

HAPPILY-EVER-AFTER: AN EXPLORATION OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY
LAWS, MARRIAGE, AND AFRICAN-AMERICAN REPRESENTATION

by

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis moves beyond the moral messages of true womanhood found in eighteenth century British-American sentimental novels to examine the alternative lessons taught in nineteenth century African-American literature. In doing so, I explore the relationship between laws, race, and literature to investigate complex questions such as: what moral lessons about the institution of marriage are conveyed in early African-American novels? How did early American laws and policies affect these moral lessons? Lastly, how have marriage, laws, and traditions affected the representation of African-American characters in novels and shaped identities within African-American communities?

Through the lens of critical race theory, feminist theory, and scholarship within legal studies, I analyze William Wells Brown's *Clotel* published in 1853, and Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig: or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* published in 1859. My analysis demonstrates both Brown and Wilson's ability to recast the conventions of sentimental novels such as the traditional marriage plot despite the legal and social constraints their protagonists face. Brown's *Clotel* teaches its audience that the institution of American slavery and the institution of American marriage are incompatible because of the legal relation between enslavers and enslaved people. As a result, the only way for African-Americans to secure their lineage through marriage is to escape the legal relation between enslaver and enslaved. On the other hand, Wilson's *Our Nig* illustrates that marriage does not always provide a secure and happy future; rather, Wilson instructs her readers to find freedom and happiness through economic independence. By analyzing and researching the alternative moral messages found in nineteenth century African-American sentimental novels, scholars and students can diversify the moral values, voices, and representation within African-American literature.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my sunflower and wildfire: Khya and Eli, may the both of you always chase your dreams with inquiring minds. To my loving husband Daniel: thank you for holding my hand and walking side-by-side with me throughout this journey. Lastly, I dedicate this thesis to my tribe of empowered women who empower women: Gayle Click, Crystal Chavez, Amber Huerta, Hannah Chavez, Melissa Brown, Carrie York, Carol Christianson, Melody Lemus, Jamie Reveles, Sarah Elkins, Ashley Riley, Jennifer Williams, Glenda Williams, Cora Garner, Amy Young, Kirstin Ramsey, Nicole Patman, and Ginger Creel.

In Loving Memory

Of

Dr. Christian D. Worlow

Your passion will live on through your students

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INTRODUCTION

By the late eighteenth century, many American authors used sentimental novels to provide moral messages that the institution of marriage results in the happily-ever-after for women. The moral messages in these novels taught readers to uphold the virtuous institution of marriage under the guardianship of parents in order to live a happy and successful life. Eighteenth-century sentimental novels responded to the anxiety and fears of the increasing rates of sexual relations outside of the institution of marriage, illegitimate children, and lack of parental control. Authors of early American sentimental novels enticed their readers with themes of seduction, betrayal, and abandonment in order to teach their audiences about the consequences of an unvirtuous life, which resulted in damaged reputations, social alienation, and/or dying in childbirth. As a result, sentimental novels popularized the cult of true womanhood, which determined that women must be pious, remain virgins until marriage, and be submissive and domesticated (Doriana 204). The reward for women who modeled this behavior is a stable and happy life through marriage.

My thesis will fast-forward to the nineteenth century and the rise of the African-American novel. In the scope of this project, I argue that early African-American sentimental novels demonstrate how the institution of American slavery corrupts the institution of marriage in ways that affect the representation of African-American identities. As a result, early African-American authors must find alternative ways to write outside the confines of conventional sentimental marriage plots. In my thesis, I will use William Wells Brown's *Clotel* (1853) and Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859) as the primary text to investigate how nineteenth-century African-American authors navigated legal and social boundaries to convey unconventional moral messages to their audiences. My project will contribute to a larger conversation around early African-American novels by exploring questions such as: what moral lessons about the

institution of marriage are conveyed in early African-American novels? How did early American laws and policies affect these moral lessons? In addition, how have marriage laws and traditions affected the representation of African-American characters in novels and shaped identities within African-American communities? By posing these questions, I will reveal the complex relationship between laws, race, and literature.

It is important to note that although early African-American authors offered alternative moral messages from the prescribed ones found in traditional sentimental novels, nineteenth-century African-American novelists were influenced by preceding sentimental novels. One of the nineteenth century's most popular sentimental novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, published in 1852 by the abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe would have been familiar to African-American authors such as Brown and Wilson. Stowe's novel gained immense popularity during the antebellum period and continues to be a staple among literary scholars and instructors today. As author Nina Baym notes, Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* changed the dynamic of the sentimental novel by combining the genre of sentimental narratives and slave narratives. Thus, Stowe is considered one of the first authors to politicize the sentimental novel beyond the issues of white womanhood (Baym ch. 12). Stowe takes the prescribed plots from sentimental novels such as parental relationships, marriage plots, and ideals of womanhood and extends them to enslaved characters. During a time in which enslaved people were dehumanized by their legal status as property, the humanization of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, although limited, was provocative to her audience and inspirational to African-American authors. Authors like Brown and Wilson are responding to writers like Stowe in the representation of their own experiences and voices through novelistic writing. However, as I argue in this thesis, they are equally responding to social realities regarding marriage and marital protections that the sentimental tradition exemplified by Stowe's

novel was not always equipped to confront. In the following paragraphs, I provide a summary of both of the novels I examine within the scope of this project.

Brown's *Clotel* is a sentimental novel depicting the complex relationship between nineteenth-century slave codes and the marriage plot traditionally used in early British-American sentimental novels. Specifically, Brown focuses on interracial sexual relationships between enslavers and enslaved women. Brown begins the novel with the interracial relationship between Thomas Jefferson and an enslaved woman, Currer. The interracial relationship between Jefferson and an enslaved woman was a provocative rumor in the nineteenth century but has since been proven accurate. In Brown's version of the story, Jefferson and Currer have two daughters together, Clotel and Althesa, who are raised as ladies in comparable comfort. Brown demonstrates the complexities of interracial relationships and the relation between enslaver and enslaved when Jefferson abandons Currer and their daughters. Jefferson's abandonment leads to Currer, Clotel, and Althesa being sold on the auction block. Here, Brown highlights how virtue has different implications for enslaved women when Clotel's auction price is increased because she is a virgin. Ultimately, Clotel is purchased by the white man courting her, Horatio Green, who promises to free Clotel and make the enslaved woman her own mistress (Brown 78). Soon after, Green abandons Clotel and their daughter Mary for a legally binding marriage to the wealthy white female, Gertrude (Brown 111).

On the other hand, Althesa is bought and "married" to a kind physician, Henry Morton. Althesa and Henry's interracial marriage is socially accepted by their community, which allows Henry to provide a comfortable lifestyle for his wife and daughters. In the end, however, Brown disrupts the image of a successful interracial marriage within the confines of enslavement when Althesa and Morton are killed by yellow fever. As a result, Althesa and Henry's two daughters,

Jane and Ellen, are sold into slavery. Clotel tries to save her daughter Mary from slavery but when Clotel is faced with being captured, she chooses to kill herself by jumping in the Potomac River. Brown ends the novel with Mary fleeing to Europe and marrying her true love. Brown proves that there cannot be a successful interracial relationship within the confines of the institution of American marriage; the relation between enslaver and enslaved must be dissolved to ensure a successful, legally binding interracial marriage.

Following *Clotel*, Wilson's *Our Nig* is a representation of how the institution of marriage is corrupted by the institution of American slavery through her depiction of white people's violent exploitation of free African-Americans in the North. Wilson's novel begins with Mag Smith, a poor white woman who is seduced, impregnated, and abandoned. Furthermore, Mag is socially alienated because of her indiscretion and becomes economically vulnerably. Mag's economic vulnerability leads to her interracial marriage to a free African-American, Jim, who is the only person willing to help Mag. Mag's interracial marriage to Jim results in her excommunication from her white community. Wilson reveals that women cannot rely on the institution of American marriage when Jim dies and Mag is left abandoned with two children. Mag experience more economic strains trying to support two children and finds herself in another interracial relationship with Jim's African-American business partner, Seth Shipley. Eventually, Seth convinces Mag to abandon Frado at the house of the white Belmont Family, so they can search for economic opportunities.

At this point, Wilson transitions the narrative from Mag's interracial relationships to Frado's journey as a child who is isolated in a completely white household. Here, Wilson focuses on the representation of power through the Belmont's white marriages that directly and indirectly cause violence against Frado's body, who is used as an informal indentured servant.

Mr. and Mrs. Belmont's marriage is a representation of a power struggle within the domestic sphere, and Frado's body is used as an object to validate that power. Mrs. Belmont physically and mentally abuses Frado, while Mr. Belmont uses the time Frado is being abused to escape the house and the wrath of his wife. Wilson leads her audience to believe the Belmont children are Frado's allies and protectors in the Belmont house. Specifically, James is presented as Frado's spiritual mentor, who guides Frado on her spiritual journey of discovering the complexities of being a mixed-race girl practicing white Christianity. Additionally, Jack is the Belmont son who swears to protect Frado against his mother's abuse, and it is implied Jack has a sexual interest in Frado. While Jack never sexually violates Frado he also does not consider her marriageable. Although Wilson represents each of the Belmont children as allies and protectors, they each use their marriages to escape the Belmont house, furthering Frado's isolation and abuse from Mrs. Belmont.

After years of abuse from the Bellmonts, Frado's body deteriorates leaving her economically vulnerable. Thus, the novel ends with Frado trying to find economic security by marrying a free African American, Samuel. Wilson's portrayal of Frado's marriage to Samuel proves that virtue is not always rewarded with a happy, successful marriage. Samuel impregnates and abandons Frado who must find the means to support her and their son. Wilson ends the novel, not with a happily-ever-after marriage, but with Frado becoming economically independent. Next, I will discuss the theories and methodologies I use in this thesis to examine how legal and social constraints affect the identities and representation of African-Americans in these novels.

To explore the ideas found in this thesis, I use critical race theory and feminist theory to investigate how the process of enslavement shapes the representation of African-American

women and their identities. Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* is a foundational text on this issue. I focus on Patterson's ideas regarding the psychological process of enslavement, or how enslavement is normalized to society and to the enslaved person. Patterson explains that an enslaved person must be genealogically isolated through "natal alienation," or denied "rights" or claims of birth from his/her parents or ancestors (Patterson 5). Thus, the enslaved person ceases to belong to any social order. Patterson explains that an enslaved person is uprooted from their community where they are still considered a "being." Then, the enslaved person is desocialized and depersonalized in the enslaver's community, resulting in what Patterson describes as the enslaved individual's "social death." The social death of an enslaved person requires alienation and loss of origins or heritage.

Robert Reid-Pharr's *Conjugal Union: The Body, The House, and the Black American* is also influential to my ideas in the scope of this project. Reid-Pharr delves into the ideological aspects that shape the understandings of black bodies in society and which connect to reader's understanding of black bodies within literature. Reid-Pharr uncovers the complicated ways in which homes and families negotiate the production of the black body (6). Reid-Pharr discusses how the black bodies of characters such as Clotel and Frado are treated within white realities and domestic spheres. In doing so, Reid-Pharr argues that African-American authors during the antebellum period were writing their communities and black bodies into existence (31). Through the writing of authors like Brown and Wilson, the experiences of black bodies came to life.

Christina Accomando's "*The Regulations of Robbers*": *Legal Fiction of Slavery and Resistance* encouraged my analysis of law, race, and literature. In her book, Accomando urges readers to consider the complex relationship between law and literature. She suggests that readers must do this in order to consider the various ways in which literature and culture are

interpreted. Accomando explains that American laws and policies involved in the institution of slavery have produced an unstable and incomplete record, which has silenced many enslaved voices and created fictional narratives revolving around American bondage (Accomando 4). Thus, literature can be a tool to disrupt the stereotypes around race and gender created by the “unified” voice of the law and to uncover the textually silenced narratives of African-American resistance (Accomando 12). Accomando’s assertions have led me to questioning and interrogating how marriage and miscegenation laws have played a role in nineteenth-century African-American literature and the representation of African-American identities.

In addition, scholarship within legal studies is pertinent to my analysis of the laws and slave codes associated with the institution of American slavery and the institution of American marriage. In my study of influential nineteenth-century laws, policies, and doctrines, I turn to William Goodell’s *The American Slave Code in Theory and Practice*. William Goodell is a famous nineteenth-century abolitionist who wrote *The American Slave Code* as an anti-racist text to dispute the laws and customs used to oppress enslaved people and perpetuate the institution of American slavery. Goodell discusses the legal identity of enslaved people as property, which results in their inability to enter marital contracts. Goodell’s text is the source to which I form my ideas about the legal relation between enslaver and enslaved in my analysis of *Clotel* and *Our Nig*.

In the same regard, Karen Woods Weierman’s *One Blood, One Nation* analyzes the early American prohibition against interracial marriages. In *Clotel* and *Our Nig*, both authors emphasize the legal and social constraints against interracial marriages and relationships between characters. Weierman claims that interracial relationships and marriages were the true test of abolitionism during the nineteenth century (Weierman 102-103). Weierman contributes a

historical overview of the laws and prohibitions of interracial marriages and marriage between enslaved individuals in different American states. In addition, Weierman analyzes how some of these laws are represented in early American literature.

My project is important because it resists a homogenized view of marriage traditions in early American sentimental literature and instead explores the diversity of moral values and concerns in these texts. In other words, it is important to learn that when literary critics place a higher value on British American sentimental novels as articulating the framework on morality in marriage, we are limiting the voices, representations, and identities of those who are affected by the institution. Authors such as Brown and Wilson provide an alternative story which promotes a different version of American marriage for readers; the version of marriage offered by Brown and Wilson humanizes African-American women who are legally exploited and violated. Further, Brown and Wilson deconstruct the legal and social constraints that determine the value of women based on the nineteenth-century standards of virtue and womanhood.

In the first chapter, I provide an in-depth examination of Orlando Patterson's theory of the process of social death for enslaved people and explain why this process is important to the rest of my project. I also offer an introduction to some of the prevalent laws, policies, and doctrines that are relevant to *Clotel* and *Our Nig*. My aim is to assist my readers in gaining a better understanding of the social and legal history surrounding the issues portrayed in the novels. In chapter two, I take my examination of the social and legal confines within the institution of American slavery and the institution of American marriage and apply them to an analysis on Brown's *Clotel*. I explore the complex dynamics of interracial relationships between enslaver and enslaved people. For instance, what happens when an enslaved woman has an intimate relationship with a white man? How does this relationship affect her character and

identity? In chapter three, I analyze Wilson's *Our Nig* to investigate how the laws and customs of enslavement dominant in the South prevail in the violent treatment of free African-Americans in the North. Further, I demonstrate how the institution of American marriage protects and enables the exploitation of free African-Americans in the North.

CHAPTER 1

The Oppressed Social and Legal Identities of African-Americans

William Wells Brown and Harriet E. Wilson's nineteenth-century novels, *Clotel* and *Our Nig* recast the traditional sentimental novel to articulate a moral lesson that reveals the legal and social constraints on African-American and mixed-raced individuals. In this section, I provide historical context and prominent ideas regarding the social and legal constraints that Brown's and Wilson's African-American and mixed-raced protagonists must resist to maintain their virtuous characters. First, I focus on Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, which explains the concept of social death for enslaved people. Next, I provide the historical context of slave codes and the illegality of enslaved and interracial marriages that delegitimized African-American familial relations. Together, the social death of enslaved people and the illegality of enslaved and interracial marriages served to reinforce the narrative of Black womanhood as unvirtuous. My analysis of the social and legal constraints for African-American and mixed-raced identities in this section will aid in the understanding of how and why African-American authors writing sentimental novels in the nineteenth-century rewrote the conventions of this form.

Traditional American sentimental novels were used as representations of society's moral standards of true womanhood in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The white female protagonists in traditional sentimental novels taught readers about true womanhood, which was socially constructed by early British-American standards. True womanhood demonstrated four virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity (Collins 72). The socially constructed identities of African-American women disallowed them from inhabiting the image of true

womanhood as represented in sentimental novels. Orlando Patterson's analysis of social death for enslaved people provides a better understanding of the social constraints that Brown and Wilson's female characters faced in redefining their identities and virtuous characters.

Clotel and *Our Nig* are provocative sentimental novels because the enslaved and free mixed-race female characters resist the social definitions imposed on their identities. Brown and Wilson's audiences must understand the social limitations placed on the identities represented by Brown and Wilson's female characters to conceptualize the impact of each character's actions. I turn to Orlando Patterson's comparative study on slavery to explain the social definition and limitations for enslaved people. According to Patterson, social death means that an enslaved person is physically forced to undergo a process that alienates them from all "rights" or claims of birth, which ceases their belonging to any legitimate social order (Patterson 5).

Patterson describes the process of social death by applying Claude Meillassoux's transitional phases of enslavement: first, a person is violently uprooted from their environment. Then, the person is isolated, desocialized, and depersonalized. Next, the person is introduced into the community of their new enslaver. Prevailing laws, customs, and ideologies ensure that the enslaved person is introduced into their enslaver's community as a non-being (Patterson 38). In this process, the institution of slavery has stripped the enslaved person of their identity, and the enslaved person has no formal social existence outside of their relationship to an enslaver.

The key component in eradicating the social identity of an enslaved person to produce a non-being is isolation; the enslaved person must not have a socially-recognized form of community or familial relations. The enslaved person must experience what Orlando Patterson terms "natal alienation," which is an enslaved person's forced alienation and "loss of ties of birth in both ascending and descending generations" (Patterson 7). The enslaved person loses any

legal attachments to ties of “blood,” and the only acceptable relations for the enslaved person is determined by their enslaver (Patterson 7). The enslaved person has memories of their past, but they are unable to root themselves in their experiences or use the memories of their ancestors to understand their present social realities.

Natal alienation leads to an enslaved person becoming a genealogical isolate.

Genealogical isolation is when an enslaved person is formally isolated from any relatives and culturally separated from the social heritage of their ancestors. The genealogical isolate does not have access to their ancestors or descendants (Patterson 5). In other words, genealogical isolation erases the identities of enslaved people and denies their ability to leave a legacy or heritage to their heirs. As Patterson explains, natal alienation and genealogical isolation perpetuate enslavement and makes it inheritable. As the genealogical isolate loses their natal claim to their parents and community, they also lose any natal claims to pass down to their children. Consequently, the enslaver inherits enslaved children for their own economic purposes (Patterson 9).

Enslavers replace the enslaved person’s familial relations with fictive kinship. Fictive kinship manipulates the enslaved person into conceiving the violent relations of enslaver and enslaved as warm and intimate (Patterson 63). According to Patterson, there are two types of fictive kinship within the institution of slavery: adoptive and quasi-filial. Adoptive kinship is a genuine assimilation of an enslaved person into the family of the enslaver. The enslaved person adopts the privileges and powers of the enslaver who has adopted them into their family. On the other hand, the fictive kinship that is mostly represented in early African-American writing is the quasi-filial kinship. Quasi-filial kinship uses expressive language as a means of addressing their enslaver and family of the enslaver (Patterson 63). Enslavers encouraged enslaved children to

call them names like “Big Pappy” to create the image of the enslaver as benevolent and kind (Patterson 65). The quasi-filial kinship is designed to compel the loyalty of the enslaved person and assert the authority of the enslaver.

My analysis in later sections of this project builds upon Patterson’s influential theories. For example, Brown’s *Clotel* recounts the narrative of the enslaved female protagonists Clotel and Althesa, who are born enslaved and raised by their enslaved mother, Currer, until they are young women. Clotel and Althesa do not feel the full impact of natal alienation until all three are sold on the auction block. Clotel and Althesa lose the remaining bond they have with each other and their mother. Later in the novel, Clotel becomes a genealogical isolate when the institution of slavery separates her from her daughter, Mary. At this point, Clotel has no access to her ancestors nor her descendants. In *Clotel* natal alienation and genealogical isolation are enforced and perpetuated by the law, a matter I discuss in further detail in later sections.

In Wilson’s *Our Nig*, the free mixed-race Frado becomes an informal indentured servant in the white Belmont household after the abandonment of her mother. In this case, Frado undergoes a social natal alienation and loses her ties to her familial relations, and she is never reunited with them. In this context, one can observe that the consequences from the institution of slavery like natal alienation and genealogical isolation, which perpetuate the loss of identity, remains significant for emancipated and free African-Americans in nineteenth-century America. In the following paragraphs, I examine slave codes and the illegality of enslaved and interracial marriages that enforced and perpetuated the social death of enslaved people.

Enslavers need the power of public sentiment behind them to exert full authority in denying enslaved people any social claims. In that case, early American slave codes and laws serve as a force to perpetuate and naturalize enslavement and social death. Slave codes are laws

designed to govern the rights of enslaved people and their relations to their enslavers. In 1705, American slave codes developed that would define enslaved people as property with no legal rights and disregarding them as human beings (Weierman 129). As legal scholar Darlene Goring notes, this definition of enslaved people as property excludes them from owning, renting, or transferring real property, from owning personal property, or from making or entering any civil contracts (Goring 303). Consequently, enslaved people cannot enter a legally binding marriage contract. An enslaved person's inability to enter a legally binding marriage contract denies the legitimacy of an enslaved person's identity and legal rights to their familial relations. Enslaved people's inability to enter a marriage contract led to the development of informal relationships between enslaved individuals. Informal relationships were meaningful within communities of enslaved people, but they were unstable. Enslavers had the legal right to sell and trade enslaved people and therefore to disrupt their developed informal relationships. Consequently, the legal status of enslaved people as the property of enslavers reinforces Patterson's concept of the genealogical isolate. In other words, an enslaved person's identity is fluid and cannot be fixed within their family's legacy or heritage.

In order to develop this discussion of how Patterson's concept of social death links up with civil and legal limits on the rights of enslaved people, I will provide some historical context regarding the prohibition against marriage between enslaved people and interracial relationships. The institution of American slavery became secured through early American slave codes legally defining enslaved people as property. An enslaved person's legal status as property and inability to enter a marriage contract denies an enslaved person numerous legal protections for themselves and their family. As early American lawyer Daniel Delaney explains, an enslaved person cannot act against the violator of [their] bed (qtd. In Goodell ch. VII). In other words, the slave codes

allowed enslavers the right to violate enslaved women physically and sexually. Further, if the enslaved woman has an informal marriage to an enslaved man, the husband cannot legally protect his wife. The slave code benefits enslavers because they profit from the sexual violence on enslaved females by producing more property. The enslaved female, then, has no legal protection of her virtuous character, which was understood to depend on maintaining sexual purity before marriage and not having sexual intercourse outside of the legal bonds of marriage, according to nineteenth-century American norms. As a result of the enslaved female's inability to consent or resist the sexual violence of her enslaver, she is always presumed to be willing (Hartman 81). In this manner, the legal narrative of the "unvirtuous" African-American female is developed which disallows her access to the social constructions of true womanhood as represented in the nineteenth century.

Slave codes defining enslaved people as property perpetuated enslavement through the legal doctrine of *partus sequitur ventrem*. *Partus sequitur ventrem* means that the offspring follows the condition of the mother; thus, a child is remanded into slavery if their mother is enslaved. In 1662, the doctrine was first used in colonial America by the Virginia General Assembly and later adopted by the remaining colonies. *Partus sequitur ventrem* derived from an ancient tradition of Roman civil law, which used the matrilineal descent to determine lineage. Traditionally, in ancient times, the doctrine was used when animals reproduced and the young were considered to belong to the mother's owner (Hunter 65). Therefore, it was convenient for early British-Americans to adapt the doctrine to reinforce chattel slavery.

Partus sequitur ventrem has two major impacts for enslaved people; first, it allows enslavers to increase their slave population and releases the enslaver from any parental responsibilities or ties to their offspring. Second, the legal doctrine makes inheritance an

impossibility for enslaved people, which perpetuates natal alienation and genealogical isolation. In most cases, enslavers could protect the image of their legal marriage to their white spouses by not having or acknowledging responsibility to their enslaved offspring. Enslavers could not be charged with adultery since civil laws at the time did not recognize enslaved women as human beings. Often, enslavers hid their indiscretions and profited from it by selling their enslaved offspring. If an enslaver chose not to sell their enslaved offspring, the enslavers would still profit by the using their enslaved offspring to increase production as a field laborer or house servant.

As Brown's *Clotel* reveals, although enslavers did not have legal parental responsibilities to their enslaved offspring, the presence of a such a child could cause much jealousy and strife in the household of the enslaver. In *Clotel*, Gertrude, the legal wife of Horatio Green, discovers Horatio has a daughter with his enslaved mistress, Clotel. In a fit of rage, Gertrude forces Horatio to sell Clotel and demands that his enslaved daughter, Mary, become their house servant. As the narrator explains to the readers, "as if to make her husband drink of the cup of humiliation to its very dregs, Mrs. Green resolved to take his child under her own roof for a servant" (Brown 137). Thus, Gertrude uses Mary to shame Horatio regarding his sexual relations with Clotel. In this case, the *partus sequitur ventrem* perpetuated the social death of enslaved people and protected the social identity of the enslaver.

The *partus sequitur ventrem* policy means that the legal identity of enslaved people as property is hereditary. As William Goodell reminds his readers in *The American Slave Code in Theory and Practice*, an enslaved person must legally be property because if an enslaved person owned property that means the enslaved person has the rights to make contracts and participate in commerce. Further, if an enslaved person has the right to contract in commerce, then they have the right to contract in matrimony (Goodell ch. VI). Meaning, such rights would imply that

an enslaved person also has legal rights to provide their familial relations with an inheritance, legacy, and establishing an identity within society. Instead, the *partus sequitur ventrem* allows enslaved offspring to only inherit social isolation and a legal identity as property of their enslaver.

I turn again to Brown's *Clotel* to provide an example of the disturbing consequences of *partus sequitur ventrem* as a means of prohibiting inheritance and identity to enslaved offspring. In Brown's novel, Henry Morton, a white physician, purchases Althesa from her enslaver with the hopes of marrying her. Althesa and Henry have a marriage that is not legally binding but their marriage is accepted by society. Mr. and Mrs. Morton live in the city with their two daughter, Ellen and Jane, who grow up into young ladies never knowing the reality that their mother is enslaved. However, Ellen and Jane discover, through the death of Althesa and Henry, that their mother is enslaved to their father. As a result, Ellen and Jane are subjected to *partus sequitur ventrem*; they must follow the condition of their enslaved mother. Instead of receiving an inheritance from their parents, Ellen and Jane must confront their legal identities as the property of their father, or their father's heirs. In the end, Ellen and Jane are sold to another enslaver to pay the debt of their father, and they no longer have their social identity (Brown 183-184). The example represented through Ellen and Jane demonstrates that within the institution of American slavery, an enslaved person's legal identity as property, which is perpetuated through *partus sequitur ventrem*, results in an unstable social identity.

Slave codes and legal doctrines that protected the enslaver's sexual violence against enslaved women resulted in an increase of enslaved mixed-raced children. Soon, American society began to fear the increasing mixed-race population because it threatened the supposed racial purity of the white race and the notion of a raced-based institution of slavery. In other

words, white enslavers had anxiety over the increasing difficulties of oppressing a mixed-raced enslaved population who would resist their legal identity as property and fight for their rights associated with whiteness.

Many slave states developed laws prohibiting interracial sexual relations and marriages in response to the fears and anxieties surrounding the mixed-race population. In the following paragraphs, I will discuss the prohibitions against interracial marriage and sexual relations, specifically focusing on states and legislation that will be prevalent in my analysis of *Clotel* and *Our Nig*. I begin by discussing Virginia because it is the main geographical location represented in *Clotel*. The narrative begins in Virginia and it is the location where the seduction narrative of Clotel unfolds. As the “mother of slavery,” the state of Virginia is known for having the most oppressive laws within the institution of American slavery, which explains the tragic fate of Clotel and Horatio’s interracial relationship (Higginbotham 1967). According to Leon Higginbotham and Barbara K. Kopytoff’s “Racial Purity and Interracial Sex in the law of Colonial and Antebellum Virginia,” Virginia was one of the first colonies to prohibit interracial marriages and sexual relations (Higginbotham 1967).

In 1662, Virginia legislation developed its first statute against interracial relations: “if any christian shall commit ffornication with a [Black] man or woman, hee or shee so offending shall pay double the fines imposed by the former act” (qtd in. Higginbotham 1989). The “former act” in the 1662 statute refers to a previous act that established fines and penalties for the “ffilthy sin of ffornication” (Higginbotham 1989). The former act targeted all individuals engaging in illicit pre-marital sex, regardless of race, but the revision in 1662 regulated sexual relations based on race. In this 1662 statute, the legislation is not focused on prohibiting interracial marriage, but

rather it is focused on preventing mixed-race offspring as a result of interracial sexual relationships.

In 1691, Virginia legislation enacted the first statute prohibiting interracial marriages. The 1691 statute declared that for the “prevention of that abominable mixture and spurious issue,” any English or white man or woman who intermarry with an enslaved or free African-American will be “banished and removed from this dominion forever” (qtd. in Higginbotham 1995). The Virginia legislation had to create the 1691 statute because the 1662 statute prohibited pre-marital sexual relations between white people and African-Americans; therefore, the 1662 statute allowed for white women to marry free African-American men and produce mixed-race children. The updated 1691 statute prohibited interracial sexual relations and interracial marriages.

Virginia legislation kept the foundation of the 1691 law prohibiting interracial marriages, but in following years made amendments to the punishments of interracial marriages and the requirements of who is considered to be African-American. In 1705, the law adjusted the punishment from the white person in an interracial marriage being banished to the white person being imprisoned for six months without bail and paying a fine of ten thousand pounds (Higginbotham 1995). Later, in 1786, Thomas Jefferson revised marriage laws and declared that interracial marriages would be considered null and void, and the Virginia legislation continued to prohibit interracial marriages until 1967.

Many other colonies and later slave states were influenced by Virginia’s legislation and designed their laws to model Virginia’s statutes prohibiting interracial marriages. In the beginning, laws deeming enslaved people as property and the *partus sequitur ventrem* policy protected the enslaver’s right to sexually violate enslaved people, but the increased population

began to threaten the hierarchy of white identities. Therefore, by tracing the evolution of Virginia's laws on interracial sexual relations and marriage, a person can observe how American laws constantly change to legally oppress the identities of African-Americans and to protect white identities and power.

I will briefly discuss Louisiana and New Hampshire's views on interracial sexual relations and marriages during America's antebellum period because Louisiana and New Hampshire are prevalent geographical settings in *Clotel* and *Our Nig*. Louisiana is the geographical setting in *Clotel* that is the backdrop of Althesa and Henry Morton's tale of marriage. Louisiana was a slave state that regulated interracial sexual relations and marriages but is known for being more socially accepting of those relationships. Louisiana's relaxed outlook on interracial relations could be a factor in Brown's positive portrayal of Althesa and Henry's socially accepted marriage. Legal scholar Vernon Valentine Palmer asserts that Louisiana slave codes were more humane compared to English colonies because of the French and Spanish influence during the colonial period (Palmer 364).

The French and Spanish leaders used Louis XIV's 1685 Code Noir to design the 1724 Code Noir of Louisiana as laws to regulate slavery, which prohibited interracial marriages (Palmer 363). Despite the 1724 Code Noir, Louisiana institutionalized systems such as *plaçage*, or unions between white European males and African-American or mixed-raced women. Louisiana, especially New Orleans, often celebrated the unions between whites and African-Americans. As Karen Woods Weierman notes, the openness of interracial sexual relationships and informal marriages in Louisiana were often written about in nineteenth-century American literature (Weierman 134-135). In this context, it makes sense that Althesa and Henry Morton

lived as a legitimate interracial married couple integrated in New Orleans society, but in the event of their deaths it is revealed that their marriage is not legally binding (Brown 183).

Our Nig features New Hampshire as the only geographical location in the novel. The treatment of African-Americans in New Hampshire is represented through the white Belmont's treatment of Frado, a free mixed-race girl who is abandoned at the Belmont house. According to P. Gabrielle Foreman, in nineteenth-century America, New Hampshire was an "abolitionist stronghold" with radical ideas (*Activist* 45). In 1857, a passage in a New Hampshire act declared that no person, because of decent, should be denied citizenship (Harper). In this case, African-Americans in New Hampshire had opportunities to legally binding marriages. However, Foreman warns that although the act declared African-Americans as having the legal right to citizenship, African-Americans remained socially oppressed. Several times, for instance, political leaders justified mob violence against visiting African-American students who were invited by abolitionists to attend a multiracial academy. In fact, Senator Isaac Hill claimed the mobs were standing against abolitionist's schemes to "mingle the races" (Foreman xxxii). New Hampshire is an example of the northern treatment of free African-Americans and the tensions between the legal and social identities of African-Americans in nineteenth-century America, issues that I address in more length in my analysis of *Our Nig* in Chapter 3.

In this section, I have provided some of the ideas and evolution of social and legal constraints on African-American identities that helped create the stereotype of the unvirtuous African-American women. The social death of enslaved people and the legal prohibitions against marriage by enslaved couples and interracial sexual relations work together to perpetuate oppressed identities for African-Americans and mixed-race people, as well as enforce white supremacy. The social and legal constraints on African-American sexuality, marriages, and

identities proves why African-Americans could not resonate with or find hope when reading traditional sentimental novels in early American literature. It explains the need for nineteenth-century African-American authors like William Wells Brown and Harriet E. Wilson to provide sentimental novels with alternative moral lessons that provide a sense of identity and hope to their audiences. I aim to provide social and legal context to my readers to aid in a better understanding of Brown's and Wilson's choices regarding the representation of resistance to these legal oppressions throughout their novels.

CHAPTER 2

Clotel

The nineteenth-century African-American author William Wells Brown uses early American marriage laws to unravel the traditional sentimental novel. In his novel *Clotel*, Brown does not provide traditional moral lessons on virtue to young ladies that are common in the sentimental tradition. Instead, Brown uses the prohibition of marriage between enslaved people and interracial marriages to expose immorality in nineteenth-century America. Brown's novel proves that the institution of American marriage and the institution of American slavery are antithetical, and this antithesis will lead to societal degradation. Traditionally, in early America, a person who has a sexual relationship outside of marriage is viewed as immoral. Consequently, the early American laws deeming enslaved African Americans as property and prohibiting them from entering a legally binding contract (including marriage contracts) created the narrative of the unvirtuous enslaved woman. Brown understands that his enslaved female characters must work outside of social and legal contracts to deconstruct this unvirtuous narrative. In doing so, Brown weds the moral values of the reader with that of his enslaved protagonists. The readers must decide if they will empathize with the morally corrupt institution of American slavery and with enslavers, or with the enslaved protagonists who are fighting against social and civil death.

Brown's *Clotel*, first published in 1853, is a work of fiction constructed largely by factual documents such as other narratives, various articles, speeches by politicians, and legal documents. Furthermore, Brown uses miscegenation laws, the Fugitive Slave Act, and the legal doctrine of *partus sequitur ventrem* (the child follows the condition of the mother) to expose the genealogical curse of the narrative of "unvirtuous" enslaved women. In other words, enslaved grandmothers, mothers, and daughters alike must fight against the immoral reputations created

by these laws. The narrative begins with Thomas Jefferson abandoning Currer, an enslaved woman, with their two daughters, Clotel and Althesa. Next, Clotel is pursued and promised freedom by Horatio Green, only for Clotel to be abandoned with their daughter, Mary. Later, Clotel escapes enslavement in an attempt to rescue Mary from the evils of enslavement. Althesa is bought by Henry Morton and they have an endearing marriage that ends with their death from yellow fever. Unfortunately, Althesa and Morton's two daughters are sold into slavery and die. Finally, Clotel's daughter Mary escapes to Europe and successfully marries George Green. As later analysis will show, the genealogical line of Currer, her daughters, and her granddaughters all struggle to uphold their virtuous character despite the unvirtuous laws which perpetuate the institution of American slavery.

Brown begins *Clotel* by addressing the impasse between the institution of American slavery and the institution of American marriage, which he argues has led to the genealogical curse of the unvirtuous enslaved woman and to societal degradation. Instead of opening the novel with a romantic pursuit, the narrator introduces the narrative with the historical and legal context of American enslavement and marriage. The narrator explains that the reason for doing so is to show that the system of enslavement undermines America's social conditions (Brown 76). Based on this introduction, readers can conclude that the impasse between and degradation of American slavery and marriage are rooted in the early American law determining that all enslaved people are the property of enslavers. As a result, enslaved people faced the obstacle of dual identities, their legal identity as property and their identity as sentient beings with the capability of feeling emotions like love. Saidiya Hartman notes that the dual identity of enslaved people as property and person links reciprocity and submission, and problematizes intimacy and domination. Additionally, the dual identity of enslaved people conflates the legitimacy of

violence and the necessity of protection (Hartman 80). This is important to keep in mind when analyzing Brown's representation of interracial relationships and marriages in *Clotel*. Can an interracial relationship work if the husband is the enslaver?

The narrator of *Clotel* suggests that society is compromised by such laws, “[w]here the slave is placed by law entirely under the control of the man who claims him, body and soul, as property, what else could be expected than the most depraved social condition?” (Brown 74). The narrator suggests that the immorality of nineteenth-century America lies in the public sentiment behind the law that created the legal relations of enslaver and enslaved. What is immoral is the intentions of the people behind the laws. As Tera W. Hunter confirms, the body of legislation supporting slavery represents the “aspirations of lawmakers” and the “broader conscience of the people they represent (64). Brown places immorality in the hands of the people who create and practice the power of the law. Abolitionist William Goodell’s legal analysis in his 1853 *The American Slave* shows that the legal relation between enslaver and enslaved provides the enslaver with absolute power and denies enslaved people legal protection (Goodell ch. I). The legal power given to enslavers permits sexual violence against enslaved people without the obligation of marriage. The result of enslaver’s freedom to sexually violate enslaved females is that “immorality and vice pervade the cities of the Southern State” (Brown 77). The enslaver is morally corrupt when having such power and lack of self-control. As later analysis shows, the enslaved female protagonists in *Clotel* must find ways to navigate this powerful legal relation and the sexual violence it enables, in order to maintain their virtuous characters.

The institution of American slavery and the institution of American marriage are incompatible because the enslaved individual’s legal identity as property prohibits their ability to enter a legally binding contract. As legal scholar, Darlene Goring explains, the law identifying

enslaved people as property prohibited them from owning, renting, or transferring property, from being educated or taught to read to making or entering any legal contracts (Goring 303). This law also disallowed enslaved people to be in the institution of slavery and legally married. Therefore, the legal relation between enslaver as owner and enslaved as property has denied the enslaved the right to the marriage contract. Brown claims in *Clotel* that marriage is the “most important institution of human existence—the foundation of all civilization and culture—the root of church and state” (Brown 75). In his view, the institution of marriage provides the education of true human sentiments of every human feelings and virtues, and husband and wife become conscious of “complete humanity” (Brown 76). The marriage between two loving parents provides a generational lesson to young children, which develops goodness within their children (Brown 76).

The denial of an enslaved person’s right to the marriage contract is a constraint on their social identity. Thus, I argue that the prohibition of marriage between people who are enslaved leads to Orlando Patterson’s notion of the genealogical isolate; a genealogical isolate has no legal claims to their living blood relations, and they are socially and culturally isolated from their ancestors and families (Patterson 5). According to Patterson, enslaved people did not have heritage or a familial legacy of their own. Patterson’s genealogical isolate is a concept I will return to in later sections. In his novel, Brown recognizes the powerful influence of the institution of marriage and the threat it posed against the institution of slavery. Marriage had the potential to prove that enslaved people were sentient beings capable of feelings and emotions outside of being property, as well as to establish legitimate family lines.

It is important to understand how and why marriage is the antithesis of American enslavement because it provides context for the fear, anxiety, and consequences surrounding

interracial sexual reproduction and relationships found in Brown's sentimental narrative. In a traditional sentimental novel, the author opens the narrative with a preface conveying the moral lessons of the evils of an unprotected young woman disobeying her parents, while convincing the audience that the narrative is factual. By contrast, Brown opens *Clotel* by addressing the fear and anxiety caused by interracial reproduction. In the first line of the book, the narrator acknowledges that with the growing population of enslaved people, "there is a fearful increase of half whites" (Brown 73). In saying this, the narrator is showing that there is a prevalent conversation circulating around interracial sexual reproduction, and the sentimental narrative in *Clotel* is also participating in this larger conversation.

Before participating in the larger conversation, Brown chooses to introduce the ideas of famous politicians and abolitionist as factual documents. Brown cites the former statesman Henry Clay's prediction that the abolition of slavery would be brought about by what he called "amalgamation." Next, Brown mentions the speech of famous enslaver and politician, John Randolph, who claims that the blood of the first American statesman runs through the veins of the enslaved. Brown follows that statement with the statistic that only one in every four enslaved people are full-blooded African Americans. Lastly, Brown pieces together quotes from William Goodell's *American Slave*, which describes the law deeming enslaved people as property (Brown 73). In this sequence of factual documents, Brown reveals the hypocrisy that the same laws indicating that enslaved women are property, which allow enslavers to sexually violate enslaved women to increase their profits, are the same laws that produced an increasing concern about and perceived threat to the system of enslavement. Interracial sexual reproduction threatened the system of enslavement because it problematized the idea of stable racial difference. It is only

after laying out these facts that Brown uses the sentimental narrative to participate in the controversial conversation these contradictions provoked.

One must analyze the historical and legal context in Brown's introduction before his sentimental narrative to understand his critique of American enslavement and American marriage. By doing this, Brown is providing context for the legal and social obstacles and consequences his characters face in their relationships and marriages. The reader can be aware of the legal and social constructs that the female enslaved characters must deconstruct to save their virtuous characters. The female enslaved characters must fight against a system that aims to perpetuate their legal identities as property, generation after generation. How can Brown's female enslaved characters be enslaved and legitimize their relationships and identities? In the following paragraphs, I aim to analyze the interracial sexual reproduction, relationships, and marriages in Brown's *Clotel* to explore the relationship between the institution of American slavery and the institution of American marriage as portrayed in a fictional novel.

Brown traces the genealogy of his enslaved characters in *Clotel* as a method for critiquing the institution of American slavery and the institution of American marriage, beginning with the enslaved matriarch Currer. Traditionally, sentimental narratives open with a young lady disobeying her parents' wishes, being persuaded into a sexual relationship outside of marriage, and eventually abandoned. In *Clotel*, Brown chooses to open his narrative by introducing the interracial sexual relationship and consequent reproduction of Currer and President Thomas Jefferson, writing "the gentleman for whom [Currer] kept house for was Thomas Jefferson, by whom she had two daughters. Jefferson being called to Washington to fill a government appointment, Currer was left behind" (Brown 77). The readers of *Clotel* would have been familiar with this description of Jefferson from the popular rumors that the enslaved woman

Sally Hemings had children by him. In more recent years, it has been confirmed that Jefferson did have children with Hemings (duCille “Where” 446). For this reason, Brown can keep the description of Curren and Jefferson simple and not provide *Clotel*'s audience with many details besides Jefferson impregnating Curren and abandoning her.

Curren and Thomas Jefferson are *Clotel*'s initial representation of the legal relation between enslaver and enslaved. Although Curren is enslaved to Mr. Graves, she is hired out to Thomas Jefferson who, by extension, has access to some of the same rights over her as Curren's enslaver. Meaning, she is considered property to Jefferson, but Jefferson does not have the right to sell Curren. The law remains that Curren's legal identity is property, thus Jefferson can impregnate Curren and abandon her with their two daughters, Clotel and Althesa, without repercussion. Jefferson may not have legal repercussions for abandoning Curren, but one may question his moral character after the story unfolds and the fate of his daughters and granddaughters are revealed. The audience must determine how they feel about the portrayal of a President claiming that the perpetual exercise of enslavement is one of “boisterous passions” that degrades the morals of the country, meanwhile participating in that same system himself (Brown 145).

The law deeming enslaved people property is the foundation of the antithesis between the institution of American slavery and the institution of marriage, but the legal doctrine of *partus sequitur ventrem* ensured the perpetuation of enslavement. As discussed in Chapter 1, the *partus sequitur ventrem* is a legal doctrine that establishes that the offspring followed the condition of the mother in her condition as enslaved or free (Hunter 65). Tera W. Hunter explains that this doctrine led to the enslaver's legal right to the increase of enslaved women. The *partus sequitur ventrem* policy determined that the white father had no legal obligation to their mixed-race

children, except that as enslaver, and the legal identity of the enslaved mother as property transferred to her children, which created a legally kinless class of people (Hunter 65). Meaning, Currer's legal identity as property evolved into her daughters' legal identity as enslaved and property, and Jefferson is legally released from obligation to his children. Brown uses Currer's abandonment by Jefferson to begin the portrayal of the genealogical trend of failed interracial relationships. Furthermore, the institution of American marriage that is built to legitimize kinship and legacies cannot coexist with the laws of enslavement that allow enslavers to legally abandon their heirs. Currer, Clotel, and Althesa are left in enslavement. In the following sections, I will analyze how Brown portrays the conventions of the sentimental marriage plot within the constraints of slave laws.

Since the institution of marriage in nineteenth-century America defines the virtuous character of women, Brown's sentimental narrative aims to answer the question, "what must be the moral degradation of that people to whom marriage is denied?" (Brown 76). What happens to the virtue of Brown's enslaved characters to whom marriage is prohibited? Since the law prohibits both enslaved and interracial marriages, then any sexual relations for enslaved people compromises their virtue, according to the norms of the period. After Jefferson abandons Currer with Clotel and Althesa, Currer does not seem concerned about the state of her virtue. Rather, Currer focused on her business and reputation as a laundress. Currer had a notable reputation as a "first class" laundress, which enabled her daughters to live in "comparative" luxury (Brown 78). For Currer, her economic success allowed her to "raise her daughter up like ladies" and to attract the attention of a gentleman at a ball or party (Brown 78). Currer understood that her daughters' virtuous reputation is important when Mr. Graves, their enslaver, died. Since Currer is Mr. Graves's property, she can be sold on the auction block. Despite being Jefferson's daughters and

being raised as “ladies,” Clotel and Althesa must follow the condition of their mother in being sold at the auction.

In the case of the traditional sentimental novel, the parents, typically the father, of the young lady would choose a gentleman who will advance their daughter’s status or wealth. In Brown’s depiction, Curren, the enslaved matriarch, hoped for an enslaver who could purchase and emancipate her daughters (Brown 78). Curren must be the figure in Curren and Althesa’s life guiding their moral characters, but ultimately Curren had no control over who purchased her daughters. Curren may not have a say in who pursued Clotel, but the mother did appear “delighted beyond measure” that Horatio Green, son of a wealthy gentleman, wanted to court Clotel (Brown 78). Horatio and Clotel’s relationship is the closest portrayal of a traditional sentimental romance in Brown’s novel.

Yet, Brown must rewrite the convention of the sentimental marriage plot as it pertains to Clotel and Horatio’s relationship. When Brown wrote *Clotel*, marriages between enslaved people and interracial marriages were prohibited through miscegenation laws. The laws did not permit Horatio and Clotel to have a legally binding marriage. Horatio courts Clotel, but he must purchase the young enslaved girl from the auction block to affirm their relationship. Here, Brown mixes romantic and contractual language to show the tension between marriage and enslavement. For example, Horatio and “the object of his affections by his side” were sitting under the “moonlight night in August” is followed by Horatio pulling from his pocket the newspaper, “wet from the press,” advertising the sale of Clotel. This scene symbolizes Horatio seducing Clotel with the idea of being purchased and becoming the mistress of her own home instead of with a promise of marriage (Brown 78).

Then, Brown replaces the conventional wedding ceremony with the sale of Clotel at the auction block. The wedding ceremony plays an important role in traditional sentimental tales because it is the public act of being united that lends legitimacy to the marriage. The scene of the auction block is described as a joyous occasion as purchasers laugh, joke, smoke, and chatter amongst themselves, while Clotel stands alone on the block with tear-filled eyes staring at Horatio, Currer, and Althesa (Brown 80). Finally, Horatio purchases Clotel at the auction, but instead of receiving a marriage certificate to legally validate their romantic relationship, Horatio is given a certificate validating Clotel's "pure chastity" as a "virtuous creature" (Brown 80). Brown must transform the familiar scenes of courtship and marriage because he is representing an interracial marriage that is constrained by miscegenation and slavery laws that prohibit a legitimate marriage between Clotel and Horatio. The readers of *Clotel* may be familiar with sentimental scenes, and they may be familiar with auction block scenes from slave narratives. Brown's method of blending the two scenes together makes the incompatibility of marriage and enslavement visible to the reader.

The antithesis of the institution of marriage and the institution of American slavery relies on the notion that enslaved people are property incapable of human virtue. As Brown exposes in his novel, the same virtue that enslaved women were denied by law, is the same virtue that is commodified at the auction block. The auctioneer's declaration that he has a "paper certifying that [Clotel] has a good moral character," puts her worth at seven hundred dollars. Clotel's value increases as the auctioneer reveals other human characteristics such as intelligence, trustworthiness, and her religious status as a Christian (Brown 79-80). Clotel's virtuous reputation relied on the narrative created by the provided documentation that as a result made Clotel more valuable.

Because Horatio courts Clotel before he purchases her, the relationship between Clotel and Horatio is seemingly consensual. Clotel is seduced by the idea that she and Horatio will have a marriage that is sanctified by heaven (Brown 92). Seduction for an enslaved woman in an interracial relationship is complex and deceiving. One might speculate that the enslaver's intentions are genuine feelings for the enslaved. However, as Hartman explains, seduction is a "veil of enchanted relations" of reciprocal relations between enslaver and enslaved, but seduction is a euphemism for violence (Hartman 88). Clotel's consent to Horatio's pursuit is an illusion. As Patterson calls it, it is a form of quasi-filial kinship; the use of the language of kinship serves as a means of expressing an authority relation between enslaver and enslaved (Patterson 63). The quasi-filial kinship made it difficult for Clotel to determine Horatio's genuine expressions of affection and his manipulation. The violence of Horatio's seduction is that Clotel must compromise her virtue by having sexual relations with Horatio outside of marriage, so that that she will have his economic protection and freedom. Clotel's conscience and the "high value she placed upon virtue" meant that she and Horatio needed an "outward" marriage to protect her moral character (Brown 92). Clotel desired to have a public ceremony although she knew that still would not give her a "legal" hold on Horatio. Still, Clotel remained in the cottage secluded from society with their daughter, Mary, while Horatio began to spend more time in the city. Ultimately, Horatio abandons Clotel and their daughter to legally marry, Gertrude, a free white woman; Horatio's marriage to Gertrude would enhance his political power and wealth (Brown 112). Clotel experienced the same fate as Curren, and she must work outside of the legal and social constraints that have formed her identity to protect her moral character.

Clotel takes on an adventurous tone after Clotel's abandonment as Clotel works to deconstruct the legal and social narrative constraining her identity. Clotel's adventure to

deconstruct this identity and to protect the virtue of Mary, her daughter, is amplified by the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. The Fugitive Slave Act required that any enslaved person caught fleeing must be returned to their enslaver, with free states obligated to abide by the act, too. After Horatio abandons Clotel and Mary, his new wife Gertrude learns the truth about Clotel and Horatio. As a result, Clotel was sold to a new enslaver, Mr. James French, and sold once more after that. On the other hand, Mary was forced to work as a kitchen servant in Horatio's home (Brown 138). Clotel's new enslaver pursues Clotel and attempts to jeopardize her morals, but Clotel maintains her virtue by claiming that she has a husband in Virginia. Clotel upholds the morals of a traditional marriage and determines she will not have sexual relations with anyone else. At this point, Clotel understands she must escape enslavement to stay loyal to Horatio and to rescue her daughter from the harmful consequences of the relations between enslaver and enslaved. Clotel's attempt to rescue Mary is an attempt to end the genealogical curse of the legal violence against the enslaved body.

Clotel uses the laws that have constructed her identity as an enslaved woman to her advantage in her attempt to rescue Mary. Robert Reid-Pharr asserts in *Conjugal Union* that "Clotel's great strength is her ability to hide herself behind the very lies by which she had been defined" (57). Meaning, Clotel's legal identity has been constructed by *partus sequitur ventrem*, which defines Clotel as the legal property of James French. However, based on the genealogical occurrence of interracial sexual reproduction, Clotel is able to pass as a free white person. Clotel has the help of another enslaved man, William, in her escape. Clotel plays the role of William's enslaver and manages to escape to the free states (Brown 157). Clotel then uses the relation between enslaver and enslaved to secure William's freedom.

Once back in her home state of Virginia where an insurrection has occurred, Clotel is caught and imprisoned. The Fugitive Slave Act means Clotel will be sent back to her enslaver. In a desperate final attempt to escape, Clotel darted past the jail keeper and “ran for her life” (Brown 191). After running to the Long Bridge, Clotel realized she was trapped by pursuers on both ends of the bridge. Clotel’s only choice for freedom was to dive into the rushing waters of the Potomac River. Reid-Pharr questions Brown’s decision to end his heroic female protagonist in this manner, “why does [Clotel] die? Why does a character with these impressive attributes throw herself into the waters of the Potomac?” (Reid-Pharr 60). The answer to that question is not simple, and I am sure readers can answer the question in multiple ways. But one relevant response is that Clotel becomes conscious of her social death, or her inability to enter a social contract. Orlando Patterson’s concept of social death defines it as a process in which an enslaved person is completely subjugated through alienating the enslaved person from their origin or heritage (Patterson 38). Therefore, Clotel defeats the legal and social constructs of her identity through death. Clotel knew the only way to escape social death and the relation of enslaver and enslaved was to die. The impasse between the institution of marriage and the institution of American slavery meant Clotel could not remain both virtuous and enslaved.

So far, Brown has shown Curren’s abandonment by Jefferson and the seduction, abandonment, and death of Clotel. Brown uses Curren and Clotel’s failed interracial relationships to show that marriage and enslavement cannot coexist, and that enslaved women have to work outside of legal and social constructs to protect their virtue. Next, I will explore how Brown represents the relation between enslaver and enslaved with the interracial marriage of Henry Morton and Althesa.

Brown portrays Althesa and Henry's marriage as legitimate and successful because they have the power of public sentiment behind it. Althesa and Henry met when Althesa was enslaved to James Crawford in New Orleans. Henry, a physician, was boarding with Mr. Crawford when the young man's "sympathy ripened into love" for Althesa (Brown 115). Eventually, Henry did purchase Althesa and the two had an outward marriage and gave birth to two daughters, Ellen and Jane. Unlike the case of Clotel and Horatio, Henry and Althesa moved to the city and did not hide their relationship from the public. Immediately in the narrative, Brown begins to refer to Althesa as "Mrs. Morton," indicating that society accepted Althesa as Henry's wife (Brown 116). As Ann duCille notes, the name change to "Mrs." was an indication of female respectability and a transition from pre-marital virginity to marriageability (duCille *Coupling* 43). Henry hires a private teacher to instruct his wife on "those accomplishments necessary for one's taking a position in society," and Althesa maintains a moral reputation in society (Brown 115). After years of marriage, Althesa and Henry die from the yellow fever epidemic (Brown 183). I argue that Brown portrays the interracial marriage of Althesa and Henry as successful because Althesa and Henry are socially accepted. In this rewriting of the marriage plot, Brown is pointing out that free white people have the power to legitimize interracial marriages.

Althesa's virtue was protected by society's acceptance of her interracial marriage to Henry Morton. However, Ellen and Jane's virtue was only protected by their father's existence. Although Althesa and Henry had an outward marriage, Henry did not emancipate Althesa from enslavement. Therefore, in the end, Althesa's identity is reduced from Henry's wife to Henry's property. As long as Henry is alive and married to Althesa, Ellen and Jane did not have to worry about violence against their bodies. Upon their parents' death, it is revealed that Althesa remained enslaved, and Jane and Ellen must follow the condition of their mother. In this case,

Ellen and Jane must be sold into enslavement to pay off Henry's debt. Brown's positive representation of an interracial marriage is fleeting. In this way, Brown demonstrates that white-sanctioned interracial marriages are temporary and fragile. Within the confines of the institution of American slavery, interracial marriages are not meant to last.

Ellen and Jane face the consequences of being enslaved women unprotected from the legal sexual violence that would jeopardize their moral characters. Ellen drinks poison and kills herself after learning the reality of her status (Brown 185). Jane was sold to an "unprincipled profligate" who removed her from society with the intentions of violating her pure nature. While a prisoner, Jane's true love is killed, and she dies from a broken heart (Brown 187). Jane and Ellen experience what Orlando Patterson calls natal alienation, the loss of ties of birth in both ascending descending generations (7). They have become genealogical isolates with no ties to any kinship. Meaning, Jane and Ellen have no legal or social protections. After losing the protection of their parent's perceived marriage, Ellen and Jane must die to protect themselves from the legal sexual violence upon their bodies. *Clotel*, Ellen, and Jane die to break the genealogical curse of the enslaver and enslaved relations. In Brown's novel, death is a powerful tool to move beyond the legal and social constructs of the enslaved woman.

The hope in *Clotel* is found in the marriage plot of Clotel's daughter, Mary. Mary is the character who breaks the constraints of her legal identity as property, has a legal interracial marriage, and legally marries her true love. Mary is able to accomplish this by the protection of another country's laws. Mary falls in love with another enslaved man, George Green, who she helps escape from enslavement. Consequently, Mary is sold out of state and, on her journey, she meets a French man, Mr. Devenant. After some time, Mr. Devenant, after seeing documentation of Mary's "good character," professed his love for her, "upon the faith of these good assurances

(of Mary's moral character), and the love I bear you, I promise before high heaven that I will marry you as soon as it can be done" (Brown 210).

Mr. Devenant and Mary flee to Europe and have a successful marriage until Mr. Devenant's death. After his death, Mary is reunited with George and they legally marry. Europe's laws protect Mary from the Fugitive Slave Act and American prohibitions against interracial marriage. Mary's marriage to George breaks the genealogical narrative of the unvirtuous enslaved female prohibited from marriage. Brown chooses to end his novel with this portrait of a legal intraracial marriage between Mary and George in Europe. I argue that Brown ends the novel with an intraracial marriage because Mary is free from the relation of enslaver and enslaved. In Europe, Mary is not legally identified as property to an enslaver. Brown's novel agrees with Patterson's notion that no authentic human relationship is possible where violence is the ultimate sanction (Patterson 12). An interracial relationship within the confines of enslavement means that one has complete dominion over the other. Mary and George's marriage is the representation of a truly consensual and legitimate marriage.

Brown used the contractual language of marriage to fight the legal fictive narrative degrading enslaved females. By using documentation and law to frame the moral of his novel, Brown places a moral obligation on his audience. Brown manipulates the language and artfully controls the subtext of the novel, requiring the audience to participate in making the meaning of his text. The reader's morals are called into question when they must decide if they will condone the insinuated sexual violence against enslaved females. Better yet, will the reader reject the creation of laws that delegitimize identities and deny people the right to kinship?

CHAPTER 3

Our Nig

In 1859, African-American author Harriet E. Wilson followed William Wells Brown's *Clotel* by publishing an alternative sentimental novel, *Our Nig: or, Sketches from the life of a Free Black*. In *Our Nig*, Wilson complicates the traditional lesson portrayed in early British-American sentimental novels that the institution of marriage will protect a young lady's virtuous character. In order to understand how *Our Nig* disrupts the notion that the institution of marriage protects women's virtue, I must provide a quick recap of my previous analysis of Brown's *Clotel*. In the previous chapter, I examined *Clotel*'s representation of the prohibition of enslaved women's legal ability to marry, thus denying enslaved women the right to legally protect their virtue according to the values of the time. It is the legal relation between the enslaver and enslaved that granted absolute power to the enslaver and legally defined enslaved people as property. Brown provides a hopeful message to his audience that if an enslaved person breaks the legal relation between enslaver and enslaved, the enslaved or formerly-enslaved person can have the protections of the institution of marriage.

In contrast, *Our Nig* represents characters in the North who are not enslaved, nor are they prohibited from legally binding marriages. Yet, Wilson's sentimental novel shows that breaking the legal relation between enslaver and enslaved may not be enough for African-American women to secure economic and sexual autonomy or the legal rights associated within the institution of marriage. In *Our Nig*, Wilson uses examples of interracial and intraracial marriages to demonstrate how the legal relation of enslaver and enslaved, as practiced in the South, influences the treatment and social constraints of free African-Americans in the North. The social constraints and treatment of free African-Americans in the North result in isolation and

alienation that is often associated with enslaved people of the South. In *Our Nig*, this isolation and alienation leads to a state of economic and sexual vulnerability in which a female must exchange her virtue for protection. Wilson's sentimental novel teaches her audience that true freedom for African-American women is found through economic independence and not through the institution of marriage. As I prove in this chapter, marriage is an unstable institution that leads to more economic and sexual vulnerability for Wilson's main female protagonists.

Our Nig is a complex novel with an autobiographical foundation in Wilson's life. Wilson's life is represented through *Our Nig*'s main female protagonist, Frado. Frado is a free mixed-race girl in the North who becomes an informal indentured servant to the white Bellmont family. Wilson evokes sympathy from her audience by beginning her novel with the seduction narrative of Frado's mother, Mag. Mag is excommunicated from white society after her fall from virtue and subsequent interracial marriages, which lead to Mag being coerced into abandoning Frado with the white Bellmont family. Next, Wilson criticizes the treatment of free African-Americans in the North through her representation of Frado's condition while living in the Bellmont household. During her informal servitude, Frado is exposed to extreme mental, verbal, and physical abuse from members of the Bellmont family.

In the end, Wilson emphasizes the importance of economic independence for African-American women when Frado's informal servitude ends, and she must rely on the white community's assistance for survival. Frado's economic vulnerability leads to her marriage with Samuel, a free African-American man who claims to be a fugitive slave. Samuel abandons Frado and their son and later dies of yellow fever. Wilson ends the novel with Frado leaving her son in the care of the white community to seek economic independence by making and selling hair

products. Frado's marriage proves to be unstable and leads to Frado finding freedom through economic autonomy.

Wilson does not plead for young ladies to obey their parents and maintain sexual purity before marriage, which can be found in the prefaces of more traditional sentimental novels in the nineteenth century. Instead, Wilson uses her preface to establish an economic relationship with her audience. Wilson exposes that her economic vulnerability is the motive behind writing her novel, "[d]eserted by kindred, disabled by failing health, I [Wilson] am forced to some experiment which shall aid me in maintaining myself and child without extinguishing this feeble life" (Wilson 3). In this matter of life and death, Wilson appeals to her "colored brethren universally for patronage" (Wilson 3).

In hindsight, Wilson's readers might find it odd that the author appeals to her "colored brethren" for universal patronage because of the lack of African-American presence throughout the novel. *Our Nig* has three African-American or mixed-race characters: the main female protagonist, Frado, her father Jim who dies when Frado is a child, and Frado's husband Samuel who abandons her and dies at the end of the novel. Besides Jim and Samuel's brief appearance in the novel, Frado is isolated within the white community. Thus, Wilson's readers might question why Wilson appeals to her African-American brothers for support.

Wilson cannot appeal to white women and abolitionists in her preface because that would mean she is asking for economic support from the same community she is condemning in her novel. As represented in *Our Nig*, the economic relationship between white people and free African-Americans in the North resembles the violent relation of enslaver and enslaved in the South. Wilson's illustration of Frado's condition in the Belmont household demonstrates that isolation and alienation from an African-American community exacerbates the poor treatment of

African-Americans and denies a sense of legitimate agency. Thus, Wilson must appeal to her “colored brethren” in an attempt to resist the economic racist treatment and violence against free African-Americans by northern white people.

Wilson is aware of the economic advantages of appealing to an audience who could relate to the exploitation of free African-Americans in the North. As noted by Eric Gardner, weeks before Wilson registered her copyright for *Our Nig*, the African-American community in Boston (where the novel was published) held a convention calling for Black solidarity and encouraged support of trades, arts, and professions in the African-American community (Gardner 244). In this case, it makes sense that Wilson would appeal to her “colored brethren” to “rally” around her as a “faithful band of supporters and defenders” since during this period, there was growing literacy among the African-American community and most African-American publications were managed by African-American men (Wilson 3). However, it is important to note Ellen Prato Fiorito’s observation that although Wilson declares her “colored brethren” as her intended audience, Wilson must also navigate the inevitability of a white readership (Prato Fiorito 42). Wilson’s preface ensures that the author has “purposely omitted what would most provoke shame” in her “good anti-slavery friends” (Wilson 3). I suggest Wilson’s preface shows her need to develop an economic relationship with an African-American community to gain economic autonomy, while also trying to evoke sympathy from her white audience. In the following paragraphs, I will examine how Wilson uses various examples of marriages to expose the social conditions that create economic vulnerability for free African-Americans in the nineteenth-century.

Wilson transitions from her preface seeking an economic relationship with her African-American community to portraying the condensed seduction narrative of Frado’s mother, Mag

Smith in chapter one, “Mag Smith, My Mother.” Some of Wilson’s readers may find the brief four-page narrative to be insignificant, but it plays a crucial role within the novel. Mag’s seduction narrative demonstrates society’s complicity in creating obstacles and conditions that leave women of all races vulnerable by the punishments of society for not adhering to the social standards of sexual purity and virtue during the antebellum period. Wilson holds society accountable by creating a racially ambiguous Mag and emphasizing society’s punishment of Mag’s indiscretion. Ultimately, Wilson’s demonstration is a tactic to preemptively combat judgement and evoke sympathy from her audience once she reveals, at the end of chapter one, that Mag has entered an interracial marriage.

Mag’s seduction takes place within the first paragraph of chapter one, and Wilson immediately acknowledges Mag’s class status as a poor orphan. In doing so, Wilson reveals the reason for Mag’s fall from virtue without having to disclose information about Mag’s identity, or the identity of Mag’s seducer. Wilson reveals that “Lonely Mag” was “early deprived of parental guardianship” and “unprotected” and “uncared” for. Therefore, Mag surrendered her “priceless gem” to a charmer who “whispered of an elevation before unaspired to.” Mag’s charmer impregnates and abandons her instead of providing a life of “ease and plenty.” By the end of the paragraph, Mag is relieved when her newborn daughter dies within weeks of being born (Wilson 5). Here, Wilson provides the root cause of Mag’s fall from virtue for her audience: Mag’s economic vulnerability leads to the exchange of her sexual purity, according to nineteenth-century standards, for promises of economic security. According to Sara L. Zeigler, it was common for women to marry for economic security in nineteenth-century America because it was culturally established that a husband’s primary responsibility was to meet his wife’s financial needs (74). In this case, Wilson places the fault not on Mag’s intentions to uphold the

nineteenth-century custom of marrying for economic purposes, rather Wilson places the blame on Mag's naivety of the "hateful deceivers" of the world from the lack of parental guidance (Wilson 5). In doing so, Wilson implicates society in Mag's fall from virtue by not offering economic support or guidance to a girl emerging into womanhood alone. By focusing on Mag's class status, Wilson justifies the economic reasons for Mag's fall from virtue and evokes sympathy from the readers without disclosing Mag's racial identity.

Wilson is aware that the revelation of Mag's interracial marriage at the end of chapter one will be provocative to her audience, since interracial marriages were socially prohibited in New Hampshire and legally prohibited in most other states during the antebellum period. Consequently, Wilson does not disclose Mag's racial identity in order to disrupt preconceived notions of race, morality, and judgement towards interracial marriages. Society's preconceived notion that African-American women are presumed willing in the sexual exploitation of their bodies stems from the legal narrative created by slave codes; thus, Mag's racially ambiguous identity within her seduction narrative deconstructs the racialized notion that African-American women are sexually immoral.

Wilson uses her reader's inferential comprehension to achieve her plot twist of revealing Mag's white racial identity. In other words, Wilson does not explicitly state Mag's racial identity, instead she allows her audience to read between the lines and racialize Mag themselves. In her analysis of Mag's racial ambiguity, P. Gabrielle Foreman explains that most readers in the nineteenth-century associate sentimental novels with white female protagonists, but Wilson's audience would likely assume that Mag is African-American. Foreman suggests that the presumption of Mag being African-American relies on a combination between the title of the book, *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a free Black*, and the title of chapter one, "Mag

Smith, My Mother” (*Activist* 62). Wilson’s readers know from the title that the main protagonist is a free Black, and the same free Black is the narrator who is telling the story of their mother in chapter one, which leads Wilson’s audience to assume Mag is African-American. Further, Mag being “far removed” from relatives resembles the forced separation and isolation found in slave narratives, a familiar genre for readers during the antebellum period.

Although Wilson’s readers might insinuate Mag is African-American because of the novel and chapter one’s title, Wilson complicates her audience’s insinuations that Mag is African-American with contradicting hints that Mag is a white woman. For instance, Wilson writes that Mag surrendered her “priceless gem” to her charmer. In this case, Mag’s “priceless gem is her virginity. However, in antebellum America, African-American women were not thought to have “priceless gems” to surrender because the history of enslaved women’s legal identities as their enslaver’s property. Historically, an enslaved woman’s virginity did have a price. For example, Brown’s *Clotel* demonstrates that an enslaved woman’s virginity increases her value on the auction block, which shows that African-American women’s “gems” do have a price attached to them (*Activist* 61). Additionally, later in chapter one of *Our Nig*, Wilson provides small details of Mag’s physical appearance that Wilson’s audience would attribute to white women; she contrasts Mag’s “fair face” to Jim’s dark skin and describes Mag’s “smooth, straight” hair (Wilson 8). Wilson uses white physical markers to problematize her audience’s assumption of Mag’s racial identity. One may question what is at stake for Mag by assuming any specific racial identity; Mag’s racial ambiguity destabilizes the legal and social privileges associated with whiteness and exposes her sexual and economic vulnerability.

Wilson must destabilize Mag’s legal and social privileges associated with whiteness to expose and condemn society’s treatment and punishment towards Mag for her indiscretion.

In this way, Wilson does not make death a consequence for Mag, as most authors of traditional sentimental novels do with their protagonist, nor does she allow the opportunity for Mag's repentance to redeem her from her indiscretion. Instead, Mag's attempt to regain some respect with a reserved attitude is met with punishment. In this case, Mag's indiscretion is reflected by society publicly humiliating her through "foul tongues" jesting of her shame, "averted looks," and "cold greetings" (Wilson 6). Mag's internal struggle to reconstruct her reputation is negated by society's treatment of her. Here, Wilson demonstrates the powerful consequences of society's use of public humiliation in evoking shame and guilt for women who violate societal norms of female sexuality by nineteenth-century standards.

Wilson's aim in demonstrating Mag's public humiliation is to hold society accountable for her economic vulnerability. By revealing the role that society plays in Mag's economic situation, Wilson is implicating society in Mag's decision to enter an interracial marriage. How can society judge Mag, if they are accountable for putting her in such a desperate situation? In doing this, Wilson is preemptively combating judgement from her audience of Mag's interracial marriage. First, Wilson illustrates Mag's increasing alienation and isolation from her community; Mag "shut herself up in a hovel" far from her village where she would be hardly seen from a "sneering world" (Wilson 6). Soon, Mag's isolation leads to her unemployment and diminished means, and Mag reveals that she "shall starve soon" if she does not find employment. Mag understands that her community has the power to determine how long she will suffer as she recalls, "all Singleton wants to see me punished and feel as if they could tell when I've been punished long enough" (Wilson 7). Wilson is showing her audience that Mag's social punishment for her fall from virtue has affected her economic autonomy.

Wilson implicates society in Mag's condition through the narrator's address to the audience, "[a]las, how fearful are we to be the first in extending a helping hand." The narrator explains to her audience that it is fear of going against social norms that prevents society from helping and providing hope for "those who stagger in the mires of infamy." In this address, the narrator claims that "professed reformers" would rather "dwell in unclean places" than the "holier-than-thou" of the brotherhood of men (Wilson 6). Wilson seems to be indicating that society should be responsible in providing hope and guidance to those who are "emerging into the sunlight of morality," instead of offering cold treatment that leads to alienation (Wilson 6). In other words, Wilson represents Mag's desperate condition and lack of economic autonomy as being the result of her community's inability to empathize and show mercy for deviating from the community's sexual moral values. It is important to note that at the beginning of the address, the narrator uses the collective language "we," which condemns the narrator as well. By using collective language, the narrator is creating a non-confrontational address to the novel's audience, and the narrator is accepting some of the responsibility. In this case, Wilson is holding both her African-American and white audience accountable in their punishments of women who are considered sexually immoral in the nineteenth century.

After Wilson demonstrates society's punishment of Mag's seduction and proves that society is responsible for Mag's economic condition, Wilson can, then, reveal that Mag is a white woman who is marrying a free African-American man, Jim. Wilson introduces Jim in the novel before she reveals Mag's racial identity; in fact, Jim appears when Mag's means have diminished to the point of starvation. In this manner, Wilson represents Jim as the only person who cares about the well-being of Mag and her economic condition. Mag tells Jim that she will starve soon and no one in the world who would care if she died, and Jim responds by saying:

“[n]o, no, Mag! Don’t talk so. You shan’t starve... I’ll help you, if nobody else will” (Wilson 7). Jim represents the person who is willing to first extend a helping hand to Mag. In this case, Wilson’s representation of Jim helping Mag through her financial condition would make it difficult for society to judge the interracial marriage of Mag and Jim. As the narrator exclaims at the end of chapter one: “You can philosophize, gentle reader, upon the impropriety of such unions, and preach dozens of sermons on the evils of amalgamation. Want is a more philosopher and preacher.” Wilson accomplishes two things in the narrator’s final address to the audience in chapter one: first, Wilson establishes that Mag’s interracial marriage to Jim derives from her desperate need for economic security. Second, Wilson is evoking empathy from her audience towards Mag’s need to marry Jim. By doing this, Wilson criticizes the tradition of marriage as an institution that provides economic security for women of all races.

In *Our Nig*, Wilson provides her audience with a variety of examples of marriages. Through the many different representations of marriage across class and racial lines, Wilson condemns the nineteenth-century custom of women exchanging their virginity for the economic security associated with marriage. The interracial marriage of Mag and Jim is Wilson’s first representation of marriage in the novel. Jim is represented as an African-American man who is a reliable economic source for Mag, and Mag is represented as a vulnerable white woman who is dependent on Jim.

Wilson invests Mag and Jim’s marriage with a false sense of security. Jim wanted to ensure that Mag was happy with her decision to marry him, so he worked hard to “furnish [Mag] with a more comfortable dwelling, diet, and apparel” (Wilson 10). Mag lives a more comfortable lifestyle during her marriage to Jim while he can work and provide. Wilson, then, removes the economic security attached to the institution of marriage through the death of Jim. Jim develops

a severe cough and pain in his side, and although he “stifled his sensibility to pain, and toiled for [Mag’s] sustenance,” he eventually abandons Mag and their two children through death. Wilson demonstrates Mag as a virtuous wife to Jim only to maintain her economic security. The narrator explains that Mag nursed Jim “faithfully and true to marriage vows,” but only as a means to “subserve her own comfort” (Wilson 10). Jim spends the remainder of his life on earth worrying about the economic protection of Mag and their two children. In fact, Jim does not confess his undying love for Mag, rather, his last wishes are for Mag’s welfare and that she would not be neglected as she was before (Wilson 10). Jim’s death disrupts this notion of marriage being an institution that ensures virtue and security. Mag and her two children are left vulnerable and with no source of income. Wilson uses Jim’s death as warning against marriages based on promises of economic security.

Since Mag has no hope of salvaging her reputation within society, her vulnerability leads her to living a life of debauchery with Jim’s African-American business partner, Seth Shipley. Living as an outcast, Mag “had no longings for a purer heart,” and she determined it was easier to enter the “darkness of perpetual infamy” (Wilson 11). As a result, Mag and Seth determine they must give up one of the children, Frado, to seek economic opportunities elsewhere. Wilson ends Mag’s narrative with Mag abandoning Frado at the white Belmont household, and Mag does not appear again in the novel. Wilson’s audience is left unaware of Mag’s fate; however, P. Gabrielle Foreman notes that Wilson’s mother, Margaret Smith, from whom the character of Mag is derived, died from habitual intoxication (*Our Nig* xxxi).

Mag’s narrative proves that the institution of marriage cannot ensure a virtuous character or economic security, not even for white women. Mag’s narrative proves Foreman’s suggestion that in *Our Nig* sex and marriage are not “ultimate items of exchange that hold transformative

power” (*Our Nig* xxxv). Instead, Mag’s marriage to Jim impairs her economic and sexual autonomy; she is left with no way to support herself and two children and, because of her fall from virtue and interracial marriage with Jim, Mag has no support from her community. In the following paragraphs, I analyze Wilson’s critique of marriage as an institution that reinforces the power of white people and their violent treatment of free African-Americans in the North.

Wilson uses Mag’s narrative to expose the fact that American women cannot rely on the institution of marriage to establish sexual and economic autonomy. Mag’s lack of sexual and economic autonomy leads to her abandonment of her daughter, Frado, at the white Belmont household. It is through the lens of the mixed-raced Frado in the Belmont household that Wilson’s audience is confronted with representations of white marriages corrupted by the violent exploitation of African-American bodies in the North. Historically, the institution of American slavery is designed as an economic system from which enslavers profit and create wealth through the violent exploitation of African-American bodies and their labor; in the same regard, the institution of American marriage is based on legally protecting and hoarding that wealth within white familial relations (Reid-Pharr 91).

It is often perceived by people that this ideology prevailed in southern slave states, while northern free states protected the freedom and equality of African-Americans. As Foreman mentions, during the antebellum period, northern states such as New Hampshire (the geographical setting of the novel) took pride in their commitment to freedom and abolitionist movements for African-Americans (*Our Nig* xxxvii). However, Wilson’s novel unveils that people in the North participated in the violence against free African-Americans. Wilson proves that the ideology behind this violent relation of enslaver and enslaved from southern slave states still exists in the North where African-Americans are free through the representation of Mr. and

Mrs. Bellmont's marriage and the mental and physical abuse Frado experiences in the Bellmont household.

Through the representation of Mr. and Mrs. Bellmont's marriage, Wilson demonstrates that society does not need to rely on laws and policies, alone, to profit from the exploitation of African-American bodies. Rather, Wilson reveals that *tradition* has the power to sustain the ideologies behind the institution of American slavery in the North where African-Americans are legally free. As Orlando Patterson points out, normalized authority derives from, and is essential to, the institutionalized relation of enslaver and enslaved. The normalized power of authority is not established through laws because laws are the complex rules which "[have] the coercive power of the state behind [them]" (Patterson 36-37). In other words, the law needs the power of authority to exist. Instead, normalized authority develops through controlling the language and ideas associated with inherited customs and beliefs of the dominating person or groups of people (Patterson 36-37). In the case of *Our Nig*, Wilson's audience observes Mrs. Bellmont's normalized authority through her violent exploitation of Frado's body for the profit of free labor. At the same time, Mrs. Bellmont attempts to force the nineteenth-century custom of marrying for economic advancement on to her children, a custom that (her behavior shows) works in part by controlling the sexual and economic autonomy of African-Americans in order to protect white familial relations and wealth.

Here, I am going to take a moment and reflect on the differences between the two white mothers of the novel, Mag and Mrs. Bellmont, and their marriages. Mag and Mrs. Bellmont are both white women who follow the tradition of marrying as a means of economic security. Mrs. Bellmont marries John Bellmont, who has inherited his father's large, two-story white house, surrounded by fruitful acres and trees that have paths worn out by "many little feet." Throughout

the years of living in the “old homestead,” Mr. Bellmont did not “depart from the example of his father” and passed down the same experiences to his children (Wilson 14). Although Wilson does not explicitly state that the Bellmonts are wealthy, Wilson’s readers know from references made throughout the novel that the Bellmont family has enough wealth to hire domestic helpers and laborers (Wilson 16, 31). Thus, Wilson offers the example of Mrs. Bellmont marrying into an established family that has the means of passing down property and wealth as well as traditions and ideologies.

On the other hand, Mag’s status as a poor orphan with no familial relations, results in her marrying Jim out of a desperate need to survive. Unlike Mr. Bellmont, who provides economic security through inheritance, Jim’s ability to provide economic security is based on his physical labor, and once Jim dies and his physical labor ceases, so does Mag’s economic security. Further, the only “legacy” Jim has to pass down to his wife and family is a “hope” for Mag to not be neglected as she used to be and to have the “manifestation of Christian patience” (Wilson 10). In analyzing this comparison, I conclude that it is the class status from Mrs. Bellmont’s marriage that gives her a closer proximity to power and normalized authority.

Mrs. Bellmont’s authority and power within the domestic sphere enables her abusive treatment of Frado, whose status in the Bellmont household is represented as an informal indentured servant. The relationship between the Bellmont family and Frado closely resembles the relation between enslavers and enslaved people of the South. The institution of American slavery commodified the bodies of enslaved African-Americans for the enslaver’s profit by legalizing their identities as property. The relation between Frado and the Bellmont family is determined immediately when the Bellmont family commodifies her body. As Lois Leveen

points out in her analysis of *Our Nig*, Frado's presence in the house turns her into a commodity that requires negotiations as to how she can be valuable to the Bellmont family (565).

Mary, Mrs. Bellmont's favorite tyrant child, suggests sending Frado to the "County House" because she does not believe Frado would be useful. Quickly, Mrs. Bellmont reassures her that training a child up *her* way could be beneficial. Robert Reid-Pharr, in his analysis of *Our Nig*, argues that Frado's value in the Bellmont house is not from sentiment, rather Frado's value lies in her utility, which Mrs. Bellmont is eager to beat out of her (101). In this way, Mrs. Bellmont acknowledges that training Frado so young is profitable, since Mrs. Bellmont had "so much trouble" with the white girls she has hired. Jack, the Bellmont son, also retorts to Mary's suggestion by claiming that it would not be more than two days before Mary would be telling other girls about "*our nig, our nig!*" Jack's response tells of the image of an elevated class status associated with having an African-American indentured servant in the household. Further, Jack wants to "keep" Frado because she is "handsome and bright" (Wilson 16). From this negotiation, it is evident that Frado's black body in the Bellmont house is valuable for labor she can produce, and for the objectification she experiences from the Bellmont men. Granted Frado's value in the house, why is she considered an informal indentured servant? Mrs. Bellmont states she has had several *hired* domestic help, so why does she not pay Frado? I agree with Leveen's argument that even though Frado is legally free, it is her race, class, and age that enables her status as an informal indentured servant to the Bellmont's (Leveen 565). In other words, the Bellmont's can treat Frado as their property because they are an established family that can provide Frado with shelter, and Frado is a poor, mixed-raced girl who is abandoned and isolated from all familial relations.

Some may question: if the relationship between the Bellmont family and Frado resembles the relation between enslaver and enslaved of the South, then why isn't Mr. Bellmont portrayed as the violent tyrant? I will provide two answers to this question: first, I turn to Leveen who argues that it is the fact that Frado is isolated within the domestic sphere where, according to the cult of domesticity, the wife typically has the authority (569). Second, if Wilson kept with the traditions of nineteenth-century slave narratives and other African-American novels of the period, providing Mr. Bellmont with the violent authoritative power would place Frado's virginity at risk for being violated; therefore, by making Mr. Bellmont a "kind, humane man," Wilson is protecting Frado's sexual purity, according to the narratives of the antebellum period. As Robert Reid-Pharr puts it, Mr. Bellmont cannot be the character who pursues violence against Frado's body because that would destabilize the racial purity of the house that Mrs. Bellmont is trying to protect (103). By protecting the supposed racial purity of the house, Mrs. Bellmont is able to maintain the family's legacy and wealth. In later sections, I will further explain the importance of Frado maintaining her virginity until marriage.

Mrs. Bellmont embodies the ideology of southern enslavers through her abusive treatment of Frado. Frado is treated as the property of the Bellmont family and endures cruel physical and mental abuse during her isolation in the Bellmont household. First, Wilson demonstrates the small, everyday aspects of Frado's life in the Bellmont's house that resemble an enslaved person who must endure the field and domestic labors for their enslavers. Frado must wake up, feed the hens, drive the cows to the pasture, eat breakfast standing up within ten minutes, followed by domestic chores and compiling wood. If Frado did not always conduct her duties in the way that she was taught, Mrs. Bellmont would apply "blows on her head" (Wilson

18). In demonstrating this, Wilson reveals how Frado's routine and abuse becomes normalized; Frado's duties and blows to the head are a part of the Belmont's everyday life.

Wilson's depiction of Mrs. Belmont's everyday violence against Frado is an example of how the domestic sphere and family are corrupted by power and race. The corruption of Mrs. Belmont and Mary are more explicit through their overtly physical and verbal abuse of Frado. Mrs. Belmont and Mary's abusive behavior toward Frado evoke fear from the other family members and, as a result, Mrs. Belmont gains more power in the house. However, the corruption of Mr. Belmont, the sons Jack and James, the invalid daughter Jane, and the spinster Aunt Abby is less visible to Wilson's audience because Wilson portrays them as Frado's allies and protectors. Here, I think it is important to note Robin DiAngelo's warning to people in the twenty-first century that white people often hide behind the intentions of niceness as the answer to racial inequalities. DiAngelo further argues that niceness is a fleeting, hollow, and performative act ("White People"). DiAngelo's concept can be traced back to Wilson's portrayal of the benevolent acts of some of the Belmont family members that hide their indirect involvement in Frado's oppression. In the following paragraphs, I will take a closer look at the Belmont's direct and indirect actions in Frado's oppression to further show the corruption of the Belmont household.

Ultimately, the direct and indirect oppression that Frado experiences is represented through Mrs. Belmont's use of Frado's black body as an object to gain power within the household, and the rest of the family members use of Frado's mixed-raced body as an object to resist and undermine Mrs. Belmont's power. The two most prevalent examples Wilson employs to demonstrate this power struggle revolve around Frado's access to education and religion. William Goodell recalls that within the institution of American slavery, the enslaved person, who

is legally defined as property, has no legal recognition to their rights as thinking and religious beings. According to Goodell, the enslaver has the power to withhold education and religious instruction or public worship from enslaved people; the access to education and religious instruction implies free agency, and the enslaved is not a free agent (Goodell ch. XXII). Since the relationship between Mrs. Bellmont and Frado resembles the relation between enslaver and enslaved, it makes sense that Mrs. Bellmont tries to use her power to prohibit Frado's access to education and religion. Frado's access to education and religion would allow Frado some autonomy and would threaten Mrs. Bellmont's power.

The question of whether Frado should go to school sparked another debate among the Bellmont family. Mrs. Bellmont did not believe in the education of African-Americans because she thought African-Americans were incapable of elevation. Thus, Mrs. Bellmont and Mary opposed Frado's education. Mr. Bellmont, Jane, and Jack, all agreed that Frado should be sent to school. In the end, Mr. Bellmont, who "seldom decided controversies at home," decided that Frado should go to school (Wilson 18). Typically, Mr. Bellmont did not oppose Mrs. Bellmont's wishes because doing so would be like "encountering a whirlwind charged with fire, daggers, and spikes," but the moment he did speak his decision, there would be no appeal, "the word became law" (Wilson 18). Here, Wilson provides a subtle reminder to her audience that Mrs. Bellmont's proximity to power is based on her marriage to Mr. Bellmont. Although Mr. Bellmont often remains silent to avoid Mrs. Bellmont's temper, he has the ultimate power in making the decisions. Mr. Bellmont's decision to allow Frado to attend school incites an explosive reaction from Mrs. Bellmont for resisting her wishes, which results in verbal and physical abuse of Frado. Although Mr. Bellmont's benevolence is highlighted by his authorizing

Frado to go to school and earn an education, when Mrs. Bellmont retaliates against his decision by abusing Frado, he becomes passive.

For instance, when Mary and Frado are walking home from school, Mary tries to force Frado onto a single plank over a stream, but there is a struggle and Mary falls into the stream herself. Mary tells Mrs. Bellmont that Frado pushed her into the water, but Frado protests her innocence. Mrs. Bellmont asks Mr. Bellmont if he is going to allow Frado to lie about Mary, and Mr. Bellmont responds with, “[h]ow do we know but she [Mary] has told the truth? I shall not punish her” (Wilson 20). Mr. Bellmont does not punish Frado, yet neither does he prevent Mrs. Bellmont from physically abusing Frado. Instead, Mr. Bellmont avoids the tempest and leaves the house to tend to Frado’s duties of feeding the cows outside. After Mr. Bellmont disappears, Mrs. Bellmont’s reaction is to beat Frado inhumanely with the help of Mary, which ended with Mrs. Bellmont propping Frado’s mouth open with a piece of wood and leaving her in a dark room without any supper (Wilson 20). One can assume Mrs. Bellmont’s decision to physically abuse Frado is in response to being undermined; therefore, Frado’s abuse is a physical reminder of Mrs. Bellmont’s dominance in the house (Wilson 20). By physically removing himself from the situation, Mrs. Bellmont has full power and authority to physically punish Frado. As Foreman suggests, Mr. Bellmont abdicates his power in the house for familial comfort and convenience (*Activist* 56). In other words, by allowing Mrs. Bellmont the power to abuse Frado, Mr. Bellmont is alleviating the house of Mrs. Bellmont’s temper. Since Mr. Bellmont fails to exert his power to prevent Mrs. Bellmont’s physical abuse of Frado, he indirectly plays a role in Frado’s oppression.

In the same regard, Mr. Bellmont overrides Mrs. Bellmont’s prevention of Frado’s religious instruction by the Belmont son James and Aunt Abby. Mrs. Bellmont, who is firm in

her notion that religion is not meant for African-Americans, pleads to Mr. Bellmont not to allow Frado to become too pious. Mrs. Bellmont argues that allowing Frado to attend religious meetings will detract from her labor at the Bellmont house, and especially on Sundays when Mrs. Bellmont has a “great deal of company.” According to Mrs. Bellmont, if Frado has the right to religion, it will lead to her having equal rights as Mrs. Bellmont’s white daughters (Wilson 49-50). In the end, Mr. Bellmont insists on Frado attending religious meeting with Aunt Abby and, as a result, Mrs. Bellmont threatens to whip Frado to death (Wilson 58). In these examples, Mr. Bellmont’s willingness to allow Frado rights to education and religion elicits violence against her body.

Jack Bellmont and James Bellmont are represented as two of Frado’s main protectors. From the moment Frado is abandoned at the Bellmont house, Wilson represents Jack’s relationship with Frado as having sexual undertones. If Wilson’s audience analyzes Jack’s treatment of Frado – from Jack wanting to keep Frado because she is “handsome and bright,” to his gifting Frado with a dog named Fido for a companion, all the way to Jack suggesting to Frado that his mother cut off her curls because Frado was getting too handsome (followed by a roguish look) – they can observe the sexual implications attached to Jack’s protective nature of Frado (Wilson 16, 21, 39). Whereas James is represented as Frado’s spiritual protector. James felt that religion would transform Frado into being worthy of the “esteem and friendship of the world” (Wilson 38). James becomes a savior figure in Frado’s life, and their many conversations regarding her ability to be saved highlight Frado’s internal struggle of understanding the fate of her soul as a mixed-raced girl.

In a conversation with James after Mrs. Bellmont has severely beat her, Frado asks James: “Who made your mother?” James replies, “God.” Frado follows with another question,

“Did the same God that made her make me?” James responds, “Yes.” Frado exclaims, “Well, then, I don’t like him.” When James asked Frado why she did not like God, Frado explained it is because God made Mrs. Bellmont white and herself black, and she did not understand why God could not make them both white (Wilson 28). In this conversation, Wilson’s audience witnesses Frado trying to make sense of how her racial identity as a mixed-raced girl fit into white Christianity, and James is there to reassure Frado that by being a good girl and loving and serving God, Frado could enter heaven (Wilson 53). Mrs. Bellmont did not mind Frado’s religious aspirations if the servant practiced privately. The moment Frado became more public in her religious practice with praying and reading the Bible, Mrs. Bellmont perceived it as a threat to Frado’s beneficial labor. As a result, Mrs. Bellmont would physically discipline Frado if she were caught practicing religion within the public domain of the domestic sphere (Wilson 48-50). In the end, the death of James also killed Frado’s hope of being accepted by white Christianity.

It is true that the protection from Jack and James provides a false sense of security for Frado. In the presence of Jack and James, Frado is more likely to antagonize Mrs. Bellmont by opposing her control. In this case, Jack and James use Frado as an object to undermine their tyrannical mother. This is the case when James insists on Frado sitting at the family table to eat her meals, knowing Mrs. Bellmont does not allow Frado to sit and eat there. In the following scene, Wilson shows James’ ability to assert his authority against his mother’s protest: “‘She *will*, mother, said he calmly but imperatively; ‘I’m determined’... ‘Now while I stay, she is going to sit down *here*, and eat such food as we eat’” (Wilson 38). As a result, when Jack returns home and Frado has the protection of both Bellmont sons, Frado antagonizes Mrs. Bellmont with a public display of opposition. First, Frado confidently sits in Mrs. Bellmont’s seat. Next, Frado attempts to eat from a clean plate. Mrs. Bellmont demands that Frado must eat from Mrs.

Bellmont's dirty plate. In response, Frado takes Mrs. Belmont's dirty plate to allow her dog to lick it clean before eating from it. From Mrs. Belmont's perspective, Frado's actions are the ultimate form of disrespect (Wilson 39). In this case, Wilson demonstrates James and Jack's use of Frado as an object to destabilize Mrs. Belmont's power.

At the same time, Wilson reveals the limitations of James and Jack's protection over Frado. Despite the intentions of their benevolent acts, Jack and James' protection requires their physical presence, which results in Mrs. Belmont retaliating against Frado upon their absence. Once Mrs. Belmont and Frado are left alone, Mrs. Belmont gave Frado a "thorough beating" and threatened to "cut her tongue out" if Frado told James (Wilson 40). Wilson shows that the supposed protection from James and Jack creates more violence against Frado's body. In this way, James and Jack's indirect involvement in the exploitation of Frado's body is obscured by their benevolent acts.

Wilson uses Frado's isolation in the white Belmont household to expose the direct and indirect violence against free African-Americans in the North. The exploitation of African-Americans in the North is fueled by the ideology behind the relation between enslaver and enslaved prevalent in the South. I have dedicated some time in this section to showing how Frado is subjected to explicit abuse from Mrs. Belmont and Mary as well as the implicit abuse of Frado from the protection and benevolent acts of the Belmont men; ultimately, the Belmont's use of Frado as an object to gain control and power in the house results in the depraved condition of the Belmont household. Next, I am going to take a moment to review Wilson's critique of the perpetuation of power over and exploitation of African-American bodies through traditions and customs related to marriage.

Wilson's examples of white marriages portrayed during Frado's isolation in the Bellmont household act as evidence that the customs associated with marriage, which are taught in nineteenth-century sentimental novels, were meant to continue a family's legacy of power and wealth. In the case of *Our Nig*, Mrs. Bellmont attempts to enforce the nineteenth-century custom of parents choosing the spouse of their child based on the economic benefit to the Bellmont children and family. In my following analysis, I show that the Bellmont children use the institution of marriage to resist Mrs. Bellmont's power; consequently, Frado is abandoned by her allies, which exacerbates the violence against her body.

Mrs. Bellmont is Wilson's representation of the traditional nineteenth-century customs of marriage, which Mrs. Bellmont tries to pass down to her children. In traditional sentimental novels, the goal of the parents is to find a suitable spouse for their child who can provide an elevation of class status and wealth. If the child already has wealth from their family, the goal of the parents is to pair their child with a spouse who can ensure that the family's legacy and wealth remain within their familial relations. On the other hand, Mr. Bellmont has more progressive views on marriage, and he encourages his children to decide on whom to marry based on free choice and love. In the following paragraphs, I take a closer look at James, Jane, and Jack's marriages, how Mrs. Bellmont tries to influence their choice of spouse, and how the marriages affect Frado.

According to Mrs. Bellmont, marriage is not a sentimental decision, but an economic one that requires her children to marry for economic advancement. Mrs. Bellmont teaches her children that wealthy parentage is an essential requirement when choosing a spouse (Wilson 31). James is the Bellmont child who comes the closest to following this custom by marrying a Baltimorean lady from a wealthy family. Even though James' marriage to Susan meets the

approval of Mrs. Bellmont, James insists that his marriage to Susan is based on his sincere love and not for wealth. James chooses Susan because of her reserved Christian nature that is much the opposite of Mrs. Bellmont's (Wilson 31). The marriage of James and Susan provides Frado with a false sense of hope of leaving the Bellmont house: once word arrived that James would marry Susan, "Frado hoped he would, and remove her from such severe treatment as she was subject to" (Wilson 30). Instead, James moves to Baltimore with Susan, and the trips Mr. and Mrs. Bellmont takes to visit James and Susan leaves Frado vulnerable to the physical abuse of Mary. Finally, Frado loses all hope after Mr. and Mrs. Bellmont return from Baltimore with news that James is severely ill, which leads to his death (Wilson 35). Frado must cope with the fact that James could have taken Frado with him to Baltimore, but he does not choose to take her. In this sense, James has betrayed Frado and stolen her opportunity to escape the Bellmont house. Wilson associates the marriage of James and Susan with Frado's lost chances of escape and freedom.

Wilson's representation of Jane's marriage follows closely with the traditional sentimental plot of a young lady's struggle with obedience to her parents and choosing to marry someone for money or love. Jane must choose between Henry Reed and George Means. Mrs. Bellmont is adamant that Jane should marry Henry because he is an only son who should inherit acres of land. Mrs. Bellmont knows Henry's inheritance will result with "silver in the purse" (Wilson 32). On the other hand, George Means is an ordinary man who genuinely loved Jane. In the following conversation with Aunt Abby, Wilson's audience witnesses Jane's internal struggle of obeying her mother or marrying the man she loves:

“Now, aunt, George is just a man as I could really love... you know I never could say that about Henry.’

‘Then don’t marry him,’ interrupted Aunt Abby.

‘Mother will make me.’

Your father won’t.” (Wilson 32)

Mrs. Bellmont’s reaction to Jane’s disobedience is explosive, and Mrs. Bellmont reminds Jane of George’s father’s marital history with four wives and five times as many children (Wilson 34).

Wilson contrasts Mrs. Bellmont’s reaction to that of Mr. Bellmont, who reassures Jane that she is not “compelled to violate her free choice in so important a transaction... she [Jane] must be free to her own choice” (Wilson 34). Finally, Jane gained the courage to marry George and the couple moved to Vermont to escape Mrs. Bellmont’s wrath (Wilson 34). Jane’s marriage is Wilson’s positive portrayal of marriage in the novel, in terms of Jane’s freedom to choose who she wants to marry, yet it cost Frado another ally in the house. Although Jane never really could protect Frado, it is her kind smiles and gestures that brought comfort to Frado at times, “thus another light disappeared from Nig’s horizon” (Wilson 34). Jane’s marriage results in Frado’s further isolation in the Bellmont household.

It is Jack’s marriage to Jenny that is in opposition the nineteenth-century tradition of marrying for economic advancement. Jack’s marriage defies and mocks Mrs. Bellmont’s teaching that her children should marry an individual with wealthy parentage and capable of receiving inheritance. In fact, Jack decides to marry a woman of Mag’s class status, an orphan. Wilson highlights Jack’s insult to Mrs. Bellmont’s traditional views on marriage when Mrs. Bellmont asks Jack, “[w]as her *father* rich?” and Jack replies, “[n]ot worth a copper, as I know of; I never asked him.” When Mrs. Bellmont continues the interrogation by asking Jack if Jenny

at least owned property, Jack exclaims, “[o]h, she’s *worth a million* dollars, mother, though not a cent of it is in money.” Mrs. Bellmont felt she could not associate with anyone in poverty because it is a disgrace and a dishonor to the family (Wilson 62-63). Wilson shows in the beginning of the novel how society dealt with Mag’s impoverished situation, but it is less personal because it is Mag’s community, wholly, that rejects her. Here, Wilson personalizes the criticism of class-cross marriages through Mrs. Bellmont’s unacceptance and judgement of her son’s union to Jenny.

Jack’s marriage to Jenny has the most impact on Frado in the Bellmont house. At this point, James, Jane, and Jack all marry and leave the household, and Frado is left completely vulnerable to Mrs. Bellmont’s abuse and power, “thus vanished all hopes of sympathy or relief from this source” (Wilson 60-61). It is important to mention Lois Leveen’s notion that not only is Frado abandoned by the Bellmont children’s escape through marriage, but Frado is offered no such escape through marriage herself (573). Not only does Frado not have the ability to escape the house through marriage, but her isolation is worsened by the additional “burdens” placed on her since her allies escaped. Now Frado must milk the cows, drive the cows, tend to the flocks of sheep, and harness the horses on her own. In other words, Frado is expected to take over the manual labor of the Bellmont sons (Wilson 30). The marriages of the Bellmont children reveal that their escape from Mrs. Bellmont is more important than their loyalty to Frado. To use Robin DiAngelo’s theory mentioned previously, the Bellmont children’s benevolent acts are performative and fleeting. Further, DiAngelo argues that it is easier for African-Americans to understand open hostility, and they can better protect themselves from it, but “the deception of niceness adds a confusing layer that makes it difficult for people of color to decipher trustworthy allyship from disingenuous white liberalism” (“White People”). Frado trusted the Bellmont

children to physically and spiritually protect her against Mrs. Bellmont but, in the end, Frado realizes she is alone in the world (Wilson 65). Thus, each of the Bellmont family members participate in the exploitation of Frado's mixed-raced body that reflects the relationship of enslavers and enslaved people of the South.

Many of Wilson's readers may wonder why Frado chose to stay with the Bellmonts. After all, Frado is free and has no contractual agreement to be the Bellmont's indentured servant. In the beginning, Frado chooses to remain because she desired the acceptance of her white community, "she thought she should, by remaining, be in some relation to white people she was never favored with before" (Wilson 17). However, once Frado realizes that her racial identity as a mixed-race girl disallows a favorable relation with white people, Frado is manipulated into staying with the Bellmonts out of fear. Here, I turn to Reid-Pharr, who acknowledges that Frado does not have access to the same modes of escape as enslaved people in popular antebellum slave narratives. Most enslaved people plan to escape to the North to find freedom; however, Frado is already in the North where she is legally free, and she has no loving Black community to turn to for help (Reid-Pharr 101-102).

Frado's fear becomes evident after James' death. Frado becomes determined to flee, but it is Frado's ally, Aunt Abby, who convinces her to remain. Aunt Abby "mapped out the dangers of her course" and Frado's "liability to fail in finding good so good friends" (Wilson 61). Aunt Abby's tactic works because Frado has been isolated to the Bellmont house and she fears the white world outside of her confinement. In the end, Frado believes she is the only one who can endure the oppression of the house (Wilson 61). Thus, she makes the final decision to stay with Mr. and Mrs. Bellmont until she is eighteen, which is when her informal indentured servitude

ends. Ultimately, Frado remains because she is mentally and physically exhausted from years of abuse and exploitation.

Wilson ends the novel with Frado's release from the Bellmont house and her marriage to a free African-American man, Samuel. Wilson's description of Frado's marriage greatly resembles the narrative of her mother, Mag. Similar to the length of Mag's narrative, Frado's freedom from the Bellmont's and her marriage to Samuel is described briefly in three pages. Reid-Pharr argues that Frado's marriage to Samuel brings Wilson's audience hope that Frado might experience her body as freedom from being a "vehicle for violence" (Reid-Pharr 105). However, I argue that Wilson's brief description of Frado's marriage concludes Wilson's moral message to her audience that the only true freedom for African-American women is through economic independence. The exploitation and violence against Frado's body during her isolation in the white Bellmont house left her economically vulnerable. Frado's health begins to decline and light work is all she could manage. By the time winter came, Frado quits work and declares herself too sick. As a result, Frado becomes dependent on her community's assistance until she became too much of a burden for the community (Wilson 65). Thus, Samuel violates Frado by taking advantage of her sexual and economic vulnerability.

Like Mag, Frado's marriage to Samuel is a result of her economic and sexual vulnerability. Further, Wilson proves with the representation of Frado and Samuel's marriage that virtue is not always rewarded, as the moral message is conveyed in traditional sentimental novels. Nor does the institution of American marriage always provide economic or sexual autonomy. Although Frado witnesses the marriage of Mag and Jim, and the relationship of Mag and Seth, Frado's main experience with marriage is her exposure to the all-white Bellmont marriages. From both Mag and Mrs. Bellmont, Frado observes the traditional practice of

marrying for economic security. In the case of Mrs. Bellmont, she witnesses the importance of white people passing down that custom to their children to hoard their wealth. It is evident in the final chapter of *Our Nig* that Frado is influenced by the idea of marriage as a means for economic and sexual autonomy.

Frado's sexual vulnerability is a result of being confined in the white Bellmont house and her status as the Bellmont's informal indentured servant, which is associated with the Bellmont's treatment of her as their property. By allowing Mrs. Bellmont to be the violent oppressor in the Bellmont house, Wilson can depict the violence against Frado's body and mind without necessarily implicating the young girl's virtue. By this I mean, many slave narratives and African-American novels written in the nineteenth-century highlight the enslaver's sexual violence against enslaved African-American women and the fact that the enslaver has legal rights to sexually violate their enslaved women. As a result, the enslaved women lose their sexual autonomy and cannot adhere to the nineteenth-century standards of virtue by maintaining their virginity before marriage. Wilson, then, focuses on the violence against Frado's body for labor, and upon the role of the Bellmont children to deter Mrs. Bellmont's abuse instead of a sexual exploitation. Despite Jack's sexual innuendos towards Frado, she leaves the Bellmont house with her virginity intact. Claudia Tate, in her book *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire*, suggests that Wilson's unwillingness to extenuate Frado's narrative with more sexual discourse is designed to evoke a more sympathetic reaction from her audience (Tate 48). Wilson tries to accomplish this by portraying Frado as an innocent female character who focuses on educational and spiritual enlightenment. As I explore later in this chapter, Frado's community is more willing to assist her because of her perceived innocence, unlike her mother Mag who has premarital sex.

Frado's sexual naivete leads her to being deceived by Samuel. Samuel appears in Frado's town as a professed fugitive of enslavement to tell of his experiences in enslavement. Since people of color are rare in Frado's New England village, it was not strange that Samuel and Frado should court (Wilson 70). Wilson returns to sentimental tropes when Frado acknowledges that her and Samuel's short courtship is an objection against marrying him, yet Frado's naïve character relies on her sentiments, which lead her to believe she knows him from seeing him often. Frado's sentiments come from Samuel's seductive behavior of toying with her "shining curls," provoking her to "smile and expose the ivory concealed by ruby red lips that her [Frado] sparkling eyes should fascinate" (Wilson 70). Even though there is a physical attraction between Samuel and Frado, the monumental reason that Frado "opens her heart to the presence of love" is her "silent sympathy" about Samuel's enslavement (Wilson 70). Although Samuel never spoke of his enslavement, nor did he bear any marks on his back, Frado is attracted to the idea of a shared experience of oppression. Wilson reveals after Frado marries Samuel, that he has lied about his enslaved life.

Frado's marriage to Samuel is not only the result of a desire for shared oppression, but a desire to have economic support. Wilson indicates that it is Frado's physical deterioration from the Bellmont's exploitation and violence against her body that leads to her economic vulnerability. Frado's marriage to Samuel allows her the "relief of looking to another for comfortable support" (Wilson 70). However, Frado quickly learns that marriage is not a stable relief or comfortable support when Samuel abandons her to go "lecture." During Samuel's prolonged "lecture" trips, Frado would have to financially support herself because Samuel left her little to no money. Eventually, Frado had to find the means to support herself and her son while Samuel is away. Frado stayed in a room with a "poor woman, but with better with a better

fortune” than herself (Wilson 71). At last, Wilson brings the novel full circle when revealing Samuel’s death by yellow fever during his stay in New Orleans. Here, Frado is left in the same position as Mag: the deaths of their husbands leave them in a more economically vulnerable position by having to support themselves and their children. In the same way, Frado had to place her son in the care of a white woman in her village, Mrs. Capone, until Frado could find employment to sustain herself and her son (Wilson 71). By Frado following the condition of her mother, Wilson proves that marriage is not the solution for sexually and economically vulnerable women.

Wilson does not end her novel with the happily-ever-after marriage of Frado and Samuel. Instead, Wilson ends *Our Nig* with Frado’s economic independence by producing and selling hair products. Frado does not allow anything to turn her from her “steadfast purpose of elevating herself” after her economic suffering (Wilson 72). Wilson critique of marriage proves to her audience that the institution of marriage works for white, upper-class couples. Further, the institution of marriage works to protect the power of wealthy white families. This protection of power enables white families in the North to continue the violence and exploitation of free African-American as it resembles the relation of enslaver and enslaved people of the South. For this reason, Frado’s economic independence at the end of the novel teaches Wilson’s audience that the way for African-American women to break the relation of enslaver and enslaved as found in the South, and perpetuated in the North, is to gain economic independence. An African-American woman’s sexual and economic autonomy means they do not have to be married to survive, nor will they become economically vulnerable if their marriage is unstable. In Wilson’s revision of the sentimental novel, women are not rewarded for their virtue, but rather, they are rewarded and find freedom through their economic independence.

CONCLUSION

My research aimed to explore what moral lessons about the institution of marriage are conveyed in early African-American novels, and to address the question: how did early American laws and policies affect these moral lessons? Based on my analysis of William Wells Brown's *Clotel* and Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig*, I conclude that both novels teach their audiences that the institution of American slavery has corrupted the morality of the institution of American marriage. For, the institution of American slavery legalizes the enslaver's exploitation of enslaved people's bodies for the enslaver's financial profit. Thus, the institution of American marriage is corrupted by legally securing the wealth and profit earned from the exploitation and violence against African-American bodies through tradition and inheritance.

As my analysis of William Wells Brown's *Clotel* concludes, the institution of American slavery and the institution of American marriage are antithetical. As long as African-Americans are confined to the relation of enslaver and enslaved, they will be dehumanized and disallowed the same familial relations that allow white people to hoard wealth and pass down their legacies. For Brown, the only way to end his novel with a successful legally binding marriage is for his characters to escape to another country where the relation between enslaver and enslaved is severed. Once that relation is severed, Brown's characters gain the sexual and economic autonomy needed to create familial legacies and heritage. Although, it remains true that not all of Brown's characters experience this happily-ever-after; significantly, *Clotel's* only opportunity of autonomy is through death.

Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig* deepens my analysis by demonstrating how the powerful relation of enslaver and enslaved prevails even in free states that do not deem African-Americans as the property to enslavers. Yet, white people use their marriages to hoard wealth and use the power of their familial relations to exploit and violate the bodies of free African-Americans.

Wilson takes it one step further than Brown by indicating that society does not need laws and policies to dehumanize and exploit African-Americans. Indeed, white people in the North only need to inherit the ideology of enslavement to oppress free African-Americans. Thus, Wilson's audience learns that the only way to be free of the relation of enslaver and enslaved, even when that relation is not legally binding, is by having sexual and economic autonomy. Wilson's character, Frado, finds her happily-ever-after through economic independence. In this way, she demonstrates that the institution of American marriage cannot provide a stable protection for women.

Orlando Patterson's theories explain how the laws, customs, and power relations that support the system of slavery result in the process of social death. Although Patterson is directly referencing the social death of enslaved people, my analysis in this thesis suggests that the psychological process of the social death of enslaved people may be extended to free African-Americans in the North. For example, Frado goes through natal alienation when Mag abandons her at the Bellmont house. In return, the Bellmonts use Frado's isolation to convince her she is the Bellmont's property. In this way, Frado experiences a social death and the Bellmonts exploit and commodify her body. Thus, the process of social death can occur in the treatment of free African-Americans in the North.

I acknowledge that my thesis is limited to analyzing the voices of two African-American authors. Brown and Wilson's sentimental novels offer a glimpse into a world of African-American voices politicizing sentimental novels. I encourage fellow scholars and instructors to continue exploring the many different moral messages found in early African-American sentimental novels. By examining the moral messages taught in early African-American

sentimental novels, scholars, instructors, and students can uncover the many ways in which laws and customs affect the representation of oppressed people.

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