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TITLE: GESTURES OF DISSENT: SELF-FASHIONING PERFORMANCES FROM
SOUTHERN WOMEN WRITERS DURING THE FIN DE SIÈCLE

A Thesis

Presented in partial fulfillment of requirements

For the degree of Master of Arts

In the Department of English

University of Mississippi

By Elisa J. Bryant

May 2021

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ABSTRACT

This project explores Southern women writers during the latter half of the nineteenth century who asserted and crafted a modernized identity by turning to various modes of transgressive performance and performance spaces. For women of the nineteenth century, this meant extricating themselves from a domestic, sentimental identity and apprehending a more fluid, dynamic type of being. The modes of performance, such as spectatorship, orality, and gesture, allowed these women to express and articulate an alternative feminine identity while also engaging with an embodied epistemology. This thesis specifically looks at the Southern writers, Sherwood Bonner's novel *Like unto Like* and her travel letters, Ida B. Wells's travel letters from her anti-lynching campaign in England, and Alice Dunbar-Nelson's short story "Sister Josepha." As these women are often read under the rubric of regionalism or sentimental fiction, a performance lens allows these Southern writers to transcend the genres that confine them. What these three writers specifically show in their performance representation is that mobility and movement, especially in a transnational route, is important to their type of alternative self-fashioning. Through movement, they were in search of modern counter-cultural spaces that brought them out of the context of the South to provide a new space for an alternate model of being. What this thesis importantly shows is that Nineteenth-century women writers, specifically Southern women writers, are dismissed from any form of modern self-fashioning, and their works serve as a precursor to a female modern identity.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my family who have cheered me on and offered unconditional support ever since I spoke my graduate school dream into existence. To my parents, Larry and Patricia Fuhrken, who taught me how to soar through life. To Sylvia Fuhrken for embracing me through the ups and down of this entire process. Mostly, I dedicate this project to my grandmother who encouraged me to become a writer and passed away during the writing of this thesis. I dedicate this project in memory of her.

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I finally express gratitude to the Southern women writers, Sherwood Bonner, Ida B. Wells, and Alice Dunbar-Nelson, who inspired me to write this thesis and who also inspire me to engage in my own forms of subversive self-fashioning.

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INTRODUCTION

“Whose pious ministrations to our wounded soldiers soothed the last hours of those who died far from the objects of their tenderest love, whose domestic labors contributed much to supply the wants of our defenders in the field, whose zealous faith in our cause shone a guiding star undimmed by the darkest clouds of war, whose fortitude sustained them under all the privations to which they were subjected, whose floral tribute annually expresses their enduring love and reverence for our sacred dead; and whose patriotism will teach their children to emulate the deeds of our revolutionary sires.”

- Jefferson Davis, Monument to Women of the Confederacy erected in 1917

“What is, or should be, a woman? Not merely a bundle of flesh and bones, nor a fashion plate, a frivolous inanity, a soulless doll, a heartless coquette—but a strong, bright presence, thoroughly imbued with a sense of her own mission on earth and a desire to fill it” (14).

- Ida B. Wells, “Women’s Mission,” 1885

Standing in front of Mississippi's state capitol, a memorial to white Southern women, erected in 1917, commemorates these women's sympathetic post-War efforts as they took on the collective grief that overwhelmed the region. The statue stages two women figures who offer

support to the wounded soldier figure; he sits, resting on the knee of one woman where she's seen placing a wreath on the other woman's head to acknowledge her triumph of sacrifice and aid. The other female figure gazes at the man, her body positioned toward him and she holds a palm leaf over his chest, an act of comfort amidst tragedy. The four sides of the monument are inscribed with "mothers, daughters, sisters, and wives" alongside captions that address the women as "guardian angels" and "angels of comfort" whose "tenderness soothed all wounds of body and spirit." The front of the monument, featuring with the Confederate symbol, reveals the words of Jefferson Davis who paid tribute to the "pious," "domestic," "faithful" women of the Lost Cause, his speech succinctly capturing the Confederate ideology that emerged post-Civil War and used memorialization as one means to secure past traditions. In an attempt to manage the anxieties of a shifting national identity, the elite South secured its attachment to the past by honoring its white, upper-class women's post-war efforts. Even though this monument does project white Southern women in an honorable light, the memorial also concretizes her image as the conventional, domestic Southern woman.

What is also important to note is that Black Southern female representations are erased from any form of memorialization. Reconstruction era and beyond created a gendered and racial divide between Black and white Southern women, as white women of a certain class were elevated to a status that offered them protection; Black women were crudely stereotyped as "jezebel" or "mammy," which created the struggle in a post-war society to be regarded as "typical" and respectable. While the post-war nation was wrecked with loss and grief, the moment illustrates the shift in gender ideology as a result of the war. This shift created space for Southern women to begin rejecting their conventional roles and to expand their political and social responsibilities in a changing Southern landscape. Perhaps the absurd story of Jefferson

Davis's capture, while wearing a full feminine garb, further illustrates the queerness of this moment's shift in gendered ideology which stimulated Ida B. Wells's sentiment: "what is, or should be, a woman?" (14). Wells was not the only Southern female writer and activist who posed this question. This thesis is interested in exploring how nineteenth-century Southern women writers, at the cusp of the new century, engaged with writing and activism to think about alternative forms of femininity. Out of this moment emerged Black and white Southern women writers, albeit disparate in their aesthetic productions, who refuted the Lost Cause ideology and white supremacist fantasies as they began to construct and negotiate new identities. Specifically, I am interested in exploring the works and lives of relatively minimally theorized Southern women writers such as Sherwood Bonner and Alice Dunbar-Nelson, as well as engaging with the more prominent Southern female figure, Ida B. Wells. As the patriarchal and anti-Black basis of the literary sphere posed its own limitations for Southern women writers, a trend emerged, in their works and lives, where turning to performance or performance spaces allowed them to articulate this alternative type of identity or sexuality.

The three chapters in this thesis are concerned with mapping out moments of transgressive and subversive performances that articulate the epistemological and ontological concerns of women in the late nineteenth-century. This study of Southern women writers is richly interdisciplinary, engaging with Southern studies, gender studies, and performance theory to explore and frame instances of the body, materiality, spectatorship, and movement. This thesis contributes to performance theory's interest in exploring various modes and gestures that transcend the discursive and turn to the non-discursive. I define performance for these Southern women writers as its own type of subversive self-fashioning that resists traditional gendered and racial paradigms, ultimately destabilizing categories of Southern womanhood in the American

imaginary. As Diana Taylor defines performance as “an epistemology” where “embodied practice, along with and bound up with other cultural practices, offer a way of knowing” (3), for Bonner, Wells, and Dunbar-Nelson, performance offers them an embodied knowledge that provides new models of what it means to be a woman at the turn of the century. Within the chapters, this concept of self-fashioning is key, expressing how Bonner, Wells, and Dunbar-Nelson all engage in self-conscious practices that resist traditional gendered ideologies, create hybrid approaches to representing the female body, and bring about agential transformation. Specifically, this turn to performance places Wells and Dunbar-Nelson into a genealogy of African American identity formation, as it provides a space for gathering and sharing in a collective struggle for selfhood. E. Patrick Johnson in *Appropriating Blackness: Performance & the Politics of Authenticity* states, African American performance, “although useful in deconstructing essentialist notions of selfhood, performance must also provide a space for meaningful resistance of oppressive systems” (Johnson 9). These Black women are up against repressive systems, where turning to dissenting performances produces a countercultural liberatory space for African American identity formation.

As the South as a region is known for its performativity, I also show how Black and white Southern women are positioned ideologically and performance serves to disrupt limiting representations of liberated femininity. These Southern women writers allow me to engage in important archival work, but to use Diana Taylor’s term, this study extends beyond the traditional archive to the “repertoire,” which shows that places of analysis are not limited to written texts, but to “verbal performances- songs, prayers, speeches—as well as nonverbal practices” (24). As Bonner, Wells, and Dunbar-Nelson perform under the strictures of genre and gender, I argue they produce counter-narratives of gender and racial identity through their own

performances that inhabit but are not limited to spectatorship, orality, and dance in spaces such as the Roman Carnival, the French theatre, the transatlantic lecture stage, and the New Orleans carnival. My chapters are connected through Bonner, Wells, and Dunbar-Nelson's relationships to their region, especially as Bonner and Wells are both from Holly Springs, MS. To further situate all three writers together, each text produces a transnational reach, specifically to Europe and the Caribbean. Within these transnational pathways, Bonner, Wells, and Dunbar-Nelson expand their definitions and boundaries of the South and southernness. Leaving the South means that these Southern women can encounter performance spaces that ultimately become a place for them to subvert old gendered and racial ideologies and express a modern identity. Ultimately, this thesis extends the work of performance theory scholars, such as Jayna Brown, who "hoped to leave enough provoked and unanswered that further work gets done on performance, dance, and racialized bodies in resistance to oppressive social regimes" (1). As these Southern women were embedded in the conflict of the South's past, their subversive performances enact a modern identity and a futurity for Southern women.

Opening this observation up beyond a regional debate, this phenomenon of women writers turning to modes of performance calls for an examination of how we think about their literary contributions during the nineteenth century. As this thesis is interested in looking at space in relationship to identity construction, the study of nineteenth-century women's works has been grounded in binary terms, as the separate spheres debate has dominated our understanding of women's works in the US, from scholars such as Barbara Welter, Jane Tompkins, and Susan K. Harris. Many scholars of nineteenth-century women writers have shifted away from these early debates, and I want to come alongside those who attempt to disrupt separate spheres ideology. Monika Elbert strays from separate spheres ideology but notes that it is often argued that women

in the modernist period begin thinking less about their identity in such dual terms because a modern identity equates to a more fluid, non-definable type of femininity. Judith Fetterley and Susan Robbins both note how nineteenth-century women writers are categorized as “regionalist” or “domestic,” which diminishes their aesthetic value in the literary sphere and places boundaries around their influence. However, in thinking about performance and performance spaces in these texts, I argue that women of the late nineteenth-century are precursors to this modernist notion of femininity and begin to navigate space and their identities in ways that transcend the patriarchal and anti-Black literary sphere. Thus, thinking about women writers’ relationship to identity, sexuality, and performance opens up the boundaries we place around these women, the genres we confine them to, and the type of womanhood we expect to encounter in these texts. As we fall into the same discursive tools to frame these women writers’ own experiences, mainly as women’s literary contributions are categorized as sentimental or domestic, looking to modes of performance and performance spaces in these texts offers fluidity and movement to scholarship on nineteenth-century American women writers.

I additionally place these white and Black Southern women writers in connection with one another as I want to show the coexisting temporalities of their experiences within these performance spaces. Tara McPherson’s theory of lenticular logic helpfully frames my analysis as she argues that often, in representations of white and Black Southern femininity, whiteness is conventionally seen separately from Blackness, ultimately repressing past oppression. She goes on to say that within these representations, “histories and images that are co-present get presented ... so that only one of the images can be seen at a time” (7) and that in order to “fashion new paradigms of vision and visibility,” representations of Southern white and Black femininity must refuse the “comforts of partition and separation” (8). Applying lenticular logic to

these texts calls for simultaneity, a temporal framework that allows us to recognize the coinciding and simultaneous representations of Southern white and Black femininity in varying performance and performance spaces. For instance, I could turn to either Sherwood Bonner or Ida B. Wells' representations of subversive, transgressive performance to circulate new ideas about the South; however, this would limit our understanding of Southern femininity. In other words, we cannot ignore the fact that both Bonner and Wells, for example, travel abroad and yield differing experiences of Southern women's search for autonomous self-definition. What eschewing the lenticular allows us to view is how Bonner and Wells both travel to Liverpool, but their descriptions and experience recorded in their respective travel writings illuminate the continuities and discontinuities between white and Black Southern women's lives. Wells's travel letters notably mention the architecture of racism in the structures of Liverpool, regarding the ways the city engaged with the production of cotton and slave ships. On the other hand, Bonner describes her passage to Liverpool as "exhilarating as a spectacle" (61), where her voyage encounters a raging storm and she is invited to the top by the captain to observe the wild winds. Bonner notes in her travel letter how she felt they were in great peril, capitalizing on the dramatics of weather to form a compelling narrative. Bonner's illustrates a very different crossing of the Atlantic than that of Wells who is a Black woman tied to an ancestry of displacement, ultimately showcasing Bonner's privilege as a white Southern woman. Wells's own voyage across the Atlantic recharts a journey of displacement, where her peril is tied to a history of oppression and subjugation, further showing the importance of placing these women in conversation with one another.

Keeping lenticular logic in mind, I structure my analysis by focusing on each individual representation of Southern femininity. Taking a chronological approach to my chapter structure,

I begin with Sherwood Bonner's fiction and travel writing, published in 1876 and 1877. Bonner writes from the perspective of a white, middle-class woman from the South who lives through the Civil War and the Reconstruction period. This chapter seeks to bring Bonner's works more into our literary imagination by extending scholarship on white Southern femininity from scholars like Betina Entzminger, Tara McPherson, and Anna Goodwin Jones, and providing new models of white Southern womanhood that looks at the self-conscious performativity of the Southern belle. Jennifer Rae Greeson and Jay Watson helpfully make this theoretical move to look at the "real" or "material" South, to understand Bonner's relationship to the material and embodied aspect of Southern performativity, which I argue, produces decay. In the second half of the chapter, I take a more biographical, historical approach to frame the protagonist's experience in *Like Unto Like*, as Bonner traveled abroad to Europe where she encountered the up-ending Roman Carnival, and the French theatre, where she participates in a form of female spectatorship. I turn to historians of feminist French theatre like Kimberely van Nort and Lenard Berlanstein to reveal the ways Bonner constructs her own identity in relation to these French female actresses. At the end of the chapter, I return to a pivotal moment in *Like unto Like*, where I use Bonner's experience abroad to help understand Blythe's moment of crisis. As Bonner believes that Southern, white women are capable of articulating new models of identity, the writer's turn to performance and performance spaces ultimately reveals Southern women's fraught relationship with Southern gender performativity, realizing they will always be tied to their Southern roots.

After working through Bonner's moments of Southern female performance spectatorship, we see Bonner disrupting Southern conservatism for white women, but it's important to ask: what has she done for Black women? Bonner's disinterest in engaging with Black female bodies

in her narrative secures McPherson's argument regarding lenticular logic for the reason that representations of the South are continuously disconnected from layered images of gender, race, and space. In the next chapter, I read Ida B. Wells's anti-lynching lecture campaign, told through her travel letters, as a performance. I engage with Black feminist performance theory from Daphne A. Brooks and Jayna Brown who argue for the self-fashioning and agency of Black women in the public space. When Wells's activism becomes more urgent with her anti-lynching work, she must take the public stage to advocate for the proper representation of the Black individual in American society. Wells's performance embodies a quadruple consciousness, as she is interested in constructing Black women as respectable while also conveying the horrors of racial violence. I argue that Wells advocates for the Black individual while simultaneously constructing herself as an icon, a stand-in for the collective African American experience. Her resonance today happens as a result of her participation in a self-fashioning, transformative public performance grounded in African American orality practices and activism.

In the third chapter, Alice Dunbar-Nelson's short stories connect this project to the modernist period as she shows a clear foregrounding of early modernist ideas of queerness and sexuality. Since Alice Dunbar-Nelson's archival recovery in the 1980s by Gloria T. Hull, recent scholars have placed her early works into the genres of Sentimentalism and Regionalism, reducing the stories to representing conventional marriage plots and local portraits of New Orleans Creole culture. However, this chapter argues that Dunbar-Nelson's early collection of short stories, entitled *The Goodness of St. Roque (1899)*, illustrates how the writer engages with representations of liberated Black female sexuality transformed through modernist countercultural spheres, ultimately pushing up against restrictive literary categories. I argue that Dunbar-Nelson is concerned with the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality, and Black

feminist performance scholars Daphne A. Brooks and Amber Jamilla Musser argue that the Black female body can then perform subversive gestures and performances that allow for self-production. Specifically, the short story, “Sister Josepha,” follows a young nun, confined in a convent, grappling with the disruptive force of a burgeoning queer desire, which allows her to seek an alternative space to explore a new type of personhood. “Sister Josepha” sets up the image of the Carnival as a transgressive, wildly feminine, liberating space for Black women in the South, a space the story expresses as “the worldly glitter of femininity” (125). Sister Josepha’s experience in the Carnival additionally mirrors that of Joseph Roach’s circum-Caribbean ideas of performance, self-fashioning, and masking. Not only is Dunbar-Nelson pushing against literary categories that obscure the writer’s engagement with early modernist ideas about African American identity formation in the South, her short stories like “Sister Josepha” also disrupt categories of southern womanhood and queer desire for Black women in a shifting historical moment.

I. “THE EYE OF THE BODY”: MATERIALIZING SOUTHERN FEMALE
PERFORMANCE AND SPECTATORSHIP IN THE FICTION AND TRAVEL
WRITINGS OF SHERWOOD BONNER

Introduction: “shows and pageants!”

“I am, in the flesh, the laziest creature in the world; but I have an intellectual consciousness that laziness is contemptible. So my two selves are constantly at war; I am torn by conflicting desires” (92).

- Blythe Herndon in Sherwood Bonner’s novel *Like unto Like* (1878)

Sherwood Bonner’s 1878 novel *Like unto Like* illustrates the post-Civil War reconciliation politics between the North and the South, and in the midst of this movement, the Southern heroine, Blythe Herndon, attempts to reconcile her struggle with a surface-level identity and her internal desires. Bonner’s moment of self-judgment where she mentions “in the flesh” points to her conflict with the conservative Southern gaze that surveys her body and prescribes her to perform conventional femininity. The laziness Blythe points out may not pertain to a lack of industriousness, but rather an enforced laziness of the mind; Blythe inhabits a persona that must carry out the expectations for Southern womanhood and deny any desires

beyond her fixed identity. Thus, Blythe illuminates how the Southern belle's empty performance adheres to the South's societal norms, and when she denies her subjectivity, she becomes a passive body, activated through unconscious, automated gestures that align with the patterns of the Old South. What is recognized in Blythe's confession is what Nina Baym in "The Myth of Southern Womanhood" articulates: "Southern women, embodiment of these graces, are what the South as a whole has cultivated; they are Southern culture" (184). In other words, as white, elite Southern women, like Blythe, are the formulation of the South's identity, they are denied their own subjectivity.

Even beyond Bonner's one novel *Like unto Like*, the writer showed an interest in the embodied performance of Southern femininity and sought to reconcile for herself the performance's meaning for a Southern woman's subjectivity. The performance the South requires surfaced in an article entitled "A Southern Girl's Experience of Life in New England," written in 1874, where Bonner critiques the North in her attempt to deconstruct the stereotypes surrounding her home region. In one part of the article, she reveals how Northerners "ask me about the South...and...They listen eagerly until I get through, when they sorrowfully sigh, 'Yes, yes. Such is Southern existence! Shows and pageants!'" (McDowell 4). Here, Bonner reveals that the Northern imaginary witnesses and evaluates the South as a spectacle. This viewpoint thus places southern individuals into fixed, empty roles that perpetuate colorful, rich stereotypes of the South, such as women playing the role of the Southern belle, dressing and performing the part of Southern gentility. Crystal Feimster indicates that a Southern woman's performance pervaded her existence as it was "sanctioned by morality and domesticity" where "the ideals of southern womanhood represented a combination of myth and reality that informed every aspect" of southern women's lives (12). Throughout Bonner's own life, she was aware of the prevalence

of Southern feminine ideals and sought to critique the type of woman she was raised to become in order to re-fashion a variant model of Southern womanhood. Bonner found that distancing herself from her Southern roots provided the ability to dispel the myth dictated by the dominant Southern society. Bonner took the chance to travel abroad to Europe which allowed her to specifically challenge the hierarchical institutions that define conventional Southern white womanhood, especially as an empty, conventional performance. In Europe, Bonner's encounter with the Roman Carnival and the French theatre reveals in her work a proclivity towards the stage and a preoccupation with the performative female body. In turn, Bonner asks us to question what happens to a woman's subjectivity when she encounters a performance space.

Bonner turned to writing to explore and unearth an alternative form of female identity through disruptive, unconventional performances of Southern womanhood; however, the literary sphere provided many limitations to a female writer. Betina Entzminger in *The Belle Gone Bad* discusses how Southern women writers utilized writing in order to subvert the structures by which they live, arguing that women writers would illuminate attributes society "deemed inappropriate to the southern belle's gender, race, and class" (Entzminger 9). In other words, Betina argues that "southern women writers complicated the figure of ideal womanhood the patriarchal system created" (Entzminger 9). In a similar fashion, Bonner complicates nineteenth-century notions of the Southern woman, not through subversive gestures, but through illustrating how the Southern female body becomes circumscribed through her social upbringing. While Bonner's historical context provided particularly strict behavioral rules in this regard—with distinctive surrounding cultural pressures—the literary marketplace raised still further challenges as most Southern white women writers wrote in the tradition of the sentimental and domestic. The genre constraints of sentimentality and domesticity, specifically its traditional marriage plot

and emphasis on the private sphere, pushed women writers to turn to modes of performance or performance spaces to creatively express an alternative subjectivity. Women's turn to performance allowed them to transcend the confines of the literary sphere, as it binds women to patriarchal traditions, and surpass troubling discursive modes to engage with the non-discursive. For example, Bonner notes in one of her travel letters a way around language's limitations: "if one could not understand a word of the language, it would be charm to watch the piquant pantomime, the grace of movement, the exquisite acting, in short, that has nothing to do with mere words" (Bonner 152). Even though Bonner was referencing how a foreigner could navigate another country, she also reveals in this moment how performance exceeds language and the body, as it communicates desire beyond the discursive, patriarchal modes. In her travels, Bonner often discussed the limitations of language and how the discursive was often disguised in manners and customs, where she struggled to properly express the self. Bonner's interest in the performance of the conventional, white Southern woman, specifically as the belle, shows the necessity in deconstructing nineteenth-century Southern patriarchal ideologies that confine a Southern woman's existence.

This paper is interested in how Sherwood Bonner, through bridging her novel *Like unto Like* and her travel letters from her trip abroad in Europe, thinks about the relationship between the body and the performativity of Southern womanhood to illustrate her struggle with the model of nineteenth-century Southern femininity. Bonner's works have been undertheorized and underread, but in evaluating her relationship to performance and performance spaces, her works extend beyond the archived and written record of American women writers in the nineteenth century. In exploring white Southern womanhood, I turn to scholars such as Betina Entzminger, Anna Goodwin Jones, and Tara McPherson whose works have provided standard formulations of

Southern femininity in literature and media. By thinking about the relationship between Bonner and female performance, I aim to apprehend Southern female performativity with a new vocabulary. Using these critics of the South and its women as a starting point, I want to extend their scholarship to discuss the role of a self-conscious performativity in a way that turns white Southern womanhood—an idea that seems tired and done—into something relevant and freshly complicated. I particularly want to situate Bonner as part of a trend of US women writers post-Reconstruction who pushed for a modern identity through their grappling with performance, identity, and sexuality. As a white Southern woman, Bonner is often dismissed from analyses of a burgeoning modern femininity; however, her travel letters and novel critique Southernness as she understands it, and by pushing against the Old South’s ideas about femininity, she participates in gendered and sexual historical and cultural shifts of the late nineteenth-century. Specifically, in her travel writings, I argue that Bonner offers one alternative model for the modern Southern woman. Her novel exposes the ruinous embodied performance of the Southern woman to deconstruct this cultural model as an ideal, and her travel writing turns to other modes of performance in which she can explore an autonomous and independent form of female embodiment.

The Body of the Belle: “no mood to play the hypocrite”

Before thinking about Europe’s performance spaces and their significance in Bonner’s discovery of an alternative femininity, establishing the writer’s relationship with her Southern identity reveals the dominant paradigms that scripted the course of her life. At her place of birth in Holly Springs, Mississippi, the writer is historically and textually marked right in front of her childhood home, as the historical plaque signals the building as a place of “the distinguished 19th

century woman writer who pioneered in dialect stories. Served as secretary and inspiration to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.” The placement of Bonner’s historical marker ties her to a seemingly domestic Southern space, as well as implies she sought a life beyond the borders of her Southern space, despite being construed as an assistant to a famous white male writer. The textual marker serves as a constant reminder of how Bonner’s body has been inscribed with a conventional Southern identity and one she grappled with most her life. For instance, in her private writings, Bonner often showcased the ambivalent trajectory of a young woman in the South who illustrates a desire to find a purpose beyond her current moment’s expectations. Like most Southern white women of her status, Bonner would marry into prominence, produce children, and live as a mother and wife. Eschewing this established trajectory, in an attempt to determine a meaningful vocation and before turning to writing, at a young age, she expressed the desire to be an actress (McAlexander 36); Bonner perhaps saw an opportunity to escape the performative rituals of inhabiting a Southern woman’s body through other modes of liberating performances. Bonner did go on to become a writer where her works seek to go beyond the tropes of white Southern womanhood—the woman whose body becomes the justification for racial violence, the woman whose intellectual proclivities are undermined by her prescribed future—and instead resist a set place as a Southern woman and embrace desires to exceed the South’s ideological limitations.

Now a part of the American literary scene, throughout her writing career, Bonner continuously explored the question: when elite Southern white women are central to the myths of the conservative South, what happens to their embodied selves? Bonner’s interest in reconciling the ideal Southern woman and her surface performance challenges how current scholarship theoretically constructs the South’s identity as part of an American imaginary. For

instance, Jennifer Rae Greeson in *Our South* interrogates this mode of thinking by pointing out that “‘the South’ is, first and foremost, an ideological concept rather than a place,” fixed in the imagination in ways that importantly tell us about American self-definition (10). What Greeson calls for is a mediation between the national ideal and the national reality, where she argues that the “real” South and the imagined South arose from national literature. After the war, the South was associated by the rest of the nation with reform and intervention. The defeated region desired to maintain a sense of conservative, Confederate nationalism, hanging onto their traditions and an identity slipping away as a result of national conflict (Greeson 12). Writers during the Reconstruction period produced narratives about the South “from a variety of ideological perspectives, ranging from white supremacy and black nationalism, from progressivism to romantic” (Greeson 274). For instance, the Reconciliation romance, a genre that has been proposed as a way to frame *Like unto Like*, contributes to the imagined construction of the South. Greeson writes that the romance plot, in order to restore national unity, was employed to interrogate “issues of political domination and subjection ... which was based upon presumably natural subordination of women to men” (278). I align my analysis of *Like unto Like* with Kathryn McKee’s analysis in *Reading Reconstruction* of how Bonner departs from this genre because “the narrative does not hum toward a preordained conclusion” (180). Departing from the imagined South constructed through the Reconciliation Romance genre, Bonner is preoccupied with the reality of Southern femininity in this novel where the figure of Blythe embodies a direct refutation of Southern idealism.

Bonner’s resistance to Southern idealism is best understood through the relationship between the imaginary, monolithic South and its elite white Southern womanhood. Betina Entzminger in *The Belle Gone Bad* illustrates how closely tied “the ideal of pure white womanhood” was “to

the ideal of white supremacy" (Entzminger 12). In other words, the elite white Southern woman, or the traditional Southern belle figure, is a central image around which the South constructed its identity. The Southern belle figure must embody purity and innocence, which becomes a way for conservative white men to preserve their nostalgic ideas about the South's past. Entzminger writes that white supremacy's "ideas of racial, moral, religious, and social perfection, because so closely tied to the ideal of the southern lady, were dependent on the society's ideas about sexuality" (Entzminger 9). As a non-sexual figure, the belle was denied any expression of desires except to entice the inclinations of men through coy flirtation or coquettish performance, while still maintaining an image of purity. Essentially, the belle became the center of men's attention where her body was continually surveyed for the pleasure of the male gaze. Because she was continually surveyed, feminine propriety was a necessity and elevated her family's social standing. Anna Goodwin Jones defines Southern womanhood quite explicitly, writing that all Southern women had to deny their authentic selfhood, "suffer and be still ... sexually pure, pious, deferent to external authority, and content" with their domestic status" as "the identity of the South is contingent in part upon the persistence of its tradition of the lady" (4). Southern women were given no space to debase themselves, contrived into a constant, rigorous performance of excellent womanhood in order to preserve the traditions and customs of the South.

With an understanding of the relationship of Southern idealism and its Southern women, turning to the connection between the Southern womanhood and its landscape reveals that even though the American imaginary of the South is perpetuated through the idealized notions of femininity, the meaning of the South for women strays from the imaginary to the material. As Southern women are central to the South's narrations, the body thus becomes the text which the

South's ideologies are inscribed onto. Much like the Southern landscape she came from, a white Southern woman's sexuality became protected by white men as she was viewed as property. Bodies and land in the South have been colonized and made the possession of white men as a result of Confederate idealism. White Southern men imposed their own racialized fantasies onto the white Southern women's, enforcing racial and gendered standards and protecting her from the only lurking danger, the form of the black male body. Greeson argues that the U.S. as an empire plays out in the Reconstructed South through the Northern occupation of its landscape. Within this occupation, Greeson describes how Southern women's bodies are tied to the landscape, writing that in the Reconstructed South, "alleged violence against white women justified all repressive actions taken by white men against people of color" (270). As a result of white men's possessiveness over their wives, "white women become the primary terrain upon which their claims to dominion are staked," just like their claims to their land (Greeson 279). Additionally, Tara McPherson in *Reconstructing Dixie* makes this connection between Southern womanhood and space through her relationship to the plantation home, a place "that continues to be central to representations of the South as the lady herself" (39). It is often white Southern women, as scholars point out, that aid in perpetuating the mythology of the South; she becomes a stand-in for what we know as "southernness" through the same way her body and the land are protected, surveyed, and memorialized.

Bonner in *Like unto Like* explores this metaphor of Southern women securely attached to place to show the difficulty of extricating her identity from southernness and its limiting ideologies. In the beginning of the novel, Blythe's father admonishes his daughter from expressing a progressive, feminine viewpoint as she quotes Margaret Fuller. He replies that "a true woman can no more be independent than the vine that clings to this rock" (7). As the

representation of Southern paternalism, he denies her any freedom from her Southern origins. As Blythe's desire for independence broadens, she travels outside of her place of origin where Bonner provides an image of the protagonist "leaned against a vine-wreathed pillar" (204). This image gestures towards a white Southern woman's relationship to the glorified plantation space, as if her body becomes a part of the landscape. Blythe's attempt to extricate herself from the space is impeded by the men in her life who continue to preserve her place as a Southern woman. Roger Ellis, her romantic partner, is introduced as her intellectual counterpart, who provides the space to expand her political consciousness, but as the novel goes on, his influence holds her "as tenaciously as the earth holds the roots of a flower" (212). Bonner's idea of women's being tied to place is metaphorically but also materially explored through the idea of "roots" and the image of rural land. She represents the conventional Southern belle as a delicate flower to show how she is constructed as intricately and materially fragile but strongly tied to her sense of place to maintain Southern patriarchal ideals.

White Southern women's connection to the landscape opens up a way to understand Bonner's exploration of the material presence of the Southern woman-- a very specific type of woman-- to resist Southern femininity's idealism. Because the South is often defined through the ideological and imaginary constructions of its Southern women, Jay Watson in *Reading the Body* calls for the South to be "rematerialized" (22). This move from the imaginary to the corporeal shows the Southern body as the central site where Southern ideologies materialize (22). Bonner responds to this ideological positioning of Southern women by focusing on how Blythe's embodiment exposes the material and corporeal performances of Southern women. Significantly, when Blythe brings attention to her "flesh," she begins the process of de-memorializing the ideal Southern woman. If she becomes just mere flesh, she is then a living, breathing figure and not a

stone or a marble figure carved to construct the ideal woman. In other words, she cannot be put on a pedestal to be preserved and she cannot be the version of Southern womanhood that is “dainty and fashionable” (Bonner 48). Bonner in her works is interested in reconciling language and the body to communicate a dissatisfaction with the society’s coding of Southern femininity. Blythe, later in the novel, thinks to herself after sparring in a political conversation: “I don’t suppose a woman counts for much in any man’s real life. She is sort of a side-issue—like Eve” (201). Blythe expresses her discouragement, in a humorous way, that from the very beginning of time, women are mere flesh, bodies to be surveyed and protected in society. Her play on words, “side-issue,” shows that on the surface level, women are insignificant to any real intellectual advancement, and on another level, women, like Eve, are a product of man’s material creation without an individual subjectivity. This revelation shows Blythe recognizing the material effects on the Southern female body such that her only significance within Southern culture comes from her embodiment. By surfacing these issues in Bonner’s work, the writer’s turn to the corporeal reveals how thinking about the material components of a woman’s existence can deconstruct Southern feminine myths.

As the Southern female body becomes rematerialized, Bonner explores how the female white Southern body communicates white Southern patriarchal logic through its repetitive performances of inherent, ingrained Southern ideology, suppressing what the individual actually believes. Watson connects the materialized Southern body to Althusser’s essay about ideological apparatuses, arguing that “ideology’s stake in the body is that its success can only be measured in terms of the body’s ability to perform effective, appropriate social functions in its real conditions, allowing the material structure of society to remain stable and its material works go on” (23). The stability of society thus hinges on white Southern women’s performance of

gentility, purity, and hospitality. McPherson agrees that Southern femininity is a “performance, a masquerade, an agreed-on social fiction, albeit a powerful one with material effects” (150). Within this theatricality, for the belle, when she performs these socially agreed gestures, “Southernness unfolds: she is integral to its successful performance, and her performance creates the reality” (McPherson 151). The material effects of the white Southern belle’s performance suggest that the repetitive gestures and motions of the body articulate the ideological notions of the South. Specifically, her demure attitude is a mask to her fleshly desires and her intellectuality, and in fashioning her body, she fashions her subjectivity. Whether her desires conflict with her performance, in performing these rote gestures, she is perpetuating the myths of the South.

Much of a Southern woman’s embodied performance, in creation of the idealized Southern woman, were contingent on her fashion choices and proprietary gestures. In an attempt to showcase this careful construction, McPherson illustrates how Maryln Schwartz’s etiquette book, *A Southern Belle Primer*, “sketches the bodily comportment of the belle, outlining a way of being in one’s body that works to facilitate southern grace and hospitality. Properly packaged, mannerisms perfected” (150). The rigorous expectations of Southern society on the belle become all encompassing: her gestures, clothing, and manners must align with the larger narrative. Emily A. Schwalbe particularly reads a belle’s clothing as a part of this process of defining Southernness. She writes that “a hoopskirt and its accompanying fabric physically carved out a separate, “private,” space (Faust 1996, p. 223). McPherson calls the belle’s skirts a historical archive of what is “revealed and concealed” (3), and through her body, we can read the ideological underpinnings of the South’s identity. Underneath the hoop skirts the body is concealed and suppressed of any desire, much like Blythe’s reference to the flesh. Mapped over

her internal desires is the South's dominant narrative, layering the belle's body with its clothing and customs.

As a Southern woman was meant to perfect her role through the material components of her performance, Bonner, in her own life, reveals that she too believed the white Southern woman, at her core, housed elements of theatricality and production. The writer often compared herself to other white Southern girls in her community who seemingly accepted their responsibility to find suitors and marry, securing their prescribed futures. In her reference to courtship, society, and essentially inhabiting the role of "belle," she shows an awareness of the performativity of Southern womanhood and discloses in her diary that "to me this is all an empty show" (Frank). As Bonner wrote about the shallowness of her social circles, she illustrates that the prescribed performance requires a woman of her class and race to live out an empty, meaningless existence. She would often write that she was in "no mood to play the hypocrite," knowing her "recklessness" and forward personality were not a fit for southern expectations. This realization of a woman's staging in society allowed her to challenge her Southern roots. Bonner had the privilege to directly confront these expectations, eschewing Southern performativity and the model of exceptional white Southern womanhood.

Instead of thinking about how the white Southern belle's performativity promotes kinship, reconciliation, and marriage, Bonner wants to think about how these expectations might generate decay for the Southern female body. Her body stands in for the collective identity which ultimately denies her own subjectivity. In the novel, when Blythe's self-interests are neglected, she becomes a hollow version of herself. In other words, Bonner shows Blythe's physical deterioration to reveal the sinister side of embodying the Southern belle. Bonner's works perhaps engage with the large body of Southern grotesque scholarship in relation to the Southern female

body; however, Watson argues that the coming of age for a young Southern woman results in “difficult embodiment,” which demystifies and materializes “the reigning cultural fictions of gender...by doing so to lay bare their somatic consequences” (218). Watson’s term aptly frames Blythe’s and the other female characters’ embodied experience as the term specifically points to how the marriage plot takes a physical toll on white women. For instance, in *Like unto Like*, Blythe’s sister enters what appears to be a blissful marriage that turns troubling and violent when her jealous husband confines his wife to the domestic space by building a large wall around their home. Driven to insane jealousy, he ends up murdering them both, showing a “note of violence that runs counter to the surface narrative of Yariba’s contented citizenry” (McKee 207). Blythe is not subjected to this type of gendered violence, but as the novel goes on, her physical health diminishes as she “grew hollow-eyed and thin” (Bonner 211). Blythe experiences a decline in her embodied self as a result of the surface performance of a demure woman. In other words, Bonner suggests that her Southern heroine is depleted by society’s persistent demand for women to follow the code of Southernness. Watson writes that “the body comes to ‘speak’ precisely what conventional decorporealization scripts of female identity, duty, and destiny seek to conceal about female experience in the South” (218), which then results in this difficult embodiment. As the South wants a lasting image of the Southern belle, one that upholds the mythologies, Bonner suggests that the result for the Southern woman’s embodied existence is decay.

Bonner as Spectator of the Roman Carnival and French Theatre

Prior to this exploration of white Southern female embodiment and performance in the context of the South, Bonner spent time abroad in Europe where she discovered an alternate model of womanhood that set her up to critique the South’s construction of conventional

womanhood. Bonner sets sail across the Baltic on January 22, 1876, leaving Boston's literary scene to encounter the attractions of Europe in hopes to further develop her independence and self-sufficiency. Commissioned by the *Boston Times* and *Memphis Avalanche* to document her travels, she wrote in the tradition of the gossip column, which inherently confined her prose to a very feminine genre; however, this genre allows her to write about "people and places ... political, social, literary" and what I am interested in discussing: "the theatrical" (Bonner 67). My examination of Bonner's travel writings follows from McKee's transnational analysis as she argues that the writer's time in Europe allowed her to physically pull away from her Southern roots. This physical pull allowed Bonner to explore an alternative identity as she was able to encounter new spaces such as the Roman Carnival and French theatre, providing her with an experience that counters the South's script for its white, upper-class women. Mary Weaks-Baxter in *Leaving the South* connects Southern identity and border crossing, specifically turning to the role of women in this transportive relationship. Weaks-Baxter discusses the difficulty for white Southern women in choosing to leave their place of origin, mainly as women in the South "have stood as 'the inviolate centre' and as 'symbolic border guards,' upholding and reaffirming the demarcation between which they represent and the 'other'" (106). As white women of the South represented the embodiment of the color line, she became the justification for racial violence by those who dare to cross the border prescribed by white supremacy. Thus, "border crossing" for Southern women became difficult as their role and fixed place in society has been secured. When the white Southern woman steps down from her pedestal to mobilize herself beyond the borders of her locale, crossing a border can "signal the opportunity for a woman to remake herself" (Weaks-Baxter 105), as well as negotiate an alternative identity that becomes detached from conventional Southernness.

When Bonner arrives in England, in her first column, her relationship to writing shifts as she notes language's insufficiency to capture her experience abroad. She shows a clear attunement to her embodied self that allows her to foreground a consciousness about her writing and its genre constraints, asking herself how to properly express her experience in what she calls "a woman's letters" (62). Within these genre constraints, she writes that the sites around her can only be "seen with the eye of the body as well as the soul" (67). Here, Bonner suggests an awareness of how she will gain alternative epistemologies of self through her embodied experience. She is aware of the emotional resonance carried within the body when exploring new, stimulating sites, as art carries within it a transformative experience where there is no boundary between what is expressed and what is experienced. She clearly expresses this viewpoint by ending that "the poorest engraving can give one a better idea of what they are than the most flexible pen" (67). Bonner carries this thread throughout her travels where she compares seeing the various city's sites "like lovers kissing when they're nothing to say—easy natural, agreeable and wildly or mildly exciting, according to the number of times the performance has been repeated" (140). Bonner suggests that seeing new sites can incite "wildly exciting" or "natural" performances of desire, hinting at the possibility of a transformative experience. By the end of her travels, when Bonner arrives in France, she writes how the "the language of gesture is as universal as that of the eye" (148), connecting performance with spectatorship, which becomes the avenue for her to explore alternative epistemologies of womanhood.

In the new context of Europe, Bonner's identity as the Southern belle would alter through various modes of performance, resisting conventional femininity as travel for women in the nineteenth century produced new forms of agency and autonomy. Bonner situated herself into the tradition of writing where white privileged American writers fled to Europe in pursuit of their

own intellectual awakenings, calling it “every American’s dream of bliss” (Bonner 59). Broadly, travel writing for American writers provided a way to articulate an American identity construction. Europe specifically appealed to American writers because it “served as a stage for independent self-definition, for establishing personal relations with culture and society that did not necessarily fit the conventional patterns prescribed by hometown and family standards” (Stowe 5). In the larger context, Bonner’s travels to Europe follow the trend of nineteenth-century writers who went abroad to secure knowledge and credibility that ultimately uplifted their status as writers, as she notes at the beginning of a letter: “so many ‘letters from Europe have been written! I shall blame no one who groans at the thought of another series!’” (66). At this point in Bonner’s career, with the desire to become a serious writer, traversing in the footsteps of precursors such as Henry James and Margaret Fuller would place her among the literary elite. While traveling would give her access to the literary sphere, McKee notes that Bonner “was genuinely expanding her exposure to the world *and* staging a performance that pulled her closer to what she understood as the nation’s intellectual center” (McKee 124). Bonner’s travels may have been motivated in part by joining herself to the larger, successful network of American writers, but she also took part in self-definition performances that procured a new understanding of female identity.

As Bonner crosses the border, leaving the South behind, she must begin to articulate a new model of womanhood; she begins this new articulation by creating a connection between the South with images of European life, specifically focusing on its women. At first she becomes critical of the women she observes, writing in the conventions of the gossip letter that women “do not emulate the lily of the field” and “there is not a line of grace” (68). Bonner indicates that she is writing about what she is familiar with as she conjures a Southern belle image. As time

passes, Bonner strays from her connection to the South, and in reference to Bonner's observations, McKee writes that she "was taking note of other ways to be a woman as an artist, an independent, self-supporting individual free to engage her emotions and her literary talents" (117). Bonner showed interest in creating a network of women to place herself in connection with. Back home in Holly Springs, MS, Bonner positioned herself among the network of strong, albeit conservative, Southern feminists that she admired such as Virginia Cox and Sarah B. Selmes. In Europe, she continued this trend, noting specifically the female performers she encountered, "those exhibiting the kind of independence she admired through her correspondence" (McKee 139). Most American women writers wanted to develop an intellectual and artistic sensibility, but Bonner's engagement with performance and the body in Europe allows for a look at nineteenth-century feminine sexual, subjective development.

Bonner's alternative self-formation transpires when she encounters the Roman Carnival, a space where the writer becomes a spectator of disruptive Carnavalesque feminine performances. After experiencing the theatre scene and the royal pageant of London, Bonner took a French steamer "over the blue waters of the Mediterranean" (75) and arrived in Italy. Bonner's time in the city during Carnival season perhaps signals a rebirth for the writer as she celebrated her twenty-seventh birthday, where in this space, "every woman is a possible Madonna" (140), she writes. Bonner identifies in this quote two important ideas to frame her time in Rome: women are capable of articulating imagined selves, especially since traditional Southern ideology tends to look backward, holding onto the past, and women are able to inhabit a new role, beyond their prescribed identities. Indeed, American women writers used Italian imagery in their texts to enable "feminist projects by portraying escape from both domestic boundaries and the stereotype of nineteenth-century femininity" (Elsden x). McKee calls Bonner's time abroad a geography of

desire, and we can also think of her travels as a performance of desire, specifically as she encountered and was a spectator of female bodies on display. For Bonner, Rome became the stage for the carnivalesque—an event that inherently upends social structures and creates an atmosphere where revelers “express their sexuality and place great emphasis on the body and its alternative functions” (Henry and Plaza 4). Carnavalesque theory shows that “all rules, restrictions and inhibitions that society normally applies to human behavior, are suspended” (Henry and Plaza 6). Rome was viewed as a “city/theatre” since “its life was most choral and frequently turned its population into ... audience of its own events” (Giorcelli 129). Bonner as an audience of the carnivalesque is able to focus on female performers whose bodies are undisciplined as they participate in the Carnival’s inherent revelry.

While attending the Roman Carnival, it is clear that Bonner identifies with a public feminine performance as she shows a fascination in her writing with the ways Carnavalesque women are performing in the streets. Bonner initially paints the image of the Carnival, highlighting its subversive performances, where the women dance “with a light heart, a fleet foot and a roguish eye” (84). She positions herself in a network with the female performers, writing how “Lena, Carlotta, and Marietta snap their fingers ... [and] dance along the streets like young Bacchantes. Bells jingle around their ankles; white powder shakes out from their long dark hair; and above all other sounds are heard their high, shrill, Carnival voices” (84). Noting a woman’s place in the Carnival, Francis Henry and Dwaine Plaza’s recent collection of essays entitled *Carnival is Women* argues that the Carnival “prioritizes a fleshly body, [as] women masqueraders use their bodies as a vehicle to have agency over patriarchal structures in society” (Henry and Plaza 10). As women use their bodies in modes of performance, they ultimately express a modern identity. The women’s bodies on display in the Roman Carnival thus

demonstrate to Bonner that women are capable of expressing a liberating identity under the public eye and pushing against the dominant structure that controls their bodies. The Roman Carnival produces potentiality which provides Bonner with the model for expressing and fashioning a possible liberating Southern feminine identity. As a spectator of the carnivalesque, we could even go as far as identifying Bonner as the “feminine flaner,” a modernist figure Jessica Kim highlights through her in-depth analysis of Virginia Woolf’s literature; this figure, Kim argues, wanders the urban streets to make observations, but what makes her feminine is her consciousness towards the social body, specifically the abject body and the various ways it performs (102). Kim writes that when a flaner encounters bodies in a patriarchal context, she observes her “mirrored double” (105) and gains greater awareness of the limitations placed on her by society.

Bonner continued her role as female spectator beyond Rome and traveled to France, where she roughly spent four months, visiting right on the cusp of the Belle Epoque—a historical term for a moment defined by its equality and progress for women in French public society as they gained more political and social agency. Kimberly van Nort highlights how the Belle Epoque placed women even more on display as they became a part of public space. However, while French women were in society’s gaze, women took on roles that were able to show liberated representations of femininity. van Nort points out that the liberated “women and their bodies” “provided the fuel” for what is called the “Belle Epoque mythology of women,” namely the image of the ideal woman who freely consented to [the] speculation” of society’s gaze (139). Out of a woman’s newfound position in the public sphere, performance and the impact of the French theatre took on a progressive meaning as “contemporary images and ideas about Paris were articulated in a language of spectacle, a language that was inseparable from

ideas about performance and display” (Hindson 14). Women in theatre were a part of the Belle Epoque’s mythology of women and “theater women were almost spontaneously New Women of the day by virtue of their lifestyles and their performances” (Berlanstein 206). In other words, the theatre was an acceptable public space where women could enter and represent themselves.

Lenard Berlanstein writes that “French culture gave actresses greater prominence than elsewhere at the same time that it withheld respectability more resolutely” (Berlanstein 1), providing “a sensitive index of possibilities for women’s publicness and personal autonomy” (Berlanstein 5). Actresses became an acceptable form of public womanhood and central to French society, rather than viewed as sinful and on the margins, such that art and literature about women as actresses showed society accepting a different model of womanhood.

Bonner’s writings show that the performance space is where women can encounter other women and map on new identities, rather than it being a space that perpetuates the heteronormative, hegemonic ideas about gender and sexuality. Historically, women’s exchange with actresses was more decorous, focused on the domestic, feminine (225). Male critics writing about actresses perpetuated a focus on the feminine by centering their reviews on the actress’s appearance. The 1870s additionally promoted a trend in reporting about the actress’s private life as theatre writing focused on the women’s lives at home. Magazine spreads portrayed actresses as domestic, in positions of motherhood and as wives to further alleviate any public anxiety about women entering the public sphere. Editors attempted to censor actresses lives by constructing an image that was orderly and an image of upstanding femininity as they were aware of the wide female readership (Berlanstein 230). In the late nineteenth-century, the media implied that “actresses were a third gender” as it was difficult to imagine beauty and intellect merging, so they perpetuated this idea of “otherness” as an actress was not “womanly”

(Berlanstein 115). However, this alternative image of femininity inspires Bonner's writing to focus explicitly on these actresses, focusing less on the fashion and shallowness of the theatre and more on the actress's craft, expressing that the "acting is simply a revelation" (152). Bonner's interest in the actresses' creative abilities strays from the conventions of theatre writing, while simultaneously participating in the tradition in order to be widely read and published.

Specifically, Bonner's article "Gossip About the Leading Theatre in the World" recounts her experience attending French theatre and in doing so, she positions herself as a female spectator of French, progressive women. The theatre was a place where men could map their desires onto the female actresses as they were eroticized, but the female gaze becomes a way for women to "take elements of them home with them, and emulate the appearance or the performance style of their favourite star in the domestic space" (Hindson 41). Hindson hints at performance's boundaryless qualities which are essential to Bonner's transformation. In writing about the performance, it extends beyond the stage, onto the page, and thus becomes an articulation of Bonner's own subjectivity. For instance, her article about the French theatre focuses on the actresses' brilliant performative creativity, noting that their craft is a product of "genius, training, or something in the atmosphere of the place, that makes it so incomparably superior" (152). Bonner's description of the actresses' creativity illustrates performance's ability to destabilize secure notions about gender as she experiences her own moment of astonishment and reflection regarding the geniuses of these women. The female performers can then become models for Bonner to map out her own identity. Sara Bernhardt, a famous French actress to whom Bonner highlights in her writing, was very politically active or at least made her politics known during the "Dreyfus affair." The public associated her with the cause Dreyfusard where

“spectators came to take lines in her plays as political references and applauded or hissed depending on their own politics” (Berlanstein 204). Bernhardt’s stance on a political event that divided the French nation, akin to what Bonner experienced in her own home context, shows a public form of progressivism that provided a new model of a modern woman.

After seeing Sara Bernhardt perform Mrs. Clarkson in “L’Etranger,” Bonner writes about the actress to reify the image of womanhood that aligns with her own desires. Bonner focuses on Bernhardt’s artistic achievements and process to convey that “[Bernhardt] seems to have a singularly complete nature” (153). This is an important moment for Bonner as she recognizes in Bernhardt what she wants to become: a woman who does not need to reconcile her two selves, much like Blythe. For Bonner, Bernhardt is a woman that has “realised that power, for a woman, lay in the management of her own image as an object of curiosity and desire” (van Nort 144). Bernhardt consciously decided on her own terms of how to be a spectacle of femininity without the prescriptive gaze. While performing, “she was hyper-conscious of the fact that the female body ... was a truly specular object, whose image reflected the needs and desires of the spectator and was reified or fetishised according to the structure of those desires” (van Nort 144). Thus, in fashioning the actress’s persona, I can argue that Bonner begins to fashion herself. The liberated image Bonner creates of a woman who possesses “every joy; every experience, every passion” (153) pushes against the idea of a conventional woman who is limited in her desires. Bonner additionally resists domestication as a form of identity construction when discussing Sara Bernhardt’s time at home. Bonner focuses on Bernhardt’s daily practices, claiming that her passion and dedication to her craft move beyond the stage into her domestic space. Bernhardt, in Bonner’s eyes, is an artist and an intellect and goes even as far to call her a sculptor, a woman capable of fashioning her own femininity (153). Bonner’s interest in Bernhardt’s artistic

ambitions rather than the conventional notions of womanhood reveals how she unravels Southern ideology within her own sphere of influence.

Bonner and The Quadroon Ball: “a new being”

Bonner’s centering female spectatorship of transgressive female performances and spaces in her travel writing is helpful in framing and articulating Blythe’s own experience with performance spaces in *Like unto Like*, which results in a crisis of Southern female identity. This moment of uncertainty of self happens as a result of Roger Ellis bringing Blythe to New Orleans to accompany him while he works, taking her out of her normal home context. McKee writes about Blythe’s time in New Orleans as a way to show the dissolution of her and Ellis’ romance to further deconstruct the Reconciliation Romance genre, further showing that any reconciling of the South’s past is in need of a more complex resolution. I also propose that much like Bonner’s time abroad, Blythe’s time in New Orleans suggests a dissolution of anything familiar to generate transformation. Blythe’s movement away from the small town that represents conventional Southern ideologies brings her to a transformative space where she “felt sometimes as if she were acting in some wild, fantastic tragedy” (Bonner 185). The performance spaces that Blythe attends to—the Quadroon ball and the Carnival—are counterpoints to Bonner’s own experience with performance spaces, as they provide a space to shift ideologies and bring about new epistemologies of female subjectivity. When Blythe steps outside of her own restrictive context, she is able to observe other performances to develop a keener sense of how performance works in the South.

While Bonner’s observations of the Roman Carnival and the French theatre allowed her to mobilize aesthetically through her writing, Blythe’s perception results in difficult embodiment.

For example, at the beginning of the trip, the narration notes Blythe's paleness and quietness as there was a subtle change in her disposition, Bonner writing that "it is so gradual" (185). Bonner, through Blythe's trip to New Orleans, reflects on the complexities of performance in Southern spaces for white and Black women. Blythe encounters the Quadroon ball as a related performance to the gestures and performance that uphold the white supremacist patriarchy, even as the racial hierarchy between white and Black women was also established. Bonner's limiting portrait of Southern femininity evades addressing the other side of Southern womanhood—the women and their bodies who are subjugated as a result of racial oppression. She is also only concerned for a certain type of body as *Like unto Like's* treatment of Black bodies is essentially non-existent. Even for the one central young Black male character, Bonner constructs him as a representation of African American "equality in social spaces" (McKee 210), completely erasing the figure of the history of his embodiment or providing any subjectivity through his ideological name "Civil Right Bill." Bonner's additional treatment of Black bodies occurs when Blythe encounters the performance space of the Quadroon ball—a performative ritual among white men and mulatto women that historically overly sexualizes the Black body and dismisses her agency. The Quadroon balls functioned less as a means to secure kinship through the result of miscegenation, but as a performance space for tourists of New Orleans to attend and observe the women performing. Bonner, in describing the Quadroon ball, pays close attention to the performance's female attendants, writing: "some very beautiful quadroon girls, who would have been called white anywhere so long as they did not show their thumb-nails, attracted great attention by their graceful movements" (186). Blythe's interest in whether the women can "pass" as white shows an ambivalent attitude towards Black female bodies. Bonner further shows a dismissiveness of Black female bodies when Blythe's friend, Betty, claims that they were

spectators of the ball out of curiosity and, in an overtly racist way, compared the event to a “monkey-show” (186). Bonner’s construction of Southern women in the novel exposes the imagined construction of Southern femininity by noting her material, embodied existence. Within this realization, Bonner must acknowledge Black Southern female bodies and shows the racial and class divide of the South.

Bonner is interested in exploring what happens to a Southern woman’s identity when she inhabits a performance space, and for the white elite Southern woman, her body on display as the Southern belle would elevate her status. Bonner positions Blythe in a manner similar to how the author herself was positioned as a spectator in her travel writing: Bonner saw the women performers as “othered,” and even though she did feel safe to articulate performance’s empowerment through her writing, she did not feel that for white Southern women this empowerment was a possibility. Emily Clark, a historian of Quadroon balls during the late nineteenth-century, notes in her preface that Quadroon balls were seen as a part of the “old regime” that “perpetuated” manners and customs (2). During these balls, the women who participated as quadroons were thought to be beautiful and meant for sexual favors for white men (2). This type of performance secures white supremacy as Clark points out that “the subjection of eroticized women of color by white men is one of the key mechanisms and metaphors of colonialism” (9). The Quadroon balls were a place of sexualized spectacle and spectatorship as it gave white men access to beautiful, alluring women of color, and the courting ritual allowed Black women to establish kinship with white men to gain social mobility as a free woman of color (154). In a firsthand account, Baron de Wimpffen describes the dance scenes as very sexual: “such precision of movement, such volubility of reins [hips], that the quickest eye can with difficulty seize a few shades of the rapid and fugitive deployment of their lascivious

graces” (67). It is a dance that brings together bodies in an amorous fashion, a uniting of flesh as it was described as a revelry and became a year-round exhibition, ultimately becoming a space that constructs a limited form of Black female sexuality.

Within this particular performance space, the Southern belle’s gentility and purity is highlighted when set against the backdrop of the perceived scandalous Quadroon ball. As the Southern identity constructed itself against Southern belles to connect to a lost past, it also “defined itself and its values against an ‘other,’ -- usually a feminine, colored other” (9). As it was a penal offense to let Black and white women in together at a Quadroon ball, what happens in this scene is what Watson describes as “segregated bodies,” which “reveals the woman’s treasured whiteness as the material aftermath of lynching, and the damage of the Black body as white woman’s material precondition” (4). Bonner explores the freedom Blythe can experience from trying on different roles when entering a space that allows for the expression of sexuality and embodiment, but only at the exploitation of Black female bodies. In other words, as she calls us to encounter the belle’s flesh on display in order to find an alternative feminine identity, the meaning is different for a white woman than a Black southern woman. The privileged, white Southern belle conveyed a sense of gentility within her performance, whereas Black bodies on display meant that women of color were sexualized as “the presence of the *mulatresse* in continental America was a threat to the sexual order that was emerging as central to forging a stable American polity” (53). The Black body is sexualized, but the Southern belle is constructed as an asexual figure, giving her a higher status in society if she maintains her purity.

Southern female performance and performance abroad helps us understand the critical turn in Blythe’s identity as a Southern woman that Bonner grapples within a pivotal scene from *Like unto Like*. This performance space does propel Blythe to begin thinking about the different

role she can perform for herself, as mentioned above. After she has a conflicting moment with her love interest, Roger Ellis, he leaves the performance space and Blythe experiences anxiety and uncertainty about her relationship. Seemingly crushed from their exchange and finding herself in an unfamiliar context, Blythe returns to a performance of convention, one that would generate a feeling of normalcy and superiority to dispel her hurt: she transforms into the belle. Bonner describes Blythe's moment of transformation into the belle like donning a mask to hide her authentic feelings, a struggle of the Southern female protagonist for most of the novel. Bonner writes that Blythe,

“like all proud, hurt creatures,...strove to hide her wound. A brilliant color leaped to her cheek, light to her eyes, and repartee to her tongue. She was a new being. She outshone Betty Page, and for the first time in her life was a belle. Her mother would scarcely have known her; her father would never have been so proud of his child” (206).

The performance articulates a scripted, rehearsed Southern femininity, void of internal desires, and redeploys the discourse of Southern ideology. Within her performance of the belle, she becomes what society would accept as the ideal woman: interesting, physically beautiful, with scripted language that entertains, and superiority to other women to encompass the pride of Southern paternalism. As Blythe experiences uncertainty and anxiety within her relationship, which manifests as a crisis of self, perhaps Bonner is articulating her region's own anxiety surrounding what will happen to a woman's subjectivity in a shifting moment for the nation, a moment that will bring about the mixing of races. What is puzzling about this moment is that Bonner chooses to show that Blythe becomes “a new being,” which suggests a type of transformation from her previous self. However, even though Blythe transforms into the belle figure, Bonner notes that this moment only lasts for a second and there is a return to her previous

state. A generous reading of this moment could articulate that Blythe does mobilize the performance of the belle to alleviate her painful emotions in relation to Ellis' abandonment. Perhaps with the focus more on the fact that this performance does end for Blythe, Bonner does somehow hint that her protagonist possesses more control over her embodiment than the moment lets on. Such that, this moment shows that if she can fall into the performance of the belle, she can easily transform herself to other modes of womanhood. However, as the performers around her were engaging in glittering processions and grotesque disguises, upending the social structure, we cannot ignore that Blythe does return to the social strictures familiarized through her enduring performance as the white Southern belle. The inherent nature of the belle performance seems to suggest that Bonner is critiquing the performance's detriment for Southern women: she can never extricate herself from the rote performance that has been internalized her entire life. As the nation experiences a large shift as a result of the war, any tie to normalcy or tradition will bring stability to the Southern identity and this can only happen with the revived performances of the region's women, and with that, her existence will result in difficult embodiment.

Conclusion: "the future may hold"

Bonner's independent, proto-feminist protagonist leaves the reader with less hope for the future of Southern womanhood. However, when Bonner leaves Rome, she writes that her experience in the city will "brighten all the dark days that the future may hold" (116). In some sense, we can read performance for Bonner and for Southern women as a way to importantly imagine a future self. What is more important to note is that post-Civil War, elite, white Southern women become monuments, circumscribed by the narrative of the lost cause, but the liberated

movement and dissenting embodiment of transgressive female performances disrupts the concretizing of an old ideology. Although Bonner's life is puzzling and often contradictory, such as her politics and her feminist ideals, I suggest that performance and performance spaces provide a way to reconcile the interests and preoccupations of this Southern female writer. The lens of performance articulates the detriments and the possibilities for a Southern woman of a particular class and race. In reading for difficult embodiment in Blythe, Bonner sheds light on the need for women to inhabit an alternative form of subjectivity. As her novel and travel writings show, she creates a taxonomy and archive of female bodies, identities, and femininity in order to grapple with Southern female subjectivity. Thus, Bonner is interested in thinking about the future of Southern women, albeit of a certain race and class, and aptly contributes to the nineteenth-century's preoccupation regarding female subjectivity and liberation.

II. THE ICONIC IDA: RESONANT AND HYBRID PERFORMANCES OF THE DISSENTING BLACK FEMALE PERFORMER IN THE TRAVEL LETTERS OF IDA B. WELLS

“All the world’s a stage, upon which, we, the actors come and go in every age” (25).

- Ida B. Wells in her 1988 article “The Model Woman: A Pen Picture of the Typical Southern Girl”

“...What is considered here are precisely the ways in which performance and other modes of practice are determined by, exploit, and exceed the constraints of domination” (54).

- Saidiya Hartman in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*

Ida B. Wells, a regular theatre goer and avid reader, must have encountered Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* in her lifetime, considering a line from the play’s most famous monologue is reimaged at the end of her article “The Model Woman: A Pen Picture of the Typical Southern Girl” as a directive to her Black female readers. The difference between the play’s monologue and Wells’s quotation is subtle; Wells strategically omits the word “merely” before the word

“perform,” diverging from the original quote’s melancholic interpretation that an actor’s gestures do not necessarily accomplish anything beyond the performance. Placing the African American community into the role of actor, Wells’s directive to “perform” recommends that Black women, who constitute the “we” in this line, obscure their authentic selves to perform societal norms, not as a way to obstruct their agency but to circumscribe public scrutiny. In a post-Reconstruction era, middle-class women of color conformed to society’s behavioral codes by creating respectable and proprietary social identities in hopes of circumventing racial violence. For white women, protection meant a turn to racialized violence, an important issue that Wells takes on later in her career as a journalist and an activist; however, Black women were not subjected to the same type of protection (Bay 108). Wells believed the way to safeguard African American women was racially uplifting them through the performance of respectability.

Throughout her entire career as a journalist and activist, Wells continued this trend of using performance as an advantageous mode to uplift Black female status and provide a semblance of agency, even if it meant their respectable performances mirrored the dominant gender and racial paradigms of Southern society. For example, if a Black woman can take on a respectable, conventional image of proper American citizenry, perhaps she can advantageously navigate and secure a proprietary status and belonging in the American public sphere. Wells’s turn to the modes and gestures of a respectable performance additionally allows her to represent the collective Black female experience to bring “attention to the hypervisibility and cultural constructions of blackness” in nineteenth-century society (Brooks 5). In terms of identity construction, Southern Black women’s gendered and racial identities were formulated in relation to Southern elite white women. To counteract this construction, Wells early in her career uses rhetoric of the ideal Southern woman to situate the Black woman in the feminine portrait of the

South, stabilizing African American uplifted femininity as “typical.” Rather than the aberrant abject being of the South, Wells claims the Black female body possesses a “character in spotless purity” (Light 24) and “stainless life” (Light 25), showing the journalist “under pressure to create positive images,” as “black females were ... reluctant to discuss the daily sexual and racial denigration they faced under Jim Crow-- at least directly” (Bay 107). Wells attempts to naturalize the African American female body by creating her as “the pattern after which all other copy” (Light 25). In other words, Wells constructs her as the ideal performance of Southern womanhood to advantageously distance her from denigration and defamation.

Often, engaging with a performance of respectability meant that Wells turned to Southern domestic ideology to highlight the demeaning as well as the important roles Black women occupied. Strategically aligning Black women’s social performance with domestic ideology, Wells was able to offer a way to secure societal status. Domestic images counteracted how African American women were often seen in the public sphere as they “faced the additional complication of damaging racial stereotypes” (Silkey 66). To counteract these harmful stereotypes, such as “the jezebel” or the “asexual mammy figure,” Wells in “Woman’s Mission: A Beautiful Christmas Essay on The Duty of Woman in the World’s Economy” begins to rewrite civilization’s timeline, placing Black women and their influence into the larger narrative of societal progress. By rewriting the historical timeline, she brings attention to the fact that Black women are often shadowed figures in society, disregarded and silenced. Subsequently, Wells needed to highlight Black women’s importance in society. She thus strategically positioned Black women as equal counterparts to men, asserting that they are “imbued with a sense of her mission on earth and a desire to fill it” (Light 14), and they must be regarded as part of “human

progress” (Light 14). If Wells can show that Black women possess an essential role in creating a modern society, they then must become more regarded and protected by the public.

In the construction of Black women as essential to society, Wells, in the same article, shows a shift in her thinking of associating Black femininity with ideal Southern womanhood. She strays from the Southern gendered ideology where they are constructed as “merely a bundle of flesh and bones ... a fashion plate ... frivolous inanity, a soulless doll, a heartless coquette” (Light 14). Wells begins to share a similar sentiment with other Southern women writers’ attempt to disrupt the shallow, empty performance of women in Southern society. To this purpose, Wells places Black women into the historical timeline of great women where they can then inhabit a role that creates a “boundless influence” (Light 14), extricating the Black woman from a narrative of subordination and unfulfilled promise. Accordingly, Wells connects female greatness to the everyday woman, as “boundless influence” is not just reserved for “great” and “powerful” women, but for “characters of daughter, sister, wife, and mother” (Light 15). Even though Wells points out a Black woman's gendered role in terms of history, uplifting the performance of these domestic roles brings visibility and resonance to the Black female body, while simultaneously deconstructing any harmful public images.

Further in her career, as she transitioned from journalism to activism, Wells continued to wrestle with the tension between asserting her autonomous self and possessing consciousness of her racial status amidst the white, public gaze. She would utilize societal role playing to agentially navigate society, as she was known for creating various personas in her own writing and public appearances. Within these performances, Wells seems to advocate for Black women to adopt an inauthentic identity to navigate society, but throughout her life and career, she modeled how women can occupy racial and gender categories that are “strange” and “disturb

cultural perceptions of identity formation” (Brooks 5). For instance, Daphne A. Brooks in *Bodies in Dissent* situates Wells as part of the “New Negro Womanhood,” an identity category that arose during the late nineteenth-century, where this type of women “imagined a world in which [she] would one day own and command the public stage” (Brooks 283). Brooks discusses Wells’s early beliefs that if a Black woman commanded the public space, she would be “neither ‘stiff,’ ‘formal,’ nor ‘haughty,’” and the “‘typical Southern girl’ would possess the grace of a gazelle, angelic luminosity, and swan-like pulchritude wrapped in a ‘sweetness of disposition’” (Brooks 283). However, diverging from Brooks’s image of Wells, I argue that Wells shifted her idea of performance and the Black female body when she went from journalism to activism routed through the public stage where she also “championed theatre and performance as key political tools necessary for the empowerment of African Americans” (Brooks 282). Wells’s turn to a public speaking career, documented through her travel letters published in the *Chicago Inter Ocean*, utilizes these strategies of respectable female performance while simultaneously inciting an alternative subjectivity for Black women in the public space.

Wells’s travel letters allow us to see how the journalist turned activist embraced the relationship between performance and Black female identity throughout her life. Turning to the gestures and speeches of Wells that are carefully recorded from her *Chicago-Inter* articles, situates her in the tradition of Black women turning to various modes of performance to produce and articulate an alternative subjectivity. Wells’s *Chicago-Inter* articles, in reporting her time abroad, gave her agency over her movement and message. Performing in lecture halls and churches allowed Wells to construct herself as the authoritative lecturer, the reverend, and as the progressive activist, authoring her own subjecthood. However, within these performances, Wells encounters what Malik Gaines calls a “quadruple consciousness,” as her performance requires

the speaker to think about construction of self, racial positioning, the negative impacts of the Black female body on display, and the transformative qualities of performance that create possibility and futurity (103). Wells performs in part for the white gaze to expose and realize the injustices against Black subjectivity. In other words, racism informs her movement; she is a mobile and performing body in protest to racist structures in America. In defining the Black individual against how the American public viewed it, Wells was simultaneously defining herself as a Black woman.

This chapter tracks how Wells apprehends performances many elements, whether through modes of respectability or transgressive gestures, to navigate and subvert society, illustrating how performance serves as a site for self-fashioning for African American female identity and revises the cultural constructs of the Black woman's body. Many scholars focus on the historical and cultural aspects of Wells's moment on the public stage, but I argue that Wells's lecture circuit should be read as a transgressive performance, where her body contests the systems that oppress her collective gendered and racial self. During Wells's time abroad, I look at the processes of material props, self-fashioning, spectatorship, oratory and rhetorical gestures, which all work to shift her status from subordinate to an icon in the American imaginary. My analysis of Wells's lecture tour follows from Amanda Adams' study of viewing nineteenth-century transatlantic lectures as performance, which highlights moments of gesture, speech, and tone that are "not reducible to language" (10). Performance study also highlights the gestures' and speeches' ephemeral quality, as they can never be entirely captured by any written record, diminishing the full impact of the moment. However, Adams helpfully justifies how scholars of performance can get around not looking at the performance itself, as most written records provide context and descriptions of non-discursive elements (Adams 10). While reading Wells's

travel letters, we can see the full impact of her performance abroad, as it is able to communicate, form new communities, remember, and cultivate new cultures (Brown 15), and she does this by creating valuable transnational networks to create change in American culture.

Reading Wells's lectures as performance additionally places her in conversation with Black feminist performance theory, which specifically focuses on how performance for Black women creates a dissent to the racial and gendered restrictions on the Black female body. Jayna Brown in *Babylon Girls*, a study of Black female performance during the fin de siècle, reveals that "the black woman's body in motion [was] central to anxieties and hopes embedded in white ideas of the modern city space as well as in the politics of black cultural self-representation" (2). Within Wells's performance in the lecture circuit, "the body is a fundamental location to look for forms of response to regimes that are, in the first instance, based on very fleshly practices of violence and physical coercion" (Brown 15). Wells's performance, as it exposed the fatalities of an unjust legal system, ultimately critiques American society for not creating a space for the autonomous Black female body and contains elements of transformation and self-representation. Black women were crucial to the antislavery movement during the postbellum periods where activism in the public sphere brought about more embodied consciousness. For example, because performance is inherently an embodied act, the American public had to reconcile or confront their ideas about the Black female body. Thus, reading Wells's public speaking career through the lens of Black feminist performances helps restore "movement and history to individuals in the cultural margins" where "their unpredictable performances cut through the tyranny of stillness evolving out of the Atlantic world's dominant racial and gender narratives" (Brooks 6). This type of movement for the Black female body breeds dissonance to the dominant cultures, as individuals joined together "hybrid and sometimes profane cultural materials to rewrite

categories of self- representation” (Brooks 6). Indeed, moving beyond a career vested in respectability politics, Wells chose the public stage, performing an anti-lynching lecture circuit, that becomes a moment in her life that illuminates how performance was essential to rewriting a Black female identity.

Wells’s public, physical presence reveals a deep investment in self-fashioning through performing alternative personas that worked to circumscribe the dominant ideologies regarding Black women in a post-Reconstruction society. Prior to taking the stage, it was important for Wells to begin constructing alternative versions of herself in a disembodied form. For example, Wells first took on the persona “Iola,” the name suggesting a pared down, simple role (Schechter 30). The name “Iola,” placed at the end of her columns, allowed the journalist to take on political issues while also protecting herself from the public’s eye. Pen names were commonly used by black female journalists as they offered protection from judgement often brought on by society’s scrutiny, but for Wells, she moved beyond the idea of an ambiguous identity to self-fashion herself as symbolic of the African American experience (Schechter 17). As a Black woman living in a post-Reconstruction society, she was eager to present her voice and opinions, while additionally remaining conscious of her gendered and racial status. Writing and performing as “Iola” provided her writings with a clear, female voice that avoided obscurity; she wanted to gender herself while also controlling her public representation as her character was often misconstrued by the press. In addition to Iola, Wells turned to more provocative personas that invoke movement, rebellion, activism, and an exploration of Black female origins. For example, she called herself “Exiled,” which showed how she continued to construct a disembodied image that allowed her to stand in for the collective Black American experience. She additionally called herself “Joan of Arc” and “Mother of Clubs” (Schechter 9), and these personas constructed

Wells as the origin of female activism in the form of collective gatherings. Pier Foreman reveals that when Wells constructed herself in these instances, she saw herself not as an “isolated figure,” but “shaped by and help[ing] to shape a wider movement of African American women” (Foreman 93). The practice of renaming herself brought on the possibility of liberatory self-fashioning for the Black woman in the public imagination that created a long-lasting icon that performed in excess beyond a subjugated self.

Living up to her pen name, Wells was exiled and forced to move away from the South to Brooklyn, NY, as a result of mob violence disrupting her Memphis press. Because of Brooklyn’s vibrant Black culture, the move provided Wells distance from Southern domestic ideology and respectability politics where she began writing for the *New York Age*. Her articles, which transitioned to uplift an anti-lynching message, captured the attention of two women who believed the women of Brooklyn and New York should show their appreciation for Wells’s activism. The women planned a public demonstration that invited Wells to speak about her work on lynching in America. The demonstration would be Wells’s first official public appearance and hosted over two hundred and fifty women at Lyric Hall in 1892, a few months before Wells’s first lecture tour in England. Outlining the details of the event, Wells describes in her autobiography *Crusade for Justice* that “the arrangements for that meeting were perfect” (Wells 79). For example, as Wells performed onstage and orated about the violence and horror enacted on the Black body, “an electric light spelled ‘Iola,’” shining brightly “at the back of the platform” (Wells 79). The arrangements staged the ambiguous “Iola” from the printed press to present her in embodied form. Underneath those bright lights, Wells delivered an emotional performance to the mass of female audience members where tears poured down her face, using sentimentality as a form of rhetoric. She writes that after the performance, she was filled with

embarrassment as she did not want to provide an “exhibition of weakness” (Wells 80), showing a desire to properly represent Black women in the public space. Her sentimental approach was well received, and to commemorate this occasion, she was given a gold brooch in the shape of a pen that read “Mizpah,” meaning “lookout,” that she notes became a fixed part of her persona at every speaking engagement for the next twenty years.

While looking at the physical presence of Wells’s performance, it is important to note the material props and visual technologies that worked alongside her performance that elevated her status and further fashioned her public identity. For example, Wells’s performance at Lyric Hill raises two interesting observations: Wells was placed in a network with two objects that both contribute to a transcendent, object-oriented, agential performance. The name “Iola” in lights, placed right about Wells as she performed, elevates her to a celebrity and iconic status. The gold brooch that Wells wore well after the performance reveals her transition from a burgeoning journalist to a well-respected public figure, the object serving as a marker of her first public speaking success. I turn to Uri McMillan’s *Embodied Avatars* where his idea of Black female avatars and objecthood helpfully frame the material significance of Wells’s performance. McMillan uses the term “objecthood” to argue that in terms of Black female performance, Black subjects who use significant props and materials in their performance “become art objects” themselves, which allows them to circumvent potential limitations on the Black female body (McMillan 7). McMillan argues that, for a Black woman, objecthood “proves to be a powerful tool for performing one’s body, a ‘stylized repetition of acts’ that rescripts how black female bodies move and are perceived by others” (McMillan 7). For example, he argues that Joice Heth, an African American woman who performed for P.T. Barnum, transformed herself into the “Mother of the American memory” using aging techniques to stage herself as timeless. Wells

makes a similar move when creating her own icons, such as “Iola” and other personas. The name “Iola” in lights and the gold brooch, extensions of Wells’s performance, provide material and tangible effects that disrupt the performance’s temporality. Wells’s ephemeral performance to secure an upright status becomes grounded by these two objects, as they possess a material resonance.

Through her lectures and performances in front of public audiences, Wells transforms herself into the embodied narrative of anti-lynching in America through objecthood. Associating Wells’s performance with objects presents some concern because of how Black individuals have been publicly objectified. However, theoretically, McMillan argues that the “reimagining objecthood as a performance-based method ... disrupts presumptive knowledge of black subjectivity” (McMillan 9). Black women’s use of performance and objecthood ““rewrite[s] the default grammar of agency’ to include both embodied acts as well as inanimate things” (11). Beyond the moment at Lyric Hall, Wells’s chosen pen name “Iola” became an emblem in the women’s suffrage movement as she saw the name printed on sashes worn by club women showing their support for Wells’s name and her cause (Schechter 19). Wells felt vulnerable in the performance space as a result of her tears, showing a consciousness of her embodied self; however, the name “Iola” in lights above her suggests that she transcends the embodiment of the abject Black female body. When the Black female performer transforms herself through performance and objecthood, she then becomes an avatar of the collective Black body that has been subjected to violence and oppression. We can see how Wells begins to extend herself to exceed society’s limitations by creating alternative roles for herself, or to use McMillan’s term, avatars in her writing and speaking engagements. Self-fashioning as an avatar provides the Black female performer with “form[s] of mobility” to create, inhabit, perform an alternative self that

provides “human-like agency” (McMillan 12). Becoming an avatar, Wells, with the aid of her network of women, creates herself as a long-lasting icon, extending her performance into a future temporality. Wells can then exceed the boundaries placed on her by society as a Black woman, and these extensions of self become new sites to explore a Black female agency.

After the success of her first speaking engagement at Lyric Hall, Wells additionally captured the attention of another woman, Catherine Impey, and traveled to Britain in 1893 and 1894. Impey was a part of an anti-Caste Society in Britain, and after hearing about the Henry Smith lynching, she desired Wells to become a part of the transatlantic antilynching movement. Wells garnered attention from the anti-lynching group because the nineteenth-century “saw the rise of many successful transatlantic reform movements, including antislavery, temperance, and women’s suffrage. Although largely excluded from political participation, women played an essential role in the creation and expansion of these reform networks” (Silkey 13). Attention for Wells was additionally invited to speak because of her radical perspective on lynching in America. Her publications, such as *Southern Horrors* and *Red Record*, argue that if Southerners would “tell the truth and admit that colored men and women are lynched for almost any offense, from murder to a misdemeanor, there would not now be the necessity for this defense” (*Record*). She points out that they secure their defense “by the words of legislators, preachers, governors and bishops, and the Negro must give to the world his side of the awful story” (*Record*). Wells did not necessarily desire to expose the racial violence in American society, but she felt compelled to tell her side because white Southern society was never going to admit any wrongdoings. Naturally, her exposure was appalling to the dominant American public, which, as a result, rejected her journalistic radical findings and assertions. Wells wrote, in context of her lecture series abroad, that “ever since the suppression of my newspaper, the *Free Speech*, in

Memphis ... I had made unsuccessful attempts to be heard in the journals and on the platforms of the American people against lynching, which was fast becoming a national evil” (Wells 1). As the literary and printing sphere shaped the American imaginary, she hoped that her message circulated abroad would aid her “in molding American public sentiment in favor of justice to everyone, and a fair trial for life and liberty” (Wells 1). For the British public, Wells’s antilynching lectures evoked a tremendous response, and the press and churches of the British Isles resounded with outcries against unjust violence. Wells believes in the power of her performance, bringing transformation to not only herself as a Black woman in America, but to the entire body of the American public sphere.

Wells found that activism in the form of a lecture circuit was necessary as she called out the complicit silence of the American press with a white supremacist agenda in addressing her journalistic claims about lynch laws. Specifically, Wells noted that her progress to educate the masses on the horrors of lynching fell on deaf ears, claiming that as the lynching statistics rose, “the press and pulpit of the country are practically silent” (Wells 1). She reads the literary sphere’s silence to her anti-lynching claims as encouragement from the white American public to continue this form of inhumane punishment. Wells acknowledges that the repression is in part because at the head of the press and pulpit are white men who spearhead a white supremacist narrative and the reception of the narrative. The literary sphere, Wells’s first medium, cannot render any productivity towards Black liberation and legal protection as “the pages of current literature, when opened to a discussion of the negro question at all, are open only to the Southern white man, who is given full license to defame the entire negro race as he chooses” (Wells 1). She thus believed her lecture series would allow her message to be “heard,” which necessitated the turn to the literal aural and physical presence of speech. She hoped to garner attention from

the public, as “we, as a race, cannot get a hearing in the United States” (Wells 1). In this quote, Wells’s double entendre in reference to the American legal system and the suppression of Black voices from the American public requires her to turn to performance in an oratory form to enact change for the Black individual. Her tour in England provides her access away from Southern white men, where perhaps she encounters similar ideologies, but nonetheless her anti-lynching agenda is better received. She claims that England and Scotland are the only openings she has to relay her message, and she hoped her time in England would cause a ripple effect in the United States.

As Wells performed in event halls, churches, and in front of large audiences, she became even more visible to the public press and her perception on the public stage became a large issue; the American public attempted to “other” her through defamation, but at the same time, Wells exercised and exuded quiet control in her lectures to counteract these claims. For instance, Wells’s early interest in creating a positive image of Black women in the public space informed the creation of the “black lady reformer” identity for her lecture circuit (Silkey 13). She had to enter the British public sphere in the guise of the lady reformer to show she was capable of articulating and representing African American interests. Entering onto the public stage, Wells was known to “employ many of the same tactics used by temperance women to legitimate her role as a public speaker and activist” and “presented her activism as a selfless concern for her race” (Silkey 68). Specifically, Wells’s lecture style carried forth self-possessed tactics as she orated “in her own quiet and unimpassioned but earnest and forcible way” (Wells 3). The British press, in return, fashioned her to be “adorned by every grace of womanhood” (Wells 1), persuaded by her careful self-fashioning. Wells’s performance style shows how she co-opted the American’s public image of “Blackness” as an identity, as “Blackness” had been historically

performed through appropriation as a way to alleviate social anxieties about the shifting social world to enact control. In other words, Wells apprehends performance as a means of control to shift the power dynamics of the public space in the way the Black individual is perceived.

Despite her intentional self-construction, an article from the *Memphis Daily Commercial* followed and reported on Wells's time abroad, citing attacks, using "language more vulgar and obscene than anything the *Police Gazette* ever contained" (Wells 1). As the US press resisted Wells's journalistic anti-lynching campaign through silence, her touring and largely successful lectures provoked the press to turn to vilify and defame her performance. The US press's direct refutation to Wells's anti-lynching campaign is what Brooks calls "hegemonic hermeneutics," which "consistently render[s] black women's bodies as infinitely deconstructable 'othered' matter" (Brooks 7-8). Now out in the public sphere, Wells boldly responded to the vicious claim against her character, further engaging in moments of self-fashioning and self-production. For example, the *Memphis Daily Commercial* called her the "negro adventuress," drawing on the recognized negative stereotypes against Black women; however, Wells modifies and recontextualizes the image, accepting the name as a compliment, as she had already laid the groundwork in her publications with her articulation as "Joan of Arc" or "Mother of Activism." Wells' engagement with the US press shows how the press and the stage inform one another, and how she had to wield both to continually define and redefine herself in the public gaze.

With the American press's vitriolic claims lingering in the air, the public questioned Wells's authenticity and authority to perform her lectures for an audience. For instance, she was invited to Pembroke Chapel to speak in front of Reverend C. G. Aked's congregation. Part of the congregation had heard Wells speak previously and persuaded the Reverend to invite her to his church to hear her story. Hesitant to extend an invitation, however, Aked did not believe Wells's

reports, but upon traveling to America and seeing a newspaper article about the lynching of an innocent man, the well-renowned reverend amended his perception of Wells and her agenda. In finding validity in the press, she was validated by the Reverend. Aked was highly influential in his community and became an important figure in Wells's anti-lynching campaign (92). Wells's relationship with Aked illustrated how she created religious networks to provide more legitimacy to her campaign's agenda, as she found validation by the Reverend. Wells performed her lecture to Aked's congregation, which offered a resounding reception to her claims.

Amanda Adams notes that transatlantic lecture campaigns highlighted the importance between orator and audience to further create authenticity and authority in presence and message. She argues that a printed text "increases authorial distance and decreases the sense of a living presence behind the work," and if one turns to the stage, "to lecture is to attempt to bridge that gap" (Adams 11). Adams goes on to say that lectures offer the audience a chance to see the "genuine" performance behind the words, meaning the author embodies "the original, authentic source of the reproduced art object that they had in their homes" (Adams 11). The text and the performance work together to create an authentic representation of its message, much like how Aked sought out Wells's text prior to seeing her performance. Thus, an author's performance to a public audience allows them to further construct their identity, to mediate their authorial textual presence with a live one. Adams puts it another way, that to the audience, "authors were disembodied to their public ... but transatlantic lecturing was inescapably embodied; an author stood on stage, rather than page, displaying much of his physical self through voice, accent, gesture, and stature" (Adams 12). Wells's performance additionally disrupts all expectations on who is supposed to deliver and properly represent an issue on an authoritative, public stage.

Wells as an embodied Black female performer shows how her performance uncovers audience bias and opens up a new space for Black women to navigate and influence.

Wells performing in front of an audience, mostly a white audience, also raises questions about spectatorship and the spectacle in relation to race, as violence is often rendered through theatrical language. While Wells is in Liverpool, she writes how the city is not a receptive space because of its history of being a market for cotton, highlighting the underpinnings of a racist past. Subsequently, she relates a story about a man who took the stage in Liverpool, further pointing out the architecture of enslaved institutions that inform the collective attitudes and actions of her audiences. In the story, the man took to the stage drunk and the audience rejected him. In response, he cries out: “What! Have I come from London to be hissed by you: you, every brick in whose walls is cemented by the blood of slaves?” (Wells 1). Clearly, Wells creates a parallel between her and the London actor, feeling exposed and rejected while on stage where the theatrical space rests upon a racist past. She goes on to write that after the London actor admonished the audience, “the hissing ceased long before the scornful tones had stopped reverberating” (Wells 1). The word “reverberate” is interesting as it points out the idea that oration and audio echo and transcend the moment it is expressed. The horrific act of lynching as a punishment practice to the Black body persists because of its spectacle quality. In thinking about public lynching in America, the display of a lynched body “circulated long after the lynching themselves were over,” and often through photographs and other visual imagery (Wood 2). Lynching and Wells’s performance as spectacles then become specters of an enslaved past as the “specter of the violence continued to smolder long after it was over” (Wood 1). As we see lynching as the ultimate spectacle in the white imagination, Wells and her body become a spectacle to the public as she counteracts these prominent images of Blackness. Her performance

unearths what is repressed in terms of violence against the Black individual, bringing the origins of enslavement to the surface through her own mode of spectacle.

Issues of spectatorship and authority provide insight into how Wells inhabits what Alex W. Black calls the “resonant body” (620). The resonant body is a term Black uses to construct Black female abolitionists, suggesting that this type of embodiment stems from “the influence a performer’s voice had over the way a reviewer saw her body” (Black 620). In public spaces, Black women were encouraged to render themselves as invisible, but to a Black female performer, this was not possible. Within the image of respectability, Black brings attention to how aurality and embodiment work together to create the Black female subject. For example, Black writes that often Black women on the public stage were associated with “illicit sexuality” (621) and worked hard to mediate their public image with their message. When Black female performers took the stage, “the voices of these performers call[ed] attention to their corporeality. These calls are answered by representations of their bodies that show the traces of their vocalization” (Black 620). In other words, Black argues that to enact these representations of the Black female body, the Black female performer can engage in a multisensory experience of visual and auditory performances, as “sound and vision, the aural and scriptural, have always been interlinked” (Black 620). In the same way, Wells as a lecturer mediated orality and embodiment, continually showing how the public receives her and how she should be received. *The Newcastle Leader*’s reports reveal how Wells engages in a multisensory experience of the visual and aural by referring to her as “a young lady ... who speaks with an educated and forceful style” by giving “some harrowing instances of the injustices to the members of her race” (Wells 95). Writing about lynching was not enough to communicate the horrors and injustice of the lynch laws. Wells needed to turn to orality in order for a horror of the lynching experience to

be realized, showing how textuality moves through orality and together, they produce a performance of dissent. The visual is represented aurally and brings the impact of racial violence into the present, creating a resonance beyond just reading a text, ultimately creating an alternative Black female subjectivity.

Wells's performance encountered and defied deeply entrenched racist structures, stirring up and inciting emotional affect from her white, American audience members who became witnesses to a Black woman as an authority figure. On the stage where Wells performs, her narratives of racial violence spill out in excess, disrupting the comfortable, controlled performance space. Specifically, in one instance, Wells visited the Pioneer Club of over 500 members, talking “hoarse on America’s lynching and race prejudice” (82). After her talk, she notes that the “ubiquitous and ... almost invariably rude American was in evidence there” (82). This woman, Wells writes, “in a strident voice ... pronounced my statements false,” but this did not shake Wells as she pointed out that the woman had never visited the South and “was a victim to her own imagination” (82). What this experience shows is that, in many of Wells’s travel letters, she took the time to describe the rebellious, outraged audience members she often encountered. She uses these encounters with white audience members, not only as detailed accounts of her experience abroad, but also as a form of personal retaliation to American society who actively rejected her narratives and activism. Even though Wells received silence from the American press, she was able to make note of how her performances abroad would incite aggressive protests amongst her white audience members. She was able to show how the American public had to face what they have tried to repress in their own society. D. Soyini Madison argues that performance spaces open up communal mourning or resistance. Madison argues that the performance platform becomes a way for audiences to “to reject not only what we

see and how we see it, but how we can reject the reality of what we see and know to be true” (D. Soyini Madison 6). The performance space, in other words, conjured the American racial and gendered imagination and its suppression of reality.

The audience members’ rejection of lynching violence’s reality brought forth another experience where Wells received resistance from a white woman and man who denied her examples of lynch crimes as truth. In turn, she counteracted their refutation by producing more facts and proof, a gesture of realism in the face of their white supremacist fantasy. In shutting down their denial, she claimed that these lynch crimes are symbolic of all treatment of the African American community (69). As a result of these confrontations, she was able to perform and engage in an improvised debate, disrupting her own script to add to and build her narrative. Madison goes on to argue that “public performance invokes public discourse by becoming a communicative instrument where the shared naming and marking of injustice can be realized,” such that “performance can overrun ideology’s containment” (Soyini Madison 6). She offered to extend the conversation to her hotel room to sit down and talk civilly with the white woman and man to help them work through their realizations, but they declined. What this instance reveals, most importantly, is that performance spaces, occupied by the contentious white gaze and the Black female body, are a microcosm of how the Black individual is treated in the public space. Wells continually feared for her life in the public as a Black woman, but the performance space offered a controlled environment to engage with racist confrontations from white audience members. Wells was the presumed authority figure in the performance space and her gestures of respect and restraint paired with a matter-of-fact approach to racial violence provided the necessary methods to retaliate against racist structures.

Part of the resonance of Wells's performance, in the way it conjures emotional responses and invites new images of Black womanhood, is from presenting her lectures in the form of storytelling. Throughout her letters, Wells continually referred to her speaking engagements as "narration of the lynchings in the States" (Wells 1) and even directed her audience to "bear my story" (Wells 1). Thinking of her lectures as stories ties Wells to the lineage of Black women's oral history. This connection between storytelling and history deepens Wells's efficacy as an orator, as she becomes the vessel of African American history and the past. Wells additionally reflects on how memory, the written word, and oration work together by commenting that "although every detail of that horrible lynching affair was imprinted on my memory, I had to commit it all to paper, and so got up to read my story on that memorable occasion" (Wells 79). For Wells, storytelling becomes a form of, to use Toni Morrison's word, rememory. Storytelling as a form of historical narration that relies on memory poses challenges for the recounter when the subject involves violence of the enslaved body. Morrison articulates this challenge in *Beloved* as Sethe tries to articulate a violent past through memory and the body. In the same way, Wells's storytelling becomes a form of rememory as she reconstitutes the past, playing it out in her performance, as it lives on through her storytelling. In other words, the Black female performer must navigate conveying to an audience the reality of enslaved violence while also noting the representation of the past is not real enough. Mostly, in merging orality and memory, Wells's performance reveals that Black women had limited methods to relate their history and presence.

Wells's use of storytelling additionally situates her into the tradition of oral performances that were historically used by Black women to reconcile the past and redefine their autonomous identity in the American imagination. Black female performance becomes a site "to explore and express the social, political, and sexual politics of black womanhood in America" (Fulton Minor

286). Wells's lectures are important as she makes race a gendered issue by illuminating how racial violence happens to African American women as well. Turning to orality, Wells engages in "a speech act that resists or subverts oppression, and controls representations, thereby substantiating subjectivity" (13), producing a "resistant orality" as it recognizes both "the oppositional and confrontation element and the ability to define identity and authorize representations" (Minor 13). While Wells produces statistical and factual information during her lectures as an act of resistance, the relationship of performance and Blackness means that her identity is constructed as the other, and it is constructed in opposition to rational thought. Brooks argues that for Black women, their performances can be thought of as "opaque" or "as dark points of possibility that create figurative sites for the reconfiguration of black and female bodies on display" (8). If we look at the gestures, speech, materiality, the optics of Wells's performance show how she creates a new future for Black citizens in the American imagination.

As Wells participated in a Black female performance tradition, she also engaged with the larger tradition of orality being a form of nation building, where performances in the nineteenth century were essential to creating an American identity. Charlotte M. Canning writes that during the nineteenth century, "American nationality was largely created through the pulpits and platforms of the land" (21). In the public sphere, there arose a need for the public platform to express and persuade people on the politics and social issues of the moment and so many orators turned to formal platforms to address national affairs. Often these oral performances were in the form of elegant elocution that gave way to "the art of graceful and mannered public speaking that emphasized gesture, vocal command" (Canning 167). Elocution became popular during the nineteenth century and turning to the theatrical became a common element of oration later on. In American culture, "these oratorical traditions collided, merged, and polarized to create vibrant

traditions of verbal art” (Adams 5). From the papers that reported on Wells’s lectures, her performance style mirrors that of elegant elocution. Wells presented the information with a rhetorical strategy that seems aligned with traditional ways of orality and performance in the American public sphere. Partly, she turned to an American style of oratory as she needed to justify her ability to be on the public platform, thus “provoked into appealing to the public opinion of this country by acts which they must all deplore” (Wells 3). In other words, Wells uses a very popular and well venerated medium to help shift the national narrative about American citizenry through the exposure of lynch laws.

Public lectures were seen as centrally American, and Wells shows what happens when disenfranchised Americans participate in this tradition. In the same way, she creates a hybrid approach by connecting her performance to two oratory traditions to subvert the American public while also remaining appealing to the public gaze. However, Wells’s lectures additionally call us to rethink elocution in the public sphere because rather than aligning herself with a performance of whiteness, oral performance in the Black community was seen as a liberatory act. Stemming from the enforced illiteracy of the enslaved, “elocution provided other opportunities for filching the master’s texts in order to raid knowledge, reroute authority, and undermine power” (Conguergood 118). Turning to Wells’s lectures, her performance in the public illustrates the need to include other forms of orality and aurality. The American public sphere produced a standard type of public elocution and Wells distances herself from these standard modes while also becoming a part of the lecture circuit. As she felt the pressure to be respectable, Wells expertly wielded elocution techniques to discuss topics that were not seen as “ladylike” or proper. Within her careful elocution, Wells’s performance style shows the tensions of being a Black female reformer on stage while lecturing about nightmarish and treacherous facts about

the present society. While she conveyed the injustices of lynching, Wells's participating in a white American oral tradition as well as connecting herself to her African American lineage demonstrates a contradictory performance. In other words, Wells's lecture style reveals the essence of her quadruple consciousness as a Black female performer in the public sphere, where her lectures take on a multidimensional quality that maneuvered respectability, memory, and tradition.

Prior to taking on the public stage abroad in England, Wells reflects in her autobiography on how she admired and desired to adopt Frederick Douglass's oratory style. She writes after one of his lectures at the Chicago World's Fair, that "Mr. Douglass's oration was a masterpiece of wit, humor, and actual statement of conditions under which the Negro race of this country labored" (Wells 119). Wells's description of Douglass's oration style illustrates her continual commitment to uplifting African American orality as important. Partly, Wells was noticing how African American orality "reflects the need to teach and know history, particularly family history in a hegemonic society that would like to exclude African presence" (Fulton Minor 1). Thus, Wells's lecture tour and commitment to the public stage reveals that this tradition of orality persists. Alongside Douglass' lecture at the Chicago World Fair, Wells describes how "Paul Dunbar read from his poems, and the Negro music presented was of high order. The thousands of people gathered at the fair who heard the story were given the opportunity they would otherwise have been denied of hearing our foremost orator at his best" (Wells 119). Wells knew the way to enact change in the public for the Black individual was through public oration, as she describes the moment at the fair like a play and a performance. Significantly, Wells turned away from the discursive to non-discursive performance and gestures to enact change in the American public sphere's views and treatment toward the African American population.

Beyond Wells's lecture tour, the relationship between Wells and performance has been reimagined and reasserted on the stage and in art form. For example, Endesha Ida Mae Holland, from Greenwood Mississippi, wrote a play entitled "Miss Ida B. Wells," which follows Wells's antilynching campaign across England. The play was originally performed by Ingrid Askew and Nefertiti Burton in 1992 at New WORLD Theatre, a stage dedicated to highlighting relevant social and political issues through performance and art. Beyond the staging of the activist's life, Wells's representation of the Black female body in the American imaginary proved effective as she also persists as an icon. In November of 2020, The Union Station in DC created a mosaic mural to commemorate the 100th anniversary of women's suffrage, creating the likeness of the activist and journalist made up of over 5,000 images that document primarily African American women's struggle with gender and racial issues. What the performance and mural show is that Wells, a Black woman in a post-Reconstruction society, strategically embodied various figures and modes of performance to express her radical opinions about the injustices of racial oppression during a turbulent moment and carries a resonance that exceeds any written text or historical moment.

III. “THE WORLDLY GLITTER OF FEMININITY:” GESTURES OF FEMININITY
AND QUEER DESIRE OF THE CIRCUM-CARIBBEAN CARNIVAL IN ALICE
DUNBAR-NELSON’S “SISTER JOSEPHA”

Introduction: Dunbar-Nelson and the Local Color Genre

To encourage Alice Dunbar-Nelson to publish her collection of short stories entitled *The Goodness of St. Roque* (1899), Paul Laurence Dunbar boasted, ““why *shouldn't* you tell those pretty little Creole stories?”” (Dunbar qtd. in Menke 81, emphasis mine). While Dunbar’s encouragement suggests the devotion of a supportive husband during the early stages of his wife’s burgeoning writing career, his description of Dunbar-Nelson’s stories as “pretty” and “little” haunted her literary career well after her death (Menke 81). Repeating Paul Laurence Dunbar’s sentiment about her “pretty creole stories” in the 1980s, Gloria T. Hull’s archival recovery of Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s work, which highlighted themes of queer desire and female sexuality in the writer’s later poetry, claimed that her early works are distinguishable from her later works by their “hyper-feminized” prose (233). Re-evaluating Dunbar-Nelson’s use of a decorative aesthetic in her early short stories, I suggest that these early stylistic choices reveal that she was indeterminately grappling with ideas concerning exploratory, autonomous female sexuality. For example, “Sister Josepha” is a short story that follows a young nun of ambiguous origins who tries to extricate herself from a repressed state of womanhood and finds herself,

outside of the convent walls in the streets of New Orleans, encountering the “worldly glitter of femininity.” “Sister Josepha's” perceived sentimental language signals scholars to read the story as a religious cautionary tale for young women, but Dunbar-Nelson counteracts ideas that a feminine aesthetic must equal sentimentality as she alternatively constructs a transformative, global space where the young nun, or more broadly Southern Black women, can begin to explore their burgeoning sexual desires. A revisionist return to Dunbar-Nelson thus allows her works to be seen beyond the classification of “pretty,” local color stories and to be placed among turn-of-the-century women writings concerned with feminine and sexual liberation.

Regional and local color fiction dominated the late nineteenth-century’s popular literary scene, even as prominent male critics disregarded female literary production as significant to their social and political moment. For example, Thomas L. Morgan, in regard to a woman’s place in literary production, writes that “the period’s literary hierarchies ... positioned regionalism and the short story as less important than the authoritative space granted to both realism and the novel” (139). Although regional fiction inhabits a non-authoritative space within the literary canon, the label does not entirely erase white female regional fiction writers like Kate Chopin or Grace King from the US imaginary, as Judith Fetterley in *Writing out of Place* claims the genre is defined by its gender and “whiteness” (3). For a Black, Southern female writer, however, the stakes are higher, such that the “local color” fiction category often diminishes and expunges Black Southern female voices. For example, scholars who seek to place Dunbar-Nelson’s works within the local color genre focus on their “smallness, everyday life, and femininity”-- Hsuan L. Hsu’s description of how nineteenth-century regional fiction is conventionally regarded (174). Fetterley confirms that when a female writer writes in the tradition of the local color genre, her text becomes marked by the genre’s associations and

cannot transcend its limiting categories in literary analysis as femininity is seen as an inherent genre trait (37). There is a catch twenty-two to Fetterley's argument about gender and regional fiction: it seems counterproductive to ignore a genre foregrounded by women writers, despite the fact that they were writing in a genre that aligns with a patriarchal and an anti-Black literary scene. Only by transcending these literary categories can we recognize how writers such as Dunbar-Nelson contributed to larger social critiques about race and gender. In other words, women writers enter into the rubric of regional fiction to subvert the genre, but the label is not always helpful in seeing the subversive as it has prevented these works from connecting to other movements.

If scholars of Dunbar-Nelson spend a considerable amount of time focusing on how the writer portrays Creole and Southern life, they miss out on unearthing her exploration of a woman's fluid identity, sexuality, and the liberated Black female body. For instance, Pamela Glenn Menke's acclaim that Dunbar-Nelson is one of the only African American female local color writers that should be remembered for her "portraits of distinctive Louisiana Creole culture" (87) nonetheless reduces her works to the "smallness" of everyday life. To be fair, Menke does argue that women writers who participate in the regional fiction genre "challenged white male dominance and the stultifying racial and gender codes upon which it depends" (78); however, when we trouble a female writer's association with the local color genre, her works move beyond limiting ideas about Southern womanhood in domestic spaces. Taking on this issue of genre classification, a *Legacy* issue devoted to Dunbar-Nelson posits that scholars should move beyond classifying her works as local color by suggesting that Dunbar-Nelson produced more "dynamic" work later in life and situates her into important movement such as the Harlem Renaissance, African American literature, and feminist literature. If Dunbar-Nelson can embody

all these literary categories later in life, paying attention to her early works would reveal emerging ideas about Black womanhood that foregrounds the later movements.

One of the reasons why Dunbar-Nelson's early works cannot be perceived as "dynamic" results from how regional and local color fiction places fixed boundaries around a story's sense of place, inhibiting any representation of the locale from taking on transformative qualities. Hsu, for instance, defines regional fiction's idea of the "locale" or the "region" as "the dead, the fixed, the undialectical" (166). Hsu's definition suggests that a regional writer like Dunbar-Nelson, while lauded for her support of the local and realism of rural life, represents space as immobile and incapable of a national or global reach. Instead, a space's fixedness in regional fiction is a result of what Anne Storm calls being "associated with nostalgia and anti-modernism" (373). If Dunbar-Nelson fulfills the tenets of regionalism and local color according to Hsu and Storm, then her "portraits of New Orleans" cannot move beyond assumptions about place and people that lend themselves to demeaning stereotypes in the collective imaginary. In local color fiction, most prominently, the Black body is typically depicted through racial stereotypes and devoid of analysis as a complex, dynamic being.

For this paper, I move beyond the idea that region is a fixed place in order to think on a granular level about the complex social systems of New Orleans that inform African American identity formation. To counteract claims that Dunbar-Nelson checks the boxes of regionalist aesthetics through her feminine style, I examine how her characters interact with global institutions like the Catholic church and the circum-Caribbean Carnival, which work syncretically both to suppress and to liberate the Black body. These religious and public spaces in Dunbar-Nelson's texts show that specific locales in New Orleans are generative, transnational, and possess cosmopolitan features, or possess what Hsu calls "complex internal processes" that

reveal “dynamic and flexible units of production” (166). Dunbar-Nelson, writing in the regional and domestic literary tradition is helpful in terms of having her stories widely read, but it is important to understand the subtext and duality of her works as their racial and gender critiques subvert the local color and sentimental genre.

Concerned with the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality, Dunbar-Nelson’s short story alternatively maps out the epistemological concerns of body, desire, and performance for Black womanhood in the late nineteenth-century. To helpfully situate Dunbar-Nelson’s work, Daphne A. Brooks’ and Amber Jamilla Musser’s theories of female and queer sexuality focus on embodied knowledge, which emerges from what Hortense Spillers calls “pornotroping;” she uses this term to show how Black female bodies have been objectified through dominant systems of oppression that “violently reduce[d] people into commodities while simultaneously rendering them sexually available” (Musser 30). To counteract pornotroping’s construction of the consumable body, Brooks and Musser argue that the Black female body can then perform subversive gestures and performances that allow for self-production. Brooks suggests that undiscovered genealogies of performance among postbellum women of color, in order to revise Black female subjectivity, provided a “means to move more freely and to be culturally ‘odd,’ to turn the tables on normativity and to employ their own bodies as canvasses of dissent” (6). For Musser, she calls this type of performance “brown jouissance,” which merges aesthetics with sensuality, creating an affect within the body where it becomes a place of “possibility, interiority, and creativity” (46). Dunbar-Nelson goes beyond the analysis of violence and overtly sexualized Black femininity to give us an image of liberated Black sexuality through Camille’s discovery of her own queer identity in the circum-Caribbean Carnival.

Taking the White Veil: Religious and Domestic Gestures of the Convent

The Goodness of St. Roque, rather than localizing and creating fixed ideas about the South, illustrates New Orleans' complex social structure, interrogating the racial and class hierarchies for people of color. In "Sister Josepha," Dunbar-Nelson creates New Orleans-- at least part of the city-- as a syncretic geography that represses as well as elicits freedom for a creole individual as social systems and religious orders contribute to a person's identity. The story's attention to New Orleans' social system engages with early renderings of Black identity formation through the young nun's ambiguous identity, revealed through a backstory disclosed halfway through the narrative. The central figure, known as Camille in her previous life, comes to the convent as an orphan, and while her origins are unknown, her ethnic roots are made clear: French and Creole. Dunbar-Nelson complicates the idea of Creole identity by specifically tying the protagonist's racial identity to her Caribbean roots and describing her as ripening into a "tropical beauty" where spectators gawk at her racialized appearance (119). While this description can be seen as a familiar trope of a regional "feminine" style, Camille's unclear yet suggested racial identity draws from the long history of Caribbean migratory patterns to New Orleans that, historically, helped create the city's "self-identified creole society" (Dawdy 11) and functions to link the young woman to a transnational diaspora. Shannon Lee Dawdy argues that in the emergence of this new creole society, "syncretism in language, material culture, and religion undoubtedly took place" in New Orleans; however, the city "also developed a new system of inequality that segregated subgroups and created new measures of difference" (7). Within the story, Dunbar-Nelson indeed represents New Orleans as a syncretic space where social and religious systems worked to construct a spatial identity, using systemic structure order to suppress an individualized personhood.

Moving to the granularity of the city's social systems, the religious system Dunbar-Nelson highlights in "Sister Josepha" is a space that complicates-- even destabilizes-- Camille's identity, creating the struggle of a dual self. Coming to New Orleans, with no perceived origins and no identity status, Camille is denied social standing, and thus she must remain in the place created for her as a woman of color: a convent. Dawdy elaborates on how, during the nineteenth-century, convents became safe havens for young, disenfranchised Black women and were committed to socialization and reform under the guise of an advantageous education. Dawdy points out not only that the education system of the convent secures segregationist ideology, but interestingly, that the architect of New Orleans consciously supported the city's segregationist agenda. Dawdy goes on to write how the city's early architect, Pierre Baron is credited "with the architectural design of the original Ursuline Convent *and* the prison on the Place d'Armes, among the few monumental buildings in the early city" (35, emphasis mine). This shared origin suggests that these institutions were designed and intended, consciously or not, for the confinement and separation of an individual personhood from the larger society. Thus, as Camille is given the choice to become adopted into a presumably white family or devote herself to religious vocation, she ultimately must deny the opportunity to assimilate into a society structured by racialized violence and instead chooses an alternative life seemingly safer for a young Black woman: devoting her life as a nun.

Placed in the repressive confines of the convent, as a young Black woman, Camille's body is continually surveyed and subjected, and a segregated, confined space seeks to limit her bodily autonomy. Even though joining the convent gives Camille a semblance of safety from a public space defined by racial subordination, the intimate space of the convent produces and reproduces a subordinate subject, an example of what Christina Sharpe identifies as "monstrous" (2) in post-

emancipation texts, defining this phenomenon “as a set of known and unknown performances and inhabited horrors, desires and positions produced, reproduced, circulated, and transmitted” (3). Sharpe argues that African Americans in a post slavery society negotiated and reproduced the effects of slavery as well as discovered new opportunities for a liberated identity as “freedom and slavery [were] performed” simultaneously, citing a “desire to be human that emerges and [was] often erased from and contained by Black bodies and narratives” (Sharpe 5). This simultaneous identity is produced in Camille once inside the convent when she takes the vow as a nun, dons “the white veil” and becomes christened as Sister Josepha. Being stripped from her former identity, Camille’s transformation into Sister Josepha seems to suggest belonging as she is now a part of the convent community but the community’s assimilation practices distances Camille from her Caribbean origins.

Now within the walls of the convent, the religious space permits Dunbar-Nelson to critique the norms of Victorian womanhood through Camille’s performance of domestic and religious gestures. Dunbar-Nelson opens the story with Camille’s dissatisfaction towards her repressed lifestyle as a nun, showing her holding “her beads mechanically, her fingers numb with the accustomed exercise” (117). As Camille participates in the convent’s gestures of domesticity and religiosity, the ennui of her performance causes her to then slip into an unconscious state where “she still knelt on the floor, her white-bonneted head nodding suspiciously” (117). Falling asleep while dutifully praying, the young nun’s subversion of religious gestures suggests a forthcoming awakening to the strictures of her present state. Beyond this moment, Camille continues to perform the gestures of her monotonous life, and her domestic and religious duties become less precise. Spilling the oil from the household lamps and polishing “the chimney with a sudden vigorous jerk which threatened destruction” (117) shows an unrest in Camille. The young nun’s

“vigorous jerks” shows an instability in the precise ritualistic and repetitive gestures of the convent where she can begin to improvise beyond the prescribed symbolic actions. The move towards a full awakening solidifies when Camille recognizes her confinement, expressing that she is “all cooped up here with nothing to see but stray visitors” and subject to “always the same old work” (117). Camille’s expression of loneliness and boredom suggests she will transgress beyond the confined walls of the convent, setting her up for an alternative lifestyle that falls in line with her desires.

Dunbar-Nelson opens up the boundaries of the convent walls to place Camille in a less bounded, more transformative space in order to explore her identity beyond the convent. Camille’s monotonous gestures shift to “rebellious prayers” where the “restless figure” tosses all night long (118), the unruly gestures priming her to begin seeing the world beyond the convent as an opportunity to unravel her dual identity formed within the convent. After a restless night, Camille is then given the chance to leave the convent to attend mass. Once beyond the walls of the convent and “determined to see much of the world,” Camille glimpses “the worldly glitter of femininity” (124). Even though the convent “control[s] behavior through architectural design” (Dawdy 148), the repressive space is thus permeated by the atmosphere of this glittery space, producing a bodily affect. Immediately following her glimpse of the outside world, as she attends mass, again, “the rebellious thoughts . . . surged in her small heavily gowned bosom” (124). Stirred by the outside world, Camille encounters and becomes enamored with an ambiguously gendered figure. Despite being read as a soldier of the Spanish-American War through the nod to their military uniform which creates what seems to be the convention of masculinity, the figure’s features are indeed effeminate. Dunbar-Nelson queers the figure through their embodied descriptions such as “beautiful boyish face” and the hair “curling and soft” (125). Camille’s

attraction to this figure suggests a formation of a transgressive, queer desire outside of the convent's prescriptive gendered norms. Additionally, the prose's turn to a more feminine aesthetic reflects a style of women's writing at the turn-of-the-century that embodied an alternative language of female sexuality, "a new version of the feminine ... with florid, purple prose that valued intensely ornamental descriptions of flowers and mesmeric experiences" (Evans 122). Dunbar-Nelson's turn to a feminine aesthetic opens up ideas about women as "sexual agents" with transgressive desires and alternative sexuality that seeks to destabilize categories of womanhood. This moment of increased awareness of African American desire and sexual agency allows writers to continue pushing the boundaries in terms of identity formation.

The Circum-Caribbean Carnival: Alternative Identity Formation through Performance and Self-Fashioning

Through Camille's attraction to the seductive, experimental, boundaryless streets of the "outside world," Dunbar-Nelson proposes an alternative sphere that holds the potential to liberate the young nun's sexual and feminine identity. While "Sister Josepha" does not fully explore what the "worldly glitter of femininity" looks like in terms of its aesthetics or liberation potential, similar descriptions of feminized spaces emerge in other stories in *The Goodness of St. Roque*, such as "The Carnival Jangle" and "Odalie." Dunbar-Nelson centers both stories on female protagonists who leave their homes, places of domestic confinement, and are possessed by a similar allure to the exciting, provocative streets of New Orleans. Dunbar-Nelson introduces in "The Carnival Jangle" the scene of the New Orleans Carnival, a place of gathering, performance, and an expression of personhood where "humanity in all shapes, manners, forms, laughing, pushing, jostling, crowding, a mass of men and women and children" are "varied and

assorted in their several individual peculiarities" (97). The worldly glitter of femininity and the jostle of "humanity in all shapes" present in earlier and later stories in the collection reveals that beyond the doors of the convent, Camille would find herself in the streets of New Orleans where Dunbar-Nelson proposes that "The Carnival" emerges.

Before understanding how the Carnival's peripheral presence in "Sister Josepha" is important to Camille's transformation, establishing a definition of the Carnival through a long history of scholarship helps us contextualize Dunbar-Nelson's use of the performative space. This scholarship engages with Bakhtin's Carnavalesque theory, which suggests that the transgressive atmosphere of such events dismantles hierarchical power structures in the public sphere, representing a "release from oppression of official culture, a suspension of its laws, an exhilarating inversion of its authority, a momentary state of topsy-turvydom, in which the common people become powerful and the powerful become ridiculous" (Roach 243). Bakhtin's European perspective on the Carnavalesque does not entirely translate to a Southern, performative space because it does not consider race or gender in its disorderly masquerading. Instead, Dunbar-Nelson's representation of the Carnival aligns better with Joseph Roach's *Cities of the Dead* as he argues that because New Orleans is a circum-Atlantic city that centralizes the "diasporic and genocidal histories of Africa and the Americas" (4), it becomes connected to the circum-Caribbean network. The Carnival as a circum-Caribbean space suggests its performance cannot upend the city's laws so publicly and overtly as the European Carnival because of its connection to an enslaved past. Performances in New Orleans, for instance, were highly regulated as a result of the "official existence of the Black Codes" which "made festivity something for slaves to get away with, a transgressive and even subversive act, the origins and meanings of which, for safety's sake, were best effaced or at least disguised" (Roach 252). To

the dominating public, African American Carnival practices were perceived as regulated performance under white imagination. Roach claims that as a result, “the law thus created on its margins a space for play, a liminal zone in which dances, masquerades, and processions could act out that which was otherwise unspeakable” (Roach 252). Thus, according to Roach, the Carnival allowed for a time and space where disenfranchised citizens could move outside the bounds of law to practice a looser, unfixed sort of existence.

The Carnival in Dunbar-Nelson’s short stories, coming at the turn of the century in a post slavery society, reimagines and supports Roach’s idea of the performance space as a peripheral, liberated Black counter-cultural sphere. Camille had two choices of living freely as a person of color in society: assimilate into a white family or become confined to the convent. By joining in step with the other performers in the circum-Caribbean Carnival, she would then create new gestures that transform into her desired identity. The new gestures within a “highly contested, representational site of national and regional cultural identities” destabilizes regulation through subversive masking, performance, and self-fashioning and elicits a national identity beyond the one constituted by a larger, white society (Aching 3). Even though readers do not get the chance to see Camille actively participate with the elements of a Carnival performance, her unruly unrest after encountering the evasive, upending space subversively communicates a desire for this liberation. This desire is enough to show that Camille is searching for what Roach defines as “collective representations” (25), which would allow her to be placed in “genealogies of performance” that would “attend not only to ‘the body’ ... but also to bodies— to the reciprocal reflections they make on one another’s surfaces as they foreground their capacities for interaction” (25). In other words, the new identities that arise within these circum-Caribbean

Carnival performances elicit interaction and connection that then subvert the structures that segregate and suppress otherwise liberating Black counter-cultural spaces.

While the Carnival space represents change and newness for Camille, the performance of the Black counter cultural sphere that generates belonging comes from its connection to the Caribbean diaspora. H. Adlai Murdoch argues that in an individual's "exile" and dispersal" through a diasporic history, the Carnival space "mediates origin and return" (576). Once Camille becomes a part of the circum-Caribbean network, her migration and movement away from her identity in coming to New Orleans is reassembled through the performance of the Carnival. Murdoch proposes the Carnival as a syncretic space because the Carnival performers draw on the "transformative character of the Caribbean diaspora" and the circum-Atlantic in order to "creatively redefine broader, long-held notions of nation, identity, and belonging" (577). Camille's engagement with this syncretic space would gain what Roach describes as, in regard to New Orleans's communities of African descent, "resilient solidarities within their own castes and kinship networks" (Roach 22). In finding fascination with the upending glittery world of femininity, Camille's search for a network of people in order to gain self-definition is made possible as a result of the syncretic, diasporic, circum-Atlantic site of resistance and performance.

I want to take a moment and consider the significance of Carnival performance and what that means for Camille in terms of her identity formation. Roach defines "performance" in the Circum-Caribbean Carnival as movements where memory and imagination merge together (25). An even more important term in regards to identity formation is "Circum-atlantic performance," which is defined as a performance that "so often carr[ies] within [it] the memory of otherwise forgotten substitutions— those who were rejected and, even more invisibly, those who have

succeeded” (Roach 5). In other words, a Circum-atlantic performance is a “sophisticated disguise of Diaspora memory” that “reinvents an African cultural pattern in its New Orleans social context” (Roach 24). Because the performance hinges on memory as well as imagination, Camille, in succumbing to the convent’s catechistic reform, is at risk of not being able to fall into step within the patterns of a circum-Caribbean performance. However, Roach argues that a Carnival performance in New Orleans specifically is the “the imaginative re-creation and repossession of Africa” (Roach 207). The imaginative re-creation of the African body troubles the spectacle of the enslaved body--in Camille’s case, the abject Black female body-- and more importantly revises the memory of the performer. As slaves were forced to move and dance on slave blocks--in other words, subject to forced movement through the entirety of their lives--and as Camille’s gestures of domesticity and religiosity are carefully orchestrated-- the improvisation and autonomy in circum-Caribbean Carnival performance stimulates an alternative timeline to the long history of enslaved movement. Through countering the past, the circum-Caribbean Carnival performance also looks towards the future by transforming the complex social space it inhabits, ultimately, opposing and transforming the oppressive structures of its city through the alternative collective identity.

Even though theorists describe the circum-Caribbean Carnival as connecting to lost identities within an African cultural practice, Dunbar-Nelson gives us a character who does not know her origins. Dunbar-Nelson posits that Camille’s self-definition is not found in the familial, kinship structure, as it would align with heteronormative ideologies. She asserts that as a result of Camille’s attraction to the ambiguously gendered figure at mass, the circum-Caribbean Carnival would allow for an exploration of desire and a creation of intimacy networks. For instance, Dunbar-Nelson creates the Carnival as an “intensely exhilarating” carnal space full of

desire, describing images of bodies mingling and colliding and a place of intense desire “making one long to cut capers” (97). The movement and intimacy of Dunbar-Nelson’s Carnival falls in line with Édouard Glissant’s idea of relations. Glissant defines the shared violent experience of the diaspora--the separation and alienation--as the “abyss,” and out of that comes a need to decolonize oneself in a post slavery society through the mode of relations (34). Glissant’s idea of “relations,” in the way it fits in with Camille’s search for relations, is defined by its “movement,” as it is transformative, free, “in harmony and errantry,” and never becoming fixed to totality (171). What relations breeds is the “imaginary becoming concrete” (Glissant 208), meaning that in this story’s instance, Camille’s imagined desires for intimacy are made possible through this mode of connection. Rather than Camille being fixed in her identity as an orphan with anonymous origins and confined to a life in the convent, Dunbar-Nelson claims that Camille is able to imagine an alternative personhood and a new society as well. Even though most scholars push back on the idea of the Carnival being a utopia, it does circulate in the public imagination an alternative representation of African American cultural identity.

In addition to a circum-Caribbean performance that hinges on memory and imagination for an alternative identity and an alternative society, these new gestures that the Carnival requires of Camille are rooted in a history of subversive identity construction through the dynamic process of “self-fashioning.” Historically, the Mardi Gras Indians, for example, participate in elaborate costume building that breeds solidarity amongst the performers (Roach 194). The Carnival performer not only performs in dance but “he performs the gestures and actions” of sewing “the feathers and beaded costumes, and he sings the songs, all of which constitute the performance” (Roach 198) The costume serves as “surrogate for the body as its creator” and “the suits should not be thought of as artifacts but as performances themselves” (Roach 206). For Dunbar-Nelson,

costuming among the performers translates as a way to act out a fluid identity construction. She describes a vivid scene of the Carnival where she's concerned with the multiple possibilities for identity construction as a result of diversification in costuming. She writes:

The streets are a crush of jesters and maskers, Jim Crows and clowns, ballet girls and Mephistos, Indians and monkeys; of wild and sudden flashes of music, of glittering pageants and comic ones, of befeathered and belled horses; a dream of colour and melody and fantasy gone wild in an effervescent bubble of beauty that shifts and changes and passes kaleidoscope-like before the bewildered eye" (97).

The costumes, a clear contrast from Camille's heavy religious gown, create an entanglement of bodies, a nexus of glittering performers through their disruptive self-fashioning, especially as it is described as "fantasy and fancy and grotesqueness" that "run wild in the costuming and the behavior of the maskers" (100). Within the obscene Carnival space, Camille can then essentially define for herself who she wants to become, even blurring the boundaries of her sexual identity. For instance, the story of "Odalie" shows the female protagonist dressed as a boy (98) where a Carnival performer looks at the young girl's slender figure and suggests she dresses as a troubadour. The young girl then takes on the identity of an artist, a person capable of exercising and executing alternate realities.

Carnival costuming can also represent a liberated female sexuality, which occurs through the image of the butterfly. Strikingly, Dunbar-Nelson includes the image in the kaleidoscope of performers: "young men and women in dainty, fairy-like garb, dancers, and dresses of the picturesque Empire, a butterfly or two and dame here and there with powdered hair and graces of olden times" (140). According to Brad Evans, the butterfly "connoted sexual desire in the public sphere, a symbol of flirtatious American girls and queer male cosmopolitans" (112). Butterflies,

linked to Oscar Wilde and more broadly to the Decadence Movement, were seen as migratory, feminine, and decorative. In her own life, Dunbar-Nelson has been described as coquettish, flirtatious, and sexual and Dunbar, her husband, knew about her reputation as a ““pretty, bright butterfly, a flirt”” (Alexander 45). More importantly, the butterfly elicits a metamorphosis aspect to the body, which again, reveals that the performers desire to exercise an alternative personhood. For Camille, while the body in convent or society is seen as something to be repressed and policed, the body in the Carnival is transformed and seen free from the restrictions of a segregated society through the acts of masking, performance, and self-fashioning.

Despite the Carnival’s transformative, utopian qualities, Dunbar-Nelson underscores this potential when she shows the darker, violent side of the New Orleans Carnival for specifically the Black Southern female body. As the gendered body becomes non-obscured in the Carnival’s exhibition, it becomes even more regulated than in the “intimate” moments of subjugation. In the public space, the Black Southern female body becomes society’s way to correct the cultural and social anxieties about a shifting national identity. For instance, Patricia Yeager argues that when Southern women’s bodies are moved towards the grotesque in its resistance to spectatorship, they also become a “punished body” (3). Yeager quotes Sheryl Stevenson saying that “the carnival grotesque does not produce ‘fecund abundance and utopian becoming’ for women, ‘but inescapable decay, pain, debasement, and death’” (77-78). Just as Flo in the “Carnival Jangle” is invited to perform and cross-dress in the Carnival performance, resulting in her death, Dunbar-Nelson tragically ends the story with Camille’s confinement. The young nun’s desire to leave the convent is intercepted when she overhears two fellow nuns whispering that her ambiguous origins would lead to rejection from the outside world. Camille retreats back into the convent and the heavy, brown door closing behind her. Gloria T. Hull connects the convent door closing on

Camille to Angelina Grimke's story entitled "The Closing Door," where the protagonist becomes deeply troubled after her brother is lynched and her insanity is a response to an unsafe world. In the same way, Dunbar-Nelson critiques the unsentimental, monstrous reality of society's failure in protecting Black women through Camille's retreat into the convent as the still, immobile punished body.

Dunbar-Nelson and Modernism: African American, Queer, and Decadence Modernism

Regional fiction and the local color genre are no longer suitable genre classifications for Dunbar-Nelson as "Sister Josepha" presents not just portraits of Creole life but an entanglement of queer desire, search for relations, and a connection to a diasporic past. Dunbar-Nelson's engagement in early renderings of Black identity formation becomes important to understanding the development of the modernist movement, specifically the African American modernist movement. James Smethurst in *African American Roots of Modernism* argues that African American writers like Paul Laurence Dunbar and W.E.B. DuBois produced literature during an era secured by Jim Crow logic in which their works impacted "American notions of modernism" and gave way to the literary expression (2). In his analysis, Smethurst leaves out writers like Dunbar-Nelson, but her early works, as evidenced by "Sister Josepha," engaged with the turbulent transition from Reconstruction into the Jim Crow era and reveal that she was thinking about what modernity meant to African Americans prior to the twentieth century.

Dunbar-Nelson highlights in the story how the outcomes of the Jim Crow South motivate Camille's decision to devote her life to the convent. Menke argues that "Dunbar-Nelson was well aware that the turn-of-the century was defined by dispiriting racial and gender turmoil" as "Jim Crow and other conservative Southern laws countenancing racial separation and inequality for

Blacks were firmly ensconced” (Menke 84). Returning to Camille’s adoption, when presented with the opportunity to become a part of a presumed white family, she observes that “the woman suited her; but the man! It was doubtless intuition of the quick, vivacious sort which belonged to her blood that served her ... and it made her feel creepy” (Dunbar-Nelson 120). Camille’s intuition towards the man leads her to reject adoption. Here, Dunbar-Nelson radically resists the nineteenth century New Orleans figure of the “tragic octoroon,” which Emily Epstein Landau argues, in literary production, “encoded and embodied” societal ideas of the racial divide. As the story goes, the beautiful girl raised in an “aristocratic privilege” undergoes familial loss and as a result, is sold to traders and succumbed to sexual slavery (Landau 51). For a story set in New Orleans, what this would mean for Camille, according to Landau, is to inhabit a space that

“existed at the crossroads of the white middle class’s desired binarism in race and sexuality, violating middle-class moral sensibilities and the dualistic imperatives of Jim Crow: this commercial sex district advertised interracial sex, with ‘octoroon’ prostitutes as its special attraction” (Landau 17).

By resisting assimilation into a heteronormative family structure and becoming a fetishized body, Camille disrupts the logic of the Jim Crow era and maneuvers around the perpetuated images of the “tragic octoroon.”

Dunbar-Nelson in “Sister Josepha” foregrounds the relationship between modernist wayward thinking with the formation of Camille’s queer desire, suggesting she is interested in modernism’s concerns with women breaking out their repressed selves and presenting “waywardness” to their sexual identity. This type of sexually liberated woman asserted in the short story aligns with Saidiya Hartman’s notion of the Black woman in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*. Hartman defines “waywardness,” in its extrication from the oppressive

structures, as becoming a “beautiful experiment in how-to-live,” much like the improvisation of Camille’s Carnival performance, the “practice of possibility,” and wildly “unrepentant” (228). The boredom that Camille experiences as a result of her convent life, as she realizes that “it’s so dull here” and “I am so young” (122), primes her for Hartman’s definition of wayward thinking in order for her to begin exploring “what might be” (228). Later in the story, Camille thinks of leaving the “torturing life of inertia” (128) and these moments of dullness open Camille up to let her mind wander, imagining desires beyond her repressive life at the convent, mirroring Hartman’s sentiments that “young Black women were radical thinkers who tirelessly imagined other ways to live and never failed to consider how the world might be otherwise” (xv). Hartman encapsulates Camille’s experience in the convent through another young Black woman’s own experience, writing that “masked behind the quiet demeanor, the cultivated manners, the very fair and very pretty appearance, was a quiet turbulence” (208). Camille’s quiet turbulence brought on by her imaginative thinking is the force for her to begin asserting herself as a “sexual agent” and to explore her desires and destabilize categories of womanhood.

Not only is Dunbar-Nelson foregrounding African American modernism, but as a result of Camille’s burgeoning sexual transgressiveness from her newly found attraction, the young nun’s experience can be linked to Queer Modernism and the Decadence movement. Aligning with Queer Modernism’s ideas about “pervasiveness” and “perpetual motion,” the story interestingly proposes the Carnival as having an atmosphere of deviance and decadence. In fact, Camille’s monotonous life in the convent is disrupted when “a great fete day was coming” and within the confined space, “an atmosphere of preparation and mild excitement pervaded the brown walls of the convent like a delicate aroma” (123). As a result of the Carnival’s “scandalous visibility of decadence,” Camille’s sexual awakening happens even behind the closed doors, which posits

what Benjamin Kahan calls the pervasiveness of queerness in our everyday life (353). Drawing her out to the open space of the Carnival counteracts what Kahan calls “claustrophilia,” a confinement of the bodily desires, and places her in transit into the “fugitive pace of queer modernism.” Here, Camille can engage with movement of the Carnival to experience an “unrestrained sexuality” in the transgressive, queer space known as a modernist counter cultural sphere.

Camille’s boredom that cultivates wayward thoughts through a wandering mind speaks to the Decadent Movement’s “intellectual figure,” whose modes of thinking move beyond societal norms. Richard Dellamora’s work on the Decadence movement considers the dangers of solitude in exploring desires beyond the norm by positing that when “intellectual figures” are in moments of isolation and solitude, they find themselves “degenerate,” a term used to Other the queer community (537). If Camille stays in her isolated community of the convent, at least from any type of expression of individualism, she would limit her possibility to explore her identity in relation to others. Instead, her wayward thinking leads her to desire “queer comradeship” as The Carnival, outside the convent, invites her to participate in a “modern counterculture” where she can explore a different type of becoming (Dellamora 543). Dellamora argues that once the intellectual figure moves outside of the norm, they need to form queer kinships to reimagine cultural norms of gender and sexuality. For Dunbar-Nelson, the circum-Caribbean Carnival values the collective as it includes “a pot-pourri of every conceivable human ingredient” (136). Dellamora argues that when participating in these modern countercultural spheres, we “are forced to recognize ourselves as sharing another mode of thought, another mode of culture, even at the risk of finding ourselves outlawed” (Dellamora 543). In the newly constructed outlawed

spaces, new social categories arise where Camille can then participate in queer comradeships in order to create an alternative identity.

Conclusion: The Archive of Queer Desire

In performing revisionist work on Dunbar-Nelson's early short stories, "Sister Josepha's" highlighted moments of transgressive, queer sexuality and femininity places the story into later literary movements such as African American Modernism, Queer Modernism, and the Decadence Movement. These modernist literary intersections thus break open the possibilities in Dunbar-Nelson's work to uncover early renderings of African American women in the transitory period of the fin du siècle who are negotiating emerging queer desires through restricted domestic environments. Just as we saw glimpses of an emerging queer desire in Camille, the story perhaps mirrors Alice Dunbar-Nelson nascently grappling with her own sexuality. In connection with Dunbar-Nelson's own life, Gloria T. Hull writes that "as [Dunbar-Nelson] grew older, [she] indulged more freely her taste for such sexual adventure" (68). Throughout her life, Dunbar-Nelson self-fashioned her own origins, creating for herself a Creole identity that allowed her to inhabit a fluid identity. Even though scholars criticize Dunbar-Nelson's ambiguous identity as not accepting her African American origins, her acceptance of a fluid identity shows that she saw identity as an unfixed concept. Thus, Dunbar-Nelson explores in "Sister Josepha" the struggle between assimilation and discovering a space for a new personhood and epitomizes double consciousness for a young Black woman during the turn-of-the-century. Her early works create the foundation for female writers who were interested in exploring a specifically Black identity and sexuality in a post slavery society. As Dunbar-Nelson's stories are recovered from the archive and the bodily performance of the circum-Caribbean Carnival can be read as an

archive of a lost identity, her life can also be read as a performance of a young Black woman in turbulence with her own dual identity in ever changing modern world.

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- Member: EGSB, social media coordinator (August 2020-Present)

University of Mary Washington

- Bachelor of Arts, English (May 2014)
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Virginia Highlands Community College (May 2008)

Associates in Liberal Arts

RELATED PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

- Writing Center Consultant and Graduate administrator—August 2020-May 2021
- Research Assistant—June 2020- Present
- Docent for the Oxford Historical Society—June 2019- March 2020
- Planning Committee for SW/SW

CONFERENCES

52nd Annual Northeastern MLA Convention—March 2021

Paper title: "Female Subjectivity and the Plantation in Coppola's *The Beguiled* and Beyonce's *Lemonade*"

Southern MLA 92: Scandal! Literature and Provocation: Breaking Rules, Making Texts—November 2020

Paper title: "The Worldly Glitter of Femininity: Gestures of Queer Desire in the Circum-Caribbean Carnival in Alice Dunbar-Nelson's "Sister Josepha."

Southern Writers/Southern Writing—July 2019

Paper Title: "Breaking the Curse": Southern Femininity and the Plantation Scopic Regime in Sofia Coppola's *The Beguiled* and Beyoncé Knowles-Carter's *Lemonade*.

SEWSA 19: Envisioning a Feminist and Queer South—March 2019

Paper title: “Two Selves are at War”: Southern Female Identity and the Regional Conflict in Sherwood Bonner’s *Like unto Like*, Oxford, MS, March 2019.

TEACHING

Instructor of Record: Writing 102: Food (Spring 2020)

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PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

7th grade English teacher at Lafayette Middle School (August 2016-May 2018)

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Creator and Leader of Ted-Ed Club at Lafayette Middle School (August 2017-May 2018)

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