Excavating Genre in our Nig

Julia Stern


Stable URL: http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0002-9831%28199509%2967%3A3%3C439%3AEGION%3E2.0.CO%3B2-I

*American Literature* is currently published by Duke University Press.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR’s Terms and Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html. JSTOR’s Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at http://www.jstor.org/journals/duke.html.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to creating and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.
In *Our Nig* (1859), the fictionalized autobiography of an abandoned mulatta child who narrowly survives the horrors of indentured servitude in antebellum Massachusetts, Harriet Wilson interrogates the idealization of maternity in nineteenth-century American culture. Since Henry Louis Gates Jr. rediscovered the novel and authenticated its authorship in 1983, critics have read *Our Nig* as a hybrid literary form. As Gates himself argues in his introduction to the second edition, Wilson grafted a slave narrative onto a sentimental novel, creating a harrowing account of captivity suffused with the affective atmosphere and moral ideology of American women's fiction of the 1850s. But, scholars have been slow to recognize *Our Nig*'s essential gothicism, although it is as critical to the cultural politics of the novel as the influence of the sentimental mode. Indeed, in its explicit and strategic use of genre, *Our Nig* marks a transitional moment in the history of American women's narrative, which until the late 1850s used the sentimental form to mask a gothic message. A vestige of this dynamic remains in *Our Nig*; but while the novel's sentimental frame attempts to function as a structure of containment, it cannot quite suppress, and indeed underscores, the gothic protest seething beneath the narrative's surface.

In her haunting and haunted representation of maternity, played out within the context of a domestic ideology that deifies white motherhood, Wilson engages in a powerful critique of the most important mother-centered novel of the period, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). Described by Ann Douglas as a "polyphonic oratory of reality," *Uncle Tom's Cabin* constitutes a fascinating literary progenitor for Wil-
son's book. In it Stowe weaves a great tapestry from disparate generic materials: in addition to documentary realism, she borrows liberally from the melodramatic, sentimental, and gothic traditions, forms that Wilson also employs. Unlike Uncle Tom's Cabin, however, Our Nig raises important questions about what Gates has called "the innocence of the mother-daughter relationship" (Our Nig, xlvii) through its critique of both biological and surrogate maternity across the lines of color and class. Wilson reveals that in a hierarchical, slaveholding society, home is not a haven from the heartless world but a reproduction of it.5

Mother love in Our Nig operates according to the principles of market relations. Bonds of reciprocal affection have no place in a world where maternal desire is represented as a one-way dynamic of consumption and incorporation rather than the give-and-take of tender nurture and loving response. Even the narrator's own experience of maternity is subject to economic conditions. When she is abandoned by her husband, a free black man who pretends to be a fugitive slave in order to exhibit himself on the abolitionist circuit, Frado must relinquish her young son to the care of the community. Physically ruined by overwork and illness, the mulatta cannot ensure the survival of her own child. It is only by commodifying her life into the narrative that becomes Our Nig that Frado can hope to reclaim the fruits of her reproductive labor, earning the money with which to take back and raise her son. Far from securing her safety within the private sphere, maternity precipitates the poor woman of color into the marketplace.

Privileges of race, however, do not insulate women from this connection between the economic and the maternal; indeed, maternity is the position from which the two white mothers of the novel—Mag Smith, Frado's biological mother, and Mrs. Bellmont, the villainous mother surrogate—seek to improve their positions on the food chain.6 But the ambition of each takes its toll on her family. In both cases Frado, the abject and afflicted surrogate-slave child, pays the price for the desire of the adult female, functioning first as an economic albatross who must be discarded by her biological mother and then as a receptacle for her mistress's wrath.

Technically, of course, Frado is not a slave but an indentured servant. But in fact Wilson never represents the child's indenture as having been officially recorded. Verbally the Bellmont family seems to agree on the terms of Frado's service; indeed, Frado herself is fully aware of the intended date of her release at age eighteen. Despite the temporal limit to her servitude, Frado is treated as if she were a house servant under plan-
tation slavery. Thus, to read Our Nig as a slave narrative or, as Hazel V. Carby puts it, "an allegory of a slave narrative . . . set in the 'free' North," makes perfect sense.7

We can also think of Our Nig as a captivity narrative; such a classification might apply equally well to gothic fiction, certain domestic and sentimental novels, and the autobiographies of former slaves. In fact, most nineteenth-century American captivity narratives partake of gothic dynamics because by midcentury America was a house divided, a haunted place. One has only to read Harriet Jacobs's Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, another "hybrid" account of life under slavery whose gothicism has gone relatively unacknowledged, to understand that slavery functions as the uncanny doppelgänger of domesticity, the central middle-class ideology of antebellum America.

Critics of Our Nig eager to argue for its place in the sentimental tradition of American women's fiction have yet to explain Mrs. Bellmont's seemingly unmotivated regime of domestic violence against her female servant, violence so brutal and sustained that it seems a form of torture. This failure to speculate about what drives Mrs. Bellmont's ferocity has much to do with scholarship's exclusive focus on the sentimental aspects of the narrative. Such critical narrowness ignores the gothic elements of Our Nig and occludes our ability to identify the politics of rage at work in Wilson's tale.

If, however, we change the generic lens through which we view maternal dynamics in Our Nig and attend to the gothic dimension of Wilson's story, Mrs. Bellmont's compulsions become more legible. The female body of the child of color registers a level of maternal fury that far exceeds purely private conflict; Frado's tortured form bears witness to a political rage as well. Inscribed within the beatings and attempts at suffocation Frado endures is a convoluted and incestuous history that links patriarchal exploitation of women with the American exploitation of African American slaves.

Using gothicism to complicate a more conventional representation of maternity, Harriet Wilson exposes the violence that both undergirds and is masked by nineteenth-century America's investment in the sentimental mother; inexplicably, this goddess of domestic beneficence is a figure whose cultural centrality is not seen to contradict the values of a slaveholding society. If Harriet Beecher Stowe sees mothers saving the world from slavery, Harriet Wilson suggests that maternity never operates separately or at a distance from the political. Our Nig reveals that re-
demption will not necessarily follow if mothers are roused to political action because motherhood is never a neutral space; rather, the maternal is always already implicated in and tainted by patriarchal structures of power.

* * *

In the narrative unconscious of Our Nig, maternal representations take two antithetical forms, reflecting the Manichaeanism of nineteenth-century American notions of "True Womanhood" and the "Cult of Domesticity." According to this binary formulation, women are either pious, pure, domestic, and submissive or the opposite—"Untrue." Many scholars exploring African American women's writing in the nineteenth century take up the complicated ways in which black women, particularly slaves, cannot by definition participate in an ideology that puts a premium on sexual purity; since slave women are ever vulnerable to white male sexual exploitation, the submissiveness so valued by the cult conflicts directly with its primary emphasis on chastity.

In Our Nig, this cultural division is shifted from the sexual realm to the maternal and is figured in a language that partakes of melodrama as well as of theology. Wilson pits gothic antinurture against sentimental maternity in a battle that takes a spatial form in her narrative. By gothic antinurture I refer to the Anglo-American women's gothic tradition that originates in the work of Ann Radcliffe. In this literature the female protagonist invariably suffers a primary maternal abandonment, either through death or separation, and is fated to endure torment under the sadistic "care" of an evil mother substitute whose structural role is sometimes filled by a male guardian. By sentimental maternity, I mean a mother-child relation that constitutes the primary—indeed, the all-encompassing—affective bond in the life of both figures. Any prospect of the separation of mother and child becomes tantamount, psychologically, to double murder. Such relations obtain in an important subgenre of American women's sentimental fiction that begins in the late eighteenth century with Susanna Rowson's Charlotte Temple (American edition, 1794) and extends through Louisa May Alcott's Little Women (1868, 1869).

In pitting gothic antinurture against sentimental maternity, Wilson reaches out to the same audience that embraced Uncle Tom's Cabin, a novel that, more than any other fictional work of the 1850s, is structured by a Manichaean poetics of familial love. But Wilson's phantasmagoric representation of motherhood is far more critical than that of Stowe,
whose vision of maternal power is nothing less than redemptive. Even
the evil of Simon Legree becomes explicable once we understand that
he has turned away from a loving mother. In Our Nig, Stowe’s senti-
mental emphasis is radically compromised by the darkness of Wilson’s
gothicism. There is simply no other way to read the preface to Our Nig
or its framed content; both are deeply gothic in their focus upon the re-
pression of the heroine’s expressive powers, the limitations placed upon
her physical freedom, her torment by an evil oppressor, and the violence
done to her identity, in this case by the racism that attempts to erase all
traces of her mixed heritage and her femininity.12

Because racial degradation does not signify unless it is made visible,
Mrs. Bellmont seeks to refashion the mulatta child by inscribing black-
ness onto her body. She forces Frado into the sun without a bonnet in
order to “darken” her well beyond the few shades that originally dis-
tinguish Frado’s skin tone from that of Mrs. Bellmont’s daughter Mary.
Wilson writes: “At home, no matter how powerful the heat when sent to
rake hay or guard the grazing herd, she was never permitted to shield her
skin from the sun. 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, my emphasis).

Wilson suggests that Mrs. Bellmont’s infernal designs, here literalized
in the burning of Frado’s skin, are racist machinations that violate the
principles of nature embodied in a Great Chain of Being that includes
distinctions of race in its parsing of the human community.13 In the mid-
nineteenth century, Americans continued to be obsessed with questions
of hierarchy and social order; hostility toward the mixing of races re-
mained an inheritance from the earliest days of colonialism and slavery.
That Frado’s mulatto heritage conjures up disturbing associations with
the “monstrous” and the “hybrid” in a white racist woman, and that such
a figure should seek to rectify Frado’s hybridity by enforcing a program
to darken the child’s skin, comes as no surprise.

In addition to Frado’s ambiguous racial heritage, the child’s gender and
sexual identities become battlegrounds upon which Mrs. Bellmont wages
her campaign of terror. She engages in a systematic program to degrade
the mulatta physically. Mrs. Bellmont dresses Frado in motley made up
of her son Jack’s old clothes and shaves her glossy ringlets. The meaning
of Mrs. Bellmont’s attempts to masculinize her servant are transparent
to Jack, who is ever attuned to Frado’s emerging sexuality: “Thought you
were getting too handsome, did she?” he offers after remarking upon her humiliating haircut (70). In fact, these efforts to erase Frado’s beauty and femininity can be seen as the displaced expression of Mrs. Bellmont’s highly sexualized perception of her servant.14 Frado’s erotic desirability threatens to destabilize her mistress’s position as the most compelling female in her household. In Frado’s final moments under the domination of the Bellmonts, just before she is to be released from servitude, Mrs. Bellmont asserts that Frado’s labor is indispensable precisely because her female identity has been beaten into a polymorphous transsexual blur. Mrs. Bellmont speaks of Frado as a worker who performs the duties of “man, boy, housekeeper, domestic” (116). Not minding “the nigger in the child” (26), Mrs. Bellmont is made homicidal by Frado’s mixed blood, her partial whiteness, and her femininity.

Such gothic scenes of a white mother figure abusing a racially mixed child make classification of the novel as a sentimental “maternal romance” seem almost bizarre.15 In fact, it is only in the final ten pages of Wilson’s story—in the appended letters that Wilson included to authenticate her autobiographical production—that a sentimental portrait of the surrogate mother as True Woman emerges. A Mrs. Walker, who takes the adult Frado into her home before the latter’s unfortunate marriage, stands in for the good mother utterly missing from the fictive world of Our Nig. Significantly, however, Mrs. Walker is introduced as an object of love from whom Frado is separated by geographical distance. Mrs. Walker’s maternal nurture is figured as a trace, its emotional benefits never fully present.

Indeed, maternal mourning, though relevant to the story of Frado’s early abandonment by her white mother Mag Smith, surfaces in its most powerful form only twice, in a brief anecdote in chapter 2 and in the supplementary documents that follow the narrative. Such longing is expressed first in a scene in which Frado and a young “colored” friend disappear immediately after the narrator reports a conversation between Mag and her black common-law husband about giving away her children. Wilson writes: “They thought [Frado] had understood their plans and had, perhaps, permanently withdrawn. . . . Mag felt sure her fears were realized, and that she might never see her again. Before her anxieties became realities, both were safely returned. . . . Mag was relieved to know her child was not driven to desperation by their intentions to relieve themselves of her, and she was inclined to think severe restraint would be healthful” (19–20). This passage raises puzzling questions. Why
would a mother determined to abandon her offspring be aggrieved rather than relieved over that child’s disappearance? Wouldn’t such a parent view this turn of events as providential? What sort of emotional logic is at work here?

The answer, it seems, is the logic of filial wish fulfillment. If we remember that Frado’s narration is retrospective, a clearer dynamic comes into focus. The scene is a product not of the biological mother’s grief but of the narrator’s double-vision and double-consciousness about Mag Smith. It is the adult narrator who endows her mother with anxiety and remorse; she depicts here a maternal longing that springs not from memory—for Frado could not have been witness to a grief provoked by and expressed at the time of her own disappearance—but from a fantasy of maternal care that her own history belies. In this episode the narrator seems to be insisting that Frado was loved by her mother; yet nothing else in the narrative corroborates such a claim. Significantly, the scene ends with Mag’s resolve to restrain Frado more severely. Despite the narrator’s poignant attempt to establish her mother’s attachment, even her retrospective, phantasmagoric tableau of love is inflected by a violence that will come to characterize all maternal and surrogate maternal relations in the novel.

This is not to suggest that the forsaken Frado of the early chapters does not long for the return of her mother—she emphatically does. But such maternal desire bespeaks a general need for nurture and is articulated in response to Mrs. Bellmont’s cruel treatment. Except for the scene narrated in chapter 2, Frado never alludes to memories of her mother or to acts of maternal tenderness by Mag of which she feels deprived in her life at the Bellmonts. Such repression is not inconsistent with Wilson’s depiction of a bestialized biological mother whose most common means of expression is the “snarl” (16). Wilson does not narrate passages in which Frado remembers details about Mag; one can only speculate that such gaps reflect a sad truth: what there is to recall would provoke its own form of anguish, a grief Wilson wants to contain.

Aroused by the narrator’s sense of childhood deprivation and rage—the emotions that drive the inner story—as well as by her adult experience as a desperate mother, both filial and maternal longing register themselves as sorrow in the framing narrative of Our Nig; yet the failure to account for the fury that underlies Frado’s misery constitutes a fascinating lacuna in the scholarship on the novel. The single-mindedness of critics who fixate on Wilson’s “sentimentalism” in the face of evidence
suggesting the presence of an insistent gothicism demands our attention. What is at stake in this willful overemphasis on the concluding frame is a repression of the uncomfortable emotions evoked by the gothic elements; uneasy with the rage that emanates from the center of Wilson’s book, critics focusing on the sentimental privilege a less ambivalent dynamic based on the maternal mourning at work in the authenticating letters that close Frado’s story.

This move on the part of recent critics discloses its own affective politics: in seeking to recover a maternal discourse for the black woman writer, such scholars must deny that rage and maternal relations can go hand in hand. Thus, efforts to rehabilitate Frado’s mother and to retrieve a tale of mother love from the early pages depicting Mag’s life are blurred into claims about maternal longing that can be substantiated only in the sentimental effusions of the novel’s appendix. Compelling as projects of recuperation, such readings suffer from the very impulse to idealize the mother that the novel itself, at least within its frame, seeks to expose.¹⁷

In the antebellum period it was not uncommon for poor free black single mothers to bind their children into indentured servitude.¹⁸ Read against such a background, the actions of Mag, which would seem heinous to an abandoned six-year-old child, are at least comprehensible in terms of the cultural practices of the time. This extenuation of the indenturing of black children who cannot be supported nevertheless elides the fact that Mag is not a black mother but the white mother of a mixed-race child. More significantly, Mag knows Mrs. Bellmont to be a brute to her servants; she has experienced firsthand the woman’s behavior as an employer, having herself “done a small job for the Bellmonts” (9). Mag admits to Seth Shipley that Mrs. Bellmont cannot “keep a girl in the house for over a week” (18). Despite this knowledge, several days later she abandons her daughter at Mrs. Bellmont’s door.

Neither mentioned nor represented is the indenture agreement that would make such a transaction legally binding. Even the evil Mary Bellmont, co-conspirator in her mother’s systematic campaign to torture Frado, knows that it is not legal for a six-year-old to become an indentured servant; the Bellmonts hesitate about taking Frado in precisely because they will have to feed and clothe her without the guarantee of work that a legal indenture implies. Any such attempt to recuperate Mag’s decision accords with neither cultural practice nor the evidence of the novel. Having fallen into the gap between the imaginary and the symbolic, disowned by one white mother and illegitimately taken up by
her evil surrogate, Frado remains in an unarticulated and tenuous relationship to the law; her fate is contingent upon the whims of dangerous mothers.¹⁹

Mag's maternal abjection, of course, can be understood in terms of her sexual victimization; caught in the interstices of a culture steeped in the double standard, Mag falls from purity, setting into motion a transformation of status with harsh and unjust economic consequences. But if we explore Mag's connection to her black husband Jim, who rescued her from abject poverty and fathered her two surviving children, we cannot deny the brutality of market relations at work in this marriage. Even the narrator's description of Mag's loyalty to Jim during his final illness suggests something cynical: "She cared for him only as a means to subserve her own comfort; yet she nursed him faithfully and true to marriage vows till death released her" (15). Mag stands by her man, Wilson implies, not out of love or desire. Rather, she is figured as a dependable business partner who discharges her legal obligations.

What remains to be discussed is the relationship that obtains between the maternal mourning deployed in the syrupy language of sentimental fiction and the more brutal vision of maternity represented in the rhetoric and imagery of gothic narrative.²⁰ The coexistence of both dynamics in one novel marks a turning point in American women’s writing, which until the late 1850s used the sentimental form to conceal a rage more commonly associated with the gothic.²¹ Wilson, attuned to the simultaneous realities of maternal mourning and filial fury, parses their connection in her bifurcated narrative, dispatching rage to Frado's story and longing to its surrounding apparatus. Attempting to contain and perhaps to dilute the wrath at the gothic core of her story, she employs the sentimental frame to keep her fury decorously in check and, most likely, her audience appeased.²²

Central to my claim that Our Nig must no longer be seen in exclusively sentimental terms is its overarching atmosphere of maternal violence and filial terror. Frado exists in a universe so contracted and saturated with pain that she can express resistance only through masochism, in suicidal longings.²³ Remarkably, the rage of the indentured mulatta erupts only twice: in her joyful reaction to the evil Mary's death and in her fleeting wish to poison Mrs. Bellmont. It is no accident, in light of the symbolic logic of Our Nig, that Mary's illness and demise take place away
from home; only outside, in the greater world, can the unchecked evils contaminating the Bellmont household be combated by dynamics beyond Mrs. Bellmont’s control. The terror of private relations can be alleviated only in public.

In Our Nig, the affective associations with which nineteenth-century American culture coded its domestic and civic space undergo a fascinating reversal. Wilson privileges the public sphere as an arena of safety and freedom, in contrast to the private, which is figured as a gothic realm of violence and mortal danger. It is only in isolation that the evil mother can act out her rage on the innocent Frado: secluded in her kitchen, Mrs. Bellmont alternates “words that burn” and “frequent blows on the head” with darker threats to “cut out” Frado’s “tongue” and to “take the skin from her body” (30, 72, and 46).

Mrs. Bellmont wants nothing less than to reduce her spirited servant to an automaton—a silent, submissive, working machine.24 To this end, the most brutal punishments she concocts to torture Frado involve the utter repression of the child’s voice: she wedges a block of wood in Frado’s mouth at two crucial points in the novel, and in a third scene she knocks Frado to the floor and then stuffs a towel into her mouth to stifle any further expression.

The motif of silencing reaches its climax in an extraordinary scene following Frado’s disappearance from the household after a beating. James tracks the child to the barn, where he overhears Frado confessing her desolation and despair to the dog he has bought to serve as her companion. James reports to Aunt Abby the contents of this confession: “‘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!’” (75).

In a remarkably complicated instance of embedded dialogue, the words of the wretched child, uttered to an unreasoning animal in the depths of privacy, are so deeply encrypted that they reach audibility only because they happen to be overheard by a white male capable of transmitting them to a larger audience. At this point in the novel, Frado has internalized the muteness originally enforced by Mrs. Bellmont’s brutality; the child’s capacity to mount a campaign of vocal resistance is now so compromised that her speech act, deployed into an abyss of silence, becomes an ab-
ject form of self-censorship. Frado's outpouring of sorrow is directed at the only creature in her world actually capable of empathic response—a dog—raising the question of who at the Bellmonts is truly bestial.

Such repression of speech links *Our Nig* to Ann Radcliffe's gothic fiction, in which a beautiful heroine is often bound, gagged, and sequestered in a dungeon or attic space. But Wilson's variations on this classic motif resonate politically: by shifting her tableau of silencing to the emotionally laden terrain of the kitchen, the heart of the home, Wilson takes aim at domestic sentimentalists, in particular, Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose utopian Quaker kitchen scenes play a crucial role in her scheme for the moral regeneration of America. In Wilson's fictional universe the kitchen becomes an inverted figure, a lively type of Hell. Only in this infernal vision of domesticity can something as innocuous as a dish towel take on the monstrous power to punish.

Encrypted within the sentimental frame of *Our Nig* is an insistent gothic story that yearns to be heard. Only in its light can we understand the relationship between Frado's longing for expression and Mrs. Bellmont's racist desire to see her "shut up" (36), both physically and vocally. The evil mistress's compulsion to incorporate or erase the child cannot succeed as long as Frado remains outspoken. To give voice to outrage is to assert one's essential humanity, and Mrs. Bellmont's modus operandi is to deny Frado those aspects of identity that link the mulatta to her mistress. Thus, the mixed-race child must be made black, defeminized, and turned into an animal. Ironically, Mrs. Bellmont's final gesture, her effort to change Frado into a beast, collapses the difference that torturer strives to inscribe upon victim, eliding the distinction between self and other so crucial in producing another's pain. For to transform a person into a beast is to enact the very savagery one needs to see as existing outside the self, in the features of an external landscape.

Frado is not the only victim of Mrs. Bellmont's repression. The two Bellmont females who are "in-valid"—Jane, the consumptive daughter, and Aunt Abby, the spinster sister who will not give up her portion in the family homestead—both see beyond Frado's status as degraded mulatta. These women exhibit a capacity for sympathy that derives from a common understanding of abjection. In less physical ways, both women are also afflicted by the evil mother and her doppelgänger daughter Mary, whose collective domain is "inside." The malevolent pair exert total control over the nurture and comfort of the invalid Jane, and they prohibit the impotent Abby from moving freely in her own home. Abby is forced
to live under virtual house arrest in a separate portion of the dwelling, which Wilson significantly terms the "quarters"—as if to underscore the spinster's link to Frado and to slavery. Caught within a domestic sphere that renders them helplessly isolated and dependent, neither Jane nor Abby has the social power to take a stand in public. Though Abby, a devout Christian, takes Frado with her to evening prayer meetings for a time, Mrs. Bellmont ultimately determines whether or not the child will have religion; after her neighbors report to Mrs. Bellmont that her servant is "serious" (86), the evil mother resolves to put a halt to Frado's attendance at services. Frado's freedom to join in religious activities is withdrawn, and the closest she comes to participation is through driving Mrs. Bellmont and Mary to church.

The irony of Wilson's inversion of the moral valuation of "separate spheres" is that middle-class women in antebellum America had no real forum, other than reform work such as abolitionism, to take a stand in public—at least not until feminism articulated itself as a distinct movement in 1848. If we infer a rough correspondence between Frado's age and Harriet Wilson's, Our Nig is set between 1828 and 1859, the period during which women began to move in larger numbers into the public sphere but had not yet attained full respectability there.

Nevertheless, it is the public sphere that provides Frado with the limited sustenance she receives in her childhood: a schoolteacher's love proves socially redemptive for young Frado, who is initially spurned by her classmates when Mary announces that she doesn't want the "nigger child" to come near her. After Frado's ninth year, when Mrs. Bellmont removes her from school and plunges her into the depths of servitude, Frado takes comfort in the attention and affection of the male workers employed on the Bellmont farm. That the admiration of these figures arises from sexual desire does not diminish the abject child's appreciation of male interest in her well-being. To Frado's mind, masculine concern is far preferable to feminine interest. Both involve an overinvestment in the servant's body, but while Frado cultivates the workers' voyeurism through exhibitionistic frolicking and a penchant for practical jokes, she never mistakes their amused attention for the sadistic pleasure the Bellmont women take in torturing her.

To escape such female attention, Frado retreats to wild and melancholy spaces that provide more physical nurture than do the comforts of the "two-story white house" of the title page while mirroring the desolate emotional landscape in which she lives. After an episode of particularly
savage violence during which Mrs. Bellmont literally kicks Frado across a room and out of the house, the child withdraws to a swamp for refuge from her monstrous mistress. Gazing on the (twice) outcast servant, James perceives Frado as “a frail child, driven from shelter by the cruelty of his mother” (50). This is not the only time Mrs. Bellmont’s “maternal” practices propel children from domestic “comfort” to a flight into the elements or the unknown: at the end of the novel, Jack and Jane light out for the Western territory in order to avoid the influence of their mother, whose grasping nature knows no restraint.

As these episodes make clear, the psychic universe of Our Nig is one whose economies of pain and pleasure are a zero-sum game. The women who control the resources in Our Nig believe that one person’s gain is necessarily another person’s loss. The domestic comforts of the white family are purchased at the price of the mulatta’s sense of home and of place. In this world everyone is hungry, even in the face of abundance. And those most amply fed have the biggest appetites. There is no realm of appropriate desire in Our Nig other than that figured as greed; the desires of those who are not greedy (though they are undoubtedly hungry) are represented in purely negative terms.

More precisely, the desires of those who are not greedy are represented only as masochistic: Frado wishes for release through death or for a future of servitude with James or John as her master. Though the reader is led to believe that Frado has fallen in love with either or both of these brothers, her ability to experience her own desire has been so brutally redirected that she can wish only to serve them in a relationship of joyful submission to their (unconscious) compulsion to dominate. And despite the fact that Frado is figured as a female object who arouses the sexual desire of others (Jack, Samuel), her own passion—beyond a wish to wait on the ones she loves and to have her pain diminished—is expressed through passive-aggressive, self-destructive yearnings. Frado actually longs to merge her own ailing body with the near-corpses of the dying James; after he dies she wishes to join him in the grave, as if her only hope of experiencing the pleasures of shared domesticity lies six feet underground.

This inversion of desire and an all-pervasive emotional dislocation become the operative psychic realities for Frado in her life with the Bellmonts. Never truly incorporated into the family, whose supportive male members pass in and out of the Bellmont home, Frado remains at the mercy of the permanent female occupants who dominate inner space.
Indeed, the Bellmonts' residence is a house divided: not only are its good men often unavailable and its women impotent or evil; its physical structure contains both "nicely furnished rooms . . . which were a source of great amazement to the child [Frado]" (27) and unfinished recesses scarcely fit for habitation where the servants are housed. "Don't bump your head," Jack warns Frado, as he shows her to her prisonlike third-story room (27). With a narrowly sloping roof that threatens to stunt the intellectual and imaginative growth of its tenant, Frado's room serves as a metaphor for Mrs. Bellmont's demonic maternity. The space provided by the evil mother is designed to cripple rather than to cultivate the child's development.

Despite the rhetoric of fraternal care that the Bellmont sons offer Frado when they happen to be present, the male family members interact with her at a distance. This distance can be read as a denial and disavowal of Frado's abuse by the male Bellmonts, whose interventions on her behalf rarely have a lasting effect. But distance can also prove salutary. In Our Nig it is overcloseness to the maternal surrogate that is to be feared. In a perverse distorion of the mother-daughter bond so idealized in American women's writing of the 1850s, mother-daughter union in Our Nig is transformed into a triangular relation in which the adult and adolescent Bellmont women consummate their connection in a horrific spectacle of physical violence against Frado. Their intimacy can be confirmed only by a ferocious ritual of exclusion, as maternal-filial ties are reforged over Frado's bleeding body.

In her portrayal of Frado as the indentured servant of a sadistic mistress, Wilson uses a series of spatial metaphors to represent Frado's distance from a nurturing relation. Mrs. Bellmont cannot see Frado as connected to her family in a relationship of affinity; rather, the mulatta is figured as existing in either a subordinate position to the evil mother and her daughter Mary or as having been devoured and incorporated into the maternal body in an act of psychological cannibalism. On entering the Bellmont household, the six-year-old Frado imagines that "she should, by remaining, be in some relation to white people she was never favored with before" (28, my emphasis). Little does the child suspect that she has entered a punitive association with a maternal surrogate whose only desire is to "subdue her" and to "'keep her down'" (33). In the most powerful expression of Mrs. Bellmont's wish to see Frado psychologically and physically enslaved, Wilson writes: "Mrs. Bellmont felt her time and person belonged solely to her"; Frado "was under her in every sense of
the word” (41, my emphasis). These spatial relations bespeak a form of abuse that transcends the merely physical. Though Wilson refrains from any explicit statement that Mrs. Bellmont has assaulted Frado’s chastity, it is clear that in her ferocious domination of the child the woman has gone beyond the pale. The notion that she looms “over” Frado in “every sense” evokes images of unspeakable violation, a rape of the spirit if not quite of the body.31

Mrs. Bellmont’s corporal punishment of Frado constitutes an essential feature of the “training” the mistress believes is necessary to make the child “do [her] work” (26). As a demonic parody of the way in which householders “break” a pet, Mrs. Bellmont’s brutal discipline must be recognized as a coherent project to “domesticate” the mulatta. The evil mother’s program follows a logic patterned on the hierarchical relationship that exists between humans, beasts, food, and waste. It is Mrs. Bellmont’s wish to see Frado, dispossessed of human qualities, tumble down the food chain, becoming first a beast, then a piece of meat, and finally garbage fit only for disposal.

The story of Frado’s passionate relationship to her dog Fido—whom she educates in remarkable feats of “dog-agility,” “as though he were human” (41–42)—provides a painful commentary on the relationship between Frado and another “mistress.” This is Wilson’s word for Frado’s relation to Fido. It also describes Mrs. Bellmont’s position in the Bellmont household. Regarding his wife’s absolute sovereignty in their home, Mr. Bellmont surrenders with the lament that “Women rule the earth, and all in it” (44). His comment evokes the gothic vision of maternal power underlying Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin, a power that in Our Nig has run amok.32

For Wilson, home is either a hellish place (the Bellmonts’) or a space from which one is continually thrust out, separated, displaced (Mag Smith’s, Mrs. Walker’s); domesticity is never represented as a solution to the political dilemma of the impoverished mulatta in antebellum America. The implications of Wilson’s critique are far more radical than those of Stowe’s: Wilson is calling for effective communal action in the public sphere involving both men and women.

In a domestic arena in which mothers torture surrogate children, animals are creatures of relative privilege whose worst fate is to be sold. While Frado’s mistress wants to deny her chattel anything beyond a rudimentary education, Fido’s learning knows no bounds; he has a generous mistress. Implicitly juxtaposing the bond of love between Frado
and Fido with the tie of terror between Frado and Mrs. Bellmont, Wilson foregrounds the absurdity of a nineteenth-century American racist discourse that figures African Americans as brutes and slaveowners as fully human.  

It is not surprising that a woman capable of characterizing African Americans as "black snakes" who cannot be killed and of asserting that if Frado "wasn't tough, she would have been killed long ago" (88–89) should ultimately seek to devour her. According to Mrs. Bellmont's racist logic, once she has identified the mulatta as a beast, it is easy to conceive of Frado as meat. Very early in the novel Mrs. Bellmont vents her rage against the child with a horrifying threat: "I'll take the skin from her body" (46). In context, the remark is bizarre, explicable only in terms of Mrs. Bellmont's racist objectification of Frado. The child's "skin" becomes the site of or metonym for an identity that the mistress feels driven either to possess or destroy. Frado's identity is reduced to the colored surface of her body. But read against the motif of the food chain lurking in the background of Our Nig, Mrs. Bellmont's fantasy makes sense. To propose the flaying of a human is to imagine a person either as an article of clothing or as potential food. In a rare moment of intervention, Mr. Bellmont rescues Frado from the "slaughter" by commanding his wife, "you shall not strike, scald, or skin her" (47). The acts Mr. Bellmont prohibits epitomize the scenario of identity erasure Mrs. Bellmont has concocted for her servant: kill the beast; flay it; cook it.

The most horrific violence Frado endures takes place, quite designedly, in the kitchen. It is not simply private maternity that comes under explicit attack here but a larger institution—the Cult of Domesticity. Wilson characterizes the most frightening tableaux of brutality in her novel as "kitchen scenes" (66). In Our Nig’s most ferocious episode, Mary Bellmont, temporarily in charge of the household, narrowly avoids murdering Frado with a carving knife. Mary's cruelty toward Frado during Mrs. Bellmont’s absence actually exceeds her mother’s; as a consequence, Frado becomes seriously ill for the first time, effectively poisoned by her surrogate mistress’s inhumanity. Rabid with rage over the ailing Frado’s seemingly dilatory response to a barrage of orders, Mary hurls a knife at the mulatta and misses her only by inches. Mary’s attempted butchery makes literal Mrs. Bellmont's threat to scald or skin the child, to make Frado into meat. If the mother has devoured Frado’s labor, Mary herself is consumed by bloodier wishes: she actually wants to slaughter the child, to turn her wasted body into carnage.
Ranking below what is cooked as meat, Frado is figured as something rotten by the various mothers who neglect her. Mag’s original abandonment is alternately represented as the shedding of excess baggage or excretion (“relieve themselves of her,” 20). Mrs. Bellmont uncannily echoes Frado’s white mother as she vents her rage onto the innocent child: “a few blows on Nig’s head seemed to relieve her [Mrs. Bellmont]” (41). While the biological mother disowns her daughter, the evil mistress seizes her as chattel, drives her into chronic sickness, steals her work, leaves her wasted, and treats her as if she were filth.

Mrs. Bellmont’s efforts to make Frado swallow her own abjection culminate in a ritual designed to humiliate her before the entire family. James has insisted that the child be allowed to eat at the Bellmont dining table rather than in the kitchen after the family has finished. His “innovations of table discipline” (70–71) do not transform Frado’s status from beast to sibling, but they do afford her a measure of dignity that Mrs. Bellmont would prefer to deny. One evening Frado seated herself in her mistress’s chair, and was just reaching for a clean dessert plate which was on the table, when her mistress entered. “Put that plate down; you shall not have a clean one; eat from mine,” continued she. Nig hesitated. To eat after James, his wife or Jack, would have been pleasant; but to be commanded to do what was disagreeable by her mistress, because it was disagreeable, was trying. Quickly looking about, she took the plate, called Fido to wash it, which he did to the best of his ability; then, wiping her knife and fork on the cloth, she proceeded to eat her dinner. (71)

In commanding Frado to “eat from mine,” Mrs. Bellmont insists that she ingest what the mistress considers waste. Not content to treat Frado like refuse, the evil mother demands that she eat garbage as well.

In a powerfully transgressive gesture of resistance, Frado turns a tableau of enforced abjection into a spectacle of triumph by assuming the role of the trickster. She elects to ingest the saliva of her dog rather than that of her mistress, preferring the merely animal to the monstrous. Frado thus “out-abjectifies” her would-be degrader. But the force of her act is undercut when, after Mrs. Bellmont has left enraged that none of the men will punish the child, Jack throws a half dollar at Frado as a reward for humiliating his mother: “Pulling a bright silver half dollar from his pocket he threw it at Nig, saying ‘There, take that, ‘t was worth paying for’” (72). At the moment of victory, Frado’s triumph is transformed into
exploitation. Having protested her degraded status and finally in possession of her dignity, Frado is reconstituted in a thoughtless expression of male pleasure.

This gesture of co-optation and reification is repeated almost exactly by Mrs. Bellmont when Frado leaves the family at age eighteen. Mrs. Bellmont's final act literalizes the market relation in which the mistress has lived with her servant since the moment Frado became "the last acquisition to the family" (42, my emphasis). But Frado's treatment by Mrs. Bellmont is not unique. In the fictive universe of Our Nig, all mother love operates according to the principles of the marketplace. Both Mag and Mrs. Bellmont are women of business who transact deals at the expense of their daughters. Even Jane Bellmont is figured as a victim of her mother. The invalid must be rescued from the potentially gothic confinement that would ensue should she submit to her mother's desire that she marry a rich man she does not love. Though Mrs. Bellmont would make her own daughter the slave of maternal economic ambition, Jane is saved by the timely intervention of another suitor, Aunt Abby's choice, a man of whom her father approves.

The embedded story of Jane's narrow escape from the captivity of a probably disastrous forced marriage serves as a haunting commentary on the plight of the abject mulatta. Frado also dreams of rescue from Mrs. Bellmont's clutches. But fairy-tale solutions are not available to impoverished women of color. Frado's best hope is to become the servant of a kind white man, of James or Jack. Never once does she imagine a more romantic scenario for her salvation; even the terms of dreamed-about rescue are limited by the real-life bounds of race and class. Jane's fate, barely averted, becomes the mulatta's fantasy. Frado's failure to imagine a life in which her intelligence and ingenuity could effect the transformation of her place on the food chain constitutes a stunning confirmation of the success of Mrs. Bellmont's project to make the child believe that she is nothing. The narrowness of Frado's dreams also reflects a dark cultural reality, articulating the social and economic immobility of "free" blacks in the antebellum North.

Frado's white mother has other aspirations. Though she marries a black laborer in order to survive the economic consequences of her sexual fall and promptly produces two children of mixed blood, her material ambition remains all embracing. In this respect she is just like Mrs. Bellmont: both women seek to climb the food chain, and both view Frado as the means by which they can achieve that goal. Ironically, Mag is less able
to see Frado’s value than is her surrogate because Mag has internalized the racist values of her culture and regards her mulatta child as a “black devil” (16). Mag therefore discards Frado in her quest for a better life. Mrs. Bellmont would like “a dozen [niggers] better than one” (26) and pounces on Frado’s worth and proceeds to devour her.

The link between Mag Smith and Frado’s evil mistress, one impoverished and the other comfortably middle class, provides us with the key to unlocking the political meaning of Mrs. Bellmont’s ferocity. Indeed, the emotional affinities between these two women are profound. Each is acutely insecure about her economic position. Mag’s poverty would seem to be utterly foreign to a woman like Mrs. Bellmont. But despite the two-story white house that suggests middle-class security, the Bellmont family is rent by economic as well as political and moral conflicts.

Mr. Bellmont, a nineteenth-century “gentleman” farmer, appears to exist in a preindustrial universe in which the notion of exchange value has not yet replaced the concept of use value. That this world is already doomed is made clear by the economic fates of the Bellmont sons: all three leave the farm to do business in the cities of the Eastern seaboard, and Jack later heads West in the hope of finding brighter prospects. In contrast, Mrs. Bellmont and Mary seem to dwell in a third economic universe, the world of speculation in which mothers gamble on their daughters’ futures by manipulating the marriage market.

Exploitation of the weak is a key component of this market. Mrs. Bellmont’s attempt to “sell” her daughter Jane fails only because the paternal veto carries vestigial weight in matters of family honor; when it comes to jurisdiction over Frado, we recall, Mr. Bellmont asserts that “women rule the earth, and all in it” (44). Less a political truth than an accurate gauge of intramural property relations, this impotent aphorism reveals that Mr. Bellmont has ceded his right to exercise dominion over the indentured mulatta.36 Disowned by a biological mother who sees her as an economic burden and deemed by her mistress unfit for future exchange, Frado is destined to be spent, used up and worn out. Only by consuming her chattel to the point of destruction can Mrs. Bellmont earn a worthy return on her demonic “investment.”37

Both Mag and Mrs. Bellmont understand the world of venture and speculation; both, having been uneasily dependent on male providers, seek to improve their situations on their own. In very different ways, both express the vulnerability and precariousness of the white woman’s position in a deeply racist culture. In her most abject moment, such a
woman could be forced to resort to a union with a free black male, who, though socially degraded by his color, is nevertheless empowered by his sex. Economically, such a man would outrank almost any Caucasian female.38

Frado is a visible sign of the vulnerability of white women. The mulatta child literalizes Mag's abjection and her transgressive choice. Frado's very being threatens to undo the evil mistress. Mrs. Bellmont must pursue her plot to erase the mulatta in order to protect the illusion of economic and racial security under which she lives. Frado must "learn her place" (47) to insure that Mrs. Bellmont need not worry about her own.

Far from proving culturally redemptive, maternity in Our Nig is enormously destructive. To underemphasize this fact is to reduce the psychological and political complexity of the novel and to view it merely as a dark mirror of Uncle Tom's Cabin. Such an interpretation accounts for the gothic dynamics of Wilson's book, but it also oversimplifies the narrative wish fulfillment that undergirds Our Nig.

In Our Nig, domestic space provides no solution to the intersecting dilemmas of race and gender prejudice Wilson so acutely discerns. Mothers are not free from economic ambition, either in the fictive world or outside it, as Wilson's own experience attests. Forced by poverty to relinquish custody of her son, and hoping to earn enough to support him through the sale of her novel, Wilson turned to the public. Though the novel was pitched to a black audience (Preface), Wilson's connections to her community crossed racial lines. The family that cared for George Mason Wilson was, in fact, white. Little information exists about the sale of the book in its historical moment, but scholars assume that its disappearance from view in the nineteenth century testifies to Wilson's material failure.39

Despite the probability of her continued economic deprivation, what must be remembered is Wilson's impulse to turn away from the private sphere and to struggle for her race, class, gender, and maternity in public—that is, through her reading public. Never losing her edge of anger against domesticity in Our Nig, Wilson uses her novel to gesture toward the larger collective efforts she sees as necessary for combating racism and sexism. Such collective efforts cannot take place in the kitchens of the nation; meaningful social action demands public spaces and must cross the multiple lines that in 1859 gothically threatened to divide Americans within their own house.

Northwestern University
Notes

I am grateful to Helen Deutsch, Peter Fenves, Robert A. Ferguson, Michal Ginsburg, Susan Mizruchi, the students in my graduate seminar on the gothic tradition in American narrative, and my anonymous readers for their helpful comments, questions, and suggestions for revision.

1 See Henry Louis Gates Jr., introduction to Harriet Wilson, *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, In a Two-Story White House, North: Showing that Slavery's Shadows Fall Even There*, 2d ed., ed. Gates (New York: Viking, 1983), xli. All further references to *Our Nig* are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.


5 For an early intuution of this dynamic that gestures toward a reading of *Our Nig* as a critique of the nineteenth-century theory of separate spheres, see Ammons, “Stowe's Dream of the Mother-Savior,” 182. See also Gillian Brown, “Domestic Politics in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: Getting in the Kitchen with Dinah,” in *Domestic Individualism*, 13–38, especially 37.

6 I use the food chain here as a controlling metaphor to describe the com-
plex hierarchical organization of social life in nineteenth-century America, in which race, class, and gender determine vertical status. Technically, the term derives from the science of ecology: *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* defines the food chain as "an arrangement of the organisms of an ecological community according to the order of predation in which each uses the next usually lower member as a food source." In employing this term figuratively, I hope to evoke associations with, and point up contrasts to, the "Great Chain of Being," first conceptualized by Plato, developed by Aristotle, expanded upon by the Neo-Platonists, re-articulated by Alexander Pope in *The Essay on Man* ("vast chain of being"), and popularized by Arthur Lovejoy in his book *The Great Chain of Being* (1936) and by E. M. W. Tillyard in *The Elizabethan World Picture* (1944), 25–26. Whereas the Great Chain of Being represents a philosophical order emphasizing transcendence, transparency, and mind, the food chain represents an order that is immanent, opaque, and embodied. Most crucial to my argument is the relationship between appetite (the drive to consume) and social and economic ambition (predation): those who dwell at the top of the food chain are the eaters; those who abide at its bottom are the eaten. I adopt the language of transparency from Helen Deutsch, who takes up the problem of embodiment and transcendence in "Resemblance and Disgrace": *Alexander Pope and the Deformation of Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1995).


10 In *The Mysteries of Udolpho* Emily is sentenced to the "protection" of her wicked aunt and her aunt's villainous second husband Montoni; in *Jane Eyre* the orphaned heroine is remanded to the custody of the demonic Mrs. Reed; in *Charlotte Temple* the innocent teenaged protagonist is both "mothered" and seduced by an evil governess at boarding school; and in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* the octrooan Cassy loses her mulatto mother when the death of her white planter father nullifies the legality of her parents' marriage and transforms the children into human property.
See also Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852).

Eve Sedgwick argues that two central features of the genre are “literal, figural, or structural” uses of “live burial” and the notion of the “unspeakable” (*The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* [New York: Methuen, 1986], 5). Wilson employs both in her representation of Mrs. Bellmont’s assault upon Frado’s powers of articulation.

The concept of an ordered hierarchy of creation extends back to ancient Greece and was passed on in the classicized Christianity of the Middle Ages. In Dante’s medieval anatomy of the universe, for example, “mixed” creatures such as centaurs and minotaurs are deemed monstrous perversions of the classical ideal of order. In the early seventeenth century, Shakespeare explores the notion of the hybrid as monstrous most memorably, perhaps, in the character of the bastard Edmund in *King Lear*. In Act II, Edmund mediates ironically upon the ways in which his out-of-wedlock birth disrupts the harmony of the Great Chain of Being.

My reading thus takes issue with Carla L. Peterson’s assertion that when Wilson represents Frado as a sexual object, her eroticism is not a natural feature of her character; rather, it is the product of an exclusively male gaze. Peterson writes: “if Frado as Our Nig represents black female sexuality to these two men [Jack and James Bellmont], she is seen by others, particularly Mrs. Bellmont, as a desexualized worker to be exploited.” Peterson stops short of interrogating the wish that underlies Mrs. Bellmont’s need to see Frado as devoid of erotic appeal. As a result, she fails to recognize Mrs. Bellmont’s identification with and complicity in the tyranny of the male (sexual) gaze. See Peterson, “Capitalism, Black (Under)development, and the Production of the African-American Novel in the 1850s,” *American Literary History* 4 (winter 1992): 559–83, 573.

The phrase is Ivy Schweitzer’s and comes from the title of her talk on *Our Nig* at the Modern Language Association convention in December 1993: “Birthing the Black Woman’s Narrative: *Our Nig* as ‘Maternal Romance.’”

The connection between double vision and wish fulfillment becomes most emphatic at the end of the framed tale, where the narrator describes the adult Frado as possessing supernatural powers of sight. After depicting the fate of the Bellmont family beyond the conclusion of the novel, Wilson writes: “Frado has passed from their memories, as Joseph from the butler’s, but she will never cease to track them till beyond mortal vision” (131). Through the simile, Frado is identified with the greatest enslaved visionary in the book of Genesis, Joseph, the brilliant interpreter of dreams. Possessed of prophetic powers, she can save lives by decoding people’s unconscious wishes. In an inversion that speaks volumes about Frado’s desire to transform the order of the food chain, the Bellmonts have become the servant (the butler) and the mulatta has become the master (or more precisely, the subject-supposed-to-know, an expert at the level of hermeneutics). Tellingly, the “butler”
feels no gratitude for "Joseph's" great service; Frado has "passed from" the consciousness of the Bellmonts like so much waste.

Frado's biblical fantasy is significant not only for enacting a reversal of power but also for setting into motion a dynamic of retribution. The force of the gaze, once the exclusive and punitive property of Mrs. Bellmont, is now the servant's to wield against her former masters. Frado has become a transparent eyeball, possessed of a vision so obsessive that it extends itself infinitely through both space and time. The mulatta seeks nothing less than to become the Bellmont's conscience; if her life has been structured like a nightmare, marked by frenzied labor from which there has been no relief, it becomes her goal to trouble the family's "rest" throughout the hereafter, to deny them peace for all eternity.


18 See Dorothy Sterling (New York: Norton, 1984), 88–89; quoted in Tate, 26.

19 I am here invoking Lacan's notions of the imaginary and symbolic stages in a child's development. The imaginary stage is marked by a dyadic relationship with the mother and takes place before language acquisition; the symbolic stage is marked by the entry of the father (the Law of Name-of-the-Father), which thrusts the child into the oedipal stage characterized by the acquisition of language and contact with the outside world. I use Lacan's terms not technically but poetically to suggest that because Mr. Bellmont refuses to lay down the law of the father Frado is caught between the imaginary and the symbolic in a position of abject disempowerment. The ambiguity of Frado's psychological place is echoed by the legal limbo she inhabits in the novel.

20 For the impoverished mulatta, life on the food chain is nasty, brutish, and short. I am grateful to Robert A. Ferguson for the observation that Wilson's portraits of bestial mothers and brutalized daughters anticipate the zoological characterizations central to the work of late-nineteenth-century literary Naturalists such as Stephen Crane and Frank Norris.


22 One can speculate that in America in the late 1850s, a woman's narrative utterly devoid of sentimental features would be almost unintelligible to the reading public. Elizabeth Stoddard's *The Morgesons* (1862), an autobiographically based gothic novel seething with female rage and written in a nonlinear, lyrical form, went virtually unread in its own time, though it was acclaimed by a literary establishment that compared Stoddard to Hawthorne, the Brontës, George Eliot, Balzac, and Tolstoy. See the critical introduction to Elizabeth Stoddard, *The Morgesons and Other Writings*, ed. Lawrence Buell and Sandra A. Zagarell (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), xi–xxv.


25 It is important to distinguish the torture suffered by Radcliffe’s heroines from that of Frado in *Our Nig*. In Radcliffian gothic, the female body is not afflicted with excruciating physical pain. The torture suffered by Radcliffe’s protagonists is largely psychological. This is not to say that Wilson’s gothicism does not take conventional forms as well. See below for discussion of the more traditional meaning of the attic room in Wilson’s poetics of space. Angelyn Mitchell briefly notes the significance of the “L” chamber of the Bellmont’s house and the Bellmont kitchen as gothic sites in “Her Side of His Story,” 17.


28 Jack, present during Frado’s early years, leaves home to earn a living and take a wife; James, who enters the story at midpoint, dies within several years; Mr. Bellmont, the warmhearted but hopelessly passive patriarch, spends more time outdoors, at work on the family farm in flight from his wife’s rage, than he does inside his house.

29 More precisely, the representation of such a bond in women's narratives of the antebellum period is always a function of narrative nostalgia, figured in the opening of such works as Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* as a quasi-Edenic state that is always already disrupted—on the psychological level by maternal identification with paternal sadism, and on the structural level by narrative prolepsis, the foreshadowing of maternal-filial separation and the mother’s death. See Warner, *The Wide, Wide World*, 1850 (New York: The Feminist Press, 1987), 1–65. In an interesting intertextual commentary on this very dynamic, Louisa May Alcott would write of the effect produced by such a reading experience when in *Little Women* she described the avid delight the March sisters took in perusing Warner’s novel. Fictional bonds between sisters are thus forged over the literary treatment of mother-daughter communion and loss. See Alcott, *Little Women*, ed. Elaine Showalter (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), 109. I am grateful to Susan Mizruchi for her insights about the way in which Warner both represents and critiques the purity of mother-daughter communion.
30 Frado, in other words, fulfills the function of the family scapegoat through whose body the Bellmonts channel and circulate the (oedipal and spousal) violence they cannot express toward each other directly. See Rene Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1986). Thanks to Terri de Langis for her comments on this portion of my argument.

31 Harriet Jacobs alludes to similarly insidious forms of physical and psychic violation when she describes her treatment at the hands of Mrs. Flint, her demonic white mistress. Aware that her husband is sexually obsessed with Jacobs, Mrs. Flint forces the young slave woman to sleep on the floor in the adjoining bedroom so that she might observe her nighttime movements: “There I was an object of her especial care, though not of her especial comfort, for she spent many a sleepless night to watch over me. Sometimes I woke up, and found her bending over me. At other times she whispered in my ear, as though it was her husband speaking to me, and listened to hear what I would answer. If she startled me, on such occasions, she would glide stealthily away; and the next morning she would tell me I had been talking in my sleep, and ask who I was talking to” (*Incidents in the Life of A Slave Girl*, 34). Such a scene could be mistaken for a passage in a gothic novel, featuring as it does the violation of the protagonist’s unconscious privacy and the villainess’s ghastly machinations, all undertaken in the dead of night.

32 In this regard, Elizabeth Ammons’s assertions that *Our Nig* operates ideologically as a mirror image of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, inverting the terms of its maternal melodrama without rejecting the central premise of the mother-savior who, though absent from Wilson’s fictional world, remains its ideal, are unconvincing. See Ammons, “Stowe’s Dream of the Mother-Savior,” 183.

33 Subversion of the trope of the bestial slave becomes a counter-figure that recurs in the major slave narratives of the period, from Mary Prince’s account of slavery in the West Indies (1831), through Frederick Douglass’s 1845 *Narrative*, to Jacobs’ *Incidents*. In all three texts the speaker, still a child, comments on being sold at auction as if he or she were a horse or cow. For details on Douglass’s inversion of the binary terms brute/human, see Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the “Racial” Self* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987), 89 and 93.

34 Frado’s own relationship to food is fascinating. Her dietary choices are never her own. Mrs. Bellmont would have her subsist on either brown crusts and skim milk eaten standing up or the scraps left on her mistress’s plate (29 and 71). In stark contrast, Aunt Abby furtively provides non-nutritious treats such as cake and pie, against Mrs. Bellmont’s explicit orders (45). Mrs. Bellmont’s food is abject, punitive; Aunt Abby’s is delicious but insubstantial and functions as a metaphor for her impotent attempts to “palliate” Frado’s circumstances, the term Wilson uses in her preface to emphasize what she is unwilling to do when alluding to the subject of slavery (Preface).
This observation was suggested by Helen Deutsch.

More specifically, Mr. Bellmont's assumption of authority over the family and, by extension, his influence upon the treatment of Frado must be characterized as whimsical and arbitrary; his willed impotence—"Mr. Bellmont found himself unable to do what James or Jack could accomplish for her" (104)—constitutes a passive-aggressive response to Mrs. Bellmont's overwhelming fury. Such moral abidications proves almost as destructive as Mrs. Bellmont's outright belligerence. At the end of the passage quoted above, Mr. Bellmont tells Frado that "he had seen her many times punished undeservedly; he did not wish to have her saucy or disrespectful, but when she was sure she did not deserve a whipping, to avoid it if she could. 'You are looking sick,' he added, 'you cannot endure beating as you once could'" (104). Reminiscent of the dynamics Freud would later represent in "A Child Is Being Beaten," this scene is rich in implication. Spectatorship becomes a form of perversion, a mode of complicity with sadistic practice. Mr. Bellmont notes the injustice of Mrs. Bellmont's abuse and withholds intervention, counselling avoidance rather than resistance and thus encouraging Frado to identify with his own victimization. Shirking liability for the maintenance of household discipline and projecting his paternal responsibility onto the abject child, Mr. Bellmont exhorts Frado to become her own monitor; with the seat of authority conveniently vacated, she must function as the sole moral arbiter in an immoral world; nowhere does this father figure suggest that the essential injustice at work in the household be challenged. Mr. Bellmont never calls into question the ethics of beating a child: at issue is the practical fact of Frado's physical decay. See Sigmund Freud, "'A Child Is Being Beaten': A Contribution to the Study of the Origin of Sexual Perversions" (1919), in The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, trans. James Strachey et al., 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–1974), 17: 175–204. See also Michelle A. Masse, In the Name of Love: Women, Masochism, and the Gothic (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1992), 40–72.

In this regard, Mrs. Bellmont mirrors the economic practices of Stowe's Simon Legree, who also uses slaves up rather than feed and care for them as long-term investments.

Obviously an upper-class white woman of independent wealth would be exempt from such an equation. But Mrs. Bellmont's family survives on the income generated by the products of their farm. Jack is represented as economically unstable, having to resort to business partnerships with his distant brother Lewis and later to a foray out West in search of work. Mrs. Bellmont's mercenary schemes for Jane's marriage are not merely whimsical; they reflect her own perception of potential economic want.

Eric Gardner's important archival work inaugurates a new phase of scholarship on the nineteenth-century audience for the novel; in his 1993 essay on the reception of Our Nig, Gardner traces the fate of first-edition copies
of Wilson's book and places the political and economic status of the first owners of the novel in historical context. His examples, while fascinating and provocative, nevertheless constitute a very small sample of what literary historians might characterize as a "representative" audience. See Gardner, "'This Attempt of Their Sister': Harriet Wilson's Our Nig from Printer to Readers," New England Quarterly 66 (June 1993): 226-46.