Speaking the Body’s Pain: Harriet Wilson’s Our Nig

“"I know
That care has iron crowns for many brows;
That Calvaries are everywhere, whereon
Virtue is crucified, and nails and spears
Draw guiltless blood; that sorrow sits and drinks
At sweetest hearts, till all their life is dry;
That gentle spirits on the rack of pain
Grow faint or fierce, and pray and curse by turns;
That hell’s temptations, clad in heavenly guise
And armed with might, lie evermore in wait
Along life’s path, giving assault to all.”

—Holland (Epigraph to Our Nig)

With these images of blood, sorrow, suffering, and crucifixion, Harriet Wilson introduces and frames Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black. Wilson’s choice of this particular epigraph foregrounds a central preoccupation of Our Nig: pain. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr., concludes in his introduction to the novel, “...Mrs. Wilson was able to gain control over her materials more readily than her fellow black novelists of that decade precisely by adhering closely to the painful details of suffering that were part of her experience” (xxiii; emphasis added). Over the course of Wilson’s narrative, we watch in horror as Frado’s once healthy body is tortured, maimed, beaten, and broken; before our eyes, Frado’s body is transformed from her strongest asset to her greatest liability.

In Wilson’s narrative it is pain, not sexuality, which explicitly determines Frado’s physical experiences, which makes her body visible, and which marks this body as worthy of note. I say “not sexuality” because, at the time of Our Nig’s writing, not only was racial difference inscribed on the body through skin color, hair texture, and facial features; it was also policed and predicated upon an assumption of an essential sexual difference, especially between black and white women.1 In order to make distinctions between persons who shared the same gender assignment, the dominant ideology, which defined the ideal white woman as pure and chaste, created the mythic “loose black woman” as her necessary correlate. Since the ideal white woman was virtually (and virtuously) bodiless, her black counterpart came to be defined as “body” and little else.2 As Barbara Christian maintains, “If the southern lady was to be chaste, except for producing heirs, it would be necessary to have another woman who could

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become the object of men’s sexual needs and desires” (190). This “necessary object” was the black woman.

In Essentially Speaking, Diana Fuss discusses the implications inherent in the sexualization of black bodies: “It is not merely that to be a ‘Negro’ ... is to possess a particular genetic or biological make-up; it is, rather, to be the biological” (75). She reminds us that, in Black Skin, White Masks, Franz Fanon refers to this mythicized black other as “the biological-sexual-genital-nigger” (qtd. in Fuss 75). While both Fuss and Fanon emphasize that this “nigger” is a fabrication of the powerful, they also recognize that its power derives from a widespread cultural belief in the essential “truth” of this construction.

In light of this preoccupation with black sexuality, Harriet Wilson’s Our Nig becomes all the more conspicuous in that, while its protagonist, Frado, is largely defined by and through her body, it is explicitly pain, not sexuality, which delineates her body; pain, not sexuality, which threatens to ruin her; and pain, not sexuality, which eventually compels her to speak out on her own behalf.3

Further, in contrast to her silence about sexualization, Wilson vividly represents Frado as raced and vehemently condemns the racism that induces whites to abuse black bodies.4 It is precisely because the racializing of bodies goes unchallenged—is posited as a given—in Our Nig that I focus on sexualizing discourses in what follows. It is my belief that many nineteenth-century black American writers contested the imposition of a sexualized narrative on their bodies, while never contesting racializing narratives; that is, they accepted that they were innately black but vehemently denied that they were inherently (overly) sexual. As I read these nineteenth-century narratives, the “truth” of a raced bodily narrative was by and large accepted; it is the sexualized narrative that produced a number of reverse discourses, seeking to challenge the simplified, monological representation of black bodies as truly and innately lascivious.

I believe that we can read Wilson’s description of the black body in pain as one such challenge, although, interestingly, it intervenes in the racist attempt to classify blacks as bestial not by taking on the sexualizing narrative but by testifying to a black subject’s ability to feel pain and condemn torture. Of course, Wilson’s narrative was not the only one to describe black (wo)men being beaten or experiencing pain. Slave narratives and antislavery tracts provide us with ample evidence of the cruel and unusual types of punishment blacks were made to suffer. In “American Slavery As It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses,” Sarah M. Grimké recounts the sufferings of a handsome mulatto woman, about 18 or 20 years of age, whose independent spirit could not brook the degradation of slavery... she had been repeatedly sent by her master and mistress to be whipped... This had been done with such inhuman severity, as to lacerate her back in a most shocking manner; a finger could not be laid between the cuts. But the love of liberty was too strong to be annihilated by torture; and, as a last resort, she was whipped at several different times, and kept a close prisoner. A heavy iron collar, with three prongs projecting from it, was placed round her neck, and a strong and sound front tooth was extracted, to serve as a mark to describe her, in case of escape. (Lemer 18)

Surely, this is as dire an indictment of the cruelties inflicted in the South as is Wilson’s testimonial to the cruelties inflicted in the North, “showing that slavery’s shadows fall even there” (title-page). And yet, notice that this unnamed mulatto does not speak for herself; it is another (white) woman who feels compelled to describe this black woman’s bodily pain. Grimké’s testimony provides an excellent ex-
ample of the way racial difference between women is reinscribed through descriptions of pain: Here a disembodied white voice can speak for the abused black woman who cannot speak. As I go on to demonstrate, however, Our Nig uses descriptions of pain not to reinscribe racial difference but to transcend it.

Few were the black women who lived to tell of such beatings, and many of those that did survive were often silenced in the process. Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853) includes the story of "Patsey," "a joyous creature, a laughing, light-hearted girl, rejoicing in the mere sense of existence," despite the frequent beatings she received from a jealous mistress. One particularly severe whipping, however, left Patsey less than "what she had been... The bounding vigor, the sprightly... spirit of her youth was gone... She became more silent than she was, toiling all day in our midst, not uttering a word" (Lerner 50-51; emphasis added).

*Our Nig* differs from these narratives of physical suffering in that, rather than allowing pain to silence her, it is precisely her pain which compels Wilson Frado to speak. Before delving further into how pain functions in *Our Nig*, however, I would like to take a brief detour through some of the images of black women in nineteenth-century writings in order to pave the way for an examination of *Our Nig*, its images, its possibilities.

**Bodies...**

In the period during which *Our Nig* was written, the focus—when and if black women's bodies were addressed in literature—was usually upon either their sexual exploitation or their sexual appetites. Whether the writer believed black women to be exploited objects or promiscuous sluts, the discourses describing black women were predominantly sexual(ized) ones.

In the white-authored and -authorized racist scripts, black women were cast as the seducers, (white) men rendered helpless in the face of their exaggerated animal sexuality. In *White Over Black*, Winthrop D. Jordan explains the logic behind this myth: "If she was that lascivious—well a man could scarcely be blamed for succumbing against overwhelming odds" (151). As Gerda Lerner contends,

By assuming a different level of sexuality for all blacks than that of whites and mythifying their greater sexual potency, the black woman could be made to personify sexual freedom and abandon. A myth was created that all black women were eager for sexual exploits, voluntarily "loose" in their morals, and, therefore, deserved none of the consideration and respect granted to white women. Every black woman was, by definition, a slut according to this racist mythology... (163)

Although it was primarily white men and their wives who constructed this myth as a justification for their own actions, "the bad black woman" (to use Lerner's phrase) made her way into the writings of blacks as well. In *Clotel*, William Wells Brown, writing for a predominantly white audience, aligns himself with the myth-makers by observing,

Reader, when you take into consideration the fact, that amongst the slave population no safeguard is thrown around virtue, and no inducement held out to slave women to be chaste, you will not be surprised when we tell you that immorality and vice pervade the cities of the Southern States... Indeed most of the slave women have no higher aspiration than that of becoming the finely-dressed mistress of some white man. (118-19)

As if to contradict his own thesis, Brown goes on to introduce us to his heroine, Clotel, who certainly would be considered exempt from such aspirations: Like Frances Harper's Iola
Leroy, Brown’s protagonist is that allegedly rara avis—a “pure and chaste” black woman.

But are Clotel and Lola merely exceptions that prove the rule? Is their virtue supposed to be read as all the more estimable when compared to their baser sisters? On the contrary, there is plenty of evidence to indicate that Brown miscalculated. For many black women, becoming a white man’s mistress was their greatest fear, not, as Brown maintained, their greatest aspiration. When black women took up their pens to address the image of themselves as sexually promiscuous, their strategy was often to attack this construction from within: By testifying to the reality of their sexual exploitation, many black women wrote to counter the myth of their exaggerated sexuality. The essentially lascivious black body was, according to these writers, not born but made.

Gerda Lerner insists that “the sexual exploitation of black women by white men was so widespread as to be general. Some black women made the best of an inescapable necessity; others tried to strike an advantageous bargain” (46). The actions of Linda Brent, the protagonist of Harriet Jacobs’s Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, could be regarded as an example of Lerner’s first alternative. Instead of resigning herself to Dr. Flint’s lecherous advances, Brent/Jacobs chooses to “make the best of an inescapable necessity,” proclaiming that, if she must surrender to a (white) man, it will be one of her own choosing: “It seems less degrading to give one’s self, than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment” (55). Thus, while Jacobs/Brent sees no way out of her prescribed role as a sexual being, by asserting herself as a sexual subject rather than an object, she gains some power within this “inescapable” sexualization.

There were some women, however, who opted for neither of Lerner’s two responses—women who neither resigned themselves nor capitalized upon their own sexual exploitation but managed to defy the dominant sexualized construction of the black woman as well as the sexual advances of the very men responsible for this construction. There were women like Fannie, a slave of the Jennings of Nashville, who told her daughter, “I’ll kill you, gal, if you don’t stand up for yourself . . . . Fight, and if you can’t fight, kick; if you can’t kick, then bite” (Lerner 35). There was also the anonymous slave woman who “lost [her] place because [she] refused to let the madam’s husband kiss” her (Lerner 155).

I make this point not to valorize these women’s resistance over the course(s) settled upon by Brent/Jacobs and other women, many of whom, despite such protests, were still raped and raped repeatedly by white men. For whether she resisted or acquiesced, each of these women was forced at some point to see herself as (many) others saw her—as almost completely defined and bound by her always already (lasciviously) sexed body. One marker of the way in which Our Nig “signifies” on dominant representations is the fact that, in light of the extreme sexualization of black women’s bodies, it is a white woman whom Wilson represents as sexual—Frado’s mother Mag, but not Frado herself. Through this twist, Wilson challenges the widespread racist notion that black women, and only black women, were innately promiscuous.

. . . And Souls

Accused of an essential lasciviousness, there were a few
black women writers in the nineteenth
century who opted not to defend them-
selves by merely reversing the genders
of seducer and seduced. Instead, these
writers chose to dispel the myth of
"the bad black woman" by substitut-
ing another image (myth?) of the black
woman in its place: Many women
(both black and white) saw an escape
from their physical sufferings on this
earth by (re)defining and (re)present-
ing themselves not as physical but as
spiritual beings, not as bodies but as
souls.

Certainly Brown's Clotel typifies
this (re)definition, but she is by no
means the only fictional prototype of
the spiritual black woman. Ann Plato,
a young schoolteacher from Hartford,
Connecticut, reassures her readers in
her poem "Advice to Young Ladies" (1841) that

Religion is most needful for
To make in us a friend.
At thirteen years I found a hope,
and did embrace the Lord;
And since, I've found a blessing great,
Within his holy word. (qtd. in
Shockley 29)

While Plato uses the somewhat sexual
metaphor of "embrace" in association
with black women, here the embrace is
a spiritual one—the Lord's—quite
different from the more physical and
more fleeting embrace of an earthly
master.

In "The Two Offers," the first
known short story to be published by
an African-American woman, Frances
Harper introduces us to the saintly
Janette Alston, who closely resembles
her fictional and spiritual sister,
Harper's famed Lola Leroy. Not satis-
fied with simply chronicling Janette's
pious life and sacrifices as exemplary,
Harper makes her revisionist aims ex-
PLICIT by interrupting her narrative to
preach to/about her ideal black
woman:

But woman—the true woman—if you
would render her happy, it needs more
than the mere development of her af-
fectional nature. . . . The true aim of
female education should be, not a
development of one or two, but all the
faculties of the human soul, because
no perfect womanhood is developed
by imperfect culture. (qtd. in Shockley
65)

Here Harper redefines the "true
(black) woman" not as perpetually un-
fulfilled body but as temporarily unful-
filled soul. Her definition of the perfect
black woman as desiring soul strongly
contradicts the trope of the black
woman as desiring body, but in order
to put forth this definition, Harper
must elide the lived reality of many
black women's physical sense of them-
selves as bodies.

In addition to countering the
dominant image of the profoundly
sexual black woman, this spiritual
redefinition occasioned other conse-
quences for the women who embraced
it: For many black women, finding
religion was synonymous with finding
a voice. Abused, degraded, dis-
riminated against, silenced, it was
only after they discovered that all were
one in Christ that these women dared
to speak up and out. When they did
speak, however, it was usually not to
rehash oppressive pasts but to foretell
glorious futures, not to give voice to
their wounded bodies but to harken to
the summons of their uplifted souls.
Thus Maria Stewart, the first black
women known to have spoken in
public in the U.S., introduced an 1833
lecture in Boston with the following
preamble:

On my arrival here, not finding
scarce an individual who felt inter-
ested in these subjects, . . . my soul be-
came fired with a holy zeal for your
cause; every nerve and muscle in me
was engaged in your behalf. I felt that I
had a great work to perform, and was
in haste to make a profession of my
faith in Christ that I might be about my
Father's business. Soon after I made
this profession the Spirit of God came
before me, and I spake before many.
When going home, reflecting on what I
had said, I felt ashamed, and knew not
where I should hide myself. A some-
thing said within my breast, "press forward, I will be with thee." And my heart made this reply: "Lord, if thou wilt be with me, then will I speak for thee so long as I live." (Lerner 563-64)

Maria Stewart claims that she is able to speak only with God's help and with God's voice. Of course, given societal strictures against women—let alone black women—speaking in public, she may have felt it necessary to attribute her gumption to God's inspiration. And yet, for my purposes here, it is still worth noting that, upon finding her voice, it is not of herself but of God and His doings that she speaks.

In striking contrast to women like Maria Stewart, Harriet Wilson and her Frado are "saved" not through religion but through speech itself. By speaking up, Frado in effect saves her own life, and Wilson ultimately achieves a certain immortality. Both protagonist and author speak of themselves and their own agony—not of God and His glory. What's more, rather than negate the image of the black woman as sexual animal with an image of the black woman as spiritual aesthete, Frado refuses to supplant her definition of herself as a body in pain with the more conventional one of a soul in glory.6

Perhaps Wilson was aware that the odds of a black woman escaping bodily oppression through spirituality were indeed slim: Not all black women were as fortunate as Janette Alston or Maria Stewart. For instance, in In Search of Our Mother's Gardens, Alice Walker describes Jean Toomer's encounter with

black women whose spirituality was so intense, so deep, so unconscious, they were themselves unaware of the richness they held. They stumbled blindly through their lives: creatures so abused and mutilated in body, so dimmed and confused by pain, that they considered themselves unworthy even of hope. In the selfless abstractions their bodies became to the men who used them, they became more than "sexual objects," more even than mere women:

they became "Saints." Instead of being perceived as whole persons, their bodies became shrines: what was thought to be their minds became temples suitable for worship. These crazy Saints stared out at the world, wildly, like lunatics—or quietly, like suicides; and the "God" that was in their gaze was as mute as a great stone. (231-32)

Rather than achieve sainthood by transcending the flesh, Toomer's "Saints," tragically, get sainthood bestowed upon them as a direct result of the most severe bodily suffering. What's more, although others might have seen in these women a certain perverse yet "intense spirituality," the women themselves neither heard God's voice nor used their own.

As if heeding the warning embodied in these women, Wilson allows freedom and reward to come not through praying for one's soul to rise in the next world, but through speaking up on behalf of one's embodied self, in all its complex materiality, in this world.7

Our Nig

In light of these other nineteenth-century black women's attempts to either defuse or deny the black woman's sexualized body, Our Nig's detailed descriptions of the physical body appear all the more striking. What we are forced to witness throughout Wilson's tale (even more, perhaps, than we might wish) is a body whose primary and delineating experience is not sexuality, but pain. Frado's dominant bodily experience is of pain; the dominant motif in Our Nig not rape but torture. Pain defines both voice and body, the speaker and the spoken.

When we first begin reading Our Nig, it is difficult to envision how pain will ever figure as anything but a brutally silencing force. From the moment

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Frado enters the Bellmont’s “Two-Story White House, North,” we are confronted with scene after scene depicting her brutal torture at the hands of Mrs. Bellmont. As Wilson informs us,

... Mrs. Bellmont felt that [Frado’s] time and person belonged solely to her. ... What an opportunity to indulge her vixen nature! No matter what occurred to ruffle her, or from what source provocation came, real or fancied, a few blows on Nig seemed to relieve her of a portion of her ill-will. (41)

Frado is repeatedly beaten (34-35, 110), kicked (43-44), whipped with the ubiquitous rawhide (30, 77, 101), forced to go shoeless even after the frost has set in (66), and made to eat and work standing, even when faint with illness (29, 81-82). A wedge of wood is twice inserted between Frado’s teeth, causing “her face [to become] swollen, and full of pain” (36, 93). Again and again in Our Nig, we are forced to read about and encouraged to empathize with experiences like the following:

Angry that [Frado] should venture a reply to her command, [Mrs. Bellmont] suddenly inflicted a blow which lay the tottering girl prostrate on the floor. Excited by so much indulgence of a dangerous passion, she seemed left to unrestrained malice; and snatching a towel, stuffed the mouth of the sufferer, and beat her cruelly.

Frado hoped she would end her misery by whipping her to death. (82)

This passage and others like it in Our Nig, as many will have noted, bear chilling similarities to classic depictions of rape. As such they speak, if to nothing else, to the close parallels between rape and beatings in the lives of black women. Both are forms of violence—both attempts to exert control, to assert dominance over the black woman’s body by marking that body as the master’s (rapist’s, torturer’s) personal property to do with as s/he will. We might even want to read such brutalizing scenes as further evidence for the hypothesis that Wilson employs pain in her narrative as a metonym for sexual exploitation. Through these passages, she is able to talk about black women’s frequent bodily oppression while displacing the reductive notion of black women’s bodily experiences as always and only sexual.

But why does Wilson feel compelled to revisit these painful experiences, to relieve them through a narrative which constantly bombards us with image after image of her own pain? If, as Wilson claims in her preface, it is true that she does not “divulge every transaction in [her] own life,” why divulge these pain-filled ones? If she has “purposely omitted what would most provoke shame in our good anti-slavery friends at home” (rape?), what emotion does she hope to provoke by not omitting her experiences of torture?

It would, of course, be naïve to suggest that Wilson consciously intended to substitute a body in pain for a sexualized body, just as it would be misguided to assume that pain and sexuality form some sort of disjunctive binary. But since it is specifically pain and not sexuality through which Frado’s body becomes present to us in Our Nig, it is worth exploring the possible signifying effects of a body in pain and how it might differ from a sexualized body. If Wilson does indeed omit the sexual but retain the painful, what does a pain-filled presence open up that a sexualized body might close down?

A case could surely be made that the sexualized body—overdetermined, reified, essentialized, always already gendered (female), and hence often othered (“That’s not my body!”)—might have evoked less empathy in a reader, more of a tendency to “blame the victim” than the rarely spoken, potentially universalizable, contingent and temporal body in pain. A body experiencing pain might indeed en-
gender a more responsive audience, not only because we all (across genders, races, classes, ages, etc.) might feasibly identify with such an experience but also, crucially, because we each could feel capable of doing something to ease that pain.

Pain, unlike sexuality, is rarely essentialized as atemporal and innate to the body. Instead, it is more frequently conceived as having an external source, a clear beginning and, importantly, a possible end. Although the veritable absence, at least until recently, of any reader response to Our Nig makes this case difficult to disprove, we can at least surmise that the prevalence of the sexually (over)determined black body led many writers to avoid writing/speaking of bodies (any body) at all in their writings. By speaking the black female body as it was rarely spoken, by speaking of her own bodily pain, Wilson manages to address black women’s experience of themselves as bodies without risking perpetuating the definition of black women as sexualized body and nothing else.

It is my conviction, then, that Wilson’s “body in pain” should not be read as oppositional to the sexualized black body but instead as metonymically displaced from yet still connected to it. Our Nig signifies on that over-determined sexualized body, displacing its more negative implications while still retaining the body as experiential referent and strategic vehicle. The pain-filled body in Our Nig, with its potentially universal sympathetic appeal, provides a sort of insurance that cries for help on its behalf have a better chance of being heard, of being answered.

But does this mean that pain is somehow easier, even less painful, to articulate than is sexual exploitation?

A brief digression should shed further light on the nexus between pain and language.

Deborah McDowell has astutely noted the scant critical attention afforded the whipping scenes in Frederick Douglass’s autobiographical narratives. In these passages, Douglass struggles to express what it feels like to be a helpless witness of another’s (usually a woman’s) pain. For instance, having stood by as a slave woman named Esther was lashed repeatedly by her master, Douglass exclaims:

The whole scene, with all its attendants, was revolting and shocking, to the last degree; and when the motives of this brutal castigation are considered, language has no power to convey a just sense of its awful criminality.

From my heart I pitied her, and—child though I was—the outrage kindled in me a feeling far from peaceful; but I was hushed, terrified, stunned, and could do nothing, as the fate of Esther might be mine next. (88; emphasis added)

Frado’s dominant bodily experience is of pain. Pain defines both voice and body, the speaker and the spoken.

In the face of this brutality, both Douglass and language are stripped of power. Moreover, for Douglass, lack of language is closely related to lack of action: He “was hushed . . . and could do nothing.” Watching a black woman suffer, it would seem, leads to impotency in both word and deed.

In The Body in Pain, Elaine Scarry underscores the antithetical nature of pain and language. She claims that “resistance to language” is essential to pain: “Intense pain is . . . language-destroying: as the content of one’s world disintegrates, so the content of one’s language disintegrates; as the self disintegrates, so that which would express and project the self is robbed of its source and subject” (35). Similarly, Douglass suggests pain’s language-destroying potential; but he claims that the sufferer is not the only one deprived of (her) voice. As McDowell
argues, in Douglass’s narrative, slave women operate as mute physical bodies, while black men are cast as impotent onlookers, condemned to watch abuse in silence for fear that they will be the next in line.

And yet, to put it rather crudely, “impotency” here does not preclude arousal (even orgasm?). For in addition to his powerlessness, McDowell points to the pleasure Douglass derives as “both witness [to] and participant” in those whipping scenarios. She contends that the erotic nature of such whippings, while offending Douglass morally, simultaneously offers up to him the pornographic pleasures of the voyeur. Through the very act of looking, Douglass is able to derive not only pleasure but power from his identification with the (over)seer.

McDowell’s account of how narrating/observing another’s torture can result in a complex blend of impotence and erotic pleasure returns us to the question of what Wilson herself achieves by recounting her persona’s sufferings. Is “our nig,” as both seer and seen, narrator and narrated, a masochist, deriving pleasure from her narrative compulsion to repeat her own pain? As observer/narrator of her own experience under the lash, does Wilson, as did Douglass, find herself impotent? And what about the reader’s role as onlooker: Do we, as voyeurs, “get off” on Frado’s pain? And/or are we, like Douglass’s childhood self, left powerless, too afraid to get involved?

If Douglass gains a certain power through the pleasure of narrating/watching such scenarios, I want to argue that, if Wilson does gain any pleasure in her narrative, it comes from the power she attains through the very act of narrating. That is to say, by documenting, by testifying again and again to her pain, Wilson effectively takes control of that pain, wresting power from her torturer and appropriating it for herself—this from a woman who, after meeting her future husband, does not ask him of his enslavement, for “[...] she felt that, like her own oppression, it was painful to disturb oftener than was needful” (127). In writing Our Nig, Wilson was willing to disturb this pain because it was “needful”; and this time around, she uses pain rather than allowing it to use her.

In order for “our nig” to use her pain effectively, however, she must first claim the right to use her voice, by no means an easy task. For it was not only through their bodies that black women (and men) were oppressed and “othered.” If language does indeed equal power, it was the power of language—of the written and (“properly”) spoken word—that was kept from blacks in order to keep them illiterate, silent, impotent. Pain and black women’s bodies can be read, in a way, as strangely similar: Both have been framed as the converse of language (and, consequently, of power). While one’s own pain, as Scarry maintains, is nearly impossible to articulate, black women’s bodies came to symbolize the spoken, the voiced without a voice (remember Grimké’s testimony).

As a pain-filled black woman’s body could appear the quintessence of mute powerlessness, we might never expect a suffering black woman to speak of her own experience as a body in pain. The fact that a black woman like Wilson does manage to speak of her own pain, then, means that she has quite literally mapped out uncharted territory, in which both pain and the black female body are redefined via powerful language as capable of both power and language. Language in Our Nig is no longer antithetical to pain; instead, language serves to make pain and even “our nig” herself intelligible.

By speaking the unspeakable, by narrating her pain, her body, her body’s pain, “our nig” transforms herself from mute, pain-filled object to
speaking, pain-filled subject. Scarry argues that pain is essentially objectless: While we fear snakes, hunger for food, thirst for water, etc., pain is the one state that does not require an object (5). However, pain does have a subject. By defining herself as the subject in/of pain, Wilson/Frado assumes the position of authoritative speaking subject. As Gates contends, "... Frado's awakened speaking voice signifies her consciousness of herself as a subject. With the act of speaking alone, Frado assumes a large measure of control over the choices she can possibly make each day" ("Introduction," iv).

Just as the act of narration in Our Nig ultimately functions to subvert the muting effects of pain, it also functions to undermine the dehumanizing effects of torture. In order to torture another human being, the torturer must first redefine that other being as "other," as less than human, even as beast. What's more, it is generally easier to "other" the already silent (silenced). The assumption is that, because they don't speak, they can't think or feel. When Mrs. Bellmont scoffs, "... you know, these niggers are just like black snakes; you can't kill them" (88), we see this pernicious logic in action: Mrs. Bellmont justifies her own inhuman actions by declaring "our nig" subhuman.

One could say, then, that the project of Our Nig is essentially a humanist one, designed to clear a space in which "our nig" can assert her essential humanity. For when she does eventually speak, she turns torture's human-beast dichotomy on its head. By speaking, she effectively protests Mrs. Bellmont's definition of her as beast and asserts instead—though protesting torture, not sexualization—that she is a thinking, feeling human being, and that it is the white woman who, because of her cruel actions, is inhuman(e).

If, through an inversion of the power structure, the "beast" becomes "human," Mrs. Bellmont herself becomes "the beast," tortured through narration. While Wilson is certainly not so relentless and sadistic a torturer as Mrs. Bellmont had been, we do sense a certain vindictive pleasure in her ability to wound her former mistress with words. As Minrose Gwin argues, narratives like Our Nig convey the black woman writer's impulse to control and dominate, in language, those who controlled and dominated her. At long last the slave woman controls the plantation mistress, and the vehicle of that domination, language, becomes infinitely more powerful and more resonant than the lash or the chain could ever be. (48)

By narrating their fictional personae's experience of pain, writers like Wilson transform themselves from powerless objects to potentially powerful subjects. The pen for these writers may not really be mightier than the sword, but it does offer its own brand of power, of pleasure.

Scarry argues that during torture "... the body is its pain, a shrill sentence that hurts and is hugely alarmed by its hurt; and the body is its scars, thick and forgetful, unmindful of its hurt, unmindful of anything, mute and insensible" (31). For at least the first two-thirds of the narrative, Scarry's description of muteness aptly summarizes Frado's relation to her own body, a body which speaks loudly in its muteness, but only of its muteness in the face of such agonizing pain. However, at a crucial moment in the text, Frado decides that she will no longer allow pain to silence her. Instead of hating her flesh as the enemy, then, Frado ultimately speaks up on behalf of her physical self. "'Stop!' shouted Frado, 'strike me, and I'll never work a mite more for you'; and throwing down what she had gathered, stood like one who feels the stirring of free and independent thoughts" (105). "Our nig's" rebellious
speech works here not only to articulate but to ease her pain. It may not erase her wounds, but it is a first step toward healing, towards a (talking) cure.

When Frado “talks back” to Mrs. Bellmont, she is in effect (re)constructing herself, moving beyond Scarry’s description of the “mute and insensate” body which is only acted upon to her description of the speaking body which acts. As Scarry contends, healing begins when the torture victim re(dis)covers his or her voice: “. . . the voice becomes a final source of self-extension; so long as one is speaking, the self extends out beyond the boundaries of the body, occupies a space much larger than the body” (33). Unlike Ralph Ellison’s “invisible man,” represented as all voice and no body, or Richard Wright’s Bigger, a body which is nonetheless voiceless and powerless, Wilson’s protagonist represents the presence of both body and voice simultaneously. The body in pain becomes more-than-body, more-than-pain by finding a voice at last.

In addition, in contrast to Mary Stewart and other black women who discovered their voices concomitant with their discovery of religion, when Frado speaks it is self- and not God-inspired. Realizing that it might be possible for Mrs. Bellmont to go to heaven, Frado ultimately resolves “to give over all thought of the future world, and strove daily to put her anxiety far from her” (104). Significantly, it is in the very next paragraph that Frado “talks back” to Mrs. Bellmont: Unlike Mary Stewart, it is only after renouncing, not entertaining, thoughts of heaven that Frado gains her voice. And when she does, she realizes that she must not look to higher powers for aid but must speak for and of herself.

This pivotal instance of self-defense within the text may also serve as representative of Wilson’s corresponding decision at the narrative level to give voice to her pain. Just as, in this textual moment, Frado defends herself in order to ward off future pain, by writing her story Wilson speaks up for herself in hopes of receiving “patronage” from her “colored brethren,” sustenance which could help ease not only her own but her son’s pain.

As Scarry speculates, “The human being who creates on behalf of the pain originating in her own body may remake herself to be one who creates on behalf of the pain originating in another’s body” (324). Although Our Nig is the story of her own pain, it might never have been told had not another’s pain—her son’s—rendered it necessary. Wilson, through Frado, describes her own unbearable pain and isolation in order to reach out to a community on behalf of another. In her self-translation from torture’s object to pain’s subject, she becomes a subject whose intention in expressing her pain is to share it with others, to compel others to respond to her pain, to find their own voices in order to respond. She leaves it to her audience to decide whether, like Wilson, they, too, will speak and act, or whether, like Douglass, they will remain mute and impotent in the face of such manifest suffering.

In thus predicating itself upon reader response, Our Nig remains an ultimately open-ended text. In his introduction, Gates claims that

*Our Nig*’s tale ends ambiguously, if it ends at all . . . the protagonist’s status remains indeterminate, precisely because she has placed the conclusion of her “story,” the burden of closure, upon her readers, who must purchase her book if the author-protagonist is to become self-sufficient. (xlvii)

In Rachel Blau DuPlessis’s sense, then, Wilson “writes beyond the ending” of her novel, postponing closure pending help from her audience for her ailing son.

But if this help came, it came too late. George Wilson died, and the
novel all but faded into obscurity until Gates published the 1983 edition. However, as Gates points out, it is George’s death which actually rescues Wilson from anonymity and restores his mother to life:

Ironically, George’s death certificate helped to rescue his mother from literary oblivion. His mother wrote a sentimental novel, of all things, so that she might become self-sufficient and regain the right to care for her only son; six months later, her son died of that standard disease, “fever”; the record of his death, alone, proved sufficient to demonstrate his mother’s racial identity and authorship of Our Nig. (xiii)

As I have argued, Gates’s resurrection of Our Nig from its untimely grave has had significant signifying consequences. To my mind, Our Nig provides an alternative to representations of nineteenth-century Afro-American women as either disembodied saints or wanton bodies. One might say, then, as Barbara Christian does of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper’s Iola Leroy, that Our Nig is “an important novel . . . because it so clearly delineates the relationship between the images of black women held at large in society and the novelist’s struggle to refute these images” (183). But, unlike Harper’s, Wilson’s struggle to refute dominant images of the black woman does not involve an erasure of black women’s bodies and bodily experiences. Instead, in Our Nig, Frado’s body serves as both her prison and her escape, the source of both her pain and her inspiration. Pain not only motivates Wilson to write her story, it is her story. Wilson finds her voice in her pain, in her ability to survive torture and her desire to see the suffering of yet another body (her son’s) come to an end.

As Gates has clearly documented, for over 100 years this audience was not only less than heart felt, it was virtually nonexistent: Our Nig and its author have long been conspicuously absent from the pages of literary history. Contemporary criticism has noted the lack of response to Our Nig, its ultimate “failure” to be heard, claiming the text and its history as paradigmatic of a larger societal silence (silencing) of black women’s lives and writings. Such readings are correct in underscoring that, if any flaw exists, it is not in Our Nig itself. The flaw, I believe, exists in a cultural inability or unwillingness to listen, in the way we decide certain texts and certain topics are more deserving of a hearing than others. For ultimately, if Wilson’s narrative was not heard, it was most certainly not because she did not speak.

Notes
1. Here the operating, differentiating dichotomy is not homo- versus hetero-, but human versus bestial.
2. Black women’s bodies were valued for production (labor) and reproduction (as suppliers of labor), not just as sexual objects, a valuing Wilson discusses in representing Frado’s servitude. But since Wilson resembles other writers in addressing Frado’s “value” as both worker and mother, yet is unusually silent when it comes to representing her protagonist in explicitly sexual(ized) terms, I have chosen to narrow my focus to the sexual construction of black women’s bodies in order to tease out the significance of Wilson’s silence—or, rather, her decision to speak the body otherwise.
3. Of course, the sexual life of black women was by no means devoid of pain; in many cases, sex and pain were coextensive, as exemplified in accounts of rape and sex-related beatings. Although I am not trying to set up a binary in which sex and pain act as opposing terms, it intrigues me that the pain Frado suffers in Our Nig is not explicitly related to sexuality; instead, it seems she is tortured solely for the sadistic (but arguably still tinged with sexual) pleasure Mrs. Belmont derives from the act of torture. More importantly, we are only afforded glimpses of Frado’s body when it is being tortured.
4. In fact, Frado is a mulatto, the daughter of a black father and white mother. It is not her "white blood," however, upon which Frado bases her appeals for better treatment; instead, she bases them on the premise that no human being, regardless of color, should be made to suffer what she has suffered.

5. See Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Figures of Signification," in his The Signifying Monkey, for further discussion of "Signifyin(g)" as a frequently employed trope in Afro-American discourse.

6. It is true that Frado does come near to a "conversion" at one point in the narrative, and that the letters appended to the text suggest that Wilson herself was a "good Christian." However, religious conversion is not essential to Frado/Wilson's "recovery," nor is it even instrumental in her/their "salvation." Indeed, recovery and salvation are "signified" upon and secularized in Our Nig.

7. Despite Wilson's attempt to speak of and through her body, however, even the friends who write letters on Wilson's behalf misread her mission and reinscribe it in sentimental, religious terms. For instance, after reframing Our Nig as a sentimental novel and tragic romance, "Alida" pens a poem to offer Wilson solace. In this poem, God addresses Wilson, saying, "What though thy wounded bosom bleed; / Pierced by affliction's dart; / Do I not all thy sorrows heed, / And bear thee on my heart?" Our Nig could be read as an emphatic "no" to Alida's poetic question. The narrative argues that the bleeding and wounded bosom cannot be healed by God's presence alone. Wilson demands help in this world, not just in the next.

8. This is especially true of the kind of pain experienced and described by Wilson/Frado.

9. While I have found Scarry's work on pain and language extremely helpful in my struggle to understand the role of pain in Wilson's narrative, I did not feel I could fairly apply her analysis of torture to Our Nig directly, for The Body in Pain represents the torture of raceless male bodies as generic and generalizable to every body's experience under torture, regardless of race, class, gender, generational (etc.) differences across those bodies.

10. Of course, it is her protagonist, Frado, that undergoes the torture in Our Nig, not Wilson herself. In one sense, inventing this surrogate may have helped distance Wilson from her own experience, perhaps making the telling of her own abuse somewhat easier; and yet, Our Nig is authored by "our nig," and the occasional slips from "she" to "I," "her" to "my" within the text suggest that the narrative is more an autobiography than a fictional account. I will be using the term our nig to refer to this blurred persona in what follows.

11. Douglass, too, attains power through this act, but in regard to the incident just described, the power he attains feels much more like the power of the voyeur than does Wilson's.

12. See Gates, "Figures of Signification," for a more detailed analysis of how the body figures in Ellison's and Wright's discourse.

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Department of Black Studies

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