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Portraits of Piety

Authenticating Strategies in Slave Narratives and Two Antebellum African-American Novels

This paper first examines the use of authenticating devices in the antebellum slave narratives and then goes on to analyze how these authorial strategies are carried over from African-American autobiography into two fictionalized autobiographies from the 1850s. In particular, the paper argues for including portrayals of black religious belief as one of the many generic strategies used by antebellum slave narrators to convince their potentially skeptical audience that they were reading “the real thing.” In investigating how authenticating strategies are incorporated into Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig* (1859) and Hannah Crafts’s *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* (1855–61?), the relative artistic success of the two writers is evaluated and the implications of borrowing techniques from autobiography for fiction discussed. By looking at texts from the 1850s, a decade when the slave narrative reached its height in popularity and the first fictional works in African-American literature were being composed, a glimpse is gained into a transitional moment in black writing.

Literary traditions invariably have many roots, yet it is difficult to deny the central role the antebellum slave narratives have played in African-American literature. Throughout the twentieth century, from James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) through Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* (1945) to Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), the slave narratives have served as one of the main models and templates for black fiction. Their use as historical documents, on the other hand, had to wait until the 1970s, when historians such as John Blassingame and Eugene Genovese helped establish these texts’ veracity. At dispute had been the slave narratives’ authenticity and general reliability.

Full authenticity of any autobiographical writing would, of course, be impossible to establish, but many of these antebellum texts carried the burden of also having been published for propaganda purposes. Numerous slave narratives appeared between 1830 and 1861, in abolitionist journals, in pamphlets, and about one-hundred as short book-length publications;¹ but the most famous of these – including narratives by

1. John Sekora, “Is the Slave Narrative a Species of Autobiography?” in *Studies in Autobiography*, ed. James Olney (New York: Oxford UP, 1988), 99–111, p. 101.

Frederick Douglass,² Henry Bibb,³ and William Wells Brown⁴ – were published with the support of abolitionist societies. White Northerners read slave narratives primarily as a means of informing themselves about slavery, not necessarily to learn about slaves as individuals or to be converted to a cause; yet in reading these texts they were confronted in varying degrees with both intentions. Slave narratives were thus inherently ideological texts serving a political purpose: they strove to win support for the abolition of slavery by simultaneously going, as one critic put it, “right to the hearts of men”⁵ and appearing as reliable as possible, as well as to tell the individual slave’s own tale. Long after the abolitionist societies closed down, however, the slave narratives remained stigmatized as propaganda tools.

The veracity of the antebellum slave narratives was not just a question for such twentieth-century historians as Ulrich B. Phillips, who claimed that they “were issued with so much abolitionist editing that as a class their authority is doubtful,”⁶ but also for their original audience. At the time they were written, the slave narratives faced challenges by Southern slave owners angry at the implicit and direct attacks on their way of life, and the skepticism of Northern white audiences whose racism often predisposed them to question whether blacks were capable of being entirely truthful or even being able to write in the first place. As a consequence, from the very beginning the first black authors – and their sponsors, editors, or amanuenses, where such assisted in shaping the text – developed strategies to authenticate the texts in the eyes of their readers.

Authenticating strategies, in other words, were woven into the very fabric of the slave narratives as these texts coalesced into a genre with recognizable patterns and conventions. Later, as African-American writing began to move beyond autobiography toward more fictional forms, some of these authenticating strategies found their way, consciously or unconsciously, into a number of these texts.

In this article I will focus on this evolutionary moment in the development of the African-American novel, the 1850s, when the slave narrative reached the height of its popularity and the first black novels were published. The purpose of the article is twofold: first, I propose to extend the list of authenticating strategies uncovered by other critics to include the portrayals of black religious life. The piety the slave

2. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself, 1845* (New York: Penguin, 1982).

3. Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (New York: Author, 1849).

4. William Wells Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave, Written by Himself* (Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1847).

5. William Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story* (Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1986), p. 5.

6. Ulrich Phillips, *Life and Labor in the Old South* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1929), p. 209.

narrators often display, I argue, is part of a sentimental strategy aimed largely at how a white audience perceives blacks. Secondly, I will look at two novels from the era – Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (1859)⁷ and Hannah Crafts’s *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* (1855–1861?)⁸ – that integrated this particular strategy, and show how their portrayals of the protagonist’s piety demonstrate two possible approaches to adapting this authenticating strategy: a strict adaption with heavy reliance on the sentimental, which ends up revealing internal contradictions in *Our Nig*, and a looser, less sentimental approach that allows Hannah Crafts to imbue the strategy with a new purpose. Both texts are generally assumed to be fictionalized autobiographies, and thus represent, like Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861),⁹ antebellum attempts to fuse one of the era’s more popular genres, the slave narrative, with the novel.

Authenticating Strategies and the Slave Narrative

Early African-American autobiography drew heavily upon the Indian captivity narrative and spiritual or conversion narrative, relying on the reader’s familiarity with these genres as a way of validating their authenticity. In the earliest narratives from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries race is largely written out of the text; for example, John Marrant’s ethnicity “is almost totally subsumed under his generic identity as [a] Christian pilgrim.”¹⁰ Rather than openly challenge their readers’ notions on prevailing racial, social, or religious concepts, these narratives present black individuals in white literary forms and show them accepting white values. As Frances Smith Foster notes, “[t]heir emphasis was upon a theme more easily identified with by all heirs to a Judeo-Christian philosophy, the struggle for existence as strangers in an inhospitable land.”¹¹

It was in the thirty years leading up to the Civil War, when abolitionists recognized the propaganda value of the narratives and began encouraging and sponsoring many of the narratives, that the slave narrative coalesced into a more distinct and recognizable genre. James Olney presents probably the best and most concise summary of the generic conventions that developed. These included, among other

7. All parenthesized references are to this edition: Harriet Wilson, *Our Nig; Or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black*. 1859. ed. Henry L. Gates, Jr. (New York: Vintage, 1983).

8. All parenthesized references are to this edition: Hannah Crafts, *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*, ed. Henry L. Gates, Jr. (New York: Warner Books, 2002).

9. Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (New York: Oxford UP, 1988).

10. Andrews, p. 45.

11. Frances Smith Foster, *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Antebellum Slave Narratives* (Madison, WI: U of Wisconsin P, 1992), p. 44.

trademarks, a title that makes the claim “Written by Himself”; testimonials written by prominent whites that vouch for the existence of the slave and truthfulness of the facts presented; an opening sentence that reads “I was born. . .”; an account of the ex-slave’s parents; tales of whippings inflicted upon the writer and/or on other (especially female) slaves; an account of how the slave learned to read and write; hypocritical Christian slave owners, who are invariably described as the most brutal; and the successful escape attempt.¹² Two parallel purposes can be readily discerned behind the use of these conventions: to authenticate the accuracy of the narrative and to galvanize the reader’s emotions into support for the abolitionist cause. These two purposes went hand in hand. First, the humanity of the slave had to be established so as to make him worthy of the reader’s empathy; then the sentiments of the reader had to be touched.

Religion could be used to affect both these ends. In the first case, portraying the narrator as religious and worshipping the same Christian God implicitly established his humanity and equality with the reader. Often the narrator made this explicit, as in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, when Linda Brent quotes a white preacher she heard once: “Your skin is darker than mine; but God judges men by their hearts, not the color of their skins.”¹³ This could also be accomplished with irony, as William Wells Brown does when describing the case of a slave named Delphia, who is whipped mercilessly by her master and of whom he adds laconically at the conclusion of the description: “She was a member of the same church as her master.”¹⁴ The second purpose, which leans heavily on the sentimental, took on two separate forms. On the one hand, the slaveholder might be shown prohibiting any sign of piety or denying the slave access to worship services, as happens to Henry Bibb, who, when upon returning from secretly attending a prayer meeting, is told by his wife that his master has ordered he “should suffer the penalty, which was five hundred lashes, on [his] naked back.”¹⁵ In a variation on this pattern, Henry Box Brown mused on what could have become of him had his mother not secretly taught him “the principles of morality”: “[i]t is really a wonder to me now, considering the character of my position that I did not imbibe a strong and lasting hatred of everything pertaining to the religion of Christ.”¹⁶ Such observations appear calculated to evoke

12. James Olney, “‘I Was Born’: Slaves Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature,” in *The Slave’s Narrative*, eds. Henry L. Gates Jr. and Charles Davis (New York: Oxford UP, 1985), 148–75, pp. 152–53.

13. Jacobs, p. 111.

14. W. Brown, p. 39.

15. Bibb, p. 120.

16. Henry Box Brown, *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself* (Manchester: Lee & Glynn, 1851), p. 3.

in the reader pity for the slave or outrage at the slaveholder's behavior. On the other hand, almost all slave narratives contained the portrayal of a professedly Christian slave owner who prayed on Sundays and whipped slaves mercilessly on the other days of the week. Frederick Douglass summarizes this hypocrisy succinctly in discussing his own experiences: "[t]he pious and benign smile which graced Covey's face on *Sunday*, wholly disappeared on *Monday*."¹⁷ To emphasize the corrupting nature of the institution and the reader's own precarious relationship to it, recently arrived Northerners might be inserted into this role and shown backsliding into brutality. Either way, provoking religious outrage in the reader was an effective strategy; it won the reader to the abolitionist cause by letting him slip into the role of religious redeemer. Helping end slavery would satisfy the missionary impulse by helping the black slave and could prevent one's neighbor or fellow countryman from leaving the narrow path.

As the above examples demonstrate, religious portrayals worked primarily on an affective level, helping modify an image of the slave narrator in the reader's mind rather than definitively proving that he physically existed. However, since the abolitionists' goal was the destruction of a very specific social and economic institution based on race, emotive appeals were as necessary to authenticate the slave's humanity as any objective verification of his story's factuality. Indeed, combining a sentimental authenticating strategy, like religion, with another more objective authentication device could prove highly effective; yet, however one approached the text, verification of the text had become a necessity.

While latent racism fueled suspicion about a text's reliability, it was the controversy surrounding the accuracy of James Williams's narrative¹⁸ in 1838 that led to authentication becoming a central issue in the publication of all slave narratives. More strategies had to be devised in order to provide an extra dimension of authenticity. Specific names and locations, bills of sale, references to the Nat Turner revolt all gave the feel of authenticity and an extra-textual referent to establish the text's veracity. I would argue that the referent did not always have to be a tangible item or a person; simply adhering to the reader's expectations or preconceived beliefs about abstract topics like race could also be understood as a kind of authenticating strategy. Such a strategy would not objectively confirm the truthfulness of the text, though if it confirms what the reader believes to be true it functions much the same way as an objective authenticating strategy in the reader's mind. In other words, presenting

17. Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage, My Freedom* (New York: Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1855), p. 241.

18. James Williams, *Narrative of James Williams, an American Slave, Who Was for Several Years a Driver on a Cotton Plantation in Alabama* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1838).

a religious portrayal of blacks that a white reader assumed to be true would make the text appear reliable to the reader. Obviously, this method of confirming a text's accuracy is not without its own – epistemological and moral – problems, as in fact the very case of James Williams makes clear. William Andrews points out that the text's amanuensis, the nationally recognized poet James Whittier, attested to the narrative's veracity not because he possessed any objective, corroborating facts, but because Williams appeared to him to be “a believable narrator.”¹⁹ Williams, like James Ball in his ghostwritten narrative published a year earlier, met the expectations of the abolitionist editors as to how a truth-telling black man behaves, with “his emotional restraint, reticence about personal feelings and judgments, and apparent propensity to forgive and pity.”²⁰

In other words, the Williams case dramatizes how white abolitionists fell victim to their own notions of what George Fredrickson has termed romantic racialism.²¹ A form of paternal racism, this concept views blacks as child-like, innocent, and possessing a natural affinity for religion. The Christian values of the era – self-sacrifice, forgiveness, charity – were thus embodied by blacks, the most famous literary example being Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom*. Should a white person encounter a black one who displayed these features, either in person or in a text, he would be predisposed to trust the figure. Hence, we can speak of an authenticating strategy when we discover that the majority of slave narrators displayed protagonists with such features.

When reading through the antebellum narratives, one can easily get the impression that most slave narrators were themselves religious, some perhaps more deeply than others, and that if the vast majority of slaves were not religious, this was simply because many of the slaveholders prevented it. Recent scholarship, however, places this belief in doubt. Albert Raboteau finds that church membership in the post-bellum era reached approximately one-third of the African-American population,²² while Daniel Fountain, in analyzing conversion reports in all slave narratives – the number of post-bellum narratives swamps the antebellum narratives by a ratio of 40:1 – places the size of the Christian community in the antebellum South at one-fourth of the black population.²³ This discrepancy between the impression conveyed by the antebellum narratives and the historians' assessment of the perva-

19. Andrews, p. 88.

20. Andrews, p. 89.

21. George Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914* (New York: Harper, 1971).

22. Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford UP, 1978), p. 209.

23. Daniel Fountain, *Long on Religion, Short on Christianity: Slave Religion, 1830–1870*. (Unpublished dissertation, U of Mississippi, 1999), p. 145.

siveness of Christianity may have been caused by any number of factors: the nature of the fugitive slaves themselves, the selection process carried out by abolitionists seeking slave narrators, the support of churches in publishing spiritual autobiographies by ex-slaves, or the desire of the slaves to tell their editor/publishers what they wanted to hear. That pressure existed to conform to prevailing standards of Christianity, however, is beyond doubt, as the 1845 narrative by Frederick Douglass, the most outspoken black narrator of the era, indicates. Apparently warned that his comments on religion could be misconstrued, Douglass felt compelled to include an appendix in which he explicitly states that the criticisms “apply to the *slaveholding religion* of this land, and with no possible reference to Christianity proper.”²⁴

The shaping of the slave narratives to meet reader expectations is also evident in areas other than religion. Narrators such as Moses Grandy, Lundsford Lane, and Josiah Henson all present themselves “as exemplar[s] of the traditional Protestant work ethic, worthy of the admiration and sympathy of northern, middle-class America.”²⁵ Frederick Douglass adapts his narrative partly to the Benjamin Franklin tradition of the self-made man, describing the desire to learn reading and writing. William Craft is representative of the many slave narrators who published in Great Britain, with his more open critique of northern race prejudice and his heaping of praise on the English for their more enlightened attitudes. In continuing his story beyond arrival in the North, Craft is clearly both highly cognizant of his audience’s nationality and ingratiating toward them: toward the end of his narrative he asks God to bless American abolitionists who are working “to cleanse their country’s escutcheon from the foul and destructive blot of slavery” and hopes that “may God ever smile upon England and upon England’s good, much-beloved, deservedly-honoured Queen, for the generous protection that is given to unfortunate refugees of every rank, and of every color and clime.”²⁶ Such comments fell on an audience positively predisposed to these observations; as Audrey Fisch notes, contemporary reviews in the British press often constructed the slave narratives as “an indictment of America and a vindication of English superiority.”²⁷ All these generic patterns encourage white readers to see blacks as essentially equal to themselves and as sharing the same values. Religious portrayals, on the other hand, have the added dimension of appealing to the white readers’ subliminally racist belief in how they think blacks naturally are: safe, child-like, and forgiving.

24. Douglass, *Autobiography*, p. 153.

25. Andrews, p. 112.

26. William Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom; or, the Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery* (London: Tweedie, 1860), p. 94.

27. Audrey Fisch, “Repetitious Accounts So Piteous and So Harrowing’: The Ideological Work of American Slave Narratives in England,” *Journal of Victorian Culture* 1.1 (1996) 16–34, p. 24.

I turn now to examine how religious portrayals were, or were not, integrated into the two novels as authenticating strategies. In particular, it is the appeal to the implicit racism of romantic racialism that the authors borrow from the slave narratives with varying degrees of success. As we will see, black authors were not uniformly successful in employing the slave narratives' authenticating devices.

Our Nig: Religious Portrayals as a Sentimental Strategy

Right off, in its extended title, *Our Nig; or, Sketches in the Life of a Free Black, In a Two-Story White House, North, Showing that Slavery's Shadows Fall Even There*. By "Our Nig," Harriet Wilson's text announces its connection to the slave narratives. Strictly speaking, of course, it is not one, as the inclusion of "Free Black" and the reference to the Northern setting indicate. Yet it is perfectly logical for Wilson to invoke the genre; while her novel is unique in the antebellum era in focusing on a black indentured servant in New England, at the same time her story parallels the fate of millions of African-Americans then enslaved in the South. Should her purpose have been to realize a profit to support herself and her child, as she herself states in the preface, then to borrow elements from two of the most popular genres in the 1850s, the domestic novel and the slave narrative, would have made good business sense, especially in advertising the connection to the slave narratives in the title. Also from an artistic and practical point of view much speaks in favor of Wilson using the slave narrative as a template. Beginning with Henry L. Gates, Jr., many critics have noted how *Our Nig* appears to be "an autobiographical novel,"²⁸ and what better model to draw upon than popular contemporary black autobiography, the slave narrative. Even if the broad outlines of her story suggest a closer parallel to the domestic novel – violent though her novel is – the slave narrative could also be used to help establish authority and authenticity, and thus act as a counterweight to the fictional format of a novel. Some measure of authenticity would have been useful, since at that point only three other novels had been published by African-Americans in North America.

Aside from the title, *Our Nig* employs another prominent authenticating device from the slave narrative: the appended letters. As we will see, it is here in this authenticating device that Wilson embeds another: religious portrayals that draw on the sentimental strategy of romantic racialism. At first glance, these three letters appear to function in the same fashion as similar letters in the slave narrative, but upon closer examination two major differences emerge, both with wider ranging

28. Henry L. Gates, Jr. Introduction. *Our Nig* by Harriet Wilson (New York: Vantage, 1983), xi–lv, p. xxxvii.

implications. In slave narratives the authenticating letters are written by prominent whites, usually males, who attest to the veracity of the narrative. A committee of well-known persons was required to counter challenges to Henry Bibb's narrative, and the nationally famous abolitionists William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips wrote letters that prefaced Frederick Douglass's 1845 narrative. The authors of the letters appended to *Our Nig*, however, are unknown, the last not even supplying a name, only initials. Although P. Gabrielle Foreman and Reginald Pitts have recently provided suggestions for the identities of the three, even the professional genealogist Pitts could not discover a Margareta Thorne in mid-19th-century New England.²⁹ What authenticating value could the letters accrue if their authors disguise their own identities, publishing the letters under pseudonyms or initials? Did Wilson simply borrow the convention but in the end decide, since she was publishing what was ostensibly a novel, that the authenticating device could be fictionalized as well? The situation gets even more complicated when we look at the second major difference, specifically, what the letters actually say.

Appended letters in slave narratives tend to fall into one of two categories: either they attest to personal knowledge of the ex-slave's existence and personal character, or they present general arguments against the institution of slavery, claiming that the experiences the narrative relates are representative. The former may or may not testify to the veracity of specific incidents; however, especially when taken together with bills of sale and advertisements for slave auctions that are often included, they read like legal documents. The letters at the end of *Our Nig* do not fall clearly into either of these categories; with slavery not an issue, the three letters stay on a personal level and avoid legalistic language, though all identify racial attitudes and unchristian behavior as the prime cause of the author's suffering. The third letter follows the slave narrative testimonials the closest, claiming a general acquaintance with the author, while the first two go on not only to corroborate the incidents described at the end of the novel, but to actually elaborate and expand upon them. Rushing quickly to a close, the novel condenses the events after Frado's liberation from the Bellmont household, her illnesses, moves from city to city, courtship, marriage, birth of a son, and abandonment, into some fourteen pages, only to have the appended letters go back and fill in the details of some of these events. The events related – for example, the author's move into a poorhouse – do little to provide extra-textual evidence for the novel's veracity, but seem instead to follow a sentimental strategy. The letters do not function as buttresses for the text but appear instead to enter into a dialogic relationship with the body of the novel.

29. P. Gabrielle Foreman and Reginald H. Pitts, Introduction. *Our Nig* by Harriet Wilson (New York: Penguin, 2005), xxiii–l.

This relationship is most noticeable when we look at how religious references permeate the three letters and how they creep into the close of the text. They are all the more conspicuous given that Frado's religious conversion, a plot element that covers the middle third of the novel, is a failed one; after "resolv[ing] to give over all thought of the future world" (104), the protagonist displays a remarkably unchristian lack of forgiveness toward her tormentor – celebrating Mary's death in front of Aunt Abby in a manner "not at all acceptable to the pious, sympathetic dame" (107) – and almost no pious behavior.

Later, during the rapid rush to the conclusion, an occasional reference to God or the Bible appears, placed at strategic moments that are possibly meant to appeal to Christian readers' sentiments. In the penultimate paragraph, for example, the narrator wraps a plea for assistance in pious language: "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" (130). When read in conjunction with the appended letters, however, another possibility begins to take shape: the references may have been made to anticipate and accommodate her sponsors' piety.

It is vital to keep in mind how little is still known about the exact conditions under which this black-authored text finally reached the printing press in the antebellum era. John Sekora urges us to remember that whites controlled the editing process and owned the publishing companies that turned out many of the slave narratives, and so we should not forget that these "black message[s] will be sealed in a white envelope."³⁰ *Our Nig* represents one of the few black-authored texts which contain no indication of a white editor or any mention in the appended letters that help was at all given in shaping the text. Nonetheless, we know nothing of the negotiations that led to the publication of Wilson's novel. In the only study to date that examines the publishing history of *Our Nig*, Eric Gardner suggests that "the book was produced as an act of charity" by the book's printer, George Rand.³¹ Given her impoverished circumstances that both the end of the text and the appended letters allude to, it seems likely that either this was the case or a sponsor was found to cover the printing costs. Potentially, any or all of the letter writers could have been benefactors, and rather than alienate a sponsor Wilson may well have adapted her text to the circumstances.

30. John Sekora, "Black Message, White Envelope: Genre, Authenticity, and Authority in the Antebellum Slave Narrative," *Callaloo* 10 (1987) 482–515, p. 502.

31. Eric Gardner, "This Attempt of Their Sister': Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* from Printer to Readers," *New England Quarterly* 66.2 (1993) 226–46, p. 232.

With these observations, I do not wish to imply cynicism on Wilson's part. In crafting what most critics agree is a fictionalized autobiography – references to Wilson/Frado's son, for example, in the preface, the body of the text, and appended letters match in age, race, and family name with the death certificate discovered during Henry L. Gates, Jr.'s research – Harriet Wilson appears, as far as one can tell, not to have unduly brutalized the facts surrounding her life. The recent discovery of her post-publication career as a medium in the spiritualist movement indicates that she was, like her character Frado, greatly interested in spiritual matters. Indeed, it seems to clear up what happened to this interest after she abandoned the more traditional path of conversion and admittance to a church. She simply does what all writers of fiction and autobiography do, consciously or unconsciously: she repackages the truth to meet the expectations of her fictive readers.

In fact, in consciously shaping her text with an eye to the appended letters, Wilson follows a literary tradition that Robert Stepto has identified in the slave narratives. Stepto evaluates the literary quality of a narrative based on how well the authenticating materials are integrated into the narrative itself; he uses Henry Bibb's narrative as an example of a text where the tale itself and the authenticating documents perform only minimal interactions, the latter framing the former. More sophisticated narratives, Stepto claims, are drawn toward each other "by some sort of extraordinary gravitational pull or magnetic attraction."³² In the case of Frederick Douglass's 1845 text, the narrative integrates and subsumes the appended letters, while William Wells Brown's 1853 narrative, published together with excerpts from his speeches and his own novel, *Clotel*, becomes part of the authenticating strategy itself. Harriet Wilson's novel represents a version of the sophisticated use of authenticating documents, with the body of the text and the appended letters reaching out to meet and support each other. The letters expand on the events in the novel's rushed conclusion, filling in precisely these gaps – the career as a sower of straw, the story in the poor house, the details about her son – that the novel has only skimmed over. The religious references in the novel's hasty closing not only work as a sentimental strategy, but also set the stage for the authenticating letters' testimonials to Wilson/Frado's Christian character. Religious belief becomes the ground upon which the novel meets its authenticating documents.

The religious dialogue established between Wilson's text and the letters finds a mirror image in the letter by Allida. Interestingly enough, she chooses to include both a letter and a poem from Wilson in her own letter, thus providing the

32. Robert Stepto, "I Rose and Found My Voice: Narration, Authentication, and Authorial Control in Four Slave Narratives," in *The Slave's Narrative*, ed. Henry L. Gates, Jr. and Charles Davis (New York: Oxford UP, 1985), 225–41, p. 237.

unusual twist of the authenticating letter being authenticated by the very person whose identity is meant to be validated in the first place. At this point, however, let us turn our attention to Wilson's poem, which presents an interesting contrast when read in conjunction with another poem Allida inserts at the end of her letter. Although it is unclear who wrote the second poem, it is clearly intended to be Allida's response to Wilson's poem, "calculated to comfort and strengthen this sorrowful, homeless one" (137). Wilson places herself in the poem as a supplicant to God, begging him "O God, forsake me not," and identifies herself in social rank and plight with Jesus: "He chose a lowly lot; / He came unto his own, but lo! / His own received him not. / Oft was the mountain his abode, the cold, cold earth his bed" (135–36). The second poem "lend[s] a gracious ear" to these pleas, repeating God's answer of "I will help thee"; three times to the supplicant. The use of quotation marks for this phrase, yet the insistence on a first person point of view for all but the second line, makes determining the poem's voice difficult. Is the speaker intended to be a human, as the opening suggests (" 'I will help thee,' promise kind / Made by our High Priest above") or God, as later lines imply ("Thy spirit find a peaceful home / In mansions *near my face*")?

Assuming Allida to be white, which is in keeping with both Foreman and Pitt's recent research and the slave narrative tradition of appended letters, the second poem reveals an authoritative and paternalistic voice of a white/God responding calmly, benevolently, and shelteringly to the supplicating black of the first poem. The dialogue between these two poems thus recreates the black voice of the novel speaking with the white voices in the appended letters, and simultaneously fulfills the paternalistic desires of the white readership. As William Andrews shows with the example of Lunsford Lane, presenting the self as a "black 'child of sorrow' safely deposited in the endlessly rocking cradle of white love and support" was one way of catering to white readers in the North.³³ The dialogue of the two poems with each other thus functions as an authenticating strategy by casting Wilson herself in the romantic racialist image of blacks, a tactic made necessary by the novel's refusal to completely portray Frado in this light.

The inclusion of Wilson's letter in Allida's testimonial helps reposition Wilson as a Christian in other ways, too. It is not only the similarities in style that Gates has noted which serve to tie authorship of the novel and the letter to each other,³⁴ but mention of the Bible she carries with her, presumably the one Frado receives from Susan, refers back both to the text and to Wilson's piety. Along with allusions to the story of the Biblical prophet Elisha, these incidents function to portray Wilson as a

33. Williams, p. 117.

34. Gates, Introduction to *Our Nig*, p. xxii.

thoroughly Christian individual. Yet even a casual reading of Wilson's letter also reveals a heavy dose of sentimental affect. The reserving of "a place nearer my heart" (135) for the Bible and the coincidental opening of the holy book to an appropriate passage remind us that Wilson the letter writer was fully aware of the conventions of sentimental or domestic literature.

The use of anonymous and pseudonymous authenticating letters, the reversion in the letters to a highly religious persona – one not supported by the failed conversion in a supposedly autobiographical novel – and the use of sentimental language at appropriate moments in both the novel and the personal letters all lend some support to Elizabeth Breau's assertion that the appended letters may have been written by Wilson herself.³⁵ Yet in lieu of evidence to the contrary, one should perhaps be generous enough to assume that the letters are what they claim to be, and that the authors themselves had reasons to conceal their identities. As mentioned above, Wilson would certainly have needed some form of sponsorship, either financial or a personal recommendation, in order to have her novel published, and the letter writers are the most likely source of such support. What the letters do finally suggest, though, is some degree of collusion between Wilson and the letter writers: almost certainly Allida, Margareta Thorn and C.D.S read the manuscript before composing their testimonials; and it is also possible that Wilson crafted the novel's ending, with its sentimental references to religion, not only with an eye to garnering her readers' sympathy, but also her sponsors' and to maintaining their good will. Additionally, I would suggest that Wilson authorized Allida's use of her private letter to a third party. Although Allida implies that it was her own decision to include it, the letter fits so well into an overall authenticating strategy that it may well have been part of Wilson's plan.

Conspicuously, the letter presents Wilson referring to her white benefactress twice as "mother" and places the twenty-something black person in the position of a small child being read to. Claudia Tate sees the maternal discourses in *Our Nig* as Wilson's attempt at an "act of heroic maternal transformation" and "the preface and appendix [as] textualiz[ing] Wilson's self-esteem as a black person, a woman and a mother,"³⁶ yet the implications of Wilson projecting Mrs. Walter as her own mother is something Tate glosses over. Far from bolstering Wilson's self-esteem, it returns her to childhood. I read this passage as another ploy to romantic racialism, an attempt to make the author credible to the white reader by fulfilling stereotyped beliefs about safe and trustworthy blacks. Reinforcing the image of romantic racialism

35. Elizabeth Breau, "Identifying Satire: *Our Nig*," *Callaloo* 16.2 (1993) 455–65, p. 458.

36. Claudia Tate, *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine's Text at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Oxford UP, 1992), p. 38.

by putting the words into Wilson's mouth, along with a renewed emphasis on sentimental religion, becomes necessary because several pages earlier the final chapter has, by presenting Wilson's ex-husband as an imposter, raised the question of authenticity and the slave narrative. Indeed, the "disclosure that he had never seen the South, and that his illiterate harangues were humbugs for hungry abolitionists" (128) undercuts the authority of the slave narrative genre that Wilson is borrowing from, and draws the reader's attention more closely to its authenticating devices. Hence, when one does arrive at the appended letters, they are embellished both in tone and with the addition of Wilson's own voice, as if any residual doubts about her piety – and hence credibility – following the failed conversion need to be overcome.

But what is one to make of this contradiction? How is one to reconcile a text that first raises the question of a genre's authenticity and then relies on the same genre's authenticating strategies? Many critics, eager to impute political motives to Wilson, simply overlook the appended letters and the implications of Frado/Wilson's re-emergent piety, preferring instead to focus on how the body of the novel itself attacks "prevailing social constructions of Christianity, race, and womanhood."³⁷ One of the few critics to deal with the appended letters, Elizabeth Breau claims the letters to be fictional, asserting they are part of Wilson's overall ironic and satiric portrayal of white abolitionists; yet, in discounting any autobiographical intent, Breau neglects both Wilson's stated purpose in writing the narrative and the verifiable facts concerning her life that the text bears out. Certainly Wilson's ability to use irony is evident in her reference to herself in the title as "Our Nig," and we can, of course, read the appended letters as ironic when placed in the context of Frado's failed conversion. However, given the firm control whites held over the publishing industry, we must assume supporters lurking somewhere in the background. Unmitigated irony from the title page to appendix, though attractive to modern scholars, would seem unlikely to attract the necessary help in publishing a book, especially when the primary purpose was to support her family. Backtracking to varnish an autobiographical novel appears a more likely approach.

Certain incidents in *Our Nig*, particularly in the early chapters, are obviously products of Wilson's own invention. The events before Frado's birth, dialogues between Mag and Jim, and some occurrences before Frado is sent to the Bellmonts at the age of six are all certainly results of a creative and imaginative process. Other events in the novel and letters have been substantiated by legal documents: the birth certificate of her son, his admission to the poor farm, and the marriage license to Thomas Wilson. Even the existence of the Belmont family, in actuality the Hey-

37. Elizabeth West, "Reworking the Conversion Narrative: Race and Christianity in *Our Nig*," *MELUS* 24.2 (1999) 3–27, p. 3.

wood family of Milford, N.H., has been verified by Barbara White, although White also suggests that Wilson combined characters and changed the chronology “in the interest of streamlining the narrative.”³⁸ Other events have almost certainly been reshaped for reasons of discretion or due to the nature of memory, yet it is fairly safe to say that the failed conversion is accurate. There would be little reason to falsify such an event and everything to be gained in having her fictional alter ego become a believer, especially given the expectations in a domestic novel or slave narrative. The spiritual struggle is possibly autobiographical, the failed conversion certainly is.

We can also view the novel as failed, at least in this sense. It remains a strong indictment of northern hypocrisy regarding racial prejudice, but from the perspective of incorporating slave narrative devices into an autobiography it allows fact and fiction to contradict each other. Literary appeals designed for a white readership, *Our Nig* inadvertently suggests to us, did not always convey the reality of black writers.

The Bondwoman’s Narrative: Moving toward Literary Authenticity

As an unpublished manuscript, *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* lacks the external authenticating apparatus of appended letters. Stored alone in a box for at least fifty years prior to its rediscovery in 2001, the text was unaccompanied by any indication of its unknown author’s intentions regarding how it should be published or marketed. Internal evidence from the text, however, suggests Hannah Crafts might well have forgone the formality of testimonials had her novel reached the presses during her lifetime. Although Crafts positions her text as a slave narrative – proclaiming herself on the title page as “A Fugitive Slave Recently Escaped from North Carolina,” and commenting in the preface, in the best tradition of the slave narrative, that the text presents “the plain, unvarnished facts” and “the truth” – practically none of the genre’s authenticating devices are used. In particular, the portrayal of the protagonist’s religious faith displays none of the slave narrative’s characteristic appeals to a white readership’s sense of how blacks experience religion.

Antebellum slave narratives, as a rule, took pains to present black religious practices as fairly similar to white religious worship and beliefs, avoiding or toning down ecstatic and enthusiastic practices that other contemporary observers frequently noted.³⁹ Some narratives did mention superstitious beliefs and conjuring that a Christian would frown upon, but they are always careful to distance themselves from these practices. William Wells Brown, for instance, flatly states in his

38. Barbara White, “*Our Nig* and the She-Devil: New Information about Harriet Wilson and the ‘Bellmont’ Family,” *American Literature* 65 (1993) 19–52, p. 44.

39. Raboteau, pp. 66–73.

1847 narrative “I am no believer in soothsaying,” when he discussed his contact with Uncle Frank, a black fortuneteller.⁴⁰ Indeed, Wells belittles the prophecy he receives, clearly painting this kind of clairvoyance as a fraud: “He further said, that in trying to get my liberty I would meet with many severe trials. I thought to myself any fool could tell me that!”⁴¹ Similarly, Henry Bibb, in describing two incidents where he sought the help of a conjurer, points out that “I had *then* great faith in conjuration and witchcraft”⁴² and at the same time attempts to assure his white readers that blacks harbor no ill intentions when they turn to the supernatural. “This is all done for the purpose of defending themselves in some Peaceable manner, although I am satisfied that there is no virtue in it at all.”⁴³ Both Wells and Bibb practiced these stories on the abolitionist lecture circuit and knew what worked with white audiences and what did not. Tales of superstitious Africans were both exotic entertainments and a way of confirming white beliefs of how blacks behaved as well as Christian religious superiority. The tales could only be believed, though, if the teller shared the audience’s own value system.

Crafts, on the other hand, has no qualms about presenting herself as both thoroughly Christian and superstitious at the same time. In introducing her new mistress, Mrs. Vincent, Crafts even gives her superstitious side a racial origin: “I am superstitious, I confess it; people of my race and color usually are; and I fancied then that she was haunted by a shadow or phantom apparent only to herself, and perhaps even the more dreadful for that” (27). There is, of course, no reason why a person cannot believe both in orthodox Christianity and the supernatural, but the point here is that in doing so Crafts forfeits the authenticating function of religion for her narrative. Her nineteenth-century audience would have been reassured by the narrator’s professing a belief they expected a black to have, yet certainly suspicious of a narrator who never firmly rejects such beliefs and completely adopts their own religious ideology.

Even Frederick Douglass, one of the most eloquent and intellectual of the slave narrators, was at pains to link himself clearly to Christianity: not only did he include an appendix to his 1845 autobiography to “remove the liability of . . . misapprehension” and assert his love of “the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ,”⁴⁴ but ten years later in his second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), he extended and deepened the one section that shows his dealings with African religious practices. In the 1845 narrative, he briefly describes how a slave convinces him to carry a root in his right pocket to prevent him from being

40. W. Brown, p. 93.

41. W. Brown, p. 92.

42. Bibb, p. 26 (my emphasis).

43. Bibb, pp. 25–26.

44. Douglass, *Autobiography*, p. 153.

beaten by Covey, the brutal “nigger breaker,” and the apparent initial success leaves him to conclude that “as it was, I was half inclined to think the root to be something more than I at first had taken it to be.”⁴⁵ Left simply with that remark, the reader may also be “half inclined” to speculate on where his subsequent courage to stand up to Covey came from. In the 1855 autobiography, however, Douglass more clearly dissociates himself from faith in magic even before he takes the root, an idea which he now considers “very absurd and ridiculous, if not positively sinful.”⁴⁶ After his early luck with the root, the inspiration for his rebellion is clearly attributed to his own resolve and not to superstition. “All went well with me until Monday morning; and then, whether the root had lost its virtue, or whether my tormentor had gone deeper into the black art than myself (as it was sometimes said of him) . . . it is not necessary for me to know, or to inform the reader. . . .”⁴⁷ Here, the tables are turned; his foe is now identified with “the black art” and not Douglass, whose physical resistance and determination place him firmly in the tradition of self-reliant American individualism that allows the audience to trust him. The process of seeking freedom in the slave narrative is thus not only the movement from “South to North . . . chattel to man, sin to salvation,”⁴⁸ but from paganism to Christianity.

Crafts, however, leaves the distinction between mainstream Christianity and folk superstition blurred. Her unyieldingly devout slave protagonist is “led . . . to the foot of the Cross” (10) in the opening pages, and later declares that “even freedom without God and religion would be a barren possession” (109). Despite this strong evangelical Christian orientation, Crafts never allows Hannah to fully complete the transition from paganism to Christianity that slave narrators accomplish. Instead, just as she “[is] not considered a servant, neither [is she] treated exactly as a guest” (124) in Mrs. Henry’s household, Hannah remains in a religious sense a liminal character, fusing a strong Christian identity that brings her credibility with her white audience, and beliefs in superstitions that she locates in her racial background. A later instance when Hannah denies possessing even “a particle” of superstition (139) should be taken with a grain of salt, for here she is talking to Mrs. Henry, a white woman with whom she desires to be on good terms. In this situation Hannah is performing a balancing act between two worlds, that of the superstitious slaves who believe there is a ghost in the house, and that of the religious Mrs. Henry with whom she enjoys a special relationship, being neither exactly servant nor guest. Privy to the secret that the ghost is in reality a runaway slave, Hannah is not

45. Douglass, *Autobiography*, p. 111.

46. Douglass, *My Bondage*, p. 239.

47. Douglass, *My Bondage*, p. 241.

48. Foster, p. 127.

lying when she claims in this particular instance not to be superstitious. By limiting her reply to the present circumstance, Crafts can uphold Hannah's ties to a more general superstitious nature and still stand in good stead with Mrs. Henry.

The Christianity Hannah espouses, while certainly similar to that of a white nineteenth-century audience, is not presented in *Our Nig* as a sentimental value. Instead, Hannah appears as a somewhat self-righteous individual, sure of God's grace when embarking on her two flights toward freedom, and pitying toward non-believers. In a moment of despair, she is guided by a chance opening of her Bible, much as Harriet Wilson is in Allida's appended letter. But whereas Wilson opens to the self-pitying phrase "I am poor and needy, yet the Lord thinketh upon me" (135), Hannah finds the passage where Jacob flees Esau, interpreting it as a sign that she must follow suit: "[t]rusting in the God that guided and protected him I will abandon this house and the Mistress who would force me into a crime against nature" (207). Later, when she befriends a fellow fugitive slave and discovers that he cannot find faith in God in himself, she can only feel sorry for him: "I could only regard him with compassion that in his trials, and difficulties he was unaware of the greatest source of abiding comfort" (217). Hannah's piety throughout the novel is that of an unabashed Christian and is not aimed at having a sentimental effect on her audience.

Walking the line between devout Christianity and a supposedly racially determined belief in superstitions serves a distinct purpose in Crafts's novel. If disavowing a belief in conjure and the supernatural is meant to ingratiate the slave narrator with white readers, Hannah's superstitious nature serves the literary end of foreshadowing coming events. Thus when Hannah stands before her master's portrait in "superstitious awe," pondering the arrival of his new bride, the changes she sees in the picture presage the coming tragedy that will lead to her flight from Lindendale and her master's death.

But was it prophecy, or presentiment, or why was it that this idea was attended to my mind with something painful? That it seemed the first scene in some fearful tragedy; the foreboding of some great calamity; a curse of destiny that no circumstances could avert or soften. And why was it that as I mused the portrait of my master seemed to change from its usually kind and placid expression to one of wrath and gloom. . . (17)

Belief in the supernatural is presented here not as something to be disowned but rather as a literary device.

In portraying Hannah as both superstitious and pious, Crafts has created, I would argue, a character unusual in antebellum African-American literature, namely a protagonist who adopts Christianity while maintaining a link to pre-Christian beliefs. She accomplishes this by emphasizing a variation on one of the slave narra-

tive's authenticating strategies: belief in blacks' predisposition to superstitions being rooted in the romantic racialism that sees blacks as possessing an inherent, child-like inclination to religion. Indeed, in the following passage she uses the romantic belief that children and the unschooled possess an instinctive wisdom in order to underscore her narrator's reliability.

I have said that I always had a quiet way of observing things, and this habit grew upon me, sharpened perhaps by the absence of all elemental knowledge. Instead of books I studied faces and characters, and arrived at conclusions by a sort of sagacity that closely approximated to the unerring certainty of animal instinct. (27)

Interesting here is that now the authenticating strategy is associated not with other blacks, as in the slave narratives, but with the narrator herself.

What Crafts's text shows us is how an authenticating strategy can mutate and take on a different meaning when used in different literary contexts. Authentication of the text – to have the reader believe that all the events of the narrative are literally true – is not Crafts's primary purpose, as the blending of apparent factual and obviously fictional elements shows. Coincidental meetings, such as Hannah's reunions with Aunt Hetty or with her mother, and melodramatic deaths, such as that of her mistress from Lindendale, should not be taken as literally but as literarily true. By this I mean that the authentication Crafts seeks is for her text as a literary work, not as a testimonial to its truthfulness. Many critics, lead by the text's re-discoverer, Henry L. Gates, Jr., have noted the links in the text to real places and people – the North Carolina locales, the government official Mr. Wheeler – and have treated Crafts's text as primarily a slave narrative with fictionalized and fictional elements added to it. While the crossing out and simplification of names suggest attempts to fictionalize real people and events,⁴⁹ we should not overvalue Crafts's statement in the preface that the narrative represents “the truth.” Her wholesale borrowings from Dickens that Hollis Robbins has pointed out demonstrate that she was attempting to validate her novel as a literary work as well.⁵⁰ Similarly, using the Gothic convention of superstitious beliefs, not to mention the falling portraits, cursed houses, and terrifying storms, indicates that Crafts was reaching out for a literary authenticity and authority in her narrative.

49. Joe Nickell, Appendix A. “Authentication Report: *The Bondwoman's Narrative*,” in *The Bondwoman's Narrative* by Hannah Crafts (New York: Warner Books, 2002), 283–315, p. 306.

50. Hollis Robbins, “Blackening *Bleak House*: Hannah Crafts's *The Bondwoman's Narrative*,” in *In Search of Hannah Crafts: Critical Essays on The Bondwoman's Narrative* (New York: BasicCivitas Books, 2004), 71–86.

Concluding Remarks

Overall, Crafts's greater willingness to blend fact and fiction, and to adopt literary conventions to different genres, makes her novel artistically more successful than Harriet Wilson's. Wilson's use of slave narrative authenticating strategies leads us to read *Our Nig* as an autobiographical novel, yet if we do so the related facts – the failed religious conversion – undermine the authenticating devices. Crafts, on the other hand, largely avoids any but the most perfunctory authenticating strategies, such as simply asserting that the text is “the truth,” and when she does borrow an underlying concept from the slave narrative's authenticating devices – a romantic racialist belief in black religious life – she places the reference in a gothic context that infuses it with a new meaning. The white reader's racialist belief that Africans possess a closer relationship to religion and nature is invoked not to assert the factuality of a slave narrative but the credibility of the narrator's Gothic intuition.

Part of Crafts's success lies also in the different approach she takes to spirituality. Wilson exploits spirituality for sentimental purposes, juxtaposing Mrs. Belmont's religious hypocrisy with Frado's heartfelt search for salvation in order to garner reader sympathy for her protagonist. Rather than invoking a sentimental version of religion, however, Crafts takes a matter-of-fact approach to Hannah's religious belief, where divine retribution is a given for those who commit evil acts, such as Mr. Trappe, or who lack sufficient religious faith, such as Jacob. By the end of her novel, Crafts's words in the preface have come to fulfillment: for those “of pious and discerning minds can scarcely fail to recognise the hand of Providence in giving to the righteous the reward of their works, and to the wicked the fruit of their doings.”

Thus, on the eve of the Civil War, as black writing begins to extend into realms of fiction, these two novels demonstrate different ways of incorporating earlier traditions into new genres. *Our Nig* shows the peril of relying too heavily on older forms, while *The Bondwoman's Narrative* suggests that authenticity may be achieved without catering to the ideologies of a white audience.