OVER ONE HUNDRED YEARS after Harriet E. Wilson’s Our Nig: or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black (1859) appeared and disappeared, the book can be bought and read again.¹ Purchasers of the 1983 reprinting fulfill, belatedly, the terms of the work’s existence. For inextricably bound to Wilson’s commentary on gender, class, and race in the nineteenth-century northern states is her insistence on the book’s status as a product for consumption in the marketplace. As Allida testifies in the appendix, Wilson, having met with some success in selling a formula “for restoring gray hair to its former color,” was forced by failing health to “resort to another method of procuring her bread—that of writing an Autobiography” (137). Wilson herself, in the preface, calls the book an “experiment which shall aid me in maintaining myself and child without extinguishing this feeble life” (3).²

An appeal for patronage was characteristic of many African American publications in the nineteenth century, but Wilson’s stands out as something of an anomaly. In a study of pre-1860 African American autobiographies, William L. Andrews notes that “more than a few slave autobiographies were published as fund-raisers for their narrators, and most were labeled so.” But Andrews says as well that “in a society as hostile to blacks as the North was in the 1840s [and later], an ex-slave [or, I would add, a northern “free” black] who hoped for a good sale of his narrative was not likely to embarrass his white sponsors or contradict his audience’s expectations” by presenting the work’s subject “in an unsanctioned manner” (108–09). As Henry Louis Gates, Jr., speculates, Our Nig might well have been ignored because it offers an aggressively unsanctioned story that not only focuses on northern racism but also criticizes abolitionists (Figures 137).

A blend of autobiography and fiction, Our Nig tells the story of Frado, the child of a mixed-race marriage. The narrative begins with Mag Smith, a white woman who is the victim of an upper-class seducer. As the news of her seduction spreads, Mag becomes
increasingly desperate, and she eventually crosses racial lines to marry "a kind-hearted African," Jim (9). After Jim dies, Mag lives with another black man, Seth Shipley; and when they can no longer care for the children she had with Jim, Mag and Seth abandon one, Frado, at the home of a white New Hampshire family, the Bellmonts, who take her in and claim her as "our nig," a domestic servant. Abused, primarily by Mrs. Bellmont and her daughter Mary, befriended mainly by a dog, Fido, Frado leaves the family at the end of her term of service. In the closing chapter, Frado's problems are augmented by her troubled marriage to a black sailor who claims to be a fugitive slave and who eventually dies of yellow fever in New Orleans, leaving her with a child. After problems with both health and employment, Frado draws from the limited education she received during her term with the Bellmonts—an education continued under the tutelage of "a plain, poor, simple woman, who could see merit beneath a dark skin" (124). In the final chapter, as Gates notes, Our Nig’s third-person narrator shifts to the first person as "the protagonist, the author, and the novel's narrator all merge explicitly into one voice to launch the text's advertisement for itself" (Introduction xlvii).

Depicting the life of a “free” black woman, showing that “slavery’s shadows fall” even in the North (title p.), and covering the experiences not only of the black laboring class but also of the white laboring and lower middle classes, Wilson conflates in a single ethical study racial, gender, and economic enslavement. The book’s status as product for sale is significant, for Wilson counters the proslavery accounts of the evils of capitalism with an appeal for salvation by way of the marketplace. Indeed, Wilson reminds her readers that judgment on Frado’s life is solely the province of God, and she frames her call for patronage as a “demand” for "sympathy and aid" (130), by extending which black and white readers alike can endorse and enact a system capable of converting into human transactions what Martin R. Delany would later call “God’s economy” (26). In other words, Wilson’s self-advertisements are directed not merely toward her own elevation from poverty but also toward a program of mutual elevation in a marketplace that is deconstructed and reenvisioned in the narrative. Wilson does not, however, propose the possibility of harmony and trust between blacks and whites in the United States. Rather, she pictures a system that recognizes and capitalizes on racial tensions and mutual distrust, a new system of exchange and balanced conflict—a new economy of identity—that readers support by purchasing the book and participate in by reading it.

“Silent Sympathy” and Cultural Understanding

To speak of this project raises questions about Wilson’s intended audience, and they can be answered only with speculations. The subject is more complicated than her opening appeal to her “colored brethren” suggests (3). In a painstaking reconstruction of Wilson’s biography, Barbara A. White identifies the “predicament” Wilson faced as she prepared to publish Our Nig: “although it was necessary to receive the support of at least some ‘good antislavery friends’ to sell her narrative, she could not distribute it very widely without alerting” those good antislavery friends who had caused many of her misfortunes. Wilson must have known that her story “could be received only by a small group, her ‘colored brethren’” (40, 45). Similarly, Hazel Carby asserts that “Wilson sought her patronage not from a white Northern audience but from her ‘colored brethren.’ Wilson attempted to gain authority for her public voice through a narrative that shared its experience with a black community which she addressed as if it were autonomous from the white community in which it was situated” (43).

Certainly Wilson’s “direct appeal to the black community marginalized a white readership” (Carby 44), but I think that her experience had taught her well that the black community was not autonomous from the white. Her task was to transform their dominant-subordinate relation to mutual dependence. The full title of the work itself signals Wilson’s awareness of her white audience, for her “colored brethren” would need no reminders that “slavery’s shadows fall” even in the North. Moreover, any
marginalization of the white readership in the preface is at least complicated by Wilson's handling of the first chapter, "Mag Smith, My Mother." Presenting Frado's story as the sequel of a tale of love and seduction and postponing the identification of Mag Smith as white, Wilson undermines any assumption that the relationship between narrator and reader can be defined according to the conventions of racial affiliation. Both in the preface and throughout the narrative, Wilson signals her awareness that this text might be read and misread by those anxious to defend slavery (by comparing the conditions of southern slaves and northern blacks) and to dismiss African Americans (by defining them as slaves, in effect, to their "inferior" racial features).6

Wilson's concern, I believe, is not to reach an

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Title page of the original edition of Our Nig.
identifiable community of "colored brethren" but rather to help create a reconfigured community of understanding. One can say of Wilson what Andrews says of Henry Bibb, that he "dismisses the fictive reader as unreasonable and implicitly calls for a reader who can interpret his actions according to the standards that emerge dramatically and pragmatically in the narrative itself." As Andrews argues, "[T]he act of reading autobiographies like Bibb's involves the reader in a decision about his own identity and his own position vis-à-vis the black and white categories of any socio-moral system of thought" (30). Similarly, Wilson appeals to an understanding "colored" by the reading of Our Nig, generated by a confrontation with complex relations that

Title page of the 1983 reprint. (Copyright © 1983 by Random House, Inc. Reprinted by permission of Random House, Inc.)
have been reduced to a simplistic dichotomy of white and black supported only by an ever more contrived and corrupt ideological system. The legal and social codification of cultural simplifications is always complex, and Our Nig—which starts with an appeal to colored brethren and then begins again with a story of a white woman—leads its readers to recognize that complexity.

By tracing Frado’s identity to her white mother’s experiences, Wilson establishes Frado as a product of northern United States culture. That is, Mag Smith’s story highlights structures of cultural identity that later confine Frado even more tightly than they did her mother. As Mag successively crosses what one might call the concentric borders of infamy, accumulating increasingly inflexible and restrictive labels along the way, the system of values that distinguishes between acceptable and notorious identity, between cultural insiders and outsiders, becomes clear. Mag begins as a woman with a “loving, trusting heart” who has the democratic simplicity to believe that she can “ascend” to the social level of her duplicitous seducer and “become an equal” (5–6). The result is a bad reputation that follows her wherever she goes, leaving her with a “home . . . contaminated by the publicity of her fall” and with “a feeling of degradation,” yet also with the hope that “circumspect” behavior might still enable her to “regain in a measure what she had lost” (7). Forced to remain in her assigned sphere of immorality, her prospects diminished further by the immigrant labor that altered significantly women’s opportunities for employment in the Jackson era, Mag is soon left “hugging her wrongs, but making no effort to escape” (8). “[T]he climax of repulsion,” according to the narrator (15), is Mag’s interracial marriage to Jim—by which Mag “sunder[s] another bond which held her to her fellows” and “descend[s] another step down the ladder of infamy” (13). Her final step, into “the darkness of perpetual infamy,” is the result of having “lived an outcast for years” (16): her extramarital relationship with a second black man after Jim dies. Had Mag set out deliberately to transgress the implicit boundaries of the dominant culture’s standards, she could not have done a better job. The point here, though, is that her acts are not deliberate and that in learning of the consequences of seduction, Our Nig’s readers witness the process by which collective cultural identity is maintained at the expense of individual moral character. Although Mag repents, she must remain an outsider. Frado is an outcome of these transgressions, and her identity as cultural product, defined before birth, is finalized when on the title page of the book she becomes “Our Nig.”

In identifying Frado as a cultural product, I refer to Clifford Geertz’s conception of culture as “not so much the empirical commonalities in [human] behavior, from place to place and time to time, but rather the mechanisms by whose agency the breadth and indeterminateness of [one’s] inherent capacities are reduced to the narrowness and specificity of [one’s] actual accomplishments” (45). Wilson would amend this conception of individuation by viewing the process morally and would thereby judge it. As Anna Julia Cooper would later put it in A Voice from the South by a Black Woman of the South (1892),

> Our money, our schools, our governments, our free institutions, our systems of religion and forms of creeds are all first and last to be judged by this standard: what sort of men and women do they grow? How are men and women being shaped and molded by this system of training, under this or that form of government, by this or that standard of moral action? (282)

Arguing that “all other values are merely relative” to the “value” of the individual, Cooper maintains that the United States—“divinely ordered as we dream it to be”—will be divinely judged by its ability, in relation to nations with other forms of government, to “give us a sounder, healthier, more reliable product from this great factory of men” (282–83). Beginning the narrative with the story of Frado’s birth and her eventual (and seemingly inevitable) creation as “Our Nig,” Wilson takes her readers on a tour of the United States factory and then centers the action and the grounds for judgment on this remarkable product.

It is Wilson’s attention to the common cultural
factory—one incapable of producing stable, uniform grounds for trust—that complicates attempts to imagine that she wrote solely for a community of black readers. Prevailing prejudices created the appearance of commonality by setting blacks apart and grouping them together as ideologically marked sites for political action in the form of charity. By such logic, blacks were either physical or ideological fugitives in need of white protection. The resulting dangers for the artificially delineated black community become clear in the ultimate chapter, “The Winding Up of the Matter.” Again Wilson enters into delicate cultural territory, for she begins by alluding to “professed fugitives from slavery, who recounted their personal experience in homely phrase, and awakened the indignation of non-slaveholders against brother Pro” (126; my emphasis). False professions were an issue in both the North and the South. In newspapers and books, antiabolitionists warned potential fugitives that self-professed representatives of the Underground Railroad could not be trusted; similarly, northern abolitionists and members of antislavery societies warned against free blacks who pretended to be fugitives to procure money and clothing from Underground Railroad sympathizers. Wilson presents her protagonist as a victim of this kind of impostor:

Such a one appeared in the new home of Frado; and as people of color were rare there, was it strange she should attract her dark brother; that he should inquire her out; succeed in seeing her; feel a strange sensation in his heart towards her; that he should toy with her shining curls, feel proud to provoke her to smile and expose the ivory concealed by thin, ruby lips; that her sparkling eyes should fascinate; that he should propose; that they should marry? (126)

Telling a familiar story of courtship, love, and marriage in a single sentence, Wilson joins the sentimental associations readers would bring to the tale with the cultural divisions that make it seem like a series of nearly inevitable steps. This conflation of the sentimental destinies of love and the limited destinies of cultural identity undermines the romance of it all, revealing how innocent, unworldly love can entail trust in deceptive appearances. This story echoes that of Frado’s mother. But whereas Mag’s love led her to the hope of transcending class divisions, Frado’s extends from what proves to be an equally naive belief in the inherent community of race. It is this belief—the product of “her own oppression”—that enables Frado to view his silence about his enslavement, when they are alone, as evidence that they share an experience “painful to disturb oftener than was needful.” “There was a silent sympathy,” the narrator emphasizes, “which Frado felt attracted her, and she opened her heart to the presence of love—that arbitrary and inexorable tyrant.” In the end, the tyrant shows his face, for Frado’s husband leaves “her to her fate . . . with the disclosure that he had never seen the South, and that his illiterate harangues were humbugs for hungry abolitionists” (127–28). Frado is the victim not merely of an oppressive culture but also of her experience as a victim. The culture, against which she has begun to develop strategic defenses, reveals a further level of power. The sense of a community of silent sympathy among the oppressed becomes another dimension of oppression, another layer of identity defined by others.

Unable to control the terms of her own cultural identity or to trust others similarly defined, Wilson speaks both to and against those—black or white, male or female—who see her as a cultural type, a familiar product. That is, as almost all critics of this narrative note, Wilson signifies on her own culturally determined identity in her use of “Our Nig” as the title of both the book and its author. I think, though, that critics are sometimes led by their retrospective readings of an African American literary tradition to a narrow understanding of the nature and terms of this signifying. Gates, for example, argues cogently that Our Nig “manifests” “the transformation of the black-as-object into the black-as-subject” (Introduction Iv), and certainly he is right. But as Wilson makes painfully clear, this “black-as-subject” still must face a culture capable of transforming her into woman-as-object and, within yet another concentric circle of identification, worker-as-object. In other words,
it is important to remember that Frado begins as a product not only of racist formulations but also of ethical, gender, and economic formulations. Troping one’s way into black subjecthood affects only the color of the corner one has been backed into; one is still faced with the adjoining walls of social and economic objectification. To escape this corner and save her son, Wilson would need to transform her economic as well as her racial identities.

“Slavery’s Shadows” and the Politics of Labor

Wilson knew that she ran risks in telling a story both unsanctioned by northern abolitionists and sanctionable by northern and southern racists. Specifically, she risked undermining what Houston A. Baker, Jr., calls “the New England ideal so frequently appearing in Afro-American narratives,” that of “free, dignified, and individualistic labor” (49). For example, one of the many proslavery responses to Uncle Tom’s Cabin, W. L. G. Smith’s Life at the South; or, “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” As It Is. Being Narratives, Scenes, and Incidents in the Real “Life of the Lowly” (1852), published in the North, tells the story of an escaped slave who experiences unbearable hardships in the North and who, by the end of the novel, willingly returns to the plantation, having recognized the value of the economic system and of his “natural” place in it. This is but a strikingly direct representative of the many attempts to counter Stowe’s portrayal of slavery by justifying the system as a paternal one designed to prepare those of African origins for their destiny in “God’s own good time” (Smith vi). Indeed, in the mid-nineteenth century, southern defenses of slavery often incorporated attacks on northern capitalism, transforming the (northern) capitalist laborer into worker-as-object and the (southern) black slave into worker-as-subject, a formulation aimed at making the reified southern economic system a national (and even universal) model.9 Such arguments, like many nineteenth-century writings on slavery and labor, were complicated by the advocates’ free borrowing from a number of ideologies and discourses—those of religion, science, politics, sociology, and economics—to dress up fundamental assumptions in new clothing. As Augustine St. Clare says about slavery in Uncle Tom’s Cabin, “Planters, who have money to make by it,—clergymen, who have planters to please,—politicians, who want to rule by it,—may warp and bend language and ethics to a degree that shall astonish the world at their ingenuity; they can press nature and the Bible, and nobody knows what else, into the service . . .” (Stowe 261). The historian Laurence Shore calls this veiling of assumptions “the process by which ‘elastic’ men shaped and reshaped Southern ideology” (194). The pervasive influence of the elastic proslavery-anticapitalist arguments is indicated by the number of antislavery authors who felt the need to respond to them.10

Proslavery commentators seized on the writings of social theorists like Auguste Comte and Thomas Carlyle to present the slave system as not only effective but also entirely just and humane. Two of the first American authors to use Comte’s term “sociology” were slavery advocates: George Fitzhugh, in Sociology for the South; or, The Failure of Free Society, and Henry Hughes, in A Treatise on Sociology, Theoretical and Practical, both published in 1854. Hughes argues for “warranteeism”—a system that “warrant[s] the existence and progress of all.” He bases the concept of warranteeism on his assertion that for the “healthy existence of all” in a society, “three warranted or ordered systems are necessary”—“the Political, the Economic, and the Hygienic” (52). By this logic, slavery becomes simply “WARRANTEISM WITH THE ETHNICAL QUALIFICATION.” Another name for warranteeism, one learns, is “liberty-labor,” and as a call for universal adoption of a form of government modeled after the American southern slave system, Hughes presents the slogan “LIBERTY-LABOR MUST BE THE SUBSTITUTE OF FREE-LABOR” (55). Whereas in warranteeism “necessary association, adaptation and regulation are . . . not accidental: they are essential,” in “the Free-labor form of societary organization” these necessities of social order “are not essential; they are accidental” (53–54). Slavery thus may be seen as both the manifestation and guarantor of social order, health, and justice. Arguably the most forceful proponent of this
view was Fitzhugh, who draws from Carlyle often and insistently in his second book, *Cannibals All!* or, *Slaves without Masters*, published in 1857, two years before *Our Nig*. With characteristically aggressive confidence, Fitzhugh asserts:

> [W]e not only boast that the White Slave Trade is more exacting and fraudulent (in fact, though not in intention) than Black Slavery; but we also boast that it is more cruel, in leaving the laborer to take care of himself and family out of the pittance which skill or capital have allowed him to retain. (15)

Arguing that the precepts of Christianity and those of capitalism are mutually exclusive, Fitzhugh concludes that “it is impossible to place labor and capital in harmonious or friendly relations, except by the means of slavery, which identifies their interests” (31).

Fitzhugh is most effective in suggesting that debates on the ethics of economic systems should extend beyond southern slavery to the broader field of labor. *Cannibals All!* quotes extensively from American and European socialist and anticapitalist writings, some arguing that slavery is the solution to the oppression of the poor, regardless of race. For example, in an essay Fitzhugh reprints in its entirety, one self-professed English “Philanthropist” contends that slavery and content, and liberty and discontent, are natural results of each other. Applying this, then, to the toil-worn, half-fed, pauperized population of England, I found that the only way to permanently and efficiently remedy the complicated evils, would be to ENSLAVE the whole of the people of England who have not property. (155)

Similarly, the southern scientific agriculturist Edmund Ruffin states in *The Political Economy of Slavery* (1853) that “in their main doctrines, the socialists are right” and that the slavery system is the most effective means of securing the benefits of “the association of labor” (83, 82).

The consideration of slavery as a mode of organized labor provided not only convenient proslavery defenses against abolitionists but also powerful rhetorical tools for mobilizing labor within the developing capitalist economy. David R. Roediger demonstrates that slavery in the United States shaped the formation of the antebellum labor movement, which was “exceptional in its rhetoric” and “exceptionally militant as it critiqued evolving capitalist social relations as a kind of slavery” (66). By use of the vague and inclusive phrase white slavery, “[a]bolitionists, free Blacks, bankers, factory owners and prison labor could, in sundry combinations, be cast as villains in a loose plot to enslave white workers” (73). But though the comparison between the white hireling and the black slave could encourage analyses of wage labor as bondage, the emphasis on visible social contrasts “also could reassure wage workers that they belonged to the ranks of ‘free white labor’” (47) and highlight the need for and progress toward improved labor conditions for white workers. In short, Roediger argues, “the growing popular sense of whiteness represented a hesitantly emerging consensus holding together a very diverse white working class” by enabling white antebellum workers to shift their anxieties onto blacks (97, 100).11 As Frederick Douglass put it in 1855, “The impression is cunningly made, that slavery is the only power that can prevent the laboring white man from falling to the level of the slave’s poverty and degradation” (My Bondage 310–11).

Wilson signals in her preface her awareness of the flexible logic of proslavery activists, noting her decision to omit “what would most provoke shame in our good anti-slavery friends at home,” carefully identifying Mrs. Bellmont with “southern principles,” and asserting, “I would not . . . palliate slavery at the South, by disclosures of its appurtenances North” (3). Throughout *Our Nig*, which begins with a white woman displaced in the job market by “foreigners who cheapened toil and clamored for a livelihood” (8), Wilson deliberately and forcefully conflates the economic situations of working-class whites and culturally enslaved “free” blacks. Wilson’s task was to transform herself from an object of charity to a laboring subject in an economy apparently designed to exclude or delegitimize her labor. Increasingly, her only material for this transformation—the only material with which she could perform as laborer—was the life that
the culture had produced, and the only product she could offer was the narrative of that life.12

Human Transactions and “God’s Economy”

As Baker writes of Douglass’s 1845 Narrative, in Our Nig “[t]he tones of a Providentially oriented moral suasion eventually compete with the cadences of a secularly oriented economic voice.” Like Douglass, Wilson works to combine “literacy, Christianity, and revolutionary zeal in an individual and economically profitable job of work” (Baker 43, 49). However, Wilson’s experiences had not offered her the kind of hope that Douglass’s revolutionary self-creation seemingly had provided him in 1845, nor was she writing under the auspices of an antislavery organization that would have made it advisable to represent hope in the northern states. Rather, Wilson grounds her goal of an “economically profitable job of work” in an eschatological vision of the existing economic system, in a consideration of the market economy as the vehicle God provided to regulate and improve human affairs. In 1879, Wilson’s contemporary Martin R. Delany would speak of race as “a means in the providence of God’s economy, to the accomplishment of his ends in the progress of civilization” (26). A similar notion of “God’s economy” led Anna Julia Cooper to argue in 1892 that “you need not formulate and establish the credibility and authenticity of Christian Evidences, when you can demonstrate and prove the present value of CHRISTIAN MEN.” To judge a culture by its “productions,” Cooper suggests, is to evaluate its adherence to moral law:

And this test for systems of belief, for schools of thought, and for theories of conduct, is also the ultimate and inevitable test of nations, of races and of individuals. What sort of men do you turn out? How are you supplying the great demands of the world’s market? (284)

In 1859, Wilson hoped to produce something that would enable her to enjoy the profits of God’s economy.13

In this vision of economy, wealth and poverty are moral concepts, measured not by economic status but by character. Poverty, Gates argues, is “the great evil in this book,” “both the desperation it inflicts as well as the evils it implicitly sanctions” (Introduction xlv); but I suggest that the great evil is rather the will to dominate, which feeds on cultural and personal vulnerability. After all, the only character who views poverty as a disgrace and a dishonor is one of the narrative’s most visible villains, Mrs. Bellmont. She is unable to see that her son’s chosen wife (and Frado’s favorite) is, as Jack Bellmont puts it to his mother, “worth a million dollars . . . though not a cent of it is in money” (112). It is also Mrs. Bellmont who insists that her daughter Jane marry Henry Reed, for the mother has “counted the acres which were to be transmitted to” him and “knew there was silver in the purse” (56). In each case, Mrs. Bellmont displays, though circumspectly, the same will to dominate that inspires her verbal and physical abuse of Frado, distorting perceptions in her effort to control or destroy those who threaten her ambitions. Once Jack is away and his wife is “more in [Mrs. Bellmont’s] power,” the narrator says, the mother “wished to make [Jenny] feel her inferiority” and watches for acts “which might be construed into conjugal unfaithfulness” (113). This project, like Mrs. Bellmont’s response to Frado’s attempts to understand and experience Christianity, demonstrates that nothing is sacred in the struggle for power, as the discourse of morality itself becomes a tool of domination.

Mrs. Bellmont dramatizes the corruption of cultural discourse, its deliberate misuse—but what the narrator takes the discourse to signify remains untainted. The narrator’s disapproval of Mrs. Bellmont’s motives for interfering with these relationships does not suggest disapproval of wealth. The narrator celebrates the marriage of Jack’s brother James to a wealthy woman, while observing that James “did not marry her wealth” but that “he loved her, sincerely” (55). Similarly, when Mr. Bellmont insists that Jane not be “compelled to violate her free choice in so important a transaction” (60), her preference for George Means over Henry Reed is a choice of love over the accumulation of wealth for its own sake. Although Mrs. Bellmont tries to make George Means’s name signify that he is, in fact,
mean, Wilson shows that proper motivations inform the power of the cultural system, for this couple find means enough to maintain their "early love" beyond the end of the narrative (130). The lesson is emphasized later, in what seems like a pun on the other suitor's name, when the narrator notes that Mr. Bellmont "bowed like a 'bruised reed,' under the loss of his beloved son." No longer the "reed" he once was, Mr. Bellmont begins to worry about his past actions —about the relation between his professions and his practices and about the preparation of his soul for "the celestial city" (102).

Mr. Bellmont's subsequent attempt to reinvest discourse with meaning leads to the most striking turning point of the narrative, Frado's first direct act of resistance against Mrs. Bellmont's violence. Fearing for his own soul, Mr. Bellmont allows Frado to return to religious meetings; Mrs. Bellmont, afraid that word will get out about her beating Frado, tells Frado to "stop trying to be religious," threatening to "whip her to death." Mr. Bellmont then acknowledges to Frado that "he had seen her many times punished undeservedly" and advises her "to avoid it if she could" "when she was sure she did not deserve whipping" (104). "It was not long," the narrator notes pointedly, "before an opportunity offered of profiting by his advice" (105). In this confrontation, Frado—"the only moving power in the house" (62)—recognizes the power of her position as laborer and essentially threatens to go on strike: "'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." This act of resistance is Frado's most successful one, for the "affair never met with an 'after clap,' like many others" (105). The lesson is that, rightly perceived, the system works: moral self-government supports American political ideals. The principles of liberty and independence ingrained in nineteenth-century national mythology but often corrupted by practice are renewed, reenacted, in a natural chain of events that begins with Mr. Bellmont's attempt to align his professions and his practice.

Indeed, all Frado's economic opportunities are associated with providential guidance over the marketplace. When Frado hears that "in some towns in Massachusetts, girls make straw bonnets" and that the work is "easy and profitable," she wonders how "she, black, feeble and poor," could "find any one to teach her" to do it. The answer is that "God prepares the way, when human agencies see no path." The way, in this case, is a woman who, guided by faith, is capable of seeing "merit beneath a dark skin" and who teaches Frado not only the art of the needle but also "the value of useful books." This lesson leads to a project of "self-improvement," as Frado comes to feel "that this book information supplied an undefined dissatisfaction she had long felt, but could not express" (124–25). Similarly, when she finds herself abandoned toward the end of the narrative, "watched by kidnappers" and "maltreated by professed abolitionists," Frado again gains help from a guiding hand: "In one of her tours, Providence favored her with a friend who, pitying her cheerless lot, kindly provided her with a valuable recipe, from which she might herself manufacture a useful article for her maintenance" (129). Episodes such as these inform her final claim that "[r]eposing on God, she has thus far journeyed securely." Her reliance on God has been a progressive self-reliance; the rewards she received for fulfilling her duty—her "steadfast purpose of elevating herself"—are the material means that make self-reliance possible (130).

But far from promoting naive acceptance of "the New England ideal" of "free, dignified, and individualistic labor" (Baker 49), Wilson presents a complex perspective on the workings of God's economy in her depiction of the "courtship" of Mag Smith and Jim. Critics have focused on the signifying conclusion of Jim's appeal to Mag: "Which you rather have, a black heart in a white skin, or a white heart in a black one?" (12). Equally important, however, is the process that leads to the conclusion, for Wilson highlights the economic contingencies and marketplace logic that enable Jim to act on his original inspiration to marry Mag. Knowing that Mag is out of wood, Jim asks, "How's the wood, Mag?" When she admits it is gone, he says, "Too bad!" The narrator notes that "his truthful reply would have been, I'm glad." When Jim asks Mag...
about food and she says that she has none, he replies, "Too bad!"—but "with the same inward gratulation as before." His marriage proposal does not even pretend to be romantic; Mag is desperate, and Jim, having forced her hand with good marketplace technique, simply presents himself as the last available source of supply: "'Well, Mag,' said Jim, after a short pause, 'you's down low enough. I don't see but I've got to take care of ye. 'Sposin' we marry!'" (12).

The significance of this episode lies not merely in the victory of a pure heart over a culturally derogated black skin but also and more fundamentally in the process by which the victory is achieved and in the economic system that enables the cross-racial exchange. After all, Wilson's final reason for Mag's acceptance is that "want is a . . . powerful philosopher and preacher" (13). But the sermon preached by want is about more than the virtues of economic gain. In a book that calls for the readers' "sympathy and aid" (130) but dramatizes—through Frado's husband and the Bellmonts—the possibility that sympathy can be used as a mask for self-interest, it is important to remember that Jim's efforts to help Mag (and himself) begin with pity. This pity leads to genuine reciprocity, however, for Mag surrenders her hope to reenter the circle of cultural respectability, and Jim not only gets what he wants but also commits himself to give what he can. No simple act of charity, no simple attempt to purchase ideological self-definition, pity here becomes part of a system of sentiments, the initial point of exchange that provides entrance into God's economy and thereby promotes the development of finer feelings. For "pity and love," the narrator summarizes, "know little severance. One attends the other. Jim acknowledged the presence of the former, and his efforts in Mag's behalf told also of a finer principle" (10).

Wilson carefully contrasts this genuine reciprocity, the motive force of God's economy, with charity in narrating the experiences Frado has after being reduced by circumstances and poor health to a situation similar to that of her mother many years earlier. With "one only resource," public support, Frado is left to two elderly maidens, who, the narrator notes with sarcasm, have "principle enough to be willing to earn the money a charitable public disburses." When Frado falls ill, she is turned over to the appropriately named Mrs. Hogs, "a lover of gold and silver" who asks "the favor of filling her coffers by caring for the sick" (122). This move aggravates yet more Frado's decline; and when her health gradually begins to improve and she starts to feel "hope that she might yet help herself," Mrs. Hogs reports her to the authorities (123). Charity diverts the motive power in their relationship from the principal parties to a third party and instead of mutual exchange establishes a chain of funds from the community to Mrs. Hogs to Frado, a linear connection in which Frado must be dependent so that Mrs. Hogs's position as a self-aggrandizing benefactor can be secure. In other words, the relationship must remain stagnant, with clearly defined and delimited roles.

Our Nig is designed to initiate a more active system of exchange, based on mutual dependence and devoted to communal development. In Wilson's vision of Christianity, as presented in this work, redemptive faith requires that one redeem one's resources in an economic management of selfhood. When James Bellmont finds "his Saviour," he wishes that Frado might find hers because the discovery would enable her to manage the "elements in her heart which . . . would make her worthy [of] the esteem and friendship of the world." This esteem has practical significance, as well as social:

A kind, affectionate heart, native wit, and common sense, and the pertness she sometimes exhibited, he felt if restrained properly, might become useful in originating a self-reliance which would be of service to her in after years.

However, such self-reliance can operate successfully only in a community of others who are similarly "transformed and purified by the gospel" and attuned to the directives of Providence (69). One can receive only as others offer, and one can offer only as others are disposed to receive. And as Jim tried to expose Mag's need, so Wilson works to expose the deprivation, the utter want, of her world, thereby indicating the
still unacknowledged demand for what only she and others like her can supply: the products of experience and the profits of a fully realized and hard-earned Christian perspective.

Wilson’s strategy of exposure and exchange is neatly summarized in two episodes. In the first, Frado deals with one of the sheep she tends, a “willful leader, who always persisted in being first served,” often throwing Frado down in his zeal. She locates herself at “the highest point of land nearest the stream” and entices the sheep with a dish, calling “the flock to their mock repast.” As she expects, the willful leader comes “furiously leaping and bounding far in advance of the flock,” and as he leaps for the dish, Frado steps aside, causing him to tumble down into the river, on the other side of which he has to remain until the night, a sheepish victim of his own greed (54–55). Frado refers to this incident later, when she half-seriously wishes for the death of Mary Bellmont, another willful leader: “I’d like to try my hand at curing her too” (80). The sheep episode echoes an earlier experience, when Mary tries to force Frado into a stream and, in the struggle, loses her footing and falls in herself. The eschatological implications of these stories of willful leaders and just deserts are underscored when Mary dies, inspiring Frado to say, “She’s got into the river again” (107).

In the second exemplary episode, Frado is forced to eat from a plate Mrs. Bellmont has used. Annoyed at being “commanded to do what was disagreeable . . . because it was disagreeable,” Frado has her dog, Fido, lick the plate clean, a job he does “to the best of his ability,” and afterward she eats from it (71). What makes this image a fitting one for Wilson’s own strategies is that Frado not only enjoys a symbolic victory over Mrs. Bellmont but also receives a silver half-dollar from Mrs. Bellmont’s son, who is pleased at seeing his mother exposed and defeated. As James explains to his mother, “You have not treated her, mother, so as to gain her love; she is only exhibiting your remissness in this matter” (72). Mrs. Bellmont never learns the lesson, but it remains for others, an education that begins when one pays the price of this narrative. Wilson’s message is that the exposure of “remissness” must be recognized as a valuable service if the nation is to maintain its moral foundations. The unmasking of willful leaders and tyrannical employers returns economic relations to their moral grounds, there to be evaluated.

The value of a marketplace economy, then—and what makes it a practical entrance into “God’s economy”—is that it depends not on hopeful cooperation but rather on inevitable conflict. In this, Wilson anticipates Anna Julia Cooper, who views the “race problem” as a vital part of God’s mode of governance, by which “eternal harmony and symmetry” are “the unvarying result of the equilibrium of opposing forces” (150). As Cooper argues, noting her preference for the troubled present over Edward Bellamy’s utopian “grandmotherly government” in Looking Backward, “Progressive peace in a nation is the result of conflict; and conflict, such as is healthy, stimulating, and progressive, is produced through the co-existence of radically opposing or racially different elements” (151). Closer to Wilson’s time, in an essay of 1844 titled “On the Moral and Political Effect of the Relation between the Caucasian Master and the African Slave,” a slavery advocate contends that the emancipation of female slaves would force them to rely on “cold charities,” replacing “a community of interests” with “a conflict of interests” (339). Distrusting the community of interests, Wilson supports a renewed understanding of the dynamic exchanges between conflicting interests, for the interests that she knew were sure to conflict. But the conflicts, she suggests, may contain the terms of mutual dependence, the demands of collective survival—the initial and fundamental elements of a genuine and morally secure community of interests.

Throughout this narrative, Wilson maintains implicitly that community can come only from the recognition of conflict and that the nation can progress only by way of ongoing negotiations among antagonists who acknowledge that each has something another needs to survive, in a world governed by God. Baker’s brilliant examination of the economic argument in Douglass’s Narrative illustrates how Douglass presents his life as a process by which he “eventually converts property, through property, into hu-
manity” (Baker 48). Addressing slavery’s northern shadows, Wilson certainly hopes to do the same. But as Douglass himself realized after his initial optimistic vision of the New England economic system, the self-purchase necessary to African American survival in the growing capitalist environment of the North required communal self-purchase by all citizens. The ostensibly empowered had to recognize that, like the physically enslaved, they too had been converted to property by the economic and political network that both supported and depended on the slave system. Ultimately, Our Nig argues that communal self-purchase begins with this book; the story of the life produced by this culture serves as the catalyst for new productions in the ongoing quest to convert disparate cultural property into a common humanity.16

Notes

1On the critical and cultural implications of the reprint and its format, distribution, and reception, see Dearborn 31–33; Gardner; White 20, 46n.

2The final tragedy of this book is that Wilson’s young son died shortly after it was published.

3White’s essay on Our Nig is a model of careful research, and her documentary evidence supports her speculation that Wilson was “bound out” to the Hayward family—the model for the Bellmonts—under the “vendue system,” or “New England method,” of disposing of the poor, “in which the poor were auctioned off or bound out” (46n).

4Among White’s numerous valuable findings is the resounding evidence that the Haywards had “strong abolitionist connections” (34). Gardner speculates that “abolitionists knew about the book but . . . may have consciously chosen not to publicize it” (227).

5On Wilson’s intended audience, see also Doriani; Fox-Genovese. Addressing a racially mixed audience, Frederick Douglass was also sharply critical of northern prejudice and of abolitionists after the late 1840s, pointedly in his revisionist 1855 autobiography, My Bondage and My Freedom.

Gardner’s recent research into the publishing history of Our Nig is valuable here, though his discoveries concerning Wilson’s actual audience only emphasize the problem of determining her intended audience. Gardner argues that “ownership patterns . . . sustain the theory that Wilson was responsible for distributing the book herself—and that the distribution was limited to personal acquaintance with the author or her friends and agents” (240). Gardner notes as well that Wilson apparently was not able to market her book in Boston, where she would have found a large black community, perhaps because her son’s death took her back to Milford before she could do so. Many purchasers, Gardner suggests, “either interpreted or deployed Our Nig as a book geared toward the moral improvement of young readers” (228).

See also Tate, who rightly distinguishes between Wilson’s intended audience and “those readers who live outside the historical exigencies of Wilson’s epoch, namely ourselves” (32). Focusing on Wilson’s attempt to “re-create herself in a novelized form” (38), Tate implies that Wilson’s first audience was both herself and the world that had constructed a restrictive selfhood for her. See especially 36–42.

6I am thinking in particular of “scientific” racialism of the type in Nott and Gliddon and in Cartwright.

7That false fugitives were a fact of antebellum life is suggested by the casualness with which Douglass, in discussing the character of the enslaved, remarks, “So uniformly are good manners enforced among slaves, that I can easily detect a ‘bogus’ fugitive by his manners” (My Bondage 70). On the complex deceptions and legends accompanying the pro- and antislavery movements generally and the Underground Railroad specifically, see Gara.

8On Mag’s and Frado’s similar situations and different responses, see Tate 37–38.

9The economic arguments surrounding slavery are as complex as nineteenth-century religious, scientific, and legal justifications of it. Temperly provides a useful entrance into the issues, as does Shore. See also Tise; Genovese; Frederickson; Takaki; and Bender.

10In Jacobs’s Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, see ch. 37; in W. Brown’s Clotel, see ch. 15; see also ch. 19 of Uncle Tom’s Cabin.

11G. Brown’s comments on abolition as “the reformation of labor” and on Stowe’s comparisons of Irish and black domestic servants seem relevant here (54–59). On labor issues related to gender, race, or national origins, see Litwack; Turbin; Bennett; Foner; and Lown.

According to Roediger, examination of “the labor and radical Democratic press of the 1840s shows that white slavery was the most common phrasing of metaphors regarding white workers’ oppression with slavery of wages second and wage slavery a very distant third.... [T]he term white slavery was at times used even in articles speculating about the fate of free Blacks if abolition prevailed” (72). See also Douglass’s 1855 discussion of white southern laborers, which includes the point that “[t]he difference between the white slave, and the black slave, is this: the latter belongs to one slaveholder, and the former belongs to all the slaveholders, collectively” (My Bondage 310).

12White emphasizes “the extent to which economic motives predominate in Wilson’s narrative” (33). White documents Wilson’s struggle to support herself and, later, her son after her years with the Hayward family. Often dependent on the town of Milford, New Hampshire, and at times forced to leave her young son either to the mercies of the county poor farm, which had “terrible conditions” (24), or to the publicly
financed care of a local family, Wilson knew intimately the complex cultural labyrinth assigned to “free” black northern laborers.

For a reading of the nature and significance of Wilson’s economic enterprise that differs from the one I present here, see Holloway.

13 Gates, as well as others, argues that Frado’s conversion to Christianity is not real, that “Frado never truly undergoes a religious transformation, merely the appearance of one” (Introduction xlix). I agree with Tate, however, that Wilson offers her own version of the familiar African American distinction between profession and practice—or, as Douglass puts it, “between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ” (Narrative 153). Tate argues, “Although the appendix clearly characterizes Wilson as a pious Christian . . . her faith is not without doubt and it mounts a sustained interrogation of the conventional practice of Christianity throughout the text” (47). The fact that Frado struggles to understand and accept Christianity should not be taken as evidence that she does not finally consider herself a Christian.

14 It should be noted, however, that while Jane certainly never confuses the two rivals, Wilson apparently does, referring in the final pages to Jane’s happiness with “Henry.”

15 See, for example, Bell 49; for a more recent analysis, see Tate 33. Critics sometimes treat this play on color-coded standards as if it were innovative. However, in 1846 Douglass, in a letter he included in My Bondage and My Freedom, sharply attacked standards that allowed African Americans to be ridiculed and oppressed “with impunity by any one, (no matter how black his heart,) so he has a white skin” (371).

16 I presented an early version of this study at “‘Other Voices’: American Women Writers of Color,” a conference sponsored by Salisbury State University and the Maryland Humanities Council. I am grateful to the codirectors of that conference, Connie L. Richards and Thomas L. Erskine, and to members of the audience for their encouragement. This essay benefited also from my friend and colleague Adele Newson’s careful reading of an early draft.

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