Our Nig—Harriet Wilson's Response to Uncle Tom's Cabin

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Harriet Wilson wrote *Our Nig, or Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* in 1859. Unlike *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, however, which Harriet Beecher Stowe serialized in the early 1850s, it had no effect on the Civil War. In fact, it had little effect on anything; somehow lost, it was not discovered until 1982 by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., who in his introduction to the 1983 Vintage edition of the novel says that scholarly publications of the time ignored the book, as did the noted historians, bibliophiles, bibliographers and literary historians. Even the European publishers of other black writers of the time, such as William Wells Brown and Martin R. Delany, did not mention Wilson's effort. Gates and one other reviewer speculate that the reason *Our Nig* "achieved instant oblivion" was that it embarrassed the Northern abolitionists more interested in Southern narratives and didn't want to "rock the (national) boat" by suggesting that things weren't much different in the North.

In his introduction, Gates compares *Our Nig* to the typical woman's sentimental novel as outlined by Nina Baym in her guide to fiction by and about women from 1820 to 1870. He shows how it both follows and departs from this set structure, or "overplot." He says that this strategy might also be read as a complex response to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, adding that Caroline E. Rush (a white writer) in her work, *North and South, Slavery and Its Contrasts* (1852), tried to get black women to stop crying for Uncle Tom and "start crying for pitiful destitute children--'of the same color as yourself.'" Rush thought the blacks of Philadelphia were incapable of "elevation," slave or free, and Gates says that Harriet Wilson addressed this
task in Our Nig, where the great evil is poverty, not just slavery. Gates claims that Wilson departed fundamentally from the plot structures of white women's novels in the 19th century as outlined by Baym in order to make that point.

My concern in this paper is also Our Nig as it relates to Uncle Tom's Cabin, but not as a deviation from the sentimental novel. Rather, I think Harriet Wilson addressed Mrs. Stowe's novel quite directly, for Uncle Tom was a huge success and, if people saw the two novels together, they would not only know the total picture in America, but it might assure Ms. Wilson's own economic security, something she addresses through her protagonist at the end of Our Nig. Several elements in the two novels stand out by comparison, and in juxtaposing them I hope to show that Wilson, as the first black woman's novelist in America, may have written, not only a better novel than Uncle Tom's Cabin, but the first existential novel, foreshadowing such notable figures as Richard Wright, whose stories and novels in the 1930s and 40s, especially Native Son, are existential in that they portray anxious and alienated individuals who defy absurd and oppressive systems without reasonable hope of success.

To accomplish this I will contrast the two protagonists, showing how Wilson parallels Frado, our Nig, with Stowe's Uncle Tom. The structures of the two novels also beg comparison, not just as sentimental novels, but as they are built around the makeup and breakup of the family, for Wilson turns the family upside down, in contrast to its central unifying position in Uncle Tom's Cabin. Within these structures, I also want to examine some secondary characters, which Wilson seems to develop as though in
tandem with those in Stowe's novel, though there are often telling differences. Then, the place of religion (the Bible, liturgy, Christ) as related to culture is highly significant to both Harriet Stowe, a minister's wife, and Harriet Wilson, who acknowledges the importance of religion in Frado, yet sees it quite the opposite of Mrs. Stowe in the total picture of American culture. Finally, there is the existential theme of alienation and despair, something Mrs. Stowe seems to be aware of, but which Harriet Wilson develops extensively. In this regard, the novels' endings both summarize their author's views about blacks in America, but Wilson is especially insightful in pitting her protagonist against the apocalyptic finale in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Uncle Tom, then, is first of all a slave in Kentucky sold to various masters during the course of Ms. Stowe's novel. He is a strong but docile character, so devoted to his Bible that in his humble, obedient, manner he comes to resemble Christ himself. His first owner, Mr. Shelby, in selling Tom to Mr. Haley to pay his debts, says Tom is "a good, steady, sensible, pious fellow" who "got religion at a camp-meeting" (2), and because of this his owner George Shelby trusts him implicitly. Thoughout the novel Tom remains the same docile servant, under Shelby, Haley, who buys Tom when Shelby goes broke, and his third owner, the lovable Augustine St. Clare. His only resistance is to Simon Legree, when he orders Tom to beat another slave. Indeed, it seems to be Stowe's point that the system of slavery is wrong, for it does not prevent a good owner, like Tom's Mr. Shelby, from having to sell his slaves, Tom eventually ending up as the property of a monster, Legree, who literally beats him to death.
By contrast, Harriet Wilson's Frado, though black, is a woman, in the North (Boston), and free. But she is every bit a slave as Tom. The daughter of a white woman whose black husband dies, Frado is a mulatto, left by her mother Mag to be raised by a white family, the Bellmonts, since she cannot afford to raise her herself. Though a child, Frado is much like the childlike Uncle Tom. She is a peasanat individual accepted immediately by her teacher, and gradually by three of the Bellmont children--Jack, James, and Jane. They show her great affection, and like Tom she responds gratefully. Through Aunt Abby, Frado goes to church, reads the Bible, gradually emerging as an Uncle Tom-like obedient and pious personality.

In the process the girl does the bidding of her "master," for Mrs. B, as she is called, might as well be Simon Legree. She is thoroughly racist, claiming she "don't mind the nigger in the child" if she could "make her do my work" (26). From the beginning Frado does that work, for which she is often unjustly punished. Mary, the daughter and Frado's schoolmate, becomes jealous of Frado, and lies to further inflame her mother's prejudice, whereupon both mother and daughter begin

... beating her inhumanly; then propping her mouth open with a piece of wood, shut her up in a dark room, without any supper (26-7).

So Frado, like Tom, is really a slave, and she is in the end utterly exhausted from the physical and psychological abuse. There is a difference, however, in Frado's response. Tom might object to certain immoral commands, but Frado has a "willful, determined nature" (2) which surfaces gradually and finally separates her from Tom, and the novel Our Nig from Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin.
The two novels also bear structural comparison. Uncle Tom's Cabin revolves around the breakup and reunion of the Christian family. In an opening chapter entitled "The Husband," George Harris, a highly-intelligent slave who invented a machine to lessen physical labor, is treated as "a thing" (13), a piece of property, and beaten as if he were inhuman. He decides to fly to the North, thus leaving his family. Eliza, in "The Mother," discovering that the slave owner Haley wants to take her infant son Harry, also flees, jumping across the icy Ohio River in a famous, often dramatized, episode. Ultimately, the whole family is united in Canada. Emily (Mrs. Shelby), who initially supports slavery as a Christian woman, completely changes her mind on the subject, saying the practice is "against common sense" (35) because it separates families, It is the breakup, as well as the eventual reunion, of those families that, for Harriet Beecher Stowe, drives the plot forward.

In addition to George and Eliza, Tom himself is separated from Aunt Chloe; in the end young George Shelby, the son of Tom and Eliza's original owner, tries to buy back Tom, but it is too late; he arrives just as Tom is dying. There are reunions, as we shall see, including that of a man named Phineas, who gives up his slaves to marry. But for people like Uncle Tom, Stowe's only answer, at least as long as slavery exists, is to unite them all in heaven where there is no color barrier. Uncle Tom's cabin may be a symbol of that cabin in the sky, the "New Jerusalem" (29), the 144,000 saved from the Book of Revelation, where all Christians become once again one big happy family.
Our Nig, a considerably shorter novel than Uncle Tom, is structured around a single family, the Bellmonts, which Wilson, ironically, undercuts. The cause for division in both cases is economic as well as racial, but with different emphases. Frado's mother Mag gives her over to the Bellmonts, a northern Christian family, because she's too poor to keep Frado after her husband's death—a motive close to Shelby's, who is going broke and sells Tom. The Bellmonts split over Frado's blackness, just as members of the St. Clare family in Stowe's novel argue about slavery itself—Alfred, a brother from the North, and Marie, Augustine's wife, defending the institution, while Augustine, the Southern slave owner, points out inherent injustices. This kind of debate gives Stowe a chance to discuss the complexity of the issue of slavery in America. In Our Nig the Bellmonts live out these racial attitudes toward Frado. Mrs. B and daughter Mary treat the girl like a slave—beat her, humiliate her, alienate her. Jack, James, and Jane (an invalid) support and protect her. Mr. Bellmont is in the middle, concerned but passive, though he does insist on Frado's early education. While is interesting is that Wilson in Our Nig transposes the viewpoints expressed by the St. Clares into a single family, the Bellmonts, so that the family itself becomes divided and divisive, not just a saving entity, and therefore the entity to be saved, as in Uncle Tom.

Helpful as some of the Bellmonts are, as a group they are simply unable to save Frado while under Mrs. Bellmont's leadership. James dies, Jane marries for love—not money as her mother wanted—and Jack becomes ill, so he cannot take Frado when he leaves. By the time Frado is eighteen, and ready to
leave, totally worn out from her work. After friends get her on feet, she finally marries, thus creating a family of her own, but her husband dies at sea, leaving her (as was the case with her own mother) unable to support their child, which she then gives up. So the novel is cyclic, not linear, and there is no Canada to unite family members, or a heaven where all members might rendezvous, as in Stowe's novel. The family as family is split, not only because of death and economic concerns, as in Uncle Tom, but because of an inherent racism, which permeates the whole country, even the "free" North.

What is also significant is the connection between the characters in the two novels. Tom and Fraedo, of course, are oppressed slaves, even though Nig is supposedly free. Tom has his Simon Legree, Fraedo her Mrs. Bellmont, though she is overtly a Christian lady. But the similarity between characters continues. Aunt Chloe as a thorough Christian, is a delightful supporting character. Around her life with Tom and in the context of cooking meals Stowe builds a picture of Christian community, including worship, mixing with friends, and Biblical thinking. She crosses barriers of class and color, saying to young George Shelby, "you oughtenter feel 'bove nobody, on 'count yer privileges" (25). In Our Nig, Aunt Abby functions much like Chloe. An outsider, she takes Nig to church, talks to her about Christ, and tells her about heaven. Nig becomes a faithful and devout Christian under Abby's guardianship. What is different is that Fraedo, not Abby, begins to question the whole system, asking Abby, for instance, "... is there a heaven for the black?" (84). So Wilson's heroine begins to
doubt the very basis on which Stowe's Christian spokesperson, Aunt Chloe, operates so naturally in *Uncle Tom*.

Within the families in the two books, characters follow strikingly similar patterns, though Wilson usually adds some kind of twist. In *Uncle Tom* Stowe balances characters, like the angelic "Saxon," Little Eva, with a mischievous, dark "Afric" (251) named Topsy. Saved from drowning by Uncle Tom, Eva comes to idolize Tom, enabling Stowe to personally dramatize the Christian notion of human equality taught by Aunt Chloe. Dying young, Eva begs her father, Augustine, to give Tom "his freedom" (283)—something he fails to do before his own death. In *Our Nig*, James Bellmont emerges as a kind of angel because he defends and protects Nig, in this way countering his mother's class consciousness and brutality, much as Eva is a foil for the brutal Legree. James becomes a virtual Christ figure for Nig; ironically, he saves her from "drowning" in a racist household. Like Eva, he dies, and like Eva's father, he dies before completing the task of separating Nig from Mrs. B—so Nig's savior is gone, much as is Eva's in her father's death, for she saw Augustine as the one who could save Tom, that is, give him his freedom. Though James parallels Eva, he shows none of the sentimental qualities of Stowe's little angel, whose touching death helped to popularize the novel.

Mary is Wilson's counterpart to Stowe's Topsy—whom this author uses in a rather didactic way. A "wicked" (250) girl who tells lies because she has no education, she becomes a "good girl" (291) in response to Eva's goodness. In *Our Nig*, Mary, who is white, is evil even though she is Christian and educated.
She's jealous of Nig, a black who outshines her at school, and lies to get her punished. And Mary never changes. So Wilson, in contrasting these two girls, cleverly reverses the role of color as related to morality. It's interesting that Ophelia, Topsy's teacher, also changes. An overzealous Puritan, who uses the lash to discipline the girl, comes to realize her rules, even her catechizing, "didn't seem to apply" (252); in the end she sees it's example that counts. Wilson's Mr. B might be Ophelia's parallel, for he emerges as a likable soul, interested in Frado's education, and though he's ineffective in general, he gradually comes to express himself more sympathetically as Frado responds to the goodness of his own children; indeed he respects her right to express her feelings—something she eventually does in an emphatic manner. Wilson's characters, then, obviously parallel Stowe's, though they are more realistic, not portraits of goodness and evil, more human than they are types. And sometimes they perform significantly different roles.

Other minor characters are strikingly similar and yet different. St. Clare is a good slave owner—to balance Legree. He loves Tom, but dies before freeing his slaves. Jack, in Our Nig, like his brother James, takes to Frado. He also becomes ill, however, before he can take Frado away. Marie, St. Clare's wife, in contrast to him, is a sickly, person—selfish and arrogant, who thinks God destined slaves to satisfy an inherent white superiority. Eventually, she sells Tom in spite of her dead husband's wishes. Jenny, Jack's wife in Our Nig, is in contrast to Marie an admirable person whose role is to take Jack away, though Mrs. B tries to destroy
her with gossip and false rumors about her son Jack. Less culpable than Marie (in this case, the arrogance and racism is supplied by Mrs. Bellmont), she still has to leave Frado to suffer. Then there are characters who undercut the major evil slave owners. In Uncle Tom, Cassy, Legree's black mistress, uses a "curl of fair hair" (380) to break his power and, in effect, do him in. Jane, the other Bellmont sister in Our Nig, marries, not for money, as her mother wants, but for love. Cassy is too late to help Uncle Tom, and Jane leaves Frado with her mother, but both unleash significant blows to the thinking of the major slave drivers in the two novels.

The role of Christianity is also basic to both Uncle Tom and Our Nig, particularly as it relates to suppression of blacks, and Stowe's characters often philosophize on the matter. Alfred St. Clare, Augustine's brother, is a northern aristocrat who claims that, for the capitalist as for the slaveowner, "enslavement of the masses" (235) is natural, for we are not born free or equal. Marie, Augustine's wife, adds psychological and theological dimensions to that position, saying God determined blacks to serve "our convience and our interest" (187). Augustine, the Southern aristocrat, counters both, arguing that economic and religious systems manipulate people for their own purposes. He says his daughter Eva is the "only true democrat" (182), for she mixes with the slaves as equals, telling Henrique (Alfred's son, who mirrors his father's class consciousness) that one should "love your servants" (277). Augustine does not have Eva's faith, however, and justifies his keeping slaves on the basis of their affection and trust (239-40),
while maintaining the class structure. Not excusing this "monstrous system of injustice" (320) in the South, he contends slavery is also an "unchristian prejudice of the north" (322); religion, he says, should be "something above" rather than "beneath" (188) oneself. For him, "state education" (276) is the best overall alternative.

Our Nig lacks the intellectual debates found in Stowe, but she still parallels this religious-philosophical thinking in the lives of her characters. Mrs. Bellmont, like Alfred, is a capitalist who makes Nig do all her work her inferior. And, like Marie, she uses Nig for her own interests and convenience—but with a slight difference. Mrs. B thinks that a "pious nigger" (88) is dangerous; threatened by Frado's religious fervor, she actually beats her after church. Nig reminds us of Tom, for she takes part in the singing and Bible reading along with Aunt Abby. Indeed, she opens herself to faith and a sense of unworthiness and doubt are reminiscent of Tom's humble spirit. At one time she virtually becomes "the publican" (90) of the Gospels. But Nig never feels, as do Aunt Chloe and Eva, that blacks and whites are on the same level, much less that they will inhabit the same heaven. Her idea of Christ, of course, is best reflected in James, whom she truly loves and sees as her spiritual and physical savior, just as Eva becomes Tom's living ethic.

If Harriet Wilson embodies Alfred's and Marie's oppressive views in Mrs. Bellmont, it's also true that Mrs. B incorporates Augustine's notion that religious and economic systems oppress blacks. At the same time, Augustine's excuse for keeping slaves
finds expression in James, Jack, and Jane, who seem to love and trust Nig, but all within the class system. And also like Augustine they (and this includes Mr. B) want Nig to get an education—something she does initially and maintains to the end with her reading and study, finally trying to make her living as a writer. But she does this on her own, asking only the sympathy of God and the "gentle reader" (139), "human agencies" providing "no path" (124) to success. So what the St. Clares intellectualize regarding philosophy and religion in Stowe, Wilson represents in her different personalities, though often with significant changes.

After being deserted by family members, Frado, upon reaching her majority, decides "to fly" (108) the system, though physically and mentally exhausted. This brings to the fore her existential rebellion—one which might include all the modern terms, such as "anxious, alienated individual, or "irrational, absurd system," or "individual flight." In Uncle Tom George Harris will not be treated as a thing, so in his anxious and defiant spirit he runs from slavery. Meeting the Wilson family, he blurts out his notion of the absurdity of the law and Scriptures when human beings are dehumanized. Eliza also flees, however unbelievable her journey across the ice. Early in Our Nig, Frado in an act of individual defiance, runs away and hides from Mrs. Bellmont, but the family brings her back. Later, Mrs. B actually confronts Nig in an absurd way, insisting the girl lick her plate, whereupon Frado gives it to the dog, and Jack breaks out in laughter. Then, at a critical point late in the novel, Mrs. B orders Frado, who is now eighteen, to carry some wood, but Frado reacts, saying
she will leave if forced to do that. Mrs. B relents, picking up the wood herself, whereupon Frado gains the "power to ward off all assaults" (105). In this way she reflects the willful rebellious actions of George and Eliza, though Nig does it more directly than they. Her final flight, the subject of the novel's ending, is also basically different.

Early in *Uncle Tom*, George acts because he has been objectivized, Eliza because her family is being separated, and even Senator and Mrs. Byrd, who help her along the way, react to the importance of preserving a mother's relationship to her child. Wilson's protagonist feels alone, alienated, caught in an abusive situation—much like Stowe's George Harris. But George and Eliza eventually escape their situation and are reunited, out of the South, indeed, the country. By contrast, Frado has nowhere to go—no one to "take her" or "love her" (108). After she leaves Mrs. Bellmont, who refuses to take her back, she receives help from a friend, Mrs. Moore, and then Aunt Abby, when her health prevents her from living on her own. Still, she tries to survive, her existential will superceding her rationality, but there is no total freedom, for poverty keeps her from ultimate independence. In existential terms, she merely "exists." Richard Wright in *Native Son* (1940) finds that, when all else fails, Bigger stills exists, claiming, "I begin to feel what I wanted, what I am" (391). Frado certainly anticipates this kind of action at the end of Wilson's 1859 novel—a prototype of the the modern existential hero.

The ending of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is apocalyptic; families originally broken are reunited. George and Eliza are together.
Phineas, who helped them escape, is together with his wife, having sold his slaves and become a Quaker. Cassy, Simon Legree's mistress, becomes Christian, discovering at the same time she is the sister of Eliza. Back home in Kentucky, Aunt Chloe prepares a "Eucharistic" dinner for the freed slaves of young George Shelby. If Tom dies, the implication is that those not united in this life will be hereafter. It is a thoroughly Christian answer to the problem of slavery. Not so with Our Nig. For all her faith, Nig is "alone in the world" (117) at the end. Former friends are going or gone. Her immediate family is dissipated—her husband dead at sea, and her child given to others to raise. If Tom is liberated by death, Nig is simply a free writer in the North, shunned by "professional abolitionists" (129) and desperate for money.

Wilson's book is quasi-autobiographical, and in the end the reader is encouraged to buy it so Nig (indeed Wilson) can survive as a writer. Uncle Tom, of course, outsold every other book in 19th Century America, excluding the Bible. By contrast, Our Nig didn't sell, and Wilson disappeared from history. But history is now showing it to be more realistic, artistically sound, and prophetic than Uncle Tom. Nig, like Tom, is a Christlike human being, lovable and communal, though also misunderstood, alienated, and abused. Like him, she is surrounded by characters, paralleling Stowe's, who define her separate existence, though there are always twists. Nig is humble and religious like Tom, but religion does not guarantee her salvation. Ultimately, she is left alone, and if the book is apocalyptic, it is not because there are grand reunions wrought
with Biblical imagery, but because Wilson envisions the blacks as alienated all over America—a picture that still applies, long after the Emancipation Proclamation. If Nig is a hero, she is an existential one—ansious, alone, but defiant and ever herself, living, as Camus would say, "within the limits of the now." Strange that it took three quarters of a century for Wilson's voice to come clear; ironically, it makes Our Nig as apocalyptic—future orientated, though in a different (this-worldly) sense—as the popular Uncle Tom's Cabin.