

GENRE AND THE SELF: IDENTITY IN HARRIET WILSON'S *OUR NIG*

TED BAILEY

Born in the United States, Ted Bailey earned a BA in literature from the University of California, Santa Cruz, an MA in German at Middlebury College, and an MA in English from California State University, Hayward. He has taught German with the University of Maryland (1986-91) and has been teaching courses in American Studies and writing at the University of Miskolc since 1994. He recently defended his doctoral dissertation on 19th-century African American literature at the University of Debrecen. He gave a talk on religion and the popular novel in America on 12 April 2006 in the Research Forum.

The changes in thinking wrought by postmodernism have influenced not only the way we view the world around us but also how we think about ourselves. The idea of a unified identity, as well as Romantic notions of a fractured self, have evolved in the postmodern era into a sense of the individual as a purely social construct. Michel Foucault, for instance, sees the modern individual as defined essentially by various social discourses, while Gloria Anzaldúa uses the metaphors of *la mestiza* and the borderlands to describe how individuals and cultures form their consciousness. For Anzaldúa, the individual “has a plural identity” and “operates in a pluralistic mode” (2213), and those who are conscious of belonging to many different groups, such as Native American homosexuals or Chicana lesbians, are more fully conscious of how this process functions. In other words, the individual is not a stable entity based on a single identity, but rather a pastiche, a product of diverse and constantly changing selves.

Pastiche is also a term applicable to Harriet E. Wilson's use of genre in her novel *Our Nig; Or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (1859). At the time of its rediscovery in 1982, critics such as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. noted not only how the supposedly fictional account of the protagonist's life melds into the autobiographical details of the author's life, but also how Wilson borrows from the traditions of the sentimental novel and of the slave narrative in creating her novel. Since then scholars have sought details of the author's life in order to ascertain the degree to which the text is autobiographical, and critics have also discerned other genres at work in the text as well. This blending of literary fiction with autobiography is significant, for the various genres constitute the building blocks with which Wilson interprets the incidents in her own life and then fashions a pluralized identity for her protagonist. The following exploration of how Wilson interweaves various genres reveals her novel to be a pastiche, an attempt to locate her protagonist, Wilson/Frado, within the social and literary discourses of mid-nineteenth century America. Additionally, her balancing act between adherence to genre and the details of her own life when discussing religious beliefs—or the lack thereof—sheds light on one of the problematic aspects of the slave narrative genre, the question of editorial intrusion.

Although all the details in the novel cannot be confirmed at this distance in time, the general veracity of the story is no longer in doubt. If the parallels between events in Frado's life and the descriptions of Wilson's life in the three appended testimonial letters suggest to readers that protagonist, narrator, and author were one and the same, then Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s discovery of her son's death certificate has—as Gates notes in his introduction to the 1983 edition—“proved sufficient to demonstrate his mother's racial identity and authorship of *Our Nig*” (xiii). Additionally, Barbara A. White has turned up information that identifies the „Bellmont' family of the novel as a prominent family in Milford, New Hampshire, with “strong abolitionist connections” (34). White's findings suggest that the family contained enough sadistic personalities that Wilson “probably did not need fictional models” from contemporary sentimental novels to create her characters (31); nonetheless, White shows that Wilson merged two real figures into one fictional character and provided a new chronology for events such as weddings, birthdays, and school experiences for aesthetic reasons. This reshaping of real events suggests that Wilson was attempting to redefine her own life story and thus take control over her life. That the shape conformed more closely to the patterns of the sentimental novel comes as no surprise; the genre was one of the most popular in nineteenth-century America.

As identified by Nina Baym, the heroine in women's sentimental fiction is often an orphaned child who ends up in the care of exploitative or abusive guardians and must endure hardships in a foster home until she comes of age. A small group of sympathizers crystallizes in the background, but these supporters are not always able to rescue the heroine from her plight (37). While Wilson apparently did not need to invent the proverbial wicked stepmother of many Grimm's fairy tales in order to—as Bruno Bettelheim points out—project a child's hostility toward the real mother (66-69), the exact attitude of others in the family toward her remains undocumented. It is possible, however, that in addition to modifying the details of Aunt Abby's life (White 43), Wilson is also consciously grouping her with the son James as a spiritual advisor to the protagonist, Frado. In thus reconfiguring the characters of her adolescence according to groupings characteristic of the sentimental novel, Wilson is constructing for Frado the identity of a character in such a novel.

Of course, not all the particulars of *Our Nig* fit into the patterns of the sentimental genre. As Gates points out, Frado's failure to find happiness in marriage marks a deviation from the overall pattern of nineteenth-century women's literature (xlvi). Cynthia Davis goes even farther and asserts that the text does not belong to the sentimental genre and that only the appended letters have “reframe[d] *Our Nig* as a sentimental novel and tragic romance” (403). Davis's hypothesis is that *Our Nig* is a response to the dominant nineteenth-century discourse that sexualized black women's bodies, but while this approach does illuminate the text in new ways, it does not suffice to remove the novel from the sentimental category. Certainly the repeated beatings and depictions of pain make us aware of the “black woman [...] as a body in pain” (399) and not as a sexualized body, yet it is precisely the tactic of not sexualizing the female body that *Our Nig* shares with the sentimental novel. Barbara Welter points out that nineteenth-century American writing was obsessed with the “Cult of True Womanhood,” which portrayed the ideal woman as white, domestic, and—except for procreation—essentially chaste (21). As Helen Carby notes, however, “figurations of black women existed in an antithetical relationship with the values embodied in the cult of true womanhood, an absence of the qualities of piety and purity being a

crucial signifier" (32), yet this does not mean that Wilson could not adapt as much of the ideal for her protagonist as was feasible. In *Our Nig*, Frado's premarriage courtship is described with oblique references to her beauty—"thin, ruby lips; [...] her sparkling eyes" (126)—but none to overt physical passion, and her infatuation with James never goes beyond the stage of adolescent crush; in short, sensuality always stays within the bounds defined by the sentimental standards of the era.

The physical cruelty evident in *Our Nig*, which is even more graphic in its depiction than Emily Brontë dared in *Wuthering Heights* (1847), brings the novel closer to the realm of the slave narrative. In fact, among the many generic conventions he lists, James Olney mentions "details of first observed whippings and numerous subsequent whippings, with women frequently the victims" as a chief hallmark of the slave narrative (153). The physicality of the beatings marks the intersection of the sentimental and slave narrative genres; it is here where both genres try to enlist the sympathies of their audiences, the former fictionalized and intended to evoke self-pity in the reader, the latter based on reality and aimed at awakening empathy for others. In Wilson's novel the two genres move in different directions, the sentimental defining much of the language in the text—"Lonely Mag Smith! See her as she walks with downcast eyes and heavy heart" (1)—as well as the character groupings, while some of the formal and a few of the thematic elements are borrowed from the slave narrative.

Wilson's decision to employ elements of these two genres can be attributed to their popularity as well as to her self-professed desire to support herself and her invalid son financially. The two genres would have been both a conscious literary model and a recipe for increasing sales, which unfortunately never occurred. Equally important for Wilson, however, is that the two genres help establish her credentials as an author. As Jill Jones argues, "by tapping into the inherent and particular authority of both the slave narrative and the sentimental novel, Wilson constructs the necessary illusion of authority for most of *Our Nig*" (38-39). While Jones ably demonstrates how Wilson "maneuvers[s] between authenticity of first-person non-fiction and the sentimental third-person voice" (40), it is also worth noting some of the particular hallmarks of the slave narrative that Wilson employs since these show her not just building credibility but fashioning a persona as well. It is an identity based not only on gender—via the sentimental novel—but also on race.

Many of the elements Wilson borrows from the slave narrative are, of course, those specifically designed to establish the author's identity and hence the validity of the text. Wilson includes such traditional elements of the slave narrative as testimonial letters by whites prefaced or appended to the texts and a passage in the preface in which the author claims, if anything, "the tale [...] understates the horror of slavery" (Olney 152). While slavery does not technically describe Frado's condition in the free North, the extended title—*Showing that Slavery's Shadow Falls Even There*—obviously intends to have the reader make the connection between the protagonist and the social and political issue of slavery. The parentless young girl of the sentimental novel becomes, when shifting the generic prism, the exploited and debased young African American of the slave narrative. The reference to race is made explicit in another self-authorizing strategy from the slave narrative, "the claim, as an integral part of the title, [that the text is] „Written by Himself”" (Olney 152). Wilson's use of the possessive pronoun with the racial epithet, ironically offset by quotation marks, gives her access to the authority of the slave narrative, while

simultaneously both showing an awareness of how her white Northern audience views her and subtly accusing them of racism as she hides behind “a deliberately constructed self-derisive humility” (Tate 113). Her manipulation of slave narrative conventions thus allows her to create a self that is outside the persona of the powerless sentimental heroine; in her racialized pseudonym, she is both oppressed and defiant at the same time.

Race strongly influences the pastiche of genres that Wilson has constructed, limiting how far she can use the white women’s sentimental novel and encouraging her to adapt the slave narrative of her race. Identifying other genres at work in *Our Nig*, however, demonstrates that Wilson is also exploring other aspects of her protagonist’s personality. Julia Stern, for example, sees *Our Nig* as a primarily gothic novel in which Wilson is chiefly examining the mother-daughter relationship, with herself alternately on both sides. Stern persuasively argues that the depictions of violence and terror mask a rage in Wilson and turn the novel into a showplace that “pit[s] Gothic antinurture against sentimental maternity” (442). Alternatively, Elizabeth West emphasizes Frado’s spiritual life in interpreting the novel as a conversion narrative. For West, Frado’s failed conversion experience is caused by her inability to resolve the contradictions between nineteenth-century discourses on religion and race, which suggest that there is a heaven for whites but not necessarily for blacks. West claims that “[i]n the construction of her own self-image, Frado does not escape the influence of racial signifiers—in her mind the primary source of her troubles is her non-whiteness” (5); this internalization of predominant social attitudes, however, leads Frado to reject “Christianity as an institution that sanctions racist ideals” (21).

While West clearly demonstrates the elements of the conversion narrative that can be found in *Our Nig*, it remains that only roughly forty of the novel’s one hundred-thirty pages deal with Frado’s religious yearnings—hardly enough to label the entire novel a conversion narrative. Indeed, many of the elements found in the description of Frado’s spiritual life are equally characteristic of the slave narrative. The similarities do not contradict West’s conclusion regarding why Frado rejects Christianity, rather they suggest that Wilson’s collage of genres relies more on the slave than the conversion narrative. It is in the attempt to interweave the religious aspects of the slave narrative into her novel that Wilson introduces a contradiction into the text, one which underscores the problem of authorship in this antebellum genre.

The similarities in the treatment of religion in the slave narrative and *Our Nig* include Frado’s initial attraction to religion as an escape from work and Mrs. Bellmont’s anger over Frado’s later deepening interest in the Bible. Additionally, Wilson does not fail to present the typical contrast found in slave narratives between a white hypocritically professing religion and a black displaying a simpler, purer religious urge. She juxtaposes the bereavement of Mrs. Bellmont over her son with Frado’s genuine mourning: the former is described as a person “who donned the weeds from custom; kept close her crape veil for so many Sabbaths, and abated nothing of her characteristic harshness” (100), while the young black woman “moved about the house like an automaton. Every duty performed—but an abstraction from all, which shewed her thoughts busied elsewhere” (97). The dichotomy between outer appearance of piety and the inner feeling of religiousness is expressed through the emphasis on clothes for the one and the behavior of the other.

But the failure to follow through with the theme of religion marks a deviation from the pattern in slave narratives such as Harriet Jacobs’s, who remains trusting in God

throughout her seven-year imprisonment and later efforts to reunite with her children. Why spend so much time discussing the topic and then—contrary to generic conventions of both the slave narrative and the sentimental novel—drop it? West is certainly right that this represents a critique of Christianity, but the intention may not be deliberate; instead, it is possible that Wilson is simply shifting between genres, moving from the slave narrative to a more straightforward autobiography. Perhaps Wilson/Frado really did go through just such an experience and rejected the idea for the reasons she stated; after discussing the topic with the generic conventions at her disposal, she was free to drop the theme and alter the slave narrative patterns. Further evidence of this comes in the final two brief references to religion at the close of the book.

Much has been made of the narrative weaknesses in the novel and the blurring of distinctions among author, narrator, and protagonist: how the text shifts from first- to third-person narration after the first few chapters, then rushes to a close in the final chapters while the narrative voice switches inexplicably back to first-person, and how the events of the narrative collapse into the details of the author's life that are revealed in the appended letters. An obvious answer for this lack of control lies with the author's inexperience as a writer; yet signs of her grasping for a narrative strategy are often overlooked. How, for example, can a reader account for the reemergence of Frado as a devout Christian on the final two pages if not as a tactical ploy to catch the reader's sympathy? Henry Louis Gates, Jr. suggests that Wilson was merely emphasizing the appearance of Christianity in order to appeal to the community around her in the narrative, citing the remark about her "devout and Christian exterior" (xlix) with which Wilson concludes chapter 11. Certainly this is in keeping with the inner-outer dichotomy Wilson employed earlier in contrasting Mrs. Belmont's and Frado's piety. Looking ahead a few pages, however, Wilson uses the appearance of Christianity to make a direct appeal to a different audience, the one reading the novel. Here, where, as Gates notes, "the protagonist, the author, and the novel's narrator all merge explicitly into one voice to launch the text's advertisement for itself, for its status as 'worthy' fiction that should be purchased" (xlvi), Frado's piety reappears embedded in the terminology of the slave narrative. "Nothing turns her from her steadfast purpose of elevating herself. Reposing on God, she has thus far journeyed securely. Still an invalid, she asks your sympathy, gentle reader. Refuse not, because some part of her history is unknown, save by the Omniscient God. Enough has been unrolled to demand your sympathy and aid" (Wilson 130).

The closing passage displays not just a shift from narrating events to directly addressing the reader, but also a return to a number of generic conventions. The idea of raising oneself through education and religion is a vital part of the slave narratives and a belief familiar to the Northern white audiences who read these narratives. Through the concept of self-elevation, white audiences could establish a link, stretching back to Benjamin Franklin and beyond, between their beliefs and aspirations and those of the black slaves in the South. Much of the effectiveness of Frederick Douglass's narrative comes from his employment of the self-made man image, and here Wilson turns to it as well. In the very next sentence Wilson uses the same strategy and quickly makes reference to her own professedly strong religious beliefs—inviting the reader to forget what she has written earlier about turning her back on Christianity—before requesting the readers' support. The contradiction for the reader can only be overcome by ignoring what appeared twenty-five pages earlier, or by

accepting those earlier incidents as a reflection of her true beliefs and the posture in the conclusion as just that, posturing for the audience.

The somewhat odd closing sentence makes it clear that Wilson in the end returned to the generic conventions of the slave narrative. The close of many slave narratives includes a plea for sympathy for the black slaves still living in the South and often a request for financial support for abolitionist societies struggling to end the peculiar institution (Olney 153). Wilson's request, however, is purely personal. The request for sympathy is superfluous—be the character fictional or autobiographical—for the sentence makes it clear that the text has already made the request. But the demand for financial aid—in other words, for the reader to buy the book—is curiously placed at the end of the text. If the reader has gotten this far, it may logically be assumed that the book has already been purchased, or never will be. Even by nineteenth-century advertising standards, this is a clumsy location to try to sell a book. Wilson's decision to do so must have been influenced by reference back to the literary conventions of the slave narrative and sentimental novels she was playing off of.

The tension thus created by attempting to balance apparently autobiographical elements—a failed religious conversion—with generic conventions from the slave narrative—the reference to her piety—effectively destabilizes the text and leaves the reader aware of an aesthetic failure by Wilson as a writer. Conversely, however, it also points toward a problem with the slave narratives. Does a similar tension exist in these texts, covered up only by the more skillful editing work carried out by white abolitionists who functioned as editors? How autobiographical are all the accounts of Christian piety in these narratives? And if the editors took liberties with the topic of the narrator's spiritual life, did they take liberties elsewhere as well?

Absolute certainty in these matters is well-nigh impossible at this distance in time, and certainly it would be wrong to challenge the religious feelings of all black slaves. The relevance of Christian theology to the black slaves' situation is obvious, and narratives such as Sojourner Truth's demonstrate how deeply religious sentiment could go and how conscious many slaves were of the political implications of their spiritual beliefs. Nonetheless, the authors and editors of the slave narratives were also well aware of their audience and the effect that the theme of religion could have upon these readers. Frederick Douglass, for example, felt compelled to add an appendix to his 1845 narrative in order to clarify that it was not Christianity he was attacking but the misuse of it by slaveholders.

Such a reading of *Our Nig* and its use of religion presupposes Wilson as an inexperienced writer and precludes Elizabeth Breau's interpretation of the novel as largely satiric. Her assertion that *Our Nig* is "a multi-layered text that combines aspects of two genres with a satire that undercuts many of the conventions of both" (464) is accurate up to a point; what subverts generic conventions, however, is not satire. While the title certainly implies satire, the shifts in voice and changes in tempo of narrative development point toward an author searching both for style and herself. It is slips, not satire, that subvert.

Our Nig should not be read, however, as a smorgasbord of styles, for there are genres it could drift into but does not. A. Robert Lee, for example, terms Wilson's work as "a novel of New England mulattoism and domestic service" (15), which certainly describes two aspects of the novel, but Frado never develops along the lines of the generic tragic mulatta. As Debra J. Rosenthal points out, "tragic mulattas are tragic because they cannot be saved from themselves and inevitably die by novel's end" (508), and this is certainly not

true of Frado. Through the act of writing, both protagonist and author assert their will to live and defy the stereotype of the tragic mulatta.

What *Our Nig* leaves us with is a pastiche personality. Reacting to nineteenth-century discourses on women's roles, religion, slavery, and race, Wilson has Frado play out the sentimental role of the orphaned and oppressed sentimental heroine, the gothic roles of the mother/daughter relationship, and the slave narrative role of the racialized self. In slipping between roles, she produces a self that, like Anzaldúa's *mestiza*, is a composite of many different identities. Establishing an identity, like establishing a genre, involves shifting, blending, and reblending that in the end leaves one with a new creation that is neither coherent nor what one necessarily thinks it is. Indeed, Eric Gardner's discovery that much of Wilson's nineteenth-century audience probably understood her novel as a moralizing tale for young children (238) reminds us that, despite all the roles we try to play, others may view us from a completely different angle. In the end, had *Our Nig* not vanished into literary obscurity until the late twentieth century, Wilson's blending of genres—autobiography, sentimental novel, slave narrative, and gothic—could even have marked the beginning of a new novelistic genre in African American literature.

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