

HARRIET E. WILSON'S *OUR NIG*: A TRIAL FOR WRITING "MY OWN STORY" II

KEIKO NOGUCHI

I.

Neither of the two key elements of the domestic novel, marriage and home, is given to the heroine of *Our Nig*. The "true womanhood" with its emphasis on piety, purity, obedience, and domesticity¹ is either unavailable to, or unable to support, a black woman in a patriarchal racist society based on slavery rules. The problem, then, focuses on the way how the heroine establishes herself in such a hostile society.

One of the chief themes of the story, in fact, lies in Frado's struggle to acquire independence. According to Harryette Mullen, nineteenth-century black women writers strived to incorporate "an oral tradition of resistance" into their literature, since the two traditional literary forms available to them, the male slave narrative and the white female sentimental fiction, are inadequate to express their experience (245). They assert oral power of black women to resist the oppressors and to insist upon their selfhood, while male writers of slave narratives underscore the physical power to attain manhood as Douglass does in the scene of his fight with Mr. Covey. When submission and self-effacement were endorsed as female virtues, black women resorted to "orality"—talking back, arguing, or revealing secrets of their masters, all of which were regarded as "saucy" or "impudent" by the ruling class—to surface their voice and thereby to establish their identity (Mullen 245-46)².

II.

Frado is by no means a submissive girl as is expected of a heroin

of the sentimental fiction. She is characterized from the beginning as a jolly, resilient, sometimes even mischievous, child. The tyrannical act of the mistress at home does not wholly suppress her jaunty nature, which surfaces at school and pleases her schoolmates: "Her jollity was not quenched by whipping or scolding. In Mrs. Belmont's presence she was under restraint; but in the kitchen, and among her schoolmates, the pent up fires burst forth" (38). She even plays a prank to delight her friends in the classroom or performs an action of bravado to amuse the men around her. When jeered by the children at her winter attire, "a cast-off overcoat, once worn by Jack, and a sun-bonnet" (37), she displays enough toughness and verbal resource to retort them.

However, any natural expression of her feelings is suppressed by Mrs. Belmont and Mary who regard it as manifestation of discontent and defiance. When she was ill and unable to answer quickly enough to Mary's call, yet dragged herself toward her room, saying that she was coming as quick as possible, the little tyrant threw a knife at her, roaring, "Saucy, impudent nigger, you! is this the way you answer me?" (64). A similar scene is later repeated between the heroine and Mrs. Belmont. As she could not accomplish the mistress's order to bring wood sticks as soon as she was expected to do, Mrs. Belmont aimed to strike her with a stick. Frado, this time, was determined not to be a passive victim of her violence; she instead tried to confront her boss with the force of words:

"Stop!" shouted Frado, "strike me, and I'll never work a mite more for you [,]" and throwing down what she had gathered, stood like one who feels the stirring of free and independent thoughts. (105)

This unexpected demonstration of defiance took Mrs. Belmont aback and enabled Frado to go without any punishment. Frado's assertion of self is comparable to Douglass's in the fight with his master. Just as his fight symbolizes the triumphant moment of his achieving "manhood," so does Frado's oral resistance signify the discovery of power within herself: "She did not know, before, that she had a power to ward off assaults" (105). Though the difference in what they resort to, physical or verbal strength, in their resistance manifests the gendered characteristics, their

attempt to express their own will leads to subduing the master's violence: Mrs. Belmont became cautious as to physical abuses so that Frado came to have "fewer whippings" (106), while Mr. Covey had never whipped Douglass again ever since the unanticipated counterattack from the slave and his consequent defeat.

III.

The episode seems to mark the turning point in the course of Frado's life, for, after this, she begins to think of fleeing from the Bellmonts. Mapping the possible dangers in the flight, however, she reasons herself that she had better stay in the house until her period of service ends at the age of eighteen. She decides instead to use the time left before parting for good from "the house of so detestable a plague" (108), educating herself so that she will be an independent woman worthy to live in a society. For this purpose, she tries to make the best use of whatever little she possesses, or, has so far obtained: "her school-books were her constant companions, and every leisure moment was applied to them" (115-16). Susan, Jack's wife, is pleased to see "her progress" and, as a reward for this, gives her a little book of Bible, which Frado had "always fastened open near her, where she [can] glance from toil to soul refreshment" (116).

By the time she leaves the Bellmonts, the relation between the master and the servant seems to be reversed. The author suggests a paradoxical inversion of Frado's hard toil and her heightened ability, of Mrs. Belmont's tyrannical power and her total dependency on the black girl she has abused: "Mrs. B. felt that she could not well spare one who could so well adapt herself to all departments—man, boy, housekeeper, domestic, etc." (116). The transformation of Frado's miserable toil into the mark of her ability reminds us of that of Hester Prynne's scarlet letter A from a mere token of her sin into a symbol of her ability, or even of her angelic nature. Mark Twain also reveals this reversed structure of the slave and the master, more than three decades later, in his post-bellum antislavery novel, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894), in the relation of the fake

master Tom and the usurped slave³.

Wilson further exposes, or makes fun of, the self-centeredness of the mistress by rendering her remark that Frado is “ungrateful” to leave a home of “such comfort” (116). Given the fact that “ungrateful” was the term frequently used by planters or proslavery Southerners to accuse a run-away slave, Wilson’s reversal of the image of the white master seen from the servant’s perspective was rather bold at the time when slavery was still a lawful institution.

Although it is very hard for a black girl, whose body has become fragile due to overwork, to support herself in a racist society, Frado never gives up her determination to retain her independence; sporadic kind help from some white people and her own capability to learn quickly such skills as sewing sunbonnets enable her to earn wages. But what is more important than the economic self-help is the spiritual and intellectual improvement of herself. Wilson emphasizes her struggle to elevate herself after she has left the Bellmonts. With help from Mrs. Moore, one of the few kind white women, Frado comes to know “the value of useful books,” and, reading them together with her, she felt “a new impulse”(124):

She felt herself capable of elevation; she felt that this book information supplied an undefined dissatisfaction she had long felt, but could not express. Every leisure moment was carefully applied to self-improvement, and a devout and Christian exterior invited confidence from the villagers. (124-25)

While the last part of the quotation again reminds us of Hester Prynne, the whole passage focuses on Frado’s earnest effort to elevate herself.

The stress on the heroine’s self-improvement, however, comes to be fused with the advertisement of the book itself towards the end of the story where the narrator-author suddenly addresses readers to seek their sympathy for her, to persuade them that she is a worthy woman to help by purchasing a copy of the book: “Nothing turns her from her steadfast purpose of elevating herself. Reposing on God, she has thus far journeyed securely. Still an invalid, she asks your sympathy, gentle reader” (130).

This concluding passage reverberates with the declaration of monetary purpose of the book in the preface and with the endorsement of the author and her book in the appendix, the three letters of recommendation, which composes the integral part of *Our Nig*.

IV.

The term “elevation” frequently used in *Our Nig* to endorse its heroine and its author, “our Nig,” and consequently the book itself, assumes a special significance when adapted by a black writer, since the term was “a key word within black discourse for demonstration of the race’s capacity to produce literature” (Gates, *Figures in Black* 133). The belief that the future of African Americans depends on the emergence of black literature had been constantly expressed because the racist discourse that black people were unable to produce any notable art, as is seen in Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes on the State Virginia* (1785)⁴, was permeated in American society. Since the lack of black literacy closely associated with the discourse of racial inferiority is often employed to justify the slavery of African Americans, many black activists put special emphasis on their literacy: “The literacy of the black, long before Wilson published *Our Nig* in 1859, had even become a central, repeated theme of the slave narratives, black poems, and black fictions” (Gates, *Figures in Black* 130).

The device that each chapter of *Our Nig* begins with a citation from a literary work is surely related with this, while it places the novel in the tradition of sentimental fiction; it demonstrates how well versed with literature the author is. The text’s epigraphs in fact evidence Wilson’s broad reading of both American and English literature (Gates, Introduction xxxix) and its range of citation is “much greater than generally found in the slave narratives or in other black nineteenth century novels” (x1). The publication of a novel with such erudition itself could be a good illustration of the possibility of black elevation in the 1850s. Even toward the end of the nineteenth century, Frances Harper had to reiterate the theme, by making her heroine remark in *Iola*

Reroy that every African American of unmixed blood “who succeeds in any department of literature, art, or science is a living argument for the capability which is in the race” (199), in order to dispute the Jeffersonian racist discourse that only white blood can create fine arts whereas all that black blood can attain is the lowest form of art such as primitive music or poetry “below the dignity of criticism” (Jefferson 147).

Facing the national crisis of the 1850s, when the cause of black liberation seemed to be gradually silenced by force, as is seen in Fugitive Slave Law (1850), Kansas-Nebraska Act (1854), or Dred-Scott Decision (1857), black abolitionists, like Douglass and Martin Delany, insisted that they should no longer allow their history, experiences, or their wants and claims, “to be written by those who ‘are not their representatives’” (Andrews 8). They were convinced that their stories should be written by themselves.

In this context, Wilson’s novel, *Our Nig*, had perhaps been an answer to this call for black literature, for it is written almost entirely from the perspective of a black servant girl. Her direct appeal in the preface to “my colored brethren” for their patronage and her hope that “they will not condemn this attempt of their sister to be erudite” may imply her earnest hope, or even confidence, that her story will fully answer to the contemporary need of black literature; she was probably sure that she had written her own story. What we have to ask finally, then, is the question of why it was neglected when African American leaders urged their brethren to write their own stories and eagerly collected works by them⁵.

Except for circumstantial factors that might have allowed the work to escape their attention, there are three main elements immanent in the novel that will explain the contemporary critics’ silence⁶. The first one is the theme of miscegenation. *Our Nig* boldly violates the taboo of amalgamation, which would, without fail, have provoked much criticism and antipathy of white readers. It should be noted, moreover, that Frado’s mother Mag, a white woman, marries a black man not as a result of external forces, but of her own choice. This must have shocked the readers at that time—the topic was the sorest spot that even abolitionists were most afraid of stepping on⁷.

The depiction of Mrs. Belmont, a Northern white lady, too, was probably beyond the limits of tolerance of general readers in the North. It is true that slave narratives at times refer to the anti-black prejudice prevalent in the "free" states. But most black writers were very careful not to anger white readers lest they should lose their sympathy. It must have seemed, therefore, gone too far to describe a Northern Christian lady (Mrs. Hayward / Mrs. Belmont) almost equated with a cruel slaveholder in the South. Besides this, there is another factor to consider as to the background of the Bellmonts. Barbara White has toiled through the hard work of identifying the models of the Bellmonts, and managed to trace them in the Haywards in Milford, New Hampshire (iii-liv). According to White, Milford was the site of "an abolitionist stronghold and station on the Underground Railroad" (xxx) and the Haywards were closely associated with the Hutchinson Family Singers, a well-known group of musicians who supported the causes of abolition, women's rights, and temperance (xxvi). If this should be true, the exposure of abuses of a black girl by the family who were regarded as the strong supporters of abolition would be scandalous and hamper the abolitionist movement.

What is even more perilous to the movement is perhaps Wilson's realistic presentation of a self-proclaimed fugitive slave, who seduces and discards the heroine. Frado's husband, Samuel, was "a fine, straight negro" who had "no marks of the lash" on his back (127). He occasionally left her for long "lecture tours," but later he disclosed that "he had never seen the South and that his illiterate harangues were humbugs for hungry abolitionists" (128). This may convey some truth involved in the abolition movement. Yet the black con-man who preys on the abolitionist cause would be the last thing that black as well as white activists want to see in the pages of their documents. Hence their neglect of *Our Nig*, and its oblivion of almost one and a half centuries. Harriet Wilson's novel, published too early to be assessed rightly, was to wait for its estimation until the late twentieth century.

Notes

¹ As for the ideology of true womanhood in the nineteenth century, see Barbara Welter.

² Muller clarifies the difference in this “orality” between male and female slave narratives by comparing Douglass’s 1845 narrative with Jacobs’s: the former does not allow his Aunt Hester to utter any protesting words except her shrieks while the latter lets a slave woman disclose the master’s sexual desires when punished by him (251).

³ Twain dexterously describes the consequence of the switch of the slave baby and the master’s heir, now called respectively Tom (the fake master) and Chambers (the usurped child):

Tom got all the petting, Chambers got none. Tom got all the delicacies, Chambers got mush and milk, and clabber without sugar. In consequence Tom was a sickly child and Chambers wasn’t. Tom was ‘fractious,’ as Roxy called it, and overbearing; Chambers was meek and docile....

In babyhood Tom cuffed and banged and scratched Chambers unrebuked, and Chambers early learned that between meekly bearing it and resenting it, the advantage all lay with the former policy. ...

Outside of the house the two boys were together all through their boyhood. Chambers was strong beyond his years, and a good fighter; strong because he was coarsely fed and hard worked about the house, and a good fighter because Tom furnished him plenty of practice—on white boys whom he hated and was afraid of. Chambers was his constant bodyguard, to and from school.... (77-78)

⁴ After stressing the inferiority of physical appearance of blacks, Jefferson further assures their inability to utter “a thought above the level of plain narration,” or to create poems worth criticism (147). His assurance of white superiority is evident to the extent that he holds that it is the white blood that produces anything deserving the name of art. It is also seen in his statement about the mixed blood:

The improvement of the blacks in body and mind, in the first instance of their mixture with the whites, has been observed by every one, and proves that their inferiority is not the effect merely of their condition of life. (148)

⁵ Gates remarks that the novel “receives almost no commentary” between 1859 when it was published and 1983 when it was rediscovered by him (*Figures in Black* 140). He further points out that even Child, who referred to this book in her private letter in 1878, seemed interested only in the fall of Frado’s mother (142-43). Gates also says that it is curious that *The Liberator*, William Garrison’s weekly organ, was silent when it “reviewed or reprinted reviews of hundreds of books by and about blacks” (133).

⁶ For the reason why Wilson’s *Our Nig* had been forgotten for more than a century ever since its publication, Gates points out the boldness of her themes and the loathsome epithet, “nig(ger),” in both the title and the author’s name (Introduction xxix).

⁷ It may be worth remembering here that Lincoln was often greeted with jeers as being pro-black, so that he had to repeat in his speeches that he had no sexual interest in black women or was no advocate of “amalgamation.” For his racial discourse, see Noguchi 18-27.

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