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Abstract

This paper explores how Harriet Wilson's autobiographical novel, *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (1859), re-appropriates and subverts minstrel traditions, sentimentality, and the objectification of Black pain in 19th century American cultural representations of Blackness. By turning to weeping and what Wilson calls the protagonist, Frado/Nig's, "jollity," *Our Nig* enters into the 19th century literary canon as a conceptually rich theorization of freedom that forces us to rethink the ways in which the politics and poetics of "resistance" emerges on the periphery of intelligibility and representation. When self-representation is a dead-end for those who are denied legal forms of recognition and freedom in antebellum U.S. society, this paper wonders how what we might call "feminine" non-representational, unintelligible, and nonsensical resistances reconstitute freedom instead as an act of fugitivity: a freedom that refuses to be located in the domain of reason and rational comprehension. I argue for a reconsideration of Frado/Nig's silent and noisy weeping and her nonsensical performances of jollity throughout *Our Nig* as provisional acts of freedom that unsettle masculinist narratives of resistance and fugitivity, creating in the process alternative feminist epistemologies of insurgency.

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Introduction

“‘Stop!’ shouted Frado, ‘strike me, and I’ll never work a mite more for you’; and throwing down what she had gathered, stood like one who feels the stirring of free and independent thoughts.”

--Harriet Wilson

Harriet Wilson’s autobiographical novel, *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (1859), is a story about a young biracial girl, Frado/Nig, who is indentured to the Bellmont family in the antebellum north. During her servitude in the Bellmont home, her mistresses, Mrs. Bellmont and her daughter, Mary Bellmont, frequently torture Frado/Nig until she is almost completely debilitated by the conclusion of the text. The quotation above thus marks a climactic moment for Frado/Nig. In this scene, she has been sent out to gather wood by her mistress, Mrs. Bellmont. Failing to return in the time Mrs. Bellmont has “calculated” (Wilson 58), Frado/Nig arrives with the wood to her angry mistress who, taking a stick from the pile, raises it over Frado/Nig’s head with the intention of beating her. For the first time in the narrative, Frado/Nig shouts, “Stop!” and threatens to “never work a mite more for [Mrs. Bellmont]” if she is subjected to another one of Mrs. Bellmont’s violent beatings. For most scholars, this moment represents what successful, intelligible resistance looks like: “this act of resistance is Frado’s most successful one”¹ and it characterizes a key moment in the text when Frado/Nig, “as a young woman discovers her voice and the power of her will.”² But I question whether self-representation is a viable measure of freedom for those whose freedom is denied to

¹ John Ernest, “Economies of Identity: Harriet E. Wilson’s *Our Nig*,” *PMLA* 109, no. 3 (May 1994), 433.

² Beth Maclay Doriani, “Black Womanhood in Nineteenth-Century America: Subversion and Self-Construction in Two Women’s Biographies,” *American Quarterly* 43, no. 2 (1991), 216.

them by the law itself? What happens when self-representation— in this instance, intelligible speech— is a trap and a dead-end for the indentured and enslaved in antebellum U.S. society? How might non-representational, unintelligible, and nonsensical resistances reconstitute freedom instead as an act of fugitivity: a freedom that refuses to be located? Although set in the “free” north, juridical notions of freedom and unfreedom are unsettling and unsettled terms throughout the length of *Our Nig*.³

What is ultimately at stake in this line of inquiry is that intelligibility and representation stand in as the only measures of personhood. For instance, some literary scholars conflate Frado/Nig’s personhood with her ability to speak out against abuse in the domain of intelligible speech. In interpreting the woodpile scene, DoVeanna S. Fulton argues that Frado/Nig, “employs orality to retrieve not just her womanhood, but her personhood as well.”⁴ This implies that normative language, such as we hear in the demand, “Stop!” is fundamentally linked first to Frado/Nig’s gendered self and then to her personhood (at least in the logic of Fulton’s statement). “Retrieving” gendered womanhood and personhood through Frado/Nig’s “restored voice”⁵ appears to be one way in which confining personhood to the limits of intelligible speech consigns *Our Nig* to a narrow formulation of freedom and unfreedom: personhood has to be “retrieved” and

³ Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Minor Compositions: New York, 2013), 97. Moten and Harney write: “Never being on the right side of the Atlantic is an unsettled feeling, the feeling of a thing that unsettles with others.” I use this word “unsettled” in the body of my paper to reflect both the un-settling historical displacement of Afro-American people across the Middle Passage and as a way for thinking about how to be “unsettled” is to also always be moving like waves in the currents of the sea. So to be “unsettled” may also be a kind of fugitivity from “settled” historical narratives of colonization, while also referencing a site of ongoing trauma and violence.

⁴ DoVeanna S. Fulton, “Tale-Bearing and Dressing Out: Black Women’s Speech Acts that Expose Torture and Abuse by Slave Mistresses in *Our Nig*, *Sylvia Dubois*, and *The Story of Mattie J. Jackson*,” *Speaking Power: Black Feminist Orality in Women’s Narratives of Slavery* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 47.

⁵ Fulton, 48.

therefore constantly maintained by intelligible speech in this logic. This begs the question as to whether Frado/Nig constitutes an alternative form of personhood than one mediated through normative structures of recognition? By relying on modes of intelligibility and representation to assert the meaning and recognition of personhood, other possibilities—alternative touch, sights, sounds, smells, and tastes of personhood— are excited and erased out of the purview of what it means to feel, speak, and live in the flesh.

Similarly, some scholars undermine the ways in which Frado/Nig takes up unintelligible and non-representational insurgent affects and performances that play out as a kind of hybrid personhood. Cynthia J. Davis, for instance, also focuses on the power of intelligible speech at the woodpile scene when she posits that, “by speaking, [Frado/Nig] effectively protests Mrs. Belmont’s definition of her as beast and asserts instead [...] that she is a thinking, feeling human being...”⁶ By drawing in on the presence of intelligible speech as an “effective” affirmation that Frado/Nig is a “thinking, feeling human being,” Davis overlooks how personhood manifests through thinking and feeling in a variety of ways, spoken and unspoken. In this sense, personhood may be improvisational and therefore contextually constituted and reconstituted over and over again. What if personhood asserted itself in a momentary hesitation? What if it was partly enveloped in the act of “scampering home as fast as possible” (Wilson 20) from an enemy?

These scholars have yet to identify how Frado/Nig’s hybrid personhood manifests through unintelligible, noisy protests and non-representational, yet disruptive performative acts. As a hybrid text with a hybrid character, I propose that Frado/Nig’s

⁶ Cynthia J. Davis, “Speaking the Body’s Pain: Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig*,” *African American Review* 27, no. 3 (1993), 400.

personhood is provisional, situational, and fragmentary— in the continuity between being both Frado and Nig. Frado/Nig cannot choose when she is “Frado” and when she is “Nig” in any given moment. Therefore I further contend that her hybridity leads us to a reading of *Our Nig* that calls attention to silenced, noisy, and disruptive affects and performances, such as in weeping and jollity, as radical expressions and sounds of personhood that might experience freedom in the liminal gaps or crevices of social life that takes place even when one is unrecognizable by the law.

I am interested in finding alternative ways for talking about insurgency that are not drawn through normative, articulate speech. My project thus departs from scholars’ interest in verbal resistance and moves toward an analysis of articulated, yet unintelligible sounds of weeping and performative acts of jollity as sites of insurgency. This paper asks: can language rooted in unintelligible, non-representational sounds and performances manifest insurgency? What if we considered weeping and jollity— behaviors that Mrs. Belmont and Mary perceives as criminal and deserving of punishment— within traditions of Black revolutionary acts?

I am also drawn to weeping and jollity throughout *Our Nig* as acts one may identify as feminine— acts typically thought to be non-threatening— because they induce the potential of far *more* violence from Frado/Nig’s abusers than her verbal protests do. The risk of weeping, for example, is immediately introduced the moment Frado/Nig enters the Belmont home. She is subjected to “‘words that burn’ and frequent blows on the head” (Wilson 18) by Mrs. Belmont. In response to these abuses, “at first [Frado/Nig] wept aloud, which Mrs. Belmont noticed by applying a raw-hide, always at hand in the kitchen. It was a symptom of discontent and complaining which must be

‘nipped in the bud’” (Wilson 18). By drawing close attention to Mrs. Bellmont’s violent reactions to Frado/Nig’s weeping, I suggest Wilson implies there is something more threatening in the act of weeping than scholars have allowed. In fact, Mrs. Bellmont’s impulse to hit Frado/Nig actually confirms that weeping bears political force by criminalizing it through punishment. Weeping is therefore not a political failure or a feminine weakness; it is a subversive statement communicating discontent through sorrow that needs to not only be punished and silenced, but ‘nipped in the bud’— permanently plucked from Frado/Nig’s spirit.

Although I argue that weeping and jollity are resistant in the body of *Our Nig*, representations of Black sorrow and joy are of course highly controversial in 19th-century U.S. literature, especially for Afro-American subjects. Wilson thus turns to weeping and what she calls Frado/Nig’s “jollity” to critique and subvert minstrelsy, sentimentality, and the objectification of Black pain within 19th century American culture. Wilson is partly responding to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s widely acclaimed novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852)⁷, where weeping is coopted as an act that justifies the objectification of Black people, denying them subjectivity.

In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the character Topsy, for example, is portrayed as either insensible, a minstrel caricature and performer, or indebted to a white child forever (and thus non- or partially human) through the acts of weeping and sorrow. In Chapter XX titled, “Topsy,” Stowe writes that Topsy “was one of the blackest of her race”⁸:

The black, glassy eyes glittered with a kind of wicked
drollery, and the thing struck up, in a clear shrill voice, an

⁷ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 2003).

⁸ Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 235.

odd negro melody, to which she kept time with her hands
and feet, spinning round, clapping her hands, knocking her
knees together, in a wild, fantastic sort of time, and
producing in her throat all those odd guttural sounds which
distinguish the native music of her race.⁹

Topsy's "glassy" eyes are supposed to indicate a kind of insensateness and lifelessness in their almost doll-like appearance; moreover, the "odd[ness]" and "wild[ness]" of Topsy's song and dance register for white readerships of the 19th century as minstrelsy, and therefore as a site of economic and social capital.¹⁰ Through an invocation of sentimental politics, Stowe's racist caricaturing of Topsy ultimately popularizes the "pickaninny" stereotype in American culture.¹¹ This passage thus illustrates the ways in which sentimental literature of the 19th century heavily relied on organizing racist structures of domination through the lens and language of the "spectacular" as well as on the insistency that Black children— represented through the "pickaninny" figure— are, "always juvenile, always of color, and always resistant if not immune to pain."¹²

Wilson also keeps in mind the ways Stowe capitalizes on Black sorrow as she spreads the insidious notion that white sympathy, sentimentality, and Christian morality will emancipate the enslaved. Briefly, Topsy's young mistress, Eva, is dying and tells Topsy that it, "grieves [her], to have [Topsy] be so naughty"; so, "in that moment, a ray

⁹ Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 235-236.

¹⁰ Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 3-12. Importantly, the entire plot of the novel was catalyzed by the spectacle of a Black child, Harry Washington, performing minstrel acts for a slave trader who, after seeing the performance, insisted on purchasing Harry.

¹¹ Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood and Race from Slavery to Civil Rights* (NYU Press, 2011), 34. In tracing cultural representations of the "pickaninny" figure, Bernstein argues: "the pickaninny was an imagined, subhuman black juvenile who was typically depicted outdoors, merrily accepting (or even inviting) violence."

¹² Bernstein, *Racial Innocence*, 35.

of real belief, of heavenly love, had penetrated the darkness of [Topsy's] heathen soul!"¹³ Because Topsy will agree to "be good" upon Eva's wish, Topsy's moral indebtedness can never be discharged, especially after Eva dies. The "darkness of [Topsy's] heathen soul"— a place where, reading against the grain of the text, Topsy might emerge as a resistant subject—is overpowered by a "ray" of white sympathy. Topsy's moral indebtedness to Eva is thus deeply undergirded by white supremacist values and their demand for "good," submissive, and obedient Black subjects.

As an abolitionist text during the time of its publication, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* uses an image of white childhood and femininity to invoke feelings of sympathy and sentimentality in white readers. As Lauren Berlant posits in her essay "Poor Eliza" (1998), "*Uncle Tom's Cabin* is an archive people come to out of a political optimism that the revolution in mass subjectivity for which it stands might be borrowed for the transformation of other unjust social institutions."¹⁴ Sentimentality is thus presented in Stowe's novel as the most effective and widely available tool for white abolitionist politics, projecting the idea of a "mass subjectivity"— one created through notions of what Berlant identifies as "true feeling"— onto a scene more critically identifiable as subjection.¹⁵

Instead of emancipatory possibilities, sentimentality and sympathy reinforces hierarchy and the subjugation of the enslaved. In order to delve into the nuances of Wilson's critique of these three interweaving patterns of violent representations of Afro-

¹³ Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 279.

¹⁴ Lauren Berlant, "Poor Eliza," *American Literature*, 70 no. 3 (Sep.1998), 640.

¹⁵ Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). I use the phrase "scenes of subjection" in reference to Hartman's book throughout the body of this paper.

American people in 19th century American culture— minstrelsy, sentimentality, and the objectification of Black pain— I engage with scholars such as Robin Bernstein and her book, *Racial Innocence* (2011) and Lauren Berlant in her essay, “Poor Eliza” (1999). With Bernstein and Berlant’s works in mind, I argue that Wilson “works on and against dominant ideology,”¹⁶ against representations of Black suffering and pleasure within antebellum American culture by unsettling notions of Blackness and whiteness as they were dispersed across popular cultural fictions of the 19th century. For Wilson, it is not about gaining recognition within available languages of sentimentality or minstrelsy, because both fundamentally rely on objectification. Instead she engages both weeping and jollity but plays them off each other, never committing to either absolutely.

Our Nig thus enters into the 19th century American literary canon as a powerful, conceptually rich theorization of freedom that forces us to rethink the ways in which the politics and poetics of “resistance” emerges on the peripheries of representation and intelligibility. My argument draws inspiration from Black feminist scholars, such as from Saidiya Hartman and from Alexander G. Weheliye’s recent work on Hortense Spillers and Sylvia Wynter. Weheliye, while interpreting “the sweets of [Mary Prince’s] freedom” in his monograph, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (2014), argues that, “to banish these articulations of freedom and/or pleasure into exile in the precinct of inhumanity or prelanguage [...] not only denies the possibility of life in extreme circumstances but also leaves intact the

¹⁶ José Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 11. In the same sense that Muñoz defines disidentification as “work[ing] on and against dominant ideology,” I also consider the way in which Wilson disidentifies with racist representations of Black personhood in 19th century America as a means of subverting them. She does not fully distance Frado/Nig’s character from these representations or assimilate into them. Rather, she plays and performs dominant ideological constructions of Blackness to critique their underlying assumptions and contradictions within 19th century American cultural society.

resists cohesiveness and resists order. Her naming, her weeping, and her jollity resist any definitive beginning as much as they resist any definitive ending— that which is commonly conceived of as Freedom.

We can try to place these acts of resistance and fugitivity within models of insurgency already available to us or along and against Hartman’s argument that pleasure is always a site of domination for the enslaved. But weeping and jollity throughout *Our Nig* continues to slide, to weave in and out of the text beyond rational comprehension, beyond what seems reasonable. As Harney and Moten state, “to have been shipped is to have been moved by others, with others,”¹⁷ and Wilson has indeed “been shipped” in various ways. On this journey, she also ships the reader by telling her story, forcing us to confront our own fear of uncertainty, of fragmentation, of sorrow, of pleasure; fear of our own complicity and feelings of stuckness in this web of domination. By turning to unintelligible modes of communication— specifically within noisy weeping and nonsensical jollity— as possible signs of the “the insurgent ground as female social subject,” Wilson radically transforms masculinist narratives of resistance and fugitivity, creating in the process alternative feminist epistemologies of insurgency.

¹⁷ Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 97.

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