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Eric Gardner


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"This Attempt of Their Sister": Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig* from Printer to Readers

ERIC GARDNER

In early September 1859, the Boston firm of George C. Rand and Avery printed the anonymous work *Our Nig; or Sketches from the Life of a Free Black.*¹ Prior to its recovery by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., which led to the publication of a facsimile edition in 1983, Harriet Wilson’s novel collected dust in libraries, bookshops, and antique stores.² Gates, who was himself introduced to the book through an antiquarian bookseller in 1981, describes *Our Nig* as "a book whose central theme is white racism in the North as experienced by a free black indentured servant in antebellum days" and notes that, as such, it revises the typology of nineteenth-century American women’s novels described by Nina Baym.³

Gates and several other critics have observed that *Our Nig* may be an autobiography—or at least an autobiographical

The author wishes to thank the University of Illinois Humanities Council Student Research Support Program and the English Department for supporting part of this research and Nina Baym, Paul Bushnell, Jodie Gardner, and the staffs of the libraries that own copies of the original edition of *Our Nig* (especially the libraries at the University of Illinois and Smith College) for their counsel and assistance.

¹[Harriet E. Adams Wilson], *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, in a Two-Story White House, North. Showing that Slavery’s Shadows Fall Even There. by “Our Nig.”* (Boston: George C. Rand and Avery, 1859). My title is drawn from the preface, which reads: "I sincerely appeal to my colored brethren universally for patronage, hoping they will not condemn this attempt of their sister to be erudite, but rally around me a faithful band of supporters and defenders."


novel—and the issues raised by this possibility have dominated study of the book. Indeed, Gates's skillful detective work of "finding" the author may have shaped the direction of critical work to date. Tracking Harriet E. Adams Wilson by various means, Gates and his research assistants were able to locate Our Nig's copyright record, a record of Wilson's marriage, and a record of her son's death and to trace Wilson to Milford, New Hampshire, in the early 1850s and later, possibly, to Boston. Within this history, Gates provides some initial information on the book's production (including information on its printer, George C. Rand and Avery) and discusses Our Nig's critical neglect in some detail. But until recently, speculation on the publication, reception, and readership of Our Nig has been just that—speculation.

In his introduction to the 1983 facsimile edition, Gates expressed surprise—and scholars continue to be puzzled—that Our Nig attracted no contemporary attention:

That such a significant novel, the very first written by a black woman, would remain unnoticed in Boston in 1859, a veritable center of abolitionist reform and passion . . . remains one of the troubling enigmas of Afro-American literary history.

My research into the publishing history of Our Nig suggests not only that abolitionists knew about the book but that they may have consciously chosen not to publicize it. Further, although Wilson clearly addresses a black readership in her preface, this readership may never have been reached by the original edition of Our Nig. From the information I have gathered so far about the first owners of the book, it appears that it instead attracted primarily white, middle-class readers who lived close to Wilson's


6Gates, intro. to Our Nig, p. xxx. Gates notes that he and a group of his students "combed through forty periodicals published between 1859 and 1861," for example, without finding any mention of either Wilson or her book (acknowledgments, p. viii).
home in Milford, New Hampshire. Startlingly, most were under
the age of twenty when Our Nig was printed. It seems, then, that
the book's purchasers either interpreted or deployed Our Nig as
a book geared toward the moral improvement of young readers.

Certainly the novel has a "moral" message to deliver. Frado,
the character referred to in the title, is the abandoned daughter
of poor, white Mag Smith and free black Jim. She is "taken in" by
the Bellmonts, a white family ruled by a "she-devil" matriarch.
After allowing Frado to attend school briefly, Mrs. Bellmont,
along with her daughter Mary, forces Frado into virtual slavery.
Despite protests from other family members, the two secure
Frado's bondage with threats and beatings. When James, one of
the Bellmonts' adult sons, returns home in failing health, Frado
nurses him and, in the process, is drawn to his ideas of Christian-
ity; these developments angered Mrs. Bellmont even more. But
when Frado has grown enough to be able to stand up to her, Mrs.
Bellmont backs down. The final two chapters follow Frado
quickly into adulthood, when she leaves the Bellmonts and, be-
cause of ill health, struggles to support herself. She marries a
black abolitionist lecturer who represents himself as an escaped
slave but who, in fact, has never even seen the South. Eventually,
he deserts Frado and their child. But even after these trials,
Frado asserts her will to persevere—and to hope.

I

Even though Boston was, as Gates writes, the "veritable center
of abolitionist reform and passion," a novel printed there in 1859
by a black woman might well have escaped notice under certain
circumstances. But given the sympathies and situation of its
printer, it seems virtually impossible that this was the case. Gates
notes that Rand "was a printer of some distinction; it advertised
its services extensively in local business directories and newspa-
pers." Indeed, George Curtis Rand and the various incarnations
of his company were, from 1842 to 1888 (ten years after Rand's
death), steadily engaged in printing for Boston's publishing

7Gates, A Note on the Text of Our Nig, p. lvii. Although I have examined some of
Rand's advertisements for printing services, I have yet to find any evidence that he adver-
tised his products.
houses and other businesses; many of their books were print specimens (books illustrating type styles and sizes), "indicating that printing for other publishers remained the firm's chief activity." Both geographically and philosophically, Rand located himself close to abolitionist activity. The company's offices at 3 Cornhill were in the heart of Boston's printers' row and thus near the headquarters of a number of Boston reform organizations: the American Sunday School Union was at 9 Cornhill; the State and New England Temperance Depositories were at 11 Cornhill; and the Massachusetts Sunday School was at 13 Cornhill. The American Tract Society and the American Peace Society also had offices on Cornhill. Some of these groups, most notably the Massachusetts Sunday School Union, had abolitionist inclinations, while others, like the American Sunday School Union, tried to walk the fine line of advocating "Christian principles" without alienating their Southern membership. Most pertinent for readers and historians of Our Nig, though, the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society and the American Anti-Slavery Society kept offices at 21 Cornhill—only two blocks away from Rand, Avery. Advertisements for the societies' publications regularly noted that "Applications for the Above Tracts, for gratuitous distribution, should be made to Samuel May, Jr., 21 Cornhill, Boston" and that donations to the tract fund could also be sent to that address. One 1858 Boston Directory also listed the Liberator at the same address.


9The Boston Almanac for the Year 1858 (Boston: Damrell, Moore, and George Coolidge, 1858, and Boston: Brown, Taggard and Chase, 1858). Enlarged and abridged reprint compiled by Judith Allison Walters and published under the title Boston Business Directory for the Year 1858 (privately printed, March 1899). p. 217.

10For an excellent discussion of the American Sunday School movement, see Anne M. Boylan's Sunday School: The Formation of an American Institution, 1790–1860 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), esp. pp. 24–25, 64–90. The American Sunday School Union, although it tried to remain neutral, did, for example, advertise The African Woman, [the] Story of little Mary, showing the piety and benevolence of a poor African; and how we should regard our fellow creatures of every colour and condition (p. 72).


12See, e.g., Proceedings of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society at the Annual Meetings Held in 1854, 1855, and 1856, endpages, in the Annual Reports.

13Boston Almanac, p. 217.
In addition to having offices in the midst of these reform organizations, Rand, although not prominent in the abolitionist movement, had strong abolitionist sentiments and worked on several printing jobs promoting abolitionist causes. In a 15 May 1867 letter to his wife Helen, William Lloyd Garrison wrote that "Mr. Rand, the printer . . . with his wife and sister, is also of our general company"; he then related how Rand had become an abolitionist:

It seems that, as an apprentice in the office of the Boston Commercial Gazette, he [Rand] was obliged to put in type the inflammatory placard which, on the 21st of October, 1835, brought together the mob of "five thousand gentlemen of property and standing," to break up the meeting of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, into whose hands I fell for a time, and from whose vengeance I could find no shelter except in a cell in Leverett street jail. Almost from that moment Mr. Rand has been an abolitionist, as his worthy and stalwart father, Reverend John Rand, was from the beginning.\(^{14}\)

As Garrison notes, Rand had been raised in a religiously devout, abolitionist home; according to a family genealogist, Rand's father, the Reverend John Rand, "took a deep and active interest in the cause of anti-slavery."\(^{15}\)

Much of Rand's early printing was done for the Methodist Episcopal Church, and his first printing ventures were its Sunday School Messenger and Sunday School Teacher.\(^{16}\) Later, it was he whom John P. Jewett hired to print the two-volume first edition of Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin in 1852.\(^{17}\) Rand also printed a number of works by the Reverend Daniel Wise. Although most of these books were geared toward the


\(^{15}\)Florence Osgood Rand, The Rand Family Genealogy (New York: Republic Press, 1896), p. 76. John Rand (1781–1855) was ordained a Baptist minister in 1806, married Betsy Babcock, and had several children. George C. Rand was born 13 December 1819, married three times (to Mary Elizabeth Adams in 1842, Almira Doane in 1845, and Julia Avery in 1851), had several children and grandchildren, and died 30 December 1878 (pp. 109–12).

\(^{16}\)Rand, Rand Genealogy, p. 109.

\(^{17}\)Harriet Beecher Stowe, Uncle Tom's Cabin (Boston: John P. Jewett and Co., 1852), copyright page; see also Dictionary of Literary Biography, s.v. "Rand, Avery and Company."
moral and religious instruction of young men and women, Wise also wrote adult tracts on Methodism and was a known abolitionist, active in that church's ongoing debate over slavery.\textsuperscript{18} I have found no record of Rand's ever being an active abolitionist, but, as the printer of works by Wise and Stowe, his sympathies would almost certainly have been known—at least within reform circles. It is reasonable, then, that Wilson and/or her agents would have appealed to Rand when it came time to print \textit{Our Nig}.\textsuperscript{19}

Given its physical appearance, \textit{Our Nig} did not cost a great deal of money to produce. Russell Maylone of the Northwestern University Library notes that \textit{Our Nig} is "on poor paper with a modest cloth binding—a plain edition in every way."\textsuperscript{20} Frederick Nash, Curator of Rare Books at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, expands on this observation by noting that the book, though inexpensively produced, was not "cheap"; in format, binding, size, shape, quality of paper, and lack of illustrations, \textit{Our Nig} is much like other common books of the period. The volume is organized in sixes, with eleven gatherings of six leaves and one gathering of four leaves, and so contains a total of 140 pages. The book is bound in blind-stamped cloth (which

\textsuperscript{18}Wise's books printed by Rand include \textit{Popular Objections to Methodism Considered and Answered} (Boston: J. P. Magee, 1856) and several moralistic children's books written under the name Francis Forrester. At the 1852 General Conference of the Northern Church, he was recognized among ministers who "condemned all slaveholding and favored excluding from the church all those who would persist in owning slaves" (\textit{The History of American Methodism}, ed. Emory Bucke, 3 vols. [New York: Abingdon Press, 1964], 2:189). In 1856, he was elected editor of the \textit{Sunday-School Advocate}, but was soon condemned by more moderate Methodists for "introducing antislavery views into that paper" (pp. 199–200).

\textsuperscript{19}Gates seems to assume from Wilson's copyright (filed 18 August 1859 at the District Court of Massachusetts) and from research with Boston city directories that she selected Rand and Avery and negotiated terms directly with the firm (intro. to \textit{Our Nig}, p. xvii, and A Note on the Text, p. lvi). Since we have, as yet, no record of Wilson's dealings with Rand, we cannot automatically assume that she handled the negotiations herself. After all, when Stowe negotiated with publishers on \textit{Uncle Tom's Cabin}, it was Calvin Stowe who went to Jewett, set terms, and signed most of the papers (see Forrest Wilson, \textit{Crusader in Crinoline: The Life of Harriet Beecher Stowe} [Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1941], p. 279). We should note, though, that some revisionist biographers of Stowe, most notably Susan Coultrap-McQuin (in \textit{Doing Literary Business} [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990]), give Stowe more agency in the negotiating process. Wilson may likewise have relied—either partially or totally—on agents or benefactors, and I ask that readers grant me this understanding in the material that follows even though I will refer to Wilson as if she acted alone.

\textsuperscript{20}Russell Maylone to the author, 19 February 1991.
originally seems to have been maroon but has now faded) over manufactured pasteboards, has yellow endpapers and pastedowns, and measures 19.5 by 13 centimeters. Many of the extant copies of Our Nig are in dilapidated condition, and their scarcity suggests a relatively small print run, or at least that the book was considered by its readers, as well as its printer, an ephemeral product, not to be cherished and preserved. In any case, Our Nig was not designed to become a best seller, and perhaps no more than a single printing was ever anticipated.

Given the book's small, inexpensive printing along with what we know about Rand, it seems likely that the book was produced as an act of charity, perhaps to launch the author's career but, more probably, to help her overcome the immediate financial difficulties she alludes to in her preface:

Deserted by kindred, disabled by failing health, I am forced to some experiment which shall aid me in maintaining myself and child without extinguishing this feeble life.

Wilson's friends, or even Rand himself, may have put up most or all of the money for printing Our Nig and left her with the task of actually selling the book. The place of Rand in all of this, then, is rather hazy; in the end, the only "facts" we have are that he printed the book and that he was an abolitionist. Ultimately, he could have been anything from a disinterested printer helping out a fellow abolitionist (who would have recommended Rand to Wilson) to a sympathetic patron who attempted to introduce

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21 Frederick Nash to the author, 19 November 1992. Because the extant copies of Our Nig are scattered across the country, I have not been able to examine all of them for the purposes of collation. I base my assertion that all of the extant copies come from the same edition on the overwhelming similarities in descriptions provided to me by the libraries that own extant copies, on the scarcity of extant copies, and on Gates's assertion that "this 1859 first edition ... appears to have been the only edition of Our Nig" before Gates's 1983 facsimile (A Note on the Text, p. lvii).

22 At this point, the only other clue to the size of the edition (besides the lack of notice/publicity) could be the mark on one of Gates's copies that reads "No. 100." If this is a printer's notation, we know that the edition was at least 100 copies; of course, we cannot be sure which of any number of owners may have marked this copy (A Note on the Text, p. lvii). That Rand was a printer rather than a commercial publisher makes his work rather difficult to track down; the comparisons I have been able to make, though, suggest that at least some of Rand's products—Daniel Wise's books especially—were of at least slightly higher quality (and slightly more ornate) than Wilson's book.
Our Nig to the Boston abolitionist establishment and apparently failed. Ultimately, though, we know that Rand did have avenues that he could have pursued to publicize Our Nig, and there is no definite proof that he used any of them.

II

It seems that Wilson found most of her customers near Milford, New Hampshire, where she was living prior to Our Nig's printing. Milford never had a sizable black community in the nineteenth century, and how Wilson came to live there remains a mystery. Though located on both the Boston and Maine Railroad and the Souhegan River, the town was still relatively small in the 1850s. The 1850 Census Population Abstracts show 2,159 people living in Milford; Harriet Wilson was the only black woman, and there were only two black men. In 1860, Milford's population had grown to 2,223, but there were no black residents enumerated by the census. The greatest concentration of original owners of the presently extant copies of Our Nig is in the small Hillsborough County city of Nashua, which was then connected to Milford by the Nashua-Keene Branch of the Boston and Maine Railroad, as well as by roads lying close to it. Nashua—"a cotton town" that held much of the area's indus-

23 Perhaps the most valuable source for examining the antebellum Hillsborough County area is the 1982 Old Maps Company's reproduction of the Map of Hillsboro County, New Hampshire, 1858, which details much of the area, down to naming and locating houses. This reproduction contains a map of buildings in Milford—a total of over 200 dwellings and stores. Of interest to readers of Our Nig is the fact that Samuel Boyles's home—where Wilson lived and where some of the story of Frado/Wilson may have taken place—is shown on p. 37 of the reproduction. As far as I have been able to determine from a survey of the area, this house no longer stands. George Ramsdell's semi-genealogical History of Milford, 2 vols. (Concord, N. H.: Rumford Press, 1901) remains the most detailed survey of nineteenth-century Milford. Though Ramsdell briefly discusses a group of abolitionists in his History, and the current church historian of the First Congregational Church of Milford informs me that the Reverend E. N. Hidden, who married Harriet Adams and Thomas Wilson (see Gates, intro. to Our Nig, p. xv), had abolitionist sentiments, Milford was by no means a center of abolitionist reform.

try—had a population of 5,820 (including 22 blacks) in 1850 but grew to 10,065 (still including 22 blacks) in 1860 as industry increased, transportation improved, and as nearby Nashvile was incorporated into Nashua in 1852.  

Of the thirty-four copies of Our Nig located during this study, eleven offer hints of ownership—signatures, dates, place names, or direct acquisition records—that in total yield seventeen names. All of these individuals, with one notable exception, resided within a few counties in either Massachusetts or New Hampshire that were near Milford. Although Gates places Wilson in Boston as late as 1863, I have found no copies bearing marks by owners who can be traced to the Boston area.

One owner, however, had strong Boston connections and was, indeed, a prominent abolitionist. In June 1951, Smith College received a copy of Our Nig as part of a donation from Eleanor Garrison and Frank Garrison, and the book’s title and date of publication appear on the inventory of a portion of the library of William Lloyd Garrison, Jr. Because Rand knew the Garrison

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26Copies without owner information are located at Yale University (two copies, one unbound in mylar encapsulation), the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, the University of Virginia, the University of Delaware, the Free Library of Philadelphia, Northwestern University, the University of Iowa, Donnelly College, Columbia University, Boston University, the University of Chicago, Duke University, Fisk University, Temple University, the Virginia State Library, the Newberry Library, the New-York Historical Society Library, and the American Antiquarian Society. One library noted that its copy was missing, and another failed to respond to my queries. At least one copy (in addition to the two copies owned by Gates) is in a private collection. Most of the copies in this study were located through searches of the National Union Catalog: pre-1956 Imprints and the OCLC and RLIN databases; doubtless additional copies exist at other locations. I would appreciate hearing from institutions/individuals who own copies of Our Nig.

27Gates, Figures in Black, pp. 139 and 161. Gates has examined Boston city directories between 1855 and 1863 and concedes that there may have been more than one Harriet Wilson (p. 161). Boston marriage and death records list several H. and Harriet Wilsons between 1860 and 1880; thus, Gates’s identification, while compelling, is not certain. See also intro. to Our Nig, pp. xvi–xvii.

28Karen V. Kuik to the author, 14 February 1991 and 9 April 1991. For information on this donation, see esp. 4 June 1951, letter from Frank Garrison to Margaret Grierson, Garrison Family Papers, box 27, item 774, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass. See also 26 July and 1 August 1951, letters from Margaret Grierson to Frank Garrison and Eleanor Garrison, box 50, items 1372 and 1373, as well as the 1951 diary/daybook of Frank Garrison, esp. entries for 31 May–3 June, box 93.
family, *Our Nig* may have come to Garrison Jr. through Rand’s recommendation, if not by his hand. Garrison Jr., although never as famous as his father, was also a noted abolitionist and was active in the cause throughout the 1850s and 1860s. There is as yet no date to establish Garrison’s initial contact with the book. Also unclear is whether he or any other member of the Garrison family (or their friends) actually read *Our Nig*. The Garrison copy does prove, however, that *Our Nig* touched the inner circle of New England white abolitionism.\(^{29}\)

Those owners of *Our Nig* who lived in the area around Milford and Nashua, New Hampshire, present a profile quite different from William Lloyd Garrison, Jr.’s. Among them was John H. Co[l]burn, who was fourteen when he gave a copy of *Our Nig* to M. Jennie Moar on 16 February 1865. John was the son of Charles and Emeline Coburn, who owned a relatively large farm in the area (worth $10,000 in 1860). In 1870, at age twenty, John was still living at home, his occupation was listed as “farm laborer,” and he attended school within the year.\(^{30}\) I can find no record of M. Jennie Moar in either the 1860 or 1870 census; there were families in the area with the surname “Mooar” and several more with the common “Moor” and “Moore.”

Among other Hillsborough County residents to whom the book can be traced is Flora M. Lovejoy, who was only two when *Our Nig* was printed; she was the daughter of Charles Lovejoy, a Nashua confectioner, and his wife Sarah. In 1870, she was thirteen, attending school, and her father’s business was growing.\(^{31}\)

\(^{29}\) In *Figures in Black*, Gates proposes that writer and abolitionist Lydia Maria Child read *Our Nig* and cites a 9 July 1878 letter to Sarah Shaw in which Child discusses the plight of a Mag who sounds very similar to the Mag Smith of *Our Nig* (pp. 142–43). But the letter never mentions the title of the work or other characters in it. Given such slim evidence, I do not think that we can assume that Child read *Our Nig* near the time of its publication—if she read it at all. Thus, the book’s entry into the abolitionist establishment at this point stops with Garrison.

\(^{30}\) This copy, now in the Ohio State University Library, Columbus, bears the inscription on the front free endpaper “Presented to M. Jennie Moar / by John H. Colburn / Nashua. February 16th 1865,” and was acquired on 2 July 1858. John Co[l]burn’s name appears in some places with the “I” and in some places without. See 1860 Census of Hillsborough County, New Hampshire, p. 24, and 1870 Census of Hillsborough County, New Hampshire, p. 22.

\(^{31}\) 1860 Hillsborough County Census, p. 213, and 1870 Hillsborough County Census, p. 154. This copy is currently at the University of Wisconsin at Madison and is inscribed on the front free endpaper “Flora M. Lovejoy / Nashua / N. H.” It was acquired by the library in 1982.
George F. Sawyer was ten years old and attending school in 1860. His father, Joseph, was a trader, and his mother kept house. 32 "Miss Mary A. Whitcomb" of Hampton, Rockingham County, New Hampshire, was nine years old when she signed her name in the copy of Our Nig Gates later used for his facsimile edition. Her parents kept an inn in Hampton, and she attended school there. 33

The New York Public Library copy bears two inscriptions: "Presented to / Mr. Edgar Johnson / By Ella Tin[d/k]er"; and "George Armstrong / Book / Bedford, N.H." The original owner of this copy was probably either George A. or Ella M. Tinker, a married couple who in 1880 were farming in Bedford, New Hampshire, with George's parents, Joseph H. and Mary Tinker. Like many of the child-owners above, either Ella, born in September 1856, or George, born in July 1852, may have received the book as a childhood gift. There are a few Edgar or E. Johnsons close to Bedford—mainly in Essex County, Massachusetts. 34

Henry Stiles wrote "a good book" twice (once in pencil and once in ink) in the back of his copy. Stiles seems to have been an atypical owner of Our Nig; he would have been forty-three when the novel appeared and was an established merchant in the small town of Brookline, New Hampshire (just south of Milford). He had only recently married his second wife, a woman of nineteen.

32 1860 Hillsborough County Census, p. 102. I can find no record of this family in the 1870 census of Nashua. There are listings for a father and son, both named George Y[oung] Sawyer, who were attorneys in Nashua, in both the 1860 and 1870 censuses. This copy of Our Nig is in the University of California at Los Angeles collection and is inscribed on the front free endpaper "George F. Sawyer / Nashua N. H." According to UCLA, this copy was probably acquired in the late 1970s.

33 Gates, A Note on the Text of Our Nig, p. lvii. The full inscription is "Miss Mary A. Whitcomb, Hampton, N. H., February 1, 1861." See also 1860 Rockingham County Census, p. 110. I can find no listing for this family in the 1870 census of Hampton.

34 This copy—acquired by the New York Public Library in 1919 for 75 cents—bears the two inscriptions on the front free endpaper. See 1880 Hillsborough County Soundex and Census, enumeration district 107, p. 19, and 1900 Hillsborough County Soundex and Census, enumeration district 78, p. 7. It seems possible, because the endpaper is detached, that George Armstrong may be George Armstrong Tinker and the last name is either missing or was unsigned. There are George Armstrong's in the area—most notably the son of John D. and Jane Armstrong, who was nine years old and living in Bedford, N. H., in 1860 (1860 Hillsborough County Census), but I have settled on George A. Tinker because of the connection to Ella Tinker. It is possible, though, that this copy passed from George Armstrong to Ella Tinker to Edgar Johnson.
Stiles was postmaster of Brookline from 30 June 1861 to 10 November 1892, town clerk for twenty-three years, selectman for thirteen years, tax collector for five years, and state representative in 1854.\textsuperscript{35}

The other traceable adult owner of Our Nig was Alonzo Sargent, who was sixteen and living with his parents, William and Elizabeth, in Gloucester, Massachusetts, in 1850. He inscribed his copy "Alonzo Sargent / Annisquam / Mass / 1860" on the flyleaf. Annisquam was listed with Gloucester on censuses, and Alonzo would later become a carpenter and move into Gloucester, where he was living at least as late as 1885.\textsuperscript{36}

The copy of Our Nig in the collection of the University of California at Berkeley presents special problems because its inscription—"Mrs. C. B. Blake, for M. W. Chandler" on the front free endpaper—is so scant. There are several C. Blakes and several more M. Chandlers in 1850–80 census records for New Hampshire and Massachusetts, and the majority carry no middle initial.\textsuperscript{37}

\textsuperscript{35}Now at the Dartmouth College Library, Hanover, N. H., this copy is signed three times—twice on the recto of the front free endpaper and once on the verso of the back free endpaper; following the signatures is the abbreviation "P.M." This copy was acquired in November 1943 for, as Stanley Brown, curator of Dartmouth's rare book collection, notes, "the princely sum of $2.00." See 1860 Hillsborough County Census, p. 259, and E. E. Parker, History of Brookline, formerly Raby, in Hillsborough County, New Hampshire (Gardner, Mass.: Meals Printing, 1914), p. 633.

\textsuperscript{36}This copy was acquired in 1955 by the Huntington Library, San Marino, Calif. See 1850 Essex County, Mass. Census, p. 125, and Gloucester Directory, 1884–1885 (Boston: Sampson, Davenport, and Company, 1885), p. 161. There is also an Alonzo D. Sargent listed in the 1850 Census of Franklin, N. H. At that time, he was seventeen, working with Jeremiah Daniel as a paper manufacturer, and boarding with Daniel's family; he was born in New Hampshire and attended school for at least part of the 1849/1850 school year, but I find no record of his ever being in or near Annisquam.

\textsuperscript{37}This copy was acquired in 1982. Although University of California-Berkeley librarians assert that the inscription clearly reads "M. W.," evidence has led me to an N. W.—Nicholas W. Chandler, a shoemaker from Plaistow, N. H., who served in the First Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Heavy Artillery in 1861. In 1880, he was living in Haverhill, Mass. (near Plaistow) with his wife Ella and three children. The Directory of Haverhill and Bradford for the year 1880 (Boston: W. A. Greenough Company, 1880) lists a Mary A. Blake, the widow of Charles Blake, living at a house at 22 Temple (p. 30). According to the 1889 Directory (Boston: W. A. Greenough, 1889), she was living at 34 Moore, and her son Charles, a shoe maker, was boarding with her (p. 81). Most of the Blakes and Chandlers in the Haverhill area were employed in occupations relating to shoemaking; of the many Blakes and Chandlers, Nicholas Chandler and Mary Blake seem to offer the strongest promise of a viable connection. If this is true, both would join Stiles and Sargent among the established adult readers of Our Nig.
I have yet to identify Sarah C. Tompkins or the “Miranda” who gave her a copy of Our Nig for Christmas in 1859. Among the large number of Tompkins families in the area, there are several Sarahs, but none I have found had the middle initial “C” or had a “Miranda” living with them. Also unidentified so far are Edith M. D’Orcey [?] and the R. S. M——[?] who gave her a copy.

Although the conclusions we can draw from this small sample of readers must be limited, some patterns clearly emerge. The starkest, of course, is that most of the owners of copies that have surfaced to date lived within twenty miles of Milford, primarily in three counties in New Hampshire—Hillsborough (where Milford is located), Rockingham (just east of Hillsborough), and Merrimack (just north of Hillsborough). Besides Garrison’s and Sargent’s, the only other copy deviating from this pattern is that held by the Balch Institute, which lists the place South Gardner, Massachusetts, in the inscription. The town of Gardner is some forty miles southwest of Milford, but it lies between Milford and the cities of Worcester and Ware—two of the cities that Gates poses as possible identifications for the “W——, Massachusetts” mentioned in a sponsoring letter included in Wilson’s appendix (pp. 133–37). If Wilson passed through Gardner, as Gates’s report of her movements would suggest, she may have sold, traded, or given a copy of Our Nig to one of the town’s residents.

Of the owners of Our Nig who have been traced, more than half were children—some not even at reading age when Our Nig was printed. Our Nig allows itself to be read as a “children’s book” because, focusing as it does on Frado’s early life (between the ages of about nine and seventeen), it deals mainly with a child’s search for a self and a God. Once Frado leaves the Bellmont family, the narrative speeds to a conclusion in only two

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38 This copy was acquired by Cornell University ca. 1913 and is inscribed on the front free endpaper: “Sarah C. Tompkins / from Miranda / Concord Dec. 25 / 59.” I have not yet determined whether the location is Concord, Mass. (Middlesex County) or Concord, N. H. (Merrimack County).

39 This copy was acquired in 1972 by the Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies, Philadelphia, and is inscribed in the front free endpaper, “from R. S——[S. M——?] / to / Edith M D[?]Oreycy / So Gardner / Mass.”

40 Gates, intro. to Our Nig, p. xxi.
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chapters.\textsuperscript{41} Further, if we take at face value Wilson’s prefatory statement that supporting her child was her major reason for writing the book, we can easily accept that questions of youth may well have been part of her intended focus. In addition, both the preface and the novel itself place a great emphasis on reading.\textsuperscript{42} The young Frado is empowered at least in part by reading. In writing her novel, Wilson may, then, have wished to bestow this gift of empowerment on young people of her own race.

I do not mean to suggest, however, that *Our Nig* was either solely intended or solely deployed as a book for youth. Indeed, as we will see, *Our Nig* deals with the complex issues of race and racism in ways that might well have threatened the abolitionist establishment, whereas *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, on the other hand (which was also read by young people in great numbers), had nourished that same establishment.\textsuperscript{43} None of the owners of *Our Nig* traced so far or their parents—with the notable exception of Garrison—seem to have been active abolitionists, so the book’s portrayal of issues of race may not have concerned them; rather, these buyers may have been drawn primarily to the Christian values embodied in the story. Moreover, because Wilson (or her friends or agents) appear to have had personal contact with the initial buyers of *Our Nig*, the books were probably purchased as much for Wilson’s representation of herself, including her need for charity, and of her book than for the novel’s actual content.

In her preface, Wilson reaches out to a specific audience: “I sincerely appeal to my colored brethren universally for patron-

\textsuperscript{41}The Library of Congress, which retains the copy filed with Wilson’s application for copyright, currently shelves *Our Nig* in its Juvenile Supplement Collection of the Rare Book and Special Collections Division (Rosemary Fry Plakas to the author, 5 March 1991). Originally, *Our Nig* was deposited with the general holdings, and no date or reason for its removal has been established.

\textsuperscript{42}Gates, in *Figures in Black*, echoes several critics when he refers to literacy as a major theme in much pre-1900 black fiction (pp. 108, 144–45).

\textsuperscript{43}Thomas F. Gossett, “*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*” and American Culture (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1985) notes that the novel “inspired a whole new industry of souvenirs of its leading characters. Enterprising manufacturers hurriedly produced candles, toys, figurines, and games based upon it. . . . By the time a year had passed, three hundred infants in Boston alone had been christened with the name Eva. There was a movement in northern churches to make the novel a textbook for Sunday School classes (p. 164).
age.” My preliminary research has uncovered no original black owners of *Our Nig*, but the possibility cannot be discounted, since the number of copies printed clearly exceeded the number of copies that have surfaced. I do think it is safe to assume, however, that Wilson was not able to reach a large black readership—a community that would at least support her morally, if not financially. In her sponsoring letter in the appendix of *Our Nig*, “Margaretta Thorn” identifies another audience: “the friends of our dark-complexioned brethren and sisters” (p. 138). Given that almost all of the surnames of the owners of *Our Nig* that I have traced (Colburn, Moar, Lovejoy, Sawyer, Armstrong, Tinker) appear in George Ramsdell’s *History of Milford* and were thus families influential within the community, Wilson did reach at least a few members of the audience Thorn identifies. Though that audience was less able to provide the moral support Wilson longed for than her fellow African-Americans, it did offer some of the financial support she needed. These considerations tend to bolster the theory that *Our Nig* was initially produced as a charitable endeavor.

Ownership patterns also sustain the theory that Wilson was responsible for distributing the book herself—and that the distribution was limited to personal acquaintance with the author or her friends or agents. Such a method of distribution in an age increasingly dominated by mass-market networks would definitely have reduced the likelihood that *Our Nig* would receive literary notice or that it would be given an opportunity to make a contribution to black literature and culture or to the politics of slavery and race.

III

Although Rand was a printer and not a publisher—the distinction being that printers manufacture and publishers market and distribute (though they may also manufacture) books—it still seems strange that Wilson’s novel received absolutely no notice in Boston or elsewhere. Rand was clearly influential in Boston and had deep ties to the abolitionist movement, and we know that William Lloyd Garrison, Jr. (and perhaps his father) owned and at least had the opportunity to read *Our Nig*. In discussing
the complex series of changes and conflicts within several factions of the abolitionist movement, William H. Pease and Jane H. Pease provide a context for further understanding the lack of white abolitionist (especially Garrisonian) support for Our Nig. They observe that white abolitionists aimed simply to “eliminate slavery and free the bondsmen” and thus directed their efforts almost solely at the “distant South”; black abolitionists, on the other hand, extended their efforts to “a variety of spheres and in many ways, both in the North and the South.” Many white abolitionists, then, were not as concerned with the issue of race as with the issue of slavery. The Peases also note that “the Liberator was not a race paper. Its major energies were devoted to expounding the theory and tactics of Garrisonianism; and . . . it had little room for items of specific interest to blacks.” Indeed, the majority of the white abolitionist movement advised blacks to “emulate the noble and long-suffering Uncle Tom.”

Given this context, Uncle Tom’s Cabin is not strictly “negro fiction”; it is a heavily Christian, white abolitionist novel. Within the abolitionist movement, it seems, few deviations from Stowe’s basic form and purpose—including any real “negro fictions”—were encouraged. So, although Gates argues that Our Nig’s ob-


45As Gates points out, the form also spawned several “copycat” abolitionist and anti-abolitionist novels, but in all of these novels, race is a secondary issue to southern slavery (see Figures in Black, pp. 133–37).

46Pease and Pease, They Would Be Free, briefly discuss black abolitionist Martin Delany’s 1859 novel Blake, or the Huts of America. Blake, which implies that “a massive conspiracy among slaves was both necessary and possible” and that “race solidarity was the essence of revolution; the action [to] be a ‘war upon whites,’” was partially serialized in two black periodicals, the Anglo-African Magazine (1859) and the Weekly Anglo-African (1861–62). Delany “sought but apparently got no support for publishing it in book form from Garrison.” Indeed, Blake did not appear in book form until 1970 (pp. 249–50 and notes). In fact, “black fiction” was repudiated by many abolitionists (black as well as white), who feared that creating a fictional form for messages about slavery might raise doubts in the minds of those the abolitionists were trying to reach; thus, slave narratives were routinely advertised as “true,” a convention that found full flower in Stowe’s A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin (Boston: John P. Jewett and Company, 1853).
curity "is especially curious just eight years after Harriet Beecher Stowe had created a ready market for what came to be called negro fiction," the relatively narrow goals of the white abolitionist movement (the initial promoters of and audience for *Uncle Tom's Cabin*) would seem instead to exclude Wilson's novel. Indeed, in this light, *Our Nig* cannot be seen as a novel of abolition; it is a novel about Northern racial issues, a young black woman's bildungsroman, and, as such, is far from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. It may be, then, that an examination of thematic differences—rather than similarities—between *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Our Nig* can help explain why one was a runaway best seller and the other seemingly a commercial failure.

Many abolitionists may not have even recognized *Our Nig* as having an anti-slavery message simply because the story takes place in the North, where most abolitionists were not prepared to recognize "slavery's shadows." *Our Nig* is far from flattering to Northerners or abolitionists. Even though the preface tells us that Wilson did not wish to "palliate slavery in the South, by disclosures of its appurtenances North," that her "mistress was wholly imbued with southern principles," and that she has "purposely omitted what would most provoke shame in our good anti-slavery friends at home," Wilson depicts aspects of Northern life that abolitionists would have regretted. The narrator speaks directly to abolitionist racism; Frado is "maltreated by professed abolitionists, who didn't want slaves at the South, nor niggers in their own houses, North" (p. 129). Abolitionists would not have been pleased to discover that Frado's husband Stephen was an imposter because false fugitives were a reality they preferred not to discuss or even recognize. And Gates further theorizes that the representation of a working interracial marriage, that of Frado's parents, could have been completely unacceptable to a Northern audience.

In addition, Frado could have been much more threatening to some white readers of the 1850s and 1860s than the pious and docile Uncle Tom. Frado stands up for herself:

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49 Gates, intro. to *Our Nig*, pp. xxx–xxxi.
“Stop!” shouted Frado, “strike me, and I’ll never work a mite more for you;” [sic] and throwing down what she had gathered, stood like one who feels the stirring of free and independent thoughts.

By this unexpected demonstration, her mistress, in amazement, dropped her weapon, desisting from her purpose of chastisement. . . . She did not know, before, that she had the power to ward off assaults. [P. 105]

Uncle Tom is incapable of this type of assertion—even George, Uncle Tom’s most radical character, is muted for most of the book, and Cassie and Eliza (and even Stowe) assert their power almost solely in their roles as mothers/mother-figures. That Frado, a black woman, dares to claim her autonomy challenges nineteenth-century norms even more than the scene in Frederick Douglass’s Narrative where he first reacts physically against his oppressor. But Frado’s oppressor, we need remember, is far from the evil Covey or the satanic Legree; she is a professed Christian and a mother of the North.50

Finally, in all slave narratives (including Stowe’s revision of the genre), the North is portrayed as a magical land where the protagonist will eventually realize the promise of freedom. Our Nig offers no such promise; Frado has neither the realistic possibility of a happy, free life (such as George and Eliza enjoy—albeit in Canada and, ultimately, for colonizationist Stowe, in Africa) nor even the hope of a martyr’s death (like that of Uncle Tom). Instead, she is a victim of “slavery’s shadows”—of a Northern racism that may simply be subtler than the South’s. In scope and portrayal of characters, then, Our Nig would likely be much more threatening to white Northerners and white abolitionists than the depictions in Uncle Tom’s Cabin. If Our Nig was turned down by general commercial publishers because of the sensitive racial issues it presented, it may well have frightened or offended even those who produced and consumed the majority of abolitionist works.

50See esp. Elizabeth Ammons’s “Stowe’s Dream of the Mother-Savior: Uncle Tom’s Cabin and American Woman Writers Before the 1920’s” and Jean Fagan Yellin’s “Doing It Herself: Uncle Tom’s Cabin and Women’s Role in the Slavery Crisis,” both in New Essays on “Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” ed. Eric J. Sundquist (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), for versions of this “cultural feminist” reading of Uncle Tom’s Cabin. As Ammons notes, Mrs. Bellmont is a startlingly dark rewriting of Stowe’s ideal.
IV

Exactly where *Our Nig* falls on a spectrum between a radical novel suppressed by part of the abolitionist power structure and a book charitably produced for the author’s personal distribution remains unclear. We do know, however, that if *Our Nig* could have sold well anywhere, it would have been in Boston. In addition to the overwhelming presence of abolitionism in its many forms, Boston had a growing black community that, for the time, was “surprisingly literate.” Boston’s black community had begun celebrating Crispus Attucks Day in 1858, and on the first and second of August 1859, only weeks before Wilson registered her copyright, the city hosted a convention of Colored Citizens of New England “to petition Congress in protest of the Dred Scott decision. The convention called for black solidarity, [and] encouraged support of black trades, arts, and professions.”

The number of blacks in the Milford area was, as I have noted, incredibly small. Indeed, according to the U.S. census, only 494 blacks (split about evenly between the classifications “black” and “mulatto”) lived in the entire state of New Hampshire in 1860—down from the 520 reported in 1850. By comparison, Massachusetts reported 6,531 black residents in 1860 (down from 9,064 in 1850); the black community of Boston alone was roughly four times larger than the total black population of New Hampshire. If Wilson had been free to market her book to the black readership she appeals to in her preface, we would expect her to have begun in Boston.

Cognizant of “free” life in the North as she seems to have been, Wilson would surely have pursued marketing opportunities in Boston had she been able. Even if *Our Nig* was meant simply as a token offered in exchange for charity, a greater num-

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51 James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *Black Bostonians: Family Life and Community Struggle in the Antebellum North* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1979), pp. 12, 117–19; see also chap. 1. In 1850, 1,999 blacks lived in Boston; only 14 percent were illiterate. In 1860 the black population was up to 2,261, and the illiteracy rate was down to 8 percent.

ber of potential, sympathetic donors would have lived in Boston than in the counties in New Hampshire and Massachusetts surrounding Wilson’s one-time home of Milford. The distribution patterns of copies of Our Nig traced so far illustrate, however, that the book may never have reached readers in Boston. Although abolitionists may have ruined the book’s chances, evidence to support a small-scale conspiracy theory is only circumstantial. Wilson’s own personal ties, infirmities, and financial limitations, may have had a greater effect on the book’s distribution; for example, her son’s death in February 1860 in Milford may have brought Wilson back to the area. In all probability these various factors combined to produce the peculiar publication history of Our Nig, circumstances that left it buried in dust for over a century.

The final image Harriet Wilson paints of Frado is this:

Strange were some of her adventures. Watched by kidnappers, [she was] maltreated by professed abolitionists, who didn’t want slaves at the South, nor niggers in their own houses, North. . . .

Traps slyly laid by the vicious to ensnare her, she resolutely avoided. In one of her tours, Providence favored her with a friend who, pitying her cheerless lot, kindly provided her with a valuable recipe, from which she might herself manufacture a useful article for her maintenance. This proved a more agreeable, and easier way of sustenance.

And thus, to the present time, may you see her busily employed in preparing her merchandise; then sallying forth to encounter many frowns, but some kind friends and purchasers. Nothing turns her from her steadfast purpose of elevating herself. Reposing on God, she has thus far journeyed securely. Still an invalid, she asks your sympathy, gentle reader. Refuse not, because some part of her history is unknown, save by Omniscient God. Enough has been unrolled to demand your sympathy and aid. [Pp. 129–30]

Perhaps in that view we receive a glimpse of Wilson. The sponsoring letter from “Alida” included in the appendix quotes Wilson directly:

53See Gates, intro. to Our Nig, p. xii, for information on George Mason Wilson’s death in Milford on 15 February 1860.
I packed my trunk, carefully placing in it every little momento of affection received from you and my friends in W——, among which was the portable inkstand, pens and paper. [P. 134]

After detailing some of the hardships Wilson has suffered and her attempts to sustain herself, "Allida" comments that the author "felt herself obliged to resort to another method of procuring her bread—that of writing an Autobiography" (p. 137).

We know little of Wilson after Our Nig’s printing. She may have stayed in Boston or she may have returned to the Milford area to distribute her book among friends and sympathizers. Remarriage, death, relocation, and name- or identity-changes are all possible reasons for her complete disappearance from state and national vital records. We do know from Gates’s research that Our Nig came too late to help Wilson’s own child, who died less than a year after Our Nig’s printing, but my readership survey suggests that Our Nig may have helped other children to begin to understand the injustices blacks suffered throughout the United States. In the end, regardless of the lack of abolitionist support, Our Nig may have also aided Wilson in her dual attempt to realize both self-sufficiency and self-satisfaction; she may have ultimately gained “a faithful band of supporters and defenders”—however small and localized.

Eric Gardner is a student in the Ph.D. program in English at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where he works as a graduate teaching assistant and writing tutor. He is in the early stages of his dissertation, which will focus on the content, production, and reception of the American discussion on slavery and race between 1850 and 1865.