

## Shaping Presence: Ida B. Wells' 1892 Testimony of the 'Untold Story' at New York's Lyric Hall

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*There is no agony like bearing an untold story inside you.*

—Zora Neale Hurston

When Ida B. Wells stood before a crowd of the social hierarchy of black women from Boston, Brooklyn, New York City, and Philadelphia at New York's Lyric Hall on October 5, 1892, according to her autobiography, she simply wanted to deliver her testimonial "of that horrible lynching affair" (*Crusade* 79). Wells was referring to earlier in the year on March 9 in Memphis, Tennessee, when a mob of masked men pulled Wells' friends Calvin McDowell, William Stuart, and Theodore Moss from their jail cell in the predawn hours when they were lynched and "shot to pieces" (*New York Times*, 10 March 1892). As editor of *Free Speech*, the black Memphis newspaper she co-owned, the thirty-year old Wells was away "carrying on the work of [*Free Speech*]" (*Crusade* 47) in Natchez, Mississippi, when she heard of the Lynching at the Curve<sup>1</sup>. Wells' 1892 testimonial at New York's Lyric Hall, *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All its Phases*, is the founding rhetorical text in the anti-lynching movement that called for a moral, religious, and legal referendum on lynching in America. By forsaking all of the commonplace rationale for lynching and the Southern social comfort that came with it, Wells reframed the simplistic characterizations of lynching with new questions to demonstrate its structural features. With the cleavage of politics and economics to lynching, Wells would offer a new interpretation of lynching and emerge as the principle shaper of America's anti-lynching crusade.

Although lynchings were a cultural feature of the Southern American ethos after slavery and Reconstruction, in 1892 there was an astonishing "increase of 200 percent" (*Horrors* 10) of blacks lynched by white mobs. Upon returning to Memphis, Wells discovered that not only were McDowell, Stuart, and Moss buried, but according to many of the black citizens of Memphis there was a "strong belief that the criminal court judge was one of the lynchers" (*Crusade* 55). Wells realized that "despite [. . .] harping on the lynching" (*Crusade* 62) in her *Free Speech* editorials and the national attention that the lynchings brought to Memphis, no legal repercussion to the brutal murders would ever transpire.

Like most blacks and whites, Wells was culturally constructed to believe that sexual contacts between black men and white women were always criminal. However, vested in assuring that McDowell, Stuart, and Moss would have due process, Wells demonstrated in *Southern Horrors* the consensual but

“illicit [sexual] associations between black men and white women” (*Crusade* 69). Given the irrefutable ethos of McDowell, Stuart, and Moss, Wells modified her questions, and a new topography of race and class emerged. Wells’ investigation not only disrupted the previous narrative, it also generated a new way of seeing lynching that showed that the preservation of White Womanhood (Welter) was neither a motive in the Lynching at the Curve nor in the majority of lynchings in the South. The true motive, Wells discovered, was to create economic stasis for McDowell, Stuart, and Moss who “owned and operated a grocery store” (*Crusade* 47) which rivaled their white counterpart who previously “had had a monopoly” (*Crusade* 48) on black patronage. Wells explains that the radical interpretation “opened my eyes to what lynching really was” (*Crusade* 64). After she published her controversial evidence on the Lynching at the Curve, the office of *Free Speech* was destroyed, Wells’ life was publicly threatened, and she was exiled for her safety to New York City.

Wells’ anti-lynching movement is one of the most effective and efficient articulations of marginalized and disenfranchised people in American public address (Royster; Logan; Giddings; Schechter; Decosta-Willis). Wells’ pioneering *Southern Horrors* testimonial at Lyric Hall Karlyn Kohrs Campbell argues, both rhetorically and strategically “use[d] evidence and argument” (436) to demonstrate that lynching was commonplace in the South. Further, Campbell notes, Wells’ testimonial “is noteworthy in three respects” (436):

First, as in her writings, [Wells] used evidence and argument in highly sophisticated ways, ways that prevented members of the audience from dismissing her claims as biased or untrue. Second, the speech was an insightful and sophisticated analysis of the interrelationship of sex, race, and class. Third, in contrast to the rhetorical acts of other women, this speech contained no stylistic markers indicating attempts by a woman speaker to appear “womanly” in what is perceived as a male role—that of a rhetor. (436)

In addition to Campbell, scholars across disciplinary domains argue that Wells rightly deserves a prominent space in American public address discourse. For example, in *“We Are Coming”: The Persuasive Discourse of Nineteenth-Century Black Women*, rhetorical scholar Shirley Wilson Logan notes that although Wells was not the only orator to speak out against lynching, “none did more effectively and more consistently” (15). African American literature scholar Teresa Zackodnik describes Wells’ antilynching rhetoric as a “pedagogy of American lynching” (132) and argues that her speeches both in the United States and abroad significantly instituted changes in lynching laws. Historian Paula J. Giddings writes about the bootstrapping of the legal, communal, and spectacle aspect of lynching saying that “Wells saw it [lynching] within

the context of her own life, times, and writings, as it migrated from the rural backwoods to the cities; from lone midnight murders to communal daylight spectacles in which bodies were dismembered and organs kept or sold as souvenirs; from southern cities to northern ones where lynchings took the form of “legal” executions by racist justice systems and mob-led riots that took multiple lives [. . .]” (*Ida, A Sword* 4).

While Giddings speaks to the legal complicity of lynching, Walter White, an African American civil rights activist who visually looked white but was genetically black, posits that lynch mobs drew their moral justification from Christianity and “it is exceedingly doubtful if lynching could possibly exist under any other religion” (qtd in Wood 50). As a journalist who covered lynchings, we can presume that Wells saw both the material and photographic images of black bodies tortured, dismembered, and burned. However, it was the trauma of McDowell’s, Stuart’s, and Moss’ lynching embodied in Wells’ psychic consciousness that, as she states, “changed the whole course of my life” (*Crusade* 47). Thus, the Lynching at the Curve served as the exigence for Wells to use her skill and experience as a journalist for her lynching protest movement to oppose the terrorism of mob rule. By the rhetorical intertwining of legal discursive practices, the cultural method of testimony, and Christianity as moral reasoning for the dehumanization and lynching of blacks, Wells initiates a profound rhetorical reflection on lynching in America.

From this space, I will examine Wells’ 1892 testimony at Lyric Hall using an interdisciplinary reading from rhetorical theory, legal brief writing, anthropology, cognitive psychology, and historical criticism to illustrate how these bodies of knowledge discursively intersect and interact in articulating the shaping presence of the agent. I will distinguish my notion of a shaping presence in five ways in which it acts as a rhetorical framing of both the agent and her visual and verbal discourse. A *shaping presence* in my articulation is a discursive practice that conveys the ideology, nature, and characteristics of the experience of seeing. Second, it enables interdiscursivity between the orator’s representation of the experience and the audience’s cultural processing of the experience. Third, it is the rhetorical binding of the rhetor’s visual consciousness and verbal consciousness. Fourth, it requires a method of reading, which is why the rhetor may use symbolic markers of culture, value-systems, and connection to a shared body of ideas for her audience to gain entrance into and engagement with the rhetor’s experience of seeing. And finally, a shaping presence is a public portraiture rather than the private identity of the rhetor.

With this framing of a shaping presence, the essay proceeds in the following steps. First, I begin by broadening Shirley Wilson Logan’s analysis of Wells’ construction of her rhetorical presence and examining how Wells’ Lyric Hall speech was constrained by and constitutive of the sociopolitical conditions

of lynching. Second, I demonstrate using Jerome Bruner's narrative theories that it was the group narrative of blacks in Memphis, and not Wells' self-narrative, which fueled the onset of her anti-lynching movement. Third, I articulate Wells' use of the ancient form of discourse *ekphrasis* to demonstrate its discursive role in Wells' visual and verbal shaping presence of her testimony. Fourth, I argue that a shaping presence is not self-interpreting but imported with symbolic traffic from the rhetor's culture. I conclude the essay discussing the implications for public address as civic awareness and the rhetorical interdependence of the two

## Shaping Presence at Lyric Hall

*A shaping presence is a discursive practice that conveys the ideology, nature, and characteristics of the experience of seeing.*

At what moment does an activist become—*the activist*—and the chief representative of a sociopolitical movement? When does the rhetorical framing of an experience provide a larger and richer insight into an ideological point of focus? How does the rhetor express her personal attachment to an experience for a public performance to evoke sociopolitical action by uncovering the experience for an audience that represents their shared political interests? Further, what is the kairotic moment that initiates the ascent and exhibition of autopoiesis for the rhetor? For many activists of sociopolitical movements the questions are deferred to time, vague and shifting instincts, and early childhood traumatic experiences. For Ida B. Wells, her shaping presence as the most prominent anti-lynching orator in U.S. history was October 5, 1892 at Lyric Hall in New York City. Alternatively, perhaps, as she posits in *Crusade*, it was on March 9, 1892, when her friends McDowell, Stuart, and Moss were shot and lynched by a mob. At any rate, these two events interlock for Wells because both were anchors in her shaping presence.

The belief that there is a convergence and strategic linking of subject, audience, and occasion by the orator to "create rhetorical discourse" (Bitzer 1) is well defined in rhetorical studies. Indeed, the orator rhetorically assembles her discourse in a sustained and tactical manner to empower her audience to assist with change in favor of a sociopolitical interest. In her study of Wells' agitation rhetoric against both the legal and cultural sanctioning of lynching, Shirley Wilson Logan examines presence in relation to how "Wells employs selective description to persuade audiences geographically and emotionally removed from the circumstances to which they were asked to respond" (74-75). Logan follows by noting that "Well's discourse not only invokes the presence of the act of lynching but also heightens awareness of the perpetrators and the carnivalesque atmosphere among the spectators" (75). Indeed, while I reinforce Logan's examination of lynching as an attendant factor in Wells'

discourse, I employ the term “presence” in relation to the performative shaping of Wells’ communication style as an artistic statement to examine lynching within the ideology of culture. Similarly, asserting that “there was art [. . .] in Wells’s discourse against mob violence” (75), Logan’s position opens a gateway to further theorize Wells’ rhetorical innovation to creatively resist and analytically break the moral closure of Southern lynching rationale. Therefore, in bracing my use of the term “shaping presence” to Logan’s, I confirm and expand her definition to emphasize both the verbal and visual characteristics manifest during Wells’ testimony at New York’s Lyric Hall.

In order to tell the untold story to her Lyric Hall audience, Wells first had to produce, process, and perform the dynamic features of the Lynching at the Curve in her mind to visually shape what she wanted her audience to encounter during the experience of seeing. “Although every detail of that horrible lynching affair was imprinted on my memory,” writes Wells, “I had to commit it all to paper, and so I got up to read my story” (*Crusade* 79). By recognizing the relevance of the Lynching at the Curve to her middle-class black Lyric Hall audience, Wells chose to translate the untold story through the performative and oral storytelling method of testimony. With the rhetorical virtuosity of an experienced journalist, Wells rooted her testimony in the cultural story of the black jeremiad to discredit the moral backing of Christianity that lynch mobs used to justify their vigilantism. Moreover, she followed the composition of legal discursive practices to illuminate the extensive lawlessness of lynching. With this strategy, Wells tacitly conveys in her testimony the inseparability of lynching, law, and Christianity. At first glance, this yoking may appear far-reaching and full of ambiguities when examined outside their rhetorical province. However, when examined more closely, by interweaving the three discourses of lynching, law, and Christianity, Wells rightly embeds and situates the narratives in a unified manner. This not only strengthened the rhetorical power of her Lyric Hall testimony, it also stimulated new questions about the political and legal role of lynching in a civil society

In the words of Geneva Smitherman, “*testifyin*” is a ritualized [form of black cultural expression] in which the speaker gives verbal [and visual] witness to the efficacy, truth, and power of some experience in which all blacks have shared” (58). This is an important point that Smitherman makes since “*testifyin*” is remarkably similar to legal deliberation in a court of law. Similarly, Wells employs the rhetoric, structure, and formality of a legal brief, which is an argument that details the main points of a case with evidence. Like biblical law, the body of laws that govern its citizenry is a legal system that generates outcomes in the name of justice. Smitherman has noted that, “[t]o testify is to tell the truth through ‘story’” (150), which enables the orator, and particularly the African American orator to invoke culturally inclusive language, customs, prominent

and accomplished African Americans, and traditions which resonate with audience members who share the same kinship. As rhetorical strategy, testimony allowed Wells the agency to burrow her story within the religious language of biblical Christianity; it also was a familiar form of sociopolitical address to her middle-class audience, and like the law of the land, *testifyin(g)* within the provisions of Christianity had a binding, although spiritual, judgment.

By using the classic format of a legal brief: summary of the argument, statement of the case, argument (s), and conclusion, Wells makes the case for the repeal of lynch law and authoritatively combines all of the rhetorical appeals—ethos, pathos, and logos—to expose the dehumanization and lawlessness of lynching. Furthermore, the titles of each section of her *Southern Horrors* speech discursively parallel “point headings” used in a legal brief to guide the reader through the document (Ricks and Istvan 1115- 1116). However, before Wells proceeds with “The Offense,” her first point heading in *Southern Horrors*, she creates a “Preface” to establish her ethos and to define the pervasive legal impediments in the law blind to the practice of lynching. By using the rhetorical style of legal discourse to situate her argument, Wells’ adjudication begins by declaring that her objective is to give an “unvarnished account of the causes of lynch law in the South” (50). From there, Wells harmonizes for her audience the central pillars of her argument—lynching, law, and Christianity

For example, Wells strategically invokes a visual anchor in her opening remarks with the biblical story of love, lust, and deception—Samson and Delilah<sup>2</sup>. With this famous and no doubt familiar narrative of betrayal tacitly presented to her black middle-class woman audience, Wells significantly influences their mental processing of black male/white female sexual relations that she will reiterate throughout her speech. With this imagery of the vulnerable Samson to the sexually cunning Delilah embedded in her audience’s consciousness, Wells tacitly generates a visual preference for the black male seduced by the white female. Another visual claim Wells makes in her argument is the social and legal preference for white bodies over black bodies. Further still, the Samson and Delilah narrative also functions as a reference and caveat to the social strictures of intermingling with lower class whites

As the first post-Reconstruction African Americans who were educated, entrepreneurs, and owned property, it is important to note that Wells’ black middle-class woman audience was not quite in the “middle” of American society. That is, while they were elite in their social, economic, and educational status compared to the majority of African Americans, black middle-class women were still on the social periphery with limited social and spatial mobility compared to white middle-class women. However, it is safe to assume that although they were elite, they still distinguished themselves from poorer blacks.

In fact, Wells notes in *Crusade* that New Yorkers were not “[. . .] interested in anybody or anything [. . .] who did not belong to their circle” (78). Therefore, by visually prompting her black middle-class woman audience to sympathize with the black male by the politically coded insertion of the Samson and Delilah narrative, Wells’ encourages them to consider class structures since it was of strategic importance in the development of her testimony.

Wells continues with the deliberate construction of her ethos saying she is deeply committed to making “a contribution to truth [by providing] an array of facts [. . .] to demand that justice be done” (50). Indeed, by presenting a letter from Frederick Douglass as part of the careful shaping of her presence, Wells’ credentials as a witness to the lynching issue are legitimized without a self-centered tone. By tactically positioning her ethos next to Douglass’, Wells sought to create a uniform and visual reading of black racial and gendered opposition to dominant strategies of disempowerment. In this way, Wells creates an enabling and particular “oppositional gaze” (hooks) for her black middle-class woman audience to construct. Wells’ strategy is important since it builds and defines the ideological shaping of her presence, which was central to illuminating the perversion of the legal system, the rhetoric in laws, and their philosophical intimacy with lynching. Therefore, in her first point heading “The Offense,” Wells’ facility with legal discourse has established a point of entry for her to rupture the legal system and laws associated with the practices of lynching. To accomplish this task, Wells integrates another familiar rhetorical form of social criticism in her testimony—the black jeremiad<sup>3</sup> to illuminate and emphasize how the discursive practices of the law and Christianity are wedded to the lives of African Americans.

In *The Afro-American Jeremiad: Appeals for Justice in America*, David Howard-Pitney observes that the American jeremiad, “a lamentation or doleful complaint,” (6) was radically recast as the “black” jeremiad into a cultural, political, and rhetorical form of address by African American orators “from the age of the Civil War” (15) in response to America’s denial of their constitutional guarantees. For Wells, like many African Americans, the Afro-American jeremiad was a powerful rhetorical strategy used to present a parallel reading of America and to restore moral balance to the ethos of a nation founded on religious ideology. Therefore, it is not inconsequential that religion, morality, and politics played a significant role in lynching discourse, and Wells, to her credit, wedded those discursive processes to the experience of seeing.

For example, in “The Offense” Wells situates the beginning of her argument of black male/white female sexual relations by seriously questioning the logos of white men’s claim that white females are virtuous and defenseless. Wells validates visual imagery as a sensible form of meta-cognition by prompting her black middle-class woman audience to give public and deliberate visual

attention to what they have silently materialized in their private thoughts. Although this particular section of *Southern Horrors* was directed at Southern white men, the rhetorical arc of the testimony was framed exclusively for the visual consumption of her black middle-class woman audience when she states, "Nobody [my emphasis] in this section of the country believes the old thread-bare lie that Negro men rape white women" (52). This statement also recircles back to Wells' highlighting of class status with the subtle stress on the educated black elite of the North. She continues with a bold warning to Southern White men saying, "If Southern white men are not careful, they will overreach themselves and public sentiment will have a reaction; a conclusion will then be reached which will be very damaging to the moral reputation of their women" (52). Once again, using visual signposts, Wells is stirring her black middle-class woman audience to grasp another lynching possibility by structuring what governs their visualizing during the experiencing of seeing.

Understanding the social importance of middle-class comfort, Wells is tactfully and tactically suggesting to her "Northern" black middle-class woman audience that "Southern" white men would not want their ethos publicly soiled in exchange for defending sexually promiscuous white women from their social underclass. At first glance, it appears as though Wells is speaking singularly of morals and manners. However, with a closer look, one can argue that Wells is also juxtaposing white male masculinity to black male masculinity with the sexual desire of white women making the determination. It is important to note that in the nineteenth century white men from the social elite were also bound to Victorian ideals of behavior just as white women were bound to the social creed of True Womanhood (Welter), with white men's social proscriptions centered on manliness. This was especially so for Southern white men, who in addition to white women's bodies, had sexual access to black women's bodies due to slavery. However, with the erasure of the slave economy, white women were no longer limited in the expression of their sexual desire. The result was the thawing of sexual space that allowed white women to choose which body and thus what form of masculinity she desired. Therefore, with the visual calculus that Wells shaped for her "Northern" black middle-class woman audience to analyze during the experience seeing, she emptied the black male/white female dynamic of a pathos driven aesthetic for a logos centered ideology to emerge. In deflecting attention away from her audience's pathos-infused visualizing, the true obscenity behind lynching—politics and economics—began to emerge. What also materializes is Wells' ontological association of self-fashioning, agency, and power—all critical for her shaping presence at Lyric Hall. Wells' ontology also produced a visual portal for her Lyric Hall audience's experience of seeing to reinterpret and reconfigure mob lynching.



The revolutionary effect of Wells' Lyric Hall testimony is also profound because she was the first orator to publicly cross-examine white men's manliness with a precise line of argument. Moreover, Wells gives "Southern" white men an invitation to redefine their position as the moral custodians of white womanhood, while challenging her "Northern" black middle-class woman audience to transform their experience of seeing from a passive to an active visualizing. However, it is important to examine implicitly and explicitly how Wells continues to give verbal and visual status to African American culture during her testimony at Lyric Hall. At the same time, it is valuable to illuminate why cultural signifiers are vital to subjugated groups when progressing beyond socio-political restricted boundaries.

## **Cultural Narrative as a Mechanism for Shaping Presence**

*A shaping presence enables interdiscursivity between the orator's representation of the experience and the audience's cultural processing of the experience.*

We tell our stories with the presence of others. Whether the subject in the narrative is dead, alive, or integrated or not in our lives—the subject is intimately involved with the structuring of our stories. Although all stories have material reality either by minutes, days, weeks, months, or years from when they are narratively represented; despite their material distance, some stories sit at the forefront of our consciousness and are easily retrievable for the narrative. Other stories, however, when verbally articulated are brought into our consciousness unwillingly and we struggle to analyze and interpret their ethos from the narrative infrastructure.

Yet, despite the material isolation from the moment between when the event occurred and when it is situated in a coherent narrative, all agents and events are critical to the orator's narrative judgment. Both subjects and events, then, regardless of their material location are not compositional barriers but rhetorical bridges to the "reading" of the narrative scene for the orator and her audience. However, this is a perplexing and ambiguous proposition since the relevance of the presence of others, and particularly the canvas of one's culture, enables the shaping presence of the orator through narrative balance. To be sure, there is no silent construction during the building of a story. Both the orator and her culture are unconsciously colonizing each other's narrative perspective—with both influencing the representation and performativity of the story. Cognitive psychologist, Jerome Bruner, for example, argues that "[t]he story of one's life is [. . .] a privileged but troubled narrative" (693) because he sees it as "reflexive" (693) given that the narrator is often a character in her own story.

Wells titles her second point heading as “The Black and White of It,” which aptly characterizes not only the racial split between blacks and whites, but also the socio-cultural divide between the two races. By tracing the contours of the “troubled narrative” between blacks and whites over the lynching issue, Wells continues to braid her testimony within legal discourse and with visual force. For example, Wells strategically returns to her “Preface” and pushes the white Delilah plot by recounting a story from the Memphis “Ledger” on “Lillie Bailey, a rather pretty white girl of seventeen years of age” (55) who gave birth to “a little coon” (55). Wells uses Lillie Bailey to demonstrate to her “elite” audience that “the “leading citizens” of Memphis were making a spectacle of themselves in defense of all [my emphasis] white women of every kind” (56) to include a poor “country girl” from “Mississippi” (56). The visual imagery of the white Delilah Wells painted earlier semantically shifts her black middle-class woman audience into her new framing of the lynching motive. Moreover, Wells boldly states again to Southern white men that the Northern public will not suspend doubt and judgment like “the South [. . .] shielding itself behind the [. . .] screen of defending the honor of its women” (61), especially white women like Lillie Bailey, who Wells suggests is sexually immoral and of a lower social status, like the biblical temptress Delilah.

Wells uses Lillie Bailey’s lower class status as a visual signpost to remind her elite audience that like her middle-class friends McDowell, Stuart, and Moss, as African Americans, they cannot escape the indignities of Jim Crow even in New York. As evidence of this point, Wells clearly situates lynching as a genuine material threat to all African American regardless of their standing on the social ladder and argues persuasively that the judicial system is guilty in the legal tyranny of blacks. For example, Wells cites several cases of middle-class black men having sexual liaisons with willing lower-class white women and that “leading white men show that with them it is not the crime but the class [her emphasis]” (58). By utilizing the argumentative structure of a legal brief, Wells elaborates and extends her argument that lynching is powered by the economic climbing of blacks. Furthermore, by strategizing her testimony through a lawyer’s prose, Wells intersects race, culture, and the middle-class status of her audience to permit them to recognize the material reality of their situatedness. This tactic is not an empty rhetorical gesture since it will enable Wells to join her language marked by legal discourse to the discursive practice of visualizing.

Bruner theorizes, “language constructs what it narrates [. . .] semantically [. . .] pragmatically and stylistically” (696). I argue language visually guides as well and with considerable awareness by the rhetor to influence the audience’s framing of the narrative. If a life story is to be discursively meaningful, according to Bruner, it has to “mesh [. . .] within a community of life stories”

and he says, "tellers and listeners must share some 'deep structure'" (699) to support the arrangement of the narrative. For example, by using the chosen people narrative as a refrain, Wells gives rhetorical, structural, thematic, and cultural unity to her life story. Wells also repeatedly calls the audience's attention to her exile status as a member of the divinely appointed lost tribe<sup>4</sup>. In doing so, Wells not only collapses the boundaries between a religious and political division of lynching; her testimony takes a subtle "civic turn," when later she places civic action demands on her audience. For Bruner, there has to be an ideological commitment or "tellers and listeners will [. . .] be alienated by a failure to grasp what the other is saying or what he thinks the other is hearing" (699). Indeed, with her purposive "life-story meshing" (700) Wells bridges the rhetorical distance between she and her audience with an ancient form of rhetorical practice.

## **Ekphrasis<sup>5</sup> at the Scenes of the Struggle**

*A shaping presence is the rhetorical binding of the rhetor's visual consciousness and verbal consciousness.*

In her introduction to Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice, Ruth Webb argues that ekphrasis is an ancient rhetorical skill that currently has "a very different definition" (1) because of "modern critical discourse" (1). Webb argues that ekphrasis' threading to "the visual arts" (1) buries the "ancient sense" (1) of the term and wrongly implies simply an aesthetic reflection of the world. Webb has shown, for example, that the visual imagination can never exist apart from the verbal framing of the scene in the audience's cognizance of the experience. Therefore, the verbal and the visual imagination are not neutral abstractions, but embodied discourses to frame an understanding of the scene. For Webb, rhetorical ekphrasis in ancient settings was about "the use of language to try to make an audience imagine a scene" (3). She argues they "were alive with rich visual and emotional effects" (5). Ekphrasis, in this view, requires a cultivated ear and a cultivated eye, for they claim distinct aspects of the audience's experiences and perspectives to engage the orator's discourse. As Webb further notes, ekphrasistic rhetoric was a way "to make the audience feel involved in the subject matter" (10). Moreover, like Bruner, Webb argues that culture plays an important ideological role because "the audience [will import] the details from their own imaginative resources and cultural knowledge" (153) as a means to participate in the rhetorical structuring of the rhetor's discourse. Webb's theories are important to consider when examining Wells' Lyric Hall testimony since both listening and seeing within ekphrasistic rhetoric has broad ranging influence in the signifying effect of an orator's structuring of the story. Wells notes in *Crusade*, "[a]s I described the cause of the trouble at home" [. . .] "my

mind went back to the scenes of the struggle" (79). For Wells, then, the "verbalizing" of the untold story was a rhetorical binding to the "visual" framing of the scene, which is why I argue that she applied the rich imagery of the Samson and Delilah biblical story in the "Preface" of her testimony. To reiterate Webb's point, both modes (verbal and visual) discursively map a conceptual pathway for the audience's and the rhetor's experience of seeing to unify and grasp the rhetorical impact of the narrative.

By discursively interlocking the verbal to the visual, Wells is mapping for her audience a process for them to interpret how the visual and verbal are ideologically "acting on" each other. That is, for Wells, the verbal and visual are not insulated discursive practices but compounded representations that enable new systems of relations for critical analysis. Therefore, in Wells' exphrasis testimony, which is how I will refer to her speech for the remainder of this article, she provides verbal and visual conceptual pathways to the experience of seeing the untold story for her elite audience.

"The New Cry," is Wells' third point heading in her fusion of legal brief discourse to her argument on the lawlessness of lynching. In Wells' exphrasis testimony, she gives her elite audience no option but to consume lynching imagery since in many respects lynching carried greater force in their bourgeois society than in lower-class African American culture. Therefore, Wells intensifies her deliberation that lynching is not separate from racial uplift ideology, but is part of racial uplift ideology. With this thesis, Wells is strategically broadening her claim that McDowell, Stuart, and Moss were lynched for economic reasons. This is important because Wells is demonstrating the effects of racial uplift, which was a social and increasingly political status she knew elite audience would not easily walk away from given the horrors of slavery, from which many of them were only one generation removed. Wells supports her argument, saying, "the whole matter is explained by the well-known opposition growing out of slavery to the progress of the race" (59-60). Wells continues to jolt her elite audience out of their middle-class comfort by reminding them they were still walled in and by their racial category into spaces that signify their difference and marginality. As an example, Wells cites the "separate car laws" (60) on trains where blacks "regardless of advancement" (60) had to sit in "filthy, stifling partitions" (60) although they were financially capable of paying for a better space on the train. By haunting her elite audience with imagery from the social indignities of their everyday lived experience, Wells is also suggesting that they must rebel or the roots of their middle-class lifestyle.

Although Wells concedes, "the crime of rape is revolting" (61), she argues against the "better class of Afro-Americans [. . .] take[ing] the white man's word" (61), without due process. For them to continue accepting the cultural construction of rape as she once did, Wells argues white society will continue,

“to stamp us a race of rapists and desperadoes” (61) and bolster lynch mobs. Wells also appears to mock the naive idea of her elite audience that “general education and financial strength [of racial uplift ideology] would solve the difficulty” (61) of lynching. Wells’ critique of her bourgeois audience may be viewed as harsh, but it also reveals Wells’ rhetorical skill, art, and craft with ekphrasis. Moreover, the “The New Cry” of Wells’ third point heading makes the claim to her elite audience that their middle-class status was not protection against lynch mobs, but was in dialectical relation to lynching as was the middle-class status of McDowell, Stuart, and Moss.

Wells’ use of ekphrasis then becomes fundamental to the construction of her testimonial at Lyric Hall given her visual packaging of the scene and her verbal account of lynching using public and legitimized documented sources from reputable newspapers. Nevertheless, how does the rhetor structure her narrative when the presence of accumulated cultural practices, codes, and knowledge loom, and often unrecognized, while shaping a presence for an audience? For anthropologists, the process is embodied in the symbolic system of culture, which is always already active at the margins of the agent’s cultural consciousness intervening during the portraiture formation. Further still, some of these cultural behaviors are called upon intentionally by the rhetor for affect.

## **Encountering Symbolic Traffic During Testimony**

*A shaping presence requires a method of reading, which is why the rhetor may use symbolic markers of culture, value-systems, and connection to a shared body of ideas for her audience to gain entrance into and engagement with the rhetor’s experience of seeing.*

In Wells’ fourth point heading titled, “The Malicious and Untruthful White Press” she recounts in ekphrastic detail the Lynching at the Curve. To be sure, at this stage in Wells’s testimony it was critical to insert the presence of McDowell, Stuart, and Moss to reiterate not only the racial ideology behind lynching, but also the black bourgeois style of life, which threatened and rivaled white Southern ideals of their social and economic station. However, it is important to note how Wells centers and harmonizes her criticism of the “White Press” and its rhetorical justification of lynching to African American social and economic mobility—hallmarks of white middle-class values, which McDowell, Stuart, and Moss were lynched for acquiring. By examining the intractability of lynching, Wells uses evidence printed in the Memphis “Daily Commercial” and the Memphis “Evening Scimitar” (62) to form her argument and to emphasize why newspapers were complicit in justifying lynch law. Wells writes, although “there had been no white woman in Memphis outraged by an Afro-American [. . .] the “Commercial” of May 17<sup>th</sup>,” published a story recounting “More Rapes,

More Lynchings" (62) that occurred in Alabama. In Wells' interpretation, newspapers like the *Memphis Daily Commercial* with their superficial "truth factor" wanted to incite lynch mob vigilantism and suppress the continuous economic ascent of middle-class blacks.

It is valuable once again to stress the rhetorical and strategic brilliance of how Wells drew upon newspapers to shape her legal argument since many white journalists unintentionally reported the psychic impact of the sociopolitical and cultural exclusion that African Americans experienced. It is equally valuable to stress that Wells was a highly competent and professional editor and journalist as co-owner of *Free Speech*. Therefore, we must not subsume Wells' rhetorical and strategic crafting of *Southern Horrors* as discursive luck, but as a tactical epistemic and moral counterargument to lynching. For example, in the *Memphis Evening Scimitar* an unknown journalist writes, "Since the emancipation came [. . .] the Negro has drifted away into a state which is neither freedom nor bondage" (62). This unknown journalist seems to grasp superficially the liminal state that African Americans were in as the progeny of slaves, and as free but disempowered people, without being able to comprehend intellectually the structural impediments they faced to assume sociopolitical and economic agency. Wells, however, clearly understood the restrictions, but also recognized the fundamental role the law would have to play in securing equal protection and due process against lynching. Equally fundamental to Wells were African American cultural anchors significant to the racial uplift campaign of her middle-class black woman audience, which is why the rhetorical arc of her testimony is discursively visualized to the *Lynching at the Curve*.

Of McDowell, Stuart, and Moss, Wells writes, "[t]hey were peaceful, law-abiding citizens and energetic business men" (64). With this view of her friends, Wells is also making a similar character argument for her elite audience. Furthermore, she is also representing middle-class blacks as law-abiding citizens while at the same time denouncing the ethos of the white press, which racially depicts African Americans as "hopelessly [. . .] behind the other in everything that makes a great people" (64). The value in Wells' character assertion of McDowell, Stuart, and Moss and her elite audience is that it is contained within the black jeremiad's visual imagery of the chosen people narrative.

By embedding the ethos of African Americans within the visual field of the "chosen people" narrative, Wells is also subverting the white press's depiction of them. These visual divisions are important since they culturally constitute her elite audience within a higher visual realm of God's faithful people suffering in bondage for eventual deliverance, rather than the white press' imagery of a sexual and immoral race of people. Therefore, in organizing her elite audience's experience of seeing within culturally mediated imagery, Wells discursively mutes the white press' depiction of McDowell, Stuart, and Moss and all

African Americans by visually trafficking them in familiar culturally significant symbols (Geertz 45). Drawing from cultural traffic to “impose meaning upon experience” (Geertz 45), Wells visually equips her elite audience with cultural imagery to synthesize their liminal space as middle-class African Americans after the “mockery of law and justice” (65) that failed to protect McDowell, Stuart, and Moss. Wells also articulates the legal deficiencies in middle-class black assimilation when Memphis blacks wanted to avenge the lynchings but were “counseled obedience to the law which did not protect them” (65). Wells illustrates the rhetor’s effectiveness of infusing symbolic markers of culture, value-systems, and connection to a shared body of ideas. By rhetorically harnessing her exphrasis testimony to the chosen people narrative, Wells visually drives her elite audience’s experience of seeing to the Mosaic people’s exodus from Egypt, who like her fellow Memphis blacks, “left the city in great numbers” (65) mindful of the coming liberation.

During the experience of seeing, the agent’s culture places individual and collective demands on her that are rooted in symbolic traffic. Indeed, culture simply inspires the meaning-making process, serving only as an index for the agent to discover and reveal the difficulties through which she views, constructs, and interacts within her world. With this understanding, culture is a political instrument where power and agency are mobilized against oppression.

## **Shaping Presence Within Civic Discourse**

*A shaping presence is a public portraiture rather than the private identity of the rhetor.*

In this section, I analyze Wells’ fifth point heading, “The South’s Position” and Wells’ sixth and final point heading “Self Help,” to demonstrate her intertwining of cultural identity to political activism. Staying true to the framework of the legal brief, Wells continues to present evidence from reputable newspapers as a statement of facts, offers her argument, and provides a conclusion to make her case on the lawlessness of lynching. Wells presents the everyday lived experiences of blacks, and particularly middle-class blacks, in a legal discursive frame to criticize the absence of protecting blacks from lynching, but also as legal leverage to use for changing lynch law. For Wells, linkages between the two are undeniably related to agency for middle-class blacks and the entire race. A greater relationship Wells seems to suggest to her elite audience is the public role they must play in transforming the legal system despite claims from respected journalists. For example, Wells cites distinguished journalist Henry W. Grady to amplify the white press’ central argument that blacks were “incapable of self-government” (66). As a counterargument, Wells emphasizes the extreme exclusion of blacks from the “ballot [. . .] civil rights [and] civil courts” (66) to challenge the false claim that blacks were incompetent to govern themselves. This was a meaningful and significant point for Wells to

mention to her elite audience since earlier in her testimony she rooted lynching in a racial and cultural context that had economic overtones. Although Wells maps lynching to the growing economic strength of middle-class blacks, she suggests at its core, lynching is a genocidal assault on the black race and culture. This again is an echo back to the prophetic tone of the chosen people narrative from the “murdering, burning and lynching” (66) that black people must endure as a precondition of liberation. With this point of view, cultural stories are not benign and trivial narratives but a “bridging device” (Burke 224) with both verbally and visually expressive rhetorical tools for racial unity and collective sociopolitical agency. By optimizing the cultural awareness of the chosen people narrative in her exphrasis testimony, Wells is also priming her elite audience for active civic engagement to influence political opinion on lynch law.

Wells notes to her elite audience the growing divisions within the press over the continued “lawlessness and lynching” (67) by the South, which was the moral gateway for many “dailies and weeklies” (67) to say publicly “lynch law must go” (67). Building on the “healthy public sentiment” (68) forged by some members of the white press, Wells accuses their morally silent audience of being “equally guilty” (68) with the vigilantism of the lynch mobs. To be sure, for white anti-lynching sympathizers, this visual imagery of being ideologically in alliance with lynch mobs was perhaps morally and religiously offensive to their belief system. Consequently, Wells demanded the institutionalized discourse of the law and the legal system “to be employed against them [lynch mobs]” (68), which was beneficial to the nation as a whole.

It is important to note, however, that out of the six point headings, Wells’ fifth point heading, “The South’s Position,” is the briefest section of her statement of facts. In it, Wells reiterates her main arguments: the intersubjective relation between the white press, lynching, law, black economic progress, and black people as a race. That these are impediments to black exclusion in the larger sociopolitical and economic spheres was not surprising; that the mechanisms are discursively related to the transformation of lynch law, individual and collective African American liberty, was a new point of entry to situate the all-encompassing force of lynching. Wells’ rhetorical appropriation of the discourse and structure of a legal brief enabled the storytelling method of “testifyin” (Smitherman) to expose the obstacles of the legal system to lynch law. As noted above, Wells did provide examples of slow moral change by a handful of the white press. Although this was an important shift in the public rebuttal of lynching, Wells argues for a sustained legal and critical reaction against lynching (Horrors 68) to awaken the frustration and impatience that African Americans were experiencing as targets for lynching violence. For Wells, then, there was only one group with the moral backing to present an



unremitting legal, moral, and critical attack on the sociopolitical transformation of lynch law—her middle-class black woman audience at Lyric Hall.

Jones Royster encourages modern scholars of feminist rhetoric to keep a penetrating vigilant eye on history lest we miss the varied character(s) and characterization(s) of the past that shape our presence. In her article, "In Search of Ways In," Royster writes that "We need to keep prying the inquiry open, to keep extending the conversation, casting and recasting, to find other 'ways in' to a territory that is so richly endowed with a multiplicity of experiences and so deeply deserving of attention, thought, and more thought" (390). Who sees, as Royster suggests, influences the representation of history, since the past is never transparent but only transferred through a constructed consciousness, and often one of privilege freed of marginal and subjugated status. Wells' 1892 Lyric Hall exphrasis testimony is an explicit oratorical example of a black woman in Royster's words of "prying the inquiry open," into the myth, manners, and false morality that substantiated the lynching of African Americans in the nineteenth-century.

Like Royster, Wells stirs a related rhetorical appeal in her sixth and final point heading titled "Self-Help," to embolden her elite audience into civic action. It is worth noting that Wells is once again suggesting—although in her title—that culture is not separate from politics but intertwined with it. Wells also takes aim at black reliance on a broken legal and political system to act on their behalf. Moreover, she argues that "black" governability is critical to "black" sociopolitical agency. "[The] Afro-American can do for himself what no one else can do for him" (68), she asserts as she reached the climax of her exphrasis testimony.

Wells alters her middle-class black woman audience's presence from their private Victorian complacency to a public portraiture with civic action as an essential feature. With the convergence of the two, Wells argues that blacks can no longer remain subordinate and powerless to a law and legal system with its token representation of them. For Wells, freedom did not mean blind obedience to a corrupt standard of law that defined blacks as inferior human beings. To continue to give allegiance to a judicial system that did not ensure "equal protection of the laws" not only guaranteed more lynchings; to Wells it also violated human dignity and moral self-worth. "Nothing, absolutely nothing," she expresses with a new revolutionary politic, "is to be gained by a further sacrifice of manhood and self-respect" (69). With this radical call for insurgent activism, Wells marks the turning point in her exphrasis testimony because she is consciously integrating and applying race to politics and law. Thus, Wells shifted the political and legal onus of sociopolitical empowerment from the law to blacks arguing, "the Afro-American can demand and secure his rights, the punishment of lynchers, and a fair trial for accused rapists" (70).

This weakening of the law's ethos as the singular legal and moral protector of blacks is a valuable prerequisite for Wells' elite audience in the final statements of her exphrasid testimony because it strengthened African American's claim to political, legal, and moral autonomy.

As a concluding point in her exphrasid testimony, Wells returns to her first statement of fact which indicts the veracity of the white press because they print "unreliable and doctored reports of lynchings" (70). For Wells, one could not divorce insufficient facts and information from constituent elements of a society who would benefit from the creation of false documentation. This was apparent in the *Lynching at the Curve* of her friends McDowell, Stuart, and Moss whose Peoples grocery store rivaled in both customers and profit a grocery store owned by a white male. As Wells argued, there was not only an economic reason created to repress, subjugate, and lynch blacks who were economically successful, but also to forestall the economic rise of future black entrepreneurs. Wells' view not only provides a cogent interpretation of the lynching issue, it also brought out the possibility that unless blacks took substantial civic action on their behalf, blacks cannot presume that the white press would report the truth behind many of the false claims of rape that precipitated lynchings. "The Afro-American papers," (70) in contrast to the white press, Wells argues, "are the only ones which will print the truth" (70). Wells' emphasis on the collective ethos of blacks stemmed from the traditions, practices, and stories of African American culture that revealed their power and significance when bound to civic action. Shirley Wilson Logan gives a rhetorically systematic study of the the black press in *Liberating Language* and argues that it was more than just a passive communication medium to disseminate facts. For Logan, the black press "functioned as a site of rhetorical education" (97) to intervene and counter the marketing of racial stereotypes of African Americans within the white press. For Wells, shattering this dehumanized view of African Americans perpetrated by the white press in favor of an image that endowed black humanity with moral autonomy was critical.

In her final comments, Wells elevates the theme and tone of her last point heading, "Self-Help," to drive home the view that lynch law demanded extraordinary and immediate civic action from African Americans. If blacks were to achieve a new and revolutionary political presence in the United States, she argues, "[we] must act" (72). To be sure, Wells' statement is consciously charged with kairos to stress the urgency of reforming lynch law since all blacks shared the risk of being lynched. Wells' promotion of civic action also necessitated a public portraiture of her elite audience rather than a veiled one if they were to reform the "last relic of barbarism and slavery" (72). By ascribing a public visual presence—rather than a private one—as central to civic action, Wells is asserting the visual ethos of black humanity while invading and demolishing

the degenerate visualization of blacks created with picturesque language by the white press. Visual rupture, then, promotes a vision of resistance and reformation which "is central to disrupting fixed notions of identity embodied in the act of visualizing" (August 255). In both cases, the experience of seeing is enmeshed within the visual constituting of black humanity. With this view, blacks become the emissaries of their own racial and cultural self-fashioning rather than the vision constructed by the visual coding in the discursive practices of the white press.

Wells reiterates the chosen people narrative to conclude her exphrasid testimony because of the rhetorical weight of its messianic mission in African American culture. The story's central concept is that God has given a liberated race of people a profound task to set an example of human dignity and moral righteousness for their nation to follow. In giving lived reality to the flowering of the divine call, Wells lifts the story from its ancient biblical domain and locates it within the legal discourse over lynch law. Wells ends with the statement, "The gods help those who help themselves" (72). With these last words to her middle-class black woman audience, Wells calls on them as the "chosen people" to come from the periphery so the prophecy can materialize. Her words are explicit, tactical, and politicized because they shift the burden of black liberation from God to African Americans. Wells is suggesting that legal and civic inaction is no longer an option since they are rhetorically interdependent and one cannot obscure the discourse of the other. This is also an argument that agency and power is best represented as a collective instrument for communal social change, rather than an individual interest to secure personal entitlements. For Wells, then, the public reformation of lynch law was a risk, but it was a risk that collectively African Americans needed; communal solidarity would restructure the law for protection from the vigilantism of lynch mobs. By fastening a God-given right to social, political, and legal justice in her exphrasid testimony, Wells is enriching both the verbal and visual ethos of the black jeremiad. Furthermore, she is also arguing that the exigence for the "chosen people" to wage war against their enemy has arrived.

## **Conclusion**

The key idea in this interdisciplinary analysis of Ida B. Wells' 1892 Lyric Hall exphrasid testimony is that a shaping presence is a deliberate summoning of the rhetor's understanding and representation of a discursive practice bound up in hegemonic ideologies. For example, the economic status of middle-class blacks was not just a masking force behind lynch law; rather, it played an active role in lynching practices to confine all African Americans into an unprotected legal state, which would allow the lawlessness of lynching to continue without due process. By providing a richer framing of lynch law; specifically within legal

discourse and the black jeremiad, Wells pointed out to her middle-class black woman audience the necessity of collective civic action to reform and redress lynch law. Furthermore, Wells stressed the importance of a visual presence during civic action since “everything signifies ceaselessly and several times” (Barthes 12). Perhaps, then, the most significant effect of Wells’ *ekphrasis testimony* was, in her words, “the real beginning of the club movement<sup>6</sup> among the colored women” (*Crusade* 81), which advocated their participation in the political culture as African Americans and as civic-minded women.

## Notes

1 The lynching was named thus because it took place where “They [McDowell, Stuart, and Moss] had located their grocery in the district known as the “Curve” because the streetcar line curved sharply at that point” (*Crusade* 48).

2 The story of Samson and Delilah is a biblical narrative of power, lust, and seduction in Judges 16. Samson, a Nazirite and favored by God as judge to deliver Israel from their oppressor was known for his inhuman strength, which was a secret. Delilah, a temptress, was paid by the Philistines to sexually seduce Samson into revealing his war strength (his hair). When Samson falls asleep, Delilah invites someone in his tent to shave his hair, which makes him vulnerable to the Philistines who eventually blind him in order to neutralize his God-given strength and power.

3 Sacvan Bercovitch refers to the jeremiad as a “state-of-the-covenant address” (4) used in seventeenth-century New England Puritan pulpits as a political sermon delivered “at every public occasion [. . .] and most elaborately at election day gatherings” (4) to reinforce Christian morals and instill fidelity to a particular political perspective. However, by the time of the Civil War, African Americans took ownership of the term and discursively inscribed “jeremiad” with their cultural, political, and rhetorical situatedness in America. Thus, the “black” jeremiad.

4 The biblical description of the “lost tribe” refers primarily to the twelve tribes of Israel who were conquered and enslaved by the Assyrian Empire. However, in African American religious lore, the lost tribe is a vision of transcendence for a diasporic people chosen and favored by God to preach and exemplify an ethical and resilient conception of faith to a corrupt system of justice.

5 *Enargeia* (rather than *energeia*) is often cited to demonstrate the vividness of imagery during the visualizing process. While it is an enriching term to depict the subject’s encounter with imagery, I prefer Webb’s weightier definition of *ekphrasis*, which focuses the subject’s attention on the cognitive processing of imagery rather than the aesthetic awareness. Although the words

enargeia and ekphrasis are used interchangeably, Webb clearly distinguishes the two with ekphrasis providing the audience a more directed visual of the experience of seeing to include cultural content.

6 For more information on the emergence of Black Women's Clubs, see Paula J. Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*. New York: William Morrow, 1984.

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