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“ETERNAL VIGILANCE IS THE PRICE OF LIBERTY”: THE
PROVERBS AND PROVERBIAL SAYINGS OF IDA B.
WELLS-BARNETT

Abstract: This essay seeks to recontextualize some of the proverbs and proverbial expressions that Ida B. Wells Barnett used throughout her life by examining biographies, personal diaries, articles and letters, and analytical texts about her life. Her proverbs and proverbial language come from a variety of different sources including literature, the Bible, and other famous leaders. She used proverbs in diverse and ingenious ways for a multitude of purposes. Her primary reasons for employing proverbial rhetoric was to persuade political leaders to put an end to lynch laws and mob violence in America. She also used them to bring attention to the temperance movement and to other causes that she cared deeply about. One overarching idea in this essay is that by understanding Wells-Barnett’s use of proverbs and proverbial language, one may also gain a more thorough understanding of various aspects of her worldview.

Keywords: African American, American, Anti-lynching movement, autobiography, Bible, clergy, civil rights, Civil War, clergy, folk, folklore, human rights, Jim Crow, paremiology, politics, proverbs, proverbial expressions, proverbial rhetoric, race, Reconstruction, slavery, suffragist, segregation, temperance.

Ida B. Wells-Barnett (July 16, 1862- March 25, 1931) is an important figure in American history for a number of reasons. She initiated and was at the forefront of the anti-lynching movement and women’s suffrage movements respectively. She also fought for the civil rights of all people. She is regarded as one of the first African-American female journalists and the very first black female investigative journalist. During the course of her life she played many different roles, she was affectionately known as “Joan of Arc,” “the mother of the club movement,” and also “the princess of the black press.” Wells displays what historian Patricia A. Schechter identifies as *visionary pragmatism* which is “a distinctive blend of religious and political commitments involving

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African American Christianity and a particular understanding of Reconstruction's unfinished business in the United States" (Schechter 2001: 9). She is also what historian Paula J. Giddings refers to as a "radical interracialist," or an African American woman who was "determined to enter the mainstream" (Terborg-Penn 1998: 119). In *A Red Record* (1895), her longest anti-lynching publication, Wells writes: "Virtue knows no color line, and the chivalry which depends upon complexion of skin and texture of hair can command no honest respect" (Harris 1991: 147; Bay and Gates 2014: 155). As a long-lasting testament to her radical interracialist ideals the proverb "Virtue knows no color line" would become one of her most well-known sayings (Harris 1991: 147; Bay and Gates 2014: 155). Wells embarked on fairly new territory when she became one of the first African-American women to run for public office when she unsuccessfully sought a senate seat in the state of Illinois the year before her death. However, the most significant and inspiring label that Wells wore proudly was given to her by her many detractors—that of "race agitator." In fact, at one point the Military Intelligence Division considered Wells to be "a far more dangerous agitator than Marcus Garvey" (Giddings 2008: 575). As a teen in the late 19th century Wells was the first African-American woman to attempt to sue a railroad company, which even precedes the landmark railway car discrimination case, *Plessy vs. Versus Ferguson* (1892) (which resulted in the expansion of Jim Crow laws). Wells's case also precedes the successful campaigns against the racially bias employment practices of railroad companies led by Asa Phillip Randolph (1889-1979) throughout the mid and late twentieth century. Even though she was always willing to confront racism early in her life, Wells became a "race agitator" when her writings began to awaken America's conscience regarding lynching.

There is an old riddle that goes, "If a tree falls in the woods and no one is around to hear it fall, does it make a sound?" Wells would become that sound for countless numbers of black lynching victims throughout her lifetime—victims whose deaths would go unnoticed otherwise. During the Reconstruction Era (1865-1877), the decade following the Civil War (1861-1865), lynching became common practice in the South and continued to happen well into the twenty-first century. The Tuskegee Institute recorded nearly five thousand lynchings that took place between 1882 and 1968.

Lynching often involved the apprehension of unsuspecting victims and then hanging them from trees or light posts. Additionally, lynch mobs burned their victims alive and filled their lifeless bodies with bullets. Victims were also mutilated by incensed crowds and photos, and small pieces of their charred flesh, teeth, articles of clothing, etc. were often distributed as souvenirs. Some victims were lynched under the assumption that they had committed a criminal offense and the lynchings generally took place whether the offense was actually committed by an accused individual or not. The most popular excuses provided for lynching black victims was often the sexual assault or rape of white women and stealing, but victims were also murdered for standing up to their white employers, and crimes as petty as being “sassy” to whites. Investigations of these crimes generally ended with the superficial determination that the murder(s) took place “at the hands of parties that are unknown.” For over a century lynching was a wide-spread practice that usually went uncontested and lynch mobs were hardly ever brought to justice.

Ida B. Wells was one of the first to publicly contest this practice, and she began to do so after three of her closest friends, Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell, and Will Stewart, were lynched in 1892, all of whom were known to be successful, law-abiding, upstanding citizens. Devastated, angry, and heartbroken, Wells religiously and vigilantly began to use the black press to make the world aware of the deceptive and fraudulent nature of lynch law in the U.S. She went to physical locations where crimes took place and gathered specific details from eyewitnesses and others involved. In all of the articles and pamphlets that she would feverishly produce following her friends’ murders such as *Southern Horrors* (1892), *A Red Record* (1895), *Lynch Law in America* (1900), and many others, she questioned the validity of the practice of lynching, proving in many of the cases that victims were not guilty of any crime at all. In fact, most of the time, as in the case of her friends, the victims’ only crimes had been their very own success. For instance, Wells’s friends ran a successful grocery store in Memphis called The People’s Grocery Company, which began to infringe on the profits of a neighboring white-owned store. Furthermore, two of the three victims were postmasters, a government appointed position that was generally viewed as being reserved for whites only. Through her painstaking inves-

tigative work, journalistic talent, and public speaking engagements, she revealed repeatedly that racial hatred and jealousy were the underlying causes of most lynchings. By openly contesting the false accusation of rape that preceded most lynchings of black men, she helped to open America's eyes to the gendered politics of southern racism and ultimately motivated law makers to pass more anti-lynching legislation despite the fact that the actual enforcement of such legislation would take even longer to achieve. Wells devoted her entire life to advocating for black people and her wide-reaching social, cultural, and political influence is still felt today. Unfortunately, her work is overlooked and ignored, but she certainly deserves to be in the very same conversation as other American political heroes and pioneers of the Reconstruction and Civil Rights eras such as: Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865), Frederick Douglass (1818-1895), Asa Phillip Randolph (1889-1979), and Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968) due to the immeasurable global impact that she had and continues to have, nearly a century after her death.

Wells made a conscious effort to incorporate traditional language in her work. By traditional, I am referring to her use of proverbs and proverbial language. Her subjects are very serious, and in turn, she uses adages and proverbial expressions to make very serious-minded observations. For instance, Wells grew very concerned when racial tensions began to escalate in Chicago in 1919. After witnessing the deaths of nearly three hundred African Americans in the East Saint Louis race riots of 1917, Wells begs the city of Chicago to intervene. When she and her delegates are turned away from the Mayor's office on two separate occasions, Wells sends an open letter to the *Chicago Tribune* editor dated June 30th, 1919. The letter is subsequently published on July 7th, 1919 and it urges government officials to take action. She closes her letter by saying: "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. And in all earnestness I implore Chicago to set the wheels of justice in motion before it is too late, and Chicago be disgraced by some of the bloody outrages that have disgraced East St. Louis" (Thompson 1990: 123; McMurry 1998: 325). Nearly forty people would die in the Chicago race riots which began on July 27th, and lasted seven days, but had Mayor William Hale Thompson heeded Wells's bit of proverbial wisdom and "set the wheels of justice in motion," dozens of lives might have been saved in East St. Louis.

Wells also incorporates traditional language from some of America's most sacred and well-known texts in order to shed more light on the deadly southern rite of passage known as lynching. In doing so, she simultaneously emphasizes that the practice of lynching contradicts all of the values and principles on which the nation was founded. In a speech entitled "Lynch Law in All Its Phases" delivered at Tremont Temple in Boston on February 13th, 1893 Wells incorporates sayings from the Declaration of Independence (1776), the Gettysburg Address (1863), and the Star Spangled Banner (1814). She says:

And yet, the observing and thoughtful must know that in one section, at least, of our common country, a government of the people, by the people, and for the people, means a government by the mob; where the land of the free and home of the brave means a land of lawlessness, murder and outrage; and where liberty of speech means the license of might to destroy the business and drive from home those who exercise this privilege contrary to the will of the mob. Repeated attacks on the life, liberty and happiness of any citizen or class of citizens are attacks on distinctive American institutions... (Bay and Gates 2014: 77)

The first saying "A government of the people, by the people, and for the people" was popularized by way of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address (Mieder 2005: 15-55). The second saying "land of the free and home of the brave" is from "The Star-Spangled Banner." Wells's reference to "life, liberty and happiness" alludes to the Declaration of Independence. All of these sayings are easily recognized by her audience as being derived from distinctly American texts. Wells employs this rhetorical strategy on a number of separate occasions throughout her career. In "Afro-Americans and Africa" (1892) Wells says: "In no other country but the vaunted "land of the free and home of the brave" is a man despised because of his color. As Irish, Swede, Dutch, Italian and other foreigners find this 'sweet land of liberty,' the Afro-American finds it the land of oppression, outrage and persecution" (Bay and Gates 2014: 47). In "Our Country's Lynching Record" (1913) Wells writes:

Civilization cannot burn human beings alive or justify others who do so; neither can it refuse a trial by jury for black men accused of crime, without making a mockery of the respect for law which is the safeguard of the liberties of white men. The nation cannot profess Christianity, which makes the golden rule its foundation stone, and continue to deny equal opportunity for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness to the black race. (Bay and Gates 2014: 287)

In “The East St. Louis Massacre: The Greatest Outrage of the Century” (1917) Wells states:

The race prejudice of the United States asks Americans of black skins to keep an inferior place and when the Negroes ask an equal opportunity for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, they are lynched, burned alive, disfranchised and massacred! Wherever a black man turns in this land of the free and home of the brave—in industry, in civic endeavor, in political councils in the ranks of Christians (?)—this hydra headed monster confronts him; dominates, oppresses and murders him! (Bay and Gates 2014: 311)

In “The Arkansas Race Riot” (1920) Wells writes about a group of black men sentenced to death for defending themselves from a vicious mob:

The other white man mentioned in the record, Clinton Lee, met his death next day while he and hundreds of other white men were chasing and murdering every Negro they could find, driving them from their homes and stalking them in the woods and fields as men hunt wild beasts. They were finishing up the job they began the night before. As a group of Negroes ran before the mob two shots were fired from a rifle one of them carried, and Clinton Lee fell dead. For his death five of the twelve men sentenced are awaiting death by electrocution. Yet no man in this ‘land of the free and home of the brave’ will say that a man is not justified in firing back on other men who are after him armed with shotguns to take his life! (Bay and Gates 2014: 318)

According to historian Angela D. Sims, statements like these that incorporate American proverbial rhetoric may serve two distinct purposes: “She wanted to promote a collective positive self-definition of African Americans in the public sphere and ‘at the same time arouse the conscience of the American people to a demand for justice to every citizen, and punishment by law for the lawless’” (quoted in Sims 2010: 41-42). Wolfgang Mieder asserts that American quotations that have become proverbial can easily serve as “guidepost for humankind “by reminding everyone that “we are tied together globally in a network of mutuality,” and this was certainly one of Wells’s intentions (Mieder 2019: 298).

It is well-known that proverbs and proverbial language are a defining feature in American and African-American political rhetoric. It is well-documented by paremiologist and folklorist Wolfgang Mieder who asserts that “...traditional proverbs are indeed a living part of all political discourse. They play a significant role in the speeches and writings of major politicians, who employ them both positively and negatively to reach their political goals” (Mieder 2019: 35). Mieder has written about the proverbs and proverbial sayings of famous political figures such as Douglass, “*No Struggle, No Progress: Frederick Douglass and His Proverbial Rhetoric for Civil Rights* (2009); Obama, *Yes We Can: Barack Obama’s Proverbial Rhetoric* (2009); King, “*Making A Way Out of No Way: Martin Luther King’s Sermonic Proverbial Rhetoric* (2010); Lewis, ““Keep Your Eyes on the Prize’: Congressman John Lewis’s Proverbial Odyssey for Civil Rights” (2014), and a number of others. Mieder’s scholarship illustrates that proverbs have and always will be an integral part of American history and the American political scene. Furthermore, Mieder’s work provides ample evidence that the study of proverbs and proverbial language may highlight essential aspects of leaders’ lives, such as ways that social and political injustices have influenced them. In many cases the proverbial utterances of leaders encapsulate their reactions to socio-political wrongs. Paremiological evidence demonstrates that many important politicians and leaders have benefited in a multitude of ways from the use of proverbs. Likewise, an examination of the works of Ida B. Wells’s illustrates that they were an important component of her communication style. She used them in her public speeches, private writings, correspondences, and in her many publications. Sometimes proverbs

and proverbial sayings were spoken or written in reference to her by others, and she was in turn, responsive to them. This illustrates that they were a popular and meaningful aspect of communication during her lifetime.

Proverbs may be defined as “concise traditional statements of apparent truths with currency among the folk” (Mieder 2004: 4). They generally originate from people who communicate an idea using a concise and memorable phrase. The phrase is then used by others which often results in variation. In addition to oral transmission, the process of dissemination is abetted by literature and other forms of media. Despite being recognized and understood by ordinary people or “the folk,” proverbs should not be regarded as absolute truths, but they are used precisely because they sound “true.” According to folklorist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Neat symmetries and witty convergences of sound and meaning, tight formulations of logical relations, highly patterned repetitions, structural balance, and familiar metaphors encapsulate general principals and contribute to the feeling that anything that sounds so right must be true” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1981: 111-112). On the contrary it is widely accepted that proverbs such as “If the shoe fits, wear it,” and “Good fences make good neighbors,” etc. should be understood according to the context in which they are used. As Mieder emphasizes, “proverbs are apparent truths about experiences and each proverb does not have universal applicability. In special situations...any proverb will express some short wisdom of sorts that comments or reflects on a given situation, even though the truth of it could be put into question when looked at from a larger philosophical framework. Proverbs are context-bound, and so is their wisdom, no matter how minute that kernel of truth may be” (Mieder 2019: 267).

Wells may have acquired proverbs and proverbial expressions that she uses from a number of different sources. These sources may include but are not limited to: her family and friends, preachers, and political figures that she often listened to, and the vast amount of literature that she was exposed to as a young child and throughout her lifetime. There is also evidence that Wells may have been a folklorist at heart, habitually recording proverbs and proverbial sayings that she encountered as she travelled. In one of her diary entries, marked Thursday July 8th 1886, Wells writes, “Have been in the city four days and this is the first opportunity

I've had to record the sayings & doings of the people whom I've met and the impressions of the country I've received" (DeCosta-Willis 1995: 86). This was written when Wells was twenty-four years old as she was travelling to Topeka, Kansas with friends for a National Education Association conference. The city that she is actually referring to is Kansas City, Missouri where they stopped along the way. If it actually exists this document of "sayings and doings" has not yet been recovered by scholars, but if it is found, it could possibly reveal new or previously unrecorded proverbs while also shedding more light on the origins of some proverbs and sayings that are still in circulation.

Due to the fact that Wells did not leave behind a record of sayings, as she expressed interest in doing, one must rely on historical background information and her actual writings to contextualize the proverbs and proverbial expressions that she uses. Ida B. Wells was born enslaved in Holly Springs, Mississippi on July 16th, 1862 to enslaved parents, James "Jim" Wells and Elizabeth "Lizzie" Warrenton, three years before the end of the Civil War and a mere three days before Abraham Lincoln, the sixteenth President of the United States, who would reveal his intentions to end slavery to a few select members of his cabinet. When Lincoln finally announced his Emancipation Proclamation on September 22nd, Ida B. Wells was two months old, but it would not go into effect until January 1, 1863 (Davidson 2007: 12-13). It was the Dred Scott decision of 1857 that ultimately determined, by way of the Supreme Court, that "the black man had no rights which the white man is bound to respect" (Davidson 2007: 15). This decision was not reversed until April 1866 when Congress passed the Civil Rights Act. It was followed by the ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment in June 1868 which "put the guarantee of citizenship into the constitution and added the promise of due process of law" (Davidson 2007: 20). While African Americans were technically and legally free, they were reminded repeatedly that they were not full-fledged citizens. The enactment of Black Codes, vagrancy laws, and later Jim Crow laws would limit the freedoms and movements of African Americans for more than one-hundred years.

Ida's father, James "Jim" Wells, was born enslaved in 1840 in Tippah County, Mississippi in an area known as Hickory Flats. He was the son of a wealthy slave master, Morgan Wells, and an en-

slaved woman named Peggy, who arrived at the Morgan estate earlier that very same year. It was a very common and unquestioned practice during the Ante-Bellum era for slave owners to father children with their own slaves. Morgan Wells never had any children with his lawful wife, "Miss Polly," and possibly for this reason he may have placed a considerable amount of value on James. In the mid-nineteenth century cotton or "King Cotton" as it was sometimes called, was the primary cash crop in Mississippi, and for plantation owners, it made slave labor a necessity. Most slaves worked in the fields from "can see" to "can't see," and endured scorching heat and unbearable working conditions. Morgan made sure that his only child was educated and skilled in the trade of carpentry. James would remain a carpenter for twenty years. He worked seven years while still enslaved and then he worked another thirteen years as a carpenter after gaining emancipation (Sims 2010: 36). By being a skilled tradesman, James was afforded opportunities that most enslaved African Americans were not. The most important benefit of being a carpenter was being "hired out" to neighboring towns and cities, and thereby evading the dehumanizing treatment that often accompanied backbreaking field labor. At eighteen years of age, James was apprenticed to Spires Bolling in Holly Springs. In the Bolling household James Wells would meet his future wife Elizabeth "Lizzie" Warrenton (1844-1878) who was a very skilled cook. In the nineteenth century Holly Springs which was also known as "the City of Flowers," was a bustling township that was growing at an exponential rate. In 1840 the population of Holly Springs was 17,536 which included 8,260 slaves and 8 free African Americans. Twenty years later in 1860 the population grew to nearly 29,000 which included 1,295 slave owners who collectively owned 17,439 slaves. The free black population remained at eight during this two-decade time span and did not include James Wells. However, being skilled in a trade was the very next best thing to having freedom (McMurry 1998: 3-5).

Wells's mother, Elizabeth Wells did not enjoy any of the protection or comforts that often came along with being the offspring of a slave master. Elizabeth was one of ten children born to slaves in Virginia. She could easily remember being separated from her parents and two sisters at the auction block. Although she tried to relocate them years later, she was unsuccessful, and would never

see them again. According to family members, Elizabeth never forgot the many beatings that she endured. When Morgan Wells died, Miss Polly ordered Peggy to be stripped of her clothing and beaten severely, which was then carried out. This is something that Miss Polly knew that her husband Morgan would never allow if he were alive. Despite such extenuating circumstances, James and Elizabeth Wells married while both still in bondage. However, they would marry again, officially, shortly after being freed (McMurry 1998: 3-5). Growing up listening to her parents talk about their lives under bondage would provide young Ida with her first glimpse into the racialized and gendered politics of slavery which she would spend her entire life trying to change.

Ida B. Wells would inherit many values and beliefs from her parents. They instilled in her the importance of work ethic, family, and education. They also helped to shape her political and religious views. James, as a freedman, was what many at the time would call a "race man" meaning that he maintained an active civic life and was committed to procuring equal rights and political power for African Americans. He was a Freemason, also known as Masons, and he was also a member of a very secretive organization called the "4-L's" which stood for Lincoln's Legal Loyal League which started holding meetings at some point before the end of the Civil War. 4-L's was organized by people from Northern states that had relocated to Holly Springs. It was a private and guarded organization that incorporated an intricate system of "passwords, special knocks, and signs." There were branches of the 4-L's organization all over the South (Davidson 2007: 21). James Wells knew the significance of the ballot for black people and he stayed well informed about politics by having young Ida read the newspaper aloud to him. In fact, she would recount later in interviews that she was reading at such a young age that she could not remember ever being taught. It is unclear if her father James actually knew how to read himself, but the evidence certainly leans toward the affirmative. He made it known that the education of all African Americans was very important to him. It is also a cause that Ida would later champion herself. James was elected to the Board of Trustees at Shaw University in Holly Springs which was a new school for blacks which Ida would later attend for some time. The name was later changed to Rust College.

Elizabeth Wells also shared many of the same values as her husband. She taught Ida at a very young age how to prepare food, wash clothes, and clean house—essential skills that would make her more independent as a young woman. Many people believe that Ida learned and developed the strong work ethic that she would exhibit later in life from her parents. Much like her husband, Elizabeth Wells also valued learning. In the South, it was a misdemeanor or punishable offense to teach slaves how to read. Some slaves would learn by secretly watching their master's children as they were learning to read. This was a very risky practice that one must assume that Elizabeth was not willing to try. However, she longed for the opportunity and made it a priority to learn upon gaining her freedom. In fact, she accompanied her young daughter Ida to school until she had learned enough to read the Bible on her own. Elizabeth encouraged Ida to read everything that she could. In fact, in her autobiography Wells writes, "I used to sit before the blazing wood fire with a book in my lap during the long winter evenings and read by firelight. I had formed my ideals on the best of Dickens's stories, Louisa May Alcott's, Mrs. A.D.T. Whitney's, and Charlotte Brontë's books, and Oliver Optic's stories for boys" (Duster 1970: 21). Despite Wells's insatiable enthusiasm for literature, on Sundays Elizabeth would only allow the reading of the Bible, which Ida did read in its entirety. There is no doubting that Ida's parents were a strong influence on her, although she would benefit from having them for only sixteen years of her life. Both James and Elizabeth Wells would die within twenty-four hours of one another of yellow fever during the epidemic that hit Holly Springs, Mississippi in 1878. Ida would find out about this tragedy while away in Tippah county helping her grandmother Peggy in the cotton fields. Upon receiving the news of her parents' deaths, she returned home.

When she arrived, Ida found out that the Masons, who were some of her father's closest friends, intended to split her six siblings up in order to help ease Ida's financial burden, but she vehemently objected to this idea. Ida insisted that her parents would "turn over in their graves" if their family were to be separated. As an alternative solution, Ida requested that the Masons help her to find a teaching position, so that she could afford to take care of her siblings on her own. The Masons obliged and were able to make arrangements for Ida to teach at a small country school nearby for

a salary of twenty-five dollars a month. It was difficult for Wells, but her mother had taught her how to manage a household. She would also receive help from another friend of the family, Rachel Rather, who would look after the children during the week as Ida taught. Every Friday, Wells would return home, traveling six miles on the back of a mule in order to prepare the children's food and clothing for the week (McMurry 1998: 17). In 1880 the two boys were able to be apprenticed as carpenters requiring them to move and become more or less independent. After a few years Wells was invited along with her two younger sisters to move to Memphis to live with an aunt. Her disabled sister Eugenia, who was paralyzed from the waist down from spinal meningitis, was invited to live with another aunt who had a small farm nearby. In the year 1884, at the young age of nineteen, Wells was already becoming acclimated to life as an adult, and she was also adapting to life as a teacher. Wells enjoyed living in Memphis and had many friends. Living with her aunt in Memphis allowed her to maintain two teaching positions, one with Memphis city schools, and another in Woodstock. She would often make the two-hour commute by train (McMurry 1998: 17).

Wells did not particularly enjoy teaching, because schools for black children were often small and kept in very poor condition. Furthermore, classes were also overcrowded. She would sometimes teach as many as seventy students at a time. The terrible conditions would only contribute to the restlessness and unruly conduct of some of her pupils. Wells did not like this aspect of the job, but she continued to teach out of necessity. She had no way of knowing it at the time, but her true calling was journalism. She would make this discovery inadvertently after a life altering occurrence during one of her commutes to Woodstock.

In 1881, Tennessee passed new Jim Crow laws requiring railway companies to make black and white passengers travel in separate cars. The car for whites, also referred to as "first-class," or "the Ladies Coach" was upscale and comfortable while the car designated for black passengers could be considered a health hazard. The colored car was located directly behind the loud engine which would billow huge plumes of black smoke that easily reached passengers. It was often overcrowded and allowed drinking, smoking, and gambling. Furthermore, the loud and boisterous passengers would use the floor as opposed to the spittoons to dis-

card tobacco juice. Sometimes exceptions to the rule requiring segregation would be made. For instance, black midwives traveling with pregnant or nursing white women were allowed to stay in the Ladies Coach and black men were permitted if they were chaperoning a woman. Well-dressed African-American women were also at times permitted to stay in first-class as long as no white person objected to their presence.

On May 4th, 1884 Wells read quietly to herself as she travelled to Woodstock in the Ladies Coach. However, at some point during her trip she was interrupted by the conductor who informed her that she would have to move to the colored car. Wells objected and the conductor attempted to remove her by force. Wells reacted by sinking her teeth into his hand causing him to bleed. Realizing that he could not force her to move on his own, the conductor went to get two other workers to help him. This only made Wells even angrier. She braced herself by placing both of her hands and feet on the seat in front of her, forcing the workers to use all of their strength to pry each of her limbs loose one at a time, tearing off the sleeve of her jacket in the process. After the men removed her from her seat, she was left on the platform with her bags. Ironically, she still held on to her first-class ticket throughout the entire ordeal (Fadin 2000: 20-23; Davidson 2007: 64-75).

Wells, at twenty-one years of age, would decide to file a lawsuit against the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad company. On December 24th the circuit court judge, who was also a former Union soldier, ruled that the railway company acted unlawfully when they forced her to move. She was awarded five hundred dollars in damages. Unfortunately, having the satisfaction of knowing that she confronted racial prejudice and won would be her only reward. The railroad company unsuccessfully attempted to settle with Wells out of court for several hundred dollars and when Wells did not accept this offer, they decided to appeal the case in the Tennessee State Supreme Court. This time C&O won. The State Supreme Court determined that Wells was merely trying to harass the railroad company and ordered her to pay two hundred dollars in damages. She was crushed by this unfair decision, but it would ultimately propel her towards a life of activism (Fadin 2000: 34; Davidson 2007: 64-75).

Many texts that relate the life of Ida B. Wells mark this point in her life as a major turning point because it is when she became

devoted to confronting racial injustices. It is also when she started writing about it. Wells started to keep a journal in 1885, and also as a young adult, she edited and wrote for *The Evening Star* (which was the newspaper of the Lyceum, a popular literary club that she was a member of), and a black church weekly called the *Living Way* (Fradin 2000: 26-27). Due to the direct and unapologetic tone of her work, her keen eye for details, and her entertaining writing style, her work quickly became popular among the local black public. Subsequently, she would grow to become a prolific journalist, and examining some of the writings that she generated, one can clearly see that proverbs and proverbial language were always an important part of the way that she expressed her ideas. For instance, upon learning of the Tennessee State Supreme Court decision to rule in favor of the railway company, Wells writes in her diary the following:

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. O God is there no redress, no peace, no justice in this land for us? Though hast always fought the battles of the weak & oppressed. Come to my aid at this moment & teach me what to do, for I am sorely, bitterly disappointed. Show us the way. (Fadin 2000: 34-35)

The important message and somber tone of this brief diary entry may easily represent the trajectory of her future writings. Wells frequently expressed the emotional pain that she felt in witnessing racial injustices, and she often incorporated figurative language in the process. For instance, she says that she trusted that the “law was on our side,” and because this time the justice system had failed her, as it did for so many other black people in the South, she wants to “gather the race in [her] arms and fly away” (Fadin 2000: 34-35). This is an appropriate metaphor that illustrates that she not only anticipated victory for herself, but for the entire race. It also foreshadows the many migrations that black people in Southern regions would embark on due to the increasingly hostile racial climate. For Wells they are only lines in her diary, but they

still show that she was thinking far ahead of her time, at least from an ideological perspective. More importantly, it illustrates that even as a young woman, she had a genuine desire to improve conditions for black people in the South.

Wells uses another proverbial expression in relation to this momentous event as she recalls it later in her life, and her use of a well-known proverbial expression may be indicative of the extent that she cared about the outcome. For instance, she says in her autobiography: "I had already secured my appointment as a teacher in Memphis before the railroad case was finally settled; so I had my salary to fall back on to help pay the cost against me. None of my people had ever seemed to feel that it was a race matter and that they should help me with the fight. So I trod the winepress alone" (Duster 1970: 21; McMurry 1998: 30). The proverbial expression, "to trod the winepress alone" is an allusion to the Bible (KJV 63:3). The full verse reads: "I have trodden the winepress alone; and of the people there was none with me: for I will tread them in mine anger, and trample them in my fury; and their blood shall be sprinkled upon my garments, and I will stain all my raiment" (KJV 63:3). In using the expression Wells is showing a number of emotions. On the one hand, she feels betrayed and abandoned because black people did not express any interest in her legal battles. On the other hand, Wells is expressing intense anger because many blacks believed that it was not a racial issue despite the prevalence of Jim Crow laws, and the fact that white presses continually portrayed her in a racist manner, referring to her as the "Darky Damsel" in headlines (Fradin 2000: 23; Davidson 2007: 73-75). In retrospect, Wells feels that the outcome would have been different if more black people had cared.

Proverbs and proverbial language are scattered throughout Wells's many writings, but no Wells biographer ever really says that she was known for this particular feature. However, the proverbs and sayings that she incorporates in her work are significant because much like her diary, they may provide us with a view of Wells from a different perspective. They may offer a glimpse into the way she thought, and they may also illustrate some of the many moral lessons that she has internalized and communicated throughout her lifetime. This essay is not a chronology of her life and writings, nor is it an attempt to document every single saying that Wells has ever spoken or written. It is instead a look at some

of the most important and recurring sayings and expressions that exist in her corpus of work and in the relatively small amount of scholarship that has been written about her life.

Proverbs and proverbial sayings that Wells uses come from a number of different places. On the one hand, Wells uses proverbs from the Bible, from all kinds of literature, and from famous political figures of her day such as Frederick Douglass, Thomas Jefferson, and Abraham Lincoln. On the other hand, some of the proverbs and proverbial expressions that she employs are cultural. They may illustrate some inherent or widely accepted “truth” without being attached to any one particular figure, and there may be a reason for this. In her later years Wells travelled profusely, both nationally and internationally, and while she may not have ever created her list of “Sayings and Doings” of the people that she came into contact with, incorporating proverbs into her work may have been her primary way of documenting these sayings without having to do so explicitly. She devoted nearly all of her time and energy to the anti-lynching crusade, African-American and women’s suffrage, and other related causes. The untiring pace at which she worked more than likely did not leave much time or energy for much else. Nevertheless, this may be viewed as a positive because instead of static lists, readers instead see her using proverbs and proverbial expressions through her writings and correspondences for specific purposes and these purposes tend to be invariable and dynamic to convince her readers to think in particular ways that are associated with her causes and to express certain aspects of her worldview.

One of the first proverbs that she uses in support of her cause appears in the publication that launched her anti-lynching crusade, *Southern Horrors* (1892). Ida B. Wells wrote this pamphlet to denounce the murders of her best friends and the practice of lynching in general. Additionally, she sought to expose the wide-spread myth of violent black brutes who go around raping white women as an insidious form of propaganda that was generated to justify murdering and stealing from African Americans and to cover up consensual relationships between black men and white women. Furthermore, since the racial climate in Memphis was becoming increasingly hostile towards blacks, in *Southern Horrors* (1892) she also urges black Memphians to discontinue all patronage of white owned businesses and to migrate to northern towns and cit-

ies and to newly established territories in the West such as Oklahoma, which many black homesteaders were already taking advantage of. The proverb that she uses appears at the conclusion of the very last paragraph of the pamphlet, which reads, "Nothing is more definitely settled than he [the black man] must act for himself. I have shown how he may employ the boycott, emigration and the press, and I feel that by a combination of all these agencies can be effectually stamped out lynch law, that last relic of barbarism and slavery. 'The gods help those who help themselves'" (reprinted in Harris 1991: 45). The proverb "God helps those who help themselves" dates back to the early 15th century writings of Dutch Renaissance scholar Erasmus (Mieder, Kingsbury, and Harder 1991: 255; Speake 2015: 128) and is used by Wells here to convince a community of terrified African Americans in Memphis to be pro-active and to engage in activism. After the publication of *Southern Horrors*, six thousand African Americans heeded Wells's warning and left Memphis within two months, and those who stayed followed her suggestion to boycott so closely that many white owned businesses were forced to close down (Sterling 1988: 81). In fact, the owners of a newly established electric trolley system in Memphis assumed that blacks were simply afraid of the new form of transportation and pleaded with Wells to write an article stating that electric trolleys were not dangerous. In response, Wells told them that blacks did not fear electric trains, they only feared discrimination and racial violence, and she refused to redact her message. Wells was out of town travelling with friends when white papers began to reprint some of the explicit messages from her pamphlet. As a result, an angry mob destroyed her newspaper office, which was the office of *Free Speech*, where she was a writer, part-owner, and chief editor. They also published an explicit threat to lynch her and her colleague, J.L. Fleming, if they ever returned to Memphis. Despite her brush with death she moved to New York where she immediately began working in the same capacities for another popular black paper, *The New York Age*, which was owned and edited by T. Thomas Fortune (1856-1928).

Some other proverbs that Wells uses appear in *Mob Rule in New Orleans* (1900). Wells wrote this pamphlet in response to the lynching of Robert Charles, a thirty-four year old African American man, who was killed protecting his own life from police offic-

ers who brutally assaulted him. Wells writes that, “Charles had his first encounter with the police Monday night, in which he was shot in the street duel which was begun by the police officer after Officer Mora had beaten Charles three or four times over the head with his billy in an attempt to make an illegal arrest. In defending himself against the combined attack of two officers with a billy and their guns upon him, Charles shot officer Mora and escaped” (reprinted in Harris 1991: 302). Charles’s troubles do not end here. In fact, the scenario only worsens as Wells continues: “Early Tuesday morning Charles was traced to Dryades street by officers who were instructed to kill him on sight. There again defending himself, he shot and killed two officers. This, of course, in the eyes of the American press, made him a desperado, make statements which will be interesting to examine” (reprinted in Harris 1991: 302). Wells’s report does a lot to counteract the salacious claim that Charles was a blood thirsty and racist criminal who was simply looking to take his anger out on white officers. Calling him things such as “desperado,” “daredevil,” and “ravisher,” a white newspaper even employs a proverb in an attempt to make it seem as if Charles was motivated to kill white officers by reading racist propaganda. Wells even includes an excerpt from the article in *Mob Rule*. It says: “...an examination of his personal effects revealed the mental state of the murderer and the rancor in his heart toward the Caucasian race. Never was the adage: ‘A little learning is a dangerous thing,’ better exemplified than in the case of the negro who shot to death the two officers” (reprinted in Harris 1991: 303). The article then goes on to describe an individual who “burnt the midnight oil” reading back to Africa propaganda with hopes to “conquer the hated white race” (reprinted in Harris 1991: 303). Generally viewed as a positive statement, the proverb, “a little learning is a dangerous thing” (Mieder, Kingsbury, and Harder 1991: 367; Speake 2015: 186) is instead used here by the white press in a negative way, to imply that it is unsafe or risky for Charles to read certain material. This is a notion that hearkens back to the Ante-Bellum era when it was illegal to teach blacks to read. In the same pamphlet, in a section entitled *Died in Self-Defense*, Wells tries to counteract the dangerous public image of Robert Charles created by white presses. Wells instead portrays a hard working student that was not bent on racial hatred, but on bettering himself and conditions for black people: “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. To his aid and his study of this problem he sought the aid of a Christian newspaper, *The Voice of Missions*, the organ of the African Methodist Episcopal Church” (reprinted in Harris 1991: 310). Here Wells clarifies the misconception that Charles’s reading materials indoctrinated racial hatred. Contrarily, she asserts that he only “burnt the proverbial midnight oil” reading Christian materials with the intent of gaining more knowledge about problems faced by black people and how to address these issues in moral ways. Three paragraphs later, Wells employs a proverb and some proverbial language to reemphasize this point: “If it is true that the workman is known by his tools, certainly no harm could ever come from the doctrines which were preached by Charles or the papers and pamphlets distributed by him” (reprinted in Harris 1991: 311). The proverb, “the workman is known by his tools” is a well-known saying, although it is not attributed to any single individual. Wells uses the proverb here to make the point that there is no evidence that Charles had any violent intentions based simply on the Christian reading materials that were found in his room. Wells continues: “Nothing ever written in the ‘Voice of Missions,’ and nothing ever published in the pamphlets above alluded to in the remotest way suggest that a peaceable man should turn lawbreaker, or that any man should dye his hands in his brother’s blood” (reprinted in Harris 1991: 311). The proverbial language that appears at the end of this statement may be a subtle allusion to Shakespeare’s seventeenth century tragedy, *Macbeth* (1603). As a young child Wells read all of the works of Shakespeare and later, as a young woman in Memphis, she often participated in plays and public readings of his work. Wells’s statement “to dye his hands in his brother’s blood” is more than likely a reference to act II, scene 2, in which Lady Macbeth, in a delusional state, repeatedly washes her hands imagining that her hands are stained with Duncan’s blood. She says: “Will all the water in the ocean wash this blood from my hands?” If Wells’s statement is a reference to *Macbeth*, she more than likely uses it to imply that Robert Charles, the criminal minded murderer, is as equally imagined as the blood that stained Lady Macbeth’s hands. Another important point that Wells makes in *Mob Rule* is that the false nega-

tive portrayals of Charles in white presses dehumanized him to the point that it ultimately led to his lynching. Wells attempts to bring some form of justice to Robert Charles, posthumously, while also revealing some of the aspects of racism that contributed to his downfall. Her work demonstrates that false characterizations are a common denominator in most lynchings and mob violence against blacks.

Other examples of proverbs and proverbial language used by Wells appear in her autobiography *Crusade for Justice* (1970) which was edited by Wells's youngest daughter, Alfreda M. Duster (1904-1983), and published forty years after her mother's death. In her autobiography Wells discusses what it was like knowing and working with the world-famous abolitionist, and self-freed ex-slave, Frederick Douglass (1818-1895). Wells became good friends with Frederick Douglass during her lifetime, and she regarded him as a father figure and a mentor. Douglass and Wells worked together on a pamphlet that she created in response to the lack of African-American representation at the World's Fair held in Chicago in 1893. The World's Fair was held annually in different places around the globe to display and celebrate scientific and cultural achievements of different nations. In 1893 the fair took place over six months, represented nearly fifty nations, and attracted nearly thirty million visitors from around the world. The one held in Chicago was considered special for a number of reasons. It marked the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus's arrival in North America and it also marked a time in history when African Americans, thirty years after gaining freedom, had made substantial contributions to American culture. Wells and Douglass attempted to convince the fair organizers to showcase some of the achievements of African Americans—the only American ethnic group that was not adequately represented. Unsatisfied with their results, they decided that they would distribute a pamphlet to expose the fair's racism. The pamphlet is entitled *The Reason Why: The Colored American Is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition, The Afro-American's Contribution to Columbian Literature* (1893). The Pamphlet is compiled, published, and distributed by Wells and includes contributions from Frederick Douglass, who wrote the introduction, T. Thomas Fortune, and Wells's future husband, lawyer and highly esteemed editor, F.L. Barnett. In the pamphlet they discuss Jim Crow laws and America's history of

racism. Wells also provides detailed accounts of lynchings that have taken place in the South, including the lynchings of her best friend, Thomas Moss. She includes vital statistics regarding thousands of lynching victims, including the years that the crimes take place, the general locations, and the specified reasons. The overall purpose of producing the pamphlet was to help their international audience to realize that the lack of African-American representation at the fair was due to America's inherent racism and not a lack of innovation or intelligence on the part of the black race. Wells was able to distribute over three thousand copies of the pamphlet (Giddings 2008: 268-81).

There were two exhibits at the fair that included black people, but they were considered insults as opposed to accomplishments. One was an exhibition featuring a French speaking indigenous African tribe. The Africans were asked to look and act as primitive as possible. The other was in a section for new products, and featured Nancy Green, "a dark-skinned domestic worker with a wide, flashing smile. She was advertising a premade pancake mix for increasingly time-limited housewives. Trademark for the product was Aunt Jemima" (Giddings 2008: 273). One thing that quickly became apparent to both Wells and Douglass was that "White Americans wanted nothing to detract from their shrine to Anglo-Saxon superiority" (McMurry 1998: 200). The African tribal exhibit took place in the Haitian building which was managed by Frederick Douglass due to his service as United States minister to Haiti. Despite their setbacks, Douglass and Wells did experience a minor victory. The organizers agreed to designate one day on the fair's program as Negro Day also referred to as Colored People's Jubilee Day, and Douglass was given the freedom to organize all of the events. Wells and other African Americans felt that it would be even more demeaning and exploitative than the indigenous tribe exhibit—a sentiment that was only exacerbated by the horticultural department's promise to provide plenty of free watermelons. However, Douglass expressed satisfaction with the plan and he used a proverb to do so. He told Wells that "it was better to accept half a loaf than to have no bread at all" (Duster 1970: 118; Bay 2009: 168). While Wells felt that Negro Day could only result in more degradation for black people, Douglass believed that it was important to do the best that they could with the limited time and space that they had. The proverb "it is better to accept half a

loaf than to have no bread at all” is first documented in the sixteenth century and has a number of variations which all convey the same meaning (Mieder, Kingsbury, and Harder 1991: 274; Speake 2015: 141). Douglass did well orchestrating the event and “Colored American Day,” as they agreed to rename it, turned out to be a success, despite having a very restricted amount of time and resources (McMurry 1998: 204). As Wells would recount in her autobiography: “Mr. Douglass’s oration was a masterpiece of wit, humor, and actual statement of conditions under which the Negro race of this country labored. Paul Dunbar read from his poems, and the Negro music presented was of high order. The thousands of people gathered at the fair who heard the story were given the opportunity they would otherwise have been denied of hearing our foremost orator at his best” (Duster 1970: 119). Wells also communicates that she regretted her previous stance. “...I was among those that did not even go to the meeting—I was so swelled with pride over his masterly presentation of our case that I went straight out to the fair and begged his pardon for presuming in my youth and inexperience to criticize him for an effort which had done more to bring our cause to the attention of the American people than anything else which had happened during the fair” (Duster 1970: 119). All in all, Douglass’s attitude towards the planning of Colored American Day, and the proverb that he uses to point out the brighter side of their predicament, taught Wells an important life lesson that she would never forget, “it is better to accept half a loaf than to have no bread at all.”

It is common for bread as a universal symbol of life sustaining elements to be used in sayings and expressions to express fundamental necessities that one may not be able to survive without. In addition to the aforementioned saying from Douglass, Wells would use expressions involving bread on at least three separate occasions. In a diary entry dated for Saturday, July 16th, 1887, her 25th birthday, Wells reflects on life and the lessons that she has learned from all of the trials and tribulations that she has endured. Disappointed in herself, Wells vows to be a better person and ultimately regrets any missed learning opportunities that may have come her way:

When I turn to sum up my own accomplishments I am not so well pleased. I have not used the opportunities I had to

the best advantage and find myself intellectually lacking. And excepting my regret that I am not so good a Christian as the goodness of my Father demands, there is nothing for which I lament the wasted opportunities as I do my neglect to pick up the crumbs of knowledge that were within my reach. Consequently I find myself at this age as deficient in a comprehensive knowledge as the veriest school-girl just entering the higher course. I heartily deplore the neglect...Thou knowest I hunger and thirst after righteousness & knowledge” (DeCosta-Willis 1995: 151).

Most would agree that Wells more than made up for any proverbial crumbs of knowledge that she may have overlooked in the past.

In an article entitled “The Negro’s Case in Equity” (1900) Wells again uses bread symbolically to make a serious point. “The Negro’s Case in Equity” is written in response to an *Independent* article urging black leaders to stop other black people from taking the law into their own hands (Thompson 1990: 112; McMurry 1998: 260; Schechter 2001: 126; Bay and Gates 2014: 256). In response, Wells admonishes the author of the *Independent* article for ignoring the fact that most African Americans obey the law even as they are frequently the targets of most lynching attacks:

The *Independent* publishes an earnest appeal to negro editors, preachers and teachers “to tell their people to defend the laws and their own rights even to blood, but never, never to take guilty participation in lynching white man or black.” This advice is given by way of comment on the double lynching in Virginia the other day. Theoretically the advice is all right, but viewed in the light of circumstances and conditions it seems like giving a stone when we ask for bread. (Bay and Gates 2014: 256)

Wells’s proverbial expression “like giving a stone when asked for bread” effectively summarizes her opinion of the advice presented to black leaders. She feels that it is an absurd statement to make, especially at a time when blacks were being lynched in the South at alarming rates.

In another article written early in her career entitled “The Model Woman: A Pen Picture of the Typical Southern Girl” (1888) Wells writes about the significance of Victorian ideology

to late nineteenth century life. In accordance with Victorianism, Wells believed that all women should strive to steer clear of sin and to take it upon themselves to enlighten the uneducated and lower classes of the race. Additionally, black women should exhibit diligence and industriousness. In order to illustrate this mentality Wells proclaims in her autobiography to be a “southern girl, born and bred, who tried to keep herself spotless and morally clean as my slave mother had taught me” (Duster 1970: 44; DeCosta-Willis 1995: 188). To further emphasize this point in “The Model Woman” Wells writes:

She is far above mean, petty acts and venomous, slanderous gossip of her own sex as the moon—which sails serenely in the heavens—is above the earth. Her bearing toward the opposite sex, while cordial and free, is of such nature as increases their respect for and admiration of her sex, and her influence is wholly for good. She strives to encourage in them all things honest, noble and manly. She regards all honest toil as noble, because it is ordained of God that man should earn his bread by the sweat of his brow. She does not think a girl has anything of which to be proud in not knowing how to work, and esteems it among her best accomplishments that she can cook, wash, iron, sew and “keep house” thoroughly and well. This type of Negro girl may not be found so often as she might, but she is the pattern after which all others copy. (DeCosta-Willis 1995: 189; Bay and Gates 2014: 32-33)

The saying “Man should earn his bread by the sweat of his brow” is derived from biblical text. The original verse from the Bible reads: “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return” (KJV Genesis 3:19). The saying used by Wells equates bread with the valuable and essential trait of work ethic. It illustrates that even in 1888 at the young age of twenty-six, Wells did not only make the decision to be a leader of her people in all matters regarding social justice, but she also wanted to lead her people in matters of moral character.

Wells also had a propensity for using proverbial expressions that incorporate animals when discussing matters of great importance. Perhaps she acquired this particular rhetorical strategy

from her mentor, Douglass. Other scholars such as Wolfgang Mieder also cite Douglass's propensity for using animal proverbs and expressions. Mieder contends: "It should not be surprising that Douglass often cites proverbs and proverbial expressions which contrast innocent lambs or sheep with rapacious wolves where the docile animals represent the victimized slaves while the wild beasts are interpreted as perpetrating slaveholders" (Mieder 2001: 43). One of the most well-cited instances of Wells's use of expressions involving animals appears in her autobiography, and it is written in response to the 1892 lynching of her best friend, Thomas Moss. The following passage illustrates that Wells had expected to be lynched herself in return for urging black Memphians to migrate. She uses the popular proverbial expression "To die like a dog" in the process (Whiting 1989: 178):

I had been warned repeatedly by my own people that something would happen if I did not cease harping on the lynching of three months before, I had expected that happening to come when I was at home. I had bought a pistol the first thing after Tom Moss was lynched because I expected some cowardly retaliation from the lynchers. I felt that one had better die fighting against injustice than die like a dog or a rat in a trap. I had already determined to sell my life as dearly as possible if attacked. I felt if I could take one lyncher with me, this would even up the score a little bit." (Duster 1970: 62; McMurry 1998: 149; Davidson 2007: 148)

Further along in her autobiography Wells incorporates a proverb involving animals to describe the social and political climate of Memphis immediately following the Moss lynching. Describing the black migration that ensued she says: "Besides, no class of people like Negroes spent their money like water, riding on street-cars and railroad trains, especially on Sundays and excursions. No other class bought clothes and food with such little haggling as they or were so easily satisfied. The whites had killed the goose that laid the golden egg of Memphis prosperity and Negro contentment; yet they were amazed that colored people continued to leave the city by scores and hundreds" (Duster 1970: 63-64). Wells's statement that "whites had killed the goose that laid the golden egg" is a variation of the proverb "Don't kill the goose that

lays the golden egg” (Mieder, Kingsbury, and Harder 1991: 262). Wells’s use of it here describes the sudden and unexpected economic downturn that the city took as black people began to leave.

Wells utilizes the same proverbial rhetorical strategy of incorporating animals in another instance in her autobiography when she expresses a growing sense of urgency felt by black people in Illinois to protect a prominent African-American dentist, Dr. LeRoy C. Bundy, who, immediately following the East St. Louis Riot of 1917, unjustly faced life imprisonment for urging black people to protect their own neighborhoods. Authorities believed that Dr. Bundy’s writings were the primary cause of the deaths of two plain clothed officers who were shot as they rode through a black neighborhood. If authorities did not believe that Bundy caused the officer’s deaths, they were still willing to use Dr. Bundy as their scapegoat. Of course, the tragic events that unfolded in East St. Louis were the result of mounting racial tensions and not the work of any one individual. Immediately following the officer’s shootings, 150 blacks were murdered and millions of dollars of property damage to black communities were recorded. No whites were charged with crimes, but fifteen African Americans would serve over ten years in prison for simply returning fire after whites had shot into their homes (Duster 1970: 391). Dr. Bundy’s case was the worst because he was the only person who faced life imprisonment even though he was never directly involved in the killings. Wells writes: “A meeting was held in Brooklyn, the Negro town, that night at which time all these facts were given and the people urged to take the bull by the horns, open a subscription list, and start at once to employ a lawyer” (Duster 1970: 394-395). Dr. Bundy was eventually released and absolved of all wrongdoing and Wells’s use of the proverbial expression “to take the bull by the horns” (Taylor and Whiting 1958: 46-47); Whiting 1989: 79-80) illustrates that it took a concerted effort to free Dr. Bundy. Ultimately the effort would involve the Negro Fellowship League (NFL), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the popular black periodical, *The Chicago Defender* in which Wells and other black writers were able to convince thousands of people to donate in support of Dr. Bundy’s legal defense.

In a letter to Herbert Hoover (1874-1964), who was campaigning for the presidency which he eventually won, Wells ex-

presses her disappointment with Hoover's lack of regard for the many African Americans who ultimately decided to put their faith in the Democratic Party as opposed to facing continual disappointment caused by the failed promises of Hoover and the Republican Party. In her letter to Hoover, Wells uses the expression "to spend money like water" which she also uses when writing about blacks migrating from Memphis (Taylor and Whiting 1958: 395; Whiting 1989: 419), and she also incorporates the saying "to be a wolf in sheep's clothing" (Taylor and Whiting 1958: 407-408; Whiting 1989: 691-692). Wells who clearly wants Hoover to pay more attention to the needs of black voters writes: "This time the wolf in sheep's clothing is spending money like water to hire our folks in the Democratic camp, but very few of them are going to betray our race for 30 pieces of silver or for the prospect of a drink of liquor" (Thompson 1990: 124; McMurry 1998: 335). The use of the saying "to be a wolf in sheep's clothing" depicts the growing sense of alienation that Wells experiences at the hands of Republicans and it also shows the extreme sense of distrust that she felt as a result of propaganda and unethical campaign tactics employed by white Democrats. The shifting tide of the black vote from the Republican Party to the Democratic Party that she describes in the Hoover letter becomes a major catalyst for Wells seeking political office as an Independent in 1930.

This would not be the first time that Wells would use her proverbial wisdom in support of abandoning partisanship. In an article entitled "Freedom of Political Action" (1885), writing in agreement with an editorial written by T. Thomas Fortune of *The New York Freeman*, Wells voices her support of Fortune's notion that black people should remain politically independent:

To the Editor of the New York Freeman: There is an old saying that advises to "give the devil his due," and after reading your editorial on "Mr. Cleveland and the Colored People," I was forcibly struck with the thought, that so few people are willing to admit that he has any "due." Evidently there is very little reasoning powers among those who need such a plain rehearsal of historical facts. According to their logic the side they espouse is all good, the opposite—all bad; the Republican party, can do no wrong—however often they use the colored men for

tools; the other, the Democratic side, can do no good—whatever the profession—because of past history. (Bay and Gates 2014: 22)

The proverb “To give the devil his due” (Whiting 1989: 166; Mieder, Kingsbury, and Harder 1991: 146) in this case is appropriate because the imagery evoked by the devil helps to illustrate Wells’s point that the black voter can only attempt to choose the lesser of two evils. Furthermore, this passage is a prime example of how at just twenty-three years of age, Wells was already developing a sarcastic and sharp style. She was becoming known for her brazen choice of political targets and her cutting sense of wit (Bay and Gates 2014: 20).

Wells also used the Bible proverb “You shall reap what you sow” (Mieder, Kingsbury, and Harder 1991: 554-555). On at least two different occasions she either alludes to this saying or creates a variation. In her autobiography she describes the rash of racial riots that seemed to plague the nation in the early twentieth century as “simply a reaping of the harvest which has been sown by those who administer justice...” (Duster 1970: 391). On another occasion Wells alludes to the proverb “You shall reap what you sow” in writing about exiled leader Marcus Garvey whom her husband, Ferdinand Barnett represented in an unsuccessful civil suit against the *Chicago Defender* for libel (McMurry 1998: 323). Wells being very supportive of Garvey and his efforts to uplift the race writes: “It may be that even though he has been banished to Jamaica the seed planted here will yet spring up and bring forth fruit which will mean the deliverance of the black race—the cause which was so dear to his heart” (McMurry 1998: 323).

When Wells was presented with an opportunity to go on a lecture tour in England to talk about American lynch law, she expressed serious doubt over whether it was a good idea to go or not. The invitation was extended to her by English philanthropist, Catherine Impey (1847-1923) and Scottish novelist, Isabelle Fyvie Mayo (1843-1914), who were both organizers of a humanitarian organization called *The Society for the Recognition of the Brotherhood of Man* (SRBM), an organization devoted to ending the British caste system in India. The organization also published a newsletter called *Anti-Caste*. They wanted both Wells and Douglass to travel to Europe to speak about lynching, but since

Douglass was too old to travel, Wells felt that she should decline the invitation also: "Thus it was that I received the invitation to go to England. I was a guest in Mr. Douglass's home when the letter came, forwarded from New York. It said that they knew Mr. Douglass was too old to come, and that if for that reason I could not come, to ask him to name someone else. I gave him the letter to read and when he finished he said, 'You go, my child; you are the one to go, for you have the story to tell'" (Duster 1970: 85-86). Wells then states that the invitation, "seemed like an open door in a stone wall" (Duster 1970: 86). She had already spent almost an entire year in the North trying to gain more support, only to no avail, and she uses the proverbial expression, "like an open door in a stone wall" to communicate that the rare opportunity to travel to Europe, at the time, felt like a much needed blessing. Once news about Wells's plans spread, many black presses were divided on the issue. Some of the presses that were against the idea of Wells representing African-American people in Europe felt that Wells's speeches may only serve to fuel British snobbery towards Americans. Others felt that speeches in general would do no good. Likewise, many political leaders felt that the lynching problem would disappear on its own. In fact, Wells uses a couple of proverbs in a *New York Age* article in response to these notions: "They forget...that no wrong ever rights itself and that whom the gods would destroy they first make mad" (Giddings 2008: 327; Speake 2015: 131). While the first proverb may be taken literally, the second proverb has a somewhat figurative meaning. "Whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad" is a proverb meaning that sometimes evil will appear as good to those who are being led to their own destruction (Mieder, Kingsbury, and Harder 1991: 256; Speake 2015: 131). This statement is no doubt directed towards the black leaders that believe that nothing needs to be done about lynching. Wells issues a similar statement regarding right and wrong on a leaflet advertising one of her many anti-lynching speeches. The leaflet reads: "The way to right wrongs is to turn the light of truth upon them" (Mia Bay and Henry Louis Gates 2014: 7). In another *New York Age* article entitled "The Lynchers Wince" Wells targets an aphorism used by a white paper in order to reveal the hypocrisy or double standard that exists in regards to lynch law: "the *Commercial Appeal* drops into philosophy and declares that two wrongs do not make one right; and that while

white people should stick to the law, if they do not do so, the blacks can hope for nothing but extermination if they attempt to defend themselves” (Bay and Gates 2014: 38). All of the Wells sayings regarding right and wrong illustrate that she is certain that her journalistic efforts and public speaking engagements helped to reverse racial injustices done to African Americans.

In addition to the groups that supported her European efforts, there were still some that believed that Wells was only interested in traveling to Europe to make money for herself, which was a misconception. She received very little pay for her efforts. Nonetheless, some black presses supported the move. For instance, *The Parsons Weekly Blade*, uses a popular proverb to summarize Wells’s predicament. The paper replies to the suggestion that Wells will be more effective on American soil by saying that “It would be another case of casting pearls before swine” (McMurry 1998: 218). The proverb, “Don’t cast your pearls before swine” is from the Bible (KJV Matthew 7:6; Mieder, Kingsbury, and Harder 1991: 577; Prahlad 1996: 241; Speake 2015: 245) and it means “do not give valuable things to people who cannot appreciate them” (Speake 2015: 245). The proverb is fitting because many people realized that passing up the offer to travel to Europe would have been a waste of Wells’s talents. Furthermore, it was no secret that many negative sentiments that Wells faced were also attributed to sexism. In fact, Wells’s colleague and friend T. Thomas Fortune used the very same proverb to conceptualize the dilemma faced by women writers: “I think our women are going to stretch our men in the variety of their information, the purity of their expression and in having the courage of their convictions, without which these are but pearls cast before swine” (McMurry 1998: 89). Fortune uses the proverb to illustrate that the men had some growing to do before they could fully appreciate black female journalists. Fortune is also making the point that black female journalists like Wells will be a critical part of that growing process.

While touring Europe, Wells gave hundreds of speeches to highly receptive audiences. Overall, Wells was left with the impression that people of color were accepted more in Europe than they were in the U.S. In a section of her autobiography entitled *What Liverpool Has Learned* she states: “And the city, with its population of six hundred thousand souls, is one of the most pros-

perous in the United Kingdom. Her freedom loving citizens not only subscribe to the doctrine that human beings regardless of color or condition are equal before the law, but they practice what they preach” (Duster 1970: 135). Variations of the proverb, “Practice what you preach” are documented as early as 1377, and it is one of Wells’s favorites (Mieder, Kingsbury, and Harder 1991: 479; Speake 2015: 254). She uses this particular proverb a number of times in the diary that she kept as a young woman living in Memphis (DeCosta-Willis 1995: 44, 134). The diary entries that include this proverb also reveal the extent that European Victorianism permeated American culture and dictated interactions between men and women during the nineteenth century. Wells aimed to be a prototype of Victorian womanhood. She always dressed well and spoke properly, but nevertheless, many Victorian ideals still conflicted with her own sense of identity. Women were not supposed to show anger, be outspoken, or even flirtatious, but Wells’s use of the proverb “Practice what you preach” seems to illustrate an ongoing inherent struggle with these expectations. In one entry written on February 14th, 1885 Wells seems to denounce the idea of flirting with a potential male suitor: “Right here comes my temptation to flirt with him; to make him declare himself and forget all others, but I cannot—I *will* not consider it. I have preached and I must practice under *all* circumstances” (DeCosta-Willis 1995: 44). In another diary entry marked February 20th, 1887 Wells writes about being criticized by male colleagues who feel that it is unladylike for a female teacher to be seen in theatres. Fearing that she may be setting a bad precedent for her students she accepts this criticism with grace: “Mr. Dardis Jr. walked home with me & read me a severe lecture on going to the theatre; he showed me how his father Prof. Thompson, Mr. Greenlee, Mr. Selectman, Dr. Burchett etc. regarded it, & that he now considered that I was one who failed to practice as I preached. I regretted it more than I can say all along, but not so keenly did I see the wrong, or think of the influence my example would exert until then” (DeCosta-Willis 1995: 134). Her frequent use of the adage illustrates that she has always valued being a good example to others. Wells uses the proverb in reference to Europe because she feels that Europe is a much better example of this proverbial wisdom than America—a place in which democracy and equality are celebrated, but not extended to all citizens. In contrast, Wells says

that Liverpool is a place where “a colored person can ride in any sort of conveyance in any part of the country without being insulted; stop in any hotel or be accommodated at any restaurant one wishes without being refused with contempt; wander into any picture gallery, lecture room, concert hall, theater or church and receive only the most courteous treatment from officials and fellow sightseers” (Duster 1970: 135). At this point in Wells’s narrative she uses a popular proverbial expression to emphasize the point even further: “The privilege of being once in a country where ‘A man’s a man for a ‘that,’ is one which can best be appreciated by those Americans whose black skins are a bar to their receiving genuine kindness and courtesy at home” (Duster 1970: 135). Wells may have acquired this particular expression as she traveled throughout Scotland or other parts of Europe. She may have also heard it being sang. The expression, “A man’s a man for a ‘that’” was popularized by the song, “For a ‘That and a ‘That’” written by Scottish poet, Robert Burns in 1795. Throughout the song the speaker rejects the notion of placing value on a person’s appearance or material wealth and instead preaches that a man’s character is his most valuable possession. As opposed to royal titles, money, or high social status, the speaker of the song values honesty, integrity, and independent thinking. Furthermore, Burns wrote the song to convey the message that people of all social classes should be valued equally, and that all should have voting rights and be afforded with opportunities to own their own land. Wells’s use of the expression, “A man’s a man for a ‘that’” in reference to her experience in Liverpool illustrates that she was pleased to witness universal value being placed on equality.

While in Europe, Wells also visits the city of Bristol in England where she speaks to a number of prominent people, and she describes the shock and disbelief that her audiences express to her upon hearing the facts about lynching in America. She comments, “There were two drawing-room meetings in the homes of wealthy and influential persons. In these drawing rooms, in which there were one hundred persons each, were gathered the wealthiest and most cultured classes of society who do not attend public meetings. One was presided over by Dr. Miller Nicholson, the pastor of the largest and most influential Presbyterian church in the city, and the other by Mrs. Coote, president of the Women’s Liberal Association of Bristol. Their shock on being told the actual conditions

of things regarding lynching was painful to behold" (Duster 1970: 154). Many members of the group were under the impression that African Americans had been relishing in complete freedom since emancipation while other members of the group believe that lynching only happens to black men that rape white women. After realizing that her audience had internalized a number of popular misconceptions, Wells states: "I read the account of that poor woman who was boxed up in a barrel into which nails had been driven and rolled down hill in Texas, and asked if that lynching could be excused on the same ground" (Duster 1970: 154). In addition to the shock of hearing about American atrocities committed against blacks, the Bristol audience also cannot believe that the American government does nothing to prevent such carnages from taking place. Wells writes: "Again the question was asked where were all the legal and civil authorities of the country, to say nothing of the Christian churches, that they permitted such things to be?" (Duster 1970: 154). In response to this question, Wells explains to her audience that the problem of lynching is largely ignored by all of the institutions that have any power to help, and she uses a proverb that is very similar to the one that she employs to criticize the inactivity of black leaders in America: "I could only say that despite the axiom that there is a remedy for every wrong, everybody in authority from the President of the United States down, had declared their inability to do anything; and that the Christian bodies and moral associations do not touch the question" (Duster 1970: 154). Wells's use of a variation of the proverb, "No wrong without a remedy" (Wilson 1970: 924) seems fitting when one takes into account the imagery that she conveys after employing it: "American Christians are too busy saving the souls of white Christians from burning in hell-fire to save the lives of black ones from present burning in fires kindled by white Christians" (Duster 1970: 154-155). The irony invoked by her statement helps to reveal the paradox that is created by the simultaneous acceptance of both Christianity and lynch law in American culture. Overall, Wells employs proverbs strategically to convince her Christian audience that it is their moral duty to help right the wrong of lynch law in America.

Upon returning to New York from her successful European campaign, Wells was eager to try to gain more support in the U.S., so she sought to improve race relations by reaching out to the

white clergy in America and also the white presses. She wanted them both to take more interest in her anti-lynching crusade, and she used her newly established European ties as leverage. "...I brought back to this country an appeal to the Christian ministers of the United States to give me the same opportunity for speaking from their pulpits as had been given me by the English clergymen. This appeal had been signed by the leading ministers of all denominations in Great Britain, that when I sought an interview with an American minister he was presented with this appeal. Rarely was it unsuccessful, because our American ministers knew that this powerful committee in London would receive reports as to their attitude on this burning question" (Duster 1970: 220).

Before meeting for an interview with the *New York Sun*, Wells is surprised when a group of African-American men waiting for her ask her to "put the soft pedal on charges against white women and their relations with black men" (Duster 1970: 220). Wells adamantly refuses to do so. Wells then tells the men how difficult it had been for her in Europe to reverse the awful stereotype that "black men were wild beasts after white women" (Duster 1970: 220). Furthermore, she explains to them that if she abandons her stance after returning home from overseas it will only give her audiences the impression that the outrageous stereotypes are accurate. Wells is then forced to defend her standpoint in the interview. She explains to the reporter that ever since her findings were published overseas and, in the U.S., she has had to defend her views. She then employs an important proverb from classical literature to make her case:

The subject was mentioned on the floor of Congress, and passionate letters in protest were written. Mr. Richard Henry Dana himself sent for me and questioned me on the subject. I asked him if he ever read Burton's *Arabian Nights*? When he said that he had, my reply was "then you know that I tell of nothing new under the sun." Not only this, but he let me make that same statement in reply to a letter published in his columns which attacked me for "defaming the honor of the white women of the country." In that letter I said, just as I had told Mr. Dana, "those who have read Burton's *Arabian Nights* know that I tell of no new thing under the sun when I say white women have

been known to fall in love with black men, and only after that relationship is discovered has an assault charge been made.” (Duster 1970: 221)

Wells employs this Bible proverb “There is nothing new under the sun” for a number of reasons (Speake 2015: 230). The first and most obvious reason that she uses it is because she knows that many people are familiar with *Arabian Nights* (1885) which is a collection of ancient Middle Eastern tales that have been retranslated and published by Sir Richard Francis Burton (1821-1890). Since it is very popular, she hopes to punctuate her argument if her listeners can recall the proverb in Burton’s text which reads: “‘What hath been shall be, and there is nothing new under the sun,’ is one of the many wise sayings of him whose words, to adopt his own language, are ‘like apples of gold in settings of silver’” (Burton 2011: 270). Wells hopes that being reminded of the extravagant imagery from the scene in *Arabian Nights* will help to convey to her audience the seriousness of her words.

Another reason she employs the proverb is because it is also found in the Bible. The verse reads: “The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun” (KJV Ecclesiastes 1:9). Both *Arabian Nights* and the Bible verse contain identical messages. However, while the Bible verse may lack the imagery and popularity of *Arabian Nights*, it does provide Wells with an air of sagacity. Furthermore, the Bible is not considered fiction by most people, especially clergy and others involved in the church. Thus, Wells is able to “kill two birds with one stone” in using a proverb that will appeal simultaneously to two different audiences, the younger crowd, that may enjoy popular fiction, and also the more conservative groups, who may only regard the Bible as being the ultimate “truth.”

Wells was always very keen in pointing out unfair practices and racial double standards in the American legal system and sometimes proverbs played instrumental roles in voicing this discontent. In response to the case of an African-American man who was imprisoned for breaking Indiana miscegenation laws while his white wife was set free Wells writes: “If justice is blind in America it is blind in only one eye” (McMurry 1998: 266). This sharp refutation incorporating the proverb “justice is blind” illustrates

Wells's humorous side (Mieder, Kingsbury, and Harder 1991: 342). It also comes very close to being an anti-proverb. It certainly incorporates the characteristic humor of most anti-proverbs. According to Litovkina and Mieder: "We laugh at some anti-proverbs because they skew our expectations about traditional values, order, and rules. We are, however, sometimes struck by the absurdity of some situations portrayed in parodies, especially when they rely purely upon linguistic tricks employed for the sole purpose of making punning possible" (Litovkina and Mieder 2006: 44). On a more serious note in the same address Wells also called out black male leaders who seemed to be unable to unify themselves and who were too afraid to speak out against racial injustice. According to historian Linda McMurry, Wells labeled this group of black men that she spoke to as "a small body of men who are anxious to pose as white men's niggers" and she incorporates a saying in order to exemplify the message. Wells says: "no man builds well whose foundation is laid upon another's ruin" (McMurry 1998: 266). This is more than likely a variation of the proverb "When a man lays the foundation of his own ruin, others will build on it (Mieder, Kingsbury, and Harder 1991: 518). Wells's use of this proverb shows the immense value that she placed on unity among black community leaders. It also demonstrates the extent that Wells was committed to reversing what historian Catherine Meeks and Nibs Stroupe describe as the *plantation mentality* or an inherent sense of inferiority and learned helplessness which became internalized by many African Americans during Reconstruction as a direct result of southern "neo slavery" which included indiscriminate violence and unjust economic and legal systems (Blackmon 2008: 8; Meeks and Stroupe 2019: 217).

In addition to her references to lynching, Wells also uses proverbs to advocate for the temperance movement. While on her first European tour Wells met temperance reformer and women's suffragist, Frances E. Willard (1839-1898). Willard served as the president of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), the most powerful women's organization in America at the time, from 1879 until her death. Shortly after meeting her, Wells learns quickly that Willard was racist. Racism among club women was not at all uncommon during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. According to historian Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, "The experiences of many leaders indicated the pervasiveness of white female prej-

udice and discrimination against Black females in women's groups, even among those who were part of the woman suffrage coalition" (Terborg-Penn 1998: 119). Willard's racist sentiments were made clear in an interview that was published in 1890 in the *New York Voice*. In the interview, Willard expresses pity for Americans in the South for having to tolerate blacks who "...multiply like the locusts of Egypt. The grog-shop is its center of power" (McMurry 1998: 210). Although Willard is leading the temperance movement, she sees the "grog-shop" or illegal liquor store as being the center of the black community in America. Willard continues by saying that, "Better whiskey and more of it' has been the rallying cry of great dark-faced mobs in the Southern localities where local option was snowed under by the colored vote" (McMurry 1998: 210). In this interview Willard, who is more than likely afraid of losing the support of southern white women, whole-heartedly denies the idea that temperance is important for blacks, and she also suggests that black people are sub-human. Additionally, Willard states, "The safety of women, of children, of the home is menaced in a thousand localities at this moment, so men dare not go beyond the sight of their own roof-tree" (McMurry 1998: 210). Willard's words quickly became the center of attention for black presses. Wells denounced Willard's racist views in an article for the *A.M.E. Church Review* saying: "In his wildest moments he seldom molests others than his own...and this article is a protest against such wholesale self-injury" (McMurry 1998: 210). Wells uses the term "self-injury" because unlike Willard, she sees black intemperance as a serious issue that will ultimately have a negative impact on the black community in two ways. First, it slowly divests the community of valuable resources that could be used in service of education and community outreach. Secondly, intemperance contributes to exorbitant black incarceration rates in the South. To better emphasize these points, Wells invokes a well-known proverbial expression: "It is like playing with fire to take that in the mouth which steals away the brains" (McMurry 1998: 210; Whiting 1989: 226; Speake 2015: 250). For Wells, black intemperance really was "like playing with fire." She goes on to write that intemperance provided "judges and juries the excuse for filling the convict lease camps of Georgia alone with fifteen hundred Negroes," and furthermore, the money

that black men wasted on alcohol only contributed to “enormous profits flowing into Anglo-Saxon coffers” (McMurry 1998: 210).

Wells also wrote a short story that focuses on the issue of intemperance in the black community. At one point in her career she had plans to become a novelist, but soon after she stopped teaching, her anti-lynching efforts took precedence in her life. She published one short story entitled “Two Christmas Days: A Holiday Story” (1894), and it is a romance that many believe is based loosely on Wells’s own life. The protagonist, Emily Minton, is a young well-educated teacher who is being courted by George Harris, a fledgling, but talented lawyer who is just starting out in the legal business. George expresses interest in marrying Emily, but Emily is reluctant to do so due to George’s intemperance. At one point in the story Emily tells George that his intemperance is to blame for his lack of ambition. She says, “The race needs the best service our young manhood can give it, my friend, and it seems so wrong to divert any part of it to the practice of a habit which can bring you no credit and gratify no noble ambition” (Thompson 1990: 231). This is a major turning point in the story and Wells punctuates the tense moment with a bit of proverbial wisdom:

George’s mind was in a conflicting whirl of emotions. He knew she spoke the truth; and yet with all his feelings of anger and mortification, he seemed to feel that this peerless girl was slipping away from him. He wanted her to think well of him and forgetful of the French proverb: “He who excuses, accuses,” he said eagerly: “But this habit of mine never interferes with my business, Miss Emily. Indeed, it rather helps me. I am the only Afro-American at this bar, and I must have some stimulus to help me through the difficulties the wall of prejudice throws my way.” (reprinted in Thompson 1990: 231)

The originally French proverb, “He who excuses himself, accuses himself” (Whiting 1989: 207) contributes to the omniscience of the narrator, and it also adds to the story’s didactic feel. In addition to the proverb, Wells’s use of the phrase “wall of prejudice” helps to emphasize the fact that the American legal system, from a historical perspective, was rooted in racism. Wells also uses the proverb and proverbial expression to help to emphasize the strong moral message which is that black men from all classes and levels

of society should not treat prejudice as an excuse for intemperance. They should resist the urge to drink away pain, anger, or stress that may be caused by bigotry and racial injustice. This point becomes that much more poignant at the end of the tale when George and Emily marry after he finally realizes the errors of his ways.

Wells also concludes her autobiography with an important political proverb, stating that “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” (Duster 1970: 415). According to paremiologist Wolfgang Mieder, the first recorded instance of the proverb “Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty” being used is by Philpot Curran who wrote a speech entitled “Speech upon the Right of Election” which he delivered on July 10th, 1790 (Mieder 2001: 70). The speech reads: “The condition upon which God has given liberty to man is eternal vigilance; which condition if he break, servitude is at once the consequence of his crime, and the punishment of his guilt” (Mieder 2001: 70). Another recorded instance of the proverb “Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty” being used in public discourse is by President Andrew Jackson (1767-1854) on March 4th, 1837 during his Farewell Address: “But you must remember, my fellow-citizens, that eternal vigilance by the people is the price of liberty, and that you must pay the price if you wish to secure the blessing. It behooves you, therefore, to be watchful in your States as well as in the Federal Government” (Jackson 1837; Mieder 2019: 16). Wells’s close friend and mentor Frederick Douglass also used it on March 17th, 1848 in an article that he wrote for his journal *North Star* which was devoted to abolitionism: “It is strict accordance with all philosophical, as well as all experimental knowledge, that those who unite with tyrants to oppress the weak and helpless, will sooner or later find the ground-work of their own rights and liberties giving way. ‘The price of liberty is eternal vigilance.’ It can only be maintained by a sacred regard for the rights of all men” (Mieder 2001: 70). In each of the aforementioned instances the proverb is being used in order to advance one’s own view of democracy and justice. There is no doubting that Wells’s use of it in her autobiography has done a lot to popularize it. Nearly every Wells biographer has mentioned her use of this particular saying (McMurry

1998: 26, 321; Fradin 2000: 161; Giddings 2008: 659; Bay 2009: 315). It seems fitting that she should use it in the forty-sixth and final chapter of her autobiography because it effectively summarizes her life's work. Wells displayed vigilance as a young woman battling Jim Crow laws in Memphis, and the vigilance that she shows in the latter part of her life helped her to initiate countless numbers of clubs and organizations that were devoted to the advancement of African Americans. Furthermore, Wells's investigative journalism and public speaking tours played a major role in reducing the frequency of lynchings around the nation, but despite all of her milestone achievements, she still feels that complacency is the ultimate enemy of black people. It may be the same sense of vigilance expressed in this saying that compelled Wells to run for Congress in Illinois the year before her death. There is plenty of evidence in her writings and actions that illustrate that Wells believed that her struggle for civil rights would never end, and her use of the proverb "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty" may be proof that she also believed that it never should end.

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