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By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence
Dr. Andrew Roth

“This, That, & the Other 111” [1]



What do ChatGPT4, the Comstock Act, U.S. Rep. Glenn R. Grothman (R-Wis.), Project 2025, Angelina Weld Grimke, and Willie Mays have in common? Maybe nothing, but sometimes even the most discordant **“Dots”** when threaded together reveal an unexpected pattern in the tapestry of America’s many stories. In this **Book Note**, let’s look at some **“Dots”** and see, what if any, patterns they reveal. Along the way, we’ll look into the great sex scandal of the 19th century.

Dot #1: ChatGPT4. The June 25 issue of *InsideHigherEd*, which, despite its tabloid sounding name, is a respected source of news and information about the higher education industry, headlined an article “A New Digital Divide: Student AI Use Surges, Leaving Faculty Behind.” [2] Sounding a slightly different note, whistleblowers at OpenAI, which owns ChatGPT, recently “filed a complaint with

the Securities and Exchange Commission alleging the artificial intelligence company illegally prohibited its employees from warning regulators about the grave risks its technology may pose to humanity." [3]

Setting aside "risks to humanity," that "students continue to run laps around faculty when it comes to using generative artificial intelligence," [4] or any other current technology, is no news at all. Embedded in the article, however, were a number of observations about our old friend ChatGPT4 and other large-language models, self-learning neural networks that rang several alarm bells. The students' chief complaint was that ChatGPT failed to provide accurate, or sometimes any, attribution for its information's sources. More ominous, using the current buzzword, sometimes "Chat" *hallucinated* providing false information.

Over a year ago, in four **Book Notes** that can be found here [Book Notes - Jefferson Educational Society \(jeserie.org\)](https://www.jeserie.org), I shared concerns identical to the students. I said "Chat" was a wondrous "graduate research assistant" with at least three potentially crippling flaws: it made stuff up, could frequently be flat-out wrong, and failed to cite its sources. Recently, working on a potential project on popular music I asked "Chat" for a bibliography of sources on the topic. In less time than it is taking me to type this sentence, "Chat" produced a 20-item list of journal articles on the topic. They all sounded very academic, were attributed to legitimate scholarly journals, and were allegedly authored by genuine scholars. The problem arose when I went to find the articles.

They didn't exist!

If "Chat" were a deejay, we'd say it did a "mash-up." When confronted, "Chat" again did the apologetic two-step I've come to recognize as part of its "personality." It confessed and then obsequiously apologized.

This would all be of nerdy interest only to researchers except that "Chat" and its cousins have gone public as key "assistants" on most internet browsers. Microsoft Bing's search engine now comes with "Co-Pilot" as your personal AI assistant. "Co-Pilot" is actually "Chat." Google's AI assistant "Bard" has been renamed "Gemini." It's not "Chat," but a "cousin" large-language, self-learning neural network.

The point?

In a world already awash in misinformation, the danger has been increased by who knows what order of magnitude.

The solution?

Use “Chat,” “Co-Pilot,” “Gemini,” and their other cousins, but be aware that they can’t be trusted. Everything they tell you needs to be cross-checked for validity. If you ask one for a recipe for Chicken Piccata you should be OK, but for anything else you must double-check their insights against other sources. That, unfortunately, undercuts the vast time saving potential they originally promised.

Dot#2: The Comstock Act. In his *The Coming Wave: Technology, Power, and the Twenty-first Century’s Greatest Dilemma*, Mustafa Suleyman identifies that dilemma as very similar to the scenario I just sketched about ChatGPT. It can be wondrously beneficial, but can it be trusted?

Suleyman is exploring the topic on the grand scale of the human future. I’ve been milling around at street level trying to balance ChatGPT’s tremendous efficiency against its tendency to deceive. One of its great benefits is that if asked even a complex, but straightforward factual question it will provide an extremely valuable answer. Suleyman says, for instance, if you ask it “to write a syllabus for a physics course, a dieting manual ... it will.” [5]

Taking Suleyman’s cue, I asked “Chat” to write a syllabus for a 15 week, 400-level undergraduate course in the history of the American women’s suffrage movement from 1848 to 1920. In less than 10 seconds, it did. I know enough about the topic to say that “Chat” nailed it. I wouldn’t use “Chat’s” syllabus without some serious tweaks, but it provided an outline for how to organize the material and identify key issues.

One was the 1872 presidential campaign of Victoria Woodhull, the first woman to run for president of the United States. Woodhull based her candidacy and women’s right to vote on the 14th Amendment’s citizenship clause. In a presentation to the House of Representative’s Commerce Committee in 1870 she argued that women already had the right to vote since the 14th and 15th amendments guaranteed that right to all citizens.

Since women were citizens, they had the right to vote.

Susan B. Anthony would use the same logic defending her action when she voted in 1872’s presidential election. The Supreme Court later rejected that argument and women didn’t get the vote for another 50 years.

One of the more flamboyant figures in the history of the women’s rights movement, Woodhull was born in rural Ohio to an illiterate mother and a conman father. She and her sister, Tennessee Claflin, carved a movie-worthy path through mid-19th century America. At different times a spiritualist communing with the dead, a “magnetic healer” (one of many Victorian-era quack cures), the first woman stockbroker on Wall Street (Cornelius Vanderbilt was her sponsor and

lover), and as an advocate and practitioner of free love, gender, and sexual equality, Woodhull was a Kardashian before there were Kardashians.

Women's rights advocates didn't quite know what to do with her. At first embracing her for the attention she brought to their cause, they later shunned her. Shunning her, they offended her. Offended, she gained her revenge by publicizing the 19th century's greatest sex scandal.

Woodhull and her sister began to publish *Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly* newspaper. Upset at what she thought the hypocrisy of some women's rights advocates, she published the story of the adulterous affair between Henry Ward Beecher and Elizabeth Tilton. Beecher, from his pulpit in Brooklyn's Plymouth Church, was the foremost Protestant minister of the era. He was also a member of the incredible Beecher family. His sisters included Harriet Beecher Stowe, who wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Catharine Beecher, a women's education advocate, and Isabella Beecher Hooker, a confidant and ally of Susan B. Anthony. His paramour, Elizabeth Tilton, was the wife of his closest friend and associate, Theodore Tilton.

The article's salacious details of sexual shenanigans among the elite titillated its audience. Using an obscure postal regulation, Anthony Comstock, a purity advocate who opposed women's rights, seized the opportunity and had Woodhull prosecuted for sending obscene materials through the mail. [6]

Although Woodhull was ultimately acquitted, the incident made Comstock's career. With his backstage political maneuvering, in 1873 Congress passed the Comstock Act, named it in his honor and made him its chief enforcer. In one move, Comstock became the protector of America's morals.

The Comstock Act prohibited using the mail to deliver obscene material. It does not itself directly "criminalize obscenity." [7] The definition of obscenity has mutated over the decades. At different times it has included pornography (the graphic depiction in words or images of sexual acts), salacious literature, information about contraception, contraceptive devices and aids, information about abortion, abortion aids and/or drugs, sex education materials, and a shifting kaleidoscope of allegedly lascivious material.

All of this would now only be an interesting historical curiosity except that the law has never been repealed. And now, in 2024, we find the Heritage Foundation wanting it enforced. U.S. Rep. Glenn R. Grothman (R-Wis.) almost certainly thinks that is a fine idea.

Dot#3: U.S. Rep. Glenn Grothman (R-Wis.) & Project 2025. In the interest of transparency, I must say I have no idea what Rep. Grothman thinks of

the Comstock Act. But I'm willing to wager that if you ask him if he thinks it should be enforced, he'd agree. Why? Because as recently as last Thursday (July 11, 2024) on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives, Grothman said America needs to return to 1960 and the time before feminism, civil rights, and godless communism wrecked the American home. And displaced men as *Home's* rightful head. [8]

Why 1960?

Because it predated all of the great civil rights acts of the 1960s and the rise of second-wave feminism following the 1963 publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. Wanting women reduced to handmaids, Grothman sounds all the familiar tropes about women seeking equality undermining the American family. They're as old as the 19th century anti-suffragists and men fighting to preserve the Cult of Domesticity to 2024's Heritage Foundation Project 2025. Project 2025's first of four goals to take America back not to 1960 but to the pre-Civil War Era and the Cult of True Womanhood advocates for "restor(ing) the family as the centerpiece of American life and protect(ing) our children." [9]

Restoring the family to the center of American life and protecting our children is one of those proposals it's impossible to argue against, but before jumping on the bandwagon one needs to do something that seems simple but isn't.

Define *family*.

In the emerging right-wing definition, it consists of a working father and a homebound mother who has lost all of her reproductive rights. A key piece of the movement to return women solely to the home is denying them access to abortion **and** contraception. Legal access to safe contraception is another byproduct of the 1960s that Rep. Grothman probably wants undone, since it post-dates 1960. The first readily available, safe birth control pill arrived in the early-1960s, but access to contraception wasn't made legal for married couples until the Supreme Court did so in *Griswold v. Connecticut* in 1965. For unmarried people, it wasn't made fully legal until 1972's *Eisenstadt v. Baird*. Supreme Court Justices Samuel Alito and Clarence Thomas have gone on record saying those decisions should be revisited.

Where does the Comstock Act fit in all of this? Well, refer back to Project 2025, which advocates for making what it calls "mail order abortions" illegal by "Stop(ing) promoting or approving mail-order abortions in violation of long-standing federal laws that prohibit the mailing and interstate carriage of abortion drugs." [10] That "long-standing federal law" is 1873's Comstock Act that Anthony Comstock sponsored after hounding Victoria Woodhull out of the country. As a long piece on NPR pointed out, its enforcement is not necessarily limited to

abortion, for it prohibits anything that can be associated with abortion, which includes many contraceptive devices and drugs. [11]

So, in 2024, we find ourselves potentially returning to Anthony Comstock's world as right-wing radicals seek to return America to a way, in Stephanie Coontz's memorable phrase, to *A Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*. [12]

Dot #4: Angelina Weld Grimke. I subscribe to the Academy of American Poets "Poem-a-Day" program that delivers a poem via email every morning. On June 23, the poem-of-the-day was "Greenness" by Angelina Weld Grimke. It goes:

Tell me is there anything lovelier,
Anything more quieting
Than the green of little blades of grass
And the green of little leaves?

Is not each leaf a cool green hand,
Is not each blade of grass a mothering green finger,
Hushing the heart that beats and beats and beats? [13]

The poem itself is a fine thing, but what connects Angelina Weld Grimke, born in Boston in 1880, to all of this is that her father, who was biracial, was a former slave and her mother, Sarah Stanley Grimke, was a white woman. More to the point, her father's paternal white aunt was Angelina Grimke Weld, one of the two legendary Grimke sisters, Angelina and Sarah, born into a South Carolina aristocratic, slave-owning family. The elder Grimke sisters fled north, became Quakers, ardent abolitionists, and women's rights advocates. The poet Angelina Weld Grimke was named after her great-aunt, the abolitionist and proto-feminist Angelina Grimke.

An accomplished poet, a member of the 1920s Harlem Renaissance, a playwright whose play *Rachel* protested lynching and racial violence while depicting the Great Migration of southern Blacks northward during the early 20th century, Grimke led a difficult life. Of uncertain sexuality, but almost certainly a lesbian, and of a mixed racial background, she found herself on society's margins. She died in 1958 just as the civil rights movement was beginning to flourish.

She was born into a biracial family and therefore of ambiguous ethnicity in America's racially conflicted society, great-niece of both a legendary abolitionist and women's rights advocate, unmarried, and gay. Although by all accounts the essence of "proper," Angelina Weld Grimke was a nightmare come to life for all those who opposed the emergence of the New Woman as the 19th century turned into the 20th. If "family" is to be the bedrock of society, where do people like

Angelina Weld Grimke fit? If America is for white people only, where do people like Angelina Weld Grimke fit?

Dot#5: Willie Mays. June was an eventful month, for while all of the above was going on Willie Mays died and almost simultaneously Major League Baseball accepted into the official record books the records of the old Negro Leagues. After years of research by acknowledged baseball experts, the acceptance of the Negro League records into the baseball's official statistics upended some old records. Most notably, Ty Cobb was no longer holder of the highest lifetime batting average. That was now Josh Gibson of the Homestead Grays. I wrote about sports and the African American quest for total inclusion into American society in my "Americans and Their Games" series and in several **Book Notes** that can be found here [Book Notes - Jefferson Educational Society \(jeserie.org\)](http://jeserie.org)

I am not going to belabor the point, but I think it's important to reiterate how important sports are in American culture as they reveal our best and worst traits. Willie Mays and baseball were part of my – I don't want to say "awakening" because I don't want to be called "woke" – dawning awareness of race in America. I related the incident in one of those earlier **Book Notes**, but all I'll say here is that when I was about 8 or 9 years old, I heard a neighbor say some vile things about Black people. I thought "That can't be true because Willie Mays is Black and he isn't like that." I won't impose on my 8-year-old self a 77-year old's sensibility, but I recall that moment with vivid clarity. I've never forgotten it. As I said in that earlier **Note**, Willie Mays made me *aware*.

Similarly, although baseball people will argue for years about how the inclusion of the Negro League statistics into the official record changes perceptions, I have heard very little from anyone saying that it was not the right thing to do. Black men played professional baseball as long ago as the 1870s when Victoria Woodhull was running for president, but they were banned by the late 1880s, early 1890s and not readmitted until 1947. In the interim, they created their own leagues in which the money was scant, but the talent huge.

It's about time they get their due.

For those who think the Negro Leagues' men of myth might not have really been all that great, Joe Posnanski in his **The Baseball 100** makes the irrefutable case for their inclusion. [14] Posnanski points out that after 1947 and Jackie Robinson and Larry Doby entering white baseball, they were rapidly followed by Satchel Paige, Monte Irvin, Don Newcombe, Willie Mays, Hank Thompson, Erie's own Sam Jethroe, Roy Campanella, Ernie Banks, Hank Aaron, and too many to list. Are we to believe that was some sort of aberration and that all the Black players in the Negro Leagues prior to 1947 weren't all that good? No way! Going backwards, you find Oscar Charleston, Smoky Joe Williams, Josh Gibson, Cool

Papa Bell, and dozens more who were, as Ted Williams said at his Hall of Fame induction ceremony, “never given a chance.” [15]

Threading Dots. Regarding AI and ChatGPT, remember, if you want to avoid embarrassment and error, you should always “verify, verify, verify”

ChatGPT aside (it did bring Victoria Woodhull back to my attention), it is still clear the essential American issues are race and gender – just as in 1848 and the birth of women’s rights, in 1872 and a woman trying to run for president, in 1873 and a prude trying to put women back in the kitchen, in the early 20th century when a very genteel woman poet tried to navigate America’s conflicted sense of race and gender, all the way down to 2024 and a U.S. representative wanting to return to 1960, Project 2025’s wanting to take America even further back in American history, Willie Mays dying, and all the great Negro League players finally getting their just recognition.

Now, in 2024, we find them, as in the past, taking center stage as the two competing meta-threads in ***The American Tapestry*** yet again confront one another. One thread, the exclusionist thread, wants to exclude them and return to some version of a past that never was, while the other inclusionist thread wants to bring us all together and move into the future.

Which thread will prevail? In the short term, which could last a long time but eventually fail, the exclusionist might prevail. But as Thomas Wolfe told us almost a hundred years ago – ***You Can’t Go Home Again***. More profoundly, certainly more ancient, as Krishna said to Arjuna in ***The Bhagavad Gita***, “You can’t stay here, you can’t go back – fare forward.”

Which path will America take?



-- Andrew Roth, Ph.D.
Scholar-in-Residence
The Jefferson Educational Society
roth@jeserie.org

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“Welcome to ChatGPT” at **Zettist** available at [What Is Chat GPT, And How Does It Work? Here's What It Has To Say. - Zettist](#) accessed July 7, 2024.

“Anthony Comstock.jpg” at **Wikimedia Commons** available at [File:Anthony Comstock.jpg - Wikimedia Commons](#) accessed July 14, 2024.

“U.S. Rep. Glenn Grothman (R-Wis.)” at **Glenn Grothman Serving Wisconsin’s 6th District** available at [U.S. Representative Glenn Grothman \(house.gov\)](#) accessed July 14, 2024.

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“Angelina Weld Grimké.jpg” at **Wikimedia Commons** available at [File:Angelina Weld Grimké.jpg - Wikimedia Commons](#) accessed July 7, 2024.

“HOF Mays Willie plaque.jpg” at **Wikimedia Commons** available at [File:HOF Mays Willie plaque.jpg - Wikimedia Commons](#) accessed July 7, 2024.

End Notes

1. Earlier **Book Notes** in the evolving “*This, That, & the Other*” mini-series mining “**Dots**” are #s 157 and 167 both of which can be found here [Book Notes - Jefferson Educational Society \(jeserie.org\)](#) Much earlier in April, 2021’s **Book Note** #56 we did a “This and That & Wallace Stevens,” but it really was all about Wallace Stevens.
2. Coffey, Lauren, “A New Digital Divide: Student AI Use Surges, Leaving Faculty Behind,” **InsideHigherEd** (June 25, 2024) available at [Digital divide: Students surge ahead of professors with AI \(insidehighered.com\)](#) accessed June 25, 2024.
3. Verma, Pranshu, Cat Zakrzewski and Nitasha Tiku, “OpenAI illegally barred staff from airing safety risks, whistleblowers say,” **The Washington Post** (July 13, 2024) available at [OpenAI illegally stopped staff from sharing dangers, whistleblowers say - The Washington Post](#) accessed July 14, 2024.
4. Coffey **cited above**.
5. Suleyman, Mustafa. **The Coming Wave: Technology, Power, and the Twenty-first Century’s Greatest Dilemma** Kindle Edition (New York: Penguin Random House, 2023), p. 84.
6. DuBois, Ellen Carol. **Suffrage: Women’s Long Battle for the Vote**. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020), p. 93.
7. “Comstock Act of 1873,” in **Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia**, available at [Comstock Act of 1873 - Wikipedia](#) accessed July 14, 2024.
8. You can hear Rep. Grothman’s address to the U.S. House of Representatives on **YouTube** at [VIRAL FLOOR SPEECH: Glenn Grothman Makes Waves For Railing Against 'Angry Feminist Movement' \(youtube.com\)](#) accessed July 14, 2024.
9. “Project 2025 Presidential Transition Project” at **Project 2025** available at [Project 2025 | Presidential Transition Project](#) accessed July 14, 2024.
10. Ibid., “Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise: Project 2025” at **Project 2025 cited above**, p. 459
11. Kurtzleben, Danielle, “Why anti-abortion advocates are reviving a 19th century purity law,” **NPR** (April 10, 2024) available at [How the Comstock Act could be used to ban abortion nationwide : NPR](#) accessed July 14, 2024.
12. Coontz, Stephanie. **The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap**. (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

13. Grimke, Angelina Weld, "Greenness" at **Academy of American Poets** available at [Greenness by Angelina Weld Grimké - Poems | Academy of American Poets](#) accessed July 14, 2024.
14. Cf. Posnanski, Joe. **The Baseball 100**. (New York: The Avid Reader Press of Simon and Schuster, Inc., 2021), pp. 197-200
15. Ladson, Bill, "Williams speech helped Negro Leaguers to HOF" at **MLB.com** available at [Ted Williams' Hall of Fame speech honored Negro League players \(mlb.com\)](#) accessed July 15, 2024.

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