

**“Nothing New Under the Sun”:
Postsentimental Conflict in Harriet E. Wilson’s *Our Nig***

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*Storm and stress to-day rocks our little boat on the
mad waters of the world-sea; there is within and with-
out the sound of conflict, the burning of body and
rending of soul; inspiration strives with doubt, and
faith with vain questioning.*

W.E.B. DuBois¹

The content of a work of literature, Walter Benjamin reminds us in “The Author as Producer,” is inextricably bound up with its form.² Hence, it is hardly astounding that much critical attention has been focused on the proper generic classification of Harriet E. Wilson’s *Our Nig* (1859).³ This task, though, has not been easy. Henry Louis Gates, rediscoverer and earliest critic of *Our Nig*, for example, goes to great length discussing parallels between Wilson’s work and Nina Baym’s ‘overplot’ of the ‘women’s novel,’ before settling on reading it as a new form of distinctly African-American literature that combines “conventions of the sentimental novel with certain key conventions of the slave narratives” (lii). Elizabeth Ammons, by contrast, places *Our Nig* squarely in the feminist tradition of the sentimental novel and argues that “the ideal of mother love explicit in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* operates *implicitly* in *Our Nig*.”⁴ Contesting Ammons’ claim, Eric

Gardner asserts that *Our Nig* is not a 'novel of abolition' but "a novel about Northern racial issues, a young black woman's bildungsroman, and, as such, is far from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*."⁵ Echoing some of Gardner's points, Elizabeth Breau contends that *Our Nig* "is actually satiric" and therefore gives an overly "bleak picture of northern antebellum society."⁶ Foregrounding neither *Bildung* nor "ironic inversions" but the "politics of rage at work in Wilson's tale," Julia Stern argues that *Our Nig* "used the sentimental form to mask a gothic message."⁷ Rejecting Gates' attempt to posit *Our Nig* as "a significant beginning of an African-American literary mode, a distinctive first in a century of firsts," John Ernest wants to read Wilson's work as a traditional "blend of autobiography and fiction," hoping to 're-place' it "within the racial, gender, and economic matrix of secular history."⁸ R.J. Ellis, while accepting Gates' assessment that *Our Nig* "draw[s] on the genres of sentimental fiction and abolitionist slave narrative," stresses the ways in which the 'hybrid' work "fractures generic boundaries" in order to provide a "full retrieval of Frado's pain, her experience of body politics."⁹ Lastly, offering a reading that links *Our Nig* to the Puritan tradition, Elizabeth West argues that *Our Nig* "manipulates well-known trappings of the conversion narrative" by telling "the story of the heroine's failed initiation into the community of earthly saints."¹⁰

Aside from illustrating that classification or categorisation itself constitutes an act of interpretation, this critical disagreement about the very *form* of *Our Nig* also seems to hint at a deep conflict, or better, a whole series of conflicts that mark its *content*. For whether one reads Wilson's deceptively plain work as a blend of women's novel and slave narrative, which transforms blacks into subjects (Gates), or as sentimental novel, which exposes the oppressiveness of American patriarchy (Ammons), or as gothic novel, which undermines the 'mother-saviour myth' (Stern), or as testimony to 'body politics' (Ellis), or as an inversion of the Puritan conversion narrative (West), there always seems to remain an unresolvable conflictedness at *Our Nig's* core. "*Our Nig's Tale* ends ambiguously, if it ends at all," Gates notes (xlvii). Nothing seems to quite fit. *Our Nig* attempts to elicit the sympathy of both 'coloured' and white readers, but "is far from flattering to Northerners or abolitionists."¹¹ It begins like a sentimental novel with an orphaned, friendless girl, but it "does not end either with a happy marriage or with institutional consolidation ... of the forces of good" (xlviii). It projects "maternal violence and filial terror," yet it does not reject *Uncle Tom's Cabin's* central premise of the 'mother saviour.'¹² *Our Nig* calls "for effective communal action in the public sphere," but also "elects ... the more empowering doctrine of self-reliance."¹³ The protagonist "reposes in God" and puts her trust in "God's economy," but she offers "no profession of

faith.”¹⁴ What is one to make of this series of formal and textual incongruities, ambiguities, even paradoxes?

Wilson’s startling refusal to provide unambiguous endings or clear solutions, I suggest, is less the result of generic hybridisation than of her calculated use of an almost Brechtian literary technique that focuses on the “blunt depiction of conditions” or *Zustände* rather than the elaborate development of plots or *Handlungen*.¹⁵ In opting for a simple, episodic storyline that ends where it begins, Wilson deliberately breaks with the linear ‘overplot’ of the typical ‘women’s novel’ to foreground the “horrors of [Frado’s] *condition*” (128, emphasis added) that keep her in various yet recurrent states of bondage, abuse, domination, exploitation, and servitude. *Our Nig*’s aims are therefore at once more modest and more ambitious than those of the antislavery and women’s novels. For Wilson neither attempts to *reproduce* nor to *adapt* well-known accounts of how the nation may be saved through mother-love, domesticity, repose in God, *Bildung*, communal action, compassion, or self-reliance. Instead, drawing upon her own experience, Wilson endeavors to *disrupt* and *complicate* dominant narratives of national uplift so as, firstly, to draw attention to the subtle mechanisms that keep nominally free blacks in a condition of permanent unfreedom, and thereby, secondly, to question the bourgeois ideologies of ‘unconflictedness’ that underlie such sacrosanct institutions as friendship, love, marriage, motherhood, family, and religion. Thrust into public view at a moment of great personal peril for the author, *Our Nig* may thus be seen as what Lauren Berlant has termed an act of ‘Diva Citizenship.’ “Flashing up and startling the public,” Wilson, like Berlant’s ‘Divas,’ not only “renarrates the dominant history as one that the abjected people have once lived *sotto voce*,” but “challenges her audience to identify with the enormity of the suffering she has narrated and the courage she has had to produce, calling on people to change the social and institutional practices of citizenship to which they currently consent.”¹⁶ Put another way, *Our Nig* is not a blueprint for easily achievable societal reforms, but a literary attempt to ‘startle’ its readership into recognising persistent political problems concerning race, class, and gender relations.

What Wilson in her preface calls “some experiment which shall aid me in maintaining myself and child without extinguishing this feeble life,” then, is both an attempt to make the material conditions of literary production visible and to revise the traditional relationship between the self-exposing black author and her passively indulgent white audience. For although *Our Nig*, in the vein of most sentimental novels, “demand[s] sympathy and aid,” Wilson’s prefatory claim “to have purposely omitted what would most provoke shame in our good anti-slavery friends at home” conveys in no uncer-

tain terms that mere charity does not absolve a sympathetic white readership from what W.E.B. DuBois was later to call the political 'burden' that "belongs to the nation."¹⁷ Calling upon her "colored brethren universally" and the "good anti-slavery friends" in particular, Wilson makes clear from the outset that the latter can never hope to cast off "Slavery's Shadows" without consciously and openly engaging in an economic, political, and cultural struggle with the former (2-3).

Accordingly, unlike the "slave authors" who "had to satisfy the dual expectation of shaping the random events of their lives into a meaningful and compelling pattern, while also making the narrative of their odyssey from slavery to freedom an emblem of every black person's potential for higher education and the desire to be free,"¹⁸ Wilson intentionally thwarts her audience's sentimental expectations of an unconflicted happy ending. Far from trying to 'satisfy' her readership with what is conventionally deemed a 'meaningful and compelling' narrative, Wilson presents Frado's despair at the end of *Our Nig* as a mirror image of "poor" Mag's dejection at the beginning of the novel. Substituting the linear plot of slave narratives for a cyclical plot that begins and ends in conflict, Wilson foils sentimental notions that Frado can achieve freedom and happiness within the domestic world of the novel. Instead, Wilson *deprivatises* Frado's personal experience of persistent domination, projecting her despair back out into the public sphere of the literary marketplace. Moving beyond the mere declaration of Frado's "desire to be free," *Our Nig* deploys the recurrent image of the heroine's unresolved struggles to hold the compassionate reader liable for the larger societal conditions that ensure the exploitation and domination of nominally free blacks under the mantle of pity and charity. The "kind friends and purchasers" (130) are thus pushed from their role of indulgent bystanders into that of active participants, who, willingly or not, must confront the ongoing political conflicts over race, class, and gender relations. In refusing to proffer 'universalist' resolution and to grant 'narrative satisfaction,' the reader is thrown out of the comfortable armchair: he or she is made to see that "a change of mind" does not "change the world."¹⁹

Wilson's literary technique, which *deprivatises* the political yet does not, as Stern asserts, simply "privilege ... the public sphere,"²⁰ points to a historical materialist reading of her own experiences that links the conflicts within Northern antebellum society to those of the Reconstruction period. Similar to Frederick Douglass, who ends *My Bondage and My Freedom* with an image of himself as an early desegregationist, Wilson's fictionalised retelling of her indentured servitude portends the end of abolitionism and, from personal 'countermemory,' excavates the vocabulary that speaks to the conditions of freedom rather than the mere need for escape. Thus, Wil-

son's Frado, much like the matured Douglass in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, is not offered up as a pitiable figure for sympathetic identification or well-intentioned appropriation by white liberals, but emerges as a conscious agent in the fight for black self-emancipation. Analogous to Douglass's victory over the "slave breaker" Covey, Frado's hard-won courage to defy Mrs. Belmont in Chapter X represents just the first step in her quest for self-determination. In a society of "professed abolitionists," who neither "want slaves at the South, nor niggers in their own houses, North," Frado still faces the more daunting tasks "to cast off the unpleasant charities of the public" and to demand both gainful employment and respect from the villagers (124, 129). Genuine cooperation across class and race lines, Wilson underscores, can only spring from the conscious recognition of the fundamental conflicts over material and cultural property.

At the risk of placing yet another ill-fitting label on *Our Nig*, I further suggest that Wilson's work, with its cyclical plot as well as its emphasis on the depiction of conditions or *Zustände*, can be read within the context of what Berlant has called "postsentimentality."²¹ According to Berlant, "post-sentimental narratives are lacerated by ambivalence," because while they (still) desire private, sentimental solutions to persistent racial, class, and gender conflicts, they only find quarrels, strives, and disputes. Hence, "postsentimental texts withdraw from the contract that presumes consent of the conventionally desired outcomes of identification and empathy."²² Instead of presupposing that a tacit consensus exists "about what constitutes uplift, amelioration, and emancipation," postsentimental works describe the steady clash of interest between individuals and groups.²³

Two scenes – one from Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the other from *Our Nig* – clarify the postsentimental impulse in *Our Nig*, which no longer promises to solve political conflicts through escape, 'true feelings,' Christian charity, marriage, or the termination of the 'peculiar institution,' but recasts private suffering as unremitting. Toward the end of Chapter XXV in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Eva, marked by impending death, passes on the gospel of Christian love and redemption to "Poor Topsy," the maltreated black orphan child who has hitherto resisted Aunt Ophelia's attempts to civilise her with the stick of a Puritan work ethic. Following a tearful exchange during which Topsy wishes that she "could be skinned, and come white," Eva, "with a sudden outburst of feeling," exclaims: "I love you, because you haven't had any father, or mother, or friends; – because you've been a poor and abused child! I love you, and I want you to be good."²⁴ Moved by Eva's impulsive spate of empathy Topsy finally renounces her rebelliousness: "O, dear Miss Eva, dear Miss Eva!" said the child; "I will try, I will try; I never did care nothin' about it before."²⁵

A strikingly similar scene takes place in Chapter VII of *Our Nig*. On a stroll to the barn, James, afflicted with an incurable disease, encounters Frado, the household's indentured servant girl whose mind and body has been nearly broken under the "raw hide" of his callous mother, Mrs. Belingham (77). Touched by the girl's lonely sobbing – "no mother, father, brother or sister to care for me, and then it is, You lazy nigger, lazy nigger" – James takes Frado aside and "under a shady tree" assures her "that she was not unpitied, friendless, and utterly despised; that she might hope for better things in the future" (75-6).

Yet, unlike in Topsy's case, James' professions of sympathy neither prompt a conversion experience in Frado nor move her to confess alleged "impudence" (72). Moreover, whereas Eva's subsequent death imparts Topsy with "sensibility, hope, desire, and the striving for good,"²⁶ James' eventual demise only exacerbates Frado's suspicions concerning eternal life to the point that she resolves "to give over all thought of the future world, and str[i]ve daily to put her anxiety far from her" (99, 104). Like Topsy, Frado resolves to 'strive,' but the direction or outcome of this striving is uncertain. In Stowe's fictional world, an inferred consensus exists as to what it means "to be good." This consensus is posited as the "transhistorical," universalist knowledge of values such as empathy, meekness, maternity, and domesticity, all of which are firmly anchored in white, middle-class Christian ideology. Wilson's novel challenges this ahistoric consent, revealing its historical constructedness when Frado contemplates a segregated heaven or seeks to avenge Mary's cruelties toward her (80). Given Frado's failed conversion to a passive acceptance of fate, it is not surprising that she remains an inassimilable troublemaker, offering living testimony to capitalist exploitation as well as the racist hypocrisies of professed abolitionists. Unlike Stowe's Africa-bound 'train of liberated slaves,' Wilson's disquieting mulatto heroine is here to stay, and so are the disquieting racial, class, and gender conflicts she embodies.

More clearly than anywhere else in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the scene of Topsy's conversion highlights Stowe's sentimental strategy of privatising the political at the very moment when the experience of private pain suggests the larger, socio-political mechanism of cruel domination. Eva's "sudden outburst of feeling" prevents any further probing into the causes of Topsy's racial self-hatred, abuse, exclusion, and poverty, so that Topsy's experience of violence becomes a formless emblem of universal pain that produces empathy rather than political action. Stowe's 'sudden' deployment of empathy not only overrides political or ethical motives for reforming society, but recasts them as the much more elemental promise of personal deliverance. Hence, it is no longer society but Topsy who must purge herself

of sin and become 'good.' Only if Topsy submits herself unconditionally to the benign authorities of Aunt Ophelia and a Christian God, Eva makes clear, may she "go to heaven at last, and be an angel forever, just as much as [she] were white."²⁷ A resolution to the political conflict over race and slavery is thus deferred to the seemingly sheltered realm of introspective privacy where good deeds, obedience, and piety promise deliverance from societal ills. As Berlant writes in "Poor Eliza":

when sentimentality meets politics, it uses personal stories to tell of structural effects, but in so doing it risks thwarting its very attempt to perform rhetorically a scene of pain that must be soothed politically. Because the ideology of true feeling cannot admit the nonuniversality of pain, its cases become all jumbled together and the ethical imperative toward social transformation is replaced by a civic-minded but passive ideal of empathy. The political as a place of acts oriented toward publicness becomes replaced by a world of private thoughts, leanings, and gestures.²⁸

It is precisely in light of this "civic-minded but passive ideal of empathy" perpetuated by Stowe that Wilson's 'reworking' of what Elizabeth West has described as the "traditional conversion narrative" assumes added significance.²⁹ For Frado's inability or unwillingness to separate Jack, Jane, or James' sporadic acts of kindness from Mrs. Bellmont's relentless acts of cruelty signal a shift from the privatisation of the political to the (re)politicisation of the private thus bringing into view the essential conflictedness of postsentimentality. While Frado wishes for her mother's return, longs for James' friendship, hopes for Aunt Abby's heavenly revelation, and desires Samuel's love, the repetition of letdowns, disappointments, and sufferings teach her that a solution to material exploitation, racial hatred, and gender discrimination cannot be found through intimacy, at least not the white bourgeois version thereof.³⁰

Having sketched out how Wilson's postsentimental portrayal of Frado strives to deprivatise the political, the second part of this essay investigates in greater detail the ways in which *Our Nig* presents a 'Diva' reading of publicised personal history that challenges liberal notions of sentimental unconflictedness and calls "on people to change the social and institutional practices of citizenship to which they currently consent."³¹ As we shall see, Wilson's depiction of the "horror of [Frado's] condition" not only startles the "gentle reader" into perceiving unresolved conflicts behind the smoke-screen of sympathy, but furthermore outlines the contours of a postsentimental, postslavery mentality that demands genuine collaboration across race, class, and gender lines.

Marked with the racial stamp of inferiority, Frado, like her white but permanently ostracised mother, Mag, must learn early on that conventional notions of friendship, motherhood, and marriage provide no redress against prejudice, exploitation, poverty. This is a decidedly unsentimental lesson and so it seems befitting that the reader is left sad or angered rather than tearful when "lonely Mag Smith" abandons Frado, leaving her in the exploitative 'care' of Mrs. Bellmont. Frado's fate, though, hardly comes as a surprise. Her subsequent plight as an abused servant, unemployable labourer, deserted wife, and careworn mother is already foreshadowed in Mag's story. As Ernest points out, Mag's descent "down the ladder of infamy" exposes the social and cultural "structures that later confine Frado even more tightly than they did her mother."³² Yet, perhaps more significantly, Mag's firm refusal "to ask favors or friendship from a sneering world" (7) as well as her deliberate acts of social transgression also already intimate that these societal structures of confinement are by no means uncontested or immutable.

At first, however, Mag is introduced as an orphaned girl with a "loving, trusting heart," who falls for a nameless "charmer" because she innocently believes that she may "ascend to him and become an equal" (5, 6). Her childish hopes are, naturally, shattered and with them any prospect of respectable life. Still trying to "regain in a measure what she had lost," Mag is soon forced to realise that her "home" is "contaminated by the publicity of her fall" (7). Forced into the margins of society by "foul tongues," "averted looks, and "cold greetings," Mag retreats into a "hovel," returning to the "village" only now and then to compete with "foreigners" over scarce jobs (7, 8). An increasingly "vengeful" outcast who steadfastly refuses "favors of familiar faces," Mag "lives for years, hugging her wrongs, but making no effort to escape"(8).

It is not until her acquaintance with Jim, "a kind-hearted African," that Mag for the first time gains a measure of control over her life, even though, or, better *because* it denotes "the climax of repulsion" from white society (15). As Wilson's detailed account of Jim's and Mag's "courtship" shows, their eventual union represents a strategic alliance between socially stigmatised individuals that redefines culturally sanctioned views of love and marriage. Though destitute, Mag – in marked contrast to her affair with the nameless "charmer" – meets Jim as "an equal," who offers relative economic comfort in exchange for status elevation in the form of "a white wife" (14). Notwithstanding Wilson's suspiciously solemn explanation to the "gentle reader" that "want is a ... powerful preacher and philosopher," Jim's marriage proposal thus not only presents Mag with a chance for economic betterment, but, more importantly, with an opportunity to "sunder another

bond which held her to her fellows" (13). Having "for years" endured the false and self-serving charities of "old acquaintances," who would occasionally "call ... to be favored with help of some kind," Jim's proposition allows Mag to free herself from "painful" and repressive social constraints (8). As Jim explains: "You's had trial with white folks, any how. They run off and left ye, and now none of 'em come near ye to see if you's dead or alive" (12).

Refuting the presumed "evils of amalgamation," Mag and Jim dutifully stand by their contractual relationship until the end. Jim "tried hard to fulfil his promises; and furnished her with a more comfortable dwelling," which she had previously declined to accept from her self-interested "old acquaintances" (8). And when Jim succumbs to consumption, Mag "nursed him faithfully," not out of pity, but of an acute understanding of their mutual dependence (15). Especially in light of Frado's later struggles, Wilson's portrayal of Mag's and Jim's tactical alliance takes on a political significance that connects the book's private world with the public world. For in stark contrast to Frado's subsequent relationships with James or the aptly named Mrs. Hoggs, Mag's and Jim's pact points to a form of genuine interracial cooperation that is anchored in the open negotiation of conflicting interests as well as a recognition of mutual dependence.

As Wilson is quick to show, however, in the face of overbearing racism, the hope for genuine interracial cooperation remains limited. After Jim's death, Mag enters "the darkness of perpetual infamy" when she consorts with Seth Shipley, Jim's former business partner. Yet, unlike Susan Rowson's Charlotte Temple or other countless tragic heroines of sentimental novels, Mag manages to survive even in utter infamy, largely because she feels no longer bound by the strict mores and customs of the dominant culture. Wilson explains: "She had ceased to feel the gushings of penitence; she had crushed the sharp agonies of an awakened conscience. ... She asked not the rite of civilization or Christianity" (16). Finally, when circumstances again worsen, Mag feels compelled to break the last societal taboo and consents to sending Frado into indentured servitude.

"The great evil in this book," Gates comments, "is poverty, both the desperation it inflicts as well as the evils it implicitly sanctions" (xlv). While Gates's observation is certainly accurate, the scene of Frado's abandonment serves as more than a bitter indictment against economic and social injustices. Breaking the silence on the collapse of maternal care in the face of exceedingly adverse conditions long before Toni Morrison would publish *Beloved*, Wilson thematises the postsentimental conflictedness that seems to have marked quite a few relationships between black (slave) girls and their desperate mothers. As Stern remarks, "in the antebellum period it was

not uncommon for poor free black single mothers to bind their children into indentured servitude."³³ Yet, Wilson's aim here is not so much to simply describe 'cultural practices of the time' as to stress that mother-child relations do not afford an autonomous private sphere, wherein the inherent and irreconcilable conflicts of society can be resolved. It is through this early identification of postsentimental conflictedness, then, that Wilson can represent Frado as the inversion of the tragic mulatto of convention, who, like her mother, learns to reject mollifying charities and to claim agency over her own life.³⁴

The most ferocious antagonist Frado faces during her indentured servitude is unquestionably Mrs. Bellmont, whose avarice and cruelty, as Ammons concedes, mocks the 19th century "myth of the mother-savior, of the superiority of maternal values."³⁵ "Wholly imbued with *southern* principles," Mrs. Bellmont treats 'Nig' worse than many a plantation mistress would treat a domestic slave, steadily "multiplying her labor" and frequently beating her into submission with "the raw hide" (3, 30). Frado is bound into submissive servitude not by Mrs. Bellmont's consistent use of physical force alone, though. Even more confining are the calculated acts of kindness, sporadically conferred upon her by the feminised Mr. Bellmont, invalid Jane, careless Jack, absent James, and pious Aunt Abby. Grateful for the smallest token of friendship, love, and acceptance from her kinder, gentler superiors, Frado endures Mrs. Bellmont's 'raw-hide' and Mary's scoffs almost beyond the breaking point. Only gradually does Frado internalise her mother's lesson that in order to attain a measure of free agency within a world of covert self-interests, she has to resist idle professions of sympathy, assuaging charities, and promises of heavenly salvation. Similar to Douglass, Frado eventually recognises that she was "under the influence of something like a *slavish* adoration of" her supposed friends,³⁶ from whose "memories" she quickly "passed" (131).

Although everyone in the family, save Mary, objects to Mrs. Bellmont's cruelties, neither Jack, nor James, nor Mr. Bellmont do anything to stop it. Characteristically, the latter's response to his wife's abuse of Frado is to take a walk. As Frado, wrongly accused of having pushed Mary into a creek, is about to receive "a good whipping," Mr. Bellmont flatly declares "I shall not punish her ... and left the house, as he usually did when a tempest threatened to envelop him" (34). Fully aware that these "kitchen scenes" of domestic violence are daily occurrences within their house yet too complacent to avert them, the Bellmont men now and again opt to re-prieve their consciences through little acts of benevolence toward Frado (66). Thus, finding Frado on the floor following the aforementioned beating, "her mouth wedged apart, her face swollen, and full of pain," Jack is so

overcome by tearful pity that he brings “her some supper, t[akes] her to her room,” comforts her, and sits “by her till she f[alls] asleep” (36). What is more, the next day he takes “her with him to the field” and buys “her a dog, which became a great favorite of both” (37). For a brief moment, Frado experiences genuine happiness and friendship. “But it could not be so generally,” and before long, “she must return ... to her household duties,” toiling as an unpaid servant for the entire family (37). Unwittingly or not, Jack’s self-serving act of charity thus coaxes Frado into a situation, wherein she feels compelled to endure her continued exploitation gratefully.

In a similar vein, Frado becomes “an object of interest to James” neither because he is opposed to her status of a quasi-slave nor because he believes in the equal treatment of blacks, but because he resents the particular “cruelty of his mother” (50). Not surprisingly, James’s rare interventions on her behalf, such as his offer of temporary protection from his mother’s whip, are usually coupled with exhortations that “she must try to be a good girl” (50). Just as Eva’s sudden outpouring of sentiment in Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* entices Topsy “to behave” and to fulfill her household duties, James’s attention wheedles Frado into silent acceptance of her servitude. The sheer “remembrance of his kindness,” Wilson writes, “cheered her through many weary month, and an occasional word to her in letters to Jack, were like ‘cold water to a thirsty soul’” (52). Inspired by the futile hope that “he would ... remove her from such severe treatment as she was subjected to,” Frado takes on the “additional burdens laid on her since his return” without complaint. “She must now *milk* the cows,” herd the sheep, “harness the horse for Mary and her mother to ride, go to mill, in short, do the work of a boy, could one be procured to endure the tirades of Mrs. Belmont” (52-3). Obviously James’s ‘kindness’ comes at a heavy price.

That James’s concern for the improvement of her ‘spiritual condition’ is not only self-interested, but effectively prolongs Frado’s passive submissiveness becomes apparent when declining health forces him and his new wife to return home. Though James compels his mother to permit Frado to eat at the family table, he remains “cautious about pressing too closely her claims on his mother, as it would increase the burdened one he so anxiously wished to relieve” (70). Instead of openly supporting her against his mother, he “cheered her on with the hope of returning with his family, when he recovered sufficiently” (70). Notwithstanding James’s repeated assurances that “there were thousands upon thousands who favored the elevation of her race, disapproving of oppression in all its forms,” Frado’s “new hopes and aspirations” are soon dashed (76). For aside from her regular duties, she now also has to attend to the invalid James. “The calls upon

Frado were consequently more frequent, her nights less tranquil. Her health was impaired by lifting the sick man, and by drudgery in the kitchen. ... She was at last so much reduced as to be unable to stand erect for any great length of time" (81-2).

"Becoming seriously ill," Frado eagerly seeks consolation in the religious discourse of James and Aunt Abby, "who kindly directed her to Christ, and instructed her in the way of salvation" (86). Tormented by thoughts of "doubt and sin which clouded her soul," Frado eventually comes to see James as a sort of saviour figure. "As James approached that blessed world, she felt a strong desire to follow, and be with one who was such a dear, kind friend" (87, 85). Under his, Aunt Abby's, and the minister's "instructions," Frado becomes "a believer in a future existence," where she may "cast off the fetters of sin, and rise to the communion of saints" (87). Under the influence of James and Aunt Abby, who tirelessly counsel patience and nonresistance, Frado "continue[s], as usual, her labors," hoping "to share the abode of James" in the hereafter (84-5).

James's death, however, abruptly halts her incipient conversion experience. On the verge of leaping after him into the grave, she suddenly realises that "she was not fit to die. She could not go where he was if she did. She did not love God; she did not serve him or know how to" (99). Released from James's spell, her old doubt that the Christian promise of salvation "was all for white people" becomes certainty, as "[h]er mistress grasping her raw-hide, caused a longer flow of tears, and wounded a spirit that was craving healing mercies" (84, 101).

As indicated earlier, Wilson's deliberate move to overturn Frado's anticipated conversion just at the point where she seems willing to sacrifice herself in accordance with James's doctrine of nonresistance and passive suffering, not only exposes "the failure of Christianity to stand as a critique of white hegemonic ideals," but, more broadly, constitutes a postsentimental attack against white liberal notions of compassion, charity, and uplift.³⁷ Before Frado can become an independent agent in the political and economic struggle for black emancipation, she has to throw off the specious ideology of compassion that on the one hand absolves a white bourgeoisie from political responsibility and on the other reinvests it with the moral supremacy that legitimises existing conditions of black servitude.³⁸

Notably, it is only after James's death that Frado musters enough courage to openly challenge Mrs. Bellmont. Returning from an errand to fetch wood, Frado is scolded for "not returning as soon as Mrs. B. calculated" (105). But just as the evil mistress is about to administer physical punishment, Frado shouts: "'Stop!... strike me, and I'll never work a mite for you;' and throwing down what she had gathered, stood like one who feels

the stirring of free and independent thoughts" (105). Of course, as in Douglass' case, this single act of defiance by and in itself does not lead to physical freedom. Yet, "the stirring of free and independent thoughts" signals that Frado no longer pins her hopes to the promised aid of charitable masters, but instead begins to actively confront the powers that be. Henceforth, Frado's overjoyed reaction to "the astounding news" of "Mary's untimely death," shocking as it may seem to Aunt Abby and the "gentle reader," marks her successful conversion from an *object* of sentimental piety to a *subject* of postsentimental resistance.³⁹ Thus, having cast off James's hollow dictum of Christian empathy, which "was all for white people" to begin with, Frado plots her way to freedom, resolves "to flee," and even "contemplated administering poison to her mistress" (84, 108).

Frado's eventual release from bondage does not clear the path toward freedom, of course. In keeping with her aim to illuminate the socio-economic conditions that permanently relegate free blacks to the fringes of society, Wilson adds a depiction of Frado's post-servitude struggles to eek out a living. In contrasting the genuine help Frado receives from Mrs. Moore, Mrs. Hale, and two nameless friends with the false charities Mrs. Hoggs bestows upon her and Samuel's antislavery profiteering, Wilson outlines the contours of a postsentimental, postslavery cooperation between and among racial lines that acknowledges both *persistent conflicts of interests* and *mutual interdependence*.

Frado's first summer after release from bondage "passed pleasantly," as Mrs. Moore affords her gainful employment from which both parties benefit (117). Soon, however, Frado's lingering illness catches up with her and when "the kind Mrs. Hale" falls sick too, she is "removed to the home of two maidens, (old,) who had principle enough to be willing to earn the money a charitable public disburses" (122). As earlier under the protection of "kind" James, under the self-serving care of these two old maidens, Frado's physical condition actually deteriorates. Matters take a turn for the worse, when, two years later, Frado is given into the care of the greedy Mrs. Hoggs, "a lover of gold and silver," who asks "the favor of filling her coffers by caring for the sick" (122). Once again leveling a postsentimental attack against the uncritical notion of public compassion, Wilson uses this scene to expose the specious nature of charities that fill the coffers of the lower middle class, while keeping the destitute in a permanent state of helpless confinement. And just in case one might doubt that this system of calculated charity primarily aims at confining needy mulatto girls, Mrs. Hogg reports Frado to the "town officers as an impostor," after the latter had taken up needle work in an attempt to "yet help herself" (123).

True aid, Wilson highlights toward the end of the penultimate chapter,

originates in the recognition of difference as well as a shared humanity, from whence it proceeds to promote self-help and self-improvement. Hence, even though Mrs. Moore had seen better days herself, she resolves to assist Frado, not because she is suddenly overwhelmed by pity, but because "she felt humanity required her to" do so. Unlike James or Aunt Abby, whose sympathy toward Frado sprung from pure emotion, Mrs. Moore's decision to assist Frado is reason-based, rooted less in religious beliefs than in humanitarian principles. Not surprisingly, with Mrs. Moore's support Frado first regains a measure of health and then once more resolves "to take care of herself, to cast off the unpleasant charities of the public" (124). Of course, "black, feeble and poor," Frado by now is only too aware of the obstacles that race and class prejudices pose to her advancement. Yet, having learned that independence requires collaboration, Frado puts her trust in a more practical-minded God and before long finds "a plain, simple woman, who could see merit beneath a dark skin" (124). The "plain, simple woman" not only agrees to instruct her "with the needle," but "also to teach her the value of useful books" (124). As a result of this cooperation between the "simple" white woman and the "invalid mulatto," Frado feels "herself capable of elevation" for the first time (124). Working hard and maintaining "a devout and Christian exterior" for the benefit of "the villagers," Frado passes "months of quiet, growing in the confidence of her neighbors and new found friends" (125).

Alas, *Our Nig* does not conclude with this serene picture of "quiet" and relative contentment. In fact, rather than "winding up ... the matter," the final chapter yet again complicates Frado's troubles. Wilson's terse description of Frado's short marriage with a "professed fugitive ... from slavery," which leaves her, like her mother, abandoned with child and "nearly prostrated," once again obliges the "gentle reader" to discard all sentimental ideas and to recognise the unresolved race, class, and gender conflicts that swelter underneath his or her very own nose (126, 127). Hence, the "silent sympathy" that initially attracted Frado to the "fine, straight negro" soon proves deceptive, as Samuel prolongs his "lectures" on the abolitionist circuit "often for weeks" and eventually "embarked at sea, with the disclosure that he had never seen the South, and that his illiterate harangues were humbugs for hungry abolitionists" (128). As nearly all commentators have noted, Wilson's portrayal of Samuel as a con artist, who makes a living by flattering the "thousands who favored the elevation" of blacks yet refuse "to admit one through the front door," constitutes her most unequivocal indictment against white hypocrisy and self-righteousness (76, 129). Equally unambiguously, though, Samuel's scheming and irresponsible behavior furthermore repudiates notions, according to which love and marriage afford

women with fulfillment and protection. For not only does Frado find her “feelings of trust” shattered, she is also “again thrown upon the public for sustenance” and – not unlike “poor Mag” before her – forced to leave her baby boy “in charge of a Mrs. Capon” (128, 129). The sentimental investment in love and marriage, Wilson makes clear, is no substitute for the recognition of mutual dependency as well as a firm commitment to reciprocal aid.

Wilson ultimately abstains from offering any clear solutions to the persistent race, class, and gender conflicts that her heroine embodies. *Our Nig* ends where it begins; namely, with the continual struggle for survival and acceptance. The reader catches a last glimpse of Frado, “busily employed in preparing her merchandise; sallying forth to encounter many frowns, but some kind friends and purchasers” (130). Yet, as we have seen, it is precisely Wilson’s postsentimental refusal to supply either an unambiguously tragic or a decidedly happy ending that preserves the political double thrust of *Our Nig*. For on the one hand, Frado’s hard-won realisation that blind faith in the sentimental promise of deliverance through motherhood, domesticity, compassion, friendship, and Christianity will invariably result in self-destruction of the oppressed, testifies to the necessity of open conflict. On the other hand, though, Wilson’s exposure of the subtle mechanisms that preserve old modes of exploitation under the new guise of compassion, underscores that the dominant culture will never cast off “Slavery’s Shadows,” unless it recognises that its own fate lies in the hands of the oppressed and eventually commits itself to genuine cooperation across race, class, and gender lines.

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NOTES

¹ W.E.B. DuBois, “The Souls of Black Folks,” in *Three Negro Classics*, ed. John Hope Franklin (New York: Avon, 1999), 219.

² Walter Benjamin, “Der Autor als Produzent,” in *Versuche über Brecht*, ed. Rolf Tiedmann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1993), 101-20.

³ Harriet E. Wilson, *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black*, ed. Henry Louis Gates (New York: Vintage Books, 1983). All in-text parenthetical references are to this book, including those to Gates’ “Introduction.”

⁴ Elizabeth Ammons, “Stowe’s Dream of the Mother-Savior: *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and American Women Writers Before the 1920s,” in *New Essays on Uncle Tom’s*

- Cabin*, ed. Eric Sundquist (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986), 183.
- ⁵ Eric Gardner, "'This Attempt of Their Sister:' Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* from Printer to Readers," *The New England Quarterly*, 66.2 (1993), 242.
- ⁶ Elizabeth Breau, "Identifying Satire: 'Our Nig,'" *Callaloo*, 16.2 (1993), 465.
- ⁷ Julia Stern, "Excavating Genre in *Our Nig*," *American Literature*, 67 (1995), 439, 441.
- ⁸ John Ernest, *Resistance and Reformation in Nineteenth Century African-American Literature: Brown, Wilson, Jacobs, Delany, Douglass, and Harper* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1995), 56-7.
- ⁹ R.J. Ellis, "Body Politics and the Body Politic in William Wells Brown's *Clotel* and Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig*," in *Soft Canons: American Women Writers and the Masculine Traditions*, ed. Karen Kilcup (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1999), 99-100.
- ¹⁰ Elizabeth West, "Reworking the Conversion Narrative: Race and Christianity in *Our Nig*," *Melus*, 24.2 (1999), 3.
- ¹¹ Gardner, "'This Attempt of Their Sister,'" 242.
- ¹² Stern, "Excavating Genre in *Our Nig*," 448; Ammons, "Stowe's Dream of the Mother-Savior," 188.
- ¹³ Stern, "Excavating Genre in *Our Nig*," 453; West, "Reworking the Conversion Narrative," 23.
- ¹⁴ See, e.g., Katherine Clay Bassard, "'Beyond Mortal Vision:' Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig* and the American Racial Dream-Text," in *Female Subjectivity in Black and White*, eds. Elizabeth Abel et al. (Berkeley: U of California P, 1997), 189; Ernest, *Resistance and Reformation in Nineteenth Century African-American Literature*, 70; West, "Reworking the Conversion Narrative," 22.
- ¹⁵ Benjamin, "Der Autor als Produzent," 116.
- ¹⁶ Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham: Duke UP, 1997), 223.
- ¹⁷ DuBois, "The Souls of Black Folks," 251.
- ¹⁸ Henry Louis Gates, "Introduction," in *The Classic Slave Narratives*, ed. Henry Louis Gates (New York: Mentor, 1989), x.
- ¹⁹ Lauren Berlant, "Poor Eliza," *American Literature*, 70.3 (1998), 641.
- ²⁰ Stern, "Excavating Genre in *Our Nig*," 440.
- ²¹ Berlant, "Poor Eliza," 641.
- ²² Berlant, "Poor Eliza," 642.
- ²³ Berlant, "Poor Eliza," 648.
- ²⁴ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (New York: Norton, 1994), 245.
- ²⁵ Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 246.
- ²⁶ Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 267.
- ²⁷ Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 246.
- ²⁸ Berlant, "Poor Eliza," 640.

²⁹ West, "Reworking the Conversion Narrative," 4.

³⁰ Representing her personal history of crisis as symptomatic of the violent tensions within society, Wilson's Frado resembles Walter Benjamin's 'Angelus Novus': "His faced turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward" ("Thesis on the Philosophy of History" in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt [New York: Schocken Books, 1985], 257-8). Like the angel of history, a matured Frado can perceive the past only as a reappearance of neglect, abuse, exploitation, and violence. But even though she "give[s] over all thought of the future world," Frado must follow "the way" "God prepares," "resolutely" avoiding the "[t]raps slyly laid by the vicious to ensnare her" (104, 124, 129).

³¹ Berlant, *The Queen*, 223.

³² Ernest, *Resistance and Reformation in Nineteenth Century African-American Literature*, 60.

³³ Stern, "Excavating Genre in *Our Nig*," 446.

³⁴ As Elizabeth Fox-Genovese notes, "[w]here the tragic mulatto is patient and long-suffering, Frado is angry and rebellious." And "[u]nlike the mulatto heroine, Frado exposes the internal scares that her experience has traced in her mind": Fox-Genovese, "'To Weave It Into the Literature of the Country': Epic and Fictions of African American Women," in *Poetics of the Americas: Race, Founding, and Textuality*, eds. Bainard Cowan and Jefferson Humphries (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1997), 42.

³⁵ Ammons, "Stowe's Dream of the Mother-Savior," 182.

³⁶ Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (Salem: Ayer Publishers, 1984), 394, emphasis added.

³⁷ West, "Reworking the Conversion Narrative," 16.

³⁸ Thus, unlike Stowe's heaven-bound Uncle Tom, Frado suddenly realises that turning herself into "a martyr" would be nothing more than a politically ineffective, self-destructive gesture of defeat (83).

³⁹ As Gates observes, it is this "transformation from black-as-object into the black-as-subject" that attests to a newfound "will to power" ("Introduction," lv).