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'Obituary, gender, and posthumous fame: the *New York Times* Overlooked project'

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the *New York Times*' 'Overlooked' project, an online memorialising enterprise dedicated to providing 'forgotten' celebrities (mostly women) with retrospective obituaries. Launched on International Women's Day 2018 with the aim of addressing the gendered and racialised inequalities inherent in obituary selection, the project attempts to rectify the *NYT*'s omission of notable figures from its obits section. Focusing on two case studies from the first cohort of these belated obits – Charlotte Brontë and Ida B. Wells-Barnett – this article examines how the retrospective nature of the project affects the structure, content and function of the celebrity obituary. Considering the issues at stake in remembering and reframing 'overlooked' lives from the past, it questions whether focusing on historically overlooked celebrities works to redress social injustice and increase diversity of representation in the present.

KEYWORDS

Celebrity; Charlotte Brontë; commemoration; death; Ida B. Wells-Barnett; inequality; news media; race

Introduction

Which lives get to be remembered in obituaries? In his study of the genre, Nigel Starck identifies six, interrelated categories which are typically grounds for inclusion: fame, association with fame, single acts of notoriety, heroism, villainy, and eccentricity (2006, p. 107). In addition, Starck notes, 'it helps to be male' (2006, p. 195). As a range of studies have demonstrated, gender imbalance has long been a feature of obituary columns in North American, British and Australasian newspapers; male subjects consistently outnumber female subjects, but also typically have greater space accorded to their life stories, and are more likely to be discussed in terms of their individual careers and achievements rather than as an adjunct to someone else's celebrity (Kastenbaum *et al.* 1977, Bytheway and Johnson 1996, Maybury 1996, Moremen and Craddock 1999, Hume 2000, Starck 2006). Notably, the dominance of male subjects in obituary columns is not only a feature of Anglophone print media. While recognising that obits have culturally specific meanings and conventions, and can vary in content and format from nation to nation, Mushira Eid (2002) identifies a bias in favour of men's obituaries in Arabic – and

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Persian – as well as English-language publications, highlighting the cross-cultural dimensions of the trend.

The kinds of gendered inequalities that exist around celebrity value in life thus continue to be produced and consumed after death (Penfold-Mounce 2020). They also intersect with other forms of social disparity and discrimination. In Western contexts, Black, Asian and Indigenous lives tend to be underrepresented in obituary columns (Hume 2000, Starck 2006), and the sexual orientations of homosexual and queer subjects have not always been fully and openly acknowledged (Starck 2009). Class biases are also evident in obituary columns: despite trading in the meritocratic illusion of ‘distinctively individual achievement’, obituaries in national British newspapers focus predominantly on subjects who enjoyed some measure of social privilege in life, such as a private education (Fowler 2005, p. 62). In many ways, these patterns of representation are only to be expected: obituary columns invariably ‘reflect the dominant society’s cultural constructions’ (Hume 2000, p. 12). They are part of the fabric of ‘social or collective memory’, revealing who ‘we respect in capitalist modernity’ (Fowler 2005, p. 53). Yet, while holding up a mirror to existing sociocultural norms, obituary columns are also active in *shaping* prevailing values and ideals. Obituary pages ‘create their own “reality”’ (Eid 2002, p. 86); editorial judgements and selections work directly to determine which lives are to be recognised and commemorated, and which are to be passed over and ignored.

It was in response to the longstanding gendered and racial biases of news obituaries that Amisha Padnani, an editor on the obituaries desk for the *New York Times* (hereafter *NYT*), decided in 2017 to create ‘Overlooked’, a project that seeks to memorialise in the present remarkable people from the past whose deaths originally went unreported in the newspaper. Padnani and her collaborator, Jessica Bennett, explain on the project’s website that, ‘since 1851, the *New York Times* has published thousands of obituaries’, but the ‘vast majority’ of these ‘[chronicle] the lives of men, mostly white ones’ (Padnani and Bennett 2018). Albert Sun confirms that since the newspaper’s formation in 1851 only ‘between 15 and 20% of our obituary subjects have been women’ (2018). Looking back through the newspaper’s archives thus delivers ‘a stark lesson in how society valued various achievements and achievers’ (Padnani and Bennett 2018). Among the high-profile omissions from the *NYT*’s past obituary columns are celebrated female writers, photographers and musicians who achieved fame in their own time, such as Nella Larson, Diane Arbus and Ma Rainey. Padnani is careful to note that the reasons behind these subjects’ non-inclusion are not known, and may be accidental rather than purposeful (Padnani 2018). In an essay linked to the Overlooked project, *NYT* obituaries editor William McDonald (2018) argues that the newspaper’s selectivity has as much to do with practical concerns of space as conscious or unconscious bias. However, as Janice Hume points out, exclusions, ‘whether deliberate or not’, offer important insights into cultural values, often proving to be as revealing as what is actually included in obituary pages (2000, p. 86).

Starting with a short history of the obituary form and its relationship to Western celebrity culture, this article will go on to explore two case studies from the Overlooked project: Charlotte Brontë and Ida B. Wells-Barnett. Our selection of these subjects was influenced by our research specialism in nineteenth-century celebrity culture: we were keen to discover how the biographies of two women famous in their own time would be reimagined and reconstructed by the *NYT* for a modern audience. Our article will examine how the retrospective nature of the Overlooked project affects the structure, content and

function of the celebrity obituary, and will consider some of the issues at stake in remembering and reframing 'overlooked' lives from the past. In so doing, the article questions the extent to which focusing on historically neglected celebrities works to redress social injustice and increase diversity of representation in the present. We conclude by arguing that despite the Overlooked project's reparative intentions, traditional biases remain evident in contemporary obituary selection.

A history of the obituary

Originally 'a register in which deaths, or obit days, are recorded' (*OED*), the obituary has its roots in the religious cultures of classical and medieval Europe, where churches and monasteries would keep lists of the dead 'in order that prayers for the soul of the departed might be offered on his or her anniversary' (Bullard 2020). Although these early necrologies lacked the biographical narrative now associated with the obituary form, in common with their modern-day successors they were both selective and hierarchical: 'only members of the Order, royal and ecclesiastical personages, founders, patrons and benefactors were commemorated by name in the precatory roll' (Waters 1870, p. 6).

A more expansive type of obituary, which combined a death announcement with an evaluation of the subject's life, emerged in the seventeenth century, 'the result of an innovative union between emerging news media' and more 'traditional sources' of commemoration, such as obit books, epitaphs and hagiographies (Clymer 2012, p. 285). Courantes and newsbooks in this period often published obituaries for European royalty, as well as notable political, religious and military leaders, generally constructing these figures as exempla, whose lives might profitably be emulated by the reading public. By the early eighteenth century, however, 'obituary sections began to include lurid or notorious lives, which were presented as negative paradigms', as well as exemplary biographies (Clymer 2012, p. 288). For instance, when dedicating part of his new monthly journal *The Post-Angel* to 'The Lives and Deaths of the most eminent Persons that die every Month', English bookseller John Dunton promised readers 'I'll omit no Life, whether good or bad, that has been remarkable' (1701, Preface).

Dunton's focus on *remarkable* lives – that is, lives demanding public notice or comment – hints at the growing relationship between obituary and celebrity in the eighteenth century. As the historian Antoine Lilti points out, the eighteenth-century obituary addressed 'a contemporary public curious to learn details about a life the principal traits of which [were] already known, and to share this communal event' (2017, p. 73). Unlike earlier forms of posthumous life-writing, such as classical prosopographies or collections of 'great lives', in which the subject of the text was remote from the reader, modern obituaries forged a sense of temporal and psychosocial proximity between the two. The obituary thus formed a key pillar of the print apparatus that supported the emergent celebrity culture of the eighteenth century. This period witnessed 'the relocation of death and its written inscriptions from the monumental materiality of the tomb to the two-dimensional medium of newspaper' and also saw a concomitant 'change in attitude towards fame that recognized the significance, in a newly commercial environment, of popular tastes and appetite' (Barry 2008, p. 261, p. 273). As the growing number of obituaries for actors, novelists, poets and artists in the eighteenth century suggests, fame was becoming progressively decoupled from aristocracy or high birth.¹ Reflecting

the outlook and interests of their middle-class readerships, newspaper and magazine obituaries increasingly commemorated subjects on the basis of their talents and contribution to public or cultural life, rather than their social status. The majority of those obituarised were men; female celebrities were commemorated, but notably their obits tended to focus less on their professional achievements than on aspects of their personal or family lives, establishing a gendered trend that can still be seen today.

By the nineteenth century, obituaries had become entrenched as a standard feature of Anglophone newspapers as editors came to realise their commercial potential. As Rebecca Bullard (2020) notes, 'the obituary is perpetually extensible, the inevitability of death guaranteeing a regular supply of fresh copy'. In a shift from eighteenth-century practice, nineteenth-century celebrity obituaries tended to be published as independent news items, separate from the brief death notices for unrenowned persons contained in 'Births, Marriages and Deaths' columns. Obituaries for particularly famous figures had the potential to significantly boost circulation. In the UK, *The Times's* obituary for British Prime Minister Lord Palmerston on 18 October 1865 added more than 11,000 to the newspaper's daily sales, while, in September 1852, the public demand for war-hero the Duke of Wellington's 47,000 word obituary was such that *The Times* reprinted it as a pamphlet for separate sale (Brunskill 2007).

Like most nineteenth-century newspaper content, celebrity obituaries were usually unsigned and, owing to the prevalence of syndication and 'scissors and paste' journalism during the period, they were often reprinted by multiple outlets, sometimes without attribution or acknowledgement.² The circulation of such standardised content about dead celebrities helped to secure but also potentially to ossify their posthumous reputations. Starck argues that obituaries printed in newspapers of record, in particular, 'achieve[d] the status of instant biography', serving as authoritative 'instrument[s] of historical record' (Starck 2006, p. xii, p. 46). The respectful, often deferential tone that characterised such obituaries carried on well into the twentieth century. It was not until the 1960s that a more intrusive or irreverent attitude towards celebrity lives began to seep into press coverage of the dead (The Obituarist's Art 1994, p. 54). In the 1980s, when previously dominant titles were in sharp competition for market share, famous people's obituaries became an important source of newspapers' human interest reporting, and the 'obituary as entertainment' was born (p. 54). The solemn, omniscient voice of nineteenth-century death writing was largely abandoned in favour of a more personalised, anecdotal style. Signed obituaries became the norm, apart from in *The Times* and *The Daily Telegraph* (UK), where the tradition of anonymous obituaries continues.

HT More recently, digital technologies have transformed the ways that audiences consume and interact with celebrity obituaries (Sisto 2020). In common with other types of news content, most newspaper obituaries have moved online (Hume and Bressers 2010, p. 255) and a number of leading English-language obituary pages, such as the *NYT's* (@NYTobits), the *Washington Post's* (@postobits) and the *LA Times's* (@latimesobits), have their own Twitter accounts. This shift has provided readers with new opportunities to comment on and recalibrate 'official' appraisals of celebrities' lives, to share personal feelings of bereavement and engage in collective forms of mourning. For instance, *The Guardian's* online obituary for Girls Aloud singer Sarah Harding in September 2021 generated 59 'below-the-line' comments, many of them criticising author Caroline Sullivan's focus on Harding's history of substance misuse, 'hardcore'

partying and failed relationships. One commentator accused Sullivan of ‘focusing disproportionately on the negative aspects of [Sarah’s] short life’, while another labelled the obituary ‘unkind and disrespectful’ (Sullivan 2021). Others expressed a sense of personal grief by addressing Harding directly or fashioning emotional connections with her family. As Ekaterina Haskins argues ‘The internet levels the traditional hierarchy of author-text-audience, thereby distributing authorial agency among various institutions and individuals involved in the production of content and preventing any one agent from imposing narrative and ideological closure’ (2007, p. 406). Online obituaries co-opt the reader as a co-producer of meaning rather than a passive consumer, and provide fresh opportunities for communities of fans to collectively mourn and interpret celebrity lives. It is within this context of digital commemoration, interactivity and the democratisation of voices that the *NYT*’s Overlooked project situates itself.

The Overlooked project

The Overlooked project launched on International Women’s Day (8 March) 2018 with the obituaries of fifteen ‘forgotten’ historic female figures. Among those selected to receive this first cohort of belated obits were the nineteenth-century author Charlotte Brontë (1816–1855); the African American journalist and civil rights advocate Ida B. Wells-Barnett (1862–1931); Qiu Jin (1875–1907), a revolutionary martyr and feminist poet; the writer Sylvia Plath (1932–1963); and Marsha P. Johnson (1945–1992), a pioneering transgender activist of the twentieth century. Since then, the project has become a regular *NYT* feature through which many more people from underrepresented and marginalised communities (including gay men and men of colour) have been granted retrospective obituaries. While the geographical focus of the project is predominantly North American, it also incorporates historically significant lives from around the globe, including China, South Korea, India, Egypt, Russia, Spain and Brazil.

Beyond the campaign’s aim to redress the gendered and racialised inequalities of the *NYT*’s main obituary selection, it also participates in the changing status and formation of the obituary from print to online format. The online versions of Overlooked obituaries each adopt a similar structure and layout: formed by a single, central column of text, they depart from traditional print obits in that they are interspersed with images of the celebrity and, in some cases, objects or documents associated with their lives. Such images can be read in tandem with the text, offering alternative routes to memorialisation. The online obituaries also foreground interactivity, soliciting personal investment in the project. The main web page invites readers to nominate their own candidates for Overlooked obits, while share buttons for social media platforms at the top of each article encourage readers to redistribute the content to their networks. Comments sections enable readers to publish their thoughts on individual obituaries, as well as on the wider ambitions of the Overlooked project and, in some cases, readers can choose whether to read the obituary text in English or in the language most associated with the person commemorated. Another notable facet of the online obituaries is that digital advertisements pepper the text, highlighting the commercial imperatives that exist alongside the Overlooked project’s ethical drivers (significantly, in order to gain full access to the project’s content, readers must subscribe to the *NYT*).

In terms of content, too, the Overlooked tributes differ from conventional print obituaries. Historically, necrologies have provided details about the deaths of their principal subjects as well as their lives, couching references to mortality in 'bodily, communal and religious terms' (Phillips 2007, p. 326). While the Overlooked obituaries acknowledge the cause and date of individuals' deaths, they do not typically lead with this information or linger over what Jason B. Phillips calls 'the biophysical aspects of dying' (2007, p. 326). Nor do they include the particulars of the funeral arrangements, or refer to surviving family members; this standard obituary content is rendered redundant by the project's retroactive status. More generally, creator Amy Padnani (2018) notes in her introductory essay on Overlooked, the project's editors 'decided to diverge from the traditional obituary style' and encourage 'writers to be creative with their storytelling'.

Yet, despite this putative interest in stylistic innovation and diversity of subject matter, an overarching pattern can be identified in the content produced under the Overlooked project's banner. The historical figures selected for commemoration are invariably framed as exceptional people or 'pioneers' who were in some way 'before their time'. In this way, they are tacitly co-opted as 'modern' celebrities, who align with and exemplify contemporary values and ideals. As Leo Braudy suggests, 'recovering the past is always linked to celebrating an aspect of the present' (1997, p. 294). In the two case studies that follow, we explore how the Overlooked project's retrospective obiturations of Charlotte Brontë and Ida B. Wells-Barnett say as much about the cultural values and demands of the present as they do about famous lives from the past.

Case study 1 – Charlotte Brontë

When the American periodical, the *Southern Literary Messenger*, published a review of Charlotte Brontë's third novel *Villette* (1853) in April 1853, it did so with recourse to the author's newly acquired, but notable, fame:

Charlotte Bronte [*sic*] is without doubt a most remarkable woman. Up to the publication of *Jane Eyre* three or four years ago, she was unknown. That wonderful story and its no less wonderful successor have fixed the fame of the author forever. Wherever men and women speak and read the English language, she is known – the thin disguise of "Currer Bell" having long since parted from her form – as the most powerful female writer of fiction that employs that language at all. We might go further. We might call her the most powerful now living. ('Notices of New Works', 1853, p. 253)³

In spite of her rising transatlantic fame, however, Brontë's death on 31 March 1855 from complications during pregnancy failed to elicit a response from the *New York Daily Times* (as the *NYT* was then called). The newspaper was unusual in its omission. Notice of Brontë's death was first published on 6 April 1855 in the *Daily News*, a London paper founded in 1846 by Charles Dickens. The commemorative piece entitled 'Death of Currer Bell', which has been attributed to the journalist and writer Harriet Martineau (1802–1876), was quickly appropriated and excerpted (occasionally without reference to the initial source)⁴ by various other newspapers including the *Leeds Mercury*, the *Chester Courant*, and the *Dover Telegraph*. Later obits appeared in *The Atlas*, the *Fifeshire Journal*, *Sharpe's London Magazine*, and *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in the United States.

HT As in the article published by the *Southern Literary Messenger*, Martineau's posthumous tribute to Charlotte Brontë underscores both the author's renown and her literary talent: she is described as a 'gifted creature' whose 'genius will yield us nothing more' ('Death of Currer Bell', 1855 p. 5). Unlike the outright admiration for the author's novelistic power professed by the American newspaper, Martineau's memorial piece tempers declarations of Brontë's literary brilliance with assertions of her feminine delicacy, humility, and restraint. We are told that although 'Fame waited upon all she did; and she might have enriched herself by very slight exertion', Brontë had a 'steady conviction . . . that the publication of a book is a solemn act of conscience' (p. 5). Rather than writing for pecuniary advantage or to satisfy her own ambitions, Brontë's limited creative productions are positioned as the result of careful control and moderation. Like her constrained literary output, Brontë herself is depicted in terms of womanly refinement and self-effacement. Her 'intellectual force' is compensated by her 'moral strength', which in turn contrasts strikingly with her fragile physical form: Martineau depicts Brontë as 'the smallest of women', a 'frail little creature' burdened by a 'feeble constitution' (p. 5). The celebrity-author is also figured as the epitome of middle-class respectability and a paragon of domesticated duty. Her 'humility' and 'self control' render her 'a perfect household image', while her feminine skills – she was 'as able at the needle as she was at the pen' (p. 5) – are consistent with her authorial prowess. In so framing Brontë's posthumous image, the obituary carefully navigates Brontë's literary celebrity and authorial legacy, reframing both in socially acceptable terms.

This manipulation of Brontë's image after death is typical of the posthumous representation of many famous nineteenth-century women writers. Textual memorials produced by family members, friends, and obituarists frequently figured the deceased woman writer as either the embodiment of permissible femininity or as an unwitting and unintentional celebrity (Ives 2012). Martineau's posthumous portrayal of Brontë plays into such narratives of gender and literary celebrity and thus sheds light on the social function of nineteenth-century obituaries. It also evidently informed the idealised and hyper-feminised image of Brontë evoked by Elizabeth Gaskell (1810–1865) in her influential biography *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857), upon which later biographers and obituarists – including Susan Dominus, the author of the *Overlooked* obituary – would draw. Gaskell's biography is often situated in academic criticism as central to the manipulation and reconstruction of her close friend's posthumous image (Showalter 1995, Miller 2002, Wynne 2017). The first biography of a famous female novelist produced by another renowned woman writer (Miller 2002), the biography attracted the attention of the *New York Daily Times*, which published a lengthy feature on it in June 1857 ('The Mystery of Jane Eyre').

In spite of the inaccuracies in Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (Miller 2002), the *Overlooked* obituary, entitled 'Overlooked No More: Charlotte Brontë, Novelist Known for "Jane Eyre"' (Dominus 2018), refers to this work throughout; it also mentions Martineau's republished death notice in the *Leeds Mercury*, thus acknowledging the custodial role these texts have played in the managing of Brontë's posthumous reputation and legacy. Just as Gaskell and Martineau's memorial writings reflect the gendered ideologies and cultural biases of their day, the contemporary obit plays into and enhances the concerns of the present moment. Whereas the nineteenth-century works stressed Charlotte Brontë's reserved and self-sacrificing nature, in Dominus's *Overlooked* obituary, Brontë

is most notably reframed in terms of ‘Girlboss’ feminism. Coined by Sophia Amoruso, the founder of the fast-fashion retail brand Nasty Gal, in her autobiography *#GirlBoss* (2014), the postfeminist neologism is entrenched in neoliberal discourse, significant for its celebration of individualism, ‘Girl Power’, and ‘Grind’ culture. In Dominus’s *Overlooked* obituary, Brontë is described in presentist terms that correspond with these cultural categories. She is repeatedly referred to as ‘fearless’ (2018), a quasi-feminist word that chimes much more readily with modern-day sensibilities than with nineteenth-century conceptualisations of fame, gender, and talent. Equipped with ‘a firm sense of her own worth – an enterprising spirit and ambition, and a longing for her own genius to find its way into the world’ (Dominus 2018), Brontë seemingly anticipates the ambitious and entrepreneurial ‘boss babe’ of twenty-first century celebrity and ‘influencer’ culture.

Significantly, Dominus also attempts to frame Charlotte Brontë’s publication of her works as an overt act of patriarchal resistance. In this contemporary retelling of the author’s life, Brontë is beset by male critics who attempt to dissuade her from publishing her poetry and fiction. Referring to Brontë’s correspondence with the renowned author and Poet Laureate, Robert Southey (1774–1843), in 1836–7, Dominus recounts Southey’s (in)famous suggestion that ‘Literature cannot be the business of a woman’s life: & it ought not to be’ (qtd. in Smith 1995, pp. 166–67). In defiance of this statement, Brontë we are told, ‘wrote back conceding the wisdom of his advice, then devoted much of her life to ignoring it’ (Dominus 2018). Here, Dominus fails to acknowledge Southey’s praise for Brontë’s poetry; nor does she realise the full context of the quotation in which Southey aptly recognises that a Victorian woman’s ‘duties’ (marriage and children) were typically at odds with a writing career (qtd. in Smith 1995, p. 167). In Dominus’s formulation, crafted as it is to appeal to a contemporary audience, Brontë’s response and subsequent literary career are brave acts of feminist insurrection.

Similarly, the episode in which Brontë is undeterred by Hartley Coleridge (1796–1849) and his less than encouraging response to her work, is employed by Dominus as evidence of Brontë’s innate and unwavering sense of self-belief. In spite of Coleridge’s ‘diffidence’, she is nevertheless driven by her ‘will to write, to publish, to be, in a sense, heard’ (2018). In contrast to the unassuming and accidental celebrity-author conjured by nineteenth-century obits, the Brontë of the *Overlooked* piece is motivated by an intense desire to succeed. Her strength of will is cited again when her early writings fail to achieve cultural and financial success:

When the poems did not earn the family fame, Brontë persisted, sending to publishers her and her sisters’ novels (also under assumed, gender-ambiguous names): Emily’s “Wuthering Heights,” Anne’s “Agnes Grey” and, a bit later, her own “Jane Eyre.” The daring contrivance played out like a plucky scheme, a plot point in some future novel . . . (Dominus 2018)

Here, Charlotte Brontë is depicted as a tenacious strategist and the architect of her and her sisters’ enduring fame. The key phrase ‘Brontë persisted’ both plays into this sense of female ambition and determination, and also strongly echoes the feminist expression ‘Nevertheless, she persisted’, which gained currency in 2017 after the United States Senate attempted to silence Senator Elizabeth Warren and her criticism of the Attorney General, Senator Jeff Sessions. Adopted by American feminists, the hashtag #shepersisted’ soon became a catch-all phrase for protesting the silencing of women in the cultural and

political arenas. Brontë's desire to write is thus tacitly aligned with a proto-feminist refusal to remain silent.

At odds with the 'fragile' and 'feeble' celebrity-author evoked by Martineau's obituary and enhanced in Gaskell's posthumous biography, the Overlooked project provocatively characterises Brontë as a 'survivor' (Dominus 2018). While nineteenth-century obits regularly used the term in a literal sense to convey that Charlotte Brontë had been the last surviving member of a large family (with the exception of her father, Patrick Brontë), in Dominus's account the term is loaded with cultural resonances. In this instance, Brontë is lauded for having apparently channelled her intense grief at the loss of her family into her creative productions. Dominus argues that in her writing, Brontë 'captured shades of emotion with a psychological subtlety that still feels exquisitely modern' (2018). If previous obits made apologies for Brontë's emotionally-charged novels by citing her personal loss and subsequent grief, the contemporary obituary situates the author's mental health as central to both her artistry and the way in which contemporary readers might approach, understand, and sympathise with the novelist. In a contemporary society in which mental health and wellbeing are increasingly prioritised and foregrounded, the significance of Brontë's works seemingly lie in their capacity to act as sites of emotional catharsis for both author and modern-day reader.

In an attempt to further reinforce the connection between Brontë's lived experience and her fictional works, Dominus turns to Lucy Snowe, the main protagonist of the author's semi-autobiographical novel *Villette*. Often theorised as the character most closely aligned with Brontë herself, Lucy Snowe is depicted by Dominus as 'battling depression' (2018). The anachronistic statement is enhanced when the obituarist claims that Snowe's 'strong response will feel familiar to many a 21st-century person who has the condition' (2018). While previous memorial writings often worked to separate Brontë from her fictional characters, Dominus's quasi-biographical reading of Lucy Snowe's 'depression' reinscribes the author's personality with that of her fictional heroine. Later, the obituary conflates writer and protagonist once more when Dominus, writing of Brontë's marriage to Arthur Nicholls in 1854, partially quotes the titular protagonist of *Jane Eyre*, when she states 'Reader, she married' (2018).

Following this statement, and towards the end of the obituary, Dominus grapples with the more conservative reality of Brontë's life as a mid-nineteenth-century wife when she acknowledges the celebrity-author's declining authorial output (an outcome prophesied by Robert Southey). Asking whether marriage stymied Brontë's creativity, the obituary speaks to modern-day anxieties around the conflicting demands of motherhood, work, and employment. Paraphrasing Southey, Dominus concedes that 'Literature would no longer be the business of her life' (2018). Not only did the exigencies of Charlotte Brontë's marriage and ensuing pregnancy apparently stifle her literary career, they are also ostensibly blamed for her untimely death. Dominus asserts that 'She died on 31 March 1855, only nine months after her wedding. She was pregnant, and unable to survive morning sickness so severe that complications from malnutrition and dehydration were the likely cause of death' (2018). Such speculations, presented here as fact, ignore the other possible causes of Brontë's death including pneumonia, typhoid, and tuberculosis (the latter was recorded as the cause of death by her doctor). In so doing, the Overlooked obituary frames Brontë's death in terms that echo its analysis of her life: a 'fearless' struggle against a patriarchal and misogynistic society.

Case study 2 – Ida B. Wells-Barnett

In recent years, heightened attention has surrounded the life of prominent African-American journalist, suffragist and civil rights activist Ida B. Wells-Barnett (1862–1931). In 2020, she was awarded a posthumous Pulitzer Prize special citation, while in 2021 the Light of Truth Ida B. Wells National Monument was unveiled in Chicago in her honour. Her legacy has also lately been recognised (and commoditised) in popular media and culture: she has been the subject of op-ed articles in *Teen Vogue* (2018) and *Glamour* (2021), and in 2022 she was commemorated as a Barbie doll as part of Mattel's 'Inspiring Women' collection. Despite her resurgent twenty-first-century celebrity, however, Wells-Barnett, like Charlotte Brontë before her, did not receive an obituary in the *NYT* following her death from kidney disease on 25 March 1931 (although news of her marriage to attorney Ferdinand L. Barnett had appeared in the paper almost 36 years earlier).

This omission is surprising given how widely her passing was reported in other US newspapers at the time. The Black press, in particular, featured copious obituaries celebrating her achievements, but tributes were also published in newspapers orientated towards white readerships, such as the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Chicago Daily News* and the *Oakland Tribune*. Invariably, these original obituaries highlighted the breadth and extent of Wells-Barnett's fame. The *California Eagle* described her as a 'historic character' and suggested that 'the entire Black world mourns the loss of this truly famous woman' (This Week 1931, p. 3). The *Northwest Enterprise* declared that the deceased 'was so well and favorably known that her friends and admirers' – who included 'persons in every station in life from presidents down' – 'were legion' (Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Militant 1931, p. 1). Other newspapers pointed to the longstanding, intercontinental nature of Wells-Barnett's celebrity: the *Nashville Banner* noted that she 'rose to fame both in this country and in Europe' as a result of her anti-lynching campaign (Ida B. Wells-Barnett 1931, p. 10), while the *Chicago Defender* stated that she had been 'internationally known for two generations for her agitations and leadership of women and public thought' (Ida B. Wells-Barnett Passes Away 1931, p. 1).

In her obituary for the Overlooked project, Caitlin Dickerson (2018) similarly acknowledges the scope of Wells-Barnett's celebrity, describing her as 'the most famous black woman in the United States' during her lifetime. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given its publication against the backdrop of the growing Black Lives Matter movement,⁵ Dickerson's piece foregrounds above all Wells-Barnett's role as a pioneering civil rights activist, tacitly encouraging readers to draw connections between her Jim-Crow-era campaign against systemic racism and vigilante violence, and its present day counterpart. Notably, the obituary begins with the death not of Wells-Barnett, but of her friend and neighbour Thomas Moss, who along with Will Stewart and Calvin McDowell was lynched by a white mob outside of Memphis in 1892. Dickerson explains that this event 'changed history' (2018) by galvanising one of the most far-reaching and influential pieces of American journalism: Wells-Barnett's investigation into lynching in the Deep South. As well as serving to contextualise Wells-Barnett's historic commitment to anti-racist causes, this introduction works to frame her political and social activism in relation to twenty-first-century concerns: the reference to Moss, an unarmed Black man, being 'shot to death' (2018) in a vigilante act for which no one would be convicted silently invites comparisons

with the fatal shooting of Trayvon Martin in 2012, the event that would inspire the creation of the Black Lives Matter global network.

A short article on the Black Lives Matter website explicitly acknowledges Wells-Barnett's role as a foremother of the movement, positioning her as 'a leader ahead of her time', whose 'legacy lives on [...] through the countless Black women in journalism working to expose and fight against systems of white supremacy' (A Leader Ahead 2021). Dickerson's retrospective obituary performs similar work, noting that Wells-Barnett 'pioneered reporting techniques that remain central tenets of modern journalism', deploying 'methods and language that, even by today's standards, [were] aberrantly bold' (2018). She is described as 'fierce in conversation', while her newspaper editorials are characterised as 'fiery' (2018) – constructions that are initially suggestive of the girlboss-ism found in Charlotte Brontë's obituary, but which actually appeared in the original obituaries published after Wells-Barnett's death. The *Philadelphia Tribune*, *Chicago Defender* and *Northwest Enterprise* all make reference to Wells-Barnett's 'fiery' articles for the *Memphis Free Speech*, the newspaper she co-owned and edited (Ida Wells-Barnett, Clubwoman 1931, p. 5, Ida B. Wells-Barnett Passes Away 1931, p. 1), while the *Enterprise* further portrays her as a 'fearless' thinker and 'fighter for her race' (Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Militant 1931, p. 1).

Indeed, in many ways, the 1931 obituaries go further than Dickerson's piece for the Overlooked project, adopting the language of militancy in relation to Wells-Barnett's anti-racist activism. The *New York Age* (a leading Black newspaper for which Wells-Barnett once worked) claimed that 'her militant attitude and uncompromising stand for racial rights made her an outstanding figure' (Ida Wells Barnett 1931, p. 1); the *New Journal and Guide* described her as 'militant in every thing she undertook' (Funeral Rites 1931, p. 5); while *The Northwest Enterprise* labelled her a 'Militant Leader' in its front-page headline, and discussed her 'militant campaign against segregation and Jim Crowism' in the body of its obituary (Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Militant 1931, p. 1). As Wells-Barnett herself acknowledged in her unfinished autobiography, her agitations for Black rights were considered 'too radical' not only by many white Americans but also by some other African-American leaders, such as Booker T. Washington (2020, p. 224). By the time Dickerson came to write the Overlooked obituary, however, many of Wells-Barnett's strategies and arguments against structural racism had been adopted and repurposed by the subsequent civil rights movement. For instance, Dickerson notes that Wells-Barnett 'organized economic boycotts long before the tactic was popularized by other, mostly male, civil rights activists, who are often credited with its success' (2018). Owing to its twenty-first-century perspective, Dickerson's obituary is able to situate Wells-Barnett's career within the long view, re-examining her place within the political genealogy of Black protest and highlighting the *ex post facto* incorporation of her radicalism into the mainstream.

Further differences emerge in the framing of Wells-Barnett's feminist activities. The original obituaries invariably highlight her role as a noted 'clubwoman', often deploying this descriptor in their headlines. The Overlooked obituary makes brief mention of Wells-Barnett's founding role in the National Association of Coloured Women, but does not elaborate on this aspect of her career. Women's clubs flourished in the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, providing women with opportunities to participate in civic action and press for social and political reforms, including female suffrage. Initially organised by middle-class, white, Protestant women, the club

movement was soon embraced by African-American women, who came together to form their own clubs where they might engage in discussion and community activism focused on voting rights and racial uplift. Wells-Barnett was particularly influential in setting up and propagating Black women's clubs. Several obituaries note that, in 1893, she established the first such club in Chicago, The Women's Era Club, which would later be renamed in her honour. The *Oakland Tribune's* obituary also highlights Wells-Barnett's centrality to the 'Votes for Women' campaign and her organisation of the Alpha Suffrage Club in 1913 (Ida B. Wells-Barnett Dies 1931, p. 18). Yet, perhaps because the club movement lacks currency for a twenty-first-century audience, and suffragism feels less vital than the on-going struggle for Black rights, Dickerson's *Overlooked* obituary decentres this aspect of Wells-Barnett's biography, despite it forming a crucial pillar of her intersectional politics.

A further, notable difference between the 1931 obituaries and their more recent *NYT* counterpart is the way that their subject is named. Dickerson's obit is titled 'Ida B. Wells' and uses that naming convention throughout. By contrast, Wells-Barnett's original obituaries all use the hyphenated surname that she adopted following her marriage. In some ways, referring to Wells-Barnett solely by her birth name could be seen as a progressive move which seeks to recognise her as an individual outside of her married identity. However, as Wells-Barnett's great-granddaughter Michelle Duster points out, Wells-Barnett was 'ahead of her time' in actively *choosing* to hyphenate her last name (2020, p. 371).⁶ The issue of how to 'name' famous women from the past came sharply into focus in 2020 when the Women's Prize for Fiction collaborated with their sponsor Baileys to launch 'Reclaim Her Name': a collection of 25 books reissued with their female authors' legal names on the cover, rather than the male pseudonyms under which they were originally published. The Women's Prize website announced that this initiative would 'honour [the women's] achievements and give them the credit they deserve' (Reclaim Her Name 2022). However, as a number of commentators pointed out, this revisionary gesture was not quite as forward-thinking as the Women's Prize organisers seemed to think. Many of the women included in the collection actively adopted, inhabited and expressed themselves through their chosen pen names; their birth names were not necessarily their preferred ones. By 'ignoring historical articulations of women's autonomy, [and] authorial intent' (Rutigliano 2020), the Reclaim Her Name collection ironically threatened to erase its famous subjects' choices rather than to liberate them from patriarchal strictures.

The *Overlooked* obituary's dropping of the 'Barnett' from Wells-Barnett's surname is less egregious than the clumsy revisionism undertaken by the Reclaim Her Name project, but nevertheless raises interesting questions about how married female celebrities should be referred to after their deaths. Being a wife and mother was an important part of Wells-Barnett's self-conception. In her autobiography, she took issue with fellow feminist Susan B. Anthony's suggestion that she should have remained wedded only to her activism and 'reveled' in her maternal status, giving a symposium to the Frederick Douglass Women's Club on the subject of 'What It Means to Be a Mother' in 1906 (Wells 2020, p. 212, p. 240).

It is unclear whether the decision to use Wells-Barnett's maiden name in the *Overlooked* obituary was consciously made; however, it is noticeable that Dickerson's piece largely avoids discussing Wells-Barnett's married, domestic life, merely noting that

her husband ‘cooked dinner for their children most nights, and he cared for them while she traveled to make speeches and organize’ (2018).

On the one hand, the foregrounding of Wells-Barnett’s professional achievements follows the example set in most male celebrities’ obituaries, where personal life is rarely a focus. To dwell on marriage and motherhood in a female subject’s obit risks detracting from the accomplishments for which they were celebrated and reinforcing already-entrenched gender stereotypes. On the other hand, Dickerson’s framing here obscures the significant challenges Wells-Barnett experienced when negotiating her roles as a public figure and a wife and mother. She was candid about the difficulty of combining activism with motherhood, writing that ‘the duties of wife and mother were a profession in themselves’ and that she would have been ‘quite content to be left within the four walls of [her] home’ following her marriage (Wells 2020, p. 210, p. 212). However, her sense of obligation to the Black cause was such that she continued to tour the United States making political speeches after this time, even though she was often beset by feelings of exhaustion and frequently had a nursing baby in tow.⁷ Dickerson’s obit elides these domestic and emotional struggles, highlighting instead those aspects of Wells-Barnett’s life that chime most readily with the Overlooked project’s inspirational ethos: her fierce commitment to justice and equality. However, while commemorating Wells-Barnett’s significant achievements, this representational strategy risks reproducing the problematic cultural narrative of the ‘strong black woman’,⁸ and thus minimising the nuanced complexity of Wells-Barnett’s personal views and lived experiences.

Conclusion

The notion that celebrity obituary columns function as mirrors of society has often been used to justify their lack of diversity; the story goes that fewer women and people of colour occupy prominent positions in public life, and obituaries (whether in print or online) simply reflect this trend. However, such an argument underplays the role of contemporary media in shaping everyday realities through the selection – and omission – of material.

The *NYT*’s Overlooked project was established with the intention of redressing historical biases in the newspaper’s coverage of famous deaths, and has undoubtedly generated some positive outcomes. Michelle Duster suggests that popular awareness of her great-grandmother, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, ‘skyrocketed’ following the publication of the *NYT*’s belated obituary in March 2018, with the subsequent press coverage enabling her to raise funds for a monument in Wells-Barnett’s honour (Duster 2020, p. 369). In similar vein, many of the contributors to the project’s comments section have praised Overlooked for enriching their knowledge of the past and introducing them to inspirational figures of whom they had previously been unaware. One reader commented ‘Thank you for honoring the names of those who deserved such respect and telling their stories!’, while another congratulated the originators on their ‘brilliant idea. Not only is it informative; it offers reassurance and the message: Yes, you can! in these alarming times’ (Padnani 2018).

The notion that the Overlooked obituaries are shaped to the demands of ‘these times’ comes across strongly in our analysis. Our two case studies indicate that, as much as any obituary column, the Overlooked project operates its own selection process, choosing

(mostly female) lives from the past that feel in some way current and/or uplifting. These figures' biographies are consistently tailored and framed in language that speaks to the concerns of the present. Historical celebrities are situated as 'pioneers' and aligned with progressive or proto-modern values and ideals; their resistances to patriarchal oppression and racial injustice are emphasised while more conservative views and actions that might complicate the Overlooked project's overarching narrative are largely sidelined.

This representational strategy is not without its problems. As Leo Braudy points out, it is right that forgotten icons who have been "ideologically" neglected by the traditional definers of Western culture' should 'be celebrated for their own sakes and function as models for new generations who otherwise would have to invent themselves without worthy precedents'; however, too often the triumphant reclamation of

groups whose nature and values have been ignored by the mainstream vitiates the force of their new insight by merely elbowing [them] into the same place in the sun occupied by those already there, rather than helping to redefine what achievement and recognition and fame can mean. (1997, p. 597)

To put it another way, representation is not necessarily enough if the underlying terms of celebrity value are left unchallenged. As one of the online commentators on the Overlooked website drily notes, 'until they [the NYT] give fair and even coverage, both now and in the future, to all people who are not wealthy or influential white men, please don't applaud too loudly' (Padnani 2018). A cursory glance at the obituary pages that have appeared since the genesis of Overlooked reveals that the ratios of male and female subjects remain far from equal. In the same month in which the Overlooked project was launched, the *NYT* published one hundred and seven obits; of these obituaries, seventy-five were of men and just thirty-two were dedicated to women. A similar pattern emerges in the following year: between 8 March and 8 April 2019, ninety-four obituaries were published in which the majority (sixty-six) were of men. The Overlooked project may be well-intentioned, but there is a danger that it serves simply as a sticking-plaster, downplaying the urgency of the need for cultural change by masking the problem. The historical celebrities memorialised in the *NYT*'s side project may be 'overlooked no more', but there remains a long way to go until equality of representation is achieved in mainstream news obituaries.

Notes

1. The democratisation of fame has been noted by a number of critics, including Chris Rojek, who observes that 'the decline of Court society in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries involved the transference of cultural capital to self-made men and women' (2001, p. 13).
2. For instance, following the death of the internationally renowned singing sensation Jenny Lind in November 1887, the *Atchison Daily Champion* (Kansas) and the *Galveston Daily News* (Texas) carried virtually identical obituaries, as did the *Daily Picayune* (Louisiana) and the *Daily Inter Ocean* (Illinois) (though the *Inter Ocean* included some additional paragraphs and a picture of the deceased singer).
3. Charlotte Brontë, along with her sisters Emily and Anne, initially published under male-sounding pseudonyms: Charlotte published under the name Currer Bell, Emily under Ellis Bell, and Anne as Acton Bell.

4. The *Daily News* alludes directly to this type of literary theft when it remarks upon the *Sun's* reprinting of 'our recent paper on the death of Currer Bell ... without any intimation of its source' ('Injured Innocence' 1855, p. 4).
5. A report by the Pew Research Centre found that the Black Lives Matter hashtag, coined following the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's killer George Zimmerman in 2013, had been used almost 30 million times on Twitter by 1 May 2018 (Anderson *et al.* 2018).
6. It is for this reason that we have chosen to hyphenate Wells-Barnett's surname in our article.
7. In her autobiography, Wells-Barnett writes 'I honestly believe that I am the only woman in the United States who ever traveled throughout the country with a nursing baby to make political speeches' (2020, p. 206).
8. Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant points out that 'strength advances a virtuous claim about any Black woman whose efforts and emotional responses defy common beliefs about what is humanly possible amidst adversity'; however, the narrative of the 'strong black woman' is 'incomplete' because it leaves out 'Black women's human vulnerabilities' (2009, p. 2).

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