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Reworking the Conversion Narrative: Race and Christianity in Our Nig

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An early example of an African American novel, and the earliest known novel by an African American woman writer, Harrie E. Wilson's Our Nig (1859) has prompted ongoing excitement among modern scholars. Since Henry Louis Gates, Jr. discovered this text more than a decade ago, contemporary criticism of Our Nig has for the most part linked this autobiographical novel to the nineteenth-century tradition of the slave narrative and the sentimental novel. Wilson's adaptation of the conversion narrative warrants further discussion, however, because it represents a literary experiment more complex than mere imitation or synthesis of popular literary genres. Frado's failed conversion affords Wilson the literary space to undermine prevailing social constructions of Christianity, race, and womanhood. Through Frado's narrative, Wilson demonstrates how Christian doctrine anchors popular notions of womanhood and domesticity, and how these concepts are limited by race and racial signifiers. Though Wilson manipulates well-known trappings of the conversion narrative that date back to the American Puritan tradition, Our Nig tells the story of the heroine's failed initiation into the community of earthly saints. Moreover, Frado's rejection of Christianity's promised eternity demonstrates how race might interrupt the Christian rite of passage for those black candidates who could not resolve the ambiguities of popular racial myths.

In both her worldly and spiritual quests, Frado faces the limitations imposed by race. From the moment Wilson introduces the story of Jim and Mag's union, we begin to see an unsettling vision of Christianity and racial blackness as diametric opposites. "'T's black outside, I know," Jim tells Mag, "but I's got a white heart inside" (12). For Jim, blackness stands in contradistinction to Christian images of goodness; moreover, with the unfolding of Frado's narrative, we become increasingly aware that race stands as an obstacle to her religious conversion as well. Frado's inability to envision black souls as
candidates for heaven thwarts her full submission to the conversion process, and her failed religious conversion impels the story’s deviation from popular conventions of domestic fiction.

A text that uses the conversion narrative pattern, *Our Nig* ends as an anti-conversion experience. Unable to dispel inherited social images that equate whiteness with Godliness, the heroine cannot envision blackness in the divine hereafter. In a novel by a black woman writer more than a century after the publication of *Our Nig*, we witness the kind of narrative that can result when a fictionalized black female heroine successfully resolves the question of race and religious experience. In Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, Celie finds God only after she expels the whiteness that threatens her conversion. Celie shares with Shug her image of God as “big and old and tall and graybearded and white” (176). However, Celie confesses that this vision of God leaves her uncomfortable: “when I think about it, it don’t seem quite right. But it all I got” (176). As a confidant and mentor to Celie, Shug explains that “this old white man is the same God she used to see when she prayed” (177). She then shares with Celie her vision of a God who is found in everything and everyone, and informs Celie that the first step to finding God is to remove “the old white man,” in order to see the God who exists everywhere. This transformation is not an easy one. Celie reveals the difficulty in trying to rid oneself of the old white man: “Well, us talk and talk bout God, but I’m still adrift. Trying to chase that old white man out of my head” (179). Again, she reveals the seeming omnipresence of whiteness that makes it so difficult to “chase” away images of whiteness as inherently powerful: “He on your box of grits, in your head, and all over the radio. He try to make you think he everywhere. Soon as you think he everywhere, you think he God. But he ain’t. Whenever you trying to pray, and man plop himself on the other end of it, tell him to git lost, say Shug” (179). Celie finds God, and she is able to converge the image of herself with the image of the divine. More importantly, she can picture herself as deserving of God’s graces only after she removes the wall of whiteness that stands between herself and God. Celie confronts her awe of whiteness as well as her fear, and she expels both. Frado, however, never expels the whiteness that impedes her vision of heaven; thus, she remains a victim of racial paradigms that leave her isolated in a temporal world.

While it does not end in the popular fashion of a conversion narrative, Frado’s conversion experience broadens our understanding of how nineteenth century notions of race influenced the literary imagination of African American women writers. Wilson’s text reveals more about the complicated creative process undertaken by black
women writers who use existing literary genres to explore how dominant racial concepts influence the lives of their heroines. Through her complex characterization of Frado, Harriet Wilson fictionalizes a concern faced by blacks throughout their history in America, that is, the question of what it means to be black in a culture that is preoccupied with whiteness. Frado believes that her blackness condemns her to a life of despair and dejection, and this in part engenders her spiritual skepticism. Frado’s spiritual conflicts result from more than just her struggle with popular nineteenth century representations of blackness; her complex integration of socialized images of whiteness and blackness, along with her own learned experiences, influence her conversion narrative. Frado has internalized prevailing signifiers of whiteness—she associates whiteness with the moral equivalent of goodness, but as the story progresses, this vision of whiteness will disturb Frado more than her contrasting association of blackness with despair. Imagining heaven as the place of perfect peace, Frado can only envision a heaven of white people: “Is there a heaven for blacks?” (84). Frado wonders, though never answering in the affirmative. She expresses an uncertainty about the existence of a heaven for blacks, but Frado never doubts that a heaven exists for whites. As the narrative progresses, Frado becomes increasingly disturbed by the bipolar racial lines that seem always present, and she eventually reveals her displeasure with the seemingly ever-triumphant nature of whiteness.

In the construction of her own self-image, Frado does not escape the influences of racial signifiers—in her mind the primary source of her troubles is her non-whiteness. In one of many dialogues with James Bellmont, her spiritual mentor and confidant, Frado reveals her valuation of whiteness over blackness:

“Oh, I wish I had my mother back; then I should not be kicked and whipped so. Who made me so?”
“God,” answered James.
“Did God make you?”
“Yes.”
“Who made Aunt Abby?”
“God.”
“Who made your mother?”
“God.”
“Did the same God that made her make me?”
“Yes.”
“Well, then, I don’t like him.”
“Why not?”
“Because he made her white, and me black. Why didn’t he make us both white?” (51)
For Frado, whiteness carries an essence so great that even in the form of James’s mother, the evil Mrs. Bellmont, it remains a decisive attribute. Mrs. Bellmont and her daughter, Mary, abuse and terrorize Frado, but it is their tyranny that significantly impacts Frado’s changing impressions of whiteness in the novel. Frado finds the behavior of James and her other Bellmont allies consistent with her vision of whiteness as good. Through the embodiment of Mrs. Bellmont, however, whiteness signifies terror and evil, and this alternate experience with whiteness collapses Frado’s understanding of whiteness into ambiguity. Although Frado appears subsumed by associations of blackness with wretchedness, her experience with the terror of whiteness subjugates the counter-impression of whiteness as good. The omnipresence of Mrs. Bellmont’s terrifying whiteness offsets the displays of affection from other Bellmont family members. Mrs. Bellmont’s image remains indelibly stamped on Frado’s mind, eventually causing her to refuse a timely offer of kindness from another Bellmont. When Mrs. Bellmont’s daughter, Jane, offers Frado refuge in her home, Frado does not accept. Frado declines this offer at a time when she has hope for little else—James has died, Jack has moved away, and Mr. Bellmont and Aunt Abby can do little for her. Jane remains the only Bellmont ally who can offer her aid. Though a confidant, Jane would nevertheless prove a constant reminder of an experience and a period in her life that Frado would rather forget: “Jane begged her to follow her so soon as she should be released; but so wearied out was she by her mistress, she felt disposed to flee from any and every one having her similitude of name or feature” (109-10). The kindness of the benevolent Bellmonts cannot offset the terrorizing rule of their matriarch, Mrs. Bellmont. Though she faces a more uncertain future with her refusal of Jane’s offer, Frado is more frightened by the idea of a continued existence near Mrs. Bellmont.

Wilson’s fictionalization of a black protagonist scrutinizing white characters illustrates a cultural circumstance that bell hooks has designated the “oppositional gaze” (Black Looks 115). While hooks constructs her argument for a contemporary critique of cinema, her insight proves both useful and fitting for a reading of Our Nig. Hooks recalls that “the politics of slavery, of racialized power relations, were such that the slaves were denied their right to gaze,” and this imposed restriction was no insignificant matter, because “there is power in looking” (115). The act of looking often intimates the act of resisting or challenging authority; hence, the weak are empowered when they dare to gaze upon the powerful. Though not a slave, Frado has been condemned to a subservient, slave-like existence, and her narrative represents, in part, a struggle to gaze upon the powerful
other. Borrowing from hooks can help us to understand more fully the significance of gazing in African American society and in Wilson’s novel. In a later chapter, “Representations of Whiteness in the Black Imagination,” hooks argues further that “black people watch white people with a critical, ‘ethnographic’ gaze,” that often goes undetected by whites because “racist thinking perpetuates the fantasy that the other who is subjugated, who is subhuman, lacks the ability to comprehend, to see the working of the powerful” (167-68). Indeed, Frado does gaze the other, for she dares to “watch white people with a critical ‘ethnographic’ gaze” and she sees in part what bell hooks suggests is the commonly held African American view of whiteness as terrifying (169). Hooks proposes that this terrorizing gaze merits exploration, for in her estimation this gaze is “that representation of whiteness that is not found in reaction to stereotypes but emerges as a response to the traumatic pain and anguish that remains a consequence of white racist domination, a psychic state that informs and shapes the way black folks ‘see’ whiteness” (169). Frado’s simultaneous gaze at whiteness and her absorption of racial stereotypes lead her to conflicting and contradictory racial paradigms so unresolvable that in the end she affirms neither the goodness of blackness nor that of whiteness, but rather exposes the ambiguities of racial signifiers.

Unable to see blackness and whiteness as fixed images, Frado’s ideas on race resonate throughout the text in a kind of double voice or double vision: racial signifiers become interchangeable—good and evil can signify both black and white. By collapsing images of blackness and whiteness, Wilson creates an ambiguity of meaning that allows her to scrutinize or “gaze” whiteness. Shaping her novel around the framework of the conversion narrative, Wilson couches her critiques in her seeming imitation of this genre. The ambiguity that grows out of Frado’s narrative may then have as much to do with Wilson’s “signifyin(g)” as it does with her seeming attempt to recreate a genre. In his study of African American literary criticism, The Signifying Monkey, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., suggests that the seeming imitative nature of black writing is itself a form of “signifyin(g).” Gates explains that commentaries on the ‘imitative’ rather than ‘creative’ nature of blacks merely demonstrate the failure of some white critics to interpret the meaning of these ostensibly uncreative acts. According to Gates, the imitation that black people engaged in was “merely Signifyin(g) through a motivated repetition” (66). Harriet E. Wilson employs “signifyin(g)” as a means to critique popular notions of womanhood and domesticity, of the freedom of antebellum free blacks, of commonly held assumptions about race and racial signifiers, and of Christianity and its tenets.
Borrowing further from Gates, we can parallel Wilson’s artistry with that of the trickster monkey whose “trick depends on the Lion’s inability to mediate between these two poles of signification [the literal and the figurative], of meaning” (55). Through the unclear meaning of the narrative, particularly of Frado’s conversion narrative, Wilson realizes a linguistic victory. The trickster monkey in the guise of Frado, masterminded by Wilson, defeats the Lion adversary (the reader) by constructing a text whose meaning the reader is incapable of accessing. On the significance of the monkey tales, Gates posits the following argument: “The import of the Monkey tales for the interpretation of literature is that the Monkey dethrones the Lion only because the Lion cannot read the nature of his discourse” (85). It is precisely her blurring of meaning and interpretation that allows Wilson as author, and Frado as fictional heroine, to claim victory at the novel’s end. It is not apparent to the white reader, and perhaps it escapes some black readers, that whiteness is the object of scrutiny—that Wilson the trickster has gazed whiteness. She has observed whiteness up close, and through her purported conversion narrative, she has challenged the social ideals that assert the natural goodness of whiteness. In Our Nig, white is not always right; in fact, in characters such as Mrs. Bellmont and her daughter, whiteness cloaks a dark inner evil unfit for the heavenly afterlife.

Race lies at the heart of Wilson’s narrative and it is the wellspring of the novel’s irony and subversiveness. Early in the novel Wilson confirms the satirical nature of her subtitle—Sketches from the Life of a Free Black. Through the protagonist, Frado, we learn the fallacy and the irony that lay behind many of the heartening stories of free blacks in antebellum America. Mrs. Bellmont’s abusive and demeaning treatment of Frado mirrors the master-slave relationship commonly depicted in slave narratives. Mrs. Bellmont uses race to justify her ill treatment of Frado: she understands that Frado is not a slave, but whether free or slave, Frado is black and subject to what Mrs. Bellmont deems the wretched existence that naturally follows. Through her inverted images of women in Our Nig, Wilson disassembles the effigy of white female virtue that pervades nineteenth century sentimental fiction. It is race which thwarts the novel’s seeming imitation of sentimental fiction. Wilson necessarily foregoes the sentimental narrative form because it originates out of a tradition of white New England women whose history significantly differs from that of most black women. Although Frado is a free woman, her blackness necessitates the construction of an alternative narrative form. Whether free or slave, the experience of most black women in antebellum America differed fundamentally from that of white women. Women like Char-
lotte Forten Grimke represented the small circle of middle class black women whose claims to privilege and gentility more closely resembled the ideal of domesticity; however, these black women were the exception and did not represent the body of antebellum black women whose socio-economic experience was profoundly oppressive and debilitating. For this vast number of black women, as for Frado, the New England cult of domesticity remained an unattainable reality. Frado exemplifies the greater population of black women who, whether enslaved or free, worked out of necessity or coercion, who would never know the long-term security of a male provider, and who would never have the advantage of self-rule in their domestic world.

In addition to the suffering they endured because of racism, the majority of nineteenth century black women found their lives further complicated by the constant threat of economic deprivation. Gates points out the economic element in Our Nig, suggesting that it expands this text beyond a black woman’s attempt at the sentimental novel. He argues that “the great evil in this book is not love-betrayed...it is poverty, both the desperation it inflicts as well as the evils it implicitly sanctions” (xlvi). While Gates clearly demonstrates how racial and economic issues render it unlikely for Wilson to construct a narrative consistent with the format of the sentimental novel, he merely glimpses the problem of Frado’s quest for religious salvation. Gates recognizes that “Frado never truly undergoes a religious transformation, merely the appearance of one “ (xlix). But Gates’s critique falls short of exploring how race impacts Frado’s religious experience.

Few readers of Our Nig would disagree with Gates’s assertion that poverty influences the plot; however, readers might be less inclined to agree with his argument on the primacy of poverty in the novel. Wilson clearly identifies race as the persistent limiting force in Frado’s life; however, through the delineation of the character Jenny, Wilson demonstrates that Frado’s troubles lie deeper than poverty. Like Frado, Jenny is poor and orphaned, and even though Jenny has married Mrs. Bellmont’s son, Mrs. Bellmont despises her for her penury. “Poverty was to her a disgrace” (112), the narrator tells us of Mrs. Bellmont, and “she wished to make [Jenny] feel her inferiority” (113). But poverty proves much less inhibiting for Jenny than for Frado. Jenny’s poverty does not exclude her from a likely union with Jack. On the contrary, Jack, whose feelings for the orphaned Jenny are similar to his earlier affections for Frado, never shows signs of considering Frado more than a kind of rare and intriguing pet. He refers to her always as “Nig,” as if to remind himself that no matter how
adorable or charming, Frado is still black and therefore excluded from his world. Jenny’s whiteness, then, plays a principal part in her escape from financial destitution. Simultaneously, Frado’s blackness leaves her more susceptible to poverty and less likely to overcome it.

Intricately linked with her inescapable poverty and race is Frado’s experience with religion. Critics seem to be divided on just how significantly religion impacts Frado’s narrative. Whereas Gates assumes Frado’s religious experience to be superficial, in his introduction to *Three Classic African-American Novels*, William L. Andrews argues for the genuineness of Frado’s religious faith. According to Andrews,

> The role of religious faith is crucial to Alfrado’s eventual decision to defy her mistress and ‘assert her rights when they were trampled on.’ Consistent with a view of Christianity put forward in much nineteenth century African-American writing, Alfrado’s faith transforms her self-image, endows her with a genuine sense of power and hope, and spurs her toward intellectual achievement. The ultimate contest in the novel centers on whether Mrs. Bellmont’s physical and spiritual persecution can blight Alfrado’s sense of personal value before the ministrations of James Bellmont and Aunt Abby can nurture a spirit of Christian self-regard in the young black woman. Alfrado ultimately wins this struggle for her soul, testifying to her victory by setting out on her own in quest of economic, intellectual, and spiritual “self-improvement.” (20)

While Andrews argues convincingly for the importance of religion in Frado’s narrative, his summary of how religion operates proves less convincing. Frado’s experience is unquestionably one of self-empowerment; however, Frado’s religious faith is never confirmed and therefore never functions as a positive catalyst for her actions. Furthermore, Andrews’s argument for Frado’s victorious “spirit of Christian self-regard” is more accurate if the term “Christian” is omitted. Throughout *Our Nig*, Frado wrestles with the conflicting images of blackness and whiteness that constantly intersect and bifurcate in her mind. Instead of promoting a clearer sense of self for Frado, these conflicting racial images leave her “Christian self-regard” an unresolved dilemma. Christianity offers Frado no meaningful salvation, no greater understanding of self; on the contrary, “Harriet Wilson and her Frado are ‘saved’ not through religion but through speech itself.... But protagonist and author speak of themselves and their own agony—not of God and His glory” (Davis 396).

Wilson’s concurrent alteration from both spiritual and domestic forms seems fitting when we consider the interdependency of these forms in nineteenth century American women’s fiction. Examples of
this interdependency are evident in some of the most popular nineteenth century women’s fiction. In *The Lamplighter*, Maria Susanna Cummins introduces the heroine, Gerty, as an orphaned child whose spiritual salvation is at risk. After her mother’s death, Gerty comes under the guardianship of a mother figure who is both unkind and uncommitted to her spiritual development. Gerty, however, is soon delivered to a nurturing domestic community, and her redemption is imminent after her saintly guardian, Emily, guides her along the path of Christian piety and faith. Similarly, Louisa May Alcott’s *Work* presents a fictional character, Christie, who also must find a Christian mother figure to guide her to salvation. Gerty and Christie become fully initiated into their domestic roles only after they have undergone Christian conversion. In Susan Warner’s novel, *The Wide, Wide World*, the protagonist, Ellen, struggles with the greatest enemy of nineteenth century fictional heroines—uncontrolled emotion. Ellen repeatedly battles her desire to retaliate when she has been offended, and oftentimes, it is her reflections on biblical doctrine that bring her to a more composed state. Warner clearly demonstrates the connection between Christian doctrine and literary constructions of womanhood with a confrontation between Ellen and William. After reflecting on her earlier argument with William, Ellen reminds herself that though William may have deserved reproof, her retaliation “was unwise, and had done mischief, and ‘it was not a bit like peacemaking, nor meek at all’” (317). For those readers who might miss the allusion, the narrator reveals the source of Ellen’s ideology: “She had been reading that morning the fifth chapter of Matthew, and it ran in her head, ‘Blessed are the meek,’—‘Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God’” (317). Ellen has been taught that women are kind, loving, and forgiving, and the bible, the book of Christian law, has been used to reinforce this ideology of womanhood. While all domestic fiction does not make references to biblical scriptures as directly as this episode from Warner’s novel, the connections between Christian conversion and female rites of passage are nevertheless evident in much of this nineteenth century genre.

Although the strict Puritan doctrine of conversion had long been abandoned by the mid-nineteenth century, certain key elements remained evident in American literature, especially women’s fiction. The conversion narrative, for the most part, has been identified as a literary phenomenon of the Colonial period; nevertheless, nineteenth century American writers like Thoreau, Henry James, and Emerson emulated this genre to varying degrees (Shea 239-69). In *The Language of Puritan Feeling*, David Leverenz argues that despite the call for nineteenth century American individualism, it is the very
Puritan “we” that resounds:

Those who trace a straight line from seventeenth-century Puritanism through the Protestant ethic into nineteenth century individualism miss the central family and community thrust of the American Puritan emigration and undervalue the power of a language of voluntary dependence. (137)

Well into the nineteenth century, religion fostered community, especially for women: “No other avenue of self-expression besides religion at once offered women social approbation, the encouragement of male leaders (ministers), and most important, the community of their peers. Conversion and church membership in the era of the Second Great Awakening implied joining a community of Christians” (Cott 141). It is this giving over of oneself to the community that we find especially prevalent in domestic fiction. Alcott’s Work offers an example of this literary practice. Alcott’s protagonist, Christie, after a series of disappointments in her life, finally finds her way into a Christian community. At the heart of this community is the realm of domesticity—under the guidance of women who are wives and homemakers, Christie’s conversion experience comes to fruition. This interdependence of the domestic and the religious also resonates in The Lamplighter. Maria Cummins’s heroine, Gerty, becomes acceptable for marriage only after she has proven her piety. She is fit for marriage only after she has evidenced the virtues of meekness, self-sacrifice, and repentance.

Following the plot of sentimental fiction, Harriet Wilson recounts the story of a young child whose salvation is at risk. However, unlike the heroines in Cummins’s and Alcott’s novels, Frado is not destined for redemption. By granting their orphaned heroines genteel lineages, Cummins and Alcott intimate their essential goodness, and accordingly, their ultimate salvation. Though poor, Christie’s parents had possessed an inherent quality that distinguished them from their peers. Christie has inherited both her mother’s disdain for the commonplace and her father’s “refined tastes” (Work 12-13). In a similar fashion, Cummins asserts Gerty’s preeminence over her peers early in the novel. Although a poor, ragged orphan at the story’s onset, Gerty, because of “something in...[her] nature,” adheres to her mother’s wish that she keep away from the “rude herd” of street children (Lamplighter 5). Despite humbling and wretched moments in the lives of Gerty and Christie, their inherited magnanimity foreshadows their destined rise to more venerable social stations. In contrast to her white counterparts, Frado begins life with a tainted legacy. The off-
spring of a mother whose soul is damned, and a father who by virtue of his race is a social outcast, Frado inherits no solid foundation on which to build her life. In fact, the prophecy of Frado's ignoble existence surfaces in the first chapter. At the novel's onset, Wilson ominously foreshadows Frado's fate in the example of her mother's failed conversion. After each calamity in her life, Frado's mother severs her ties with God and the Christian community until finally, "She had ceased to feel the gushings of penitence; she had crushed the sharp agonies of an awakened conscience.... She asked not the rite of civilization or Christianity" (16). Mag's first public fall from grace begins the inverted religious narrative in Our Nig, and her disregard for racial boundaries confirms her fall from grace and ultimately Frado's unsuccessful conversion. The implications of race in Christianity are underscored with the brief story of Mag's firstborn. Before Frado, Mag has given birth to an illegitimate white child who dies soon after birth. It is Mag's white child that has "passed from earth, ascending to a purer and better life" (6) who is thus spared the shame and dejection that follows a child born to a profligate. But Frado, Mag's black child, lives to suffer a cruel, tainted life. By the close of the first chapter, Frado's dejected and hopeless future is prophesied in Mag's rhetorical question: "How many pure, innocent children not only inherit a wicked heart of their own, claiming life-long scrutiny and restraint, but are heirs also of parental disgrace and calumny, from which only long years of patient endurance in paths of rectitude can disencumber them?" (6-7). God, who has spared Mag's white child a degraded existence, abandons her black offspring to a life of depravity without the promise of refuge in His eternal kingdom.

Frado's religious experience mirrors the conversion narrative as she struggles with the uncertainty of the afterlife, of what a true regeneration entails, and of her inability to truly repent for her sins. She longs for conversion and acceptance into the Christian community, but her full surrender to God is thwarted by her ignoble beginnings, as well as her perceptions of blackness. Frado cannot envision a heaven with black souls, for she has internalized the racist vision of black as evil and undeserving. Even the memory of her father's self-sacrificing nature cannot remove the negative associations Frado draws with blackness. Frado remembers Jim as "industrious and fond of Mag" (14), and she recounts his unaltering affection that only death could bring to an end: "He loved Mag to the last. So long as life continued, he stifled sensibility to pain, and toiled for her sustenance long after he was able to do so" (15). Notwithstanding Jim's heroic effort to provide and care for Mag, his skin color excludes him from emotional connections to the outside (white) world. In spite of his
devotion and love for Mag, Jim confirms Mag's social damnation when he marries her: "she was now expelled from companionship with white people; this last step—her union with a black—was the climax of repulsion" (15). This social alienation translates further into spiritual damnation, for expulsion from the white community also means that if she should undergo a conversion experience, Mag would not find a community of Christian women to welcome her to the fold.

Like her father, Frado encounters moments when her blackness signifies an unworthiness that bars her from full emotional experience. At the brink of her freedom from Mrs. Bellmont, Frado struggles with the desolation that she thinks is inherent in blackness. Believing that her race predisposes her to a life of isolation and dread, Frado reconsiders leaving Mrs. Bellmont. If others see her as Mrs. Bellmont does, "then no one would take her. She was black, no one would love her" (108). Frado's conversion cannot be brought to fruition because her race leaves her with an unresolvable self-doubt, and also with no community. A free but isolated black woman in antebellum America, Frado has no access to a Christian community that will receive her wholeheartedly. She finds only limited acceptance among white women, and no community of black women is available. Whether Wilson understood the subversive nature of her novel is impossible to determine, but the effect of Our Nig is, nevertheless, to undermine the universal claims of Christianity. Racial oppression, with its concomitant social and economic effects, renders Frado incapable of undergoing the classical American conversion that hallmarks so many sentimental narratives. Frado's most resounding critique of Christianity is its powerlessness against racism. Christianity cannot curtail prevailing racial paradigms; moreover, racism cannot even become a non-issue for Christians.

For Harriet Wilson's fictional character, there is no domestic sanctuary to welcome her after conversion. Consequently, Wilson's conversion narrative swings like a pendulum, oscillating between faith and doubt. Frado comes close to, but never fulfills, what Patricia Caldwell identifies as three of the most prevailing confessional stages in the Puritan conversion narrative: confession of sins (repentance), profession of faith, and confession of experience (Puritan Conversion Narrative 64-65). This confessional formula, the cornerstone of Puritan spiritual autobiographies, still resonates in the nineteenth-century sentimental novel. In the Puritan narratives of Thomas Shepard and Jonathan Edwards, elements of the conversion processes are at work. In both autobiographical accounts the first-person narrator wrestles with doubt and temptation, but ultimately receives grace
and is accepted into the church. Reminiscent of these spiritual models, Frado vacillates between faith and doubt. Shepard and Edwards, however, clearly confess their sins, profess their faith, and share their divine conversion experiences. Although no extant record of Shepard’s and Edwards’s public confessions survive, their narratives recall this elemental stage of their religious transformations. The transposition of elements from the conversion narrative to domestic fiction are evident when we examine these genres. In particular, an episode from Edwards’s narrative demonstrates the importance of community in some early conversion narratives. Remembering “seasons of awakening” that he encounters on the path to true conversion, Edwards describes his first awakening which culminates into his acceptance by a community of young boys like himself:

I was then very much affected for many months, and concerned about the things of religion, and my soul’s salvation; and was abundant in religious duties. I used to pray five times a day in secret, and to spend much time in religious conversation with other boys; and used to meet with them to pray together...I, with some of my school-mates, joined together, and built a booth in a swamp, in a very retired spot, for a place of prayer. (59)

Edwards joins this Christian community of boys who offer him refuge and support. Similarly, in Work and The Lamplighter, the heroines move into religious communities where they find guidance from surrogate mothers who serve as models of female domesticity. Alcott and Cummins, then, integrate the conversion narrative into the domestic novel. While Harriet Wilson employs the form of the domestic novel, racial constraints prohibit her protagonist from fully emulating the heroines of this form. No domestic community of Christian women exists for Harriet Wilson’s autobiographical character—Frado approaches conversion but never completes its process nor attains its accompanying reward of admission to the community of women. The racial isolation that Frado experiences, while denying her full Christian fellowship, also causes her to turn away from this ostensibly egalitarian spiritual event. In her search for spiritual regeneration, Frado discovers that Christian promises of universal grace from a universal God cannot arrest the reality of neglect and isolation that she has known.

Frado calls into question Christianity’s claims of forgiveness and spiritual refuge for the downtrodden. Framing her skepticism in the form of the domestic novel, Wilson issues a challenge to Christianity to prove itself forgiving and protecting. It is the failure of Christianity that leads Frado to eventually turn away from religion as a hope
for eventual peace and salvation. Frado’s early orphaned condition echoes the common nineteenth century sentimental story of the young abandoned girl who is brought into a domestic setting, nurtured by a mother figure, and taught the virtues of Christian womanhood. Certainly by the third chapter we see Frado as the homeless, abandoned, yet sensitive orphan in need of a mothering or nurturing environment. Wilson has already made it clear that the lack of this caring, nurturing society of women has proved the cause of Mag’s downfall, for Mag was “early deprived of parental guardianship” (1). “As she merged into womanhood, unprotected, uncherished, uncared for” (1), she became easy prey for her first lover. Mag’s sexual indiscretions lead to her spiritual damnation, but she is not doomed because of an inherent sinful nature. Mag’s imprudent choices are symptomatic of a woman who has matured without the benefits of a nurturing Christian community.

From the beginning of her childhood Frado suffers an isolation similar to her mother’s, but Frado’s fate is not as devastating as Mag’s because she has the advantage of a pseudo-community. Aunt Abby and Jane, though powerless to release her from the abuses of her mistress, offer Frado the kind of motherly sympathy and compassion that her mother never knew. Even Frado’s male sympathizers provide maternal nurturing. But like Aunt Abby and Jane, Mr. Bellmont and his two sons are powerless when they meet the wrath of Mrs. Bellmont. Although we find isolated moments when Mr. Bellmont challenges his wife’s authority, Wilson’s narrator clearly emphasizes his impotence in the face of his wife’s willpower. We are told that Mr. Bellmont “was a man who seldom decided controversies at home” (30-31). Despite her small community of supporters, Frado remains a victim in the Bellmont household, and she never achieves more than superficial admittance into a nurturing Christian community. Members of the Bellmont household who befriend her are no match for Mrs. Bellmont who is committed to reminding all that Frado is black and therefore an outsider. Unlike Harriet Jacobs, who in her autobiographical account, recounts her connection to a community of black supporters, Frado is alone. Jacobs, like Frado, is bound to domestic servitude; but unlike Frado, Jacobs has community ties outside her master’s domain. This black Christian community nurtures Jacobs, protects her, and gives her spiritual guidance.

Denied the fellowship of a Christian community, Frado dwells in a maze of doubt and despair, often at the very brink of a conversion experience. Her earthly tempter, Mrs. Bellmont, plays a significant role in Frado’s spiritual struggle. It is Mrs. Bellmont who constantly reminds Frado that it is at best questionable whether blacks can
receive religious salvation, and that blacks are in fact unlikely candidates for the kingdom of heaven. Despite Mrs. Bellmont’s conviction that “Religion was not meant for niggers” (68), at first Frado embraces Christianity with enthusiasm; and she “seemed awakened to new hopes and aspirations, and realized a longing for the future, hitherto unknown” (70). She receives James’s religious instructions with serious contemplation, and she accepts Aunt Abby as her spiritual guide, but as the following passage illustrates, Frado cannot make a confession of faith because her conception of her own blackness causes her to doubt her salvation:

Frado, under the instructions of Aunt Abby and the minister, became a believer in a future existence—one of happiness or misery. Her doubt was, is there a heaven for the black? She knew there was one for James, and Aunt Abby, and all good white people; but was there any for blacks? She had listened attentively to all the minister said, and all Aunt Abby had told her; but then it was all for white people. (84)

Frado’s attempts at seeing herself in the afterworld of the good are always thwarted by her idea that there is an overwhelming presence of whiteness in that world, and with her constant proclamations that heaven holds no worthwhile place for blacks, Mrs. Bellmont stands as the blinding whiteness that leaves Frado unable to envision blackness in heaven. Although the dying James assures Frado of a heavenly place if she lives a good life (95), Mrs. Bellmont advises her after James’s death to give up the notion of heaven because “she [Frado] could not go where James was; she need not try. If she should get to heaven at all, she would never be as high up as he” (100). In one of Frado’s last meditations on religion she, in fact, confesses her rejection of a heavenly afterworld:

Frado pondered; her mistress was a professor of religion; was she going to heaven? then she did not wish to go. If she would be near James, even, she could not be happy with those fiery eyes watching her ascending path. She resolved to give over all thought of the future world, and strove daily to put her anxiety far from her. (104)

Frado’s deliberation on and subsequent rejection of Christianity and the afterlife occur in a tone not as humorous, but at least as ironic as Huck Finn’s rejection of religion more than 30 years later. Reminiscent of Frado’s meditation on the benefits and uncertainties of heaven, Huck Finn contemplates the cursed afterlife that awaits him after he has committed the unconscionable sin of protecting a runaway slave. Faced with the option of performing his Christian duty and
returning Jim to his owner, or helping Jim go free, Huck chooses what seems more right in his own mind, even though he believes that this decision will ensure his spiritual damnation; his affection for Jim impels him to maintain Jim in hiding (Twain 205). It is noteworthy that thirty years before Twain’s Huck Finn challenges the soundness of Christian doctrine, Harriet E. Wilson fictionalizes a black female heroine who boldly denounced Christianity for its seemingly blanket acceptance of whites as candidates for heaven.

Frado’s meditations on the complex network of race and racial signifiers suggest that she is not merely imitating and reaffirming tenets of the dominant culture. Frado’s oppositional gaze, particularly her critique of Mrs. Bellmont and Mary, precipitates her rejection of Christianity. She associates heaven with whiteness, but the omnipresent and frightening Mrs. Bellmont complicates this parallelism. While alarmed at the possibility that heaven holds no place for blacks, she is more disturbed by the vision of a heaven that includes the terrifying whiteness of Mrs. Bellmont. Resembling a ‘she-devil’ (22) more than an angelic figure, Mrs. Bellmont embodies an obscure form of whiteness—a whiteness that defies popular consensus on the nature of whiteness. Mrs. Bellmont inspires an association of whiteness with wickedness that is incompatible with common nineteenth century images that likened whiteness to more meritorious ideals. In his 1851 novel, Moby-Dick, Herman Melville summarizes some of the prevailing images of whiteness in the nineteenth century imagination, and he suggests that whiteness symbolized a near God-like condition. In his famous chapter, “The Whiteness of the Whale,” Melville details the powerful images that whiteness conjures: “Though in many natural objects, whiteness refiningly enhances beauty, as if imparting some special virtue of its own...whiteness has been even made significant of gladness...this same hue is made the emblem of many touching, noble things—the innocence of brides, the benignity of age...in many climes, whiteness typifies the majesty of Justice in the ermine of the Judge” (253). But Melville cautions the reader that “though even in the higher mysteries of the most august religions it has been made the symbol of the divine spotlessness and power...there yet lurks an elusive something in the innermost idea of this hue” (254). Melville further explains that “this elusive quality...causes the thought of whiteness, when divorced from more kindly associations, and coupled with any object terrible in itself, to heighten that terror to the furthest bounds” (255). While Melville advances a recitation on whiteness to explain the horror of the white whale, we can draw on his analysis to consider the horror of whiteness that Harriet E. Wilson invests in Mrs. Bellmont. Mrs. Bellmont
defies even her name which suggests something large ("mont" which translates to "mountain") and "beautiful" ("bell"). Seemingly bigger than life, yet the incarnation of evil, Mrs. Bellmont incites an overwhelming fear in Frado—a fear heightened by the unexpected investment of evil in whiteness, which usually signifies purity and goodness.

Like Melville, Wilson offers an alternative lens for viewing whiteness. Through the eyes of the oppressed other, we see representations of whiteness that lie outside popular nineteenth century fictional constructions. Early in the novel, Wilson presents characters who upset commonplace assumptions of the inherent virtue in whiteness. In fact, Frado’s woeful life originates out of a dark, evil whiteness—her mother’s first lover. Mag reaches her early ruin after giving herself over to a man whose voice “seemed like an angel’s, alluring her upward and onward,” and consequently assures her offspring a desolate and hopeless existence (6). Although he is initially identified by his bright, angelic features, Mag’s lover is promptly transformed into a demonic figure. Mag assumes that her lover offers her happiness and security: in her imagination, he promises “an elevation before unaspired to; of an ease and plenty her simple heart had never dreamed of” (5-6). But his chivalric promise fades into horror. He becomes a distant, dark figure, seducing Mag with no show of remorse. By leaving him nameless, Wilson maintains his mystique and magnifies his evil presence. Like Melville’s white whale, Mag’s white lover represents a heightened level of evil because he has veiled his demonic nature in a cloak of whiteness that is usually associated with virtue and benevolence.

As Mag’s offspring, Frado inherits her mother’s legacy, and she is unable to escape her cursed future. Christianity offers her no refuge or hope. She has been taught that true Christians give over concerns of the mortal world to thoughts of the hereafter. But Frado is not certain that heaven receives black souls, and even if blacks do go to heaven, Frado finds it difficult to imagine that their lot in heaven would be less painful than their sufferings on earth. Frado’s doubts, then, leave her unable to profess a faith in Christianity, which only promises her in the afterlife more of the pain she has known in her mortal life. Frado then cannot give herself over with the traditional proclamation of faith that is fundamental to the conversion process. She further understands that conversion calls for a confession of sins and an acknowledgment of one’s unworthiness for heaven; however, when Frado encounters opportunities for repentance, she recoils from the spiritual course and chooses the path of temporal and immediate satisfaction. Frado reveals her virtual defiance of the doc-
trine of repentance as she revels in the news of Mary's departure and later at the announcement of Mary's death. Elated that Mary is going away, Frado shares her excitement with Aunt Abby: "'she's gone, gone, Aunt Abby. I hope she'll never come back again'" (80). When Aunt Abby responds by emphasizing the Christian doctrine of kindness to one's enemies, her words prompt no pious reflections in Frado. Instead, Frado justifies her enthusiasm, explaining to Aunt Abby that she has unselfishly assisted Mary in preparing for her journey. In her own defense, Frado asks Aunt Abby, "Didn't I do good, Aunt Abby, when I washed and ironed and packed her old duds to get rid of her, and helped her pack her trunks, and run here and there for her?" (81). Frado's refusal to repent for her unchristian feelings towards Mary remains unchanged even at Mary's death. For Frado, Mary's death has "seemed a thanksgiving" (107), especially with the departure of Mrs. Bellmont who must leave to handle the final affairs of her deceased child. Frado expresses no grief for her deceased enemy; on the contrary she revels in the thought of where Mary's soul might now reside. She asks Aunt Abby, "S'posen she [Mary] goes to hell, she'll be as black as I am. Wouldn't mistress be mad to see her a nigger" (107). Frado's religious experiences never lead her to the moment of triumph she feels at Mary's departure, and especially not the victory she feels when considering the possibility of Mary's afterlife in hell. The pleasure and triumphs of these moments offer Frado greater satisfaction than the promises of a questionable religious experience with a dubious continuance in the hereafter.

Throughout the text, particularly through the hopes that James and Aunt Abby hold for Frado, the reader anticipates a coming conversion experience that will set Frado on the path to religious salvation. But Frado is never touched by a divine experience that leaves her with a feeling of a new beginning and a path to a purer life. James longed for Frado to undergo this conversion experience; he "wished to have Frado's desolate heart gladdened, quieted, sustained, by His presence. He felt sure there were elements in her heart which, transformed and purified by the gospel, would make her worthy the esteem and friendship of the world" (69). James shares with Aunt Abby his convictions regarding Frado's religious state: "'She seems much affected by what she hears at the evening meetings, and asks me many questions on serious things; seems to love to read the Bible; I feel hopes of her'" (74). Along with James, Aunt Abby hopes that Frado will experience divine enlightenment. Frado's enthusiasm for reading the bible "strengthened her [Aunt Abby's] conviction that a heavenly Messenger was striving with her" (86). But James's wish, as well as Aunt Abby's goes unanswered, for Frado never fulfills a con-
version experience. Frado never arrives at a satisfactory understanding of how race influences life in the hereafter. As a place where whites, by virtue of their skin color, are preferentially admitted, heaven seems only an extension of the temporal world, and Frado finds no advantage in an afterlife that promises whites a continuation of their earthly dominion, and blacks like herself, a continued existence of servility and subjugation.

Frado’s failed conversion, then, results from her own vision of Christianity as an institution that sanctions racist ideals and from the failure of her religious mentors to disabuse themselves of white supremacist beliefs. While they are notably concerned with Frado’s salvation, James and Aunt Abby fall short of suggesting that heaven holds an equal place for blacks and whites. Although James is the picture of earthly sainthood, he, along with Aunt Abby, remains unresponsive to Frado’s cries of racial self-dejection. This silence on the part of Frado’s two most faithful allies signifies their unanimity with her valuation of whiteness over blackness. In their failure to disengage themselves from their own adherence to racist beliefs, James and Aunt Abby demonstrate the failure of Christianity to stand as a critique of white hegemonic ideals. They are unable to confirm Christianity as a religion that promises a bright eternity to all its converts. Frado, then, finds no benefit in conversion—a religious conversion would still render her powerless and oppressed. Moreover, with Aunt Abby and James as examples, she realizes that the Christian conversion leaves even whites incapable of critiquing pervading ideas of white supremacy.

Harriet Wilson does not stand alone as a nineteenth century writer who shows the ineptness of Christianity in the face of nineteenth century white hegemony. Herman Melville, whose writings have been the subject of many recent studies on race in nineteenth century literary works, exemplifies this point. In “Benito Cereno,” and “Bartleby the Scrivener,” Melville suggests that the power of the conversion experience is limited by the conventions of the dominant culture. In “Bartleby the Scrivener,” the failed conversion is the result of the emerging nineteenth century economy that threatens to dehumanize and demean the new generation of office workers. The narrator in “Bartleby the Scrivener” experiences a moment of awakening one Sunday morning when he stops by his office on his way to church. Discovering Bartleby in his office, the narrator describes the moment of revelation that he experiences as he encounters his peculiar clerk: “For the first time in my life a feeling of overpowering stinging melancholy seized me. Before, I had never experienced aught but a not unpleasing sadness. The bond of a common humanity now drew
me irresistibly to gloom. A fraternal melancholy! For both I and Bartleby were sons of Adam” (55). But the sentiment of this religious experience is short-lived, for when the narrator moves his office to rid himself of Bartleby, he will deny knowing Bartleby, and he will disavow any responsibility for him. Much like Peter who denies Christ three times, the narrator will deny Bartleby three times (67-68). The narrator’s commitment to the business of making money proves more powerful than any spiritual impulse he may have. Being one of the “sons of Adam” is less important to the narrator than being one of Wall Street’s sons.

Christianity’s subordinate place is also suggested in “Benito Cereno,” as the disillusioned Don Benito enters a monastery following his rescue and the trial that sealed the fate of the black insurrectionists. After his near-death encounter aboard his mutinied ship, Don Benito enters a monastery. But the monastery, the symbol of redemption and refuge, only offers him a brief reprieve. It is the memory of “the negro” that has cast a shadow upon the life of Don Benito (314). The negro haunts Don Benito, even after he has been “justifiably” killed and his head displayed as a reminder of the price that one pays when one challenges white authority. Don Benito has been saved, white rule has been reaffirmed, and as Captain Delano reminds him, natural order has been restored, for “all is owing to Providence” (314). Don Benito is unable to find consolation in Delano’s proclamations, but remains disturbed by both the experience of the uprising and the resolution. Don Benito is unable to testify against Babo, the leader of the mutiny, because he is not convinced that the blacks were altogether wrong in their desire for freedom. In his confusion, he enters the monastery, but religion cannot help him dispel his doubts about the rightness of the world. Don Benito dies within months of entering the monastery—the church offers him no solace from the heresy that has sprung from racism. In the end, his own world seems more barbaric than that of the blacks; it is a heretical picture at the story’s conclusion. Melville seems to suggest that in the face of white power gone awry, the church is inept. This charge is evident in the “unabashed...gaze of the whites” (315) directed at the head of the negro planted on a pole that faces the community church.

Like Melville’s Don Benito, Harriet Wilson’s heroine cannot reconcile the conflict of Christianity’s message with the reality of her own experience. At the close of the novel, Frado is sick and financially destitute, but the narrator would like us to remain hopeful for her future. Looking back over Frado’s long struggle, the narrator concludes that “reposing on God, she has thus far journeyed securely”
(130). The final image of Frado “reposing on God” however, proves inconsistent with the Frado who has found power in a secular, not spiritual realm. Furthermore, there is the Frado who, after denouncing Christianity and finding herself unable to envision a place in heaven for blacks (104), abandons any further hopes of finding security in religion. The ambiguity here may again lie in Wilson’s game of signifying: the novel has clearly told the story of Frado’s “un-conversion,” but Wilson veils the story of that failed conversion with summarizing words that merely pay lip service to the typical ending of this literary form. Wilson does not follow the form of the conversion narrative to its logical end; Frado offers no confession of sins, no profession of faith, and she never gives an account of an experience of revelation.

Finding no power in religious tenets, Frado at last discovers a power to combat that of her mistress, but this power does not grow out of religious experience. Frado quite simply follows Mr. Bellmont’s advice and stands up to her mistress. She threatens that if Mrs. Bellmont does not cease striking her, she will work no longer for her (105). Her power is an earthly one, stemming from her recognition of her worth as a laborer. Foregoing the commonly practiced confessional act of self-effacement and subsequent submission to God, Frado elects instead the more empowering doctrine of self-reliance. Wrestling with her faith and her doubts, then, does not lead her to a profession of faith in either God’s powers on earth or in the hereafter. Instead, in a highly ironic subversion of the confessional form, Frado’s conversion ends not in an affirmation of faith in God, but in a profession of faith in herself. This affirmation of the self echoes the Emersonian transcendental message of self-reliance. In his widely quoted 1841 essay, “Self-Reliance,” Ralph Waldo Emerson celebrates man’s independent spirit, and he promotes a doctrine on nonconformity. Emerson proclaims that “Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist” (141), and that the mark of human success is to know one’s own worth (148). Whether Wilson read Emerson remains undetermined, but her depiction of Frado as self-reliant and confident of her worth as a laborer suggests that she was, at the very least, familiar with Emerson’s general theme.

As an antebellum work, Our Nig shows us that the foundation of modern African American women’s fiction predates the late nineteenth century period which fostered a proliferation of black women’s writings. Harriet Wilson anchors Frado’s narrative in the story of her religious experience, which, though a recurrent theme throughout African American women’s writings, runs an unusual course in Our Nig. Harriet Wilson’s novel represents a central narra-
tive plot uncommon in nineteenth century black women’s fiction in which the prevailing storyline entailed the protagonist’s deliverance and conversion. Whereas in much of late nineteenth century black women’s fiction religion strengthens the protagonist in the face of racial discrimination, religion leaves Frado wearied and disheartened. Frado’s lost hope in religion grows out of the despair that she attributes to the legacy of blackness, as well as to the ultimate terror and isolation that whiteness imposes on blackness. With the story of Frado’s “failed” conversion, Harriet Wilson offers an alternative fictionalization of a black female protagonist responding to the myriad racializations that overwhelm her. Moreover, Our Nig highlights the racial constructions and myths that African American women writers struggled with as they wrote fiction. Race made it unlikely for nineteenth century black women’s fiction to simply imitate existing literary forms, and Our Nig reveals how race influenced one nineteenth century black woman writer to develop her own literary form. Frado’s conversion narrative is driven by race and prevailing racial signifiers. Her unending encounters with disturbing racial images jettison the seeming conversion narrative and precipitate the need for an alternative narrative form. With Frado’s gaze of an omnipresent, terrifying whiteness, and her irreconcilable association of blackness with depravity, the narrative of conversion becomes the narrative of un-conversion, and signifyin(g) becomes the medium for the novel’s double voice.

Creating an antebellum narrative that is not a slave narrative, Harriet Wilson sheds light on the evolution of the African American novel. Frado differs from the antebellum stock character of slave narratives who is considered representative of the black population. Wilson may imply through the novel’s title a similar plight between blacks in the North and the South, but she quickly qualifies this line of comparison. In the preface to Our Nig, Wilson clearly distinguishes between her experience as a Northern free black and that of slaves in the South: “I would not from these motives even palliate slavery in the South, by disclosures of its appurtenances North” (iii). The effects of slavery in the South spread into the North, but the experiences of Southern slaves differ significantly from that of Northern free blacks like Frado. Wilson’s text is not a slave narrative, and she does not proclaim the general humanity and equality of blacks. Unlike Frederick Douglass who at the end of his personal narrative describes a yearning to help other slaves, Wilson describes Frado’s determination as self-interest: “Nothing turns her from her steadfast purpose of elevating herself” (130). Douglass struggles for fellow slaves because he believes, in general, in the humanity and self-worth of blacks. Out
of his experience with a master who forbids his schooling, Douglass learns early that "the white man’s power to enslave the black man" is not an inherent natural phenomenon, but rather the result of the white man’s deliberate effort to keep blacks in perpetual ignorance (Narrative 78). Whereas Douglass is convinced that blacks are capable of a humanity equal to whites, Wilson seems less certain. Her ambiguous perceptions of blackness leave her unable to echo Douglass's assertions; however, Frado’s search for her individual humanity persists, and despite her ensuing financial and health problems, the narrator insists that Frado "felt herself capable of elevation" (124).

The story of a black woman’s experience less influenced by the institution of slavery than by the encoded values and myths institutionalized in slavery, Frado’s un-conversion foreshadows the post-slavery African American novel. Frado’s narrative suggests that even free African Americans in the North could not escape the poverty and destitution that seemed the fruition of blackness. More importantly, however, Our Nig reveals a protagonist engaged in the question of her humanity, of her place in a world blanketed by whiteness. Longstanding associations of blackness with inferiority did not disappear when blacks gained their freedom. While they might escape slavery or even economic destitution in the North, African Americans could never escape their skin color. More than just the physical maltreatment that blacks endured in slavery, Wilson suggests that the problems of nineteenth century African Americans originated in a subconscious, but resounding voice that marked blackness as otherness.

Wilson’s protagonist also undermines popular myths about whiteness, for in Our Nig whiteness is often ugly, evil, weak, and a misrepresentation of the real. While Frado is unable to dispel whiteness with the deliberateness of Alice Walker’s Celie, she is nevertheless an important heroine in African American literature. Frado’s story suggests that what some may deem innate characteristics of African American literature may in fact be what Wilson Jeremiah Moses describes as the link between literary traditions and socio-historic conditions: "The most important promoter of continuity in a literary tradition is neither conscious imitation nor unconscious influences of past authors, but the power of social environments to cause successive generations to repeat certain types of literary behavior" (Golden Age of Black Nationalism 154). In response to prevailing representations of blackness and whiteness, black writers like Wilson etched out narrative mediums to proclaim their humanity, and to challenge white America’s valuation of whiteness. Although she never proclaims an inherent worthiness in black people, Frado does assert her
individual worth. While racism leaves Frado unable to rejoice in her blackness, it does not trap her into blind assumptions about the benevolence and natural authority of whites. Though she never finds self-love or self-importance in her racial blackness, Frado stands as a notable literary figure, for she demonstrates how a nineteenth century African American heroine manipulated language to critique widely accepted representations of whiteness. Furthermore, Frado’s story suggests that for African Americans, the path to self-love and self-empowerment is intricately linked to dispelling not only racial myths about blackness, but also challenging dominant myths about whiteness.

Notes
2. While the American sentimental novel is not wrought with biblical scripture, this literary genre has as its textual grounding some basic biblical tenets: the obligation of adults to insure the redemption of children (as prescribed in St. Mark 10:14); God’s priority for the dejected and downtrodden (see Psalms 25:9 and Matthew 5:5); the necessity of repentance before one can enter the spiritual world of the redeemed (see Luke 13:3, Acts 2:38); and the salvation of those who proclaim their faith (see Luke 13:28-31, Romans 1:5, Col 1:23-29, and 2Timothy 4:7-8).

Works Cited
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