

Ida B. Wells-Barnett's *The Red Record*

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Intro

Ida B Wells-Barnett's *The Red Record* is an argument against lynching as a means of enforcing law and order in the United States. It is not, merely, a condemnation of lynching; it is an argument, with structure purporting to logically interlink premises so as to support a conclusion. It thus adduces reasons against a practice that many would say is totally unreasonable - and, indeed, so evidently unreasonable that the point scarcely needs to be argued. But argue it Wells-Barnett did, and the focus of my investigation in this essay shall be on what her argument is supposed to achieve and why she has arranged it in the manner she did.

It is not the case that extra-judicial killing has vanished as a method of enforcing a social order. The lynch-mobs of Wells-Barnett's day may have disappeared, but as I write this essay the United States - and much of the world beyond - is once more in uproar as footage of the extra-judicial murder of a black man, accused of a most trivial crime, came to light. This the latest of many such outrages in recent years. Perhaps as you read this essay a similar uprising shall be in process, or you will remember when recently it was - or anticipate it soon being so again. Under such circumstances Wells-Barnett's work will always seem pertinent. It is thus no coincidence that as the spectre of police violence towards African Americans has haunted American public life and political discourse, Wells-Barnett received a posthumous Pulitzer prize (Silkey 2020). More broadly, brute force and associated intimidation are central methods of racial oppression, and likely to be with us so long as any sort of domination continues to blemish the earth. By offering a detailed, well researched, examination of a particularly stark example of such evil, Wells-Barnett has offered future generations much data and a plausible analysis of said data to build upon.

However, beyond being informative about its first order subject matter Wells-Barnett's text, and Wells-Barnett herself, give us exemplars respectively for how to do socially relevant scholarship, and how to be an activist-scholar. The central tension I explore in this regard is the relationship between being persuasive to a hostile audience on the one hand, and doing work according to epistemic standards one endorses oneself. These are tensions any activist-scholar must navigate. I argue that through her style of work she realised a kind of epistemic self-determination that should be considered an admirable trait for scholar activists. Before explaining this, however, a summary of what this neglected classic actually says.

A Brief Survey of *The Red Record*

Published in 1895, *The Red Record*'s main goal is to press the case against lynching as a form of upholding justice. That lynching is unethical may seem so obvious as to not need serious defence, and we shall return to this thought in the conclusion. But Wells-Barnett addresses this herself within *Red Record*. She says that any Christian who knew the facts of the case would certainly oppose lynching (Wells-Barnett 2002a, pg 151 - henceforth all page number citations without attribution are to this text) - though as we shall see, there are dramatic ironies within the text on this point. But she also opens the text by recounting that at the time she writes African Americans were the subject of such dreadful propaganda that many thought even mass lynching might be justified against them. For, the charge was being made by defenders of this violence that lynching was the only way to prevent black men from raping white women, and the heinousness of the latter crime (pg. 60) as well as white Southern men's investment in the welfare and honour of women (pg. 62) justified this measure. So she takes her goal to at least be substantial in the following

sense: people are disposed to disbelieve her conclusion, and she has work to do in swaying them.

Her argumentative strategy is itself simple yet effective. She begins by presenting some statistics on the prevalence and spread of lynching in 1894, and the causes behind each case as reported by the *Chicago Tribune*. Immediately this makes the point that in most of these cases no rape was even alleged by the people involved at the time, undermining the propagandistic argument made on behalf of lynch law by its retrospective defenders. However, while this is often the point the book is remembered for (and even then often not properly credited - Harris 2003, pg. 217), the bulk of the book goes beyond making this simple point. Wells-Barnett spends the substantial middle portion of the book going through principles one might wish a fair or decent judicial system to satisfy, and arguing that examination of how these lynchings have worked in practice violate all of them in an oft horrific manner.

The principles Wells-Barnett argues are violated are as follows: one ought differentiate between those who are and are not mentally capable of culpability, which lynch-mobs routinely fail to do; due process is a requirement on an adequate system of justice, but since lynch-mobs make a mockery of this they clearly often target people who did not commit the crime in question; there must be proportionality between crime and punishment, but since lynching is applied to such a wide variety of cases this is impossible; and most basically of all punishment should not be applied where there is no crime even alleged, and yet lynch-mobs sometimes target such innocents. Each of these sections works by Wells-Barnett briefly introducing the central theme, then proceeding to go through various cases wherein the principle in question is manifestly violated in a horrific manner - always using white owned newspapers for their reports on events.

What follows is a rather interesting chapter in itself, the central message of which can be described as: lynching as a practice facilitates a pernicious ideology. This is an ideology in the sense of a set of claims people are widely aware of and which can permissibly be appealed to in legitimising their actions or legitimising the social order more broadly (see Táíwò 2018). Wells-Barnett argues that those familiar with the facts on the ground know full well that in many cases of alleged rape, there are “voluntary and clandestine” relationships going on between black men and white women. But given the anti-black racial prejudices of the day and the general desire of powerful Southern whites to maintain the subordination of blacks, it would be extremely inconvenient to acknowledge that such voluntary unions occur with reasonable frequency. As such the papers do not report honestly on what is going on. Lynching evidently serves as a powerful and shocking deterrent to such unions, it murders and thereby silences the black man involved while often gaining the participation of the white woman involved whose reputation now depends on denying the voluntary nature of the union. And finally, by perpetuating the line that such cases are invariably rape, it has “the effect of fastening the odium upon the race of a peculiar propensity for this foul crime”. (pg 109). As such, establishing the practice of lynching serves to establish something like the claim “black people are monstrous rapists who may, perhaps must, be violently suppressed if peace is to be had” as a publicly available justification for action (see also Wells-Barnett & Le Vin 1899, pg 1). Needless to say, this general disdain for black people further legitimises our subordination.

All this being argued, Wells-Barnett rounds the book out by pressing her case that something must be done about all this, reiterating that mealy mouthed compromises with lynching’s justifications are unacceptable, and calling upon those who read to get involved in the campaign against lynching. In words we shall return to, Wells-Barnett quite specific about what those who have been persuaded should do. “The very frequent inquiry made after my lectures by interested friends is “What can I do to help the cause?” The answer always is “Tell the world the facts.” When the Christian world knows the alarming growth and extent of outlawry in our land, some means will be found to stop it.” (pg. 151) Red Record is thus simultaneously an act of telling the world the facts and an inducement to pass this information on.

It will be important later on that the audience for the latter inducement, and hence the presumed audience for the text, seems to be white Americans. This because in the midst of calling the reader to anti-lynching action Wells-Barnett says one ought “[t]hink and act on independent lines in this behalf, remembering that after all, it is the white man’s civilisation and the white man’s government which are on trial” (pg 149). The apparent meaning of this is an appeal to the reader’s

sense of investment in the good name of the white man's civilisation and government. I will hence presume that Wells-Barnett had an intended audience of white people, and white Americans especially since at other times she refers to America as "our community and country" (pg 148).

Here, then, is what Wells-Barnett has established by the end of *Red Record*. The defences offered of lynching do not stand up to scrutiny when examined in light of the facts as reported by white owned newspapers. Further, those very same sources make it clear that the prevalence of lynching is leading to the flagrant violation of important principles any decent system of justice must satisfy. Finally, by perpetuating the pernicious ideology surrounding black people and their propensity to crime, lynching and the stories given in its defence serve to justify the brutal subordination of black people, all based on a lie. Since error and deception are so key to both how lynching is maintained and justified, and also part of the pernicious effect it has on the world, exposing the truth is a natural method of fighting it. This is what Ida B Wells-Barnett has done, and she exhorts you, the reader, to do likewise.

Red Record is a work of naturalistic applied ethics, or applied politics, or even in some sense applied legal philosophy. The great strength of the book is to blend together careful empirical investigation, self-conscious carefulness about the evidential sources used during that empirical investigation, and explicit moral reasoning in light of plausible general principles. In addition to the first order facts about lynching, its history and effects, one gains from this text, it also presents a model of applied philosophy that can fruitfully serve as a methodological paradigm for contemporary work.

To help draw its methodological interest out, I shall in the remainder focus on one of the methodological peculiarities of this work - ought Wells-Barnett to have restricted her evidence base to only the pronouncements made by white owned newspapers and white journalists? There is something at least *prima facie* odd about this, given that, first, this is strictly a subset of the evidence she possesses and thus might be felt to violate intuitive principles of good reasoning that are often thought essential for confirming one's claims (Good 1967). And, further, it is not just a subset of her evidence, but a subset which - as we shall see - she quite avowedly does not trust. I shall refer to this restriction of her sources to white newspaper sources as Wells-Barnett's evidential self-limitation. And I shall simultaneously address two questions - one, a hermeneutic question, why did she do this, and two, a normative question, can it have been a good idea to do as much? I shall claim that this was in fact a good strategy on her part both in light of her own projects and also normative goals we might endorse, and understanding why helps us see why her work can serve as a model for applied work in future.

A Rhetorical Counter to Epistemic Injustice?

There is an immediately apparent answer to our question, and one indeed suggested by the text. Wells-Barnett draws upon white owned newspapers and white journalists because she expects them to be trusted in a way that she does not expect black people in general, or herself as a black woman in particular, to be trusted. She thus tries to persuade her largely white audience by means of sources they will be inclined to believe. If one conceives of the text as primarily in the business of persuading people so as to rouse action this would then justify the evidential self-limitation to untrustworthy white sources.

I shall argue that there is something to this interpretation, but dramatic ironies in the text and others of her writings complicate the story. The rhetorical advantages of appealing to white authors are indeed noted by Wells-Barnett. But her method's justification ultimately lies in its epistemic features. This epistemic justification for her evidential self-limitation, I will argue, allows Wells-Barnett to realise ideals of self-determination.

That is not to say that Wells-Barnett does not clearly appreciate the rhetorical advantage of appealing to the words and work of white journalists. Wells-Barnett says when introducing the statistics she shall be working from that:

"The purpose of the pages which follow shall be to give the record which has been made, not by the colored men, but that which is the result of complaints made by white men, of reports sent over the civilised world by white men in the South. Out of their own mouths

shall the murderers be condemned. For a number of years the *Chicago Tribune*, admittedly one of the leading journals of America, has made a speciality of the compilation of statistics touching upon lynching. The data compiled by that journal and published to the world January 1, 1894, up to the present time has not been disputed. In order to be safe from the charge of exaggeration, the incidents hereinafter reported have been confined to those vouched for by the *Tribune*.” (Wells-Barnett 2002, pg. 68)

It is evidently significant that her choice of sources means the condemnation comes out of their own - presumably, saliently, white - mouths, and that she cannot be charged with exaggeration. Further, throughout the text, Wells-Barnett makes a point of noting her sources, and frequently draws attention to the fact that it is white journalists she quotes or white editors who approved certain stories etc. She even quite explicitly calls back to this rationale later, saying “Lest it might be charged that any deeds of that day are exaggerated, a white man’s description which was published in the white journals of this country is used” (pg. 78). Likewise she later notes that a “white person’s word is taken as absolutely for as against a Negro” (pg. 120) when discussing a case wherein intervention by white people vouching for a black person’s claims saved them from lynching.

In contemporary terminology, Wells-Barnett might be thought of as here pre-empting a sort of testimonial injustice or epistemic violence. For an example of how this might be spelled out, Kristie Dotson points out that “to communicate we all need an audience willing and capable of hearing us” (Dotson 2011, pg 238). To display such a willingness and capacity to listen is linguistic reciprocity. She then says that epistemic violence occurs just in case there is a “a refusal, intentional or unintentional, of an audience to communicatively reciprocate a linguistic exchange owing to pernicious ignorance” (ibid). Being systematically subject to such violence is one form of epistemic oppression (Dotson 2014).

With this in hand one can say that Wells-Barnett anticipates that her audience will not be willing or capable of hearing her out. This because as a black woman she was subject to epistemic oppression. As such she cannot expect reciprocity, and must take steps to avoid epistemic violence she would otherwise be subject to. To this end she has her point made “out of the mouths” of white men more likely to get a fair hearing. If one sees in *The Red Record* the primary goal as being to rouse action, the rhetorical goal of actually receiving uptake is very important to her purpose. The urgency of achieving this goal, and the fact that it requires reciprocity, would then justify the epistemic sacrifice of not using all her available evidence, and relying upon untrustworthy sources.

If this were all there was to say on the matter it could still hold lessons for contemporary activists or activist-scholars. For, the epistemic jiu jitsu involved in turning the words of “the malicious and untruthful white press” (Wells-Barnett 2002b, ch.4) against white supremacy is an example of what can be gained by judiciously engaging with the source material one’s opponents are working from. However, a fuller examination of the text and surrounding context makes this rhetorical reading of the text unlikely.

For, a key part of the text is that plenty of white people are in fact aware of these events and have not changed their minds about what is going on. For instance, as she notes:

“In July of this year, 1894, John Paul Bocock, a Southern white man living in New York, and assistant editor of the New York Tribune, took occasion to defy the publication of any instance where the lynched Negro was the victim of a white woman’s falsehood. Such cases are not rare, but the press and people conversant with the facts, almost invariably suppress them.” (pg 108)

Mr. Bocock is evidently supposed to be aware of the falsehoods he is perpetuating by this conduct. However, he simply does not care, and goes on perpetuating his lies. It might be thought

that he is unusually malicious, but then Wells-Barnett expressly says that such cases are not rare and that others like him invariably behave in the same way.

One might instead think that the problem is especially with Southern as opposed to Northern whites, and the hope is that the latter can be persuaded to act against the former. As we shall see there is good evidence that Wells-Barnett thought that something like this might work. But her preferred mechanism for bringing this about was not likely to be moral suasion towards the Northern whites. Some background to this is - by the time Wells-Barnett wrote *The Red Record* she had experienced censorship, and indeed threats of violence and destruction of property, owing to her own efforts to expose lynching through a black press in Memphis (Hardin & Hinton 2001). In light of this she had taken to giving speaking tours. Most pertinently, as she discusses in chapters 7 and 8 of *The Red Record*, she had given speeches in Britain. What's noticeable for our purposes is that she had been acutely aware that these had met with more success than her attempts to sway white Americans (Zackodnik 2005). She would indeed contrast the reception she got in Britain and America as being to the latter's discredit (Ochiai 1992, pg.371 - Appiah 2011 defends the efficacy of persuading people that international good name or national honour depends upon ending some grave injustice).

In fact, in chapter 7 she answers the charge that it is unpatriotic of her to try and appeal to support for the anti-lynching cause from England and else wise abroad. Against this she argues that there has been up to now little evidence that Americans are all that concerned to do anything about lynchings even when the facts are made apparent to them - though it should be noted that she expresses hope that this is in the midst of changing (pg 125). She prefaces her response to the charge of unpatriotic behaviour by saying that "If America would not hear the cry of men, women and children whose dying groans ascended to heaven praying for relief..." then no fair minded person could begrudge her going abroad. And she then says:

"If stating the facts of these lynchings, as they appeared from time to time in the white newspapers of America - the news gathered by white correspondents, compiled by white press bureaus and disseminated among white people - shows any vindictiveness, then the mind which so charges is not amenable to argument" (pg 121)

In short, it seems that it is not only Southern whites but (white) Americans more generally that Wells-Barnett was wary of actually being persuaded of the evils of lynching by being made aware of the facts. But, I have argued above, white Americans seems to be the intended audience of *The Red Record*. It thus does not seem to me that a practical purpose which required a rhetorically effective strategy can be the justification for the evidential self-limitation. Wells-Barnett could well, of course, have reasonably hoped that some in her intended audience would be persuaded, and was aware of what we would now call her epistemic oppression and how it affected her epistemic and rhetorical situation. But given her pessimism about white America's reaction to the facts even when they are known, I deny that it was her motivation to ensure she was believed on this point. Even if she were believed, white America's interest in perpetuating the suppression of blacks may induce many to simply ignore the facts. I thus see Wells-Barnett as appreciating a point that Du Bois famously only came to much later in his career (Du Bois 1990, pg.41), and think there are better justifications available for her evidential self-limitation.

To summarise the results of this section, Wells-Barnett might plausibly be making use of only white evidential sources for rhetorical reasons, to overcome prejudice. This could be justified on the grounds of noting the urgency of persuading people given the drastic evil of lynching, and a plausible analysis of the epistemic oppression of black women in Wells-Barnett's own circumstance. However, this would rely on believing that white Americans would, if faced with the facts, change their mind and change behaviour. There is some material in the text to support this. But on the whole *The Red Record* contains too many passages evincing scepticism about the degree to which acquaintance with the facts changes minds in white America, and the broader context of Wells-Barnett's own writings suggest this was not something she had much faith in. As such it would be preferable to seek an alternative justification of *The Red Record*'s evidential self-limitation.

Statistical Virtues

I shall offer a rationale for Wells-Barnett's evidential self-limitation that stresses its epistemic rather than rhetorical virtues. It is a speculative account of Wells-Barnett's rationale, but I claim that it is consistent with the text and features of her practice as an activist-scholar.

The key point is an elaboration of Wells-Barnett's remarks when she notes that her goal is to ensure that she cannot be charged with "exaggeration". What is underlying this is presumably the following: the white press is not just unreliable, but would make all their errors in the same direction. They were going to err on the side of attributing more, and more extreme, crime to black people, and less brutal and more well justified acts to white people. So by examining their records and basing her claims only upon what she finds there Wells-Barnett will certainly avoid any risk of over playing her hand. In fact, presumably, she draws attention to this security from charge of exaggeration precisely because the opposite is likely to be true - by drawing from this source she is likely to be understating, and it is likely to be more difficult to prove that lynching is a great injustice to black people, and that white lynch-mobs are acting with totally unjustified brutality. I will argue that the central epistemic virtue of *The Red Record* as a text come from thinking through what is gained by avoiding "exaggeration" in this particular manner.

Wells-Barnett arranged her evidence such that her central claims, I shall argue, passed a severe test. To see what this means and why it should be considered epistemically beneficial it will be necessary to take a brief detour through contemporary philosophy of science.

Explicit discussion of the epistemic ideal of what we should now call severe testing can perhaps be traced to Popper (1959), and is related to the error theoretic perspective of Neymann and Pearson. But is nowadays typically associated with the work of Mayo and Spanos (2006). Mayo and Spanos were engaged in the project of trying to show that classical statistical methods were an epistemically well justified way of carrying out ampliative or inductive inference. Mayo and Spanos succinctly tell us what it is to pass a severe test as such:

"A hypotheses H has severely passed a test to the extent that H would not have passed the test, or passed so well, were H false. (Mayo & Spanos 2006, pg. 350)

Mayo and Spanos then develop a number of technical proposals designed to show how classical statistical methods can ensure inductive reasoners carry out severe tests. Space will not permit going into too much detail as to why one might find more severe tests attractive. (For a book length elaboration and defence of the ideal of severe testing see Mayo 2018. For a good technical introduction as to how statistical severity relates to philosophical theories of evidence see the discussion in Fletcher & Mayo-Wilson 2019). The intuition, however, is clear enough - a hypothesis that has passed a severe test is one which we probably would have got rid of were it false. The fact that we find ourselves still warranted in holding on to a severely tested hypothesis thus gives us some security in taking it as the basis for further action.

Return now to Wells-Barnett's use of data and reports from white journalists. I claim that this evidential self-limitation meant that her hypothesis passed a more severe test than they might otherwise have done. Of course this discussion must remain at a broad qualitative level, but none the less I think the central lines of argument are clear enough that Wells-Barnett can safely be said to have secured this methodological virtue for her thesis. It would be anachronistic in the extreme, of course, to suggest that Wells-Barnett argued this way in order to (de dicto) secure for herself the epistemic good of severe testing. Rather, my contention is that it was in order to secure the underlying intuitive epistemic goods which the technical machinery for implementing severe tests is meant to capture.

Wells-Barnett is advancing the central claims that, first, most lynching does not even purportedly respond to allegations of rape. And, second, that a number of core principles which must be satisfied by a decent system of justice are flagrantly violated by lynch-mobs. While she does make use of statistical information here, her method of validating these claims are largely informal, and in principle she has many choice points and (what we now call) researcher degrees of freedom available to her (c.f. Simmons et al 2011). There is some reason to worry that she will be able to

prove her central claims too easily, by cherry picking sources or drawing upon the interpretations of events from persons who already agree with her.

Wells-Barnett's evidential self-limitation immediately cuts down on this freedom, and does so in a way that apparently stacks the deck against her. By this choice she's only allowed to draw from a source which, were there evidence that lynching was in fact usually a response to alleged rape, would be keen to document and advertise as much. And, likewise, given how keen the malicious and untruthful white press was to defend Southern whites, if there was evidence that lynch-mobs had behaved judiciously it would be here. But this is just to say, if her claims were false, she would be unlikely to have been able to support them by appeal to these evidential sources. Her claims would not have passed the test of these evidential sources if they were false; but they have, and hence have passed severe tests. And by restricting herself to such sources and generally avoiding supplementing them with other news sources, Wells-Barnett ensures that only claims that pass severe test are allowed in. For the simple reason that it was only the severe tests that they were put to, only the kind of evidence base which would have caught them out were they to be false which did the work in validating them.

Not only is the epistemic self-limitation thus seen to be an epistemically defensible procedure, it is also in line with what might be expected of Wells-Barnett's general beliefs. Indeed, I shall argue in the next section that this way of justifying her procedure also allowed her to avoid a certain kind of mental domination. The repeated emphasis on avoiding exaggeration can be seen as a reference to the fact that her evidence source will, if anything, push in the other direction from her central claims. As just argued, this plausibly generates severe tests for her claims. Yet it might be thought odd that, unlike the previous suggestion, this rationale for the evidential self-limitation does not involve consideration of what will prompt action in the audience; it's attraction lies entirely in terms of the epistemic good of passing severe test. But I shall argue that this is not so odd in light of Wells-Barnett's statements on the intrinsic good of truth seeking.

For instance, in an essay from Christmas of 1895 on the role of women as a force for social good, she wrote that "... it is not queens, conscious of power... but yet the many workers and artists who minister to their love of the truthful and the beautiful, that most possess this influence for good" (Wells-Barnett 1895, pg 181). Here she is directly saying that those who work out of the love of what is truthful are those who will bring about social change. That latter is, of course, a pragmatic good; but it is secured by being the sort of woman who loves truth in an intrinsic fashion. Note that the language here could be read as suggesting that one needs both the epistemic and aesthetic concerns to be a good activist - this might then in turn suggest a close alliance between the rhetorical and epistemic purposes of the text. I shall return to this in the conclusion.

Whatever her thoughts on the love of beauty, the importance of the love of what is truthful was always clear. It can also be seen in the opening to her narration in *Lynch Law in Georgia* where she says "[w]e submit all to the sober judgement of the Nation, confident that, in this cause as well as all others, 'Truth is mighty and will prevail'" (Wells-Barnett & Le Vin 1899, pg.1). And all this is consonant with the closing chapter of *The Red Record* when encouraging readers to spread the word and change public opinion on lynching, she advises that they "let the facts speak for themselves, with you as their medium" (pg. 148). Recall also the advice to tell the world the facts as being the central take away for readers. Here, again, there is a suggestion that good will come from the epistemic achievement of being a medium through which facts may speak.

There is no doubt a tension here between these pronouncements and her distrust in her white readership, and before concluding I shall explore that tension. But for now suffice it to note that Wells-Barnett seems to think that an intrinsic concern for the truth is admirable, and that work produced in line with that intrinsic concern can change the world. It thus seems plausible that the fact that the epistemic-self-limitation would secure an epistemic good would be in itself enough to explain Wells-Barnett's own adoption of the procedure; she wrote for truth, not just for direct persuasiveness.

To summarise the argument of this section, I sought a rationale for the epistemic self-limitation that was not directly tied to the good of ensuring that white people came to see the facts. This was found in noting that Wells-Barnett's mode of argument ensures her central claims have passed severe tests, an intuitively desirable epistemic property nowadays studied by philoso-

phers of statistics. Not only does this provide an attractive epistemic rationale for Wells-Barnett's evidential self-limitation, but Wells-Barnett's herself suggests that it is important for her mode of activism that her texts be epistemically well motivated. It thus seems to suffice as a motive for her work that it would be epistemically virtuous to proceed as such, without it necessarily having the sort of direct rhetorical or practically-persuasive advantages that were claimed for the former rationale.

Lessons for a Scholar-Activist

Wells-Barnett was an activist and an intellectual. As Collins puts it, “[u]nlike contemporary distinctions made between intellectual production and activism, Wells-Barnett managed to do both” (Collins 2002, pg. 9). Guided by Collins' contextualisation of Wells-Barnett's work, I have been trying to draw attention to the interplay between Wells-Barnett's urgent need to persuade and spur action on the one hand, and her high epistemic purpose and reverence for truth seeking as an admirable goal in itself, combined with a realistic understanding on how much she could hope to sway white Americans in any case, on the other. These were not strictly separable features of her work. In this section I explain this feature of Wells-Barnett as a scholar activist in more detail, and draw out an explicit moral for contemporary readers. What exactly is the relationship between the attempt to be persuasive to a white audience who cannot be trusted to care, and the attempt to do work according to plausible epistemic standards.

Wells-Barnett is part of an African American intellectual tradition which places great stock in the importance of “describ[ing] the truth of Black lives in a way that gives agency to African Americans” (Collins 2002 pg 15). She had a central moral proposition that she hoped both to prove and encourage belief in - as she put it in the introduction to the 1892 text *Southern Horrors* “The Afro-American is not a bestial race. If this work can contribute in any way towards proving this, and at the same time arouse the conscience of the American people to a demand for justice... I shall feel I have done my race a service” (Wells-Barnett 2002b pg. 26). Note, again, that proving the point and persuading people to take action towards justice are both listed as goals for her work - but clearly separated, at least analytically, in how Wells-Barnett describes her own purpose for work. She hopes to persuade, but recognising this as a distinct goal from trying to do good work according to her own epistemic standards. This analytic separation allowed Wells-Barnett to generate a mode of scholar-activism that encourages mental self-determination as a step along the path to general liberation.

Wells-Barnett can plausibly be seen as a forerunner to the militant African American movement of the 1960s (Curry 2012). In memorable words found in *Southern Horrors* she said that African Americans could learn from both the failures of the justice system to protect black people and the success of some people in fighting off lynch-mobs. As she put it:

“The lesson this teaches and which every Afro-American should ponder well, is that a Winchester rifle should have a place of honour in every black home, and it should be used for that protection which the law refuses to give. When the white man who is always the aggressor knows he runs as great risk of biting the dust every time his Afro-American victim does, he will have greater respect for Afro-American life. The more the Afro-American yields and cringes and begs, the more he has to do so, the more he is insulted, outraged and lynched.” (Wells-Barnett 2002b, pg.52)

And this is far from the only time one sees Wells-Barnett expressing such radical sentiments. She also advocated labour radicalism to force Northern capital to intervene against Southern whites:

“In the creation of this healthier public sentiment, the Afro-American can do for himself what no one else can do for him. The world looks on with wonder that we have conceded so much and remain law-abiding under such great outrage and provocation. To Northern capital and Afro-American labor the South owes its rehabilitation. If labor is withdrawn capital will not remain. The Afro-American is thus the backbone of the South. A thorough knowledge and judicious exercise of this power in lynching localities could many times effect a bloodless revolution. The white man's dollar is his god, and to stop this will be to stop outrages in many localities,” (Wells-Barnett 2002b, pg.50)

I note in passing that whereas here Wells-Barnett suggests an idolatry of mammon is typical of the white man, in *The Red Record* it is specifically the Christian world that she says will be moved to act by being presented with the facts.

And she presciently advocates a public transport boycott in the American south as a way of garnering support (Wells-Barnett 2002b pg. 51) before summarising her point thusly:

“The appeal to the white man’s pocket has ever been more effectual than all the appeals ever made to his conscience. Nothing, absolutely nothing, is to be gained by a further sacrifice of manhood and self-respect. By the right exercise of his power as the industrial factor of the South, the Afro-American can demand and secure his rights, the punishment of lynchers, and a fair trial for accused rapists” (2002b, pg.51)

What one finds in these extracts from *Southern Horrors* again and again is a clear sense that it is only by standing up for ourselves, by engaging in “self-help” as one of *Southern Horror’s* chapters is called, can we hope to secure justice. Her emphasis is on African American self liberation. I believe this same spirit can be seen as underlying the model of the scholar-activist in *The Red Record*.

For what one gains from this sort of epistemically conscientious scholar-activism is a sense of mental self-determination. We are doing our thinking for ourselves when we concern ourselves with what actually constitutes a good argument for our claims, rather than what would be persuasive to a hostile audience. The latter grants anti-black racists a subtle but pervasive power, as even when reasoning for ourselves we are orienting ourselves around them, their standards, what they should be likely to believe. Wells-Barnett makes the best case she can because that matters to her; but by serving as a medium for the facts in this way, by evincing a love of what is truthful, she is also self-empowering. Generating knowledge in a fashion that is acceptable to her, and useful to her projects in so far as knowledge of our power assists in the judicious exercise of said power. She did not spurn assistance from sympathetic whites where she could get it (King 2004, pg. 127) and did clearly make strategic use of allies in Britain (Silkey 2015). But her methodological choices as a scholar-activist reflect her overriding concern that black people do for ourselves - we think for ourselves, according to standards that we ourselves endorse as reflecting our own love of the truthful. By such self-empowerment we may hope to win the future.

Wells-Barnett is nothing if not clear that there is, of course, a link between good knowledge and successful action. Schechter (2001) describes Wells-Barnett’s intellectual style as that of a “visionary pragmatist”, which accords well with the picture I have drawn here. So I am not saying that Wells-Barnett had a project of knowledge for knowledge’s sake. In the end the goal was to change the world and secure rights for black people. The claim is simply that we shall achieve that worthy end best by becoming both mentally and physically self-determined, and that involves due love for truth, and a well grounded knowledge of the facts as they pertain to us. It requires that we make the best case we can for our claims not in the hope that we will persuade thereby, but because we are working to our own standards, and invested in securing both truth and our rights. It requires an epistemically conscientious form of scholar-activism, just like that of Ida B Wells-Barnett. All of us who would seek to not just interpret but change the world can stand to learn from her work and example.¹

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