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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/10223>

DOI: 10.4000/ejas.10223

ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

Elizabeth Boyle, " 'Twisting herself into all shapes': blackface minstrelsy and comic performance in Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig*", *European journal of American studies* [Online], 9-1 | 2014, document 3, Online since 17 December 2013, connection on 08 July 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/10223> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.10223>

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'Twisting herself into all shapes': blackface minstrelsy and comic performance in Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig*

Elizabeth Boyle

1. Introduction

- 1 The idea for this article sprang from a seemingly simple question: why are there so many practical jokes played in Harriet Wilson's novel, *Our Nig* (1859)? Although the novel—generally recognised as the first to be published in the United States by an African American—centres on the tragic story of a young, mulatto indentured servant mistreated by her Northern mistress, the narrative consistently undermines its mid-nineteenth century sentimental framework by including short comic sketches performed by the supposedly tragic protagonist, who nevertheless 'was ever at some sly prank', and would often 'venture far beyond propriety' in entertaining herself and those around her (Wilson 38). Are these comic interruptions evidence of narrative inconsistency? Or, is Wilson's persistent inclusion of the figure of the black comic performer in fact a shrewd exploration of a powerfully resonant theatrical tradition and its manifold racial discourses? And what does it mean for a female African American author writing at the crux of the 'slavery question' in the run-up to the Civil War—and near the peak of blackface minstrel popularity—to delve into the complex social meanings behind popular comic performances of blackness? Why these pranks, in this manner, at this time?
- 2 Exploring these questions means a careful assessment of Wilson and her contemporaries. In doing so, it soon becomes apparent that there are many comedians like Wilson's protagonist in African American antebellum culture in the decades before the Civil War: jokers, tricksters, conjurers and wits (authors, actors *and* characters) committed to using a spectacular brand of humour to address the violence of racism

and slavery, the kind of black humour which has only very recently begun attracting serious scholarship.ⁱ Frederick Douglass performed burlesques on the abolitionist stage early in his career and, as Granville Ganter has shown in his recent article, “‘He Made Us Laugh Some’: Frederick Douglass’s Humor”, a theatrical sense of satire is integral to his later autobiographical work. William Wells Brown drew ‘dark comedy’ from aspects of voodoo and conjure, argues Glenda Carpio, which dramatically ‘signif[ied] on chattel slavery’s transformation of people into objects’ (15-16). The black actor William Henry Lane, known as ‘Juba’ and celebrated in Charles Dickens’s *American Notes* (1842) as the best popular dancer of the day, knowingly mimicked ‘million[s] of counterfeit Jim Crows’ on the minstrel stage (139). And the racially ambiguous actress Adah Isaacs Menken’s legendary skin-coloured body suit transformed her performances of *Mazeppa* into a sensational play on racial and gender ideologies (Brooks 164). Taken together, they represent the full heterogeneity of black popular performance culture in this period. In their influential studies of black humour, both Mel Watkins and Carpio have noted that such performances use humour in a similar way, producing laughter by focusing on the ‘theatricality and tenacity of stereotypes’ that underpinned contemporary perceptions of African Americans (Carpio 17). Michael Rogin, moreover, has done a great deal to reveal the long-lasting influence of blackface on broad comedy in early twentieth century ‘talking’ motion pictures like *The Jazz Singer* (1927) and subsequent traditions of transgressive American comedy. Douglass, Brown, Lane, and Mencken, therefore, create historically significant and potentially radical relationships with the nineteenth century theatrical tradition of blackface minstrelsy, one of the ‘first mass-media forums to claim to represent African Americans for the nation as a whole’ and a major ‘source of racist iconography’—especially, crudely exaggerated images of black bodies including the rolling eyes and enormous painted lips of the happy slave Jim Crow; the long, sexually suggestive coat-tails hanging between the legs of the dandy Zip Coon; or the enormous hips and buttocks of the mammy and jezebel figures (Carpio 23-24). In their writing and their stage performances alike, Juba, Douglass, Mencken and others frequently used the body as a spectacular medium through which these racial stereotypes could be brought to life, transmitted and—crucially—resisted.

- 3 Can Wilson and her narrative pranks be read as part of this group of spectacular comic performers? African American female authors also used humour throughout the nineteenth century, although critics usually either overlook this aspect of their writing or argue that their humour is inevitably more curtailed than male-authored examples: essentially earnest, ‘largely textual’ and ‘neither necessarily politically radical nor performed’ (Carpio 66).ⁱⁱ It has been argued, for example, that ex-slave Harriet Jacobs uses mild ridicule throughout her slave narrative, *Incidents In The Life Of A Slave Girl* (1861), in order to highlight the perversity at the heart of Southern slave society, but avoids using the more spectacular forms of body humour like masquerade, burlesque and hyperbole in order to ‘guard against the always potential discursive consumption’ of her body, something to which black women were doubly vulnerable in antebellum society (Carpio 70). Although many critics, like Elizabeth Breau in her groundbreaking article ‘Identifying Satire: Our Nig’ (1993), now agree that Wilson makes more thorough use of satire than Jacobs, and is, moreover, one of only a handful of black authors of any gender to risk making Northern racism rather than Southern slavery her primary subject, others like Carpio still insist that Wilson’s humour, like that of Jacobs, remains limited by considerations of gender. They argue that while Wilson’s satire may boldly

represent and repudiate the violence of racism (this time, cruelty to a servant rather than a slave), its impact is still limited by the crucial distance that satire creates between reader and the site of violence.ⁱⁱⁱ Wilson's descriptions of the torture inflicted on her juvenile mulatto protagonist Frado (pejoratively known as 'Nig') by her white mistress Mrs Bellmont may be drawn from Wilson's own true-life experience as an indentured servant in New Hampshire but they are written with deliberate emotional detachment in order to 'prevent the commodification of her pain' and deflect readers instead towards the full force of her anger. Rather than a performative humour that inspires laughter, the consensus is that Wilson chose a cold and earnest form of satire that 'ultimately alienated readers' (Carpio 70). It is certainly true that Wilson's novel sank without trace, receiving no attention from the Northern abolitionist or black presses, despite attempts in the novel's preface to attract both white readers among 'our good anti-slavery friends at home' and African American readers, to whom she appeals 'universally for patronage' (3).^{iv} And Wilson's humour threatens to come unstuck in another, more profound way, too: by restricting Frado's body to a single satirical function (exposing the cruelty of her mistress), she risks enacting 'in narrative form the silencing to which Mrs Bellmont consistently subjects Frado' (Carpio 70).

- 4 Yet Wilson's humour is not as uniform, nor Frado's body as guarded as these critics suggest. This article argues that the practical jokes that run throughout *Our Nig* are evidence of a deliberate and sophisticated comic strategy that exploits the spectacular body's potential for subversive performance. While initially utilising the crude humour of minstrelsy, Wilson deliberately capitalises on her readers' laughter in order to deliver a radical message about the ways in which race is constructed and displayed in the antebellum period—both in popular performance culture and in the system of indentured servitude to which Wilson is vigorously opposed. The article demonstrates Wilson's strategy in three sections: first, it shows how she uses Frado's comic body to animate and then defamiliarise the Topsy stereotype (familiar to her readers from popular theatrical 'Tom Shows') in order to expose the alienation and dispossession at the heart of popular performances of blackness. The article also considers how Wilson uses Frado to reinterpret other popular stereotypes—particularly, the minstrel clowns Jim Crow and Zip Coon and the minstrel trickster Jasper Jack—in order to highlight the violence inherent in racist caricature. The third and final section demonstrates how Wilson turns the joke on her white readers in an extended burlesque of the Bellmont family that ultimately reveals whiteness, like blackness, as a performative identity. Taken as a whole, Wilson's comic strategy, with its 'embodied insurgency', aligns her with the period's most politically racial African American performers (Brooks 3).

2. Defamiliarising Topsy

- 5 Wilson's most overlooked literary skill is her ability as a mimic of white popular culture and the ways in which this culture often spectacularly and systematically objectified black people in the antebellum period. In particular, Wilson imitates the many theatrical blackface 'Tom Shows' that flourished throughout the United States after the publication of Stowe's novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), and especially the character of the mischievous slave girl Topsy, which despite its sentimental roots had become an increasingly clownish and one-dimensional role in the hands of professional adapters like George Aiken and H. J. Conway and theatrical impresarios like P. T. Barnum. Recasting its readership as an audience and frequently creating impromptu theatres from

its imagined rural landscape, the text references the dramatic tradition of these 'Tom Shows' and encourages readers to identify *Our Nig*'s eight-year-old mulatto protagonist Frado as only the most recent example in a long line of highly conspicuous, grossly excessive Topsy characters. Readers may well have laughed thoughtlessly at the spectacle, just as Conway's 'saucy pert negress' or Aiken's blackface Topsy, 'more tangle-haired, and moping and grinning than in the original [novel]', amused theatre audiences and provided light relief from the more melodramatic scenes of the play ('Boston Museum—Uncle Tom's Cabin'; *H*).

- 6 However, Wilson's hyperbolic depictions of Frado/Topsy also exploit this thoughtless laughter, by repurposing it in support of what becomes a radical performance of African American liberation. Topsy's hyper-visible body is transformed by Frado's opaque performances. This process of defamiliarisation occurs within *Our Nig* in a number of ways: first and most importantly, as a mulatto performing a Topsy role, Frado undermines by default the many counterfeit blackface Topsys in public circulation. If, as Saidiya Hartman has argued, 'the donning of blackface restaged the seizure and possession of the black body for the other's use and enjoyment', then Frado's performance, as the genuine article in racial drag, is an ironic reclamation of that alienated black body by rendering the symbolic power of the blackface mask redundant (31-32). While the same might be said of every black performing in minstrel shows during this period, Frado's sex and her extreme youth mark her out as an unusual minstrel. Moreover, her exaggerated use of costume, material props and physical gesture allows her to escape the temporal and spatial restrictions placed on the spectacular Topsy figure—what Daphne Brooks calls the 'tyranny of stillness' behind images of black women in the New World—and enable her body to move and grow in empowering ways (6).
- 7 Such a result is a considerable achievement, since alienation and dispossession were at the heart of most 'Tom Show' performances of Topsy. Mrs Caroline Fox Howard's famous rendition of the character in popular stage versions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* during the 1850s and 1860s reputedly 'delighted' Stowe herself, but like most other Topsy interpretations, her performance was heavily dependent on representational exploitation, in effect reducing the image of a black woman's body to 'infinitely deconstructable "othered" matter' (Lott 221; duCille 70). Like blackface minstrels, Howard's European features were only thinly disguised behind the burnt cork and woolly wig she wore on stage and her ersatz black dialect—'I 'spects I's de wickedest critter in de world'—barely concealed her cultured Boston accent; the obvious racial deceit of the blackface figure was part of the in-joke, a sly, knowing wink to the audience acknowledging how easily this flimsy performance of 'otherness' could be dismantled (Aiken II.4). Moreover, the sheer number of Howard's performances bound the character to a prescriptive physical routine and invested her with a humiliating sense of timelessness. Howard was twenty-three years old when she first took on the role in 1852, and before she retired thirty-five years later in 1887 she would play the adolescent Topsy over five thousand times. The gross incongruity in age between actress and character on stage was further exaggerated by Howard's over-sized pinafore costume and her famous 'dance breakdowns', which, like many set-pieces within blackface minstrel shows, also 'fetishize[d] the body in a spectacle that worked against the forward motion of the show, interrupting the flow of action with uproarious spectacles for erotic consumption' (Lott 223, 140). Therefore, whereas

Stowe's literary character demonstrates her ability for moral growth by pledging to better herself on Little Eva's death, the more spectacular 'Tom Show' Topsy figure is permanently dispossessed of both personal history and narrative development.

Figure 1: Caroline Fox Howard as 'Topsy' in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, c. 1854.

- 8 Two examples illustrate Wilson's dramatic process of defamiliarisation. First, Frado's initial appearance in *Our Nig* reinforces her similarity to the spectacular 'Tom Show' stereotype. Wilson describes her as a 'wild, frolicky thing' with 'long curly black hair and handsome, roguish eyes, sparkling with an exuberance of spirit almost beyond restraint' (17-18). This exuberance leads to a boisterous confrontation with her stepfather, Seth, during which she pushes him from a chair with 'a sudden jerk which destroyed Seth's equilibrium, left him sprawling on the floor, [after] which she escaped though the open door' (19). The scene's emphasis on exhibition and physical excess (from Frado's lush hair to the energy of her attack) overtly recalls the slapstick that was a familiar part of Topsy's routine in 'Tom Shows'. However, the text undermines this connection to blackface performance by simultaneously emphasising that Frado is not wearing racial drag, but is a genuine mulatto. The realistic portrayal of Frado's mixed racial heritage, placed so closely to crude blackface action, only serves to frustrate the symbolic power of the blackface mask.
- 9 The second example of Wilson's method demonstrates the importance of action, costume and material props, rather than realism, in the defamiliarisation process. Although now a servant on the Bellmonts' farm, Frado is allowed to periodically attend the local school. Here, a clear link is established between costume, display and racial categorisation. Just as Topsy's rags clearly identified her as a slave girl to a 'Tom Show' audience, so Frado's rags immediately distinguish her as an indentured servant and therefore a hyper-visible object of racial derision to her quasi-audience of Northern schoolmates: 'As soon as she appeared, with scanty clothing and bared feet, the

children assembled...“See that nigger,” shouted one. “Look! Look!” cried another’ (31). However, Wilson uses costume again to imagine ways in which Frado’s subjugated, ‘looked-at’ body can move more freely by embracing what Carla Peterson calls an ‘empowering oddness’ (xi). Frado reappears next season in ‘her winter over-dress’, which includes ‘a cast-off overcoat, once worn by Jack [Bellmont], and a sun-bonnet’ (Wilson 37). This eccentric outfit is accessorised with other strange material props:

The teacher’s desk was supplied with drawers, in which were stored his books and other *et ceteras* of the profession. The children observed Nig very busy there one morning before school, as they flitted in occasionally from their play outside. The master came; called the children to order; opened a drawer to take the book the occasion required; when out poured a volume of smoke. ‘Fire! fire!’ screamed he, at the top of his voice. By this time he had become sufficiently acquainted with the peculiar odor, to know he was imposed upon. The scholars shouted with laughter to see the terror of the dupe, who, feeling abashed at the needless fright, made no very strict investigation, and Nig once more escaped punishment. She had provided herself with cigars, and puffing, puffing away at the crack of the drawer, had filled it with smoke and then closed it tightly to deceive the teacher, and amuse the scholars (38-39).

- 10 Frado’s body is transformed into a ‘canvass of dissent’ that functions in terms of both race and gender (Brooks 6). The mixed gender signals of her costume (a ladylike bonnet and the boyish overcoat) and her props (especially the phallic cigar, which she handles so expertly) allow Frado to further exploit her fellow pupils’ fascination with her seemingly-misfit body: they are now unsure whether she is a girl or a boy, let alone a black servant or a white schoolmate, and she uses this delightful, confusing opacity to counteract the horrendous transparency of her previous roles. Her androgynous performance also allows her to unmask the gender performances of others too, most notably her school teacher, whose rather brittle masculine authority gives way very easily to melodramatic screams and girlish embarrassment.
- 11 As such, then, these scenes in *Our Nig* expose the radical gender dimensions of Wilson’s work and align her more strikingly with Menken and her spectacular bodysuit than with contemporary male performers, since both Frado and Mencken’s bodies are marked and sexualized differently and are therefore able to invoke and critique a different set of discourses. Like Mencken, whose ‘nude’ performances both attracted and repelled contemporary theatre-goers while reliably driving up her ticket sales, Frado’s defamiliarising gender performance is simultaneously disturbing and fascinating to the schoolchildren and brings her substantial profit (although social rather than financial in this case). The knowing exploitation of her own and others’ slippery gender identities draws ‘merriment from the children’ who ‘shielded and countenanced’ her, turning laughter into a social weapon and repelling the bitter racism and physical abuse of the younger Belmont daughter, Mary: ‘Nig’s retorts were so mirthful...that it was not painful to Nig or pleasurable to Mary. Her jollity was not to be quenched by whipping or scolding’ (Wilson 37-38).
- 12 These two examples illustrate the variety of ways in which Wilson defamiliarises the comic Topsy stereotype, and the role this process plays in exposing and resisting the alienation at the root of both ‘Tom Shows’ and the system of black indentured servitude itself. Having thus considered the body politics of *Our Nig* in the light of ‘Tom Shows’, which were a strange hybrid of melodramatic theatre and minstrelsy, let us now explore the novel’s relationship to the mainstream minstrel stage and Wilson’s attack on the violence that lay behind images of blackness in this period.

3. Violence and laughter

- 13 In his study of Douglass's humour, Ganter notes that 'American ethnic humor is often bound up in a violent sociological struggle for minority recognition and survival' (542). As Ganter argues, taking a leaf from Joseph Boskin and Joseph Dorinson's 'Ethnic Humor: Subversion and Survival' (1985), in times of racial conflict comedy can be used as both defence and attack as ethnic groups seek to blend in with but also assert their independence from the dominant culture. Likewise, *Our Nig*, published nine short, turbulent years after the divisive Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 and just two years before the outbreak of Civil War, both tries to make its white readers laugh and threatens them. While Wilson's comic Topsy 'act' threatens to blur social and racial categories in troubling ways, her narrative reinterpretation of the more mainstream minstrel characters Jim Crow, Zip Coon and Jasper Jack offers a more aggressive challenge to her white readers. This section explores this dimension of *Our Nig*. As with the previous examples, Wilson's text makes links between Frado and these three minstrel characters, provoking laughter, but also a sense of disturbance, at the spectacle of Frado's pained and painful body. Minstrel stereotypes, of course, functioned by denying African Americans control of their own bodies, emphasising the body as a comic object consumable by white society through ritual performances of pain and humiliation. Freud suggested that humour's primary function was to relieve repressed anxiety, and so 'the black mask offered a way to play with the collective [antebellum] fears of a degraded and threatening—and male—Other while at the same time maintaining some symbolic control over them' (Lott 25). However, Wilson again presents Frado's performances in a 'knowing' way, reclaiming symbolic control over these racialised discourses of violence and refracting them back towards the reader. Read in this way, *Our Nig* becomes an aggressive liberation narrative.
- 14 Three examples illustrate this pugnacious element of Wilson's comic strategy. Firstly, she punctuates Frado's experience as an indentured servant with numerous spectacular brushes with death by drowning or exposure that are both amusing and serious at the same time, a ghoulish litany that culminates in a reckless attempt to climb to the roof of the Bellmonts' barn:
- Some repairs having been necessary, a staging had been erected, and was not wholly removed. Availing herself of ladders, [Frado] was mounted in high glee on the top-most board. Mr Bellmont called sternly for her to come down; poor Jane nearly fainted from fear. Mrs B. and Mary did not care if she 'broke her neck,' while Jack and the men laughed at her fearlessness (53).
- 15 The comic framing of this scene is clear from the easy way in which the barn becomes a theatre, complete with 'staging' and boards to tread, a 'gleeful' black clown and an exuberant white audience, the largest section of which is made up of an appreciative group of farm labourers—young, working-class men similar to the sort that frequented the theatres of lower Manhattan in the 1830s and 1840s to cheer at the early minstrel shows there. The rural narrative setting immediately recalls the rural plantation scenes that regularly formed the backdrop for Jim Crow stage performances. And, like so many crooked-backed, shuffle-dancing minstrel Jim Crows before her, the image of Frado's dangerously exposed, dancing body is eagerly consumed, digested and imaginatively reduced to a 'broken neck', the very thought of which produces various pleasurable sensations in the watching crowd and, by inference, in the reader too. Through the

action of what Eric Lott calls the 'pale gaze', blackness is made the imaginary locus of pain, disfigurement and death (153). Despite the familiar comic framework and the easy laugh it was bound to generate in antebellum audiences, however, the real threat of this scene nevertheless lies in Wilson's knowing performance of the Jim Crow stereotype and the conscious hyperbole of the spectacle, which defamiliarises Frado's body and reasserts narrative control over minstrelsy's racial pathologies.

- 16 Wilson maintains this tension between laughter and threat elsewhere in the narrative, too, but extends it towards other minstrel types. 'Occasionally,' we are told, '[Frado] would utter some funny thing for Jack [Bellmont]'s benefit, while she was waiting on the table, provoking a sharp look from his mother, or expulsion from the room' (53). And, halfway through the novel, Frado provokes a domestic farce that laughingly recalls the comic figure of dandy Zip Coon but conceals more dangerous implications for white readers:

Frado seated herself in her mistress's chair, and was just reaching for a clean dessert plate which was on the table, when her mistress entered. 'Put that plate down; you shall not have a clean one; eat from mine,' continued she. Nig hesitated. To eat after James, his wife or Jack would have been pleasant; but to be commanded to do what was disagreeable by her mistress, *because* it was disagreeable, was trying. Quickly looking about, she took the plate, called Fido to wash it, which he did to the best of his ability; then, wiping her knife and fork on the cloth, she proceeded to eat her dinner. Nig never looked toward her mistress during the process (71).

- 17 The American entertainer George Washington Dixon created the dandy character of Zip Coon in 1834 to mock the social and political pretensions of free blacks in the North, who were then growing rapidly in number. Frado's comic pretensions in this scene are similarly rebuked by way of the striking similarity between her and Zip Coon. Social norms are aggressively restored when Frado is beaten by Mrs Bellmont—who threatens to 'cut her tongue out'—and ridiculed by Jack, who, 'boiling over with laughter' at her minstrel-like affectations, throws her a half-dollar coin: 'There, take that; 't was worth paying for' (72). Again, the positions of reader and audience are conflated and their laughter comes at the expense of an easy association between blackness and abjection. Yet the scene itself, which owes much to the visual humour of the minstrel stage with its incongruous tableau of mistress, servant and dog, turns on the crucial irony that Frado has a better understanding of social etiquette than Mrs Bellmont. By ostentatiously cleaning the cutlery and preferring a dog's hygiene over that of her mistress, she not only demonstrates that she knows her table manners, but she also skilfully inverts the pernicious antebellum ideology that so frequently equated African Americans with animals. Just as Jim Crow's exaggerated body works to reclaim itself from the pathological 'pale gaze' by embracing excess, so, by exaggerating Zip Coon's usual pathetic pomposity and transforming it into something more lean and mean, more unscripted and unpredictable, Wilson reimagines the way his and other African American bodies are seen in antebellum culture. The ridiculous Zip Coon is pointedly animated, infiltrated and re-appropriated in *Our Nig* as an image of African American bullish self-assertion.
- 18 Wilson's careful balance between laughter and aggression comes dangerously close to collapse in other scenes, however. In these scenes, Frado performs the role of the minstrel trickster, a rare figure typically known as Jasper Jack. By consistently outsmarting his white master, he exemplified antislavery sentiment and was thus a useful model for Wilson. Frado's comic tussle with Mary on the banks of a stream in

Chapter Three, for example, leaves the Bellmont girl utterly outsmarted, 'dripping' and 'half crying' (34). The tussle is carefully re-staged metaphorically in Chapter Five, but in this second scene, Frado's trickster body is exaggerated and the attack on the 'white' body is unmistakable:

Among the sheep was a willful leader, who always persisted in being first served, and many times in his fury he had thrown down Nig till, provoked, she resolved to punish him...Just as he leaped for the dish, she suddenly jumped one side, when down he rolled into the river, and swimming across, remained alone until night (54-55).

- 19 Instead of fixed in spectacular ways, Frado's body becomes fluid and unpredictable in this scene: 'she hopped about on her toes, and with laughable grimaces replied, she knew she was quick enough to "give him the slide"' (55). Her physical gestures betray the threatening doubleness of her act, 'grimaces' within the laughter. Moreover, Frado's tricky body is not the only threat to Bellmont land and property. Although watching farm labourers 'convulse with laughter' at Frado's joke because they are familiar with Jasper Jack and find it easy to respond to Frado as a variation on the theme, they also 'guess at once [the] object' of the prank and this knowledge makes their laughter dangerous. Lott has argued that antebellum minstrelsy represented a 'condensation of working-class and racial impulses', and the minstrel show was often 'useful in figuring class struggle' (208). The farm labourers' laughter might be interpreted, therefore, as an open acknowledgment and condoning of Frado's aggression towards her white employers. A double 'laughing' threat to the Bellmonts' power exists here, then, emerging from both racially and socially 'othered' groups. These three examples demonstrate the way in which Wilson's 'laughing' comedy of stereotypes operates in relation to the mainstream minstrel stage, using its comic violence to engage the interest of her readership, while simultaneously defamiliarising that violence through exaggeration and a sense of knowingness, eventually reflecting that violence back towards the reader. Let us now turn to the final element of Wilson's comic strategy, one that strains the goodwill of the reader to breaking point.

4. Burlesquing whiteness

- 20 Toni Morrison has argued in *Playing in the Dark* (1992) that the power of whiteness in literature lies in its nameless, invisible status. Reviewing the evidence of classic American texts like *Moby Dick* and *Huckleberry Finn*, Morrison suggests that 'if we follow through on the self-reflexive nature of these encounters with Africanism, it falls clear: images of blackness can be evil and protective, rebellious and forgiving, fearful and desirable—all of the self-contradictory features of the self. Whiteness alone is mute, meaningless, unfathomable, pointless, frozen, veiled, curtailed, dreaded, senseless, implacable' (59). In popular performance culture, too, whiteness remains powerful but 'veiled' behind the ever-changing spectacular blackface mask. If Wilson is concerned with disrupting the spectacle of blackness through slippery, opaque performance, she is equally interested in using performance strategies to disrupt the idea of whiteness. In an extension of her comic strategy so far, she seeks to name whiteness in as many humorous, spectacular ways as possible. The Bellmonts, as the most visible white characters in *Our Nig*, become the primary focus of her efforts and are variously burlesqued as Southern grotesques, circus performers, lunatics, dupes and even, in a satiric twist worthy of Wilson's savage reputation, as blackface performers themselves.

The ultimate effect is not only to make whiteness visible through the prism of antebellum popular culture, but also to suggest that whiteness, like blackness, is a performative identity.

- 21 Wilson's central burlesque in *Our Nig* relies heavily on incongruous humour. According to a theory first articulated by Schopenhauer in 1818 and developed by Hazlitt in his *Lectures on the English Comic Writers* (1819), laughter is produced by incongruity. Hazlitt suggests that 'the essence of the laughable...is the incongruous, the disconnecting one idea from another, or the jostling of one feeling against another' (Hazlitt 414). As a consequence, incongruous humour emphasises change rather than consolidation; it 'allows us to see the world inverted' and 'to question the habits of mind that we may fall into as we critique race' (Carpio 7). It is this dramatic shift in perspective that Wilson is aiming for when she critiques images of whiteness in *Our Nig*. The narrative of *Our Nig* pivots on a major geographical incongruity: although Wilson frequently invokes the Southern characters and scenes, the novel's action is set exclusively in the rural North. This geographical discontinuity is designed to have an unsettling effect on the way Wilson's Northern white readers saw themselves. Proud white families with strong abolitionist connections like the New Hampshire Hutchinsons and Haywards (a direct model for the Bellmonts in *Our Nig*) are conflated in Wilson's narrative with grotesque Southern plantation stereotypes in a series of low burlesques reminiscent of minstrel 'afterpiece' pastiches (White xxvi). The 'real' Mrs Bellmont may have descended from one of the 'Pilgrim Mothers', but in the narrative she is reduced to a 'she-devil', indistinguishable during her many melodramatic 'kitchen scenes' and punishment 'performances' from the wicked plantation mistress type; as the narrative progresses, the sympathetic but weak Mr Bellmont is also revealed to be as complicit in racist violence as any stock plantation master (although perhaps more ridiculous), and at least one of the Bellmont sons is as rakish and casually racist as any Southern stage dandy (White xv; Wilson 17, 66, 44).
- 22 However, Wilson's burlesque of whiteness finds its true target in the character of Mary Bellmont. At school, 'self-willed, domineering' Mary's inability to charm her audience means that instead she becomes spectacularly lunatic in the eyes of the other schoolchildren, 'everyday reported "mad" by some of her companions' (33). At home, Mary performs her own spectacular burlesque mid-way through the novel by hurling a large carving knife at Frado: '[d]odging quickly, it fastened in the ceiling a few inches from where [Frado] stood. There rushed on Mary's mental vision a picture of bloodshed, in which she was the perpetrator, and the sad consequences of what was so nearly an actual occurrence' (65). By drawing such a strongly visual, even darkly comic, parallels between Mary's excessive cruelty, madness and the spectacular circus culture then flourishing in antebellum America, both scenes do a thorough job of ridiculing the empty theatricality of Mary's social and moral status in the novel and, by extension, the status of all Northern white readers. The moment Wilson's readers recognise themselves in these burlesques is set up as a moment of incongruous comedy, in which certainties about their own hotly-defended geographical and political positions, including abolitionism, would have been turned upside down, leaving them exposed to the sharp edge of Wilson's humour. The nameless power of whiteness is most thoroughly debunked, however, on the event of Mary's death in the closing stages of the novel, when she is reimagined by Frado not as a white angel but as a black devil: 'she's dead, Aunt Abby! ... She got into the river again, Aunt Abby, didn't she; the Jordan

is a big one to tumble into, any how. S'posen she goes to hell, she'll be as black as I am. Wouldn't mistress be mad to see her a nigger!' (107). It is entirely consistent with Wilson's larger comic project that such an image should draw so overtly on a performative model of humour. The doubleness of the blackface mask is now reappropriated by Frado in order to expose and *name* Mary as she truly was—'as black as I am'. 'Having no genuine content other than a culturally manufactured one', whiteness and blackness are optical illusions to Wilson (Babb 16).

5. Conclusion

- 23 Since Breau's 1993 article, it has become popular to think of Wilson as a powerful satiric voice. Her passionate attack on racial and religious hypocrisy, her defence of social justice and the rights of indentured servants, even her ties to abolitionism are mediated through her excoriating brand of humour. Although her novel was not widely read at the time, Wilson clearly believed in the efficacy of language to inspire change. In this respect, we are bound to see her in the context of other Northern antebellum writers—Emerson, Thoreau and Fuller; Garrison, Douglass and Stowe—and their belief in free speech and the revolutionary power of the 'renovated tongue' (Gilmore 76). Rather than defining Wilson strictly in these rhetorical terms, however, the violent slapstick, cross-dressing and incongruous burlesque in *Our Nig* bear witness to the transformative influence of performance on her humour, in particular the bodily discourses of contemporary blackface minstrelsy and their ambiguous potential. The decade before the Civil War saw an explosion in black popular performance culture that inevitably permeated contemporary literary works. Like Juba's dance acts, Douglass and Brown's abolitionist jokes and plays, or Menken's drag spectacles, Wilson's knowing use of racial stereotypes and her emphasis on slippery, opaque performance offered her new opportunities to communicate in engaging and powerful ways. Reading *Our Nig* with the knowledge of Wilson's later career as a spiritualist medium, it is unsurprising that her first and only literary venture was as much about the 'renovated body', as the 'renovated tongue'.

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NOTES

- i. As Jeffrey Ferguson suggests, the critical reluctance to study black humour in any depth may be due to the fact that 'for the most part the American discourse on race has provided a stronghold for sincerity, melodrama, sentimentalism, and deep seriousness, but it has admitted the spirit of irony and humor only with the greatest of trepidations' (Ferguson vii). Most recent, full-length studies of African American humour focus primarily on the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, with only cursory glances at earlier periods. Carpio is an exception, with significant space in her book devoted to Brown and Chesnut.
- ii. For more information on women and humour in the nineteenth century, see Kreger.
- iii. Frank J. Webb's *The Garies and their Friends* (1857) published just two years before *Our Nig*, is another exception, focusing on the white racism experienced by a mixed race couple Philadelphia. Webb's novel received a cool reception from both contemporary and more recent commentators because 'we do not find a direct attack on slavery anywhere' (Bell 42).
- iv. For more information on the limited circulation of Wilson's novel, see Ellis, 13-14.

ABSTRACTS

This article argues that the practical jokes running throughout Wilson's novel *Our Nig; or Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (1859) are evidence of a deliberate and sophisticated comic strategy

that exploits the spectacular body's potential for subversive performance and works against the alienating conditions of social and political marginalisation experienced by African Americans in the antebellum period. Initially utilising the crude humour of minstrelsy, Wilson deliberately capitalised on her readers' laughter in order to defamiliarise the 'spectacle' of blackness in both popular performance culture and indentured servitude. Using movement, costume and material props, Wilson imagines new ways to present her protagonist's body through the minstrel stereotypes of Topsy, Jim Crow, Zip Coon and Jasper Jack. Wilson then turns the joke on her white readers, ultimately demonstrating that whiteness, like blackness, is a performative identity. Taken as a whole, Wilson's comic strategy, with its 'embodied insurgency', aligns her with the period's most politically racial African American performers.

INDEX

Keywords: abolition, Adah Isaacs Menken, African American literature, body, Daphne Brooks, defamiliarisation, Eric Lott, Frederick Douglass, Glenda Carpio, Granville Ganter, Harriet Wilson, Hazlitt, humour, indentured servitude, minstrelsy, performance, racial stereotypes, Schopenhauer, Toni Morrison, whiteness, William Henry Lane

AUTHOR

ELIZABETH BOYLE

Department of English, University of Hull, Cottingham Road, Hull, HU6 7RXe.boyle@hull.ac.uk