

Challenging Conventions: Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig*

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Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (1859) takes readers through the experience of Frado, a young, black woman living as an indentured servant in the North. The novel is not very well known; it was recently discovered after being lost, having not been very successful in its time. Like much of the literature of the period, this work has been identified as a sentimental novel. The sentimental novel as a genre, with its aim to illicit sympathy for the characters from its readers, has a few basic conventions, some of which being women depicted as a moral compass for families, marriage signaling a happy ending, and the use of diegetic narration. Wilson's character, Frado, lives a life that warrants sympathy from her readers. Abolitionist print, too, has its own conventions: it regularly held that the South was far more treacherous than the "humane" North, and that freedom from slavery meant a better life. Abolitionist print relied heavily on sentimentality, such as images of happy, free blacks in the North, to make the claim that the North was a safe place for people of color. *The Liberator*, a newspaper edited by William Lloyd Garrison, made claims that largely blamed the South for issues of racial injustice. While much attention has been given to discussing how Wilson's novel fits into genre, and how claims of abolitionist print echo

sentimentality, the two are treated as completely separate entities, with little to no overlap. It seems there have been no considerations that Wilson's novel was a criticism of abolitionist print. Not only does Wilson increase sympathy for Frado by bending the conventions of the sentimental novel, she also seems to call into question the value of sympathy even as she appeals to sympathy. By pointing out the shortcomings of sentimental conventions, she underscores the failures of abolitionist print. I argue that Harriet Wilson writes within the genre of the sentimental novel, but challenges its most basic conventions to illustrate the insufficiency of the conventions offered by abolitionist print, and that by assuming the North is a safe place for people of color, we miss the fact that racial injustice is not a regional problem, but a national one.

By presenting white people within the North as being particularly cruel, Wilson challenges the typical ideas about African Americans being treated brutally in the South and more humanely in the North. Wilson feels the need to address this idea in her preface: "I would not from these motives even palliate slavery at the South, by disclosures of its appurtenances North. My mistress was wholly imbued with *southern* principles" (Wilson 3). Claiming that Wilson's mistress had southern morals, she tells readers that her own experience of living in the North was not "humane" as people thought. By challenging this popular notion, she lets air out of abolitionist Northerners' tires by pointing out that racial injustices are found everywhere in the United States, not just in the South. Researcher and scholar Eric Gardner, with little commentary on its implications, claims, "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" (Gardner 227). His research also found that William Lloyd Garrison himself owned

a copy of the novel (239). Why didn't he, a prominent abolitionist with a newspaper at his fingertips, promote the novel? It is rather fitting that abolitionists would not publish Wilson's work; her novel redirects the finger that abolitionists point at the South back to the very region they pridefully claim is free from inhumane cruelty. Though Wilson's emphasis on the North is brave and forceful, her preface still reads largely as a disclaimer, and it is clear that she felt compelled to apologize and tone down her narrative to avoid being persecuted by her community for extending blame to the North.

The Liberator contains messages that reflect the exact sentiment that Wilson criticizes. In the same year as the publication of *Our Nig*, 1859, *The Liberator* printed a message in a January issue that demonstrates the sentiment that the South was mainly to blame for issues of racial injustice:

"Sorrow, shame, tears, for the betrayed and humbugged South! The pity of her friends, and the dupe of her foes, she is made to exhibit herself before the world in an attitude so unenviable that it is sickening to look upon, and goes staggering along like a man bereft of reason, and the noble attributes with which his Creator has endowed him, to the cruel destiny which her remorseless and insatiate enemies have declared shall be hers. Christ never poured more bitter tears over the wayward city of His love, than the patriot weeps over the blinded, deceived, and unfortunate South."

The author of this statement obviously felt very strongly that the South's involvement in slavery was not only a crime against humanity as popularly thought by abolitionists, but also a crime against God. The "her" in the paragraph refers to the South; "she" is presenting herself to the world in a very unfavorable way. *The Liberator* regularly published messages that suggested that the South needed to make the changes necessary to create a more unified

society, but the newspaper rarely mentioned any instances of injustice in the North. The messages were submitted from all over the country, but it's not as common to see a message of this type submitted from the South, and certainly not one that places blame on the North for instances of injustice. *The Liberator's* masthead echoes sentimentality; African Americans and whites are depicted interacting with each other; the children of both races are seen playing happily together. In the center, both a black man and a white man bow their heads before a depiction of Christ. Woven through the title of the newspaper is a banner, reading "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thy self" a popular Biblical reference. Though it seems *The Liberator* was created with good intentions, it did little to nothing to solve the issues of racial injustice in the North. The newspaper relied on sentimentality, such as depicting blacks and whites coexisting peacefully, but sentimentality has its shortcomings. Wilson's novel highlights the shortcomings and criticizes sentimentality.

Challenging the conventional sentimental idea of female characters being sympathetic and benevolent moral compasses for homes, Wilson presents the corrupting forces of racism in some of the female characters Frado encounters. In the Bellmont household, Mrs. Bellmont and her daughter, Mary, are especially cruel to Frado, frequently referring to her as the racial epithet indicated in the title of the novel. The sentimental convention that women are the moral compasses of households is flipped on its head in their brutal mistreatment of Frado. Scholar Julia Stern notes this:

"Critics of *Our Nig* eager to argue for its place in the sentimental tradition of American women's fiction have yet to explain Mrs. Bellmont's seemingly unmotivated regime of domestic violence against her female servant, violence so brutal and sustained that it

seems a form of torture. This failure to speculate about what drives Mrs. Bellmont's ferocity has much to do with scholarship's exclusive focus on the sentimental aspects of the narrative" (Stern 441).

While Stern does see the insufficiency of female characters as sentimental in the novel, I hold that this was not an accident; by challenging this convention of the sentimental novel, Wilson actually garners more sympathy for Frado. Readers disturbed by the cruel behavior cannot help but feel sympathetic towards Frado. After being subjected to terrible beatings at the hands of Mrs. Bellmont, Frado's health declines, limiting her mobility. Frustrated with Frado's delayed speed, Mary hurls a carving knife at Frado, who narrowly dodges it (64). This horrendous episode of brutality is only one of many present in the novel. Frado even questions what Mrs. Bellmont's future will hold: "Frado pondered; her mistress was a professor of religion; was *she* going to heaven? then she did not wish to go" (104). Mrs. Bellmont treats Frado so terribly that, despite being enthusiastic about religion, Frado does not wish to go to heaven if it means Mrs. Bellmont will be there too. R.J. Ellis points out Frado's discomfort with religion: "Frado, despite prudently appearing to be 'serious', is never presented as being comfortable with white New England's Christian religion because of her experiences of its pervasive hypocrisy" (87). If her mistress reads the same religious doctrines that Frado reads, why does she act so cruelly? By calling attention to Frado's discomfort with religion, Wilson points out the hypocrisy of Christians abusing people of color. Not only does Mrs. Bellmont's cruelty generate more sympathy for Frado from readers, but also undermining the convention of the white women as moral compasses calls into question the assumptions about where allies can be found. *The Liberator*, with its images of whites and blacks living in harmony, would not have printed the mistreatment of Frado in the

North, as they regularly retold instances of brutality against people of color in the South. The conventions of abolitionist print are insufficient just as the idea of a safe haven in the North is untrue.

The male Bellmonts are largely benevolent to Frado; what's troubling about their kindness, however, is their inaction in making Frado's situation better. Mr. Bellmont acknowledges that she had been "punished undeservedly," and tells her that "when she was *sure* she did not deserve a whipping, to avoid it if she could" (104). Though it may seem that Mr. Bellmont is on her side, his statement is problematic. Are there instances in which, to his mind, Frado deserves the brutality she faces? Why is it her responsibility to prevent the attacks from Mrs. Bellmont? Why does Mr. Bellmont not use his power as the head of the household to stop Mrs. Bellmont and Mary from torturing Frado? While the convention of sympathy for the main character seems to be present in the inactive Mr. Bellmont, there's still no hope for Frado, and the burden is placed on her to resolve her troubles. Sympathy, in other words, does her little good. Without action, sympathy is only an emotion that, while it is good to know that those surrounding her aren't all heartless, can do little to help Frado out of her situation.

Contrary to the convention of marriage signifying a happy ending, Wilson turns the trope of marriage to serve as a message that when it seems hope is around the corner, Frado is only met with more suffering. Just as illustrated in the challenging of the other conventions of the sentimental novel, Frado truly is without a safe space and without an ally. In an institution that should provide both security and unity, Frado's experience of marriage never works in her favor. From the very beginning, when Mag marries Jim, it ends up that Frado is surrendered to the Bellmont house, which begins the brutality she faces (23). Karsten Piep claims:

“Marked with the racial stamp of inferiority, Frado, like her white but permanently ostracized mother, Mag, must learn early on that conventional notions of friendship, motherhood, and marriage provide no redress against prejudice, exploitation, poverty. This is a decidedly unsentimental lesson and so it seems befitting that the reader is left sad or angered rather than tearful when ‘lonely Mag Smith’ abandons Frado, leaving her in the exploitative ‘care’ of Mrs. Bellmont” (185).

Though marriage should conventionally mean that troubles are gone, this is untrue for Frado. However, as Piep points out, the departure from the sentimental convention garners more sympathy for Frado, as readers bitterly detest Frado’s abandonment. When James Bellmont gets married and moves to Baltimore, Frado hopes that he’ll take her with him, but it only means that Frado loses an ally in the Bellmont house (55). When Frado has finally grown up, her own marriage to Samuel seems to foreshadow a happy ending: “She realized, for the first time, the relief of looking to another for comfortable support” (127). Frado finally has somebody to trust. However, this too goes wrongly for Frado, when Samuel is revealed to be a fraud (128). This undermining of the sentimental novel convention progresses the sympathy readers feel for Frado, like the undermining of the previous conventions. Though he claims he was from the South, he was not. He is untrue in his relationship to Frado, and he is also a fraudulent fugitive slave. Not only is this a critique of sentimental conventions, it is also a criticism of the failures of abolitionist print. Gardner explains that “abolitionists would not have been pleased to discover that Frado’s husband was an imposter because false fugitives were a reality they preferred not to discuss or even recognize” (242). The situation with Samuel begs a question: if Wilson wants to criticize racial injustice, isn’t it risky to include an instance in which a black man is proven to be a fraud? Though it seems as if Wilson is echoing pro-slavery rhetoric that holds that

people of color are not to be trusted, Frado's failed marriage illustrates the issue of African Americans not being able to find an ally.

A common feature of sentimental novels, Wilson uses diegetic narration in *Our Nig*; however, she uses the diegetic narration as a vehicle to overtly express her criticism of the abolitionist movement, as well as directly asking for sympathy for Frado. Gabrielle Foreman also observes Wilson's usage of diegetic narration: "While Wilson both employs and subverts the conventions of sentimental fiction in *Our Nig*, her autobiographical voice continually interrupts her fictional fabric" (314). Like Foreman, I also assume that the voice of the diegetic narration is Wilson's own, and by this assumption, readers can more clearly understand Wilson's novel as a criticism of abolitionist claims. Preparing to conclude her novel, Wilson writes of Frado's life: "Watched by kidnappers, maltreated by professed abolitionists, who didn't want slaves at the South, nor [negroes] in their own houses, North. Faugh! to lodge one; to eat with one; to admit one through the door; to sit next one; awful!" (129). Wilson directly calls out "professed abolitionists" as being hypocritical; they argue for the South to be reformed and for African Americans there to be liberated, but they will not themselves associate with black people happily. She boldly mocks white Northerners, saying what she believes they think, but what they will not say out loud. Drawing back to *The Liberator's* masthead, it is safe to assume that Wilson would certainly see the hypocrisy of those sentimental depictions. Wilson also uses diegetic narration to explicitly ask for sympathy for Frado: "Still an invalid, she asks your sympathy, gentle reader . . . Enough has been unrolled to demand your sympathy and aid" (130). Wilson's method of interrupting the narrative to insert her own voice allows her to expressly give her messages.

Harriet Wilson's challenging of the conventions of the sentimental novel combined with the protesting of popular assumptions about racial injustices gives readers insight to the conditions African Americans faced. Neal Lester sees her challenges to the conventions of genre as a strong political statement: "While Wilson is keenly aware of both sentimental fiction and slave narrative genres, her text moves beyond boundaries established by those genres to present a piece with considerably more political and social bite" (Lester 349). Proving herself capable of the "political bite," Harriet Wilson was able to produce a work that not only revealed the hypocrisy of abolitionist editors and writers, but also made them feel so threatened that they refused to publish or promote her work. Through her non-conformism to the conventions of genre, Wilson gives us a character for whom readers cannot help but feel sympathy. To be in Frado's situation, a brutalized indentured servant in the North, it would be tormenting to know that white abolitionists were focused on primarily improving the lives of those who were living in the South. This distinction seems to have fallen along racial lines: white abolitionists generally seem to have focused on Southern slavery, while black abolitionists, such as Wilson herself, gave space to critique racial oppression in the North as well as Southern slavery. By restricting readings of *Our Nig* to understanding the work in terms of how it fails to meet the conventions of the sentimental novel, or by not considering the implications of the work's lack of success and how it relates to abolitionist agendas, readers can completely miss out on an insight into the historical context of the novel, and how certain factors reflect the very issues that Wilson reveals through Frado's experience.

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