

Our Nig : Examining Racism and the American Abolitionist Movement

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***Our Nig*¹ :**
Examining Racism and the American Abolitionist Movement

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私たちのニグー人種差別とアメリカの奴隷解放運動の調査—

ハンソン ローナ

Abstract

Lost for nearly 100 years, *Our Nig* by Harriet Wilson is a fictionalized account of her life as a black woman in 1860's New England. This report will examine her life and the deeper meanings of her singular work. Included themes are: racism in the New England states at that time, the Abolitionist community of that time, and what *Our Nig* means for the African-American community today.

概要

ほぼ一から百年にわたって失われた、ハリエット・ウィルソンによる「私たちのニグ」は1860年代のニューイングランドにおける黒人女性として彼女の人生の自伝的小説である。本論文では、彼女の人生、とこの作品にの意図について検討する。含まれるテーマはニューイングランド州で人種差別と人種差別時点で廃止論者コミュニティ内、および「私たちのニグ」がアメリカ黒人コミュニティに行ったこと。

キーワード : American Abolitionist Movement, Harriet Wilson, *Our Nig*

Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig* was printed in 1859, at a time when she felt hypocrisy was rampant. The book was written as a way to earn money to support herself and her son. Despite this, Wilson utilized it as an opportunity to write her commentary on the injustices she saw, using experiences from her own life as writing material. Her voice comes through in the main character, Frado, who is essentially a fictionalized young Harriet Wilson.

Our Nig touches on many subjects. The most noticeable subject is that of racism in the supposed "free North." The second part of the title on the cover page even says: "Sketches from the life of a free Black... Showing that slavery's shadows fall even there" (Wilson). Another significant subject is the reversal of traditional gender roles. Despite men having the final say, women in the book wield a great amount of power while the men sit back and are passive, or have no interest whatsoever in the affairs of their female counterparts. The use of colors in the novel is also an important subject to notice, as she separates the notions of good and evil in relation to white and black. *Our Nig* describes conditions for blacks, regardless of their status in society, in a place that was supposed to be "free."

Although there is a discrepancy in her birth records, (In Massachusetts there is another Harriet Adams

born during the same year. There is debate among Wilson scholars as to which Adams is the author of *Our Nig*. The widely accepted birth date of Harriet Adams (Wilson) is March 15, 1825 in Milford, New Hampshire. She was born to a Joshua Green and Margaret Ann Adams. Her mother, Margaret, was a white woman of Irish decent, while her father, Joshua was a free black man. Despite the novel being very close to Wilson's real life experiences, there is not much known about why her parents married. It is only known that a few years after she was born, her father died, leaving very little to Wilson and her mother. Soon after the death of her father, her mother abandoned her at the house of a white farmer, Nehemiah Hayward Jr. who lived in Milford as well. Research has shown it is probable that the Hayward family is the same as the Belmont family in the novel. From ages six to eighteen years old, the Hayward family put Wilson to work as an indentured servant, or basically a slave. She experienced abuse, among many other horrible things.

When she came of age and left the Hayward house, broken down and sickly, she worked as a seamstress and house servant for various residents across New Hampshire. At times she worked in Massachusetts if she was feeling well enough. During this time, she met Thomas Wilson who was a traveling abolitionist. He said he gave speeches on his life as a former slave all over New England, but he later told Harriet Wilson that he was never a slave and had never seen the south. This is also in *Our Nig*. The significance of her husband's revelation will be touched on later.

They married in Milford, New Hampshire on October 6, 1851. In the book, Frado marries a black man named Samuel, who is a fictional substitute for the man Wilson married, Thomas (Wilson 127). The book comments on how secure Frado is beginning to feel in her relationship with Samuel. In *Our Nig*, Wilson writes how this empowers Frado. "Here were Frado's first feelings of trust...She realized, for the first time, the relief of looking to another for comfortable support" (Wilson 127). She is, for the first time in her life, able to trust that another person will take care of her. Frado feels safe in her marriage to Samuel, which is something completely novel to her.

However, much like her father died and left her mother, Thomas abandoned Wilson shortly after the marriage. By this time, she was ill and pregnant, with no husband and no money. The theme of abandonment occurs frequently in Wilson's life and is transferred to *Our Nig*. The relationship which Frado felt so secure in has fallen apart and she is once again unsure of her situation. Frado develops a strong sense of independence when her husband is absent. "Frado was again feeling her self-dependence, and was at last compelled to resort alone to that" (Wilson 127).

She moved into the Hillsborough Country Poor Farm in Goffstown, New Hampshire where she gave birth to her only son, George Mason Wilson on June 15, 1852 (Gates). After the birth of her son, her husband returned for a small amount of time and eventually left them again only to die soon after.

After the death of her husband, Wilson put her son back in to the care of the Poor Farm and moved to Boston, Massachusetts in order to raise money for herself and her child. It was during this time in Massachusetts Wilson wrote *Our Nig*. On August 1859, she copyrighted the manuscript and it was printed on the 5th of September by a printing company by the name of George C. Rand and Avery. A year later, her son died at the Poor Farm at the age of seven (Gates).

From then on, there were no records of Wilson anywhere until she was listed in the Boston's newspaper,

Banner of Light, as living in East Cambridge, Massachusetts. There, she became a spiritualist and was known as the “colored medium.” She used spirituality for medical reasons, healings, and gave “entranced” lectures anywhere and anytime she pleased.

She married again in 1870 to John Gallatin Robinson, a man fourteen years her junior. He was interestingly a white man of German and English decent. It is interesting that Wilson should marry a white man; it is the opposite of the situation her mother was in (marrying a black man). Also, for someone such as Wilson, who has experienced many hardships at the hands of whites, should marry one.

However, by 1877, they were living in separate homes, but no legal divorce had taken place. Two years later, Robinson married another woman and had no further contact with Wilson. She was once again abandoned, in a sense.

Although Wilson disappeared from the official records around the 1870's there has been reports of her being very involved in her Boston community. In the time before she wrote *Our Nig* it is believed that Wilson traveled around Boston and the New Hampshire area selling hair tonics and dyes. Later in her life, she helped organize Christmas parties, baked for church groups, and participated in meetings and small skits put on by the community. She helped create and organize the Children's Progressive Lyceums, a spiritualist “Sunday school” for children. Other jobs included employment as a nurse and a self-proclaimed clairvoyant healer, a housekeeper of her own boarding house (Gardner 7).

Harriet Wilson died on June 28, 1900 in Quincy, Massachusetts (Boggis 233). She was never recorded as having written anything else besides *Our Nig*.

The reception of *Our Nig* was short lived at the time of its printing. Forty-six copies were found to be in existence (Gates). Wilson, in the introduction to her book, pleaded with the black population to take notice of her book. She asked them to buy it not only to help her and her son, but also to read her story and take notice of the message she was trying to convey. However, it did not receive much, if any, recognition.

The book was printed in Boston, a hot spot for the abolitionist movement, but it was largely ignored. Some scholars think this is because *Our Nig* painted an unfavorable picture of the Northern abolitionists; most of them being just like the “good Northern white people” such as the Bellmonts, the fictionalized Haywards, in the book. Wilson brazenly called the Northern whites out on this. The opinion she expressed in her book was no matter where a black person went in America, he or she would always be viewed as a slave. A quotation from *Our Nig* perfectly illustrates this by saying Frado is, “Watched by kidnappers, maltreated by professed abolitionists, who didn't want slaves in the South, nor niggers in their own houses, North” (Wilson 129).

Our Nig shows white people in the North subjecting free blacks to the nearly the same treatments as the slave owners in the South. Such a view would be unhelpful to the abolitionist movement, as the Northern abolitionists wanted to separate themselves as much as they could from the “bad Southerners”, and thus the Northern white abolitionists turned their eyes away from *Our Nig* (Gardner 10).

It is thought that Wilson had to resort to peddling her book much like she did her hair tonics and dyes (Gardner 12). The buyers of the book could have been her same customers to whom she sold her hair products. It is surmised that most of the recipients of the book were children, who were most likely the

children of people Wilson had business dealings with. Most of them either didn't read the book until they were older, or passed it on to people who were older than themselves. Only three known adults received the book (Gardner 12). Some scholars have thought that Wilson geared the sales of her book towards children, perhaps hoping that they would identify with it and grow up with the book in their mind (Gardner 15).

Another point to notice is that most of Wilson's readers were white. As stated above, she could have sold copies of her book to people she sold her hair products to, it so happened that her customers were white. The book was hardly circulated among the black people in her community.

Some of the people who bought it were friends of Wilson or those who were sympathetic to her plight. The letters that appear in the appendix of *Our Nig* are long winding histories of Wilson's life and the things she went through. These letters raise Wilson up on a platform and praise her character and her love for her son. They plead with readers to buy her book; though they ask not because they felt the book had an important message the entire nation needed to read, but for charity. One such letter, written by a good friend of Wilson named "Margaretta Thorn" states: "I hope those who call themselves friends of our dark-skinned brethren, will lend a helping hand, and assist our sister...in buying a book; the expense is trifling and the reward of doing good is great" (Wilson 140).

All of the letter writers state that they are friends of Wilson (referring to her through a nickname, 'Alfrado'). They all say that although their color of skin differs, they are proud to be friends with Wilson. It is strange that the writers of these letters consider themselves friends of Wilson and black people alike, but they have nothing to say on the message of *Our Nig*; and although Wilson initially wrote the book to support herself and her son, she must have wanted to communicate something to the public, or she wouldn't have used such strong images in the book.

Our Nig practically disappeared from the public eye soon after it was printed. It went unnoticed until the early 1980's. It was re-discovered and published by Henry Louis Gates Jr., The W.E.B. DuBois professor at Harvard University. Gates is quoted as saying: "Wilson's novel showed us that slavery and racism existed in New England, just a short journey from Boston and Concord, those hotbeds of Abolition and freethinking that have long been considered the foundation of the American literary tradition" (Gates *xi*).

One of the things that are most apparent in *Our Nig* is the hypocrisy of the "free North". Since *Our Nig* is considered an autobiographical novel, it is the only source for information on Wilson's childhood. From this can be seen the ways she expresses her anger and disappointment with society. Although the character Frado is born a free person, she is basically a slave in the Belmont house.

Mag, Frado's mother is ostracized from the community because of her marriage to Frado's father, Jim, a free and prosperous black man. He is elated that he has married a white woman. He describes his situation as obtaining a treasure: "She'd be as much a prize to me as she'd fall short of coming up to the mark with white folks" (Wilson 11), and again in the next chapter: "Jim, proud of his treasure,-a white wife,-tried hard to fulfill his promises" (Wilson 14).

It is ironic that Mag marries him for his money, but exiles herself from the community in the process. Wilson could be illustrating that people may have free will, but if it does not go along with the mandates of society, that is to stay within one's financial and racial circle, then that person will be "appropriately"

punished like Frado's mother. She says: "Upon the impropriety of such unions ... She has sundered another bond which held her to her fellows. She has descended another step down the ladder of infamy" (Wilson 13).

Jim dies soon after and leaves Mag to herself and her children. Mag, feeling the hatred of the town drops Frado at the Belmont farm and abandons her there. Frado goes from the hands of a white woman lamenting her situation and her choices, into the household of racist abolitionists.

Mrs. Belmont is a woman who clearly believes in slavery and blacks living below the whites, despite her family living in a community full of self-claimed abolitionists. While in the Belmont household, Frado is beaten regularly, given the family's scraps for her meals, and put to work doing all the household chores and any work outside that Mrs. Belmont determined she should do.

Since it is shown that Mrs. Belmont has a strong say over what goes on in the household, and she seemingly has complete control over Frado's life, one would think that Mrs. Belmont ruled the home. However, this false strength that Wilson gives the Belmont women is deceiving. It is Mr. Belmont who has the final say in everything. It is he who says that Frado must go to school, and he who orders his wife, despite her tears, not to beat Frado. However, since he is absent from the house on many occasions, these orders have almost no merit to them. Mrs. Belmont may obey him when he is in the house; though once he is gone, she takes over and does what she likes. So although Mr. Belmont can be seen as an ally to Frado, he is not. If he is not present to see his family's behavior, then it doesn't exist to him. In the end, he assists Frado no more than Mrs. Belmont.

The positions that Wilson puts men and woman in are curious. The women of the house are very strong spirited. John Belmont, or Jack, the younger son said: "How am I to help it? Women rule the earth, and all in it" (Wilson 44). At first glance, men in the book are very passive; they sit back and let women run things. However, as stated above in relation to Mr. Belmont, the men do get the final say in everything. This odd imbalance of power between men and women shows imbalance in the household and in society. Frado finds herself at the mercy of the Belmont men and women, and is often torn between the demands of the family members. James tells her to be a good girl; though Frado insists that she will be beaten no matter what she does (Wilson 50-51).

Ironically enough, it is mostly white men who are the kindest to Frado. Kind white females are hard to come by in the book. The only exceptions are the old Aunt Abbey, who shielded Frado from Mrs. Belmont when she could, and Mrs. Moore, who takes in Frado after she ends her time with the Belmonts. Wilson is, for the most part, harsh on women throughout the book. Mrs. Belmont is first described as "Self-willed, haughty, undisciplined, arbitrary and severe" (Wilson 25), while the younger daughter, Mary is said to speak "In a tone which indicated self-importance of the speaker. She was indeed the idol of her mother, and more nearly resembled her in disposition" (Wilson 25). Wilson writes more in favor of men, describing them as kind and humane. They are men who "Would not grudge hospitality to the poorest wanderer, nor fail to sympathize with any sufferer" (Wilson 24). In writing this, Wilson is, in a way, promoting an odd view of feminism. She puts women in places of power, while the men act passively to them. This would seem as though *Our Nig* is a novel that is favorable towards women, but it must be kept in mind that the book is Wilson's opinions and account of her life. She is saying that a world ruled by women is essentially the same as

a world ruled by men (Gates). Only the gender has been reversed. Wilson shows us, rather than tells, which is something very rare for her time (Gates).

The favorable opinions that Wilson bestows upon men in *Our Nig* almost always refer to white men. Although the character of Jim can be seen as an exception to this, but it must be kept in mind that Jim was the ultimate reason for the downfall of Mag. Yes, she was already poor and malnourished when she married him, but it was, in fact, their marriage which exiled her from the white community. All other black men in the book, Seth and Samuel, for example are men that contribute to the worsening of Frado's life. Seth convinces Mag to abandon Frado to the Bellmonts, while Samuel marries her, impregnates her, and takes long leaves of absences. He eventually dies, leaving Frado and her child with no money or means for survival. Furthermore, Jim expresses his marriage to Mag as his treasure, which would make one question his motives. Whether he truly loves Mag, or wants her as something to flaunt to the blacks in his community.

It is the white men like Jack, James, and even Mr. Bellmont who are kind to Frado. When they were children, Jack and Frado sometimes played together, and he shielded her from Mary, the youngest daughter. Frado takes refuge in James's room when he is ill and listens to him read from different books and the Bible. This difference in color is something that the reader of *Our Nig* comes across again and again.

The use of color as a way of describing people and situations is also prominent in *Our Nig*; more specifically the colors black and white. When Jim is trying to convince Mag to marry him, he uses both colors to differentiate between bad and good. "It's black outside ... but I's got a white heart inside. Which you rather have, a black heart in a white skin, or a white heart in a black one?" (Wilson 12). In this passage Wilson is equating black with bad and white with good. Conversely, a later description of Mrs. Bellmont shows the opposite person to Jim's white inside and black outside. "A few sparks from the mother's black eyes were the only reply" (Wilson 68). Mrs. Bellmont here is shown to have a black, evil inside which is masked by her white outside. If this quotation is put juxtapose to Jim's statement, it can be deducted that white is meant to be pure and good. Jim asks Mag which combination she would rather have, obviously assuming that a white heart is better than a black one. A black hearted person is evil. This view of Mrs. Bellmont is later reinforced when Mag refers to the woman as a "she-devil" (Wilson 17). Wilson goes even further to suppose that a mix of the two colors is worse.

When Seth, Jim's friend, and Mag are contemplating where to leave Frado, they argue as to the character of the Bellmonts: "Bellmonts!" shouted Mag. "His wife is a right she-devil!" (Wilson 17). Seth replies with a scathing comment: "Hadn't they better be all together?" interrupted Seth, reminding her of a like epithet used in reference to her little ones" (Wilson 17-18). Interestingly, Mag makes no attempt to defend Frado. Instead, she moves on in the conversation, completely ignoring Seth likening her child to a devil. Through her silence, Mag agrees with Seth in his appraisal of Frado.

The idea of black being bad comes up again when Frado is being educated on the Bible. In a conversation on God with James, the elder Bellmont son, Frado says: "I don't like him...Because he made her white and me black. Why didn't he make us *both* white?" (Wilson 51). Wilson writes this childish view of religion to ultimately highlight the hypocrisy in the way Christianity is interpreted by whites; showing that white is good and black is bad. It is once again mentioned in the descriptions of Frado's up-bringing.

During the summers, Frado is given a bonnet to shield her from the sun; this causes her skin to lighten a bit. It is noted that the lack of sun on her skin likens its tone to Mary's skin. Mrs. Belmont's reaction to this once again showcases the values of white and black: "Mrs. Belmont was determined the sun should have full power to darken the shade which nature had first bestowed upon her as best befitting" (Wilson 39). Mrs. Belmont seeks to darken Frado's skin and make her more like a black person. As long as Frado's skin is dark, then the difference between her and white people will be noticeable.

The term *nigger* is used liberally by the Belmont women and they always use the word to refer to Frado, never calling her by her first name. Eventually *nigger* is shortened to *nig*, and the name sticks. Even Jack calls her by this name, which is the only incident in the book of a specific white man saying or doing something unkind to her. One thing that is initially taken for granted, but a point that is very important, is that Wilson was a literate, educated black woman. She shows her education not only through the words she uses in the book, but also in the quotations that precede every chapter. She quotes well known authors and scholars such as Percy Bysshe Shelly and Eliza Cook (Wilson 14, 24). She even has knowledge of the historical figure King Solomon. In *Our Nig*, Frado only receives a small amount of education when she was a child and little after that, but Wilson must have had an extensive amount of education, or read an extensive amount.

Considering the time in which she wrote *Our Nig*, it is a fascinating fact. The lives of free blacks at that time were hard to say the least. Many of them resorted to working in the service industries including jobs such as tailors, seamstresses, and shoe-shiners. For Harriet Wilson, a black woman, it is a feat that she was able to accomplish the completion, and minor sales even, of a book.

The discovery of *Our Nig* redefined literary history. Before Wilson's book was unearthed, the latest record of a novel by a black African-American woman was in 1892; *Iola LeRoy* by Francis Ellen Walker Harper. Harper was a very prolific and well-known author during her time (Gates). Discovering *Our Nig* pushes back the records of black women writers by thirty years and re-defines the history of the novel (Gates). At the time *Our Nig* was printed, the novel was coming into its own and being accepted in the professional literary circles; it was no longer simple entertainment for the low and middle-class masses. Although largely unrecognized during her time, the significance of printing date of *Our Nig* is significant to the literary annals today.

That aside, the next point brings attention to the most significant statement that *Our Nig* makes. The book unmask a part of American history which most people never learn about. New England, during the mid-nineteenth century, was a place that many today perceive as where the abolitionist movement began. How interesting it is then, that Harriet Wilson printed *Our Nig*, which clearly defamed these claims. As stated above, the reception of *Our Nig* was not great at all. Slavery, as in the sense of having a white master and Africans sold like cattle, did not officially exist in New England. This could be the cause of white indifference to the black population of New England, more specifically New Hampshire and Boston (Cunningham 97).

For Wilson to share her story through Frado, she is essentially saying that the white abolitionists in the North, preaching about a world without slavery, still have blacks doing work for them and treating them as if they were slaves. In fact, Frado's life in the Belmont house is no different than the life of a slave in the South.

She is maltreated everyday. Since it is widely acknowledged that *Our Nig* is a fictionalized account of Wilson's early and middle years, one can believe that the same or similar experiences happened to her. A letter from one of her friends, Margaretta Thorn, says: "She was indeed a slave, in every sense of the word" (Wilson 139). If the experiences detailed in *Our Nig* are taken to be fact, then the printing of the book would be quite detrimental to the abolitionist movement.

The title, *Our Nig*, could even be seen as a deterring factor to the books failing popularity. The title is ironic in a way, perhaps even sarcastic. It is once again criticizing the white abolitionists. The mere word nig would offend people, more black than white. This can also be a reason why her book did not do very well among the black audience of New England. Titling the book *Our Nig* is a slap in the face to both blacks and whites. She is calling out the blacks for letting themselves be used as such, and the whites for pretending to be all good. The Northern whites, in Wilson's eyes, are no different from the Southern whites. They would all have her as a slave. One writer even changed the title to *Our Mag* perhaps for the original 'offensive' wording. This change led to rumors that the book was a hoax, written by a white woman (Wilson v).

Wilson is setting herself apart from the pack by writing this book. She, unlike her first husband, Thomas, did not fall in line with the abolitionists. There were blacks like Thomas who made a lucrative living from the abolitionist movement. Although many of the blacks that lectured along with the white abolitionists were, in fact, former slaves, there were also blacks that made up stories of their lives as slaves. They never actually had such experiences. Wilson echoes her late husband's lies and in *Our Nig* in reference to Frado's husband, Samuel: "The disclosure that he had never seen the South, and that his illiterate harangues were humbugs for hungry abolitionists" (Wilson 128).

Wilson is years before her time as she sets herself apart from the masses yet again in her portrayal of the "tragic mulatto" (Pilgrim). The tragic mulatto is a literary character, in most cases a woman, who is half white and half black. She is most often the product of a Southern plantation owner and his black slave. The tragic mulatto lives her life thinking she is white, then discovers her "blackness", and eventually is abandoned by her peers, dies a tragic death, and is soon forgotten by everyone who knew her (Pilgrim). The character of Frado in *Our Nig* is far different than this. Although she fits the description for the heroine of a sentimental novel, she in no way fits into the mold of the tragic mulatto.

Frado is a bright, strong headed child, so much so that Seth believes that she can withstand the Bellmonts: "She's a hard one...I'd risk her with the Bellmont's" (Wilson 19). Frado is also witty with a sharp tongue. She makes friends easily with the people who are willing. Frado is very aware of her situation and those who would keep her there. Other characteristics of the tragic mulatto include the character being sexually promiscuous, and if a woman, having children out of wedlock (Pilgrim). Frado does not traipse the country finding different partners to be with, nor does she have children out of wedlock. The tragic mulatto often despises both blacks and whites. Blacks, because she is ashamed of them and does not want to be associated with them; whites because she despises they way they treat blacks, but she also is desperate to be accepted by them (Pilgrim). The only instance of this in *Our Nig* is when Frado and Aunt Abbey are having conversations about God and the Bible. In this way, Wilson is breaking the mold of the tragic mulatto. Although Frado expresses her disappointment with God for making her black, she lives on, past the end of

the book.

It is quite fortunate that *Our Nig* was discovered by Gates. Otherwise the literary world would not have known about such an important author. Harriet Wilson is important for the obvious reason that she became the first African-American woman to print a novel in the history of American black fiction, but also because of the issues she raised in *Our Nig*. She saw the hypocrisy of the abolitionist movement, so she wrote her opinions on that. She understood women's position in her society and she challenged that by giving men and women unconventional places in her novel. She also knew she was white and black, but them again, neither. She took the opportunity to break the mold previous works had set for the mulatto, and presented a character that was not so tragic. All of these subjects add up to create a novel that spoke of truths and issues mid-nineteenth century society was not ready, or willing, to acknowledge.

If only Harriet Wilson did not have to depend on the kindness of others; if only she had the means to support herself and her son longer than she did. If Wilson had a home of her own, no financial problems and plenty of leisure time, one can only begin to imagine what other things she could have produced.

Although she managed to write only *Our Nig*, Harriet E. Wilson has no doubt contributed greatly to the cannon of American black writing.

Notes:

1. "Nig" is a shortened term for the overtly offensive racial slur used against African Americans and people of black or African decent in America (the "n-word").

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