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**Whiteness, The Real Intermediary Agent: Harriet E. Wilson's Medium
for Amalgamation in *Our Nig; or, Sketches in the Life of a Free Black*
Hannah Miller**

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Over one hundred years after the abolishment of slavery, its remnants still permeate our mental faculties. Freedom, in practice, does not always result in liberty. Race studies and race theories are gradually altering preconceived notions about literary texts that may have been glossed over in the past. This is why Harriet E. Wilson's semi-autobiographical work of fiction, *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (1859) has been experiencing a wave of attention since its rediscovery by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in 1982. Familiar with W.E.B. DuBois's idea of "double-consciousness," the belief that one is always bound to see one's self through the eyes of others—both an American and a Negro—conscious of one's "two-ness," I was able to inherently begin unravelling the way that Wilson deconstructs her own work (3).¹ I intend to present a reading of Wilson's text that demonstrates when and how she manipulates the voice of her text, only permitting the protagonist, Frado, to speak through her intermediary agent—or medium²—the white family that she works for, the Bellmonts. The specific ideas that I will refer to are as follows: medium, ghosting, haunting, and religion. Using Foucault and Orlando Patterson, I demonstrate how whiteness leads to a state of embodiment, creating personhood for Frado. Following the discussion of Foucault and Patterson are brief discussions of the genre of autobiography and of Wilson's own biography, which both aid in conceptualizing whiteness as it applies to Wilson's text. The remainder of the essay will be broken up into three sections: The Text as Medium; Pathway to Personhood; and Christianity in Crisis. My discussion of The Text as Medium refers specifically to the front matter of Wilson's work, calling attention to how the title page and preface create a medium for Wilson to own her text despite its fictional makeup. In the Pathway to Personhood

section, I delve into how Frado becomes embodied through the Bellmonts. This leaves *Christianity in Crisis* to demonstrate how Frado is ghosted completely out of heaven.

My argument relies heavily on Wilson demonstrating a Foucauldian notion of power. A Foucauldian notion of power does not operate top-down, but instead suggests that power is universal. To demonstrate this, Foucault introduces societal power in two forms: sovereign power and biopower. Sovereign power is just as the definition of the word sovereign suggests: it is an autonomous, supreme power, one that has “a right of life and death” (Foucault 240). Biopower, on the other hand, is a Foucauldian conception that applies to “the power of regularization” (247). An imbalance between the two places racism at the foci. Foucault defines racism as “a way of introducing a break into the domain of life that is under power’s control: the break between what must live and what must die” (254). What must die is the lesser race, making way for a heartier, cleansed race (Foucault 255). This is why and how race is an acting precursor for acceptable killing in a normalizing society to Foucault (256). Foucault’s discussion of “the normalizing society” is a byproduct of juxtaposing the disciplined sovereign power with the regulatory biopower (253). Power to Foucault can no longer simply be understood as a negative brute force, but must now be understood as a positive and dynamic force in society. Yet, why Foucault and how does he relate to a work of semi-autobiographical fiction?

Wilson’s novel demonstrates the rift between the Foucauldian sovereign power and biopower in the work with the creation of a mixed race protagonist, Frado. It was easier to control “what must live and what must die” in a population unaccustomed to a new race: the mulatto. The sovereign power is incapable of exercising the biopower resulting in an upset in the normalized society. With no way to regulate those amalgamated persons, all previous socio-political conditions cannot be entertained. Recognizing the lack of a codified system for mixed raced persons, Wilson’s novel reveals her propensity to capitalize on the changing racial landscape of post-Antebellum America. She uses what is codified, otherwise understood as real—white and black—to create a sphere in which

she, and other uncategorized persons, experience a state of embodiment. Furthermore, Eve Allegra Raimon shows that mixed race persons were not even considered in the census until 1850: “Whereas 1840 census takers counted only groupings of whites, free persons of color, and slaves, the 1850 schedule posed detailed questions about individual slaves and for the first time, their ‘colour’” (1-2)³. Prior to this time, mulattos were literally ghosted out of American history—a factor that led Wilson to use ghosting as a tool to undermine abolitionist ideals throughout the North.

Wilson’s use of embodiment is understood through the Foucauldian power upset, but Frado’s actual physical presence, or personhood, is cemented through her alienation from the basic rights of humanity. Despite the fact that Frado is quite literally two, black and white, blackness prevails. The inability to “regulate” between her mixed race biology alienates her to such an extent that she becomes a specter of a human being only embodied through the medium of whiteness. In the novel the patriarchal family, the Bellmonts, serve as the intermediary agent—or medium—through which the mulatto Frado accesses personhood⁴. Orlando Patterson refers to such alienation as becoming a “social nonperson,” which given Frado’s perpetual state of limbo between white and black—mulatto—creates not only a social othering within the text but a physical othering that allows Frado to be embodied and disembodied, both physically and mentally, at times within the work.⁵ Patterson’s argument alone, however, does not address Frado as “real.” This is why a more Foucauldian notion of power is needed. Wilson uses her mixed raced biology to illustrate the rift between sovereign power and biopower, cleverly bouncing off of Patterson’s slave as a “social nonperson.” Neither Wilson nor her protagonist, Frado, are actually ghosts, yet her choice to ghost Frado out of the text in order to become “real” requires some measure of agency and power. The agency and power in Wilson’s case is whiteness.

Knowing that Frado is real, Wilson manipulates the work of fiction to also include elements of autobiography. Wilson frames her work in first-person narration, which feels autobiographical, but then shifts to third-person narration calling into question the validity of her semi-autobiographical work of fiction.⁶ W.E.B. Du-

Bois's idea of "double-consciousness," may also be applied to Wilson's text. When the novel is viewed through the lens of DuBois, it takes on the guise of "two" constantly slipping between the genre of autobiography and fiction.⁷ It is clear that Wilson is not Frado, given that the piece is fiction; however, these snippets of autobiography are most prevalent when Wilson has Frado embodied through the Bellmonts.

Wilson's biography further demonstrates how *Our Nig* grapples with racial tensions of the time. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and R.J. Ellis, in their collaborative "Introduction" to Random House's most recent publication of *Our Nig*, claim that Wilson details in her text the pitfalls of life as a free black in the North. What Gates and Ellis fail to do is attend to how Wilson is able to achieve such through Frado. The missing link is how Wilson permeates the pages of her text at very calculated moments, paying close attention to when and how she manipulates the voice of her text, only permitting Frado to speak through her medium, the Bellmonts. The Bellmonts, according to Gates and Ellis, correspond largely to the Milford family, the Haywards: "The details of the Hayward family and their history mirror in most respects those of the Bellmonts" (xliii). Wilson's time with the Haywards serves to either promote or denounce Wilson as an autobiographer because it is the span of time that Frado spends with the Bellmonts in the novel. Barbara A. White also proves that Wilson's life after the Haywards directly corresponds to the last two chapters of the novel: "There is considerable documentary evidence that the rest of Wilson's life followed literally the path she marks out for Frado in the last two chapters of *Our Nig*" (359). Although there is no way to explicitly prove that Wilson and Frado are mirror images of another given the fictional genre of the novel, the manner in which Wilson—and Frado—become both present and absent at times within the work promote the creation of a category that prior to Wilson's novel was largely glossed over—the mulatto.

The Text as Medium: Framing the Front Matter for Wilson

The original title page for the novel reads "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,'" which highlights Frado's status, as well as Wilson's status, as a disembodied presence (Wilson 1). By stating that "Our Nig" authored the piece of fiction, she completely ghosts herself, and Frado, out because of the unsigned nature of the novel. If she wanted to be considered a person, or to have Frado be considered as a person, Wilson either would have signed her piece "By Harriet E. Wilson" or "By Frado, the Mulatto." Yet, she chooses "BY 'OUR NIG,'" because Frado is embodied through the Bellmont's who collectively call her "our nig" (16). Wilson solidifies Frado's existence as a nonperson by italicizing the word "our"; she is not anyone's Nig, she is "our Nig." Frado's ability to only be embodied by those who disembody, the Bellmonts, is evident in the way that Wilson frames the piece by beginning with a backstory of Frado's white mother, Mag Smith. Wilson has to frame the narrative this way because, although Frado was left with the Bellmonts at a young age and likely does not know about her mother's past, Frado is, again, only embodied through those who are experienced as real—the whites. Their embodiment also serves as reasoning to why Frado's black father, Jim, and his death, must play second fiddle to her fallen white mother. The very marriage of Mag to Jim is embedded within the tale of Mag's demise:

He prevailed; they married. You can philosophize, gentle reader, upon the impropriety of such unions, and preach dozens of sermons on the evils of amalgamation. Want is a more powerful philosopher and preacher. Poor Mag. She has sundered another bond which held her to her fellows. She has descended another step down the ladder of infamy. (Wilson 9)

Again, the reader is prompted to grapple with understanding where Frado, where Wilson herself, is ghosted out of the text. In the phrase, "evils of amalgamation," amalgamation being an interracial marriage, the "two-ness" of what will be Frado becomes evident. Frado is embodied through her white mother, but disembodied through her black father. Thus, her "two-ness" helps her to act as both a presence and an absence. Furthermore, the idea that, "She

has sundered another bond which held her to her fellows,” illustrates that Mag, due to her whiteness, was able to “sunder,” literally sever another bond, which “held her to her fellows.” Her white fellows, specifically the Bellmonts, would later condition the environment, or act as the medium, through which Frado’s story may be told. According to Cynthia J. Davis, Frado is defined through the pain that is inflicted on her body: “And yet, notice that this unnamed mulatto does not speak for herself; it is another (white woman) who feels compelled to describe this black woman’s bodily pain” (392).⁸ Thus, it is not Mag who has to look to others to be embodied, for whiteness is figured as real in the novel, but Frado—and Wilson—because blackness is only embodied through whiteness.

Recognizing that her mulatto status places her in a category above other free blacks of the time, Wilson uses her preface to cement how her novel will serve as the medium to dictate autobiographical moments in her life that otherwise would have been completely forgotten:

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. 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. I do not pretend to divulge every transaction in my own life, which the unprejudiced would declare unfavorable in comparison with treatment of legal bondmen; I have purposely omitted what would most provoke shame in our good anti-slavery friends at home. (Wilson 3)

Wilson, as the preface suggests, like her autobiographical narrator, Frado, is “deserted” and “disabled” and wholly “forced” to construct a work of fiction that fits within the confines of a novel written by a female at a time in history when slavery was still not open for discussion. Wilson’s use of the words “deserted,” “disabled,” “forced,” and “extinguishing” to frame the various avenues of her life reaffirms the ability of slavery’s shadows to exist even in the North. Wilson directly addresses the institution of slavery in the South

without any insistence on her work of fiction as a cure to southern ailments. She refers to only her “mistress” as being “imbued with *southern* principles” without mentioning the rest of the family with which she was housed. Even Wilson is unsure of her presence—both physically and mentally—without the aid of her mistress. In telling her story through the eyes of her mistress and the rest of her mistress’s family, Frado becomes aware of her alienation and lack of personhood. Wilson admits to not divulging “every transaction of my own life” fully aware of what she has “omitted” to prevent a provoking of “shame in our good anti-slavery friends at home.” In contrasting “my own life” in the first sentence with “our” in the last sentence, the reverberations of *Our Nig* written “BY ‘OUR NIG,’” begins to link blackness to the intermediary agent of whiteness, as Wilson chooses to frame her work with an assertiveness that is only supplemented through her “two-ness.” Wilson’s amalgamated state requires her to mediate between the sovereign power and biopower—blackness and whiteness—carefully attending to both her needs and the needs of her fictionalized protagonist.

Pathway to Personhood: Frado’s Intermediary Agent

The relationship between Mrs. Bellmont and Frado demonstrates the extent of Frado’s alienation from the basic rights of humanity because she is embodied physically through both her dialogue and her actions. The work that Frado is assigned by Mrs. Bellmont suggests the embodiment of Frado through labor:

Frado was called early in the morning by her new mistress. Her first work was to feed the hens. She was shown how it was always to be done, and in no other way; any departure from this rule to be punished by whipping. She was then accompanied by Jack to drive the cows to pasture, so she might learn the way. Upon her return she was allowed to eat her breakfast, consisting of a bowl of skimmed milk, with brown bread crusts, which she was told to eat, standing, by the kitchen table, and must not be over ten minutes about it. (Wilson 17)

The passage begins with Frado being “called” the following “morn-

ing by her new mistress,” to “her first work,” presenting Frado as no more than a slave. Wilson solidifies Frado’s existence as a slave by italicizing the word “always”; any variation in her actions would be “punished by whipping,” a common punishment for slaves throughout the South. Frado, in name, is only mentioned at the onset of the passage, but is referred to with the pronouns “her” or “she” throughout the rest of the piece, suggesting that the more intense the labor, the more dehumanized is Frado. To further demonstrate Frado’s existence as a “social nonperson,” the phrase “she was allowed to eat her breakfast” reduces Frado to a possession, only “allowed” to exist through the eyes of the Bellmonts. Frado’s disembodied presence appears once more in the phrase: “which she was told to eat, standing, by the kitchen table, and must not be over ten minutes about it” (17). It is through the direction of Mrs. Bellmont, either in physical force or verbal force that Frado is humanized, suggesting that without Mrs. Bellmont, Frado is disembodied physically. Frado is also simultaneously dehumanized by being made to stand in the kitchen rather than eat with the family at the table. The ability to be humanized and dehumanized at the same time directly relates to the Foucauldian rift between sovereign power and biopower. Mrs. Bellmont is at this moment the acting agency of power. The physical pain that Frado incurs, according to Davis, serves as a means for her to speak, rather than to be silenced: “The pain-filled body in *Our Nig*, with its potentially universal sympathetic appeal, provides a sort of insurance that cries for help on its behalf have a better chance of being heard, of being answered” (398). Frado’s “cries” in response to Mrs. Bellmont’s mistreatment present a physical, living voice for Frado; Frado, who according to Patterson is no more than a “social nonperson,” is in fact real. In her mistreatment of Frado, Mrs. Bellmont dishonors her because Frado is incapable of entertaining any power or independence over herself.⁹

The Bellmont children—specifically Jack—also serve as a catalyst for Frado’s ability to be both embodied and disembodied within the work because they react to her without allowing her any chance to react to them. The way Jack reacts to Frado requires Frado to have, according to DuBois, “no true self-consciousness,” but instead a need to constantly measure her soul, “by the tape of a

world that looks on in contempt and pity” (3). If Frado is conscious of her “two-ness,” then the way that Jack reacts to her after her physical beating disembodies both Frado and Wilson:

How Jack pitied her!...After breakfast Jack took her with him to the field, and kept her through the day. But it could not be so generally. She must return to school, to her household duties. He resolved to do what he could to protect her from Mary and his mother. He bought her a dog, which became a great favorite with both. The invalid, Jane, would gladly befriend her; but she had not the strength to brave the iron will of her mother. Kind words and affectionate glances were the only expressions of sympathy she could safely indulge in. (Wilson 21)

The first line of the passage reads, “how Jack pitied her,” indicating that the reader should pity Frado for the life of ineffectual bondage she has been reduced to, and for the “two-ness” she has been subjected to. Jack treats Frado tenderly, caring for her as if she is his little pet who has been wounded. Yet, Jack cannot make sense of Frado either. This is because Frado is only real to him as his playmate, friend, and servant. He does buy her a dog, but it serves as a consolation for the fact that Frado has no more importance than a mangy animal. Due to his white status, Jack disembodies Frado leaving behind a specter of a human being, only understood as real through the whiteness that runs counter to her blackness.

The abrupt departure of Jack from Frado’s life creates an upset in how Frado—and Wilson—challenge the shortcomings of the Northern abolitionist circuit because his leaving limits the lens through which her story can be told:

Thus another light disappeared from Nig’s horizon. Another was soon to follow. Jack was anxious to try his skill in providing for his own support; so a situation as clerk in a store was procured in a Western city, and six months after Jane’s departure, was Nig abandoned to the tender mercies of Mary and her mother. As if to remove the last vestige of earthly joy, Mrs. Belmont sold the companion and pet of Frado, the dog Fido. (Wilson 34)

Frado is referred to as “Nig” with the loss of Jack, left to the “tender

mercies of Mary and her mother,” but “Frado” when Mrs. Bellmont sells the “last vestige of earthly joy” that Frado has left, her dog. The contrast allows Wilson to exercise her “two-ness” and show how Frado must be nameless, “Nig,” without the Bellmonts but become “Frado” through the eyes of Mrs. Bellmont and her actions. Also gone with Jack is the “light” and in its place, utter darkness. Frado is almost real when Wilson claims she has a “horizon,” but this faint glimmer of hope is quickly extinguished when Frado is left to the “tender mercies” of Mrs. Bellmont and Mary. Furthermore, the phrase “earthly joy,” implies that Frado is only allowed to demonstrate her “two-ness” through her medium, the Bellmonts.

Christianity in Crisis: Ghosting Frado Out of Heaven

Religion also serves as a way to highlight Frado’s ghosted presence within a society that only acknowledges whiteness as real.¹⁰ Whiteness acts as the embodying factor within the novel suggesting that when Frado attends church with the white Aunt Abby, she sheds her “two-ness” and crosses over into the real. However, Frado is also disembodied by white religion. Recall Foucault’s rift between sovereign power and biopower. Frado is unable to “regulate” her amalgamated state demonstrating that white religion inhibits Frado from experiencing the basic rights of humanity. In fact, when instructed by Aunt Abby and the minister to come to Christ, she is reminded of her “two-ness” and becomes ghosted out of the white religion because there is not a category for the mulatto servant girl:

Frado, under the instructions of Aunt Abby and the minister, became a believer in a future existence—one of happiness or misery. Her doubt was, is there a heaven for the black? She knew there was one for James, and Aunt Abby and all good white people; but was there any for blacks? She had listened attentively to all the minister said, and all Aunt Abby had told her; but then it was all for white people.

(Wilson 47)

The phrase, “Frado, under the instructions of Aunt Abby and the minister, became a believer in a future existence,” illustrates that

Frado is only embodied when she is “under the instruction” of whites who are always embodied—of whites who are certain of a future existence. Frado’s ability to believe in a “future existence” serves a dual purpose—the future which will end in death and the future that will include the time after she leaves the Bellmonts. The narrator also questions if “there is a heaven for the black,” knowing that there is a place for “all good white people,” because white people are real in this text and 19th century culture as it describes; white people are what embody Frado. Here, again, Frado is ghosted from her own narrative because she is neither white nor black but mulatto. She is only “Nig” because the Bellmont’s deem her to be a nig, and because whiteness is real, to be real at times within the work, Frado must adhere to the confines of her medium—to the confines of the environment that has been conditioned for her existence. Frado is again conscious of her positioning as both a white and a black, constantly aware of her ability to be both a presence and an absence. The narrator goes through great pains to illustrate the struggle for black people to enjoy the comforts of an afterlife claiming that “she had listened attentively” to all of the white people in her life, but realized that “it was all for white people.” In discovering that the Christian afterlife is only for white people, Frado, and all of slavery’s subjects alike, are placed into a state of purgatory, forever ghosted out—forever disembodied—from a supernatural existence beyond the one that has been conditioned for them in the land of the living.

Wilson further illustrates that there is no conception of Christian afterlife for black people in the space of her text when Frado falls ill and is reminded of how she, the mulatto servant girl, is “not fully human”—through the words of her mistress:

Frado was becoming seriously ill. She had no relish for food, and was constantly over-worked, and then she had such solicitude about the future. She wished to pray for pardon. She did try to pray. Her mistress had told her it would “do no good for her to attempt prayer; prayer was for whites, not for blacks. If she minded her mistress, and did what she commanded, it was all that was required of her.” (Wilson 52)

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The idea of Frado not having a “relish for food” or being “over-worked” is not uncommon when describing the typical slave. Yet, the manner in which Wilson finds Frado worrying over her future suggests that Frado envisions a life beyond the Bellmonts. She is quickly and astutely shut down by Mrs. Bellmont, however, because “prayer was for whites, not for blacks.” Mrs. Bellmont fails to account for the fact that Frado is neither white nor black but mulatto. Again, Frado’s “two-ness” manages to ghost her completely out of religion and, when embodied through whiteness, she is merely a physical possession, much like that of an animal. Wilson even uses the word “commanded” to further suggest that Frado is a nonperson. In asserting that following commands is all that is “required of her,” Mrs. Bellmont reiterates that Frado, as a nonperson, requires the whiteness of both herself and her family to be embodied. Thus, Frado—and Wilson—are always conscious of their “two-ness” because they must live in a constant state of limbo between embodied and disembodied due to their mulatto status.

Mrs. Bellmont’s propensity to inhibit the mulatto, Frado, from discovering herself within the white church may not be overlooked as an attempt to disembody Frado—and Wilson. Two specific moments in the novel demonstrate Frado’s disconnect with the white religion of Mrs. Bellmont. The first of which involves a dialogue between James—one of the other Bellmont children—and Frado about who created her:

‘If I do, I get whipped;’ sobbed the child. ‘They won’t believe what I say. Oh, I wish I had my mother back; then I should not be kicked and whipped so. Who made me so?’

‘God;’ answered James.

‘Did God make you?’

‘Yes.’

‘Who made Aunt Abby?’

‘God.’

‘Who made your mother?’

‘God.’

‘Did the same God that made her make me?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, then, I don’t like him.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because he made her white, and me black. Why didn’t he make us both white?’ (Wilson 28-9)

It is Frado’s belief that despite the obvious evils of her mother—mainly abandonment—if her mother were there, she would not be “kicked and whipped so.” Frado also appears at a loss as to how “God” created James, Aunt Abby, Mrs. Bellmont and herself demonstrating that her childlike innocence does not completely inhibit her from understanding that the same “God” could not have created them all. This is why she asks James, “Why didn’t he make us [Frado and Mrs. Bellmont] *both* white?” Wilson here uses the curiosity of Frado to illustrate the hypocrisy of the entire institution of slavery and religion as its complement. Mrs. Bellmont’s disembodiment of Frado also occurs after both James’s death and Aunt Abby’s insistence that God loves all:

Frado pondered; her mistress was a professor of religion; was she going to heaven? then she did not wish to go. If she should be near James, even, she could not be happy with those fiery eyes watching her ascending path. She resolved to give over all thought of future world, and strove daily to put her anxiety far from her. (Wilson 58)

Frado is questioning the existence of heaven because if Mrs. Bellmont is to go, “...then she would not wish to go.” Wilson’s use of the word “professor” dictates Mrs. Bellmont’s place in the realm of religion. The word “professor” itself typically means one of two things: an expert of a particular field or subject area or one who professes his or her faith without actually being faithful. In placing Mrs. Bellmont in the arena of religious experts, Wilson both ensures that Frado is able to exist because whiteness is real while also undermining Mrs. Bellmont’s position as one who truly believes. Thus, through the “professor of religion,” or Mrs. Bellmont, Frado is caught in a constant state of uncertainty—neither black nor white—othered to such an extent that her existence is only truly solidified through the presence of the Bellmonts.

By the end of the work, Frado is still bound to the Bellmonts because they act as the medium through which her story can be told:

Do you ask the destiny of those connected with her early history? A few years only have elapsed since Mr. and Mrs. B. passed into another world. As age increased, Mrs. B. became more irritable, so that no one, even her own children, could remain with her; and she was accompanied by her husband to the home of Lewis, where, after an agony in death unspeakable, she passed away. Only a few months since, Aunt Abby entered heaven. Jack and his wife rest in heaven, disturbed by no intruders... Frado has passed from their memories, as Joseph from the butler's, but she will never cease to track them till beyond mortal vision. (Wilson 72)

First, it is important to note that this is the last paragraph in the novel and, keeping that in mind, it is also spaced apart from the final chapter, which details Frado's life after the Bellmonts. This implies that no matter how detached Frado becomes from the Bellmont's, she is continually battling with an ability to exhibit DuBois's double-consciousness. The first line of the passage reads, "Do you ask the destiny of those connected with her early history," which illustrates Frado's inherent connection to the Bellmonts. Wilson consciously italicizes the word "early" asking the reader to question why she would choose to end with a regression back to Frado's time in servitude. The answer is simple: whiteness is embodied. She has to frame the end of the narrative in much the same way she frames it with Frado's white mother, Mag, in the beginning. Also, the narrator chooses to refer to Mr. and Mrs. Belmont as "Mr. and Mrs. B." demonstrating her struggle to try and disembody the Bellmont's in the same manner they have disembodyed her throughout the work. The narrator—or Wilson herself—contrasts Mr. and Mrs. Belmont's passing with that of Aunt Abby and Jack and his wife. Mr. and Mrs. Belmont, "passed into another world," whereas Aunt Abby and Jack and his wife went to "heaven" which, given the way Mrs. Belmont condemned Frado for her partial blackness, suggests she may or may not have been allowed a Christian redemption in the end. Much like Frado's leaving the Bellmonts—passing into another world where she is embodied—Mrs. Belmont has been placed into a realm where she can be disembodyed. The last line says that, "Frado has passed from their memories, as Joseph from

the butler's, but she will never cease to track them till beyond mortal vision," suggesting that Frado has become a haunting presence, even beyond the graves of the Bellmonts. If she, as "Nig," is not allowed in heaven because heaven is for whites, then Frado's ability to "track" the Bellmonts beyond their graves indicates that, for Mr. and Mrs. Bellmont at least, they do not reside in heaven, just "another world." The idea of tracking them "beyond mortal vision" also furthers my claim that Wilson ghosts herself and the character Frado out of her own story because the fictional piece is written in such a retrospective fashion that the entire work props itself on this one line. Frado—and Wilson—are literally living ghosts within their own text, bound by their need to be embodied through whiteness.¹¹

Conclusion

To internalize one's "two-ness"—one's embodiment and disembodiment—as well as one's ability to be both black and white, so much that you ghost yourself as the author and your protagonist out of the story is problematic for a semi-autobiographical work of fiction.¹² Yet, this is entirely what Wilson does in *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black*. She sketches for the audience two versions of Frado: the one who is embodied by the Bellmonts—physically present on the page—and the one who is disembodied by the Bellmonts—completely missing from the text of the novel. The Bellmonts, because they act as the intermediary agent through which Frado's story can be told, illustrate that whiteness is real; whiteness embodies blackness. Wilson uses the characters of Mrs. Bellmont and her children to create an acceptable sphere through which Frado is able to exist. Most striking to the novel, in its entirety, is the manner in which religious hypocrisy becomes so prevalent that it serves to ghost Frado—and Wilson—completely out of heaven. What is often lost in translation between what is real—white and black—is the byproduct: the mulatto. This is why Wilson uses her text as the intermediary agent for the Foucauldian rift between what is real and what is unable to "regulate" between the sovereign power and the biopower, persons of mixed race biology. In doing

so, Wilson exposes the hypocrisy in Northern abolitionist ideals to such an extent that she equates freedom in the North to the institution of slavery in the South. There is no place for the mulatto. Frado, and her “two-ness,” when supplemented with the agency of whiteness, allows Wilson an ability to haunt the pages of her own text.

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Notes

¹For further discussion of W.E.B. DuBois's "double-consciousness," see "Of Our Spiritual Strivings" from *Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*, 3.

²The *OED Online* cites several definitions for "medium." The specific definition that I am here referring to is, "A person or thing which acts as an intermediary."

³For further discussion of the 1850 census, see Raimon 1-25.

⁴Wilson's life after the novel places her as one of the most well-known spiritualist mediums of the nineteenth century, demonstrating that Wilson may have used the knowledge she developed in writing her novel to pursue a second career. For further discussion of her life as a spiritualist medium, see R.J. Ellis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "'Grievances at the treatment she received': Harriet E. Wilson's Spiritualist Career in Boston, 1868-1900."

⁵For further discussion of Orlando Patterson's "social nonperson," see "The Constituent Elements of Slavery" from *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, 5.

⁶Other critics who have grappled with Wilson's autobiographical propensity in her novella, include Ted Bailey in "Portraits of Piety: Authenticating Strategies in Slave Narratives and Two Antebellum African-American Novels," Lisa Elwood-Farber in "Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig*: A Look at The Historical Significance of a Novel That Exposes a Century's Worth of Hypocritical Ideology," P. Gabrielle

Foreman in “The Spoken and The Silenced in *Incidents in The Life of a Slave Girl* and *Our Nig*,” Jill Jones in “The Disappearing ‘I’ in *Our Nig*,” Barbara Krah in “Tracking Frado: The Challenge of Harriet E. Wilson’s ‘Our Nig’ to Nineteenth-Century Conventions of Writing Womanhood,” Lois Leveen in “Dwelling in the House of Oppression: The Spatial, Racial, and Textual Dynamics of Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig*,” and Barbara A. White in “‘Our Nig’ and the She-Devil: New Information about Harriet Wilson and the ‘Bellmont’ Family.”

⁷On Frado’s body, see Kyla Wanzana Tompkins “‘Everything ‘Cept Eat Us’: The Antebellum Black Body Portrayed as Edible Body.”

⁸For further discussion of the link between honor and power, see Patterson, 10.

⁹On Wilson and religion see Elizabeth J. West in “Reworking the Conversion Narrative: Race and Christianity in *Our Nig*.” I do not find that the prevalence of Christianity as it pertains to race in Wilson’s work suggests a conversion narrative. Instead, I argue that religion also serves to highlight Frado’s ability to be embodied only through whiteness, suggesting that there is no opportunity for blacks to entertain in white Christian afterlife.

¹⁰On the concept “beyond mortal vision,” critic Katherine Clay Bassard suggests that Wilson is referring directly to Genesis 40, which, although intriguing, I take issue with because Wilson is aware of her inability to reach a white Christian afterlife, so she would not explicitly refer to a reference from the Bible. Bassard also deals with Frado’s ability to become disembodied, but instead of formulating an argument about how Frado’s disembodiment highlights racial division as I have done, she finds Frado’s disembodiment to be a direct link to Joseph’s biblical journey.

¹¹Several critics have grappled with the genre of Wilson’s work including R.J. Ellis in “Traps Slyly Laid: Professing Autobiography in Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig*,” Elizabeth Fox-Genovese “‘To Weave It into the Literature of the Country’: Epic and the Fictions of African American Women,” Eric Gardner in “‘This Attempt of Their Sister,’” Lisa Elwood-Farber in “Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig*: A Look at the Historical Significance of a Novel That Exposes a Century’s Worth of Hypocritical Ideology,” Angelyn Mitchell in “Her Side of the

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Story: A Feminist Analysis of Two Nineteenth-Century Antebellum Novels—William Wells Brown’s *Clotel* and Harriet E. Wilson’s *Our Nig*,” Sonya Lawson Parrish in “Shadows and Houses: Politics and Place in *Our Nig* and *Mansfield Park*,” Kristen H. Piep in “‘Nothing New Under the Sun’: Postsentimental Conflict in Harriet E. Wilson’s *Our Nig*,” and Julia Stern in “Excavating Genre in *Our Nig*.” Instead of trying to decipher Wilson’s text as either a sentimental novel, a slave narrative, or even a captivity narrative, as the critics suggest, I have argued that Wilson’s choice to blur the lines between two genres—autobiography and fiction—allow her to be both within the work and distanced from the work.