnett saw her life as a symbol of the tumultuous development(?) of this nation. She began writing it with the hope that it could become a testimony to the possibilities (Reconstruction) that were up-ended. She remarks that she initially sat down to record her life "... so those of her generation could know how the agitation against the lynching evil began" (Wells, 1970, p. 4). The final chapter of the book beings with a warning,

ETERNAL VIGILANCE IS THE PRICE OF LIBERTY, AND IT DOES SEEM to me that notwithstanding all these social agencies and activities there is not that vigilance which should be exercised in the preservation of our rights. This leads me to wonder if we are not too well satisfied to be able to point to our wonderful institutions with complacence and draw the salaries connected therewith, instead of being alert as the watchman on the wall (Wells, 1970, p. 415).

The chapter ends by stating: "I also received some beautiful letters from members of the board of directors thanking us for calling attention to what was go ..." (Wells, 1970, p. 418-419). It does not even end in a complete sentence. Thus, we have the beginning of the agitation against lynching, but not its ending. This seems like a gothic warning that it has not ended; that the specters of lynching—and thus, enslavement—still haunt. The trial continues. How will it end?

In this chapter I attempted to evaluate how the gothic's "plots and tropes [reflect] the increasingly frequent questions on the place of the black in America." The white gothic conveyed a different sense of that place than the black gothic. For the white gothic, the black ('darkness') functioned as a continued avenue of understanding who was 'not-me'—which brought what was deemed important insights into who 'me' was. This formulation came with a cost. This version of the gothic was filled with inconsistencies, although many of these were outside the access of the consciousness of these white writers. Reading this genre against the political climate that birthed it, and was nurtured by it, reveals how "the historical horrors that make national identity possible

... must [also] be repressed in order to sustain it” (Goddu, 1997, p. 10). This becomes most clear when one examines the black gothic. This gothic brings to light the heavily disputed and contradictory origins of both the genre and the nation itself. It reveals that the national character—despite what the collective (white) nation espoused—was in a flux that undermined any idea of inevitable progress. The country’s myths, many of which found their locus in the ‘American Dream’, seemed out of step with its behavior. At the heart of this character there resided a dark side. One of the starkest revelations of this darkness was revealed in its treatment of the enslaved.

America, Morrison (1992) informs us, “distinguished itself by, and understood itself to be, pressing toward a future freedom, a kind of human dignity believed unprecedented in this world” (p. 33). This hope was embodied in the ‘American Dream.’ This dream convinced the dreamers that the future was bright. However, the dreamers do not seem to be completely at peace. Contemplations of the possibility that things could be, or turn out to be, otherwise was relegated to the nation’s literature. This “dour,” “troubled,” “frightened,” and “haunted” corpus suggested that, hopeful as they were, things were not settled. But there was some solace in knowing the darkness was sequestered. The gothic literature that developed was a way to explore the nightmare that was inverse of the dream. However, as Sedgwick notes, “... no nightmare is ever as terrifying as is waking up ... to find it true” (Sedgwick, 1986, p. 13). In the gothic nightmares have a common function. They are usually ‘distressing or disturbingly prescient” and often allude to “a state between sleeping and waking” (Martin, 2009, p. 207). If the “subject of the dream is the dreamer”, who/what is the subject of the nightmare? As a gothic trope the nightmare usually had something to say about how the dreamer related to their future. I read the African-

American gothic as the inverse of its Anglo counterpart. Often in the latter, while dark, helped assure white Americans that they were on track. Having an arena to safely work through their fears, they could be assured that the world they actually lived in was nothing like the text. However, these assurances were haunted by the African American gothic. No mere fabrications, they communicated that the dream had a nightmarish foundation. Wells-Barnett's antilynching analysis was yet another wake-up call for this nation. Through her exploration of the gothic nature of black life in America, Wells-Barnett was able to convey how lynching was another evidence of the destructive foundation the dream was resting on. The monsters it produced in order to justify its existence warned that the nation, even after the abolishing of legalized enslavement, remained haunted.

## Chapter 2

### Ida B. Wells, the hierophant

#### I.

Ida B. Wells was on an eastern tour a few weeks after the lynching of her friends Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell, and Will Stewart. Just prior to her departure she published a short editorial revealing the results of preliminary investigation of the broader trend of lynching. When she met T. Thomas Fortune in New Jersey he informed her of the developments that resulted from the article. She had not yet read the morning paper; it revealed that her press, *The Free Speech*, had been destroyed the previous night. The article remarked that the reporter, and she could only assume the perpetrators of the destruction, were aware that she was not in Memphis. There was a note left behind threatening “that anyone trying to publish the paper again would be punished with death” (Wells, 1970, p. 61-62). Because of her unwillingness to let the brutal execution of her friends rest, many of her “own people” cautioned her that this day would come. Rather than surrender to the pressures to be silent, Wells armed herself instead. If her desire to fight for justice was going to cost her life she thought it “better [she] die fighting against injustice than to die like a dog or a rat in a trap” (Wells, 1970, 62). If that moment came she hoped she would not go alone. Inviting the reader to travel back to that time and her mindset as she read the article she assumed they would also “wonder what caused the destruction of my paper after three months of constant agitation following the lynching of my friends” (Wells, 1970, p. 63). In other words, what took this faceless mob so long?



The causing of agitation was nothing new for the *Free Press*. Wells was invited to join the staff of the paper three years prior (1889). She was elated for the opportunity to join the paper, however she had her conditions for joining. She notes, “I refused to come in except as equal” (Wells, 1970, p. 35). She was made editor of the paper, the first black woman in the nation to don such a position. She found success with the *Free Speech and Headlight* from the start and the paper benefitted greatly from her addition. She was able to earn as much money as her salary teaching, and this seemed to assure her that she had found her calling (Wells, 1970, p. 39). As editor, the vision of the organ began to take on more and more the shape of her perspective. Hardin & Hinton (2001) argue in their article, “The Squelching of Free Speech in Memphis,” that Wells “molded the conscience of the newspaper” from when she joined until its destruction (p. 82). The paper was outspoken about many issues confronting black people in Memphis (and the nation more broadly). For instance, in 1890 the paper called out Isaiah Montgomery, the only black member of Mississippi’s Constitutional Convention of 1890, for casting his vote for the “infamous ‘Understanding Clause’.” What gave the clause its infamy was its thinly veiled attempt to obstruct the black vote. The paper’s critique of Montgomery was simple. They argued that he “should never have acquiesced; but that it would have been better to have gone down to defeat still voting against this outrageous” clause (Wells, 1970, p. 38-39). An important moment in the paper, they were able to level this critique without spoiling the relationship with Montgomery, who became one of the paper’s staunchest supporters. The following year Wells became a full time editor. Prior to this year she investigated and wrote while maintaining her teaching position with Memphis city schools. However, after critiquing the inferior conditions of those schools, due to lack of resources and what she took to be mismanagement, and of some of the

faculty, she was not nominated to return the following school year. The loss of the job, as a result of her journalism, was a stinging blow. However, on reflection she determined that “it was right to strike a blow against a glaring evil and [she] did not regret it” (Wells, 1970, p. 37). Thus, as she continued to sharpen her writing voice in these initial years with the *Free Speech*, she was also learning valuable lessons. Agitation, even when motivated by the determination to demand justice, was costly.

The following year, 1892, Wells had a “rude awakening” (Wells, 2014c, p. 99). The lynching of Moss, McDowell, and Stewart, she recalls, “changed the whole course of [her] life” (Wells, 1970, p. 47). Devastated by the loss, she felt compelled to investigate lynchings—and their motivations—in more depth. Through her investigation she realized the intimately connected network of forces that enabled lynchings to take place (e.g. social, legal, economic, print, etc.). What she discovered alarmed her. For instance, she came across a lynching that took place in Tunica Co., Mississippi. Allegedly a ‘big burly brute’—as he was reported—raped the seven year old daughter of the local sheriff. Wells, by going to the location and investigating the story, came to realize that the seven year old girl was in fact (at least) 17 years old. She also discovered that the charge of rape was revisionist and leveled in order to “save [the sheriff’s] daughter’s reputation” (Wells-Barnett, 1970, p. 65). Based on several stories like this Wells concluded that the charge of rape, that was gaining steam, was based more on myth—and a purported sense of self-preservation—than on anything factual.

She was motivated to publish a report of this discovery; a report that became (according to many) an (the?) ‘infamous’ editorial. In that editorial she attempted to clarify, it can be argued hyperbolically, that, “*Nobody* in this section believes *the old thread-bare lie* that Negro men as-

sault white women” (Wells, 1970, p. 65). She then warned that if Southern white men were not careful with their management of this lie the (moral) reputations of ‘their’ women would suffer. In other words, Wells surmised, the mythological edifice they were building, at some point, could do nothing but crumble. Bettina Aptheker in her article, “The Suppression of the ‘Free Speech’,” argues that, unbeknownst to Wells, this editorial marked “the beginning of the end” for the *Free Speech*. A few days after the publishing of her editorial there was a counter published in the *Daily Commercial Appeal* entitled, “More Rapes, More Lynchings.” This article reinforced the myth that the trend of the inordinate sexual assault of white women by black men was only increasing. In actuality, the article declared that black men had largely reached the point that their ‘brute passion’ could no longer be checked, backing Southern white men into a corner. This article concluded, Aptheker (1977b) notes, that the “only recourse for white people ... was to kill the offending Negroes *in the most brutal manner* possible in order to dissuade others of their race from committing the same crime” (p. 37). They attempted to justify this position by assuring the reader,

Nothing but the most prompt, speedy and extreme punishment can hold in check the *horrible bestial propensities* of the Negro race ... The crime of rape is always horrible, but for the Southern man there is nothing *which so fills the soul with horror, loathing and fury* at the outraging of a white woman by a Negro (*Commercial* editorial, 1892, as cited in Aptheker, 1977b, p. 37, emphasis added).

Again, this reiteration was a response to Wells’ challenge. The hope was that this declaration of the ‘horror’ that was produced by the professed specter of this violation would be enough to si-

lence whoever was foolish enough to question the situation. In case it was not, however, they followed up this with a threat for the writer. Unaware that the author was a woman<sup>1</sup> they exhorted,

“If the negroes themselves do not apply the remedy without delay it will be the duty of those whom he has attacked to tie the wretch *who utters such calumnies* to a stake at the intersection of Main and Madison strs., brand him in the forehead with a hot iron and perform upon him a surgical operation with a pair of tailor’s shears<sup>2</sup>” (as cited in Aptheker, 1977b, p. 38).

In other words, telling a ‘lie’—if it was about this subject—caused enough ‘horror’ to warrant death.

However, the conclusions drawn in “More Rapes, More Lynchings” seemed to betray what was really at stake with lynching. On the same day the article was published, in response to what seems to have been perceived as a call to arms, a “gathering of leading men” convened to determine what could (and should) be done. One of the subjects that was discussed was how this group could get their hands on the authors of the *Free Speech* editorial with the intention of lynching them. However, they could not find them. Restless, and frustrated, they commissioned a group to visit the office of the *Free Speech* where they decimated the equipment with the hopes of extinguishing this source of agitation. This did not satiate this group, however, they were sustained by the hope that they could get their hands on Wells. In her autobiography Wells does not leave the reader to wonder about the motives of this mob (who was giving voice to the ‘leading’

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<sup>1</sup> I want to signal here that it will not matter for these writers, and those that they represent that the author is a woman. This will be another hint for Wells of the veracity of her developing understanding of the mythological structure buttressing the practice of lynching.

<sup>2</sup> A slightly different version of this quote is recorded in her autobiography: ‘The *black wretch who had written that foul lie should be tied* to a stake at the corner of Main and Madison streets, a pair of tailor’s shears used on him and he should then be burned at a stake’ (as cited in Wells, 1970, p. 66, emphasis added). I highlight the differences not in an attempt to indict either Wells or Aptheker. While I am not completely clear why they are there the differences are interesting to me. Wells’s emphasis of black when she does helps paint a picture of what the problem really was in the minds of the writer (and those he takes himself to be representing). And her substitution of ‘calumnies’ with ‘foul lie’ help the reader focus on what the issue really was. There is a confrontation over interpretation, or who is telling the truth, a confrontation both writers take to be so dramatic lives are at stake.

figures of the city). She argues, “They had destroyed my paper, in which every dollar I had in the world was invested. They had made me an exile and threatened my life *for hinting at the truth.*” (Wells-Barnett, 1970, p. 62-63, emphasis added). This is an important determination. Wells is confirming what the writers of, “More Rapes”, intimated—the contention was over who was telling the truth. The editorial, Wells claims, became the catalyst for the destruction of the press because their motives could be veiled by the myth they were attempt to solidify at the time. She clarifies, “This editorial furnished at last the excuse for doing what the white leaders of Memphis *had long been wanting to do: put an end to the Free Speech*” (Wells, 1970, p. 66). This did not discourage Wells, however. Instead, the destruction of her press communicated to her that she had an obligation to no longer hint, but to “tell the whole truth” (Wells, 1970, p. 63).

This chapter highlights this struggle over ‘the truth’—and who was/was not telling it—as a foundational leitmotif running through Wells’s work from 1892 forward. Wells took this ‘telling the truth’ to be a satisfaction of a “long-felt want” of black people (Wells, 1970, p. 40). Hardin & Hinton (2001) argue that Wells’s time at the *Free Speech*, and what she learned as a result, “helped her to develop her admired ability to present facts objectively ... [which was] paramount to Wells” (p. 92). Wells realized that the practice of lynching rested on a system of justification(s) and rationale(s) (Sims, 2010, p. 6). Thus, the epistemological element of lynching was fundamental to understanding the convention of lynching. It is crucial to attend to this in the work of Wells because she was analyzing lynching at a time where its justifications were still, largely, unsettled. In other words, Wells attacks this justification while it is still vulnerable, or at least she believes it to be. The practice of lynching needed, demanded, and could not survive without acquiescence to the justifications of its practitioners. In order to demonstrate this I first

explore the relationship between epistemology and the systems of oppression in this nation. I then turn to Wells's identification of the series of rationales proffered by those carrying out this particular form of oppression. I focus on her reading of the third justification—what she identifies as 'excuses'—and her evaluation of the 'moral monsters' presented as the most efficient justification of lynching. What her reading reveals is that, while 'monsters' are usually understood as sources of fright, these versions confronted by Wells had a different function. Instead, they offered those fabricating a certain comfort within their larger epistemological frames, holding them up in particularly effective ways. Wells's perceptive, and largely pioneering reading of these monsters enabled her to present a truth that penetrated, and thus illuminated, the system of oppression black people in America persistently found themselves confronted with (of which lynching was an appendage). This revelation of the justificatory practices of lynching—which shed light on the larger system of which lynching was a defense—revealed why so many white Americans struggled with depending on it, or fell silent in the face of it (despite their feelings toward the particularly brutal nature of its iterations). There was a heavy cost in *not* believing in its necessity. Also, many *wanted* to believe in the rationale, a desire which made the justification seem more 'reasonable.' The chapter ends with the consideration of two different monsters—one 'moral' the other 'horrendous'—that emerged as a result of the system of oppression allowing to remain largely entrenched.

## II.

*'A heap see, but a few know.'* (told to Carolyn Chase's by her aunt<sup>3</sup>)

Epistemology is the study of knowledge and justificatory practices of beliefs. It is concerned with questions of knowledge (e.g. how it is produced and maintained) and its contraries (Mills, 2007). Moral epistemology, specifically, is concerned with the processes of knowledge and its contraries (and their justifications) regarding propositions/ideas as they relate to questions of 'right'/'wrong', 'good'/'bad', etc. How these come to be established and maintained as believable is under consideration in this study. Patricia Hill Collins (2000), in her groundbreaking text, *Black Feminist Thought*, highlights that there is much at stake in the examination of the standards of knowledge and belief. She argues that this study "points to the ways in which power relations shape *who is believed* and why" (Collins, 2000, p. 252). She identifies that through this study questions emerge that determine whose knowledge, questions, and interpretive frames, have value (or are seen as meaningful having utility in making sense of the world). Thus, individuals—and their perspectives—get elected and obscured in the pursuit of knowledge in and about the(ir) world(s).

Thus, Collins (2000) argues that a critical issue is "the question of what constitutes adequate justification that a given knowledge claim, such as a fact or theory, is *true*" (p. 255). She highlights, for instance, the fact that throughout American history black women have produced what she calls "specialized knowledge." Focusing on their work in academic circles she notes that their distinctive framing places them in an environment where their framing is challenged

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<sup>3</sup> I should account for what could possibly seem a strange ascription to some. It is recorded in Patricia Hill Collins's, *Black Feminist Thought* (p. 257), and effectively encapsulates the frequency with which we are confronted with competing epistemological frameworks when we're 'out in the world'—frames that are not all created equally. A disparity that should be taken seriously before 'we' can discuss, debate, philosophize, etc., what individuals think they are capturing in this social world together.

and resisted by other (accepted as) predominant frameworks. Thus, they have often “had to struggle against White male interpretations of the world” (Collins, 2000, p. 251). This struggle conventionally leaves the knowledge, questions, etc., of black women subjugated within these larger systems of knowledge production and maintenance.

This result has important implications. In his pivotal essay, “White Ignorance,” Charles Mills fleshes out the stereotypical (male) Anglo-American epistemology, which is treated as foundational/canonical in these environments. This epistemology is usually heavily individualistic. Sometimes this focus is so centered on the individual—often heedlessly understood to be a white, male individual—that it can “self-parodically ... verge [on] solipsism” (Mills, 2007, p. 13). Mills agrees with Collins that epistemological concerns are not innocuous and lead to determinations about who is and is not believable. Thus, if the standard figure is this isolated, white male, it will have an undeniable bearing on the type of person who is not found believable in these arenas. This is a truth that does not merely hold in academic arenas, but its implications can be seen reflected in the larger society this arena is a segment of. Mills attempts to counter this trajectory by introducing a more social epistemology. One important emphasis for Mills is the necessity of intentionally placing, and acknowledging this placement, of the individual within their specific context. It is important, Mills asserts, to see these individuals as members “of certain social groups, within a given social milieu, in a society at a particular period” (Mills, 2007, p. 14). One cannot understand who this individual is, or the knowledge they attempt to produce or confirm, without this step. Genuinely excavating the epistemological context of the thinker helps avoid another pitfall the ‘standard’ epistemology falls into. In this standardized version, the ‘world’ the individual is thinking out of is “too often presuppose[d] a degree of consent and in-



clusion that does not exist outside the imagination of mainstream scholars” (Mills, 2007, p. 15). The implications of this are critical. The world that these hypothetical individuals are placed within—and thus usually comes to reflect the imagined world of many of the speculators themselves, at least in the initial stages of trying to get their reflections off the ground—is inherently idyllic. In this world that is essentially peaceful presents the hypothetical with a largely clear runway to epistemological clarity. Any obstructions, if/when they do appear, are seen as irregularities or exceptions. The problem with this approach, Mills contends, is it does not fit any of the fallout of these speculations for usefulness in the actual world. In other words these speculations “crucially [handicap] any realistic social epistemology, since in effect it turns things upside down” (Mills, 2007, 17). It inoculates the fabricators to be unprepared to face a world where obstructions to knowledge and (true) belief (e.g. racism, sexism, white supremacy, etc.) “have not been the exception but the norm” (Mills, 2007, 17).

Yet, this is not a pitfall that is inevitable. Kristie Dotson (2015), in her reflections on the privileges of inheriting the kind of epistemological framework offered by Patricia Hill Collins, argues that it was *through* the study of philosophical epistemology that she was able to learn “one of the ways that colonialism and oppression gets in the air and stays there” (p. 2322). There was no presumption of idyllic or clean arenas here. Instead, she notes that it is usually the case that “knowledge economies are engines for oppression” (Dotson, 2015, p. 2322). They are often the culprits in the dismissal and erasure of perspectives held by those who do not represent the standard cognizer. However, the answer is not necessarily, according to Collins, the abandonment of epistemological reflections. But, it is through the considerations of knowledge production, and producers, that these forces can be identified and, hopefully, counteracted. Collins (2000) offers

an approach that “addresses ongoing epistemological debates concerning the power dynamics that underlie what counts as knowledge (Collins, 2000, p. 273). Within this frame<sup>4</sup>—what she identifies as a “holistic epistemology” (p. 276)—Collins identifies four interrelated/interlocking domains of power: interpersonal, structural, disciplinary, and hegemonic. While they blend, each has its own particular sphere and end. While all four are critical, this chapter will be focusing on the implications of hegemonic power. Its relationship to the structural domain will be important however.

Structural power influences how oppression gets organized. This domain is “large-scale, systemwide, and has operated over a long period of time via interconnected social institutions” (Collins, 2000, p. 277). These institutions (e.g. legal, education, religion, media, labor, etc.) develop a symbiosis that are all utilized to further entrench oppression in this nation. It is the structural integrity of this domain that allow oppression to maintain its strength across time and space. Time has a dual significance here. There is the time that passes from one generation/era to the next—which is why many oppressions look familiar to sufferers from different times. But the structures also allow for oppression to follow an individual through the different phases of their lifetime (e.g. school-to-prison pipeline). Hegemonic power is useful here in that it allows for the justification of oppression. The “significance” of this domain, Collins (2000) argues, “lies in its ability to shape consciousness via the manipulation of *ideas, images, symbols, and ideolo-*

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<sup>4</sup> Throughout this chapter I am trying to avoid what I perceive to be a misattribution of the identifier ‘black feminist’ to myself. First, I do not want to be mistaken for identifying or entering (and thus, taking up) a space that I am not qualified to enter. However, the sources used to make the case I am trying to make in this chapter are intentionally selected. It is the undeniable force of their perspectives in making sense of the world I believe Wells found herself in (one I take myself to also inhabit). Collins, for instance, is particularly helpful here. At one point in *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins (2000) declares, “It is important to remember that although the following argument is developed from the standpoint of U.S. Black women, *its significance is much greater. Recall that Black feminist thought views Black women’s struggles as part of a wider struggle for human dignity and social justice*” (p. 276). Thus, I engage black feminist thinkers presupposing this significance, trying careful not to communicate a presumption of the position of an ‘expert’ of that standpoint.

*gies*” (p. 285). This ‘manipulation’ is a mechanism through which all the domains can remain connected. In other words, the groups that attempt to maintain control fabricate, use, or abuse available ideas, images, symbols and ideologies to craft a ‘commonsense’ under which all are compelled to abide. The hope is that this ‘commonsense’ becomes so pervasive—“gets into the air and stays there”—that it becomes all but impossible to “conceptualize alternatives to [it], let alone ways of resisting the social practices that [it] justifies” (Collins, 2000, p. 284). This ‘commonsense’ can become so entrenched, becoming the background of the lived experience of those under its watch, that it becomes resistant to any ‘facts’ that seem to suggest otherwise. This domain depends on the structural realm for its dissemination (e.g. school curriculum, religious teachings, collective memory, the arts).

It is not all bleak however. No matter how dire the circumstances, how established the commonsense seems to be, Collins encourages an approach to epistemology that never loses sight of the fact that “there is always choice, and power to act” (Collins, 2000, 290). This is true for both oppressor and oppressed, though it is critical the latter never lose sight of the fact. The world is in a constant state of being made and re-made according to this framework. This seems to be clear when one examines the effort it takes to keep up things like hegemonic power. Dotson (2015) urges this when claiming that “engaging in epistemology is necessary for empowerment, particularly with respect to the operations of hegemonic power” (p. 2325). There is a constant need for justification which seems to be a strong indicator that things, no matter what the profession, are never settled. Within this necessity there seems to open up gaps for empowerment. There is a power that flows from the naming and evaluation of the processes of knowledge production and possession. If ‘commonsense’ needs justification, then it cannot be sustained without

justifiers (or ‘ascribers’ as referred to by Dotson). “This kind of epistemic power, the *authorized power to judge another* epistemic subject (or ascribe positive epistemic status on a subject),” Dotson (2015) observes, “is where a great deal of the workings of hegemonic power lies in epistemology” (p. 2326). Dotson flags this in order to raise concerns of the problems that present empowerment. However, I submit that, irrespective of if the domains of power are willing to acknowledge this fact, the road of justification runs both directions. If the systems of oppression could sustain themselves by themselves, they would not be in constant search of justification. To be able to manipulate this necessity can be an important source of disruption to the system.

Empowerment remains a delicate dance however. Mills reminds us that one cannot/should not lose sight of the intricate and tangled nature of knowledge production and possession. He identifies five intimately related elements of cognition—perception, conception, memory, testimony, and motivational group interest. Mills notes that there can be reasonable attempts to analytically separate these for heuristic ends; however, experientially any attempt to get a clean separation will end in failure. He argues that at “any given stage it is obvious that an interaction of great complexity is involved, in which multiple factors will be affecting one another in intricate feedback loops of various kinds” (Mills, 2007, 23-24). He attempts to demonstrate this intricacy, and I quote it in its entirety in order to not fall into the analytic trap he identifies. He explains,

*Perception is also in part conception, the viewing of the world through a particular conceptual grid. Inference from perception involves the overt or tacit appeal to memory, which will be not merely individual but social. As such, it will be founded on testimony and ultimately on the perceptions and conceptions of others. The background knowledge that will guide inference and judgment, eliminating (putatively) absurd alternatives and narrowing down a set of plausible contenders, will also be shaped by testimony, or the lack thereof, and will itself be embedded in various conceptual frameworks and require*

*perception and memory to access. Testimony will have been recorded, requiring again perception, conception, and memory; it will have been integrated into a framework and narrative and from the start will have involved the selection of certain voices as against others, selection in and selection out (if these others have been allowed to speak in the first place). At all levels, interests may shape cognition, influencing what and how we see, what we and society choose to remember, whose testimony is solicited and whose is not, and which facts and frameworks are sought out and accepted (Mills, 2007, 23-24, emphasis added).*

I want to highlight a few implications of this interrelation because of the light I believe they help shine on Wells' early interrogation of lynching and its motivations. It is important to keep in mind that perceptions are not merely an 'objective' taking in of the world, but the vision is flooded with conceptions inherited—and thus largely reflective—of the world the perceiver came up in. Mills (2007) claims, "when the individual cognizing agent is perceiving, he is doing so with eyes and ears *that have been socialized*" (p. 23, emphasis added). Thus, if these individuals find themselves participants in, or beneficiaries of, a society that is structured around various oppressive power relations, it is critical they interrogate the mediums through which they take in the world interrogating the ways these have been shaped and influenced by that world—unless, of course, they desire its maintenance. If this work goes undone this individual may make the mistake of conflating the 'commonsense' of the(ir) given world with objectivity. From here there is an easy slide to an experience where they "tend to find the confirmation [of the dominant 'commonsense'] in the world *whether it is there or not*" (Mills, 2007, p. 25). As we will see, Wells-Barnett identified the submitted 'doxastic architecture' (Mills, 2007, p. 25) of the world she found herself in in the shape of the declaration—"this is a white man's government"—and, thus, it is no marvel that much of the 'evidence' seemed to confirm the justification of that declaration for so many. Mills (2007) argues that our concepts "orient us to the world" (p. 27). This orientation is not without an effect that is difficult to combat, even for those who the concepts are not on

behalf of or benefitting. The “social-mindset” is hard to resist because, if unattended, it becomes “not a matter of seeing the phenomenon with the concept discretely attached but rather of seeing things through the concept itself” (Mills, 2007, p. 27). The danger is when the ‘mind-set’ becomes confused for (merely) perceiving, and the former comes to stand in for the latter. If this individual is in a environment structured around domination and oppression, this is dangerous regardless of the individual’s thoughts about their intentions, character, etc. They can (will) become a part of the justificatory system that holds that world together. And they could be doing this bidding blindly because “it is the blindness of the concept itself that is blinding the vision” (Mills, 2007, p. 27). In the face of this vulnerability an epistemic unease/suspicion must be developed and maintained.

The relationship between perception/conception and memory (both individual and social) is critical as well. Mills argues that memory is an “obviously pivotal,” albeit oft neglected, concern in social epistemology (p. 28). A society’s collective memory can be seen throughout its structural domain (e.g. curricula, monuments, music, legends, official holidays). This memory has a bearing on the perceptions (of self and world) from as early as the individual is brought into participation with the structural and hegemonic domain. The society (and the individuals that constitute it) form their identities out of that which they choose to remember—“memory is necessarily selective” (Mills, 2007, p. 29). This selection is usually connected by a sense of wanting to be ‘good’—at least as self-measured. This seems to hold true even for society’s dominated by, structured around, oppression. Thus, the self-selection will be motivated by, or resulting in, an inevitable self-delusion, or what Mills refers to as “mystification”. When one sees a mystification in the present day they can be assured, he argues, that it is underwritten by an his-

torical mystification (Mills, 2007, p. 31). In order for this mystification, especially that which is self-imposed, has to be careful with how it manages alternative memories (and testimonies of that history). Mills (2007) notes that it is “irrefutably clear how dependent we are on others for so much of what we know” (p. 31). The problem arises from the fact that we all do not ‘know’ the same thing, and the effect that these knowledges have on the structures of self-image and ‘commonsense’ that govern the social environment varies. In other words, for the sake of self-preservation (at least one that is buttressed by a specific selective memory) every type of knowledge/memory cannot be countenanced equally. Thus, those whose memories/knowledge(s) can impair the project must be diminished (e.g. identified as ‘epistemically suspect’), monitored, (re-)interpreted, or removed. Mills identifies a space like this nation as an example of this. He notes that there has always been a counter-memory and counter-testimony, but these “would originally have been handicapped by the lack of material and cultural capital investment available for its production” (Mills, 2007, p. 33). This lack was imposed. The society, if it was going to remain what it perceived (conceived) itself to be, it could not risk entertaining these alternatives. Wells was an example of black testimony, rooted in our collective memory, that was able to effuse into larger conversation in Memphis. The result, discussed earlier in this chapter, was direct and destructive. It is interesting how a society can preemptively determine the testimony that threatens it. What I mean here is that their response to her editorial—one she says they were desiring to execute for well before that moment—reveals the conceptual material they were using to make sense of the world. Her mere ‘hinting’ at the truth was enough for them to short-circuit any interchange between epistemological frames. They could not bear it, not if they were going to be able

to remain themselves, and they knew it. Their world was too high a cost to gamble with *Free Speech*.

In this section I attempted to establish how crucial an examination of the epistemological is in the attempt to make sense of the social/political world. A world must be framed before it can be inhabited. I highlighted the understanding of epistemology as articulated by Patricia Hill Collins, Charles Mills, and Kristie Dotson, because they take serious the parts of the construction that often go unattended—either willfully or ignorantly—in the more ‘traditional’ articulations. What is meant here is that the world that one begins with when trying to make sense of the epistemological foundation is vital. We, like Wells-Barnett, live in a society that has structured itself around/through domination and oppression. This was why the destruction of her press did not come as a surprise—it was anticipated by many who knew her that if she was going to continue to pursue (alternative) truth in the face of the prevailing ‘commonsense’, that search would not go unrewarded. This suggests that, by the time she began to investigate lynching in the wake of her friends’ execution, she knew two important things: (1) the violence was not aberrational (there was something that held together her friends’s murders and the threats to her own life, and (2) its justifications were mythological (but ‘logical’ nonetheless). The violence followed and was presented as rational because ‘commonsense’ demanded it.



### III.

*'If the monstrous races had not existed, it is likely that people would have created them.'* (John

Block Friedman)

*'But I must accept the status which myth, if nothing else, gives me in the West before I can hope*

*to change the myth.'* (Baldwin)

Patricia Hill Collins (2000) warns that “activating epistemologies that criticize prevailing knowledge and that enable us to define our own realities on our own terms *has far greater implications*” (p. 274). I take her to mean the implications do not just stay contained within the individual—that solitary figure—but bleed onto others and into the world that individual is in. Thus, Collins (2000), these contemplations about epistemology, justification, truth, etc. are not merely “intellectual issue(s) for most African-American women—[but are] a lived reality” (p. 274). This reality can be observed in the reaction to Wells’s attempt to (re)define her own reality. In this section I want to examine her attempt at this redefinition as critique of the ‘prevailing’ knowledge of her day. I submit that her critique of lynching was actually a critique of the larger systems those acts of violence signified. I will focus on her interpretation/reading of the ‘moral monster’ that arrived on the scene in the 1890s. I submit that a close reading of that analysis reveals what is at stake when someone like Wells usurps the task of defining the world, but also why, in truth, this articulation, even though it attempted only to recite the facts was met (and continues to be met)

with such resistance. Before doing that I briefly turn to Charles Mills and Jacqueline Goldsby and their analysis of the world Wells (and we) lived in.

In *The Racial Contract*, explores a suspicion that, despite what was written on paper and the collective memory of the nation, the notion of ‘we the people’—and the bond that phrase created—was never intended to apply to everyone in this nation. Instead, it marked out ‘the people who count’ and ideologically sequestered them from the others (who, thus did not ‘count’—at least not in the same way). This ‘racial contract’, Mills argues, is actually the consolidation of several contracts: moral, political, and epistemological. Due to this current chapter’s emphasis, I am focusing on the latter contract. The racial epistemological contract enjoins a series of prescriptions that are imposed on ‘signatories’ and ‘beneficiaries’ of the racial contract. In order to continue to benefit from the larger contract they must submit to the epistemological expectations. Mills (1997) relays, “There is an understanding about what counts as a correct, objective interpretation of the world, and for agreeing to this view, one is (‘contractually’) granted full cognitive standing in the polity, the official epistemic community” (p. 17-18). Mills argues that to sign on to this contract is to enter a world governed by an “inverted epistemology.” This inversion impairs, for the sake of being a part of this particular polity, their ability to see the world correctly—a condition he refers to as ‘epistemological ignorance.’ This plays out through a resignation to the demand to misread the world. “One has to learn to see the world wrongly, but with the assurance that this set of mistaken perceptions will be validated by white epistemic authority” (Mills, 1997, p. 18). This self-assured (‘self-‘ here could mean communal because of the agreement they have ascribed to) vision of the world has moral and political implications. For instance, part of the epistemological fallout is the refusal to see black people (or indigenous peo-

ple, or many non-white others — those not invited to sign the contract) with the same moral worth as they hold for themselves.

There is an interesting tension that arises when one considers the intimate relationship between ‘ignorance’ (which seems to suggest a sub-conscious or passive condition) and ‘refusal’ (which would seem to demand some conscious effort). This tension seems to be maintained (not resolved) through the forcing of these signatories (white Americans) “into *rationalizations* so fantastic that they approached the pathological” which leads to a “tortured ignorance” (Mills, 1997, p. 97). This ignorance, however, in large thanks to the rationalizations that allowed it to settle, is a “delusion” that becomes all but impervious to any rebuttal. This is true whether the rebuttal is factual or not, in actuality, it seems like the more factual it is the more it needs to be denied or refuted. In their ‘inverted epistemology’ the ‘facts’ ring as error particularly because they carry the threat of revealing the actual world to these deluded figures.

This ‘inverted epistemology’ has a social impact. It creates, Mills argues, a “fundamental epistemic asymmetry” between black and white people (Mills, 1997, p. 17). Black people, because of their imposed station under the racial contract, have missed out on the opportunity to sign the contract, which means they never were asked to take on the inverted epistemology the contract demanded. Thus, they are able to see the world much clearer than those who signed the racial contract. Also, black people have had to familiarize themselves with the contract due to their vulnerabilities to its implications. The political and moral determination that they were not equal positioned them in the vision of the signatories in such a way where the latter felt they could do/treat the former however they pleased. This almost always manifested as abuse and brutalization—the contract encouraged it. Our survival has depended on the intellectual mastery of

the inner-workings of the contract and the effects it has on those under its epistemological burden.

There are also political implications to the epistemological contract. The brutal treatment of the black other has plagued this nation and has been either sanctioned or permitted (e.g. turning a blind eye) by the structures of this nation. The list of examples is long sustaining this is long. Jacqueline Goldsby in her important book, *Spectacular Secret*, identifies lynching as one of these examples. Goldsby (2006) argues that lynching was an important tool of “social control” that found its usefulness in the fact that it could be included within the ‘cultural logic’ of this country (p. 17). This ‘cultural logic’—meaning it did not violate the racial contract—made it both necessary *and* coherent. She argues that the power of the practice resided in the fact that it was both spectacular and had the capacity to blend into the background (secret). Its spectacularity allowed it to confirm important things about the racial contract to the onlookers (and those who could not stomach looking). As “an articulation of the[ir] social world’s organization” at that moment, it conveyed to them that the past and the present (ideologically) remained connected (Goldsby, 2006, p. 26). With time this temporal bridge was crossed by draconian laws that allowed them to maintain hope that things could be returned to the ways they once were. Thus, because of its cultural logic, Goldsby warns that any attempt to read lynching as abnormal, regressive, regional, or anomalous misinterprets what lynching was, and what it meant to those bound by the racial contract. But, also, its “fit within the flow of American history for as long as it did because of its cultural logic allowed us[?] to disavow its connections to national life and culture” (Goldsby, 2006, p. 27). This disavowal allowed lynching to become a “cultural secret”. Those under the racial contract were paradoxically encouraged to both keep it in mind *and* forget

about it. “Lynching thrived as a social practice at the turn of the nineteenth century because,” Goldsby (2006) submits, “to the degree that the violence could be integrated ‘secretly’ into the new regimes and routines of American life, the death toll of African American lynch victims could be both shocking and ordinary, unexpected and predictable, fantastic and normal, horrifying and banal” (p. 27). The cultural rationality of lynching made it a difficult institution to contend with. Not only the practice, but the rationalizations that gave it life, encouraged sympathizers, and traumatized its victims, into a “silence, leaving *gaps of knowledge in its wake*” (Goldsby, 2006, p. 35). The racial contract—hierarchizing the social world placing white people at the pinnacle—was able to thrive untroubled in those gaps. Any meaningful critique of lynching would have to defy the encouraged silence giving voice to the gaps. It would have to be able to interrogate the epistemological framework that justified things allowing them to make ‘sense’ in the world. I turn now to Wells-Barnett’s, *Red Record*, as an example of such an attempt.

Ida B. Wells-Barnett’s, *Red Record*, opens with an explanation of its purpose. Wells-Barnett began, not with her own words, but with a letter from Frederick Douglass, whom she would later identify as “the greatest man our race has produced” (Wells, 1970, 72). Douglass, himself, was someone who struggled with getting a handle on the growing epidemic. In Wells-Barnett’s analysis he saw a glimmer of hope. In the letter Douglass declared that his attempts paled in comparison to her methodology. He declared, “You give us what you know and testify from actual knowledge. You have *dealt with the facts with cool, painstaking fidelity, and left those naked and uncontradicted facts speak for themselves*” (Wells, 2014d, p. 220). The full title seems to suggest her mission upfront: ‘A Red Record. Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynchings in the United States, 1892-1893-1894. *Respectfully Submitted to the Nineteenth Century*

*Civilization* (emphasis added). The title seems to identify the audience (nineteenth century civilization) and her goal for this audience (that they may receive the ‘facts’ about lynching—in the form of statistics and a chronicle of the causes). However, from the title page we are confronted with some interesting questions. First, the title seems to betray any need for the submission of the facts. These statistics have been chronicled for the previous three years, so why would she assume this submission would make a difference? Also, the audience seems too broad? Who is this ‘nineteenth civilization’? Douglass’s letter introduces us to another problem—even though he celebrates her method. Douglass suggests that the facts may not work. He observes that the “American *moral* sensibility” had become so “hardened by persistent infliction of outrage and crime against colored people” (Wells, 2014d, p. 220). This resonates with Mills’s notion of an ‘inverted epistemology’, which intensifies an understanding of the problem. This epistemology has been inoculated against the impress of facts according to Mills (and seemingly Douglass here). Douglass suggests if their moral sensibilities were not so impaired there would be a “scream of horror, shame, and indignation” wherever the pamphlet was read (Wells, 2014d, p. 220). However, they may not be her intended audience.

There is more than one way this pamphlet can be read. Many choose to follow the lead of the opening sentence and its address to the “student of American sociology” (Wells, 2014d, p. 221), reading it as an attempt to employ a ‘cool’ sociological method. Goldsby (2006) argues that this is the method chosen by Wells-Barnett in order to derive a “less subjective mode of analysis” (p. 82). Goldsby (2006) continues,

*The seeming neutrality of numbers, together with the detached, objective-sounding tone of social science writing, encouraged the public to regard empirical data as a nonpartisan account of the problems such research describes.* Wells recognized the utility of sta-

tistical thinking: by measuring the aggregates of lynching's trends, *she could marshal empirical evidence to support her critiques of the violence* (Goldsby, 2006, p. 83).

Goldsby (2006) suggests that this is the quickest path to credibility with an audience who may not be as heated about this issue as she was (p. 84). However, Wells immediately follows up this salutation with a qualification. As opposed to a 'cool' and 'detached' submission to the American student of sociology, she seems to be warning them. She argues that it was only the year previous where a "pronounced awakening of the public conscience" had come alive; however this is in response to a decade's worth of "scenes of unusual brutality" that somehow could not awaken a similar awakening of "human sentiments" in America (Wells, 2014d, p. 221). If the scenes could not do it, why would Wells-Barnett think the statistics—as cold figures on the page—have more success? Goldsby (2009) notes there are two potential problems with the use of statistics. First, they have the potential to "condense the complex and tangled histories of social encounters gone awry into an abstraction of mere numbers" (p. 423). This flattening can produce an effect where the impact of the actual event the statistic is signifying gets lost. Second, aggregation has the capacity of producing "habits of thought" among its recipients that conflates what is being recorded with the life that is being recorded. In other words, there was a danger in "the tallied losses of black life fail to measure any other condition but their own privation" (Goldsby, 2006, p. 83). Wells-Barnett seems to be aware of, and share, similar concerns. She hedges with an educated speculation that "[n]ot all nor nearly all of the murders done by white men, during the past thirty years in the South, have come to light" (Wells, 2014d, p. 221). Nevertheless, she does adopt the usage of statistics and tables and charts.

Goldsby suggests that there may be a hidden intent in her adopting this method (that was gaining steam in this country during this time). She argues that Wells-Barnett takes up this

method in order to “[parody] the discourses of American social sciences (particularly sociology) to explore how paradigms of objectivity and empiricism functioned to produce and reinforce white Americans’ simultaneous rage for and disinterest in lynching as a crisis of national concern” (Goldsby, 2006, p. 82). In this way, Goldsby (2006) argues, Wells-Barnett is able to shed a light on lynching’s cultural logic and the “orders of proof” that were so important to the “authority of scientific rationalism” (p. 82). In order to demonstrate this Goldsby focuses on chapters 3-6 which she concludes were written to counteract the negative effects statistics could have on the reader. She notes how Wells disrupts this effect by taking the tables and rearranging them in a way that intended to highlight the lives those numbers allegedly represented. By placing the chapters that narratives after the statistics Goldsby claims Wells-Barnett was able to utilize empiricism in such a way that “recupere[d] the deaths of lynching’s black victims as histories full of meaning that *reason* cannot deny” (Goldsby, 2006, p. 87-88). However, I want to focus on chapter one (“The Case Stated”) briefly. It is interesting to me that she does not begin with either statistics or with narratives of lynchings. Instead, she begins with a narrativized interrogation of the phenomenon itself. She starts with an exploration of the epistemological foundation of lynching—its justifications/excuses and their impact on the believability of necessity of the practice. I suspect that this was where she began to communicate a distrust in the reasonableness of the participants and sympathizers (and onlookers?) of the phenomenon. Thousands upon thousands had died by the time she began to pen this pamphlet, and this was not enough to awaken the humane sentiments of the vast majority of Americans. I suspect that the reason the statistics could dampen, deaden the effect was because there was already a passion that raged underneath those cold



tables that chronicled lynch law's growth in the country. This passion/desire would be excavated by Wells-Barnett in the first chapter.

In this first chapter Wells-Barnett indicts the justifiers of lynching by pointing out that if only they “would tell the truth and admit” the indiscriminate nature of their abuse of black people she would not have felt the need to write this pamphlet (Wells, 2014d, p. 224). But, because they were intentionally obscuring the record there was a need for black people to “give to the world his side of the awful story” (Wells, 2014d, p. 224). She then begins the story, again, not with statistics or anecdotes, but with a story<sup>5</sup>. She begins the chronicle in enslavement. Earlier it was shown that Goldsby argued that part of lynching's ‘cultural logic’ was its function as a bridge between the past and the present. Wells-Barnett shares this assessment. She argues here in the first chapter that lynching was the manifestation of “the inevitable result of unbridled power exercised for two and a half centuries” (Wells, 2014d, p. 221). Wells-Barnett believed, then, that lynching was a revisitation of (the sentiments) of enslavement in a new, but familiar, garb. During the “slave regime” a presumed control was expressed over black people “body and soul”. This was the result of the belief that the black body was the property of the enslaver granting him “unlimited power” over them (Wells, 2014d, p. 221). The enslaver was compelled to manage this control, not out of any concern for the enslaved, but out of financial interests. Thus, he would attempt to do his best not to impair the body of the enslaved in any way that would inhibit their

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<sup>5</sup> I keep referring to this as a narrative not to diminish its factuality. I think it is ‘true’. I think Wells believed it to be ‘true’. She says, before getting into the details, that our side of the “awful story” needed to be told. She then gives the biography of the practice of lynching in this story. I just use that classification to contrast with the ‘cool’ employment of the statistics, and the (hot?) re-telling of some of the more brutal executions that had happened over the years. I think she frames both of these, and their relationship to each other, through what she does in this first chapter.

productivity. This placed a limit on the physical punishment he would subject the enslaved to.

Wells summarizes,

While slaves were scourged mercilessly, and in countless cases inhumanly treated in other respects, still *the white owner rarely permitted his anger to go so far as to take a life*, which would entail upon him a loss of several hundred dollars. The slave was rarely killed, *he was too valuable*; it was easier and quite as effective, for discipline or revenge, to sell him ‘Down South’ (Wells, 2014d, p. 221, emphasis added)

Again, brutality was definitely a part of the ‘slave regime’. According to Wells-Barnett, any sentiments the enslaver had that was favorable toward the enslaved was wrapped up in a utilitarian calculus (what could be extracted from the enslaved for the enslaver’s benefit). Then came a major social/political shift in their relationship.

With emancipation there should have been a dramatic shift in this relationship. No longer ‘owned’ (“body and soul”) they *should* have been free from the coercive control of their former enslavers. But there was a problem: “the Southern white people had been educated so long in that school of practices, in which might makes right, that they disdained to draw strict lines of action in dealing with the Negro” (Wells, 2014d, p. 221). There is an important diagnosis of the problem. The legal circumstances, on paper, had shifted. However, they “disdained” (scorned, sneered, showed contempt) to move with the shift. What I am attempting to highlight is that their attitude/disposition/sentiment toward the formerly (legally) enslaved did not change despite the legal/social/political circumstances. Their commitment to the racial epistemological contract overruled any changes in the ‘real’ world. Thus, in the ‘free’ times a “new system of intimidation came into vogue” (Wells, 2014d, p. 221). No longer invested with the restraints that came with fiscal responsibility, they continued the brutal physical treatment and added murder to the list. The result was the thousands of deaths Wells-Barnett lamented at the beginning of the chapter.

These wanton murders continued until the “public conscience” of “nineteenth century civilization” began to weigh heavy, and the subsequent criticism of the Southern white man “compelled [him] to give *excuses* for his barbarism” (Wells, 2014d, p. 222). These ‘excuses’ were offered as justifications “as a tribute to the nineteenth century civilization”, as a substitute for a change in disposition toward black people. This is evidence of the necessity of attending to the epistemological aspect of lynching. Wells-Barnett took this seriously. There was something underneath lynching that allowed it to be maintained as long as the rational remained ‘believable’. This also problematizes any ‘rational’ discussion surrounding this crisis. The excuses were offered because the desire was there. Was this desire rational? Could it change merely with a shift in beliefs?

Wells-Barnett, borrowing from Douglass’s framing, then turned to the series of excuses offered for lynching. There is an important rhythm to them. There were three between legal emancipation and the penning of this pamphlet. The rhythm is horrific in its simplicity. Each excuse, Wells-Barnett argues, was “adapted” to a purported emergency (Wells-Barnett, 2014d, p. 222). Each excuse reflects the time period it was offered in. There would be an ‘emergency’ that warranted(?) the killing of some black people. Eventually, the ‘emergency’ never manifested—there was no evidence for the justification. Thus, they would turn to a new excuse. The first rationale (running from emancipation for about a decade or so) emerged out of the necessity to quash any development of a rumored ‘race riot’. Massacres would ensue which were legitimized in the eyes of ‘civilization’. In these massacres many black people were brutally executed, while it was “remarkable” (miraculous?) that no white people died. Due to the lack of ‘race riots’ the excuse “at last wore itself out” (Wells, 2014d, p. 222). Not satisfied the perpetrators “*made up*

*their minds*” that a new excuse was needed (Wells, 2014d, p. 222). They found one during the reconstruction era. As a justification to continue in their horrific treatment of black people the cry went out, ‘No Negro domination’. It was determined that political, social, or economic control would never be ceded to this population. And yet, it went further, it was not merely a fear of subordination to black people, they refused to grant black people “any right which a white man was bound to respect” (Wells-Barnett, 2014d, p. 223). The rationale for this denial was the determination that ‘This is a white man’s government.’ This struggle was fought on two levels: legal and extra-legal. Eventually they were able to achieve total legal/political/social “victory” over the black population. With the prospect of ‘Negro Domination’ vanquished the excuse became worthless. However, they were still not satisfied. “Brutality still continued; Negroes were whipped, scourged, exiled, shot and hung *whenever and wherever it pleased the white man so to treat him*” (Wells, 2014d, p. 224). However, this violence was no longer justified before the eyes of ‘civilization.’ Thus, they went in search of a new excuse. The third excuse they eventually landed on, Wells-Barnett laments, was the most efficient of the three. “There could be framed no possible excuse more harmful to the Negro and *more unanswerable* if true in its sufficiency for the white man” (Wells, 2014d, p. 224). Therefore, they landed on an excuse that provided them all the justification they needed to continue the attempted usurpation of that “unbridled power” that was at their disposal just three decades prior. The new excuse was the charge that black men had begun to inordinately sexually assault white women. The efficiency of the excuse rested in the fact that,

Humanity abhors the assailant of womanhood, and this charge upon the Negro at once placed him *beyond the pale of human sympathy*. With such unanimity, earnestness and apparent candor was this charge made and reiterated that the world has accepted the story

that the Negro is a monster which the Southern white man has painted him” (Wells, 2014d, p. 73).

This excuse was crafted to appeal to the sensibilities of white America. It superseded any possible rational debate about the treatment of black people. It was so effective that here in the quote we see the excuse worked to blanket black *people* placing them beyond “the pale of human sympathy.” Thus, the prospect of speaking on their behalf was presented as irrational (no human would do so). Wells-Barnett observes that this excuse held in check those who took the “crime, lawlessness, [and] anarchy” associated with these scenes of horrific violence as “certain precursors of a nation’s fall” (Wells, 2014d, p. 74). It became the reasonable option to remain quiet on behalf of these ‘moral monsters’ even if it meant the disintegration of the social world as they knew it. I take Wells-Barnett’s classification of the lynching victims(?) to be worthy of consideration here. There were many ways these individuals were talked about in the papers during this period (e.g. ‘fiend’, ‘brute’, ‘bestial’, etc.). But here she contrasts with the withdrawal of ‘human sympathy’ the appearance of the ‘moral monster.’ This contrast was enough to override any need for evidence. The accusation or speculation was enough to warrant their destruction. In order to explore the effect of this classification I will now turn to several monster theorists. Through their discussion I will be building toward the conceptualization of ‘epistemological vertigo’ and its relationship to the monster.

I turn to monster theorists because of their ability to elucidate the value that resides in getting the proper reading of ‘monsters’. For instance Jeffrey Cohen, who was formative in the establishment of monster theory as school of study, developed seven theses for engaging with the monster. In that formative essay Cohen (1996) argues that a monster is a “glyph that seeks a hierophant” (p. 4). In other words, according to Cohen, the nature of their existence rests in this

demand to interpret the reason for their existence and purpose. There is an urgency to this reading because the monster is usually associated with destruction/terror. The inability to properly read the monster is usually followed by peril. According to Jeffrey Weinstock, this demand to be read presents the monsters (and their monstrosity) as an epistemological question. “Whether the monstrous comes to us or we conjure it up,” Weinstock (2020) argues, “monstrosity is a *loose and flexible epistemological category* that allows us a space to define that which complicates or seems to resist definition” (p. 4). Because the monster is not human it places the latter in a crisis. It embodies all that is outside human control, that which is unwieldy, disobedient, and unmanageable. When they appear, then, they arrive to “frustrate our epistemological strategies for making sense of the world” (Weinstock, 2020, p. 19). They demand to be interpreted but this will be no easy task.

The demand emerges out of the relationship the monster holds with the time and place of their appearance. Bernadette Calafell (2015), in her book *Monstrosity, Performance, and Race in Contemporary Culture*, argues that the monster actually come to stand in for the “cultural space” out of which it emerges (p. 6). Cohen resonates claiming that the monster embodies “a certain cultural moment—of a time, a feeling, and a place” (p. 4). Their reflection of their culture, however, is deformed and warped—which is why they are so difficult to read. Asa Mittman (2013) argues, “They swallow up our cultural mores and expectations, and then, becoming what they eat, they reflect back to us our own faces, made disgusting or, perhaps, revealed to always have been so” (p. 1). Thus, this relationship is not a peaceful one, but one of anxiety and turmoil. They frustrate the cultures they appear to/in, but carry a sense of necessity with them. Mittman (2020) identifies the monster as one that presents “challenge and question ... trouble ... worry ... [a]

haunt[ing] ... [something that] break[s] and tear[s] and rend[s] cultures, *all the while constructing them and propping them up*" (p. 1). Through this process the culture, if it survives the conflict with its monster, is able to achieve a deeper sense of itself.

Mittman suggests that the discussion of the 'reality' of the monster is unnecessary, and maybe even moot. He notes that they are usually deemed fictional (e.g. dictionary definitions), mythical creatures that are the result of an individual's or community's imagination. The belief in them is usually, he argues, summarized in one of two ways. Either it is understood that 'rational' groups view their monsters as metaphors, thus, they never really believed in them. They still have function within that group, but they never slip into the possibility of actually existing (in the same way we do). The groups who actually believed in their monsters are often looked down on as gullible or 'superstitions'. This naïveté is treated as a sign that they are "unable to arrive at rational conclusions in the same manner as modern people" (Mittman, 2020, p. 5-6). These groups deserve the pity of those of 'us' who are more advanced. He offers an interesting caveat regarding this second group though. He asks about the relationship between that group's 'given reality' and the monsters they believed in. The structure of their world was 'rational' (it had norms, systems, laws, etc. that gave it sense). Their monsters often found a source/origin within these rational structures. Thus, on some important level, it made 'sense' to believe in them. The America Wells found herself in the 1890s, I am arguing, was more like the second. I submit that it really 'believed' in the monsters, if it did not it is unclear on the forcefulness of the justification for their eradication. This belief, especially by a society that was 'progressing' on so many levels challenges the distinction made by Mittman here. Mittman moves past this question though. He does not think the question of its reality is a good one. Across time they have been so various it is

difficult to build a meaningful criteria for its identification anyway (Mittman, 2020, p. 9). Instead, he argues that a monster is better identified by the “effect” or “impact” it has on the culture in/through which it appears. “[F]rom this perspective,” Mittman (2020) argues, “all the monsters are *real*” (p. 6). Thus, there is no question as to the reality of the monsters Wells-Barnett is confronted with in *Red Record*. Her qualification (‘moral’) is an important one here. They were deemed ‘moral’ monsters who were untamable and thus needed to be destroyed—at least that was the rationale.

The effect most common to monsters is reflected in most of the legends that form the ‘commonsense’ regarding monsters. Weinstock (2020) argues that the attention the monster receives is not centered on them as much as the desire to see how “human protagonists contend with them” (p. 19). In most articulations, the arrival of the monster necessitates a hero. Gilmore (2003) argues that across the globe the story unfolds typically revealing a “recurrent structure” (p. 13). It generally unfolds in five stages. In the first stage the monster ‘irrupts’ into the world (Gilmore, 2003, p. 13). It emerges from the shadows—outside the borders of the human community. Prior to the monster’s arrival the community is generally idyllic, peaceful, and thus ill-prepared. In the second stage the monster causes destruction and death, alarming the community shaking it out of its self-satisfaction. This alarm raises a cry for some hero to come so that the monster can be vanquished—the third stage. In the fourth stage the hero is able to destroy the monster. This is the function of the hero at all times: to “[clear] the field for humanity” (Gilmore, 2003, p. 11). This locks the hero and monster in a symbiotic relationship. The two are “constant and inevitable foil[s]” (Gilmore, 2003, p. 4). It is crucial to the story, at least in its typical form, that the monster does not prevail. Also, it is not enough to kill it, but it



must be done “in the most gruesome manner imaginable” (Gilmore, 2003, p. 4). Cohen argues that the monster’s destruction is dramatic and communal and “functions as an exorcism and, when retold and promulgated, as a catechism” (Cohen, 1996, p. 18). Recorded for posterity, this destruction brings on the fifth stage: the return to normalcy. It is through the monster’s destruction that the community—with or through its heroes—purifies itself.

The reason the monster must be dealt with is because of the potential epistemological damage it can cause if it is allowed to remain alive. Again, they emerge from/dwell in realms outside of the world the human calls home. This places them outside of the social mechanisms these humans use to make sense of themselves and their world. Because of their overall incomprehensibility they present an epistemological danger to the human world. The main effect of the monster is their capacity to create a sense of ‘epistemological vertigo’ in the mind of the humans who are in conflict with it. This sense of vertigo Mittman notes, “calls into question our (their, anyone’s) epistemological worldview, highlight[ing] its fragmentary and inadequate nature ... thereby [asking] us ... to acknowledge the failures of our systems of categorization” (Mittman, 2020, p. 8). The monster frustrates the taken-for-granted ability of the human to be able to have a rational slot for everything in their world. The monster’s power derives from its capacity to resist such categorization. Its monstrosity rests in its ability to remain “the inverse or outside of what is acceptably human” (Wright, 2013, p. 3). In other words, it becomes a ‘monster’ at the moment when concepts and categories fail to find its place in the world. Mittman argues that this aspect of the monster is more frightening than the violence usually associated with these figures. To remain uncategorizable creates the possibility that the world is not grasped and may need redefinition.

This aside into monster theory is useful because it reveals important things about the monster Wells-Barnett, and the world-at-large that she inhabited, found herself confronted with in the 1890s. However, there are critical differences that provide important insight about that world (cultural moment). This monster did not irrupt on the world, but was instead ‘painted’ into existence (Wells, 2014d, p. 224). It still, interestingly, called forth ‘heroes’ who felt commissioned to vanquish them. However, this demand did not seem to emerge from any sense of epistemological vertigo. In actuality they had the opposite effect. They were necessary because their fabrication/production is what held the world together. They had no problem classifying these monsters because they created them. To be clear, the individual who had to suffer under the paint brush of their oppressors were not made monstrous through this process. Their ‘monstrosity’ was a projection that allowed them to, unfortunately, satisfy a role in the ritual of attempting to keep pure this inverted world. Their delusions were such that some needed to be sacrificed to maintain them. These delusions were so insatiable that the myth was used as a pretense to kill the majority of which did not even satisfy the criteria for monstrosity. This is, after all, what the ‘facts’ revealed (see chapter 2 of *Red Record*).

#### IV.

‘... don’t tell a lie on me/I won’t tell the truth ‘bout you ...’ (Kendrick Lamar)

These (painted) ‘moral monsters’ raise interesting questions about Wells-Barnett’s dogged pursuit of the ‘facts’ that motivated her investigation of lynching (and racial violence in general). This pursuit structured her first major work, *Southern Horrors*, as well. The preface—

the letter from Douglass—links the two texts. But the portrayal of her motives that frame *Horrors* link the two texts as well. As stated at earlier in this chapter, *Horrors* was a development of that ‘infamous’ editorial establishing her preliminary findings when she began to investigate lynching. By the time she is writing *Horrors* we see her engaged with many of the themes that are still haunting her in *Record*. She does not employ the language of monsters in this early text, but she is dealing with the same phenomenon. She states that the text was the result of a sense of duty to present to the world “a statement of the facts as they exist” (Wells, 2014a, p. 61-62). She understood this submission would function as a “defense” for black people in America. The necessity was two fold. Wells highlights, “The awful death-roll that Judge Lynch is calling every week is appalling, *not only because of the lives it takes*, the rank cruelty and outrage to the victims, but *because of the prejudice it fosters and the stain it places against the good name of a weak race*” (Wells, 2014a, p. 58). What is this stain? — the charge of rape/sexual assault of white women. After identifying the amount of lynching victims between 1884-1892 (728), and identifying that many of them victims died for charges much lighter than this stain, she identifies the rationale for the staining<sup>6</sup>. She argues,

*To palliate this record* (which grows worse as the Afro-American becomes intelligent) and *excuse some of the most heinous crimes that ever stained the history of a country*, the South is shielding itself behind the plausible screen of defending the honor of its women. This, too, in the face of the fact that only one-third of the 728 victims to mobs have been charged with rape, to say nothing of those of that one-third who were innocent of the charge (Wells, 2014a, p. 70).

It was these kinds of truths she hoped to be able to get before America in the wake of the 1892 lynching in Memphis.

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<sup>6</sup> This language is awfully close to that of ‘painting’ used in *Red Record*.

Just a few months after the publishing of this work, Wells expressed a sentiment that must have haunted her as she was writing *Horrors*. In “Lynch Law in All its Phases,” Wells declared that she was motivated to get the truth out because of a conviction “that the country at large does not know the extent to which Lynch law prevails in parts of the Republic, nor the conditions which force into exile those who speak the truth.” This conviction, despite how naive it sounded, rested on her unwillingness to “believe that the apathy and indifference which so largely obtains regarding mob rule is other than the result of ignorance of the *true* situation” (Wells, 2014c, p. 96-97). Thus, in her early work there she holds a strong link between knowledge/ignorance and action/inaction, the latter naturally flowing from the former. This was why she wanted to deliver the truth to her country. She submitted *Horrors*—“a contribution to truth, an array of facts”—with the hope that its “perusal” (no mere skimming) would “stimulate this great American Republic to *demand that justice be done* though the heavens fall” (Wells, 2014a, p. 58). This expectation reveals the connection Wells believe existed between the truth and (what she called) sentiment.

The remolding of the American public sentiment through its introduction to the factual situation they were confronted with was of critical importance for Wells. The giving of the facts, she believed, could work toward the “creation of a healthy public sentiment” which was “the first step toward revolution” (Wells, 2014b, p. 89). Her staunch belief in the ability of facts to produce change makes sense when one considers her life trajectory in the lead up to 1892. Not long before this year she also gave space to the mythological framing of the justification of lynching. In her autobiography she reflects,

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 (Wells, 1970, p. 64).

It was the “facts” surrounding the lynching of Moss, McDowell, and Stewart—(1) it was executed with “just as much brutality as other victims of the mob” (Wells, 1970, p. 64), and (2) they were lynched, not for rape, but for attempting to defend themselves against the overreach of a white man—that induced in her an epistemological vertigo of sorts, setting her on the trajectory to discover, for herself, the actual causes of lynching. That lynching also disrupted her endorsement of the ‘doctrine’ of self-help, thrift and economy as safeguards against the “humiliations and proscriptions under which we labored” (Wells, 2014c, p. 97). It was this belief that initially motivated her writing. But, again, she learned a hard lesson in the wake of that lynching. She reported that the lesson learned was the fact that she was surrounded by white people in Memphis who had a growing concern that, ‘The negroes are getting too independent.’ The lynching of Moss, McDowell and Stewart was an attempt to teach these ‘independent’ blacks the “lesson of subordination” (Wells, 2014a, p. 72). It was her subsequent investigation of lynching that revealed to her the true motivation behind lynching: the type of subordination desired by these white men was nothing short of a return to enslavement. This was strongly implied in an article she cites heavily in *Horrors* entitled ‘More Rapes, More Lynchings’ (p. 72). This article combined the thread-bare lie with what seemed to be the hopes of what Wells suspected were represented by some of the leading citizens of the city. The article intimated that the major problem with black people in the city (particularly the generation which grew up after legal emancipation, the ones too young to remember bondage) was their loss of “the traditional and wholesome awe of the white race” (as cited in Wells, 2014a, p. 72). This awe, fine-tuned under the auspices of their

enslavers, kept them subdued. This article connects this loss of awe with the (mythological) increase in the sexual assault of white women—a crime unthinkable during enslavement. Since they were no longer under the guardianship of chattel slavery there remained no “restraint upon their brute passion” (as cited in Wells, 2014a, p. 72). The only remedy that followed according to this inverted epistemology was reenslavement, or the recourse executed at the lynching site.

Wells seems very aware of this contrived conundrum. She agreed that there was a regression taking place since legal emancipation. However, she did not identify it in the black people of that region. Instead she remarks, “To the Afro-American the south says, ‘the white man must and will rule.’ *There is little difference between the Ante-bellum South and the new South*” (Wells, 2014a, p. 76). This is an interesting instance of the ‘epistemic asymmetry’ Mills argued was the result of the different positions held in relation to the racial contract. Wells-Barnett held this view of the connection between enslavement and lynching until the end of her life. In *Crusade* she reflects that in the wake of the 1892 lynching,

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. The federal laws for Negro protection passed during Reconstruction times had been made a mockery by the white South where it had not secured their repeal. This same white South had secured political control of its several states, and *as soon as white southerners came into power they began to make playthings* of Negro lives and property. This still seemed not enough to ‘keep the nigger down.’ Hence came lynch law to stifle Negro manhood which defended itself, and the burning alive of Negroes who were weak enough to accept favors from white women (Wells, 1970, p. 71).

Both *Horrors* and *Record* are replete with anecdotes and intimations illustrating this fact.

In exploring the question of the foundational role of the epistemological in making sense of Wells analysis of racialized violence, the goal was not to unduly critique her methods or resolve anything. It was just to point to a conundrum that haunted Wells through her writing career

(and deeply frustrates me as I work on her so many decades later with the suspicion that certain things have not dramatically changed. In the face of overwhelming odds Wells-Barnett believed the antidote was in a shift in the public sentiment of this country. She believed in the pen's ability to effectively confirm the humanity of black people to her audiences. She hoped that through this work, which in large part was a refutation of the rumors an innuendo seizing that same public conscience, she could "arouse the conscience of the American people to a demand for justice to every citizen, and punishment by law for the lawless, I shall feel I have done my race a service" (Wells, 2014a, p. 58). With that aroused sentiment she supposed,

When a sentiment against lynch law as strong, deep and mighty as that roused against slavery prevails, I have no fear of the result. It should be already established as a fact and not as a theory, that every human being must have a fair trial for his life and liberty, no matter what the charge against him. When a demand goes up from fearless and persistent reformers from press and pulpit, from industrial and moral associations that this shall be so from Main to Texas and from ocean to ocean, a way will be found to make it so (Wells, 2014c, p.112-113).

This seems almost oxymoronic when placed up against her assessment of the true nature of lynchings. Legal emancipation came without a generalized meaningful destruction of the mindset that undergirded the institution; a mind-set that Wells-Barnett indicted, as early as *Horrors*, as desiring to return to that state. So was the raising of public sentiment effective? Maybe this is the nature of hope. Interestingly, she does not come with a prescribed plan on how to fix it but banks on that path coming clear once a "healthy" sentiment is established.

V.

About six decades after Wells-Barnett initiates her anti-lynching investigations James Baldwin is in a Swiss village where he identifies a 'moral monster' that is important conversation

with Wells-Barnett's discovery in *Red Record*. Arriving in that village for a second round of a writing retreat (he was initially there the previous year). He reflects, "I remain as much a stranger today as I was the first day I arrived, and the children shout *Neger! Neger!* as I walk along the streets" (Baldwin, 1998, p. 118, emphasis supplied). He did not take this interaction to be malicious in any way, but it did cause him to reflect on his life in America. He contrasts the two experiences, "I am a stranger here. But I am not a stranger in America and the same syllable riding on the American air expresses the war my presence has occasioned in the American soul" (Baldwin, 1998, p. 124). One of the major problems he recalled facing black people in America is the battle with "the legends which white men have created about black men, the most usual effect of which is that the white man finds himself enmeshed, so to speak, *in his own language*" It is through these legends that Americans, according to Baldwin, try to turn black people into "abstractions," however, this presence only reveals the long-standing turmoil their actual presence causes "the American character" (Baldwin, 1998, p. 125). The struggle is over what position the black person will hold in the epistemological framework of white America. Baldwin argues that all the black person wants is to be recognized as a human being, while white America strives "to keep the black man at a certain human remove" (Baldwin, 1998, p. 122). Why won't the latter relent? They carry with them a sense that the cost is too high, that the risk will not be worth the reward. White America must, by any means, preserve its purity. Yet, this has a cost as well. Their grasping for purity weakens their "grasp on reality" (Baldwin, 1998, p. 129). They cannot hold on to



both at the same time and have placed themselves where they have to now choose between reality or (self-)delusion<sup>7</sup>. The choice here is crucial.

Baldwin (1998) counsels, “People who shut their eyes to reality simply invite their own destruction, and anyone who insists on remaining in a state of innocence long after that innocence is dead *turns himself into a moral monster*” (p. 129). Again, to choose reality is to acknowledge the humanity of a presence who has been haunting the nation—because it has perpetually attempted to hold off this choice—since its inception. Yes, selection of reality will have its costs, one of which will come immediately and will (i assume) hurt profoundly: the loss of innocence. However, Baldwin seems to believe that it has been long lost, it is just the masquerade has convinced the nation otherwise. Baldwin (2017) lamented the moral cost that came with the attempts to structure the world in such a way where the masquerade could continue,

I’m terrified at the moral apathy, the death of the heart, which is happening in my country. These people have deluded themselves for so long that they *really don’t think I’m human*. And *I base this on their conduct, not on what they say*. And *this means that they have become in themselves moral monsters*” (p. 39, emphasis added).

Thus, moral monstrosity, for Baldwin, is connected at the intersection between the desperate attempt to maintain an innocence that is long gone, and the treatment of others (black people specifically here) who one cannot fully embrace because they are a reminder of that innocence lost. I don’t take his utilization of ‘apathy’ here to mean the same thing as something like aloofness, but instead an indifference that is motivated and has to be maintained through living, and active structures (e.g. segregation—was the example he used preceding this quote).

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<sup>7</sup> Baldwin will argue a few years later in an interview that in this self-imposed quandry—between recognition of a fellow human and the maintenance of this sense of innocence—they have made themselves “monsters” and are, thus, destroying themselves (as cited Baldwin, 1998, p. 122).

There was an intimate link between morality, life, and their interplay in the day to day experience in this nation. He argues that moral beliefs are “never as tenuous as life” (Baldwin, 1998, p. 126). He makes a differentiation between life and morality, in other words, he is weary of conflating the two. Through a person’s moral beliefs, he maintains, both “a frame of reference and a necessary hope” are created (Baldwin, 1998, p. 126). However, the lived experience continue to threaten a sense of the fragility of those cherished moral beliefs. Thus, it seems like those things created through the moral beliefs are threatened as well. The “necessary hope” created through those moral beliefs sustain the desire that something will remain when life has done its worst, and that ultimately one will come off a conqueror. “Life,” Baldwin (1998) declares, “would scarcely be bearable if this hope did not exist” (p. 126).

Ideas (e.g. morality) for Baldwin are “dangerous” because they inevitably lead to action, the direction of which the holder of the idea is unable to anticipate. They are also dangerous because they place one in the position where they are vulnerable “to the most inhuman excesses” (Baldwin, 1998, p. 126). These excesses emerge out of the confrontation with two impossibilities: (1) remaining true to them, and (2) of being able to liberate oneself fully from them. According to Baldwin beliefs both justify and guard one from the chaos on the other side of their vanishing. White supremacy is the idea/belief that is the “warp and woof of the heritage of the West” (Baldwin, 1998, p. 126). This idea demand the persistent denial of black people. Baldwin argues that the maintenance of this idea (through various behaviors)—remaining true to the idea — has caused a “strain”. It also seems like there is an exhaustion related to the fear that comes from the prospects of liberating oneself from this particular idea (who would they be on the other side?). Baldwin also argues that the humanity of the one being denied is “overwhelmingly unde-

niable” and the attempt to maintain the idea in the face of this undeniably has forced them”into *rationalizations so fantastic that they approached the pathological*” (Baldwin, 1998, p. 127).

These rationalizations, and the excesses they produce, betray “a certain, unprecedented uneasiness over the idea’s life and power, if not, indeed, the idea’s validity” (Baldwin, 1998, p. 126-127). Yet, many cling to the rationalizations because they feel safer than then chaos on the other side of letting this constitutive idea go.

Why take this aside? Baldwin helps me, on some level, wrestle with some of the issues that arise when reading about the responses to Ida B. Wells-Barnett’s attempt to tell America the truth. The rationalizations and excesses Baldwin is reflecting on some decades after *Horrors* and *Record* were not new. In other words the public sentiment Wells was hoping to generate through a presentation of the facts had not taken hold. In an early speech, “The Requirements of Southern Journalism” (1893), Wells explained how the public sentiment in this nation could change. She explains that, in the early stages, she hoped to be able to present the facts she discovered through the white press, because “it was the medium through which [she] hoped to reach the white people of the country, *who alone could mold public sentiment*” (Wells-Barnett, 2014b, p. 86). It is understandable that Wells held this expectation in light of what she saw the white press seemed like they were able to influence in Memphis in 1892. Articles were written that many credited as spurning on the small mob that executed Moss, McDowell, and Stewart. It was also the case that the press seemed to catalyze the destruction of her press and an ultimately failed search for her in order to lynch her as well. This chapter is an attempt to begin to push toward an exploration of if this was the case. In other words, I wonder which is the cart and which is the horse. For instance, many of the ‘leading citizens’ were also a part of each of these groups (that stormed the jail and

destroyed her press). Wells-Barnett also speculated that the destruction of her press was a long time coming, something many of them wanted to do and were just looking for an excuse. If that is the case, it does not seem like they needed the press to drum up a ‘sentiment’ that would flow in that direction. This causes me to suspect that a mere implementation of that medium by a new set of ‘facts’ (delivered by Wells) could have brought about the reversal of sentiment she was hoping for. This, is not a critique of Wells per se. I am not sure discussions of the success/failure of Wells’s truth-telling are not wrong-footed. I believe her diagnosis to be right, I am just not sure if that particular remedy would (could) have worked. It was clear the facts she framed could produce the ire of the white citizenry in Memphis—it was loud; it just does not seem as clear that ‘facts’ could reverse sentiments so entrenched that long education she refers to in *Record*. The destruction of her press seems to suggest that the facts did work on some level. And yet, that same destruction flowed naturally out of the ‘inverted’ epistemological framework that was holding much of the ‘commonsense’ of America together.

There is a hope in Wells and Baldwin that things could change. The conversation raised between their respective ‘moral monsters’ raise concerns that seem to threaten their hopes. Wells’s ‘moral monster’ was fabricated in order to justify the destruction of lives the only remedy being the absolute subjugation of the group. Baldwin’s ‘moral monster’ is plagued by Wells’s era and hopes it could all be forgotten, even if that means they can never reverse their monstrous condition. In both times, it seems like the solution rested in the development of a courage to think or believe differently. We live on the other side of Baldwin, and it is not clear that the ideas or sentiment has shifted dramatically. Granted, there are some structural and material differences that seem to suggest that considerable changes have taken place. But, if it is true that a monster

embodies its cultural moment, what are America's current monsters saying? They, of course, continue to appear (e.g. Laquan, Sandra, Trayvon, Mike, George, etc.). While few appear under that infamous third excuse, an excuse that, based on the rhythm laid out in *Record*, was bound to diminish in its efficacy (like its predecessors). A similar attempt of painting on their monstrosity in the wake of their death—where they could no longer testify—was made for the first four I listed. These attempts aided in the soothing of many American consciences, an abetting in that apathy mentioned by Baldwin. This seems to suggest that the moral/epistemological framework is determined to hold on, making me wonder which set of facts the nation is waiting on before they can muster the courage to let go.

## Chapter 3

### Trapped: Ida B. Wells-Barnett and the ‘unwritten’ law

#### I.

1892 was a transformative year for Ida B. Wells. When reflecting on that year decades later in her autobiography, *Crusade for Justice*, she reminisced that the year “changed the whole course of my life” (Wells, 1970, p. 47). Prior to 1892 Wells was committed to writing in the name of ‘self-help’. She believed that, through such things as thrift and economy, black people in America could obtain the education, wealth, and character needed to defend themselves against “the humiliations and proscriptions under which we labored” (Wells, 2014c, 97). What Wells desired for black people was ‘justice’ and felt self-determination was the most effective route to it. According to Wells this approach “bore good fruit in Memphis” (Wells, 2014c, 98). Many were reading, and appreciative of, Wells’s prescriptions. The assumption was that as long as they did their part, the world around them would respond favorably. This brightened Wells’s and her readers’ outlooks, even with brooding clouds on the horizon. “There had been lynchings and brutal outrages of all sorts in our own state and those adjoining us,” Wells noted, “but we had confidence and pride in our city and the majesty of its laws” (Wells, 2014c, 98). Thus, despite the forecast, Wells and other Memphians felt secure.

Wells found herself “rude[ly] awakened” from this sense of security was disrupted following the events of March 9, 1892 (Wells, 2014c, 99). Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell, and Will Stewart were accused of shooting a few deputies in a raid of the *Peoples Grocery*, a store they co-owned with several others. The details regarding the altercation were shaky at the time,

but this did not stop the local newspapers from stoking the fire of resentment and vengeance. The agitation hovered around the recovery of the officers. There were many threats leveled at the three promising retribution if the officers did not make it. However, all of the wounded officers showed they would recuperate which brought a sense of relief to those concerned for Moss, McDowell, and Stewart. Others in similar situations found themselves stolen from jails by mobs. However, they believed that the good news ensured these three would survive any extrajudicial interference. This assurance, Wells recounts, was because they maintained “confidence in the law” (Wells, 2014c, 100). Nonetheless, this bubble was burst a lynch mob, in the dead of night, took the three from the jail and brutally murdered them. In the wake of this atrocity a group of white citizens were able to fulfill William Barrett’s (owner of a competitive store) promise to put the store out of business. He was a part of a ‘conspiracy’ who felt the black people in the area were getting ‘too independent’ and needed to be taught a ‘lesson’ — the “lesson of subordination” (Wells, 2014a, p. 75). The ‘conspiracy,’ Wells would later discover, executed a plan “known to every prominent white man in the city” (Wells, 2014c, 100). The plot included newspaper writers, government officials, and business men who worked together to help one white man put his competitor out of business.

Wells argued that the lynching of Moss, McDowell, and Stewart was “our first object lesson in the doctrine of white supremacy.”<sup>1</sup> This ‘object lesson’ laid out “the South’s cardinal prin-

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<sup>1</sup> It is interesting, and worth noting, that Wells’s framing of this lynching as an ‘introduction’ to this “object lesson” raises some questions. Just eight years prior Wells sued a train company for being harshly and unjustifiably removed. After initially winning her suit the verdict was overturned on appeal. Wells did not take the results lightly. Logging her disappointment in her journal she remarked, “*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, and just now, if it were possible, would gather my race in my arms and fly away with them*” (Wells, 1970, p. xvii, emphasis added). It is possible she recovered from this disappointment only to have the confidence (re)shattered a few years later.

ciple that no matter what the attainments, character or standing of an African-American, the laws of the South will not protect him against a white man” (Wells, 2014c, 102). In other words, those who survived were introduced to an ‘unwritten’ law that governed their community. Once Moss, McDowell, and Stewart raised their hand against a white man, regardless of the rationale, they were subject to its penalty. Their execution displayed the ‘unwritten’ law’s commitment to ensuring that no black person, regardless of their standing or character, would be safe if they attempted to make themselves a “rival” of any white man (Wells, 1970, p. 52). They also learned that there would be no recourse for someone who worked on behalf of this law. Thus, it was revealed to Wells, and other black Memphians, that the (written) law was “in the hands of their murderers” (Wells, 2014c, 101). Wells summarized the feeling of horror that followed,

I have no power to describe the feeling of horror that possessed every member of the race in Memphis when the truth dawned upon us that the protection of the law which we had so long enjoyed was no longer ours; all this had been destroyed in a night, and the barriers of the law had been thrown down, and the guardians of the public peace and confidence scoffed away into the shadows, and all authority given into the hands of the mob, and innocent men cut down as if they were brutes . . . (Wells, 2014c, 102).

This sense of horror would remain a critical part of Wells-Barnett’s analysis as she continued to try to make sense of the rising tide of lynching and its causes.

This chapter is an exploration of the impact this “rude awakening” had on Wells’s ongoing investigation of antiblack violence in America. The examination will center on her interrogation of the relationship between the ‘unwritten’ and written law. Wells-Barnett argued that the American (white) government was under trial, and the relationship between these two laws was at the core of the proceedings. It was Wells-Barnett’s contention that the ‘unwritten’ law had achieved ‘absolute’ sway over the written law of the land. While it can be argued that this domi-



nance was most clear at the lynching site, this chapter engages the broader argument Wells-Barnett makes. Naomi Murakawa (2021) argues that Wells's analysis extends beyond the lynching site to the many other forms white violence took, and continues to take, in this country (p. 214). I maintain that these forms of violence find common ground in their justification of the 'unwritten' law. To narrow Wells's investigation to lynching alone, one runs the risk of missing the depth of specter of violence that has haunted, and continues to haunt, black life in American for centuries. I also suggest that Wells-Barnett formulating this experience as one of "horror" is not accidental. In elucidating this experience as gothic/horrific, she joins a long tradition of black writers who used this lens (e.g. Harriet Jacobs, Frederick Douglass, Henry Bibb, etc.). Her interrogation of the relationship between the 'unwritten' and written law reveals the gothic nature of the law itself, as Wells points out as early as *Southern Horrors*. In her second major text, *Red Record*, Wells-Barnett argued that the law was haunted by 'monsters'. Wells-Barnett argued that America, and the 'civilized' world more broadly, was not heeding the warning these monsters were bearing—the written law, American government/civilization itself, was on the verge of crumbling under the weight of the 'unwritten' law. This had implications for both black and white people in this nation, regardless of the fact that, for whatever reason, the latter refused to attend to the warning, or (horrifically) even invited it. I will first explore what is meant by the law being gothic. The gothic has long been obsessed with the law as a 'haunted house' that is difficult to navigate. I will then turn to Wells-Barnett's interrogation of the (mis-)reading of the (unwritten) law, and how this misreading can lead to further misunderstanding of how manifestations of the unwritten law (e.g. lynching) can be remedied. I follow this by exploring how these misreadings/misinterpretations could have been avoided if her early analysis was allowed to be pub-

lished more broadly and could take hold. The chapter ends with Wells-Barnett's reading of a particular 'monster' that appeared in New Orleans, and how that reading confirmed Wells-Barnett's suspicion of the 'unwritten' law's absolute reign.

## II.

*'... we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code' / '... for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.'* (the apostle Paul)

Of the many themes that are examined in Gothic literature, the law is a consistent one. According to Leslie Moran (2001) the Gothic provides a "philosophy", or sensibility, through which "the sense and non-sense of past and present, stability and change, tradition and modernity are made and unmade on a day-to-day basis" (p. 80). One of the elements of this routine is living under the jurisdiction of law and order. Within the text a well-trod formulation of the law is the haunted house. Ruth Anolik (2000) notes that it is often within the walls of the cursed house that "the Gothic masterplot is played out" (p. 667). If the walls could/would talk it would be revealed that the dwelling is a "repository of past violence that is shortly to return". In other words, "Law is a living archive through which the present might be haunted by a specific past that is a logic of evil acts, corruption, monstrosity, dread and terror" (Moran, 2001, p. 84). One of the important elements registered on this archive is crime. Crime appears as "the mark through which man's corruption is *given form*" (Moran, 2001, p. 76, emphasis added). This corruption manifests in specific ways, which demonstrate the logic that registers as haunting. This corruption can also appear as specific (or specific types of) individuals. It is through the criminal act of these indi-

viduals that corruption is made alive. Through these actions “the body is made monstrous” (Moran, 2001, p. 76). Of all the crimes explored in the Gothic, murder “is the gothic act *par excellence*” (Moran, 2001, p. 76). The Gothic explores, then, the relationship between certain individuals, crime/criminality, and monsters/monstrosity, and the attempt of the house to contain them (to vary degrees of success). It is worth noting that the nature of this haunting complicates understanding the relationship between the archive and what it chronicles.

The Gothic often incorporates many sites often associated with the legal system into the storytelling (e.g. the prison, the court room, the trial, lawyers, judges). “These appear as characters in Gothic texts as the embodiment of a certain ambivalence of good and evil: between law as order and right reason and law as corruption” (Moran, 2001, p. 76). In other words, these sites (or within/through these sites), the negotiations between ‘good’ and ‘evil’, ‘civilization and barbarity’ are waged. Moran (2001) argues that in the Gothic the law appears as labyrinthine. Thus, “the quintessence of law as an archaic past that haunts and corrupts the straight path of rule and reason” (p. 76). The law, then, is difficult to navigate when seen in this gothic light. Its profession as bastion of reason and order is challenged in the Gothic text. There seems to be more at play than meets the eye. Within the Gothic the law, and the sites that embody it, are often associated with “madness, unreason, corruption, and a tangle of tortuous and perplexing enigmas and idiosyncrasies.” These elements seem to suggest—because who can be sure?—that because of the law’s haunting, the law is actually a “form of violence through which the social order is made possible” (Moran, 2001, p. 76). For this reason, instead of the security a house can present, to be trapped in the haunted house that is the law can be terrifying. To be stuck in the maze with no clear way out is truly a horrific proposition. The settling of ‘order,’ because founded on violence,

does not provide peace to the inhabitants, or visitors, of the house. Within a gothic environment, those within the house, and the things that fill it, are never quite settled.

Another theme that continues to appear within the Gothic text is the process of property ownership and the transfer of property. The Gothic presentation of the house as (seemingly) inescapable, strange, and phantasmagorical has a bearing on how property is, or can be, understood. Property, within the haunted house, appears as “epistemologically unpossessable, resisting both rational and legal attempts at control ... Gothic property, it seems, is not the kind of property that can be fully owned or transmitted by legal conveyance” (Anolik, 2000, p. 667). Because of its nebulous status, to seize ownership, to possess, property often foretold destruction of the house itself. Through this framing the Gothic interrogates ownership and the hierarchies and inequities that can be represented by/through property ownership. Under normal circumstances ownership provides a sense of security, but in the Gothic this security is unsettled and even overturned by its “eventual destruction”. In the Gothic, even when destruction is not the result, property “. . . is rendered undesirable by ghostly haunting” and through this haunting the rule of law—that at face value secures property ownership—is disrupted (Anolik, 2000, p. 668). Ultimately, there is no true security within the (gothic) law. It is haunted by a specter that suggests things were not established on a firm foundation. The acceptance of this haunting, however, does not make the house any easier to escape.

This sense of entrapment is a critical focus of the Female Gothic. Emerging in the late eighteenth century, this subgenre interrogates how the patriarchal system’s structuring of ownership of the house and property positions, or attempts to position, women within that structure. Through the gothic lens the Female Gothic represents “. . . the extent to which the law in various

ways facilitates the incapacitation and maltreatment of the female subject” (Chaplin, 2016, p. 135). With a particular sensitivity the Female Gothic explores how the female subject is trapped in the haunted house (or ‘Gothic castle’ as it is often portrayed), and the feelings/sentiments associated with being trapped. This focus reveals to the reader—if they are willing to hear—to what is at stake in “the violence, authority and limits of the law” (Chaplin, 2016, p. 148). It is not just the house that threatens to entomb her, there are figures within the walls that threaten her survival as well. These male subjects—e.g. the “demon-husbands”, “dangerous fathers”—function as “agents of Gothic imprisonment” (Anolik, 2000, p. 679). Thus, the text is often framed around a series of escapes and captures (the cycle repeats). Within the texts, it is worth noting, the agent’s attempt to possess her is ultimately foiled. So, the Gothic presents a world that is in constant flux. The pursuit of security is one of constant turmoil. The text challenges the wisdom in the attempts to possess. The possessed often turns on the possessor (if they can even ever really settle into this position) in such away that suggests any attempt at possession seems essentially foolhardy. The Gothic, then, turns the world upside down. The full story is rarely told, but the effects of the trajectory that brought the characters to their position seems to rest in the very walls themselves, and this saturation does not allow the house to ever truly become a home. Nothing is settled, nor does it seem it ever will/can be. In the following section I turn to the life of the enslaved. I attempt to apply this gothic lens to a reading of their lived experience. This reading is not, I argue, idiosyncratic or eccentric, but was a lens that many enslaved peoples utilized themselves. More sharply, what was communicated by many of the enslaved that their life was no fiction at all (and, thus, did not need to be composed as gothic), but the world (the house?) they lived in was, in effect, a gothic one.

### III.

*‘ . . . [the slave] is under the control of law, though unprotected by law, and can know law only as an enemy, not as a friend’ (William Goodell)*

This section, while exploring the gothic nature of the life of the enslaved, will focus primarily on their relationship to the ‘Gothic castle’ that is the law. The law’s role was fundamental in securing the enslaved person’s ‘place’ in America. Buried within this system “[t]he very life of a slave is . . . inevitably a gothic existence” (Wester, 2012, p. 35). The enslaved were in an environment where the specter of violence constantly hovered over their heads. Their real life was composed of elements that would later permeate the Gothic text (e.g. murders, bondage, brutal whippings and other tortures, illegitimate births, etc.). Thus, the lives of the enslaved read like a gothic plot. Just as the law was fundamental contemplation in early Gothic narratives, it was also a crucial element of the world of the enslaved. Like so many gothic protagonists, the enslaved were trapped in the labyrinth. “Excessive, often unpredictable, and arbitrary,” Ellen Weinauer (2017) observes, “the law functioned to create a real-life universe for enslaved persons *that had its fictional parallels in the dark, twisting labyrinths, locked rooms, blocked exits, colluding despots, and gory tortures of the popular Gothic*” (p. 272). To repeat, I do not read the influence from text to experience (as if the enslaved, or those on their behalf, were utilizing known gothic tropes in order to motivate a ‘proper’ understanding of their experience), but highlight that the lived experience of the enslaved was in essence (what came to be understood as) gothic. And it is in that experience that we can observe the very function of the law as to create and maintain an enslaved life. The enslaved were locked in the house with the hope of there never being an es-

cape. In other words, "... slavery might well be understood as the classic gothic chamber, *locked from the outside, with the law as the keeper of the key*" (Weinauer, 2017, p. 279, emphasis added). Since the very environment of the slave was gothic, we can read in their texts (e.g. slave narratives) as the means of bringing light to their world. So, it is reasonable to anticipate reflections on the law and their relationship to it. In these narratives "... the law itself becomes a kind of gothic villain, exerting *a seemingly absolute and inescapable control* over the lives of the enslaved" (Weinauer, 2017, p. 272, emphasis added). This goal of the law is the control of the enslaved, not their protection or security. Even if there were laws on the books (written law) that stipulated the 'better' treatment of the enslaved (e.g. outlawing 'cruel' punishment) these "protections ... were hardly worthy of the name" (Weinauer, 2017, p. 274). There were largely just pretense and their enforceability was never truly their intention. Built into these laws were opportunities for the oppressors to circumnavigate their consequences. For instance, the enslaved were not able to testify in the courts regarding their mistreatment. Also, the weight of the word of the enslaver far outweighed that of the enslaved. Thus, by refusing to build genuine mechanisms where the brutal treatment of the enslaved could be punished, white violence was "displaced" onto the slaves (Dewaard, 2006, p. 3). In order for the house to remain standing, things could be no other way. The rights of the enslaved on the books, could not penetrate to real life. This would, after all, put the house at risk. Lawrence Friedman speculates, "These rights [the protection of the enslaved] gave Southern law the appearance of justice, without upsetting the real social order. Had these rights been widely used, or used beyond the limits of Southern toleration, they would not have survived, even on paper" (as cited in, Weinauer, 2017, p. 274). In other words, it seems like truly, the right of the slave was subjugation.

However, subjugation was no easy task. Above, it was discussed how elusive possession of property was within the Gothic text. Even though it provided a sense of security for the possessor, that security was never long-lasting. Possession threatened the integrity of the (haunted) house. The property resisted both rational and legal possession. This seems to be a part of the message conveyed by the voices that haunt the house. Thus, it seems as if the gothic symbol suggests that the role of the house is to the possessions in place, even as they resist this placement. This seems no less true of the law governing enslavement. Patricia Williams (1991) elaborates on this structure,

In trying to describe the provisional aspect of slave law, I would choose words that revealed its structure as rooted in a concept of . . . *black antiwill*. I would characterize the treatment of blacks by whites in *their* law as defining *blacks as those who had no will*. If ‘pure will’ or total control equals the perfect white person, then *impure will and total lack of control equals the perfect black person* (219-220, emphasis added).

The goal of the slave law was to (attempt to) maintain the enslaved as possessable. However, possessions do not tend to have wills. Thus, the goal of the law was to keep the enslaved in a place of a broken will. Williams classification of this as ‘anti-will’ is interesting. It seems like it was not enough to have no will (if that was at all possible), but the goal was for the subjugation of the will. The ultimate goal seems to be the active self-imposed repression of the will. Yet, this does not seem to be something many, if any, enslaved were willing to participate in. This raised the necessity of another type of intervention by the law.

The legal status of the enslaved was “paradoxical” (Dewaard, 2006, p. 1). On one level they were persons, but they were treated as property. This was true, until they broke the law. In these moments, they were “held as fully responsible as any free white person” (Dewaard, 2006, p. 1). Saidiya Hartman (1997) argues, “The slave was recognized as a reasoning subject who



possessed intent and rationality solely in the context of criminal liability; ironically, the slave's will was acknowledged only as it was prohibited or punished" (p. 82). Thus, according to the law, the enslaved could only will to be criminal. Or, in other words, in the eyes of the law any expression of their will was a criminal act. The examination of the criminality of the enslaved veiled any examination of white criminality(?). After all, the possession of the enslaved took brutal methods. For the enslaved to respond to these affronts on the will was not lawful. Thus, "[t]he black body was simply the site on which the 'crimes' of the dominant class and of the state were externalized in the form of a threat" (Hartman, 1997, p. 82-83). The enslaved person, then, was haunted by, and continued to haunt, the house. The trial of the slave, for the expression of their will, was one-sided. To express it was to violate the slave law. The gothic truth was that the only way the enslaved could be acknowledged was as a "criminal" (Dewaard, 2006, p. 1).

A prominent voice in the expression of this gothic reality was Frederick Douglass. In 1850, he delivered a speech entitled, "The Nature of Slavery." Borne from experience the speech was an attempt to give a view of the essence of enslavement as it was practiced in this nation. Douglass (2014a) summarized slavery as "the granting of that power by which one man exercises and *enforces a right of property* in the body and soul of another" (330, emphasis added). And this environment, Douglass argues, had pernicious effects on both the enslaved and enslaver. This attempt to usurp power over the enslaved was an attempt to treat one's "fellow-man" as property. Douglass notes that it was the authority of the law which sanctioned this grasping. Under the law the enslaver was granted "absolute power" over the enslaved. Within the law's jurisdiction the enslaver was able to work, brutalize, hire out, sell, and, in certain situations, kill the enslaved "with perfect impunity" (Douglass, 2014a, p. 355). Despite the law's view of the en-

slaved, Douglass never loses sight of their humanity. In order to demonstrate this, Douglass highlights the enslaved person's interior life—the enslaved was one who experiences happiness and woe, hopes and fears, affections and passions, joys and sorrows (Douglass, 2014a, p. 355). However, within the house, there was a constant attempt to rob the enslaved of all of this. The hope was to reduce the person to a beast of burden, a position the enslaved was already placed in legally. According to the law, they were preemptively considered property, and the law granted any means to the enslaver to bring the enslaved into a corresponding lived experience. The intent was to reduce the enslaved's will to the enslaver. This, Douglass remarks, was a “monstrous relation” out of which “springs ... an unceasing stream of the most revolting cruelties” (Douglass, 2014a, p. 355). The distinction between perspectives is important to note here. While these “cruelties” were “revolting” from the view of the enslaved, they were understood as necessary in the eyes of the law (even if the law professed on paper otherwise). In conjunction with this law “... the slaveholder must strike down the conscience of the slave before he can obtain the entire mastery over his victim” (Douglass, 2014a, p. 357). The interiority of the enslaved person, then, must be stamped out, the end of which was their becoming property in ‘soul and body’ (inside and out). The law framed this, according to Hartman, in romantic language of submission. Submission, she notes, was the “guiding principle” of the relation between enslaver and enslaved; it was the vital element in the “trinity” of submission, sentiment, and savagery (Hartman, 1997, p. 90). It was for the enslaved person's ‘good’ that they resign to this program. If they did they were taken care of—at least physically. Williams (1991) notes, “to define slave law as comprehending a total view of personality implicitly accepts that the provision of food, shelter, and clothing ... is

the whole requirement of humanity” (p. 219). The inner life, however, was largely neglected, except to ensure things remained the way they needed to be.

Douglass (2014b) focuses on the way slave law attempted to keep things in order through physical savagery, or, what he deems the “bloody paraphernalia of the slave system” (p. 334)<sup>2</sup>. These implements were an absolutely necessary part of the “monstrous” relationship of enslaver and enslaved. Some of the examples Douglass listed was forced starvation, ‘the chain’, ‘the gag’, ‘pilliwinks’ (the thumbscrew, and the ‘bloody whip’. The ‘bloody paraphernalia’ had a specific purpose. They were used by the enslaver, and countenanced by slave law, in order to “keep the slave in his condition as a slave” (Douglass, 2014b, p. 332). Brutality, then, was a necessary part of keeping the enslaved in his position. This has important echoes with the gothic notion of property discussed earlier. Possessions work hard to avoid being possessed. This was definitely true of the enslaved person. Thus, brutal means were needed with the hope that the enslaved person would remain subject to the enslavers will—that they could remain their possession. Douglass (2014b) rehearsed the sentiment of the enslaver/slave law: “Unless you do so and so; unless you do as I bid you—I will take your life away” (p. 334). According to slave law, the enslaver held the right to physically brutalize the enslaved<sup>3</sup> *because* he held the right to enslave. Thus, there were no limits on the enslaver’s tyranny — “No law whatever will bring the guilty man to justice for the crime” (Douglass, 2014b, p. 338). The enslaved person had no recourse to this

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<sup>2</sup> It feels worth noting the value Douglass placed on exposing these methods. While a lot of attention is given to Douglass’s physical altercation with Covey as a means to liberation (see, for instance, Angela Davis’s, “Lectures on Liberation”), Douglass seems to understand that moment as only part of the process. In connection to relaying the nature of enslavement, he adds that through lifting “the curtain which conceals [the slaveholder’s] crimes” he took himself to be “[breaking] loose from [the slaveholder’s] chains” (331-332). He said this while physically free. Thus, escape from the house, for Douglass, seemed to critically include a proclamation of what was going on inside.

<sup>3</sup> Douglass adds the withdrawal of education from the enslaved as a part of this process. For Douglass, the mind was just as critical as the body. Even though this withholding does not seem to be part of the ‘bloody paraphernalia’ as Douglass formulates it, it does not seem to be less important.

tyranny in the eyes of the law. The appellation of ‘criminal’ was largely unavailable to any individuals participating in slaveholding. But any reaction to this system ensured the enslaved be deemed a ‘criminal,’ and the punishment was heavy-handed. If either the enslaved man or woman defended themselves—expressing their wills at the expense of the enslaver—they risked death on the spot, or at the hands of the law itself.

Harriet Jacobs, reflecting on her experience during enslavement, adds to this testimony. There are many important similarities the Female Gothic has to her retelling of her experience within the haunted house, but with a critical difference. Wester (2012) notes,

In the majority of American slave narratives, the South becomes the haunted landscape, its darkness troubled by the wails and screams of the tortured, through which a white villain pursues and torments a black heroine and her dark hero. *Such inversion of the typical gothic color scheme—where the ‘good guys’ are always (in) white—begins these narratives’ disturbance of the gothic genre’s more fundamental ideologies* (p. 30).

Harriet Jacobs’s, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, is a critical contribution to this tradition. Jacobs’s view of the law (the haunted house) is important. In her recounting of enslavement Jacobs “rejects categorically the system of laws that governs her, and therefore dismantles the ostensible difference between ‘socially tolerable violence’ and ‘criminal violence’” (Weinauer, 2017, p. 277). This notion of a ‘socially tolerable violence’ sheds an important light on slave law, and law in this nation more broadly. Jacobs extends the hauntedness beyond the slave system. There was a complicity with the corruption that indicted more than the slaveholders. Jacobs’s recounting definitely had direct ‘agents’ of imprisonment. Mr. Flint was just that for Jacobs. As an ‘agent’ Jacobs identified him as a “vile monster”. What made him monstrous, according to the text, was his desire to drown Jacobs’s will in his own. Jacobs (2000) remembers, “My master met me at every turn, *reminding me that I belonged to him*, and swearing by heaven and earth

that he would *compel me to submit to him*” (p. 31). He would constantly try to convince her to submit to her legal position as his property. And as his property she “must be subject to his will in all things” (Jacobs, 2000, p. 30). There was no respite from his pursuit. He haunted every corner of the house, including where she slept. Jacobs was well aware of what this meant for her. Under this demand Jacobs lamented that her situation represented the general position of the enslaved. In he haunted house, “there is no shadow of law to protect ... from insult, from violence, or even from death; all these are inflicted by *fiends who bear the shape of men*” (Jacobs, 2000, p. 30). Jacobs was locked in the house with a demon who was trying to convince her that there was no relief save submission to this hell.

Jacobs acknowledged that she was not in the house alone. To illustrate this fact, she recounted the story of James. James was a sold to a particularly cruel slaveholder. In response to a “severe whipping”, in desperation and misery, he attempted to escape to the woods. Once in the woods James “was in a most miserable condition—cut by cousin, half naked, half starved, and without the means of procuring bread” (Jacobs, 2000, p. 54). He was in this miserable state for a few weeks, but was eventually (re)captured and dragged back to the plantation. His enslaver decided that merely whipping him was too light a punishment for his offense. So, he first whipped him and cared for James’s body to ensure his wounds would not decompose (he did this by washing his body in “strong brine”). He then had James put in a cotton gin with little space other than to turn to his side from time to time. His punishment was to remain there for as long as he was in the woods. After a few days, at the request of another enslaved person who was in charge of bringing him food and water out of concern that he was dead (the smell gave a clue), the cotton gin was opened to discover that James was, in fact, dead. On discovering his body, they real-

ized it had been “partly eaten by rats and vermin” (Jacobs, 2000, p. 54). It was not clear if they started to devour him before his death. I recount these details because (1) it seems Jacobs believed they helped shed a light on how ‘cruel’ the enslaver (and, thus, enslavement) was, and (2) they help convey how gothic the experience of the enslaved was. This point is not to take away from the reflections Jacobs gives of her own experience during enslavement. Her gothic rendering of this experience communicates, in my estimation, that these moments taught her similar lessons about the nature of enslavement. When connected to the stories of fellow enslaved persons like James displays how Jacobs did not (or refused to) fall into the trap of individualism. In the Gothic text it is usually a singular female character who is trying to evade being trapped in the Gothic castle. Texts like *Incidents*, on the contrary, reveal a sensitivity that the writer realizes they are not trapped in the house alone. The cloud of violent oppression cast its shadow over the environment that was enslavement, even when it was not manifested in explicit and directed brutality toward the enslaved. There was an important lesson Jacobs also drew from James’s brutal demise. Jacobs depicted his funeral: “They put him into a rough box, and burned him with less feeling than would have been manifested for an old house dog. Nobody asked any questions. *He was a slave; and the feeling was that the master had a right to do what he pleased with his own property*” (Jacobs, 2000, p. 54-55). Jacobs here is referring to the community, their silence was complicity. No challenge of the brutality suggested that there was general agreement about the nature of the relationship between slaveholder and enslaved—regardless of the former’s treatment of the latter. Hartman refers to this complicity as “white culpability” and “white offense” (cf. the offense of individual enslavers) because the submission that Jacobs recounts is not merely that to an individual (e.g. Flint) but “the submission of the enslaved to all

whites” (83). In their eyes (and the eyes of the law) it was received as normal, even necessary, at least that is what the silence suggested. In contrast, Jacobs (and Douglass) understood treatment like this to be the result of the ‘monstrous’ relationship between the enslavers and the enslaved. Even though at the times of the productions of their narratives they were trapped in the house (even though they were physically free), as well as many others, they refused to keep silent. According to both Jacobs and Douglass the law, as opposed to the slaveholders, was the actual villain. Weinauer (2017) argues, “... the law plays a key role in these gothic stories, entrapping the slave by offering ‘protections’ that not only fail to protect, but also remind the slave over and over again, precisely through the failure to protect, that ‘it’s no use resisting’” (p. 275). The enslavers were not brutal aberrations, but were agents of this law. They aided in keeping the enslaved locked in. But not just them, those who sympathized and/or complied also contributed to their entrapment.

In this section I explored the relationship between enslavement and the law (as haunted house). The testimony of Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass encourages us to look at enslavement as, in essence, a monstrous relationship between the enslaved and enslavers. The law ensured the maintenance of this relationship. It sanctioned, generally, whatever means were necessary to ensure the enslaved remain trapped in the labyrinth. Douglass, for example, refers to the ‘bloody paraphernalia’ as instances of this. However, a few decades after Douglass’s relating these facts the enslaved were legally emancipated. However, did this ensure them opportunity to leave the labyrinth. There’s a danger in conflating change in the the (written) law and liberation. I submit there is a way to interrogate this. During enslavement the (written) law encouraged the horrific treatment of any enslaved person who refused to yield their will. This constant push to-

ward an acceptance of possess-ability is an important clue about the true condition of things, despite changes in the (written) law. Did the gothic relationship to the law for black people remain even in (legal) emancipation? I turn now to Wells-Barnett's analysis of this experience. As someone born in the dusk of (legal) enslavement she was alive to bear witness to this transition period. Her witness is invaluable here. Her identification and interrogation of the 'unwritten' law during this period gives a crucial lens into the haunted house and its condition post-emancipation.

#### IV.

*'... [remember] that after all, it is the white man's civilization and the white man's government which are on trial.'* (Wells-Barnett)

The depth of one's understanding of how Wells-Barnett contributes to this discussion depends on what they understand her to be analyzing in her early writing career. In other words, to limit Wells-Barnett to merely analyzing lynching is to potentially miss the point of her analysis. Naomi Murakawa (2021) argues *Red Record*, for instance, "situated contemporary white violence within *a comprehensive history of white killing sprees since the abolition of slavery*" (p. 219). Wells-Barnett, in other words, picks up on the haunting that bridges the gap between enslavement and (legal) emancipation. This haunting dogged the experience of black people in America. Through the decades that followed there were persistent attempts to (re)construct black women, men, and children in the attempt to keep them stuck in the labyrinth. Murakawa (2021) argues that this is the motivating force between "racial criminalization," a process of which Wells-Barnett is a "foundational thinker" in its identification (Murakawa, 2021 p. 219). 'Racial



criminalization,' Murakawa (2021) notes, is "...the stigmatization of crime as black and the simultaneous erasure of white violence and criminality in all its forms" (p. 214). There were many attempts to feign renovation of the house's interior in the decades that followed (legal) emancipation. It is Wells-Barnett's analysis that penetrates the superficial renovations (e.g. new wallpaper, furniture moved around, etc.) and allows one to see (how) the structure largely remained.

"Beginning with the emancipation of the Negro," Wells-Barnett claims, "the inevitable result of *unbridled power* exercised for two and a half centuries, by the white man over the Negro, began to show itself in acts of conscienceless outlawry" (Wells, 2014d, 71, emphasis added). Here she lays out the context through which one can get a proper view of the motivations that undergirded lynching. Through her lens we see that enslavement, as the (legalized) granting of 'unbridled power,' changed clothes. Thus, it seems the house did not fall, but remained haunted with black people still locked inside. There were, however, some differences between the experiences according to Wells-Barnett. She recounts, "During the slave regime, the Southern white man owned the Negro body and soul." In light of this perceived ownership it behooved the possessor to "dwarf the soul and preserve the body" (Wells, 2014d, p. 221). There was an important limit on the enslaver, and it was not a legal one. While physical punishment was a constitutive element of the relationship between enslaver and enslaved, it did not, under normal circumstances, make sense to harm the body to such a degree that one could no longer expropriate the resources from their labor. It did not make good financial sense, then, to physically debilitate the enslaved. Thus, the 'bloody paraphernalia' had a specific, albeit limited, function—the destruction of the soul/will of the enslaved person. This would optimize how much could be made of the enslaved. It is worth noting an important observation that flows from Wells-Barnett's thought

here. The expression of the enslaved person's will had both legal and economic consequences. The costs of attempting to rehabilitate the enslaved person was potentially high. And, if they were not careful, it put the legal and economic demands at cross-purposes. However, during (legal) enslavement it ultimately seemed worth it if the enslaved person could not (would not) settle into the desired position of possession. This conflict dissipated, however, with (legal) emancipation. The economic advantages to keeping the formerly(?) enslaved alive no longer constrained them. Wells-Barnett (2014d) observes "... the vested interests of the white man in the Negro's body were lost" (p. 221). There was a problem though. Wells claims that the Southern white man lost his (written) legal right to brutally punish, and even kill, black people. That was not the problem as much as it was that they had grown so used to it. They, Wells (2014d) notes, "had been educated so long in that school of practice, in which might makes right, that they disdained to draw strict lines of action in dealing with the Negro" (p. 221). Because they could not relinquish this sense of entitlement, added to that the fact that there was no longer an economic advantage to restraint, there was a shift in practice. In the place of legal enslavement a "new system of intimidation came into vogue" (Wells, 2014d, p. 221). They were now free to add killing to the list of the 'bloody paraphernalia'. Where did the law go here? Even though the (written) law had shifted (some would say) dramatically on paper, the sentiment toward black people was generally maintained. This is important to note. Even if the law seemed positioned to do so, much, if not all, of the brutal treatment went unpunished. Thus, just as in the days of enslavement, the law did not protect the formerly enslaved. Weinauer (2017) argues that during enslavement "... the law not only [failed] to protect the enslaved, but indeed positively [ensured] that the slave owner [could] abuse with impunity" (p. 274). In the postbellum world, even though this assurance was

no longer provided, it certainly lacked the capacity (or the willingness) to intervene in any meaningful way on behalf of this oppressed population.

However, as the proliferation of these kinds of killings was not without impact. Though the law had little to say, these killings began “to tell upon the public conscience.” ‘Civilization’ came calling demanding a reason that could warrant this sudden outburst(?)<sup>4</sup> of killings. To appease this conscience—“as a tribute to the nineteenth century civilization”—Southern white men developed a series of rationales to justify the killing (Wells, 2014d, p. 222). Between emancipation and the publishing of *Record* three of these justifications were offered. There was a rhythm to these offerings; after each excuse found no resonance in reality, it was replaced by a new one. For the sake of space the goal of this section is not an in-depth coverage of each excuse. For the purposes of this chapter—the question of gothic law—I will be focusing briefly on the last two excuses here. The first excuse was the claim that the brutal violence was justified to preemptively guard against black insurrection. The fear of reprisal, so it was claimed, necessitated a heavy-handed response. However, no legitimate insurrections/rebellions ever materialized. This led to the offering of a new excuse. This rationale emerged during “the turbulent times of reconstruction.” Largely in response to the exercise of the ballot by black males, it was anxiously declared that this nation should never submit to ‘Negro domination’. The house could not bear this level

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<sup>4</sup> I feel the need to explain the use of this parenthetical (‘(?)’) here. I do not want the reader to lose sight of the fact that brutal violence was very much a part of the environment during enslavement. Both Jacobs and Douglass alert us to the fact that murder was on the table to keep the enslaved person in line. I do not believe Wells-Barnett is disagreeing with them. I believe the argument being made is that there was an increase in the selection of that option because the former enslavers (and their sympathizers) no longer had a vested (economic) interest in keeping black people(?) alive. Thus, as I hope to work through in the following sections, it seems there was a rationale that could satisfy ‘civilization’ regarding the treatment of the enslaved. Post-emancipation, I argue, ‘civilization’ had to check in for new justifications of the treatment of the formerly enslaved.

of renovation. Thus, this wave of political and economic power needed to be stamped out. Wells-Barnett (2014d) recounts,

The southern white man would not consider that the Negro had any right which a white man was bound to respect, and the idea of a republican form of government in the southern states grew into general contempt. It was maintained that '*This is a white man's government,*' and regardless of numbers the white man *should* rule (p. 223, emphasis added).

As it was in the days of enslavement there were 'agents' of imprisonment. On behalf of the call of 'no Negro domination' rode such groups as the Ku Klux Klan, the Regulators, and various collections of "lawless mob". These groups assembled "for any cause . . . as suited their purpose" (Wells, 2014d, p. 223). Wells-Barnett's classification of these 'agents' as "lawless" seems crucial here. They succeeded, according to Wells-Barnett, in stymieing black political influence in the South and were able to undo all of the (written) legal developments in the decades following the 1860s. "The federal laws *for Negro protection* passed during Reconstruction," Wells (1970) claims, "had been made a mockery by the white South *where it had not secured their repeal*" (p. 70-71). It is worth noting the two-tiered attack on the newly developed (written) laws. The 'agents' of imprisonment do not seem to be working on behalf of the (written) law at this time, unlike during legal enslavement. However, the success/failure of their work seemed to be measured by them by the effect they had on the (written) law. It is also worth noting here that the written law did not put up much of a fight against their work, but instead eventually capitulated to their demands. With this victory sealed, a new excuse was needed.

A new call rung out, that the brutal violence and killing was necessary to grapple with growing trend of the sexual mistreatment of white women by black men. This excuse was the most potent of the three. "There could be framed no possible excuse more harmful to the Negro

and more unanswerable if true in its sufficiency for the white man” (Wells, 2014d, p. 224). A cursory glance at the transition between the second and third excuses seems to suggest that those doing this work were now back on the side of the (written) law. The gothic nature of this excuse (and how it was dealt with) is undeniable. Wells-Barnett (2014d) was clear on the effect of this new rationale:

Humanity abhors the assailant of womanhood, and this charge upon the Negro at once *placed him beyond the pale of human sympathy*. With such unanimity, earnestness and apparent candor was this charge made and reiterated that *the world has accepted the story that the Negro is a monster which the Southern white man has painted him* (p. 224, emphasis added).

Unlike the second excuse, those who were appointed to deal with these ‘monsters’ were not working at cross purposes with the (written) law, but claimed now to be working on its behalf, on behalf of ‘civilization’ itself. The development of these excuses, and the response to them, reveals just how complicated the relationship was between the (written) law and the lived experience of black people in the nation (during before and after (legal) emancipation). The ‘paradoxical’ relationship black people held to/under the (written) law does not seem to have completely dissipated after their legal emancipation. The third excuse had a compelling power. Many, the vast majority, of the on-lookers were sympathetic to the suggestion that violence was necessary under the circumstances. In the next section I will examine a version of this reading as exemplified in Jane Addams’s attempt to make sense of lynching. Her reading provides an important example of how intoxicating the excuse was and how it impaired the willingness to read otherwise. The third excuse provided a persuasive argument for locking these newly formed ‘monsters’ in the labyrinth and throwing away the key. Even if one disagreed with the method of how they were being dealt with, it was difficult to argue on their behalf. After exploring this type of re-

sponse I will turn to Wells-Barnett's interrogation and critique of these excuses and the main response to it.

V.

*'... there is the lingering unease that it's not quite over; that slavery didn't end, but just keeps shape shifting. It is a weird and creepy fog that has yet to lift.'* (Leila Taylor)

By 1901 the surging trend of extrajudicial murders had grown to such a degree that its notice seemed all but inescapable. In response Jane Addams wrote an article, "Respect for Law," that attempted to call attention to the destructive effects these killings stood to have on the participants and victims. She also worried that this influence could not be contained within the South<sup>5</sup>. An interrogation coming from someone like Addams at this time was no minor thing. By 1901 she was "...by many accounts, the most famous woman in the country" (Giddings, p. 418). Wells-Barnett in her autobiography identified Addams as the "greatest woman in the United States" (Wells, 1970, p. 259). This does not seem like hyperbole (see also Aptheker, 1). By this point Addams was a few decades into her settlement house work, what she is most well-known for. She established the Hull House in Chicago in the 1880s. However, she established Hull as more than just merely social work. It was one more aspect of her social activism (she was also a suffragist and fought for civil rights). The Hull House was an attempted embodiment of her theorist and intellectual work. A singular thinker in her own right, she believed there was an intimate relationship between theory and practice. She rejected, though, what she took to be the standard

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<sup>5</sup> I am not making the claim here that lynchings were only happening in the South. I make this observation here because this is where Addams isolated her attention.

philosophical understanding of practice flowing from theory. Instead, she attempted to embody the “pragmatist ideal of developing theory *out of* practice, rather than bring theory *to* practice” (Seigfried, p. 188). Bettina Aptheker (1977b) explains, “For Addams, the Settlement House was the instrument through which to realize the egalitarian ethic of an authentic democracy” (p. 2). The House rejected any kind of ‘top-down’ attempt to actualize democracy and in the place of this kind of approach substituted “working with others in a way calculated to change the attitudes and habits ...” of all those involved (Seigfried, 186-187). Addams believed that the key to the realization was association with the ‘common lot’ (the poor), and this belief was at the foundation of her social ethic. This this process of association the “belief of the absolute value of each human person ... is secured through affirming human solidarity” (Seigfried, p. 192). Theorizing this value was not enough. Instead, Addams recommended “the idea of democracy as a way of life” (Seigfried, p. 186). Thus, through the Hull House Addams hoped to influence theorizing(s) about democracy (and social ethics more broadly) through what could be demonstrated through the work at the House.

Theory, for Addams, benefits best from a certain type of practice. Addams espoused a practice that acknowledged an intimate relationship between experience, knowledge, and values. Because practice is experimental, the kind of experience that is integrated has a major influence. Knowledge flows from experience. Experience, according to Addams, is “the raw material out of which ideas and judgments are formed” (Seigfried, p. 190). It is both the origin and the proving ground of inquiry. Instead of inquiry determining experience, it was the later that forced, or acts as a funnel for, the former. Out of the foundational role of experience emerged Addams’s promotion of ‘sympathetic understanding’. It was through coming close to others that one can truly

come to a better understanding of the world (including the other and themselves). Sympathetic understanding does not look at/to the other in order to merely siphon information that is self-serving. On the contrary, sympathetic understanding is borne out of a mutual interest and concern between all the parties in proximity to each other. There is something that can be learned from the social ethics of others, and sympathetic understanding takes this opportunity seriously. It is this social ethic/lens through which Addams attempted to analyze the growing trend of lynching in, “Respect for Law.”

This understanding fundamentally impacted the approach Addams took in “Respect.” While Addams did a lot of theoretical work, race was not a common theme. Maurice Hamington (2005) observes that the opinions on the effectiveness of this element of her work is “mixed.” Addams, he argues, “was simultaneously ahead of her time and very much of her time” (p. 167). To her credit few, if any, northern white women spoke out about this issue. And her contribution was important because of the potential attention, and resources, a woman of Addams’s standing could bring to the issue of lynching (Giddings, 2009, p. 429-430). However, because of Addams’s understanding between experience and theory, she took herself to be both geographically and experientially at a distance from the actual issue. This seems to be at the basis of why she positioned herself as an ‘outsider’ at the beginning of “Respect.”

Her social ethic seems to demand a hedge. “Each nation, and each section of a nation so large as ours,” Addams (1977) argues, “has its own problems and difficulties, many of them so subtle and intricate that it is almost impossible for an *outsider* to *judge* of them fairly” (p. 26). This argument reveals what Addams took to be the key to self-government—the benefits of sympathetic understanding. This proximity allows for a sensitivity to the specific difficulties that



tend to be regional, intimately connected to (and impacting) the group. The experience of going through these difficulties provides important tools for confronting them. This is where the value of their theorizing emerges from. Thus, from the outset Addams is informing the reader of “the difficulty of commenting on a social issue about which she has no direct knowledge” (Hamington, 2005, p. 170-171). She warns the reader that it is critical to keep this in mind as they read the rest of the article. She is not trying to diminish the weight of the problems or the necessity to address them however. She identifies that the problems the south was confronted with was three-fold: (1) the “difficulties” surrounding Reconstruction<sup>6</sup>, (2) the task of restoring an area devastated (both physically and mentally) by war, (3) the presence (and proximity) of two “alien” races. Of the three problems this region was confronted with, the third, according to Addams, was “that most intricate of all problems” (p. 26). Her ability to identify these issues did not seem to encourage a boldness to analyze/evaluate them. On the contrary, it may be the identification that gave this northern white woman pause.

Yet, Addams did not stop at identification. Proximate knowledge, despite the high value she placed on it, was not an absolute good. Certain experiences can diminish this knowledge’s utility. Addams (1977) warns, “... it still remains true that certain well established principles underlie all self-government and that to persistently disregard these principles is to endanger self-government itself” (p. 26). These principles seem to undergird the proper appraisal of experience (and the knowledge that flows from it). To disregard or continually violate these principles is to make oneself and those they associate with vulnerable to outside evaluation. It may even demand

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<sup>6</sup> I do not want to take away from the flow of the argument at the present moment in this chapter. But I do want to flag that Wells-Barnett identified the main ‘difficulty’ as it was identified by southern white men during this period. Much of what undergirded the turmoil of this period was the professed dread of ‘Negro domination.’ I place this as a forecasting of the unnecessary “faux pas” (Hamington, 171) Addams makes that she could have avoided if she would have taken Wells-Barnett’s analysis more seriously before writing.

it. This is because a “faulty morality” can emerge (Hamington, 2005, p. 171). Also, a greater danger develops because this morality is often justified because of the confidence placed in proximity. The problem with a ‘faulty morality’ is the threat it poses to the community. This threat, and the potential blindness to it, requires intervention. As an analogy Addams (1977) submits, “... just as the civilized nations interfere with any one nation whose public acts throw back the whole of civilized progress” (p. 26). This was the call Addams was responding to.

Addams attempted a surgical critique of lynching. Her focus was the intention out of which lynching emerged. “A most superficial study of history will discover that the method of deterring crime by horrible punishment has been tried many times...,” Addams (1977) reflects (p. 27). Thus, lynching (and other brutal violent acts), as a method, is not new. She asserts that this method has proven faulty. She attempts to prove this through a class analysis. She argued that historically brutal treatment found its source in a general loathing of the lower class by the higher. It is at its most sharp, according to Addams, when the lower class makes a move toward democratic development—toward “asserting their human claim as such, when they assert their rights rather than ask for privileges.” Because of a professed belief in the lower class’s ability to be appealed to by reason they could only be “treated upon the animal plane, bullied and terrorized” (Addams, 1977, p. 27). Above all, this treatment was at its most intense when the upper class perceived a threat from the lower to their “property and persons” (Addams, 1977, p. 27). A sensitivity to this type of conflict emerged out of her work with the poor classes in Chicago through her settlement work. She then attempted to apply this analysis to lynching proper. She admits, though, that the inclusion of race only complicates things further. The relationship is not merely between the upper and lower classes. It gets even more tangled when considering the fact

that the parties in conflict are former slave owners and slaves. The difficulty arises out of the fact that the former slave owners are tasked with regarding the former slave as a “former citizen” (Addams, 1977, p. 28). It is no surprise, Addams remarks, that out of this “worst possible situation” barbarity emerges.

In the face of the attempt of the (re)application of a method that has proven a failure by those in the South, Addams (1977) lodged a warning (one laden with gothic undertones). “... [T]he bestial in man, that which leads him to pillage and rape, can never be controlled by public cruelty and dramatic punishment, which too often cover fury and revenge” (p. 28). The problem with the method was how, and in what ways, it was ineffectual. Regardless of the belief of those implementing it, it cannot tame those who are deemed unreasonable. It also threatens, Addams argues, to unleash similar characteristics in those utilizing the methods. If the community is not careful it will be “thrown back into the savage state of dealing with criminality” (Addams, 1977, p. 28). In other words, ‘brutality begets brutality.’ And Addams believed this to be true for all involved. Both the employer of the method and the brutalized are vulnerable to this transformation (even though, the implementation of this method is largely based on the profession that the method is needed because the recipients are already brutes). Addams raises a particular concern: those who observe the savagery will have their confidence in ‘law and order’ shaken. Addams localized this effect though. She raised concern for the particular region of the country that lived in the aftermath of the Civil War<sup>7</sup>. She 1970) summarizes,

It is certainly doubtful whether these scenes could be enacted over and over again, save in a community in which the hardening drama of slavery had once been seen,

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<sup>7</sup> Again, this move seems rash and unclear. The Civil War was a national war, and enslavement, at least initially, was established in states often not associated with ‘the South’ (e.g. Maryland). To localize the effects of the war to the South alone sets one up to overlook the effects the lynching will have on the rest of the nation.

in which the devastation of war had taken place; and *we may be reasonably sure that the next generation of the South cannot escape the result of the lawlessness and violence which are now being indulged in* (p. 28, emphasis added).

Thus, Addams warns that there must be a break with the current form of punishment. It threatened to preclude any possibility of rebuilding community in the aftermath of the war.

Addams qualified her protest/critique of this methodology. She reminds the reader "... that many of the most atrocious public acts recorded in history *have been committed by men who had convinced themselves that they were doing right*" (26). She added that these commitments emerge from two possible sources: (1) a "false theory of conduct", or (2) a revisionist theory of conduct employed to justify behavior. For Addams (2) is worse than (1). The revisionism betrays any ability to claim ignorance. It also dismisses any claim that the perpetrator of such actions can genuinely claim they are 'doing right,' or else they would not need to cover it over. Addams was convinced that this was not driving those participating in (actively or passively) lynchings. Instead, she claimed that it was driven by an honest belief, however misguided, that they were doing the right thing. These 'lawless' parties genuinely believed that they were confronted with a class of crimes of which they could only deal with in particular ways. The dismissal of (written) law is utilized because the law cannot contain these criminals. In other words, they are convinced that lawlessness can only meet this particular form of lawlessness. Addams believed she was channeling their sentiments, she identified their 'honest' belief that black people were underdeveloped, and thus could only be shocked into submission. This anthropology drove the "time-honored" (but false) theory: "crime can be prevented by cruelty" (Addams, 1977, p. 26). And the white southerner was so convinced of this they were willing to (unknowingly) risk both personal and communal integrity. Addams warned that this type of protection would be useless. It would

prove ineffectual for its intended audience. “The under-developed,” she advises, “are never helped by such methods as these, for they learn only by imitation” (28-29). The exploration of the motivations of the lynch mobs, and the effects of the actions based on these, was Addams’s main concern in “Respect for Law.” She expressed sympathy for the misguided, at the expense of those they were brutalizing it seems. Those committing the atrocities risked regression to the very thing they are fighting—a savagery cloaked in black. This does not seem to account from where the savagery emerges. How were they able to access it so readily? The war? This argument seems to be underestimating the brutality that was learned during enslavement—through the mechanisms employed to maintain the relationship between enslaver and enslaved. Her theoretical conclusions beg an examination of the experience that demanded them.

Wells-Barnett explores these questions in a response to Addams’s article published a few months later called “Lynching and the Excuse for it.” Wells praised Addams’s critique of lynching as a “dispassionate and logical argument” (Wells-Barnett, 1977, p. 31). Wells appreciated that someone of Addams’s stature would employ her pen to make such an “earnest” appeal. If only others would utilize their platforms to join her voice, she lamented. However, there was an aspect of Addams’s argument that Wells-Barnett felt compelled to address. She (1977) regretted the “... unfortunate presumption used as a basis for her argument” (p. 21). Before diving into Wells-Barnett’s critique more fully, it is worth briefly examining how Addams’s could fall so short with the foundational aspect of her argument. Hamington (2005) argues that Addams failed in “... follow[ing] her own philosophical commitments” (p. 171). Addams, aware of the possible implications on her argument, relented to building her argument largely around speculation. For instance, in her early work, *Twenty Years at Hull House*, Addams employed a method that “was

essentially autobiographical, and the virtues and defects of her work were those that come from writing directly out of one's experience" (Lasch, xxvi). This approach seems to drive the books she wrote in the wake of "Respect for Law" (e.g. *Democracy and Social Ethics* (1902) and *Newer Ideals of Peace* (1906)). Within the framework of Addams's pragmatic approach there was a problem in depending on conjectural knowledge. Seigfried (2004) argues, "The problem with principles arrived at speculatively, especially when reinforced by other like-minded people, is that they can lead to propaganda and fanaticism" (p. 190). Perspectives, especially those that seem to naturally reinforce already held or cherished beliefs, "not only limit, but can distort the facts we are trying to understand" (Seigfried, p. 191). Thus, Seigfried argues that one should reach out to others of different experiences. It is through the concrete engagement with these others, and the ills and frustrations that plague them, that the most effective and meaningful work will get done. It is through listening that our view of the facts sharpen. The experience they have borne provides them compels a theory adjusted to their situation (especially the injustices confronted in their day-to-day lives). One makes a mistake if they bring with them theories that precede the engagement with the goal of applying them to others' problems. It is unreasonable to hope that these theories will be of real aid to the problems.

Did Addams, then, have access to this kind of 'sympathetic understanding' that could have placed her in a better position to analyze lynching and its relationship to law? In general, it has been chronicled that Addams had quite a bit of exposure to black Americans during the 1880s and 90s. For instance, she helped black people establish settlement houses. She also supported civic organizations and women's clubs that included black women (e.g. League of Women Voters, Women's City Club). More specifically, prior to 1901, Addams worked along Wells-Bar-

nett in Chicago. In 1899 both the Afro-American Council and the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) held their annual meetings in Chicago. When Addams desired to hold a lunch for the women of the NACW Wells-Barnett functioned as her liaison. This desire seems to be a clear evidence of Addams to reach across the social barrier that was interracial interaction at the time. By the end of those meetings Wells-Barnett was appointed the head of the Anti-Lynching Bureau, a newly established section of the Afro-American Council. This was a prominent appointment providing Wells-Barnett much needed resources to continue her ongoing investigation of lynching around the country, and the ability to publish her findings (see Giddings, p. 423). This means she became a useful resource for anyone who desired a deeper understanding of lynching and its causes. The following year Wells-Barnett noticed a growing surge of people who were calling for the segregation of city schools in Chicago being published in the local newspapers. These articles were expressing the benefits of such a move, and support for such a move was growing. Wells-Barnett attempted to address these articles by meeting with the editor of the *Chicago Tribune*, but was shunned by him in their meeting. She left the meeting dejected. In her autobiography she records those feelings,

There seemed nothing we could do, because the Negro had neither numerical nor financial strength which could be used in the race's behalf. I knew that if every Negro in Chicago taking or advertising in the *Tribune* should fail to take it, the result would be so small it would not even be known. Therefore it was up to us to get somebody whose opinion and influence the *Tribune* would respect to interest themselves in our behalf (Wells, 1970, p. 276).

In her despair she turned to Addams. Wells-Barnett called her to explain the situation and requested a meeting, Addams agreed to meet with her. They met at the Hull House where Addams collected “representative men and women of the white race” throughout the city. Included in this company were editors from other papers, religious leaders, and civic leaders. This collection sur-

prised Wells-Barnett and she was given opportunity to explain the situation to them. After doing so it was determined that they would do what they could to address the problem. Through their work they were able to stem the tide of the movement to segregate. The schools were never (legally) segregated. In light of the working relationship Wells-Barnett and Addams had it is unclear why Addams did not appeal to her and her experience when preparing her critique of lynching.

Wells-Barnett's analysis of lynching emerged out of her lived experience. It was the lynching of 1892 that alerted her to the need to investigate the true causes of the lynchings, including the rationale employed to justify the atrocious treatment of those who suffered the brutal mistreatment. It was her challenge of these rationalizations that got Wells-Barnett exiled from Memphis (which was how she ended up in Chicago). Thus, Wells-Barnett came face to face with the professions of the lynch mobs, and she came to understand the potential cost of confronting these professions and the commitments they revealed (cf. the commitments being founded on the professions). This experience produced a social ethic that would have been invaluable for someone who, like Addams, wanted to genuinely confront the practice of lynching. Wells-Barnett's experience with lynching—and the 'lawlessness' of the mob—provides a critical frame for a proper understanding of Addams's ultimately misguided analysis. Hamington (2005) notes, "Wells and Addams had shared values and commitments and yet, because of their differing social experience, there was an experiential gulf that would be demonstrated in their approach to lynching" (p. 169). To have the "greatest woman in the United States" employ an argument that does not actively account for this gulf could be costly. It contributed to the 'propaganda and fanaticism' that had well-nigh taken root in the country regarding lynchings and other racialized vio-



lence in ways that deeply frustrated any possibility of undoing it. This was why, no matter how appreciative she was, Wells-Barnett was compelled to address the argument.

Wells-Barnett felt compelled to thread a very difficult needle in “Lynching and the Excuse for it.” While she felt driven to call attention to the “unfortunate presumption” that was the undercurrent of Addams’s article, she by no means wanted to diminish its “force”<sup>8</sup>. The presumption under consideration: the “Southern citizens who take part in and abet the lynching of negroes *honestly believe* that that is the only successful method of dealing with a certain class of crime” (Addams, 1977, p. 26, emphasis added). Wells-Barnett identified this presumption as ‘unfortunate’ for two important reasons. First, it was not based on the facts, or as she put it, it was “warrantless.” Just as importantly, once it was accepted and utilized it undoes the force of any recommendations in addressing lynching (Addams, 1977, p. 31). To be fair to Addams she was not the only one to grant this presumption when addressing lynching. As an aside, this is why I believe Wells-Barnett does not make the addressing of her argument personal (which in other interactions she demonstrated she could be more than willing and capable of doing so). The “baseless” presumption “influence[d] ninety-nine out of every one hundred persons who discuss this question” (Wells-Barnett, 1977, p. 31). This sympathetic take on those participating in such brutal displays appeared in newspapers and journals all around the country. Wells-Barnett marks that for five years she had been collecting the clippings that rehearsed the groundless charge, “slander” of the lynchers themselves. Thus, she points the reader to the publishing of *Red Record* which, as explored earlier in this chapter, she unmasked the rootlessness of the assumption. De-

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<sup>8</sup> This desire continued through the penning of her autobiography a few decades later. It is interesting that while Wells-Barnett chronicles the positive work her and Addams were able to accomplish in her autobiography, there is no mention of Addams’s article and Wells-Barnett’s subsequent response.

spite her efforts “ninety-nine per cent discuss the question upon the presumption that lynchings are the desperate effort of the Southern people to protect their women from *black monsters*” (Wells-Barnett, 1977, p. 31). The problem with buying this profession is that it diverts the eyes away from what is actually going on. It also diverts the sympathy away from where it *should* be placed. Even if the goal is the condemnation of the practice of lynching, this effect of the denunciation is mitigated because of the “plea” made for the lyncher. After all, it is reasonable that “... human nature gives way under such useful provocation” (Wells-Barnett, 1977, p. 31). It is worth noting that this was a sympathy Wells-Barnett herself held prior to the lynching in 1892. When reminiscing on her development regarding the question of lynching she noted,

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).

She, at one time, believed that these spurts of ‘lawlessness’ were, even though extreme, understandable. Such violations demanded it. Thus, condemnation must be tempered with compassion. However, in “Excuse” Wells-Barnett is attempting to rudely awaken the reader to the facts—the source of her own awakening.

The problem with the sympathy for the violators—particularly one based on their rationalization—is that it results in mystification. It blinds recipient to the true nature of lynching. Wells-Barnett attempted to dispel the fog. She argues, “The deepest dyed infamy of the nineteenth century was that which, in its supreme contempt for law, defied all constitutional guarantees of citizenship, and during the last fifteen years of the century put to death two thousand men, women and children, by shooting, hanging and burning alive” (Excuses, 31). A few critical

points are made in this one sentence. Among other things, those who participate in lynching are, regardless of their profession, motivated by a “supreme contempt” for law. This is different than saying that their lawlessness was the (reasonable?) result of getting caught up in the moment. Also, the violation that was lynching was just a part of a broader attempt to deny the victim (and those the victim represents) any rights as a citizen of this nation. Furthermore, she notes that the victims of this targeted brutality included women and children. This seems odd in light of the accusation that was being paraded to justify the practice of lynching. How do these two parties satisfy the criteria? The excuse and the resulting sympathy does not seem to place a demand on the viewer to entertain, and much less answer, this question. Finally, Wells-Barnett shows that there was more than one way to execute a lynching (not just hanging from a tree). Wells-Barnett also adds that sympathizing with the lynch mob adds injury to insult. The injury inflicted is to how the victims will be remembered. She notes, “It is unspeakably infamous to put thousands of people to death without a trial by jury; it adds to that infamy to charge that these victims were *moral monsters* (Wells, 1977, p. 31, emphasis added). This revisionist reclassification as ‘monster,’ if applied to all the victims of lynchings, raises serious problems regarding its justification. Or at least this seems like a reasonable assumption. But Addams’s analysis of lynching shows how easy it is to slide into an enveloping dehumanization in the name of sympathy. The association between black people and the bestial, for instance, made an appearance. Monsterization is a useful contrastive device. And they also justify the overreaching of the law in the face of confrontation with them. The law is allegedly for ‘civilized’ *people*. Monsters cannot be appealed to in this way. Yes, the ‘civilized’ run the risk of being sullied in dealing with these monsters in an

undeniable way, but it was deemed worth it for the sake of the community. At least this was the claim being published in the vast majority of the representations and reflections on the lynchings.

Wells-Barnett, however, conveys a bewilderment in the face of the popularity of these claims. It was unclear how this narrative had gained such popularity while the facts were readily available to any who desired them. Wells-Barnett assumed that anyone who wanted to meaningfully confront lynching would seek out this information. “No good result can come from any investigation which refuses to consider the facts,” she argues (Wells-Barnett, 1977, p. 35). The records of lynchings and the accusations that attempted to justify them was faithfully kept by many of the same newspapers that entertained the rationalizations of the perpetrators. These then, Wells-Barnett argues, were “the best authority for the causes which actuate them” (Wells-Barnett, 1977, p. 32). Within “Excuse” Wells provides the opportunity for examination, challenging the reader not to look away but to “consider the record” (Wells-Barnett, 1977, p. 34). What the facts showed, she hoped, was alarming. For instance not even 20% were accused of the ‘peculiar crime’ “by the *fiends* who murdered them” (Wells-Barnett, 1977, p. 31). Wells-Barnett makes clear that, more or less, this is reflective of the record as it has been chronicled from the beginning of when she attempted to sound the alarm almost a decade prior. In actuality one of the major changes was the decrease in the proportion of those accused of that ‘peculiar’ crime over that span of time. The bulk of the accusations amounted to trivial crimes(?), even worse, some “suffered death for no offense *known to the law*” (Wells-Barnett, 1977, p. 34). Some were murdered for ‘mistaken identity’ while others made the mistake of ‘giving evidence.’ The only conclusion Wells-Barnett feels is reasonable after confronting the record is that there should be no sympathy for the lynchers. The excuses offered for their behavior in the wanton execution of black chil-

dren, women, and men, cannot be confirmed by anything but their perpetuation. Their “fiendishness,” Wells-Barnett clarifies, is justified by fables.

What can be confirmed by the facts, as demonstrated by the table, is how their “contempt for law and race prejudice constitute the real cause of *all* lynching” (Wells-Barnett, 1977, p. 34, emphasis added). By not allowing the facts to drive the analysis of lynching “intelligent, law-abiding and fair minded people” they were becoming blind to “America’s national curse” (Wells-Barnett, 1977, p. 31). The sense of the gothic is hard to shake here. Wells-Barnett is trying to alert the reader to what should be obvious. America is cursed, and that curse is spreading throughout the land. She notes that the trend is starting to extend to white people as well. The rate of (albeit poor) whites who were vulnerable enough to find themselves suffering at the hands of the ‘lawless’ and ‘fiendish’ mob was on the incline. The fact that the curse was spreading to poor whites was an important signal for Wells-Barnett. She argues, “... it was contempt for law which incited the mob to put so many white men to death without a complaint under oath, much less a trial” (Excuse, 34). This seemed to suggest that it was difficult to anticipate just how far the curse could spread. Despite the spread, there were limits. Race prejudice, she makes clear, was why only black people were lynched for ‘trivial’ offenses. The warning of a deepening/broadening lawlessness was not a new one. Wells-Barnett had been trumpeting this suspicion since the publishing of *Southern Horrors*. She feared that this spread may actually be replacing all pretense of (written) law in this nation.

In this section I examined the ways racialized violence was being misread after the legal emancipation of black people in America. The main culprit for this misreading was an unexamined acceptance of the justifications for lynchings that were being published broadly through this

nation. This acceptance placed the individual on a path that ensured their inability to be able to properly analyze the nature of lynching, even if their intention was to condemn its employment. To accept the justifications was to make one more likely to sympathize with the perpetrators of the lynching while demonizing their victims. This killed the latter twice. If the goal was to have an analysis grounded in the factual those conclusions made no sense. Wells-Barnett argued that there was no excuse for having an analysis of lynching that was rooted in anything but the facts. Thus, it was unreasonable to justify ignorance when it came to lynching, even if the ignorant had the best of intentions. To be ignorant was to be blind to the lawlessness that motivated the brutal treatment of blacks in America. However, to be lawless was not to be without law. In other words, the ‘fiends’ who participated in the program of racialized violence were under the jurisdiction of a law, one that guided them in the pursuit of a certain kind of ‘order’. Wells-Barnett brought light to this law in her investigative work leading up to her interaction with Addams in 1901. In the next section I unpack this investigation as she outlined it in an article entitled, “Lynch Law in America,” which was published the year before “Lynching and the Excuse for it.”

## VI.

*‘Killing in the name of/Some of those that work forces/Are the same that burn crosses.’ (Rage  
against the Machine)*

In this section I interrogate Wells-Barnett’s understanding of the structure of the haunted house that was the law in America. She noticed that there was a persistent and pernicious ele-

ment that threaten to consume the law completely; in actuality, she argues this may have already taken place. The (written) law was haunted. This haunting did not start with the (legal) emancipation of the enslaved. According to Wells, this haunting functioned as a bridge that connected the lived experience of black people in America on both sides of this emancipation. While these individuals may have been set free on paper, their white counterparts were generally still bound by the same sentiments that undergirded the relationship between the enslaver and the enslaved during enslavement. Both black and white people, then, were trapped in the labyrinth that was American law. This entombing was reflected in the treatment of the formerly enslaved in the decades that followed legal emancipation. I will first examine Wells-Barnett's arguments regarding the 'unwritten' law as they are expressed in the article, "Lynch Law in America." I will then turn to a case study of this experience Wells interrogated in her pamphlet, *Mob Rule in New Orleans*. In that text she highlights an individual who was merely one decision away from being thrust into the turmoil of being trapped in the haunted house. And as a direct effect of that decision the entire city was thrust into consequent trouble as agents of the 'unwritten' law sought to destroy the 'monster.'

Ida B. Wells-Barnett opened, "Lynch Law in America," with the indictment, "Our country's national crime is lynching" (Wells, 2014f, p. 394). Contrary to popular belief, she unveils that lynching "is not the creature of an hour, the sudden outburst of uncontrolled fury, or the unspeakable brutality of an insane mob. It represents the cool, calculating deliberation of intelligent people who openly avow that *there is an 'unwritten law'*" (Wells, 2014f, p. 394). The intention of the article was, through telling the story of the development of lynching in America, to demystify the reader—and hopefully America—of the delusion they have been wrapped in through the

professions of the lynchers. The rationalizations they provided as offerings to ‘civilization,’ as Wells-Barnett pointed out five years previous in *Red Record*, had largely been accepted. Even when individuals (whether they be preachers, teachers, editors, or other persons of influence) did not agree with the practice of lynching to punish, many feared speaking out because of the possibility of being mistaken as defending the ‘moral monster’ that was being punished. This fear seemed reasonable because, after all, one could understand the moral depths the lynch mob was vulnerable to under the conditions. However, as Wells-Barnett lifts the veil off of the true motivations of the lynch mob this reasonableness, she hopes, will prove criminal. Will the same fear of aiding and abetting appear as terrifying? It seems that this would be the case, only if, one was not ascribing to the same law that motivated them.

Wells-Barnett told the story of lynch law—and the ‘unwritten’ law that commissioned it—in three phases. Lynch law originally emerged out of (perceived) necessity. She recounts that it “... found excuse with the rough, rugged, and determined” who left the ‘civilized’ centers of America heading west looking for economic advancement (Wells, 2014f, p. 394). Groups centered around this opportunity. They could not suffer dissent and betrayal because it compounded an already difficult environment. However, unlike back in those ‘civilized’ centers they left behind, there was no court system to try these Judases. “Far removed from and *entirely without protection* of the courts of civilized life, these fortune-seekers *made laws to meet their varying emergencies*” (Wells, 2014f, p. 395). Wells-Barnett gives an example of a trial under these circumstances. Someone betrayed the group by attempting to steal from them. Once this treachery was discovered it needed to be dealt with swiftly. If they were found guilty, punishment was not delayed. They were often hung under the same tree they were tried. This procedure, Wells-Bar-



nett comments, was “exceedingly effective” (Wells, 2014f, p. 395). There was no recourse or appeal to the execution of this law. “The only way a man had to secure a stay of execution was to behave himself” (Wells, 2014f, p. 395). This was the established order until ‘civilization’—which apparently did not leave with these fortune-seekers—caught up to them. With its arrival “the orderly processes of law” took the place of their established systems. “The emergency no longer existing, lynching gradually disappeared from the West” (Wells, 2014f, p. 395).

This change signaled a shift, a new phase in lynch law. The ‘spirit’ of the law moved from the formerly ‘uncivilized’ areas back to the ‘civilized’ areas in the South. Wells-Barnett notes, “... the spirit of a mob procedure seemed to have fastened itself upon the lawless classes, and the grim process that at first was invoked to declare justice was made the excuse to wreak vengeance and cover crime” (Wells, 2014f, p. 395). Using the language of possession, Wells-Barnett is interrogating the necessity of lynching *after* ‘civilization’ has taken root. While she seems to be sympathetic to those fortune-seekers who utilized lynching as a means of pursuing justice, this pursuit was allegedly handed off to the established systems of justice (e.g. the courts). However, this possessed class refuses to relinquish control to these systems. Or it may be better put that the possession *is* the refusal? Trust seemed natural to Wells-Barnett because “centuries of Anglo-Saxon civilization had made effective all the safeguards of court procedure” (Wells, 2014f, p. 395). These were honed to deal with those who threatened the health of the community, or so it seemed. Either way, through the possessed lynch law “... asserted its sway in defiance of law and in favor of anarchy” (Wells, 2014f, p. 395). These individuals even expanded the way this law was executed when on the western frontier. They were not satisfied with mere hanging but utilized such methods as burning alive, riddling with bullets,

drowning, etc.; what these methods held in common—how Wells-Barnett was able to identify them as manifestations of the ‘spirit’ of lynch law—was in the “inhuman butchery” of their targets. It was their commitment to the ‘unwritten law’ that enabled, or demanded, them to behave with such savagery (not understood as such by them). The establishment of the ‘unwritten’ law in these areas led to a third phase<sup>9</sup>. This ‘spirit’ was spreading throughout ‘civilization.’ It was so effective in its dealing with the professed danger “... that the lynching mania has spread throughout the North and middle West” (Wells, 2014f, p. 395). There was not much, if any, of the country left that had not experienced its influence. The ‘unwritten’ law would not be satisfied until it had complete jurisdiction over the nation. Persuasive in its effect(s) that its spread continued “... until the national law was nullified and the reign of the ‘unwritten law’ was *supreme*” (Wells, 2014f, p. 396). Wells-Barnett did not close the story but left it open-ended. It was unclear if the victory she perceived the ‘unwritten law’ accomplished over the laws of the land could/would remain complete.

The laws of the land Wells-Barnett was referring to (e.g. voting rights) that were established to grant and protect the rights of the formerly enslaved, which were the result of much struggle, were recorded in ink on papers throughout our nations systems of ‘justice’. The statutes of the ‘unwritten law’ were transferred through a different medium altogether. They were not written in ink but “in the blood of thousands of brave men who thought that a government that was good enough to create a citizenship was strong enough to protect it” (Wells, 2014f, p. 396). Thus, every victim of the ‘unwritten law’ was a confirmation of this law’s efficacy. Heavy-hand-

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<sup>9</sup> Admittedly, she is not as explicit in the identification of this as a ‘new’ phase. My reading of her is that it is a third phase because of its expansion beyond the borders of the South. The borders of the phase may have been less clear because she was very much in its throes as she was penning this article. The possibilities of its success or failure in this expansion was still open for her.

ed and expansive, it was not difficult for its victims to find themselves on the wrong side of this law. Under its “reign” a mere accusation from a white person was enough to warrant punishment. Wells identified the main tenet of this law early in her investigation of the practice of lynching. In 1893, in an article entitled, “Lynch Law in All its Phases,” reflecting on the lessons learned from the lynching of Moss, McDowell, and Stewart, she identified the main principle of the ‘unwritten’ law,

It was our first object lesson in the doctrine of white supremacy; an illustration of the South’s *cardinal principle that no matter what the attainments, character or standing of an African-American, the laws of the South will not protect him against a white man* (Wells, 2014c, 102).

The ‘unwritten’ law was about control. The ‘spirit’ of the law was the commitment to reestablishing an order reminiscent of the one established during enslavement. That time was only about four decades removed from the writing of “Lynch Law in America.” The memory of that order was still quite fresh in the minds of many citizens. Wells-Barnett provided insight into the sentiments of those committed to the fulfillment of this law. She realized these early in her investigation. She argues, “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*” (Wells, 1970, p. 70). This resentment fueled their mistreatment of those lynching victims. This plaything-ness was the desired form of the black person, a position they idealized during enslavement. Granted, it was not something that was every fully accomplished, but that was not due to lack of effort on their part. The problem the possessed had here was that the (written) law was on their side during that era. The law was in full cooperation with the attempts to bring black people to the level of a possession (chattel). However, things had changed temporarily. Laws were passed that, on paper, encouraged the rejection of this plaything-ness.

The laws, though, were “short-lived and illusionary” (Wells, 2014f, p. 396). The law fell to the line of reasoning that the rejection of plaything-ness was part and parcel with ‘Negro domination’. The ‘unwritten law’ could not stomach this. It took upon itself the task of coming “to the rescue” of those being victimized by this (perceived) domination (Wells, 2014f, p. 397). These champions of the (white) people—the possessed—“boldly avowed their purpose” and worked through intimidation and suppression to overturn any sense held by black people of a rights to no longer be (understood as) playthings. These advocates of the ‘unwritten law’ “proceeded to beat, exile, and kill negroes until the purpose of their organization was accomplished and the *supremacy* of the ‘unwritten law’ was affected” (Wells, 2014f, p. 396). Once this was accomplished, and the written laws committed to the protection of black people from this treatment were largely overturned, the possessed “began [again] to make playthings of Negro lives and property” (Wells, 1970, p. 71). Order, under the sway of lynch law, was restored.

Wells-Barnett’s analysis in this article reveals that in reality the relationship between the ‘unwritten’ and written laws was muddier than it appears at first glance. Many of the proponents of the ‘unwritten law’ (those possessed by its spirit) were “white representatives of American civilization” (Wells, 2014f, p. 397). Many of those that constituted the lynch mob were ‘leading citizens’ from the area (e.g. business owners, judges, police officers, etc.). They presented themselves, in their day jobs, as proponents of the order founded on the written laws of the nation. However, as the situation demanded, they were committed to the brutality protected, and encouraged, by the ‘unwritten law’. Many of these actions were committed with little to no concern about how these actions would affect their standing in ‘civilization.’ However, Wells-Barnett argues these displays of the ‘unwritten law’ were “a disgrace to civilization” (Wells, 2014f, 396). If

and individual could represent both laws this raises important questions about the nature of the relationship between the two. How would this individual be able to keep clear which law they were representing at any given time? Is it possible to keep these commitments separate, keep them from bleeding into each other. This may shed light on what is meant by the gothic law being ‘haunted’. “Law,” Weinauer (2017) argues, is a living archive through which the present might be haunted by a specific past that is a logic of evil acts, corruption, monstrosity, dread and terror” (p. 84). This seems a fitting description of American (written) law. All of these elements were present in the brutal displays of the ‘unwritten law.’ As Wells-Barnett identifies, this is a haunting that the nation was not able to exorcise. The ghosts remained in the house after legal emancipation. This seems to explain the ebb and flow that was the written law in the decades that followed. While some steps were taken forward on paper (e.g. voting rights), the (white) response to these laws came with such force that their reversal seemed basically inevitable. This made it a difficult world to navigate for black people. The law was truly a labyrinth. How could it protect black people from the whims of white people when it was written, legislated, guarded, and executed by many of the same white people possessed by the spirit of the ‘unwritten law’? Trying to navigate this labyrinth was a truly horrific proposition.

Those proponents had such a disdain for (written) law that even defending it became an infraction deemed punishable by death. A few months after publishing, “Lynch Law in America,” Wells-Barnett published one entitled, “The Negro’s Case in Equity.” This article was a response to an ‘earnest appeal’ made to black editors, preachers and teachers pleading with them that while encouraging black people to defend their own rights they not to use their positions to encourage participation in the lynching of white or black men. She took exception to this appeal.

Similar to her critique of “Respect for Law,” it was not so much that the above advice was bad, but, under the circumstances black people found themselves in, “... it seems like giving a stone when we ask for bread” (Wells, 2014g, p. 405). Wells-Barnett felt the appeal was a bit of preaching to the choir. “For twenty years past,” she clarifies, “the negro has done nothing else but *defend the law* and appeal to public sentiment for *defense by the law*” (Wells, 2014g, p. 405, emphasis added). The duration of time she selects in making her point here does not seem arbitrary. Going back twenty years from “Equity” takes the reader to the 1880s, to the twilight of reconstruction. When matching the eras of lynch law as expressed in *Red Record* to this point made above, the reader is taken back to the reign of the second excuse for lynching—‘No Negro Domination’. We have already seen that political and economic empowerment (encouraged, on paper, by the written law) appears—through the lens of the ‘unwritten law’—as ‘domination.’ Wells-Barnett is arguing that the cry has not changed over the last two decades. The hope was that the law would intervene on behalf of black people to protect them from the whims of the ‘unwritten law.’ In the place of this protection black women, children, and men received abuse and death. There were times, she notes, that these came “by connivance of officers of the law” (Wells, 2014g, p. 405). Wells-Barnett saw this first-hand. The Peoples Grocery was raided by a collection of white people that included officers of the (written?) law. Moss, McDowell, and Stewart were arrested in response to this raid and carried to jail. They were later delivered to a mob in the still of night to their extrajudicial executions. This duplicity was just one example of what many black people received in response to their hope of defense by the law.

According to Wells-Barnett black people not only hoped for protection from the law. She also noted that many black people lost their lives in defense of the law. This defense often came

in the form of self-protection (due to lack of protection). She gives a list of examples in the article to demonstrate this point. For instance, in Jacksonville, FL, a group of black people attempted to set up guard outside of a jail to protect an incarcerated black person from a mob. Due to their sacrifice “not a shot was fired.” However, the man who gathered the group was indicted for ‘conspiracy’ and was offered a choice: jail or exile from his home. He eventually traded his home and property for freedom; all for trying to protect someone from a lynch mob. She also told the story of a man named John Delegal. He attempted to guard his father from a mob. A “posse” formed and pursued John as a ‘conspirator.’ That posse broke into John’s home and began shooting at John and his family. John fired back killing the mob leader. John was tried “by a jury of the kind of men who tried to lynch [his] father” (Wells, 2014g, p. 407). To no one’s surprise he was found guilty of ‘conspiracy,’ and was sent to the penitentiary for life. These stories were illustrative of a fact about black people’s lives under this collusion between the ‘unwritten’ and written laws: there was no guaranteed safety for black people as long as the ‘unwritten’ law had its way. The only safety(?) was obedience. Its reign was so thorough that even defense of the written law could prove fatal. This is why the appeal that prompted “Equity” was so offensive to Wells-Barnett. She argues,

Notwithstanding all this is true and has been true for twenty years past, while ten thousand men, women and children have been done to death in the same manner as in the late Virginia case; in spite of the fact that the governors of States, commanders of militia, sheriffs and police have taken part in these disgraceful exhibitions; and with absolute proof that the public sentiment of the country was with the mob—who, if not the negro preachers, editors and teachers, are to be credited with the fact that there are few, if any, instances of negroes who have had ‘guilty participation in lynching white men or black (Wells, 2014g, p. 406)?

It was the lynch mob who was anarchic—they only countenanced the law insofar as it converged with the ‘spirit’ of the ‘unwritten law’. Addams expressed a worry that ‘brutality begets

brutality,’ but the response of black people under these conditions, as chronicled in these articles by Wells-Barnett, seemed to challenge this notion. They did not seem in a rush to respond in kind but instead maintained some hope that justice could prevail. They cherished this hope to such a degree they were willing to fight to establish it. But Wells-Barnett seems to be weary of limits to this endurance and ends “Equity” with a bit of a hedge of her own. “If [white preachers, editors and teachers] will do their duty in [helping spread the actual facts about lynching],” she appeals, “the negroes will soon have no bad examples of the lynching kind set, *which in their desperation they may be tempted to follow*” (Wells, 2014g, p. 407). In other words, black people could not win this fight for justice (which includes protection under law) alone. White people must join in this fight if there can “be any hope of success” (Wells, 2014g, p. 407).

In this section I explored Wells-Barnett’s interrogation of the ‘unwritten law’. This law, she argued, had gained supremacy over the written law of the land by the turn of the century. This had dire consequences for black people. During enslavement it was the law that locked them within walls of the haunted house that was the American legal system. Within this system they were confronted with the persistent attempt to turn them into mere possessions. For a time they seemed to be freed from these walls. Legal enslavement inscribed certain protections which allowed them opportunities to extend their lived experience toward new horizons. However, legal enslavement was not the same thing as an exorcism. The ‘spirit’ of the laws that governed enslavement continued to haunt the lived experiences of black people. There were many white people who maintained the commitments reflected in these previous laws and they worked until the new law of the land began to reflect the olden days. Their determination was relentless; their goal: to reduce black people to ‘playthings’ that they could manipulate as they saw fit. Lynching



was just one mechanism used to try and enact this regression. Because of the influence of the ‘unwritten law’ black people found themselves locked in the labyrinth that is the gothic law in this nation. Within these walls we could meet death for anything and nothing—including any attempt to move the nation toward its much needed exorcism.

In the final section of this paper I turn to Wells-Barnett’s exploration of this entombing as she interrogated it through the figure of Robert Charles. In *Mob Rule in New Orleans*, Wells-Barnett investigates the circumstances that turned Charles into a ‘monster.’ I believe this investigation shines important light on her understanding of the ‘unwritten law’ and how it reigns (even when things seem idyllic).

## VII.

*‘I once knew the Robert Charles song but I found it was best for me to forget it, and that I did in order to go along with the world on the peaceful side.’* (Jelly Roll Morton)

One of the first investigations Wells-Barnett engaged in after being appointed the head of the Anti-Lynching Bureau was the slaying of Robert Charles, which became the pamphlet, *Mob Rule in New Orleans*. According to Paula Giddings (2009), this text was a “departure from her other writings” (p. 424). Instead of a more sociological explication of lynching data, this text takes a more narrative turn focused largely on a singular figure. One of the main goals of the pamphlet is the much needed rehabilitation of the image of Charles. She attempted to do this through trying to gain an understanding of what made him resist law enforcement so boldly. In

order to do this Wells-Barnett interviewed people who actually knew Charles to get an intimate picture of him. She combined this with a reassemblage of the facts of what happened through a critical reading of the reporting of area (white) newspapers. She identified the local papers as useful because they “gave the most minute details of the week’s disorder” (Wells, 2014e, p. 340). A quick note on her method helps shed a light on the connection between Wells-Barnett’s investigation and the gothic. A trope that shows up often in Gothic texts where the law is a theme is what Moran calls a “juridical approach to narrative and truth.” This approach consists of the “presentation of an accumulation and ... incomplete consolidation of fragments” (Moran, 2001, p. 77). These method intends to draw the reader into the process of the identification of the truth. The use of this method of narration “produces particular effects” (Moran, 2001, p. 77). In other words, the reader is asked to take the position of a juror. Judgment emerges out of the review of the ‘evidence’ (the fragments). The potential problem with the gothic use of this juridical method is the ambivalence of the law within this gothic framework. Through this method the reader must navigate the labyrinth that is the law. In other words, any determination of the truth will not be straightforward for the reader. I call this to mind here because a similar method is utilized in several of the texts composed by Wells-Barnett between 1892-1901, *Mob Rule in New Orleans* being one of these. In *Red Record* Wells-Barnett gives us a key to why she employs this method. She used the *Chicago Tribune*’s statistical record to ensure that “[o]ut of their own mouths shall the murderers be condemned” (Wells, 2014d, p. 229). She was hoping to avoid any accusation of hyperbole or prevarication, so she placed the onus on the reader. After the compilation of the data/narratives she closes the book with a challenge to the reader:

Think and act on independent lines in this behalf, remembering that after all. *It is the white man's civilization and the white man's government which are on trial.* This crusade will determine whether that civilization can maintain itself by itself, or whether anarchy shall prevail. Whether this Nation shall write itself down a success at self government, or in deepest humiliation admit its failure complete (Wells, 2014d, p. 309).

Wells-Barnett's method seems to suggest something about her expectations here. Implicitly she seems to be admitting that, if any progress is going to be made, she cannot do it alone. The reader must be involved in the determination; if the nation will be delivered from the influence of the 'unwritten law' they have a hand in that as well. Wells-Barnett attempts to bring to the reader's attention that they are in the labyrinth, however, they will have to read with care the monsters and haunts that abound. The reader is invited to join Wells-Barnett in a critical examination of the reports of what happened in New Orleans during that infamous week.

The task the reader is confronted with is a difficult one. It is difficult because there is no straightforward version of the story (is there ever?) (Hair, 1976, p. 119). Because of how things ended we may never receive Robert Charles's account, but the officer who engaged him in the initial altercation does give his account. William Hair argues, "The most believable and generally consistent account was that of Patrolman Mora ..." (Hair, 1976, p. 119). According to Wells-Barnett the reader will discover that there may be good reasons to handle that account with some skepticism. Despite the difficulties, I will depend mainly on Wells-Barnett's reconstruction of the events. Because of the mystery surrounding the events that initiated such a bloody riot, her attempt at re-membering what happened is crucial. Officer Mora<sup>10</sup> stated that he and two other officers approached Robert Charles and Lenard Pierce demanding the two black men explain to them how long they had been hanging out there and what they were doing. Mora claimed they

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<sup>10</sup> This initial accounting of Mora's perspective will come mainly from William Hair's, *Carnival of Fury*.

offered some vague answer. Then, according to Mora, the ‘larger’ of the two black men [Charles] stood up. Hair infers, “Mora must have interpreted this as a menacing gesture—for Charles was larger than Mora, and he was black” (Hair, 1976, p. 120). I assume Hair draws this inference from Mora’s immediate reaction to Charles standing up. Mora attempted to grab Charles. A struggle ensued and Mora claims, because Charles was strong, he was pulled into the street. Mora began to strike Charles with his [billy] club. As he was striking him Charles somehow shook loose, took out his gun, and began to fire<sup>11</sup>. He shot around three times at Mora. One of the bullets struck Mora in his thigh, another grazed his hand. Charles got away which initiated a manhunt that spanned several days.

Wells-Barnett provides an account that both differs and colors Mora’s in interesting ways. She places culpability at the feet of the officers because the “determined without a shadow of [legal] authority” to arrest Charles and Pierce (Wells, 2014e, p. 342). Wells-Barnett highlights that there was no justification, no warrant, for this attempted arrest. There was no crime broken and all these men were doing was sitting on the doorstep. So, what motivated the officers to engage these two men? According to Wells-Barnett, the officers were “*secure in the firm belief that they could do anything to a Negro that they wished*” (Wells, 2014e, p. 342). This is language that points to the authority that motivated (compelled?) these officers to approach Charles and Pierce. Although they did not have legal/written authority, as Wells-Barnett points out, there was a greater law that justified their actions that day—the ‘unwritten law.’ This law “fortified [them with] the assurance born of long experience” as police officers (Wells, 2014e, p. 342). Wells-Barnett accounts that the officers pulled their guns and one of the officers placed theirs to

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<sup>11</sup> This was his initial account. He would later clarify that it was actually he who drew his gun first and Charles drew his weapon in response. There was also a fellow officer who shot at Charles as well.

Pierce's head, Pierce relented. Mora attacked Charles with a billy club, drew his gun and shot at Charles. Charles pulled his gun in response, shots were exchanged, and Mora was hit. Charles escaped and Pierce was detained. A manhunt for Charles ensued.

I place these two accounts next to each other to highlight the differences, but I take the similarities to be meaningful here. If we take Mora's account—with the retraction and adjustment to his original story—there are a lot of similarities between his and Wells-Barnett's account. The major difference is the attendance to what motivated the officers that day. According to Mora he was afraid—a tune that would be repeated until the current day, according to Wells-Barnett Mora was compelled by the 'unwritten law'. Interestingly enough, they both may be right. What unfolded in the days to come provides important clues regarding the motives of all involved.

Because a large part of *Mob Rule* is the rehabilitation of Charles—the human being—Wells-Barnett spends a lot of time contemplating the interior life of Charles. For instance, Wells-Barnett entertains the question as to why Charles ran after shooting at the officers instead of turning himself in. She acknowledges that in a community that was “law-abiding” the latter made more sense. Officers who were governed by law and order would treat him properly despite what he was accused of, after which he would be granted a genuine examination. She also argues that in this hypothetical community he would have the right to lawfully defend his life. But based on his reaction Wells hypothesizes that Charles knew he did not live in a community like that one she proposed. Thus, he “knew that his arrest in New Orleans, even for defending his life, meant nothing short of a long term in the penitentiary, and *still more probable death by lynching at the hands of a cowardly mob*” (Wells, 2014e, p. 342). This was confirmed during the manhunt. As

frustration mounted due to them not being able to find him, the officers were ordered “to kill him on sight” (Wells, 2014e, p. 347). Charles understood that he was on the run in a city that did not ultimately abide by the written laws, but the officers who pursued him were motivated by a different law altogether.

Wells-Barnett notes that she was not the only one trying to figure out what made Charles tick. The press played a critical role in both the chronicling and development of the events that ensued. While the city was reeling trying to figure out what was actually going on, the press declared Charles to be a ‘desperado’. The papers “who were in the best position to trace the record of this man’s life,” Wells notifies, “made every possible effort to find evidence to prove that he was a villain unhung” (Wells, 2014e, p. 377). Even though, with all the resources they had at their disposal, they were unable to find any clues that identified Charles as a criminal prior to his interaction with the police, this lack did not inhibit them from publishing a characterization of him as a ‘lawbreaker’, ‘fiend incarnate’ and ‘desperado’. Instead of following the evidence these writers, Wells-Barnett accuses, “gave full license to their imagination and distorted the facts that they had obtained, in every way possible ...” (Wells, 2014e, p. 377). They started to revise events as well. They suggested that Charles and Pierce were sitting on that step contemplating burglary just before the police confronted them. This much was obvious the papers surmised. Their evidence? Wells-Barnett argues that the only evidence they had was Charles’s refusal to submit to “an absolute lawful attack, and a gun fight followed” (Wells, 2014e, p. 347). One can argue that Wells-Barnett is speculating here as well. Yet, her reading of the situation sheds an important light on how critical it is that very different lenses are being used here. If we accept Wells-Barnett’s framing, it is no accident those “unlawful” officers (and the papers and citizens

that share their perspective) are going to read Charles's 'lawful' actions as 'unlawful'—because he is after all breaking the 'unwritten law,' the law the others abide by. This vertigo is inevitable when the law is haunted. Of all the articles Wells-Barnett uses to reassemble the story, there are two that are particularly helpful in this examination of the relationship between the 'unwritten' and written law —

(1) 'Negro Kills Bluecoats and Escapes' (published 7/25/1900, cited in *Wells*, 2014e, p. 378-380):

Published two days into the manhunt and after 'officials' investigated [broke into?] Charles's room. Referring to Charles as 'the philosopher in the garret' the article claimed that the materials discovered in his room were helpful in providing a 'complete index to the character of the man'. They found periodicals and books (some of which were textbooks, many of which were classified as 'race propaganda'), some police gazettes, and an unidentified white substance in a jar. The papers that got the most attention in the article was the 'Voice of Missions' literature. These papers were mainly about black empowerment and possible emigration. They interpreted his reading material as evidence that he harbored an anti-white sentiment. They claimed Charles desired to be 'the Moses of his race' whose 'objective in life seemed to have been the discomfiture of the white race.' They speculated that he must have often 'burnt the midnight oil ... desirous of improving himself intellectually *in order that he might conquer the hated white race.*' (as cited in Wells, 2014e, p. 379, emphasis added). They conflated a desire for the equal rights of blacks with a hatred of the white race, to believe in the former is to desire the latter according to this article. It was easy to conclude, based on this evidence, that his hatred of white people motivated his "lawless" shooting at the police and running.

(2) 'The Making of a Monster' (published 7/25/1900, as cited in Wells, 2014e, p. 380-382)

This article begun with a fascinating admission: 'curiously little can be learned of his habits or mode of life.' However, this awareness did not curb their speculation. Out of the mystery they attempted to provide 'something of the personality of the *arch-fiend* Charles' (emphasis added). They also highlight his dedication to 'African equality,' and tried to account for its effect on his psychology. To be so focused on this one thing must have had 'a powerful effect' on his mind. This effect led to a 'ferocious hatred of the whites.'

Wells-Barnett argues that these conclusions, due to the lack of evidence they were based on, amounted to nothing more than fabrications. They did not prove anything about Charles more than they just confirmed what people were predisposed to think about him. There were some things that *had* to be true about him. This demand was largely the source of his monstrosity. He was a monster because he believed in black equality/hatred of whites. This double sided coin made Charles, they assumed, a ticking time bomb. The threat his sentiments leveled at the 'un-written' law was unbearable.

Wells-Barnett combatted these fabrications with an investigation of her own into Charles's character. She accused the papers of substituting "fiction for facts" in order to ground their classification of Charles. She was motivated, then, to (re)establish the facts "... as a matter of duty to the race, and the simple justice to the memory of Charles" (Wells, 2014e, p. 383). She concluded from the examination of the materials found in his apartment that Charles "was not an educated man. He was a student who faithfully investigated all the phases of oppression from which his race has suffered" (Wells, 2014e, p. 383). Not only was he a hard-working man by day, but he spent many nights reading/studying and writing. She concluded from this activity that he



was dedicated to self-improvement. “He knew that he was a student of a problem which required all the intelligence that a man could command, and he was burning his midnight oil gathering knowledge that he might better be able to come to an intelligent solution” (Wells, 2014e, p. 383). It was noted that he was deeply affected by both the disenfranchisement of Louisiana blacks that took place in 1898 and the lynching of Sam Hose in Atlanta the previous year. He was a “disaffected man who was acutely aware of the injustices faced by his race” (Bay, 2009, p. 247). This did not deter him from being a “studious and highly politically conscious man” who dedicated much of his free time to studying and contemplating how to live in the face of this oppressive situation. Mia Bay argues that Wells-Barnett may have had a better angle at interpreting Charles’s motives because they were familiar to her. She was also self-educated, with much of that education coming by the light of the fire as she read through the night because she had to teach during the day (Bay, 2009, p. 249). Wells-Barnett recounts those early days in her autobiography,

I had always been a voracious reader. I had read all the fiction in the Sunday school library and in Rust College. In the country schools where I had taught many times there was no oil for lamps and there were no candles to spare. My only diversion was reading and I could forget my troubles in no other way. I used to sit before the blazing wood fire with a book in my lap during the long winter evenings and read by firelight (Wells, 1970, p. 21).

Thus, Wells-Barnett was more sensitive to what these materials meant to the mindset of the one contemplating them. She declared that relating how this all reflects the interior life of Charles was a fulfillment of a “duty” to both Charles and black people in general. Elizabeth Alexander (2004) argues that black people “... are seen, imagined, and ‘known’ through sociological and *fantasy* discourses” (p. ix, emphasis added). She contrasts this knowledge from the outside with what she calls the ‘black interior’—“...black life and creativity behind the public face of stereo-

type and limited imagination. ... a metaphysical space beyond the black public everyday toward power and wild imagination that black people ourselves know we possess but need to be reminded of” (Alexander, 2004, p. x). Alexander notes (2004) that out in the public black people exist as ‘real’ when they are understood as “fixed properties” This, it has been discussed above, has been true since attempts were made to reduce us to mere chattel to be used at the fancy of our enslavers. We have to be constructed as ‘real.’ Or, we become ‘real’ once we’ve been constructed/fabricated. This construction is most often the result of being “misrepresented, absented, distorted, rendered invisible, exaggerated, made *monstrous* in the Western visual imagination and in the world of art” (Alexander, 2004, p. 5-6, emphasis added). Hortense Spillers suggests that this is a necessary process in the eyes of some. She argues how, for instance, black women ‘describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasure of rhetorical wealth. *My country needs* me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented” (Spillers, 1987, p. 65). Black people, she adds, have worked hard to combat these constructions. But this means that how we have imagined and presented ourselves is in direct conflict with the ‘real’ versions that are presented of us. Both emerge from imaginations—the former from one that has internal access, the latter is limited to guesstimating from the outside. This explains why the ‘real’ is so monstrous, its deformities and distortions betray that it is contrived. This battle between the ‘real’ and the interior is raging within the pages of *Mob Rule*. Wells-Barnett seems to understand that more is at stake than just making sure one gets the picture of Charles correct—not that this is not inherently valuable. The sharper Charles comes into focus, the sharper the world that is trying to mis-present him does. The ‘facts’ really do matter here. Either Wells-Barnett is correct about the destructive effects of the ‘unwritten law’ (as it is chan-

neled through the ‘officials’ of the written), or the proponents are correct that there is ‘good’ reason to destroy someone as monstrous as Charles. The newspapers seem to understand, on some level, what is at stake as well, which is why they are going through so much pains to build such a straw man out of such a limited amount of straws.

I do not want to run from the (mis-)appellation of the ‘monster’ here though. The work it is doing is vital to understanding this discussion of the ‘unwritten law.’ In order to navigate this well, though, we need to tread lightly. At all times it is important to remain cognizant of whose lens one is looking through. What I mean is that it may not be incorrect that Charles is a ‘monster’ here. I believe there is good reason that someone like Charles would appear as a monster to the individuals who identified him as such. Wells-Barnett warns us that the Southern white man has made it their business of “painting” black men as “moral monsters” (Wells, 2014d, p. 224). Her framing here is instructive. I read ‘painting’ as consonant with fabricating/imagining/constructing here. The monstrousness of black men is, then, a projection. But once painted, following Alexander, these individuals are presented as ‘real.’ While the excuse was offered that what made them monstrous was their debased morality—particularly their insatiable appetite for white women, Wells-Barnett revealed that this was not true on two levels. First, it could not be verified that there was an inordinate or increasing amount of aggression and violation of white women since the 1880s. But, secondly, and more importantly, this was not even the rationale offered for the vast majority of lynchings during that same period. We see that here with Robert Charles. By 1900, the definition of ‘monster’ seems to be expanding. It could now mean, at least in New Orleans, that one believes in the basic equality of black and white people/‘hatred’ for white people. Thus, it seems like this is a precursor for new pretentious justifications on the horizon, or maybe

they will continue to run with the old seeing that they do not need to establish the factual nature of it to use as a veil for the general brutalization of black people. Thus, on one level this is what it means to be a ‘monster’—from the perspective of the white imaginary. But I argue there is a complementary meaning that is also important. Jeffery Cohen (1996) formulates seven theses regarding the study of ‘monsters.’ His first thesis is helpful in reframing what it means to read the ‘monster’ more faithfully, turning the mirror back out on the world that has ‘painted’ them such. Cohen argues that the monster is “... an embodiment of a certain *cultural moment*—of a time, a feeling, and a place” (p. 4). Thus, the monster embodies the anxieties, desires, and *fears* of the moment out of which it appears. Cohen (1996) also argues in this thesis that monsters exist “only to be read” (p. 4). He notes that monsters are “glyphs” whose appearance demands an “hierophant” (an interpreter). This suggests that a culture struggles reading correctly the monsters that are, in actuality, a reflection of them. There is also a great potential for misreading the monster. Thus, a hierophant is invaluable. Following this thesis I take Wells-Barnett to be such a hierophant. We see in *Mob Rule* various attempts to read Charles as ‘monster’ and to interpret the message he bears. We see the papers struggle to make sense of his dwelling, and are compelled to construct a reading based on what can be gleaned from the outside. Wells-Barnett challenges that reading providing a more faithful reading of Charles. She has access these other writers do not. Thus, she is a more trustworthy hierophant (even though the creation of the monster finds its source in those who endorse the ‘unwritten’ law).

In Cohen’s seventh thesis (the monster stands at the threshold . . . of becoming), he argues that, when the monster appears, it comes bearing questions. Because monsters are made (as opposed to being born *ex nihilo*) they appear demanding their origin story. Searching for its cre-

ator it asks, ‘why was I created’ (Cohen, 1996, p. 20)? Their creation was contingent, they could have been otherwise (or, maybe not have been at all?), so this adds to the intensity of the demand. This question has implications for ‘us’ as well. The answer to the question bears insight to how ‘we’ see, or have constructed, the world ‘we’ find ourselves in. The pronouns in the last few sentences have scare quotes around them because the monster forces its interlocutors to interrogate who is ‘us’, ‘we’, ‘them’, and ‘me’? These can no longer be taken for granted in the face of the monster. Lewis Gordon, tracing the etymology of the word ‘monster’, argues that its derivations suggest that we should read the monster with the goal of deciphering the warning it bears. Derived from the Latin word for ‘to warn’ (*monere*), the word ‘monstrum’ suggests a ‘divine warning.’ Gordon (2021) suggests that the sacred nature of this word has largely been secularized, and thus, this warning does not necessarily derive from the heavens. But this does not make the need to properly interpret it any less urgent. Gordon argues that the ‘monstrum’ is intimately associated with ‘disaster’ (p. 111). In actuality, it is the disaster the monster is trying to warn its readers of. To misinterpret the monster, then, is to invite destruction. Whoever the message is for cannot afford to miss it. This is disheartening because the monster is usually depicted as something that is vanquished, out of a perceived necessity (e.g. fear, despair). It seems like one is bound to miss the message if this is the response. “The error, then,” Gordon (2021) warns, “is to focus on the monster instead of what stimulated its appearance” (p. 111). The warning that disaster is coming brings hope because there is still time for an intervention. But, it does not seem like time is infinite (or else the warning seems baseless—is a warning for something that will never come meaningful?). It is in this vein I want to engage the ‘monster’ as it appears in *Mob Rule*. The ‘moral monster’ is a leitmotif that runs through much of Wells-Barnett’s work between

1892-1901. I do not take this to be coincidental. So, if we take the charge that Charles is a ‘monster’ seriously, his appearance as such demands certain questions of the reader. What does Charles (and all the others who have been “painted” such) tell us about the cultural moment and space where he arrives? What can he tell us about his ‘makers’<sup>12</sup>? I believe that the monster has important things to tell us about the nature of the ‘unwritten’ law that demanded the monster’s emergence. Every monster carries with it a “double narrative”—one side of the story explains the monster’s origin story, the other side is the monster’s testimony which reveals the function the monster holds for the culture in which it appears (Cohen, 1996, p. 13). Wells-Barnett gives us the first side of the story: the monster was made in order to justify the brutal treatment of black people post-enslavement. Their unwillingness to give up their perceived/self-proclaimed right to treat black people as their playthings needed a rationalization in the eyes of ‘civilization’. Of all the excuses offered for doing so, the third rationale—painting them a moral monster—was the most effective. This analysis is closely related to the second narrative. The ‘unwritten law’ builds its legitimacy on the back of the monster. As long as monsters exist, the ‘unwritten law’ can maintain its self-appointed position as the savior of ‘civilization’ (as they desire it to be). Yet, she also notes highlights the neglected aspect of the monster’s warning. The absolute supremacy of the ‘unwritten law’ threatens the very fabric of society. Can we see this warning fulfilled in the days that followed the altercation between Robert Charles and Officer Mora?

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<sup>12</sup> To be clear, I do not mean ‘make’ in the Frankensteinian sense here. This is why I take Wells-Barnett’s work to establish his interiority so seriously. She keeps him, I argue, from being sealed as ‘real.’ However, I think it is a wasted move to just reject/dismiss the attempt to make him a ‘monster’ that is tried by the general white public in New Orleans. To be painted a monster does not necessarily make one a monster. But it is worth trying to interpret the painting because of what it can tell us about the painters. I believe this is also one of the main objectives of *Mob Rule*.

The search for Robert Charles in the days subsequent to the shooting threw the city into turmoil. “During the entire time,” Wells-Barnett notes, “the mob held the city in its hands” (Wells, 2014e, p. 365). This period gave it a vivid demonstration of what a “reign of absolute lawlessness” [the reign of the ‘unwritten law’] looks like (Wells, 2014e, p. 352). It did not take much time, due to frustration, before mobs generalized their anger turning it outward. Wells-Barnett claims that, in actuality, this generalized ire took the place of the search for Charles (Wells, 2014e, p. 375). At this point, accusation of crime was dispensed with, it only took one crossing paths with the mob that exposed them to abuse and even death. With a gothic hue Wells recounts the story “... of the mob in New Orleans, which, *despising all law*, roamed the streets day and night, searching for colored men and women, whom they beat, shot and killed at will” (Wells, 2014e, p. 340). Wells-Barnett chronicled as much of the violence as she could in the space provided in the pamphlet. The mob did not withhold abuse from women, men, or children. Some black people were ripped off street cars and beaten, shot, and/or killed. Homes owned by black people were broken into and lives and property were destroyed. Black schools were burned down. The (written) law was in flux. Many city officials joined the mob in their hunt. Initially they were enlisted by the mayor to join the search for Charles offering a reward to whomever brought him the body of Charles ‘dead or alive’” (Wells, 2014e, p. 348). However, once unleashed they could no longer be corralled. Once the mob turned on the black occupants of the city the mayor commissioned a ‘posse’ of a thousand men to “assist the police in maintaining order” but to no avail. Thus, officials (representing the (written) law), at first glance, seemed to be able to commission the possessed at its will. But, what was discovered was that proponents of the ‘unwritten law’ followed its will. The ‘unwritten law’ was so brazen that it made no effort to

conceal its crimes. During the massacre the mob made no effort to hide their faces; after the massacre the participants made open confession of their actions. Also, there were no efforts by the (written) law to punish any of the participants (at least by the publishing of *Mob Rule*) (Wells, 2014e, p. 365). There were some punished in the wake of the massacre though. For instance, in response to a white man who declared that Negroes should be lynched, Edward McCarthy retorted that they “were as good as any white man.” McCarthy was beaten by a crowd and then later fined for that declaration. (Wells, 2014e, p. 365). Matilda Gamble suggested that it was a shame that more officers were not killed by Charles and was fined. Juxtaposing these two instances illustrates just what the ‘unwritten law’ had a problem with. It was not the sexual assault of white womanhood, but the equal standing and self-defense of/by black people. And it is crucial to notice that it was the (written) law that worked at the ‘unwritten’ law’s behest in attempting to stamp out any of this influence. Over the course of the five day massacre several black people were killed, a couple dozen seriously injured, and dozens more beaten by the mob. This was the result of the “absolute reign” of the lawless(?) mob.

On July 27th, 1900, after a five day manhunt, after killing several white people (several officers and others who joined the search party), facing a mob of thousands, Robert Charles died in a blaze of glory. I use this characterization intentionally, following Wells-Barnett’s lead. In chronicling his death she uses language usually applied to the hero of a story (e.g. he fought “a courage which was indescribable”). The contrast becomes more brilliant when placed up against her gothic descriptions of the reign of the ‘unwritten law.’ Wells-Barnett summarizes the character of Charles and his struggle this way,



So he lived and so he would have died had not he raised his hand to resent unprovoked assault and unlawful arrest that fateful Monday night. That made him an outlaw, and being a man of courage he decided to die with his face to the foe. *The white people of this country may charge that he was a desperado, but to the people of his own race Robert Charles will always be regarded as the hero of New Orleans* (Wells, 2014e, p. 387).

It is a difficult task, admittedly, to make sense of how Wells-Barnett classified Charles and the massacre in New Orleans. For instance, it was not universally agreed upon among black people that Charles was a hero. More specifically, few black people, especially those living in the aftermath of the massacre in Memphis agreed. Some even joined the voices who identified Charles a ‘demon,’ ‘fiend,’ ‘devil in embryo,’ and ‘lawless.’ Some hoped he could be forgotten. Bay notes, “In a nation where white supremacy reigned increasingly uncontested, Charles had few avowed fans even among his own people ...” (Bay, 2009, p. 250-251). Wells-Barnett disagreed. It was the mob who she deemed ‘lawless’ and ‘fiendish’. This was not merely a competition in name-calling. How one read Robert Charles said a lot about how one read the world that produced him. According to W. Scott Poole (, “American heroes are monster slayers, and the monsters are the enemies of America” (148). Wells-Barnett’s analysis turns things upside down, but not really. She suggests that “only [to] those whose anger and vindictiveness warp their judgment is Robert Charles a desperado” (Wells, 2014e, p. 387). Wells-Barnett couches her reading of Charles within the longer analysis of racialized violence that she engaged for almost a decade prior to this New Orleans massacre. The ‘unwritten’ law would always remain the threat for her (not just to her, but to the nation at large), and she challenged her audience to never take their eyes off of that fact.

## VIII.

*'Murder was so common on his plantation that he feared to be alone after nightfall. He might have believed in ghosts.'* (Harriet Jacobs)

*'because white men can't/police their imagination/black men are dying'* (Claudia Rankine)

This chapter<sup>13</sup> ends with an acknowledgment of a tension I am not sure how to resolve. Truthfully, I am not sure it can be if the continuum I suspect exists does. I am left with a question—a conundrum—what does it mean to accept Charles as a hero? Wells-Barnett argues, it seems, that the second Charles raised his hand to defend himself he knew death would shortly follow. Wells argues,

This authority . . . would have been no news to Charles, not to any colored man in New Orleans, who, for any purposes whatever, even to save his life, raised his hand against a white man. *It is now, even as it was in the days of slavery*, an unpardonable sin for a Negro to resist a white man, no matter how unjust or unprovoked the white man's attack may be. *Charles knew this* . . . (Wells, 2014e, p. 348).

Is this the lot of the hero? To frame Charles as a hero within the haunted house seems to suggest that he—and black people in general—were in a no-win situation. Either one could submit to the mold of playthingness (“as it was in the days of slavery”) or to fight against that demand. The latter, as it was demonstrated by Charles, could only end one way within the haunted house. Murakawa (2021) notes, “... Wells's vision of justice transcended simple pronouncements about the value of violence. Violence was not intrinsically 'barbaric,' and nonviolence had no inherent value” (p. 222). While violence in general was not intrinsically valuable, she did laud self-defense/protection. In *Southern Horrors*, Wells calculates,

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<sup>13</sup> Really, the project.

The only times an Afro-American who was assaulted and got away has been when he had a gun and used it in self-defense. The lesson this teaches and which every Afro-American should ponder well, is that a Winchester rifle should have a place of honor in every black home, and it should be used for that protection which the law refuses to give (Wells, 2014a, p. 80).

Wells believed that this was a language the white perpetrators of violence could not confuse. She argues, “When the white man *who is always the aggressor* knows he runs as great risk of biting the dust every time his Afro-American victim does, he will have greater respect for Afro-American life” (Wells, 2014a, p. 80). She believed that to capitulate to their illegitimate grasping was to undervalue one's life, a valuation the perpetrator would adopt as well. Murakawa (2021) confirms when declaring, “Black worth is inherent, and whites can learn this lesson through their direct calculus of risk. Greater risk drives greater respect for Afro-American life; less risk continues the downward spiral of white insult and violence” (p. 222). But the articles and books penned by Wells-Barnett that followed *Horrors* seems to challenge—or at least seriously interrogate—her early assessment. For instance, in “The Negro's Case in Equity,” less than a decade after she penned *Horrors*, Wells-Barnett chronicles multiple stories where self-defense (or the defense of others) brought on the vengeance of the mob. It is unclear, then, that in these scenarios the natural response of these white people to black people who were merely defending their lives was respect. I agree that the calculus of risk can cause the aggressor to think twice. This was the case with some of the officers who opted not to hunt Charles in response to his shooting a few of their colleagues. However, Charles's very stand turned the city upside-down, resulting in the death and injury of dozens of black people in the name of vengeance on Charles. I even suspect that the retribution visited on those New Orleanians was always just bubbling under the surface. Even the life of Charles was extinguished once the mob grew enough to face the chal-

lenge. This does not mean that I am suggesting that submission to the pressure to return back to the condition of things during enslavement—a plaything—is the answer. I am just flagging the tension/conundrum black self-defense raises. The very notion of raising up, even in self-defense, is a violation the ‘unwritten law’ cannot countenance. This tension comes to view as new monsters continue to appear in this nation. The fear Laquan, Trayvon, Atatiana, Ahmaud, Mike, Eric, and many others, evoked cost them their lives. Many of these deaths were grounded in the justification that they were monstrous (e.g. ‘I was in fear for my life.’). Many of them were merely standing up for themselves, refusing to count their lives as cheap. Some became aware of their perceived threat when it was all but too late. They (we), like Charles, were trapped in the haunted house. Sadly, they join the many voices whose haunting stretches from here to the 17th century.

Within the gothic frame there is always the possibility of the house imploding. But through the lens Wells-Barnett’s analysis provides this seems like no light prospect. And yet, she also warns that the house’s integrity is threatened by the “absolute supremacy” of the ‘unwritten law.’ What does it mean to be trapped in an imploding house? It is difficult to end this chapter in any story-book/theoretical way that would suggest closure. Wells-Barnett, herself resisted this in so many of the texts analyzing lynching. Instead of offering the delusion of closure (she was still in the throes of it after all), she places the onus on the reader to consider their relationship to the ‘unwritten law’ and what can actively be done to overcome it. I am choosing here to follow her lead in resisting the urge to offer an unearned resolution.

This chapter focused on the relationship between the gothic and law (or gothic law). The law has been a major theme in Gothic literature from early on. In the Gothic, the law is portrayed as a haunted house or labyrinth that is difficult to navigate. In these stories the inhabitants of the

house are often trapped inside. In this chapter I attempted to use this lens to focus on the gothic nature of American law specifically. Particularly how the law has remained gothic from enslavement through the turn of the twentieth century. This lens provides important insights on the antilynching work of Ida B. Wells-Barnett (and vice versa). One important theme of this analysis is the relationship between the ‘unwritten law’ and the brutal violence it demands to maintain itself. This process of maintenance, Wells alerts us, needs justifications. One of the most effective rationalizations was the “painting” of black males as moral monsters by the accusation of their sexual mistreatment of white women. I take this claim serious and ask, through Wells-Barnett, what these monsters tell us about American law, and how (and why) it produces its monsters. W. Scott Poole (2011) argues, “American history can best be understood through America’s monsters” (p. 69-70). Thus, Wells-Barnett’s reading of the monsters of her day provide critical insights into the nature of this country in the window between legal emancipation and our current day. Following Naomi Murakawa’s (2021) prompting, I focus on Wells-Barnett’s analysis of the ‘unwritten law’—on whose behalf lynching was practiced. Lynching was not, however, the only racialized violence Wells-Barnett analyzes though, and it is the ‘unwritten law’ that bonds all these violences together.

Jeffrey Cohen (1996) explains, “No monster tastes of death but once” (p. 5). The monster continues to reappear. This is one important way that the house remains haunted. Even when the monster is killed—there were thousands in the name of the ‘unwritten law’—it continued to revive. “[T]he monster itself turns immaterial and vanishes, to reappear somewhere else” (Cohen, 1996, p. 4). One reason the monster continued to reappear in this context was because the ‘unwritten law’ needs it, lest it run out of rationalizations. Thus, as long as the ‘unwritten law’ re-

mains monsters will continue to appear. In *Red Record*, Wells-Barnett lists three rationalizations that kept the 'unwritten law' afloat. However, her analysis challenges us to keep our minds open to the fact that the 'unwritten law' is adaptive, there is always the possibility of the implementation of new statutes. New monsters seem to signal these adaptations. In other words, the 'unwritten law' still lurks (sometimes in the shadows, sometimes out in the open). All the while 'civilization' remains on trial. It seems inevitable that one day the monsters will vanish, which will mean the verdict is finally in; this will mean that either disaster has finally settled in or that the 'unwritten law' was finally conquered.

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