HARRIET E. WILSON’S OUR NIG:
A TRIAL FOR WRITING “MY OWN STORY” I

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I. A Literary Experiment

Harriet Wilson’s Our Nig is a story of a free black girl in the North. Since the details of the author’s life are extremely scarce, it is hard to determine whether the story is an autobiography or a work of imagination. But many critics assert that it is an “autobiographical” novel. Our Nig was published in Boston in 1859, two years before the outbreak of the Civil War. It attracted little attention even from black abolitionists, and had been buried in oblivion for more than a century until Henry Louis Gates, Jr., accidentally unearthed and reprinted it in 1983. As Barbara White notes, the discovery of the work dislodged Frances Harper’s Iola Leroy; or Shadows Uplifted (1892), “previously considered the first novel by an African American woman” (iii), and re-dated the emergence of black female fiction three decades earlier all at once.

Not only does the recovery of Our Nig dramatically alter the chronology of black women’s writing, however, but it also expands the world of the early African American literature since the novel is far more complex than it first appears to be. Alice Walker emphasizes its “enormous significance” by saying that “[it] is as if we’d just discovered Phillis Wheatley—or Langston Hughes” (Gates, “Preface” vii; White iii), while Ralph Ellison confesses that it reassured his “suspicion that there was more ‘free-floating’ literacy available to Negroes than has been assumed” (Gates, “Preface” viii).

Highly evaluating Wilson as the first black woman to have published a novel in the United States, Gates remarks that the plot of Our Nig “has no parallel either in sentimental fiction generally or in Afro-American fiction” until the twentieth century in that the initial
inter racial marriage is the very incentive force for the ensuing incidents (Figures in Black 145). Ira Berlin also insists on the importance of the novel, declaring that it is “more complicated than any black novel” before Charles Chesnut’s The House Behind the Cedars published in 1900, for, until then, scarcely had either the antebellum interracial marriage or relations of black men and women been articulated from the black perspective (154). In this sense, Gates calls Our Nig a “missing link” between the enriched tradition of black autobiographies (or slave narratives) and “the slow emergence of a distinctive black voice in fiction” (Introduction lii).

The uniqueness of Our Nig lies also in the combination of the two received literary traditions, the slave narrative, employed chiefly by male black writers, and the sentimental novel predominant among works by white female writers in the nineteenth century. Yet Our Nig is more than a mere mixture of the two. In her struggle to voice the suffering of the black heroine, a free mulatto exploited and abused by a white family, the Bellmonts, Wilson seems to fuse the two literary conventions to create a new form to suit her purpose (Gates, Introduction lii).

Although Wilson makes it clear in her short preface that she wrote the book as a sort of “experiment” to sustain herself and her child in destitution, the term “experiment” can also be metaphorical, for she attempts to find a way to express her long painful experience as an indentured servant. Following the traditional framework of sentimental novel, Our Nig, like Harriet Jacobs’s slave narrative, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861), diverts from the genre and thereby exposes its limits. The parentless heroine, Alfrado (often called Frado), grows into a young woman through countless harsh treatments by her mistress, Mrs. Bellmont, and her youngest daughter Mary, and yet the hardship does not promise her a comfortable and respectable life which is sure to be given to sentimental heroines; nor does the story ends with a happy marriage, the expected “reward” for a pious lady who has gone through certain ordeals. Frado, like Linda the heroine of Jacobs’s narrative, remains homeless at the end of the story, and her religious belief, the most important element for a sentimental heroine, is ambiguous to the end².

Indeed, as the title implies, Wilson is quite audacious in many
respects in spite of her prefatory humble apology (“her inability to minister to the refined and cultivated, the pleasure supplied by abler pens”; “defects are so apparent it requires no skilful hand to expose them”). By naming her autobiographical novel “Our Nig,” the author challenges her contemporary Northern readers, especially those abolitionists, who believe that they are free from the taint of slavery and who boast of democracy, reproaching the inhumanity of slaveholders in the South. The derogative appellation, “Nig(ger),” immediately implies racial prejudice against the black, and the possessive pronoun “Our” indicates the voice of the white family who “own” the heroine like a slave; the title might have repelled the white Christian readers to whom the book chiefly addressed.

What is more striking, or tricky, is the way Wilson presents the author of the book. Following the pattern of the slave narrative whose authorship is often forced to be hidden for his/her security, and yet must be somehow recorded to guarantee the truthfulness of the narrative by adding, for instance, “written by himself/herself” as in the case of Frederick Douglass’s narrative, she offers her anonymous version, “By ‘Our Nig.’” While the titular name repeated in double quotes gives an impression that the following story narrated in the third person is in fact a true story—the effect anti-slavery fiction as well as slave narratives generally aims at, it gradually makes the reader conscious of the ironic viewpoint from “Our Nig.” As Gates aptly points out, by using the debased name as her pseudonym, Wilson is enabled to transform the heroine, the “object of abuse and scorn,” into “a subject who writes her own thinly veiled fictional account of her life in which she transforms her tormentors into objects” (Introduction li). The reuse of the scornful appellation given by her tormentors reverses the perspective and grants the “passive” victim with power to objectify them; the person gazed and assessed becomes a gazer and assessor. *Our Nig* is, as it were, a story of this gazer/assessor who gains power by writing her own story.
II. Slavery’s Shadows in the North

Although pecuniary shortage was certainly the main factor that drove Wilson to “scribbling,” as it was often a hidden motive for the publication of domestic novels by such women writers as Susan Warner and Harriet Beecher Stowe, Our Nig is another powerful antislavery novel in the 1850s when slavery was a national issue of paramount urgency; it was published only two months before John Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry. Just as the title alludes the servitude of the black race, so does its long subtitle further suggest the virtual existence of slavery in the North where the institution had been legally abolished: “Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, in a Two-Story White House, North. Showing That Slavery’s Shadows Fall Even There.” The phrase, “Slavery’s Shadows,” carries a double meaning. It signifies, in the first place, the prolonged unpaid labor and the relentless physical violence inflicted upon “our Nig”: Mrs. Bellmont’s frequent whipping, kicking, or confinement, as well as continual verbal harassment. Wilson discloses in her preface the literal existence of slavery in “a two-story white house” hidden from the public eye: “My mistress was wholly imbued with southern principles.”

But “Slavery’s Shadows” is also figurative. The author’s indictment is not limited to an individual family or person, but extended to racism prevalent even in the Northern free “democratic” states. As Lydia Maria Child, a prominent abolitionist writer who edited Jacobs’s Incidents, had seen through racism at the core of slavery as early as 1833 in her abolitionist book An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans (186-207), Wilson recognizes anti-black racism as the cause of slavery; she in fact almost equates racism with slavery itself. Mrs. Bellmont is so prejudiced against black people that she “hardly believed [Frado] had a soul” (86); religion is meant for white people alone, not for blacks. She cares not at all how ill Frado looks in consequence of overwork because “niggers are just like black snakes; you can’t kill them” (88).

It must be noted that behind Mrs. Bellmont’s skeptical comment on giving the black education lies her fear of racial reversal:
“I have let Nig go out to evening meetings a few times, and, if you will believe it, I found her reading the Bible to-day, just as though she expected to turn pious nigger, and preach to white folks. So now you see what good comes of sending her to school.” (88)

The above citation echoes the well-known rhetoric Hugh Auld uses in Douglass’s narrative when he prohibits his wife Sophia from teaching Douglass how to read.

*Our Nig* indeed inherits the tradition of the slave narrative. Frado’s life is just like that of a Southern slave. She was separated from her family when she was only six years old, though not as a result of being sold by a cruel slaveholder, but of being deserted by her own white mother in utter poverty. Except for the short period when she was allowed to attend a school for elementary education, she is a literal slave who toils under the control of Mrs. Bellmont. The portrayal of Frado’s routine life reflects slave narratives: her drudgery lasts from early dawn until after all the other members have retired into beds; she has to do everything exactly in the way she is directed to do, and “any departure from this rule [is] to be punished by a whipping” (29), just as any delay leads to the same result; her meal is a coarse scant one, “a bowl of skimmed milk, with brown bread crusts” (29), which she has to take within ten minutes, standing by the kitchen table; beside the scanty clothes, she is given no shoes and no headgear almost all through the year, so that she is always exposed to heat or coldness; and, if she cries over her misery, she is sure to be whipped, for tears are regarded as “a symptom of discontent and complaining which must be nipped in the bud” (30).

Such presentation of heartless treatment by a white lady must have appalled the contemporary readers when women were regarded as the “angel in the house” and pedestaled as a moral guardian of home in the context of what is called the cult of true womanhood in antebellum America. Wilson discloses the wide gap between the idealized middle-class woman and her reality. The “Two-story White House” in the subtitle is suggestive of this reality. While the phrase describes the actual house in which the protagonist stays, it implies a house divided between the races. The white house of the Bellmonts, which most probably assumes a stately
front, is divided between the “nicely furnished rooms” that amazed Frado, and the attic room allotted to her, “an unfurnished chamber over the kitchen, the roof slanting nearly to the floor, so that the bed could stand only in the middle of the room” (27).

The double-structured residence is symbolic of hypocrisy of Mrs. Bellmont who plays a role of the middle-class mistress in the parlor, behaving perhaps like a respectable lady, but who becomes a “she-devil” (25) in the kitchen, where she enslaves the poor black orphan, applying a rawhide whenever she is in the mood. And the compartmentalization of the house “produces a compartmentalized language deployed by the white woman, who speaks like an angel in the parlor but like a ‘she-devil’ in the kitchen” (Mullen 254). Mrs. Bellmont depicted by Wilson is perhaps close to the reality of a plantation mistress, as Douglas introduces in his narrative several examples of cruel mistresses like Mrs. Giles Hick who killed his wife’s cousin: “Mrs. Hicks, finding the girl slow to move, jumped from her bed, seized an oak stick of wood by the fireplace, and with it broke the girl’s nose and breastbone, and thus ended her life” (53).

Mrs. Bellmont’s brutality, however, does not come only from her wicked nature (“she-devil”), but it also includes class exploitation. She is an avid mistress who sees nothing wrong in extorting as much money from the oppressed as possible. It is suggested in the text that, before Frado became her servant, many hired young girls had fled from the house one after another because of hard work there. Objecting to the idea of a religious servant, Mrs. Bellmont retorts to her husband who urges her to let Frado attend prayer meetings:

“Why, according to you and James, we should very soon have her in the parlor, as smart as our own girls. . . . If you should go on as you would like, it would not be six months before she would be leaving me; and that won’t do. Just think how much profit she was to us last summer. We had no work hired out; she did the work of two girls—” (89-90)

This quotation reveals the extent to which Mrs. Bellmont abuses Frado. It is quite ironic that her vindictive comment on Frado paradoxically tells us
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how able she is. Frado’s ability to manage the work of two girls, however, does not lead to any betterment of her condition, since Mrs. Bellmont’s strong sense of class distinction never allows the lowest working class to trespass the line that divides the parlor from the kitchen. Mrs. Bellmont ends the argument with her husband, saying, “I’ll beat the money out of her” (90). And she did beat the money out of her, so that Frado became sick and lame as a consequence of many years of overwork, for which Mrs. Bellmont paid only “a silver half dollar” when she left the house at the age of eighteen.

Mrs. Bellmont’s class consciousness is also expressed in her objection to the eldest daughter, Jane’s marriage. She wished Jane to marry Henry, in prospect of the great riches that he would inherit from his father. She, therefore, grew infuriated to know that Jane had selected as her husband George, a less wealthy man, and her anger was not subsided until Mr. Bellmont intervened in this matter for the daughter. A similar scene is repeated again when Jack, the younger son, announces that he has married a woman who, according to him, is “worth a million dollars . . . though not a cent of it is in money” (112). Regarding his wife as a disgrace to the Bellmonts, his mother tries to break up the marriage. The letters she manipulates for this purpose remind us of Jacobs’s narrative and Walker’s *The Color Purple*.

Financial/class rise and decline by marriage is another important motif of this novel. Frado’s white mother Mag goes down the social ladder by marriage. Her story follows the convention of Richardsonian sentimental novel such as *Charlotte Temple*—seduction of an innocent young girl by a wicked man, his desertion of the girl with a baby, the coldness of her peers and her utter poverty and desperation, but its subsequent latter half deviates from the convention of the genre with Mag’s second marriage with a colored man named Jim—the introduction of “amalgamation,” a taboo in the sentimental novel. And this is what makes *Our Nig* unique in the sentimental tradition.

Amalgamation is the object of the most vehement attack from the proslavery against abolitionism (Foster 29), though such attack overlooks the existence of many children of mixed blood in the South as a consequence of “amalgamation.” Wilson challenges the reader, through
Jim’s wooing, to reflect on the question of which is more awful, the cold shoulder those former white “friends” give, or the offer of help by the caring blackman by means of interracial marriage:

“You’s hard trial of 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. I’s black outside, I know, but I’s got a white heart inside. Which you rather have, a black heart in a white skin, or a white heart in a black one?” (12)

The story of Mag’s fall and poverty actuates that of Frado the protagonist, and the former somehow anticipates the latter. Like her mother, Frado is in a sense seduced by a self-proclaimed fugitive slave, bears a baby and is deserted by him, and is compelled in the end to leave her child in a charitable family because of destitution. Frado’s never-ending suffering from poverty criticizes the hierarchical society based on race and class. Although Caroline Rush’s *The North and the South* (1852) is an anti-Tom proslavery novel, it somehow resonates with *Our Nig*, since Rush speaks for those poor working children, insisting that slavery exists in the North as well and that poverty is the hardest master. She addresses the reader, who shed tears over the fate of Uncle Tom, a masculine Negro, “where is the genius to paint the scenes that exists in our cities? To awaken a sympathy that shall give strength to the white, wearied, worn-out daughters of toil?” (23) *Our Nig* is, in a way, a critical response to the question Rush raises (Gates, Introduction xlv). Wilson has revised Rush’s story of poor white children in Northern cities and created a story of a black working-class girl who is the very “wearied, worn-out daughter of toil.” *Our Nig* “transmogfies the rhetorical devices of the sentimental ‘woman’s novel’ into an early Afro-American commentary on race, class, and poverty in mid-nineteenth-century America” (Davis).
III. The Invisible Men and Their Sexual Exploitation

While Mrs. Bellmont and her younger daughter Mary, a sort of copy of the mother, are the “monsters” to torture Frado, the male members—Mr. Bellmont, James the eldest son, and Jack—all seem to be gentle to her. They often play the role of a mediator between Frado and those female “devils” in the house. Yet none of the males ever attempts to rescue the poor black girl out of the servitude. Mr. Bellmont, for instance, is a sympathetic, humane man, but tends to evade the storm of anger of his shrewish wife, like Rip Van Winkle, and thus to leave Frado in her cruel hands. He even wished that Frado would never return when she once fled from the house. He acquiesces in his wife’s violence, saying that he cannot resist women: “How am I to help it? Women rule the earth, and all in it” (44).

Though Mr. Bellmont pretends that women are the law, a close reading of the story reveals that the patriarchal law rules the family. After the long familial controversy over Frado’s education, Mr. Bellmont declared in the end that “she should go to school” (30); the word once spoken by him “became the law” (31) and the objection of Mrs. Bellmont and Mary was silenced. He once advised Frado to try to avoid an undeserved whipping. This implies that he does not deny the act of whipping itself; he rather thinks that she should be whipped if she deserves the punishment.

Most important matters are thus determined by Mr. Bellmont, the head of the family. We may remember here that it was after all Mr. Bellmont who decided to let Jane choose her future spouse in the midst of the wife’s stormy fury. And this patriarchal power is subtly suggested in the relationship between the Bellmonts. When Frado fled from the house after Mrs. Bellmont’s severe whipping, Mr. Bellmont suspected that his wife confined her somewhere. With a sense of humiliation, Mrs. Bellmont complained, “Oh, dear! I did not think it would come to this; that my own husband would treat me so.” Tears gushed from her eyes, but “nobody but Mary seemed to notice” them (47-48). Yet whenever she finds something uncontrollable about Frado, she appeals, the narrator comments ironically, to her husband: “Strange, when she was always
foiled in this direction, she should resort to him” (87).

James and Jack, the future patriarchs, are not different much from their father in that their kindness is limited within the structure of racial hierarchy. Even if James invites her to the parlor, it does not mean she can join the world of the parlor; the racial division is never dissolved. What Jack can do to protect her from his mother’s tyranny is only to give her a dog which is to become her sole “friend” to listen to her lamentations.

The dog called Fido signifies her double, as the sight rhyme of the names, Frado/Fido, implies (Johnson 106). It is a symbolic existence that reflects her situation, a pet among the Bellmont men. This is best expressed in a scene of the dinner table. When Mrs. Bellmont commanded her to eat from the plate she had used instead of a clean one, Frado called the dog to lick it. Jack enjoyed her witty counterattack so much that he threw a bright, silver half-dollar, saying, “There, take that; ’t was worth paying for” (72). This reminds us of a scene in Uncle Tom’s Cabin where Mr. Shelby, a Kentuckian planter, and Haley the slave trader throw a slave boy raisins or a quarter of an orange to reward the amusement he has given them by his comic gestures. The analogy between the two scenes clearly tells us that Frado is not regarded as a family member; she is no more than a pet at best to Jack even though he is kind and sympathetic to her.

When a slave is a “she-pet,” however, that makes much difference, for it involves almost without exception sexual exploitation. Frado is described from the start as a beautiful mulatto girl and Jack urges his family to “keep her” in the house because she is “real handsome and bright, and not very black, either” (25). When James returned home after long absence, his first question was, “Is this that pretty Nig, Jack writes to me about, that you are so severe upon, mother?” (47) Frado’s body is the object of sexual desire of the men as well as of Mrs. Bellmont’s monetary greed. Ronna Johnson even suggests “rapes” behind the intimate, friendly attitude of the Bellmont males and Frado’s sudden boldness toward her mistress when she is sure of their presence (Johnson 97). It is indeed probable that her occasional daring behaviors are supported by a sense of protection that comes from her closeted sexual ties with the Bellmont men. But the matter of sexuality is suppressed in the text. Throughout the
story Mrs. Bellmont’s (and Mary’s) brutality both physical and verbal is forwarded, whereas the male members are put in the background and almost invisible in the depiction of the heroine’s suffering.

Whether or not actual “rapes” compose a hidden sub-text beneath the surface narrative, the story discloses a quite different aspect if we read sexual abuses in it. Mrs. Bellmont’s sadistic impulses of violence spouted on Frado may be better understood in this context (Johnson 109). When she makes Frado work outside without a hat to shield her head from the glittering sunlight, it is not only to torture her, but to make her sun-tanned and black enough: “She was not many shades darker than Mary now; what a calamity it would be ever to hear the contrast spoken of. Mrs. Bellmont was determined the sun should have full power to darken the shade which nature had first bestowed upon her as best befitting” (39). At another time, she quickly responds to James’s recognition of Frado’s beauty, saying, “I’ll not leave much of her beauty to be seen” (47). And she actually tries to make her look ugly by cutting her glossy ringlets. Finding that his mother cut her curls out of jealousy, Jack remarks, consoling the victim, “Thought you were getting handsome, did she? Same old story, is it; knocks and bumps? Better times coming; never fear, Nig” (70).

Mrs. Bellmont’s tears of fury shed behind the back of the men, which only Mary notices, assume, then, much more complex layers of meanings than they seemingly show. It may be worth noting here that Mary Chestnut insisted that the master’s indulgence in sexual pleasure extracted from his slave women was the “sorest spot” of slavery (168-69), denouncing Stowe’s neglect of this point in her popular Uncle Tom’s Cabin; that Mrs. Flint in Jacobs’s narrative was so jealous of the slave girl to whom her husband was attached that she became mad enough to “[spend] many a sleepless night to watch over [her]” (31); or that the white mistress in Cather’s last novel, Sapphira and the Slave Girl (1940), set in pre-Civil-War Virginia schemes to make one of her nephews rape her slave girl to whom she suspects her husband is sexually attached.

As Gates observes that “Frado’s complex relation to James . . . is a curious blend of religion and sexual desire” (Introduction xlix), the reader cannot but perceive certain sexual connotation affixed to her religious
growth through his earnest guidance. It is evident that Frado’s religious awakening parallels her attachment to James. After he became ill and returned home again for recuperation, she devoted herself to the care of him, although she already had hard enough toil so that nursing sick James meant further reduction of her rest at night: “Yet she insisted on being called; she wished to show her love for one who had been such a friend to her” (77).

It seems Frado the servant girl who most mourned over the approaching death of James; she wept “like one inconsolable” (97). After the funeral, she wished to be buried together with him, and yet she mourned, at the same time, over “her unfitness for heaven” (99). Her aspiration for another world comes from her longing for James, as she herself admits, “He was the attraction. Should she ‘want to go there if she could not see him?’” (100). Even the minister advises her to make Christ, instead of James, the attraction of Heaven” (103). The description of Frado’s emotional ties to James, thus, evokes a tone of romantic (and sexual) affinity.

James, on the other hand, takes a patriarchal attitude toward Frado, though his concern with her soul is earnest. He initiates his inculcation of Christianity, like a minister, with a sort of catechism, examining Frado’s possibility of salvation, while the female members, like Abby (Mr. Bellmont’s sister) and Rachel (James’s wife), help her to probe a religious being within herself by taking her to prayer meetings or reading Bible together with her. James sees in her a kind heart, capable of vast love, but he believes that “[a] kind, affectionate heart, native wit, and common sense, and the pertness” he perceives in her should be “restrained properly,” if they might ever serve for herself (69).

Frado’s religiosity is, as it were, tested and disciplined by her devotion to the sick James. The long ordeal she endures is similar to that of the heroine of The Wide, Wide World (1850), that functions as well to make her a wife suitable to her future husband, John, the very man who guides and tests her religion. The long painful religious education, which serves to inculcate self-sacrifice in the heroine of the domestic novel, usually leads in the end to the “reward” of a happy marriage. In Our Nig, however, the long ordeal the heroine suffers through her self-sacrificial
caring of James brings about no such happy marriage. Frado is not good enough to be his wife. If she could be close to him in this world, it would have been only as his servant; her sole hope in taking care of him lies in the possibility that James would take her to his home as a housekeeper when he should get well.

IV. Frado and Topsy

Harriet Wilson, emulating the framework of the domestic novel, discloses not only the limitation of the genre but also hypocrisy in white Christian religion. She tactfully reveals the problem of racism through religious education of Frado by voicing her resistance to it as well. Unable to answer to her “knotty querries” (51) like the question of why God made the black and the white, James could only tell her to go to sleep. Even after she came to believe in “a future existence,” a doubt persisted and she wondered if there was “a heaven for the black” (84). This echoes Mrs. Bellmont’s racist discourse that “prayer was for whites, not for blacks” (94). And after the death of James, the narrator voices Frado’s inner thought that she did not “wish to go” to heaven in spite of her hope of being near him, if Mrs. Bellmont was also going there (104).

James’s concern over Frado’s soul reminds us of little Eva’s compassion for the black orphan, Topsy, who is uncontrollable to all but the white little girl and who instinctively sees through the racial prejudice against the black in well-meaning Ophelia, her caretaker, and mourns deep inside about her miserable situation: “No; she can’t bar me, ’cause I’m a nigger!—she’d ’s soon have a toad touch her! There can’t nobody love niggers, and niggers can’t do nothin’! I don’t care” (409). Only Eva understands Topsy’s inconsolable sorrow beneath her defiant attitude. And she sheds tears for the first time when Eva shows her sincere compassion for her: “I love you, because you haven’t had any father, or mother, or friends;—because you’ve been a poor, abused child! I love you, and I want you to be good” (409-10).

James likewise sees through the deep grief hidden in Frado’s wild spirit, as he one day told Abby that he had once overheard her lament:
“Oh! oh!” I heard, “why was I made? why can’t I die? Oh, what have I to live for? No one cares for me only to get my work. And I feel sick; who cares for that? Work as long as I can stand, and then fall down and lay there till I can get up. No mother, father, brother or sister to care for me, and then it is, You lazy nigger, lazy nigger—all because I am black! Oh, if I could die!” (74-75)

It seems probable that Wilson had Eva and Topsy in her mind when describing the relationship between James and Frado. There is no evidence that she read *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, yet it is improbable, on the other hand, that such a well-read author as she had not perused once the best-selling antislavery novel before writing her own. If she reproduces, however, Eva and Topsy in the portrayal of James and Frado, their relationship is sexualized with a tincture of patriarchy and her self-sacrificial devotion to him leads nowhere, as we have already seen. Frado thus remains a helpless black orphan, while Topsy is adopted and taken to the North by Ophelia to be educated to become a Christian lady. Frado thus has to continue her struggle to find a way to be independent.

**Notes**

1 Although most critics regards *Our Nig* as an autobiographical fiction, the emphasis they put on facts and imagination differs from one another. Barbara White, who has traced the models of the Bellmont family to the Haywards, seems to hold that *Our Nig* is for the large part based on the facts that Wilson experienced (iii-liv). The recent research by Gates and R. J. Ellis more definitely asserts that the work is a fiction (xxvi).

2 Harryette Mullen regards Frado’s religiosity as “a partial conversion to Chrisanity” (257).


4 My understanding of the implicit sexual exploitation in *Our Nig* is indebted
much to the analysis of the text by Johnson.

5 Wilson mentions twice that she “omitted” certain matter in her story, first in the preface and, then, in the closing part of the text, saying that God only knows it. Johnson sees in this elision sexual abuses: “indeed, from Clarissa to The Color Purple, confidence entrusted by women in narrative to ‘the Omniscient God’ have signified sexual violation” (97). And she is certain that the sexual violence means rape when a black woman is placed in servitude comparable to slavery (97). Elizabeth Sparks, an ex-slave, illustrates Johnson’s implication in telling her memory of slavery:

Old master done so much wrongness, I couldn’t tell you all of it. Slave girl Betty Lilly always had good clothes and all the privileges. She was a favorite of his.

Might as well quit looking at me. I ain’t going to tell you any more. Can’t tell you all I know—old Shep might come back and get me. Why, if I was to tell you the really bad things, some of them dead white folks would come right up out of their graves. But can’t tell all! God’s got all! (28-29)

It is clear that “the really bad things” about which Sparks has to shut her mouth signifies rapes.

6 Johnson also sees in Mrs. Bellmont’s vengeful violence the fixed pattern caused by patriarchy that white mistresses tend to punish “black female victims of rape” for the “sexual transgressions of their white men” (109).

Works Cited


Davis, David Brion. Comment on the cover of Our Nig by Wilson.


