

***Crusade for Justice* and the Question of Authenticity in African American Autobiography**

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ABSTRACT: This article aims at investigating the concept of authenticity and its connections with authority and cultural dominance in Ida B. Wells's *Crusade for Justice*. Set in the Reconstruction period, Wells's autobiography incorporates authenticating strategies typical of slave narratives and post-Emancipation political memoirs, therefore it can be analyzed as a work of transition that embodies the profound shift in authenticating issues occurring after Emancipation.

KEYWORDS: racial authenticity, authority, Ida B. Wells, slave narratives, memoir, Reconstruction

Introduction

The concept of authenticity in itself is a complex and controversial topic, and the term 'authenticity' has come to acquire a variety of meanings, especially in Postmodernist contexts. It has been used for example to refer to factuality or verisimilitude, in the sense that authentic is what deals with proven facts, or at least with a plausible situation. Authenticity has also been employed to hint at the commitment to express one's feelings and opinions in a sincere way, even if they are in conflict with the public image that a person has given of himself or herself: In this sense, there is authenticity if there is coherence between statements and feelings. On the other hand, especially in the world of art, authenticity often refers to the similarity between a piece of art and a given model, and means fidelity to the original.¹

In the context of American literature, authenticity has often been linked to the efforts of artists and critics to capture the significance of the experience of hitherto unrepresented

¹ See, e.g. the debate on Olaudah Equiano's origins in Carretta; Trilling and Taylor on authenticity as coherence between statements and feelings; and Denis Dutton, "Authenticity in Art," in Levinson on authenticity as fidelity to the original.

minorities, and publications that reflect on racial authenticity have become quite frequent.² It is difficult to give a universally acceptable definition of racial authenticity. Generally, if we accept that authenticity is about “successful signification of what is accepted as ‘real’ or ‘true’ for cultural products and individual’s identities” (Nguyen and Koontz 770), we can state that racial authenticity is about successful signification of what is accepted as being “real” or “true” within the specific context of a minority group. This “successful signification” is, of course, in constant motion, since the definition of what it means to be authentic within a particular context of racial minority shifts overtime, following the specific political and ethical struggles that minority is involved in, and the racial discourses that it is subjected to. In this paper, I will consider racial authenticity within African American literary production, concentrating on different conceptualizations of Black authenticity in African American autobiographies.³

Racial Authenticity, Authority, and Cultural Dominance

Analyzing authenticity in autobiographical texts always implies some kind of conceptual limitations. Firstly, as already mentioned, conceptions of what is ‘true’ shift overtime. Secondly, scholars do not agree on a common terminology, so that the term ‘authenticity’ is often employed in a wide variety of contexts to refer to different concepts. Thirdly—and probably most problematically—autobiography deals with personal impressions of an author of his or her own life, so that the definition of what is true is quintessentially personal, and therefore almost beyond criticism.

In analyzing different conceptions of authenticity in African American autobiographies, this set of problems links up with complex issues of authority. The concepts of ‘authenticity’ and ‘authority,’ actually, are etymologically quite distant: ‘Authenticity’ comes from the Greek *autoentes*, ‘perpetrator,’ somebody doing something with his own hand and therefore expressing agency; ‘authority’ derives from the Latin *auctor*, ‘author,’ someone that creates

² See, e.g., Griffiths; Favor; Long; Bracey.

³ Since in this paper I only deal with African American authors, when I mention “racial authenticity” I mean authenticity in the context of African American literary production. The expressions “racial authenticity” and “Black authenticity” are used as synonyms thereafter.

or gives life to something. Nonetheless, the two expressions seem to go hand in hand when dealing with African American texts, especially with autobiographical ones. In fact, since no one can guarantee the authenticity of his or her own writing without an external intervention, a text to be considered authentic depends on somebody else's authoritative opinion on it. The association between authenticity and authority becomes even more evident in the context of African American literature, which has always been the target of the authoritative evaluation of mainstream society.

As a matter of fact, from the very beginnings of African American literature black authors have been pushed to demonstrate the authenticity of their writing, so that authenticating strategies emerged out of a pressure by the mainstream readership that white authors did not face in any comparable degree. The socio-political circumstances that African American had to face—slavery before, discrimination *de facto* after—caused them to be the target of mistrust and belittlement by the white readership, so that their texts were considered acceptable only if 'authentic.'

The necessity to authenticate one's text was even more evident in the case of autobiographical writings. Because of their greater subjectivity, autobiographies could be very easily dismissed with the excuse that every single statement could simply be a lie and a fiction. This argument appears particularly solid in the light of the dominant socio-cultural ideologies that permeated American society from the end of the seventeenth century onwards, and that deprived people of African descent of every kind of authority not only over their writings, but over their very persons. As African American lawyer and race relations expert Christopher Bracey summarizes, "that which we identify as authentic enjoys a presumption of value and quality. [...] The one that bears the hallmark of authenticity is invariably perceived as superior" (2). And in the context of traditional racial discourses that overtly stereotyped blacks as inferior, the recognition of authenticity in African American texts—and especially in autobiographical ones—was paramount.

The analysis of African American texts and of their consideration in literary criticism makes clear the representational roots of racial authenticity, a concept that does not exist by itself, but depends on the expectations and pressures of the mainstream readership. As Leslie W. Lewis observes, "authenticity may seem about *being* real, but it is always, in truth, about

being *perceived* as real, and, consequently, authenticity is a representational rather than an existential concept” (53, emphasis in the original). In other words, it is authority that defines authenticity and not vice versa, and the confirmation of this is given by the fact that while discussions about black authenticity or other forms of ethnic authenticity are quite frequent, discussions about white authenticity have never been considered necessary (Lewis 52-54).

Historically speaking, the question of racial authenticity has troubled African American authors at least since the trial of Phillis Wheatley, which Henry Louis Gates Jr. describes as “the primal scene of African-American letters” (*Trials* 5). Phillis Wheatley was a slave of Senegambian origins, brought to Boston in 1761 on board a schooner, the *Phillis*, at the age of seven and purchased by John and Susanna Wheatley as a house servant. The Wheatleys had teenaged twins, who, encouraged by their parents, began to instruct Phillis in English, Latin, and the Bible. Despite the fact that Phillis spoke no English upon her arrival in 1761, by 1765 she had started writing poetry in English and Latin, and in 1772 Susanna Wheatley decided to have her poems collected and published as a book. About three hundred subscribers were necessary to underwrite the cost of publication, but they could not be found because not enough Bostonians believed that a slave possessed the necessary degree of reason and imagination to write poetry. This is why on October 8th, 1772, Phillis Wheatley was examined by an assembly of eighteen examiners,⁴ whose goal was to determine if the young slave was actually the author of the poems she claimed to have written. Wheatley passed the examination, and the judges signed an attestation in which they unanimously declared that she had written the poems herself.

To understand why Wheatley’s writing skills aroused so much skepticism, we must be aware that there was, at the time of the trial, a wide body of literature that dealt with the question of the nature of people of African descent. Philosophers David Hume and Immanuel Kant as well as Thomas Jefferson, in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, were among those who

⁴ For a more detailed description of Phillis Wheatley’s trial—including the names and positions of the eighteen examiners—, an overview of the debate on the nature of non-white people, as well as for details on Phillis Wheatley’s upbringing and education see Gates, *Trials*.

questioned the humanity of black people.⁵ Their main argument was black people's alleged lack of reason, and their consequent inability to create art and sciences.

A glimpse at this philosophical belief lets us understand why Wheatley's trial marked a cornerstone in African American history. The recognition of the fact that she could write poetry would demonstrate that Africans could create art, and as a consequence, stood as members of the human family and could not be enslaved. Basically, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. puts it, "she [Phyllis Wheatley] was auditioning for the humanity of the entire African people" (27), and she passed the audition with full marks.

Nevertheless, despite the judges' verdict, the reading public remained skeptical and the debate on the nature of non-white people was not put to an end. As a matter of fact, as Nellie McKay claims, "eighteenth-century American society as represented by the Wheatley court had rigged the game" (54). The examiners had actually limited their decision to a question of agency, that is, once attested that Wheatley had actually written her poems, the question remained if what she wrote was *authentic* or merely imitative poetry. In Jefferson's words: "Religion, indeed, has produced a Phyllis Wheatley, but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism" (178).⁶ Jefferson actually concedes that Wheatley may have written her poems, but because she is black, he claims, her compositions must necessarily be derivative.

By changing the parameter of authenticity from the possibility of a black person writing poems to the quality of these poems, Jefferson denied Wheatley—and all non-white people alongside her—the recognition of a higher form of authenticity, based on the quality of authorship more than on authorship itself. For Jefferson, Wheatley's poems did not count because she did not count as a human being.

This kind of commentary on Wheatley's poems make clear that the issue of racial authenticity in eighteenth-century society was essentially the question of the authentic humanity of non-white people, a question that whites kept raising well beyond the first

⁵ See Hume 217-36; Kant 58-61; Jefferson 175-81.

⁶ The spelling of "Phyllis" is reproduced as in the original.

decades of the nineteenth century. Consider for instance this commentary that accompanied a Currier and Ives lithograph of the 1860 exhibition “What is it?” in Barnum’s Museum:⁷

What is it? Is it a lower order of man? Or is it a higher order of monkey! None can tell! Perhaps it is a combination of both. [...] it has a skull, limbs and general anatomy of an oran outing and the countenance of a human being. To be seen at all hours at Barnum’s museum.⁸ (Hughes and Meltzer 62)

It is easy to trace the development of this theory of sub-humanity as a necessity to justify the institution of slavery and its most brutal practices in the context of a Christian society. This theory, largely accepted by the great majority of white society, had its foundations on a rich corpus of publications of natural history and physiognomy, which authenticated race according to specific physical and behavioral parameters, and defined authentic humanity accordingly.⁹ The acceptance of the sub-humanity of black people was meant to erase any sense of guilt, reinforcing a perverse notion of what the “natural” order of things was, and fostering the oppressive market economy of slavery that characterized the Southern states. In the light of these considerations, it is evident that for eighteenth-century African Americans writing became not only an occasion to leave written evidence of their personal stories, but also something that gained them full access to authentic humanity in the opinion of the dominant white society.

The importance of the production of literature as a way for people of African descent to establish their status within the human family is witnessed by the success in African American literature of the so-called “trope of the talking book.”¹⁰ In this trope, books refuse

⁷ As in the case of many other “wonders” in Barnum’s museum, citizens were invited to come and judge for themselves the authentic nature of the creature exposed. As later scholarship confirmed, the “What is it?” creatures were African American actors. The text accompanying the Currier and Ives lithograph is reprinted in Hughes and Meltzer 62.

⁸ Spelling and punctuation are reported as in the original.

⁹ One of the first and most successful publications in this regard was Johann Blumenbach’s *On the Natural Varieties of Mankind* (1775), which distinguished five races based on skin color: white, black, red, yellow and brown. Blumenbach’s classification is then reflected in Thomas Jefferson’s comparative analysis of whites, blacks, and Native Americans in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*. For a more extended description on race authentication in nineteenth-century natural history see Tucker.

¹⁰ The trope of the talking book was firstly theorized by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in 1988. See Gates, *The*

to speak to a person of African descent who, coming from an oral culture, cannot communicate with them. At the same time, we paradoxically read about it in a text created by an African American author, as a demonstration that blacks could, indeed, write. The image of a book talking—or refusing to talk—to a person of African descent was firstly introduced by James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw in his 1770 slave narrative *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable articulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, An African Prince, as Related by Himself*. In a famous passage from his autobiography, the author expresses his anxiety to demonstrate equality to white people through literacy:

[My master] used to read prayers in public to the ship's crew every Sabbath day; and then I saw him read. I was never so surprised in my life, as when I saw the book talk to my master [...] I wished it would do so with me. As soon as my master had done reading, I followed him to the place where he put the book, being mightily delighted with it, and when nobody saw me, I opened it, and put my ear down close upon it, in great hopes that it would say something to me; but I was sorry, and greatly disappointed, when I found that it would not speak. This thought immediately presented itself to me, that every body and every thing¹¹ despised me because I was black. (16-17)

The ability to produce literature, formulated in this trope as the ability to make the text “speak,” was a way for African American authors to prove their equality to white people as members of the human family. The trope of the talking book was so representative of the relationship between the production of literature and authentic humanity that, between 1770 and 1815, five authors used the same image to explain the significance of their process from literacy to authorship,¹² and examples of this trope can be found also in much more recent black literature.¹³

Signifying Monkey: “This topos assumed such a central place in the black use of figurative language that we can call it a trope. It is the trope of the Talking Book, which first occurred in a 1770 slave narrative and was then revised in other slave narratives published in 1785, 1787, 1789, and 1815” (130).

¹¹ Spelling as in the original.

¹² John Marrant, *The Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, a Black* (1785); Quobna Ottobah Cugoana, *Thoughts and Sentiments* (1787); Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789); John Jea, *The Life, History, and Unparallel Sufferings of John Jea* (1815).

¹³ A notable example are the final sentences of Toni Morrison's *Jazz*, when the book suddenly starts to “speak” to its readers: “Talking to you and hearing your answer—that's the kick...If I were able to say it.

If for the Wheatley court the question of authenticity in African American literature was essentially a question on the authentic humanity of non-white people, in the nineteenth century the question progressively shifts from “who is authentically human?” to “who is authentically black?,” leading to interrogations on what authentic blackness should be and how it could be achieved and performed.

By the early nineteenth century, the institution of slavery had been in place in the United States for nearly two centuries, shaping race differences clearly and solidifying the distinction between slaves and free citizens. After the ratification of the 13th Amendment, the task was to delineate a path of transition from slavery to freedom, defining the status of African American people as American citizens and securing for them the full range of rights accorded to all citizens. Each step towards this goal would be taken in the face of a strong white resistance, and the struggle against this resistance caused a redefinition of race authentication issues. If by the close of the nineteenth century, race authentication had become a means of sorting individuals in order to facilitate racial oppression, during the first decades of the twentieth century “blacks would begin to assert control over their own racial identity—to racially authenticate on their own terms. [...] Race authentication, when harnessed by racial minorities themselves, would be converted from a tool of oppression into a means of human liberation, community building and political activism” (Bracey 25).

The Harlem Renaissance marked an important transition point in this process, for it was in this period that African Americans embraced racial authenticity as a means of social empowerment. Racial authenticity was the defining feature of the Harlem Renaissance, since one of its central aspirations was to acknowledge and cherish the distinctiveness of the African American cultural heritage. Racial authentication could still be used as a mechanism to sort out individuals in order to facilitate discrimination, but it could also serve to evaluate one’s racial salience, “the extent to which one’s personal identity was shaped by the habits, culture, and expressions of a particular racial group” (Bracey 34.) In this new context African

Say make remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where your hands are. Now” (264-65).

American authors, impatient to reconstruct their racial image on their own terms, started to discuss what it meant to be “truly” black.

Returning to the Wheatley court, it is possible to see how the concept of authenticity fundamentally changed, following shifts in the discourses on racial rhetoric: While the Wheatley examiners demanded proofs of human authenticity on the base of humanity as they knew it, authenticity as conceived from the nineteenth-century onward is something disconnected from whiteness, something that offers the opportunity to escape representation by the dominant society.

This plurality of meanings when talking about racial authenticity dates back to the already mentioned shift from questions of human authenticity—which worried so many antebellum black authors—to questions of authentic blackness. This shift is one that, in literary terms, changes the racial question to a considerable extent, and deserves being explored in a detailed way. It is exactly this shift that is illustrated in Ida B. Wells’s autobiography, and it is this move from questions of authentic humanity to questions of authentic blackness that the book so powerfully conveys.

Authenticity in *Crusade for Justice*

Crusade for Justice, the Autobiography of Ida B. Wells is a memoir that explores the private life and political career of Ida B. Wells, an African American teacher, journalist, editor, pamphleteer, suffragist, feminist and civil rights activist. Written between 1928 and 1931, it narrates events happening approximately between 1862 and 1927 and can be seen as a work of transition between slave narratives and post-Emancipation political memoirs.

As James Cox notices, the memoir, and above all the political memoir, is a genre that has been quite neglected from literary criticism and deserves more attention. Actually, in the criticism of life writing of the last decades there seems to have been a preference to analyze autobiographies that explore the emotional life of a writer, overlooking works based on factuality like the memoir.¹⁴ As Cox puts it:

¹⁴ Here I use “memoir” in Cox’s appropriation of the term. Cox conceives the memoir as a sub-genre of autobiography which focuses more on facts and less on the emotional life of the protagonist (124).

The memoir is, after all, pointed towards history and facts whereas literary criticism invariably seeks after creativity and imagination. There is a distinct tiresomeness about the ease with which literary critics assure themselves that ‘mere’ fact has little to do with the art of autobiography. The *truth or falsity* of autobiography is thereby subordinated to the creativity, the design, the ‘inner’ truth of the narrative. [...] Teachers, students and critics of literature have more and more retreated from the world of fact, leaving it to the historian or the political scientist. If there is too much fact or idea in a piece of writing, it is under the threat of abandonment. (124-25; emphasis mine)

In Cox’s opinion, the imaginative aspects of an autobiography have come to be seen as those that make an autobiography authentic. This could be one of the reasons why extensive criticism on Wells’s autobiography is still missing, despite the fact that there has been, in the last years, a revival of interest in her civil rights activism.¹⁵

Crusade for Justice could be classified as being part of what James Cox describes as “literature of content” (125), since the text is strongly involved in factuality and in the meticulous description of Wells’s career, although elements of her personal life are not completely absent. Actually, a certain kind of confessional mode is present, too, as an integral part of the narrative, and this gives Wells the liberty to discuss aspects of her family life that actively influenced her career: This is also the reason why *Crusade for Justice* has been referred to as a “duplex autobiography” (Braxton 91). This expression makes clear that *Crusade for Justice* presents the protagonist both as an attentive and caring wife and mother, and a determined civil rights activist.

Wells’s text is a good example of how questions of authenticity and questions of authority blend, since authentication is used here as a strategy to acquire the necessary degree of authority in the eyes of the reader to respond to the attacks of the white press. These attacks regularly occurred after every one of Wells’s speeches, and aimed at discrediting her person and diminishing the significance of her anti-lynching campaign at the same time, condemning Wells both on a personal and professional level.¹⁶

¹⁵ Among the many publications on Ida B. Wells that came out in the last fifteen years see, e.g., McMurry; Davidson; Bay; Sims.

¹⁶ Wells reports many examples of these defamatory articles; e.g., 168, 181, 186-87, 234.

Wells draws on many authenticating techniques from the slave narrative genre, basing her authenticating arguments above all on the use of intertextuality—authenticating subtexts—, on the myth-making process of the protagonist and on the pattern of identity formation through conflict that makes an exceptional subject out of the author. Still, she reinterprets these techniques and employs them for a different goal, revealing in this way a significant change in authentication issues after Emancipation. Wells does not need to authenticate her text in order to prove the veracity of her story or to show her literacy, her capacity of formulating abstract thoughts and consequently her humanity, nor is she interested in demonstrating her equality to white people. What she needs is a strategy of defense against charges of being a “Negro Adventuress” (Wells 187),¹⁷ an opportunist whose only goal was to gain the approval of a sympathetic white public. This preoccupation is manifested and conceptualized in the need of writing “authentic race history of Reconstruction times” (Wells 4), meaning a narrative of the post-Emancipation period written from the African American perspective. In this sense, the use of a rich set of authenticating strategies is essential for Wells in order to acquire the necessary authority in the course of the narration to give her own definition of what it means to write authentic race history.

One of the most visible strategies is the myth-making process of the author and protagonist, which is already evident in the title. The term ‘crusade’ introduces the metaphor of the holy war that runs through the whole book, and that cannot fail to touch the conscience of a God-fearing readership with supposedly high moral standards. The figure of the crusader is then immediately reassessed in the preface, since the first episode that Wells shares with her readership is that of a young black woman who compared her to Joan of Arc, but who could not explain why she did so. The young woman, Wells reports, was at a vesper service whose topic was Joan of Arc, and each participant was asked to name a person they would compare to the French heroine. As the only black person present, the girl named Ida B. Wells, but being too young to know the details of her anti-lynching campaign, she could not mention the reasons of her choice (Wells 3).

¹⁷ The expression “Negro Adventuress” was first used in an article of the *Memphis Daily Commercial*, which published the most aggressive editorials on her anti-lynching activities, as reported by Wells in her narrative (Wells 187).

In narrating this episode Wells not only informs us that she was already considered a heroine and almost a martyr during her lifetime, but also states the reasons for writing an autobiography. She regrets the fact that there seemed to be among young African American a certain lack of knowledge of the history of their race, and declares her intention of filling this gap, giving to her autobiography an educational purpose. It is precisely in the education of the young African Americans that Wells claims a need for authenticity, for authentic race literature¹⁸ of the Reconstruction period. As she explains:

It is therefore for the young who have so little of our history recorded that I am for the first time in my life writing about myself. I am all the more constrained to do this because there is such a lack of *authentic* race history of Reconstruction times written by a Negro himself.

We have Frederick Douglass's history of slavery as he knew and experienced it. But of the time of storm and stress immediately after the Civil War, of the Ku Klux Klan, of ballot-box stuffing, wholesale murders of Negroes who tried to exercise their new-found right as free men and citizens, the carpetbag invasion about which the white South has published so much that is false, and the Negroes' political life of that era—our race has little of its own that is definite or authentic. (4)

The reader is therefore informed that Wells will function as a crusader not only in a political sense, because of her struggle against lynching, but also in a literary one, since she will be the one that redresses the wrong done to her people by Southern historians, providing her readers with an authentic version of the history of Reconstruction from the African Americans' perspective, narrating the "facts of history that only the participants can give" (5).

Following the well-established autobiographical pattern of the figure of the exceptional man, Wells fashions herself in her text as an exceptional woman, acquiring in this way new authority in the eyes of a hypothetically skeptical reader. Actually, despite the cliché of stating the utility of her autobiography for the young people of her community, Wells's text

¹⁸ Here I use "race literature" in Hanna Wallinger's definition, although Wallinger focuses on black women's literature, while I extend the definition to include also literature written by men: "These writers committed themselves to race literature, which is literature with a social and political function, its main goal being to record the past and offer a vision of the future. It was women's literature with a pronounced focus on racial issues" (189).

lacks the collective consciousness which is typical of many women's life narratives.¹⁹ Instead the achievements and personal initiative of the protagonist are underlined, presenting her as an extraordinary individual, more in line with the tradition of men's autobiographies like *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* or *The Education of Henry Adams*.

It is interesting, for example, that Wells reports that her parents died and she had to take care of five younger siblings when she was only fourteen (15), while her biographers agree on the fact that she must have been sixteen.²⁰ Such a detail on a text so much involved in factuality and in the meticulous report of biographical details lets us understand that Wells was consciously creating a myth out of her own person, with the goal of showing the extent of her talent even in the hardest conditions. The myth-making process of the protagonist can be seen, at first, as something that threatens the authenticity of the text, in the sense that it makes it less credible. In reality, in the many episodes in which Wells is presented as a heroine there is always another person who validates her image as a "crusader," giving her authority and credibility. Wells never openly speaks about her courage or talent, it is always somebody else who, asking her questions—like the black young lady of the preface—or commenting on her achievements, lets the "truth" of her heroism emerge. The result of this strategy is that, in the end, presenting the protagonist as a myth does not jeopardize the credibility of the narration, but on the contrary it endows Wells with more authority, enhancing her trustworthiness.

A good example of this can be observed in the conversation between Wells and a train conductor who takes her home during the yellow-fever epidemic that killed her parents in 1878. While Ida is visiting a grandmother outside Holly Springs, she receives news of the epidemic and of the death of her parents, so that she decides to catch the first train and reach the remainder of her family. When the train conductor advises her not to do so, she

¹⁹ On women's autobiographies and collective consciousness see, e.g., Brodzki; Culley; Thompson.

²⁰ As a note of the editor makes clear, Wells's birth year (1862) was established in a letter from the bureau of the census to the editor, 4 October 1867 (Wells 15). Historian James West Davidson established 1878 as the year in which the yellow fever epidemics entered Memphis (44). It is presumable that the epidemics reached Holly Springs, where Wells lived with her parent, shortly after entering Memphis. As a consequence Wells, at the death of her parents, must have been sixteen.

answers that she too must fulfil her duty, the same way he is fulfilling his by conducting the train although two of his colleagues already contracted yellow-fever and died while doing the same (12). The admiring look of the conductor is enough to transform Wells in a heroine, without her openly underlining it.

Wells makes the reader aware that after the death of her parents she will have to rely exclusively on her personal resources, since she refuses to accept the proposal of kind neighbors and family friends who offered to take care of her siblings. As a consequence, she stops going to school, chooses instead a profession her parents would have approved of, and finds a job as a schoolteacher. This choice portrays her as a heroine for two main reasons: Not only does she refuse to see her siblings scattered among many families, she also challenges the expectations of her community by moving outside the sphere of domesticity and accepting a position six miles away from home.

As in many other autobiographies by African American women, childhood receives limited treatment, with Wells describing it in less than fifteen pages. Nevertheless, this tragic period is used in order to develop the myth of the tireless Christian soldier, and follows in this regard the tradition of many black women's life narratives, in which childhood is suddenly put to an end, adulthood starts abruptly, and the typical preoccupations of adolescence, like flirtations and concerns about one's physical aspect, are completely non-existent. In their place there is a more practical concern for survival and the supporting of a large family (Braxton 95-96; Spacks 48).

Unfortunately, her determination to stand as the head of her family and her will to act in the public sphere do not match the concept of ideal womanhood imposed on her by her community, in which rumors spread that she wants to live alone with the children in order to be able to associate with white men freely (17). It is at this point that Wells introduces the theme of identity formation through conflict, a leitmotif that becomes evident during the narration of her early adulthood and that interlaces with the process of myth-making. As a matter of fact, challenging the authority of a certain group of people—the conservative black community of Holly Springs first, and the white society of Southern United States, later—makes Ida more and more set in her convictions and her ideals of justice and equality, so

that it is only through continuous challenges and conflicts that the young schoolgirl has the possibility to shape her personality into that of a crusader.

These patterns are reinforced in what is probably the most famous episode of the book, that of the incident between Ida B. Wells and the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad, which marks Wells's entrance into the world of journalism and civil rights activism. This dispute dates back to the year 1884, when Wells was a schoolteacher regularly commuting from home to school by train. Having found that the car reserved to the black passengers was full of smoke, she took a seat in the ladies car. When the conductor ordered her to move to another car and she refused, he tried to drag her out she bit his hand, fighting to keep her seat. The conductor then secured the help of the baggage-man and they succeeded in dragging her out, with the approval of the white passengers. After this episode Wells sued the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad, obtaining a compensation of five-hundred dollars. In the end the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad appealed the case to the Supreme Court, which reversed the decision of the lower court and condemned Wells to pay court costs. Nevertheless, this incident marked a turning-point in Wells's life, since it gave her a certain fame which allowed her to move from the field of school-teaching, which she perceived as limiting and isolating, to that of journalism, which she considered much more rewarding.²¹ In this episode Wells not only consolidates her position as a crusader for justice, but also introduces what from now on will become the major authenticating practice of her text, that is the insertion of subtexts in the main narrative in order to prove her statements and prevent possible charges of insincerity from her detractors. She quotes a headline from the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* that read: "Darky Damsel Obtains a Verdict for Damages against the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad—What it Cost to Put a Colored School Teacher in a Smoking Car—Verdict for 500\$" and in this way demonstrates the real scandal caused by her decision to sue the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad (19).

²¹ "Although I had made a reputation in school for thoroughness and discipline in the primary grades, [...] the confinement and monotony of the primary work began to grow distasteful. The correspondence I had built up in newspaper work gave me an outlet through which to express the real 'me' and I enjoyed my work to the utmost" (Wells 31).

The sources and dimensions of the subtexts which Wells inserts in the main narrative are very different: newspaper headlines (as in the previous example), but also entire articles, quotations, excerpts from letters, diaries, travel journals, reviews, and vary in length from a couple of sentences to two or three pages. This practice becomes very frequent in the chapters dedicated to her series of anti-lynching lectures in England and Scotland, where Wells successfully tried to secure the support of many well-to-do white families, whose social status helped her to strengthen her position, enhancing her reputation by their wealth and political influence. In these chapters, quotations and subtexts often include correspondence between Wells and some of her supporters, a practice that certainly validates the text, but sometimes contributes to make it eclectic, choppy and difficult to read.²²

As already mentioned, the choice of Wells to enrich her narrative with different kinds of subtexts closely reminds of the authenticating techniques of slave narratives, in which the insertion of external voices cooperated with the main tale. In this regard, Wells's narrative seems to take inspiration from the eclectic nature of what Robert Stepto calls "integrated slave narratives" (4), narratives in which the various authenticating documents are integrated harmoniously into the main plot creating a sophisticated and almost dialogic narrative. Actually, in this kind of narrative the authors of the authenticating subtexts are mentioned as characters in the novel, so that the main tale and the subtexts can be seen as a dialog between author/protagonist and authenticators.

Stepto argues that integrated slave narratives represent a second stage in the development of the slave narrative genre (5), and differ from the very first examples of slave narratives, which guaranteed the slave's tale in separated documents, so that the authenticating responsibility was carried mostly by white editors or friends of the (ex-)slave.²³

²² It must be mentioned that Wells did not use facsimile—she typed the correspondence—nor did she use expressions such as "reprinted with permission of." The veracity of the letters is nevertheless testified by the fact that they appeared in local periodicals as "Letter to the Editor" (see e.g. Wells 98-99).

²³ Stepto distinguishes among three main kinds of slave narratives: I. "Eclectic Narrative," in which the authenticating documents are appended to the tale; II. "Integrated Narrative," in which the authenticating documents are integrated into the tale and become voices and/or characters into the tale; III. "Generic Narrative," a slave narrative on its way to become a narrative of a different genre (e.g.,

In the integrated narrative, on the contrary, the responsibility of authenticating the text is carried by the author alone, who is in full control of the coordination and management of these external voices. In this kind of narrative, the attitude of the slave or former slave is no longer deferential or submissive, and the relation between author and white supporters is one among peers, who cooperate to give life to a credible, well-documented text, while the author takes up the task of unifying the narration. Wells certainly borrows the authenticating techniques of integrated slave narratives, creating a unified text in which the authenticating machinery does not dominate the narration, but plays an essential role to give it credibility and authority.

If the various subtexts collected by Wells give evidence of a connection between her text and those of the slave narrative genre, Alfreda Duster's introduction to *Crusade for Justice* seems to perform a different role, contributing to the authentication of the text in a more subtle way. *Crusade for Justice* ends abruptly in midsentence because of the sudden passing of Ida B. Wells, so that it was her youngest daughter, Duster, who wrote the introduction, edited the text, and published it posthumously. Duster does not openly stress the truth of her mother's statements; nevertheless her preface participates in Wells's myth-making process, and in this way validates the text without undermining the narrator's authorial control. For example, she quotes Norman Wood, a white author who compared her mother to a modern Deborah, the prophetess of the Old Testament who led an army against the enemies of her people, and asserts that Wood's was not an unusual description of her mother (xiii). In this way Duster directs the reader's attention away from herself as an authenticator, and maintaining the detachment and objectivity typical of her mother's style, she succeeds in introducing her as an exceptional subject.

Duster's introduction is preceded by a foreword by co-editor John Hope Franklin who also presents to the reader the figure of Ida B. Wells in almost mythological terms. What is curious is that this foreword does not authenticate the main text, but tries to validate Duster's efforts as an editor, serving as a sort of authentication of the authentication.

autobiography or essay) in which the authenticating documents are either subsumed by the tale (III a), or the tale is subsumed by the authenticating documents, becoming an authenticating document itself for other texts, e.g., novels or historical account (III b). See Stepto, chapter 1.

Actually, given the filial bond between Duster and Wells, Hope's foreword serves to guarantee the reader that Duster's revision of her mother's text has been accurate and objective, and that the text is essentially Wells's.

Conclusion

It is evident that Wells as well as her editors attempted to compensate in a variety of ways for her public image, often maligned by the white press. Like the ex-slaves, Wells wants to tell her version of history, writing from the African Americans' perspective. Historical consciousness permeates the text, and this is the reason why documentation and authentication play such an essential role. In *Crusade for Justice* Wells places herself between a tradition of women's autobiographical writing and the previously male-dominated genre of the political memoir, allowing herself the necessary space to discuss the way in which she decided to shape both her public and private life. In this way, *Crusade for Justice* not only fulfils its initial intended goal of documentation of black history after Emancipation but also poses itself as a forerunner of much more recent political autobiographies such as those of Anne Moody or Angela Davis.

In a famous scene of the book, Wells mentions the encounter between her son, who was just six months old, and so-called "General" Harriet Tubman during the founding ceremony of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW). This moment plays a central role in the narration and symbolizes the passing of the torch of human rights to the younger generation, and the emergence of a new, modern civil rights movement (243). So was the work of Ida B. Wells and so is her autobiography: A crossover work that fills the gap between antebellum and post-Emancipation African American literature, one that James Cox would have defined as an important part of the so-called "lost ground" of American literature (123).

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