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# Whiteness in African American Antebellum Literature: An Enduring Imprint in the Lived and Literary Black Imagination

*Elizabeth J. West*

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In the aftermath of the 2013 court verdict that cleared George Zimmerman of murder charges for shooting unarmed black teenager Trayvon Martin, many news agencies printed a photo that was profound in the history that the image captured. Taken at a protest in Atlanta, the photo shows a young black girl, identified as 3-year-old Jediah Jones, holding a sign as her mother, Keiota Jones, stands behind her, bracing her with arms on the young girl's shoulder. The young girl's sign displays a three-word text written in marker in large, but simple print: "YOU LOOK Suspicious!!" (Feeney). While many who viewed this photo may have been unmoved by the child's frightened and confounded expression, I found the image deeply disturbing for the historical rawness and honesty that resonated in the combination of the signage and the face of the little girl. Her three-word text challenges centuries old discourses that have marked black as symbolic of evil and criminal, and white contrastingly as good and lawful. With sign in hand, her piercing gaze projects the fear and uncertainty that have grown out of a black historical suspicion of whiteness.

I have downloaded this image onto my computer, and I frequently return to this face that takes me back to the voices and faces in texts that I have taught for numerous semesters. In the eyes of this young girl, I am reminded of the fearful look that, centuries ago, the 6 or 7-year-old Phillis Wheatley must have cast on those adult white men examining her to determine the price she might bring on the auction block. The 2013 photo of the little black girl at a protest in Atlanta and the eighteenth-century century gaze of the young African, Phillis Wheatley, are ages apart, but the juxtaposed images remind us that black experiences with whiteness continue to be interpreted through a self-reflective lens of whiteness. We operate in a society that despite the skepticisms of the modernist age, often retreats to pre-modern no-

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tions of objective, singular, authoritative History or Truth. This is often the case in discourses of race—in and outside the academy. The history of slavery and Jim Crow in America continue to be contentiously debated, but if the sheer number of publicly displayed commemorations of the Southern secessionist movement is an indicator, the narrative from this perspective remains a dominating one. Contrastingly, one might argue that the glaring paucity of public memorials honoring African Americans reflects the subjugation of their experiences and perspectives. This subjugated perspective, or gaze, continues to play out in significant ways.

In her seminal 1990 publication, *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison asked readers to consider how blackness has been perceived and constructed in the works of white American authors as a means to define and validate whiteness. Morrison underscores the primacy of a black presence in the New World and New World Literature to give life, meaning, and authority to whiteness. She argues that, “the contemplation of this black presence is central to any understanding of our national literature and should not be permitted to hover at the margins of the literary imagination” (5). *Playing in the Dark* spawned much critical discussion on the white gaze and constructs of race that emerge out of this positionality, but its import also rests in how Morrison’s ideas about the white racialized gaze invite critiques of the dynamic exchange of gazes directed through the prism of race. In bell hooks’s 1992 critical collection, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, we find a work that expands on the critical line of inquiry that Morrison invites two years earlier in *Playing in the Dark*. In hooks’s work we are asked to consider the contrasting positionality—that is, the black gaze and how it informs constructs of whiteness in black-authored texts. In the essay entitled “Representations of Whiteness in the Black Imagination,” hooks expresses the importance of this critical inquiry, for through such study we begin to acknowledge that whiteness does not exist simply as whites imagine and construct it. Despite Anglocentric constructions of whiteness as equivalence of good, hooks argues that from the perspective of their own history and experience, blacks see and represent whiteness as a terrorizing presence (167). Similarly, in *The Scary Mason-Dixon Line: African American Writers and the South* (2009), Trudier Harris underscores the prevailing association of whiteness with terror in the black imagination. Harris offers an examination of the South and Southern whiteness in African American fiction, and she posits that the legacy of slavery and white tyranny has so pervaded the black psyche that to date “Whether it is to celebrate the triumph of black Southern heritage over repression or to castigate the South for its horrible treatment of black folks, African American writers cannot escape

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the call of the South upon them” (2). She argues further that, “Not one of them considers himself or herself truly an African American writer without having confronted the South in some way” (2).

With respect to their emphasis on white terrorism in American slavery, Harris and hooks have been preceded by earlier scholars.<sup>1</sup> In his groundbreaking history of American slavery, John Hope Franklin notes that by the end of the colonial period, the slave colonies had become “armed camp[s] in which masters figuratively kept their guns cocked and trained on the slaves” (74). The Civil War’s end did not eliminate the legacy of sustained violence against blacks that had come to define their encounters with whites. It is a legacy that to the present informs black art as well as black culture, serving as blueprint for black literary engagement with matters of race. Trudier Harris offers a cogent overview of how this history has shaped black writing: “African American writers have documented the fear of the South in terms of how the landscape can be used against black people. But of course it is people who are manipulating the landscape, so the major tales of fear have to do with white human beings” (12). Harris explores this theme through an insightful analysis of works by such well-known writers as James Baldwin, Ernest Gaines, Octavia Butler, Yusef Komunyakaa, Sherley Anne Williams, Randall Kenan and Raymond Andrews. For both hooks and Harris, the focus is the matter of whiteness and the South as symbolic of terror and violence in the works of twentieth-century black writers. A look at early African American Literature, however, can teach us much about the evolution of the black gaze as it critiques whiteness. In particular, by turning our attention to earlier works we might better understand the foundation for the modern black gaze examined in the works of hooks and Harris. In addition, perhaps, we might also understand the gaze and the text of the young black girl in the 2013 photograph as a continuum of centuries-old, black-conceived associations of whiteness with terror.

Harris and hooks recount a black gaze rooted in a history of black alienation, disenfranchisement, and abuse at the hands of a white ruling class. Harris suggests that the preoccupation of modern black writers with the South represents, in part, a feeling that with respect to its racial history, there is unfinished business in the South. In part, seeking resolution and restitution, black writers revisit the South as a kind of ground zero of historical white terrorism. Again, missing in these contemporary critical contemplations of whiteness and the South is analysis of how this unfinished business, or unfulfilled recompense, addressed in modern black writings is presaged a century earlier in black-authored narratives of the nineteenth century. Mid-nineteenth-century texts such as William Wells Brown’s *Clotel*, Frederick Douglass’s

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*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents*, Frank Webb's *The Garies*, and Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig* underscore the depths of terror and violence that are commonplace in the lives of slaves and free blacks as well. In later postbellum texts by black writers such as Pauline Hopkins, Frances Harper, and Sutton Griggs, for example, the South and its white inhabitants continue to evoke terror. Even in Charles Chesnutt's late nineteenth-century *Conjure Woman*, a collection of tales that white readers generally found light-hearted and amusing, we find a continuation of slavery's early violent imprint in the African American literary imagination. Collectively, these works invite a comprehensive study of nineteenth-century black narrative reflections on the terror of whiteness; however, in this essay I focus on two antebellum works, Webb's *The Garies*, and Wilson's *Our Nig*. As fictional works focusing on the nineteenth-century North, these novels allow for analysis that specifically connects to Harris's focus on the seeming necessity of black authors, even those born outside the South, to confront the South as epicenter of white terrorism.

At its birth, African American literature is informed by the legacy and imprint of slavery, an experience out of which those blacks enslaved, those escaped, and even those never enslaved find in slavery and the South the overriding image of whiteness as synonymous with terror. It is a terror that manifests into numerous forms: physical violence, sexual violence, destruction of families, destruction of communities, destruction of self-esteem and self-love. Although antebellum nineteenth-century America was an era filled with abolitionist activism, it represented a continuation of a prevailing white discourse that maintained the innate superiority of whites and the presumed submissiveness and inferiority of blacks. In particular, pro-slavery advocates regularly represented slavery as a natural condition for blacks; they would argue that blacks were innately deficient in human intellect and human feeling. They often espoused the benefit of slavery for this group who had no capacity for citizenship or autonomy. These assertions would be espoused with little if any acknowledgement of counterarguments posited by blacks, especially discourse predicated on counter critique. At the heart of this racist and ethnocentric doctrine was the presumption that blacks could not speak back, and that they lacked the capacity to gaze or see whiteness. Thus, whites presumed that blacks clearly saw whiteness as whites represented or constructed it. By dismissing blacks as subhuman and then further arguing that they lacked the capacity for human introspection and analysis, America could construct a glorious history of itself despite its criminal and violent legacy of slaving.

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The history of the trans-Atlantic slave world has been one dominated by Western white discourses of race. On both sides of the Atlantic whites wrote about slavery and race through an ethnocentric lens that they deemed the authoritative account. In the hundreds of years that included the transatlantic delivery of Africans into slavery in the new world, leading white thinkers and statesmen explained away this human violation with speculations regarding the African's humanity. Western Enlightenment philosophy issued a discourse on human excellence that allowed for dismissal of Africans and non-westerners as "primitives." Enlightenment thinkers envisioned man as a progressive being—moving along a path to human perfection or excellence, fueled by his intellect and his powers of reasoning. This was a vision tied to a Eurocentric epistemological worldview—a view that saw letter learning as the consummate manifestation of knowledge and intelligence. This view effectively marginalized or dismissed population groups rooted in oral traditions—in general, that would include Africans. Drawing from Enlightenment epistemology, pro-slavery advocates found additional argumentative support for their assertion that blacks were particularly suited for slavery. While the publication of creative and political writings by blacks clearly compromised Anglo racist assertions of black inferiority, this seeming counter proof did not deter this line of rhetoric. When having to explain the likes of a Phillis Wheatley, for example, Thomas Jefferson refused to acknowledge Wheatley's genius; instead, he simply assessed her poetry as inferior appeals to the senses, appeals that showed no evidence of originating from intellect ("Query 14" 140).

This denial of black humanity and intellect planted in early America not only served white presumptions of racial superiority but also fueled a concomitant assertion about the black gaze. Out of the plantation social order that closely regulated encounters between master and slave, whites concluded that blacks had no critical capacity to see or judge whites—that blacks could only understand or read whiteness as they were instructed. In the event of highly public and inflamed black-voiced discourses to the contrary, white backlash was usually immediate. David Walker and his *Appeal* (1829) are a striking example of this dynamic. With his defiant call for slave uprising and his direct challenge to Jefferson and his racist conclusions about black humanity, Walker infuriated Southerners. Especially alarmed by Walker's rhetoric were "slaveholders, particularly the powerful plantation owners and their political allies" (Turner 13). The import of his words was so alarming that "racists called for Walker's life. A group of wealthy planters offered a ten-thousand-dollar reward for him—dead or alive" (14). Within a year of the *Appeal*, Walker was found dead—likely assassinated (17). Walker's publication and his death, which was

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believed the consequence of his public challenge to white authority, underscores the looming threat to blacks who dared read whiteness as evil, and then further dared to promote black resistance. In slavery, the black gaze was rendered nonexistent and “white supremacist terror and dehumanization during slavery centered around white control of the black gaze” (hooks 168). Slaves were subjected to violent, sometimes fatally violent repercussions for looking their masters or other whites in the eyes: “blacks learned to appear before whites as though they were zombies . . . To look directly was an assertion of subjectivity” (hooks 168).

To look into the eyes of the other is an act that presupposes equality, and slavery in the United States was justified in large part on the presumed inferiority of the slave. The power dynamic that subordinated blacks was fortified by the requirement that slaves cast a downward gaze. In general, then, slaves avoided direct eye contact with whites, and this outward diversion of the gaze left whites confident in their construction of white superiority. More importantly, the slave’s compliance to this rule of racial engagement fueled a general belief among whites that blacks were incapable of seeing and critiquing them. Constructs of whiteness as symbolic of or synonymous with freedom, democracy, superior intellect, and superior civilization, dominated American literature and political discourse with whites unable or unwilling to consider that in the black imagination, whiteness epitomized quite the opposite. Though slaves cast their eyes downward, they saw whiteness just the same, and the dominant vision of whiteness shared by slaves was that of terror.

The threatening view of whiteness imprinted in the minds of slaves found its way into the psyche of early black writers and thus into their works. One of the earliest examples of this transformation of the real to the written is the poetry of Phillis Wheatley. Preceding the earliest publications of black fiction by more than half a century, Phillis Wheatley’s eighteenth-century poems anticipate the writings of her black literary successors.<sup>2</sup> As author, Wheatley exemplifies the masked gaze and the pretense of invisibility that underscored slave survival. As poet, Wheatley is visible, but as black and slave her poetic gaze must not be cast outward and upward toward the eyes of her white readers. She must not suggest to her white readers that she sees whiteness as other than good. Were she to posit an open and contrary representation of whites, Wheatley would have been risking the wrath of her masters as well as her white readers.

On the one hand, as artist, Wheatley is constrained by the real threat to a slave who would voice public scrutiny of whites. On the other hand, she is driven by the compelling impulse of the poet wishing to tell of

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accounts and impressions as she has experienced them. Wheatley masters this challenge just as slaves on the plantation who master the art of seeming to not see while, in fact, seeing with a highly discerning eye. She appears to cast the downward slave gaze, and her words seem to echo constructs of whiteness originating in Eurocentric discourse. However, just as the slave who speaking to her master avoids meeting her master's eyes but sees him quite clearly nonetheless, Wheatley, as poet, avoids direct confrontation with her white audience. Given the absence of overt criticism of whites in her poetry, Wheatley emerged into the twentieth century scorned by many scholars who read her work as submissive and self-denigrating.<sup>3</sup> While in the past Wheatley's work was criticized as mere imitation of Eurocentric art form and reiteration of white supremacist thinking, Susan Lippert Martin reminds us that, "critics now view Wheatley's work with a more discerning eye" (157). Scholars are revisiting Wheatley's poetry and acknowledging the subversive nature of her work, and the worldview beyond the West that influences her thinking.<sup>4</sup>

Criticism of Wheatley often points to one of her most anthologized poems, "On Being Brought from Africa to America." In this poem, whose title seems to make light of the Middle Passage, Wheatley subversively challenges white biblical exegesis and interjects a quiet affirmation of African humanity. Wheatley begins the poem echoing popularized white discourses on Africa and Africans, referring to her native continent as a "pagan land" and her pre-converted self as a "be-nighted soul" (1-2). Were the poem to end here, Wheatley's detractors would have a more convincing case. It does not, however, and what follows is Wheatley's own critique of white Christian hypocrisy as well as a challenge to the white racialized reading of the Cain and Abel story. Wheatley does not name whites specifically, but she is clearly speaking of whites when she says with a tone of incrimination, "Some view our sable race with scornful eye" (5). With her use of the pronoun, "our," Wheatley includes herself in that group of Africans/blacks who are castigated by "some"/whites. While the first four lines of the poem echo commonly espoused white depictions of Africa, with the shift in line five Wheatley undermines these racist portraits. She rejects the assertion that black skin represents a shortfall or failing and suggests that this view is just that, a view by "some." In the closing lines of the poem, specifically with her reference to the biblical figure, Cain, Wheatley challenges white presumptions of authority that anchor these conclusions. White pro-slavery advocates regularly recited the story of Cain and Abel to validate black slavery: they maintained that the curse of Cain, who they deemed the ancestor of blacks, forever defined the plight of blacks. As the descendants of Cain, blacks were presumed a



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cursed people, for God had cursed Cain for slaying his brother, Abel. Absent from this convenient appropriation of the story, however, is acknowledgement of the story in its entirety. In the Genesis account of Cain and Abel, God, though initially enraged by Cain's act, later forgives him and then promises Cain his protection. The complete story thus reveals the import of Wheatley's closing lines, for here she makes clear that she has read the text and knows that Cain was redeemed and restored to God's graces: "Remember, Christians, Negros, black as Cain, / May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train" (7-8). If blacks are the descendants of Cain, then clearly rather than being a cursed race, they are the inheritors of a divine promise.

A teenager and a slave with first hand knowledge of the Middle Passage, Wheatley composes "On Being Brought from Africa to America" fully aware of the power of whites and the terror and violence that they can and do inflict upon blacks. She is acutely aware of the limited license available to her to speak openly about the ills of slavery or those who had enslaved her. Again, slaves lived with the constant threat of violence and death should they dare challenge their masters. Wheatley's poetry shows a slave well aware of the master's ultimate power, but one who cleverly gazes at whiteness and subversively reveals its terrifying underbelly. An example of this subtle but clear gaze at whiteness is found in Wheatley's poem, "On Imagination." In this reflection on the origin or nature of artistic creativity, Wheatley describes a quest for poetic excellence that is stifled by an imposing force—and that force is whiteness. As with her more well-known poem, "To Maecenas," Wheatley invokes the muses for creative inspiration. "On Imagination" identifies imagination as the specific gift that the poet desires from the muses. The boundlessness of imagination promises boundless creative possibility to the poet granted its power:

*Imagination!* who can sing thy force?  
Or who describe the swiftness of thy course?  
Soaring though air to find the bright abode,  
Th' empyreal palace of the thund'ring God,  
We on thy pinions can surpass the wind,  
And leave the rolling universe behind; (13-18)

Despite this plea to the muses and the recognition of imagination's power, the poet is left hopeless in her pursuit. The warm, bright light of imagination is interrupted by the deadening cold of winter:

But I reluctant leave the pleasing views,  
Which *Fancy* dresses to delight the Muse;

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*Winter* austere forbids me to aspire,  
And Northern tempests damp the rising fire;  
They chill the tides of *Fancy's* flowing sea,  
Cease then, my song, cease the unequal lay. (48-53)

Whiteness, symbolized in “*Winter*,” and the “Northern tempests,” halts the poet’s aspirations. A threatening presence, whiteness ultimately stamps out the poetic fire and kills the poet’s song.

The threatening image of whiteness underscored in Wheatley’s eighteenth-century imagination presages a racialized imprint that will pervade black antebellum narratives. In a work that was probably the most celebrated nineteenth-century slave narrative, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), Douglass reveals the arbitrary and ever-present threat of violence and abuse that white rule represented in black life. Whether it was the more unflappable Mr. Lloyd, the highly agitated Mr. Severe, or the proud underling Mr. Covey, white rule was synonymous with unchecked violence in this slave world. Similarly, in William Wells Brown’s 1853 novel, *Clotel*, Brown depicts a white-ruled South that defied human reason and compassion. *Clotel* makes the case that worse than the threat of bodily harm, slaves lived with the constant threat of the master’s power to disrupt and even destroy their families and communities.

While slave narratives offer views of slavery from those who had experienced its ills first hand, works by free Northern blacks represent an imprint of slavery and whiteness that crossed into the landscape of the free. These Northern black writers showed white terror extending beyond Southern borders into the supposed free Northern landscape. Symbolizing the evil of slavery and racism, the American South was presumed the location, and white Southerners the perpetrators of wrongs against blacks. The North was depicted as a haven for blacks, and white Northerners were deemed distinct from their slaveholding fellows of the South. This paradigm notwithstanding, however, Northern antebellum blacks faced violence and discrimination at the hands of white Northerners. The published narratives of ex-slaves were widely disseminated for abolitionist activism, and while these works consistently show the terrorizing nature of slavery and the slave master, Northern antebellum fiction, that is, works authored by free-born blacks of the North, more poignantly reveal the far-reaching impact of slavery on the black psyche. Although few in numbers, these texts reveal that though they are geographically removed from slavery, free-born Northern blacks, like their enslaved contemporaries, see whiteness as symbolic of terror.

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This trans-geographical imprint of a looming and threatening white presence is poignantly illustrated in two mid-nineteenth century novels: Frank Webb's *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857), and Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859). These works unveil the North as anything but a haven for blacks: whites are at best indifferent to the plight of their fellow black citizens but more often complicit in the ongoing violence and discrimination enacted against blacks. While some of their Northern white characters sympathize with and even attempt to aid victimized blacks, Wilson and Webb paint these would-be benefactors as powerless. *The Garies* and *Our Nig* are early examples of Trudier Harris's emphasis on the South and whiteness as central tropes in the black literary imagination. Just as the contemporary black authors of Harris's study, Wilson and Webb—a century earlier—return to the South to wrestle with the matter of black suffering and subjugation. The South, its white inhabitants and its trans-geographical reach, serve as tropes of terror that pervade black life.

In her essay, "Capitalism, Black (Under) Development, and the Production of the African-American Novel in the 1850s," Carla Peterson underscores the significance of *The Garies* for its focus on the economic and social struggles of black Northerners (578). Peterson emphasizes the uniqueness of Webb's text as it takes readers beyond the South and the plantation in its depictions of black life. Without question, Webb's narrative turns our eyes Northward; however, the fate of the Garie family is rooted in slavery and the threat to black life inherent in this institution. Although he quickly shifts the setting to the North, Frank Webb begins *The Garies* in the South. The novel opens with the picture of the mixed race Garie family in their Southern antebellum household. Emily Garie, Mr. Garie's mulatto mistress (because Southern law prohibits marital union between blacks and whites), convinces her planter spouse to move the family North. Mr. Garie provides well for Emily and their two children; however, Emily realizes that they live under constant threat of the possibility that she and the children could be reduced to slavery. Emily Garie understands that the privileged life she knows could be disrupted and ended with an unforeseen turn of fortune for Mr. Garie. She explains this to Mr. Garie who, though caring and generous to his family, does not seem altogether clear on their precarious place in his life: "I know you do not treat me or them as though we were slaves. But I cannot help feeling that we are such . . . If anything should happen that you should be taken away suddenly, think what would be our fate. Heirs would spring up from somewhere, and we might be sold and separated for ever" (53-54). Through his position as white male plantation lord, Mr. Garie spares Emily and their offspring their designated position in Southern society, but Emily is

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clear about the horror that would be unleashed should she find herself in her Georgia home without Mr. Garie's protection.

Emily Garie's fear of the South, of indiscriminate and arbitrary white rule, precipitates the Garies' move North, to Philadelphia, where she and Mr. Garie can legally marry and presumably free their children from the racist dictates of Southern law and culture. In this presumed Northern haven, however, things quickly go awry: through a plot devised by Mr. Stevens, whose family relation to Mr. Garie is unknown to Garie, Mr. Garie and his wife are killed. Stevens sets in motion a mob of Irish immigrants who attack black residents as well as the Garies. This mob storms through the black neighborhood, waging war against local blacks and destroying their property. It is of course ironic that the Garies will perish in the very place that had seemed a refuge from the well-known dangers they faced in the South. Mr. Garie's status as wealthy, white male was not enough to counter his wife's or his children's black ancestry. His mixed race family reduces him to the scorn and violence that blacks all too often face. This is most dramatically illustrated when the drunken Irish mob arrive at his door during the riot. They greet Mr. Garie not as the white gentleman that he assumes his wealth and status should garner, but rather as one beneath even their impoverished and outsider status: "You white livered Abolitionist, come out, damn you! We are going to give you a coat of tar and feathers, and your black wench nine-and-thirty" (221).

The Garies meet their violent end far away from their Southern homeland; however, their fate has been determined by the arm of white Southern rule that extends well beyond Southern boundaries. Mr. Garie's villainous cousin, George Stevens, is the embodiment of this reach. Only after Mr. Garie becomes his Philadelphia neighbor does Stevens come to know Garie and learn that they are cousins. Having married a Northerner of inferior means and status, Stevens's mother was disinherited and her brother, Mr. Garie's father, became the sole heir of the Garie estate at their parent's death. Stevens is raised in the North, but he has direct familial ties to the South. He also carries within him a conviction for Southern racist codes of behavior and assumptions of white privilege. Moreover, Stevens's very physical countenance mirrors the portrait of the slave South as gazed through black/slave eyes. Like the picture of the South that threatens Mrs. Garie's sense of security and well-being in the opening chapters of the novel, Mr. Stevens is the portrait of evil and greed, prepared to sacrifice others for his own desires. The narrator introduces Stevens as possessing a set of "cunning-looking grey eyes," and a face that transmitted an overall "sinister aspect" (124). In addition to his overall evil aspect, Stevens has a burning hatred for blacks, especially for those such as Mr. Walters,

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“with his grand airs” (125). Just as Southern codes dictate black subservience, Stevens maintains whiteness as position of privilege and authority, and rejects any social expressions that suggest the equality of the races. This he makes clear when he learns that the biracial Garie children attend school with his children. He reports to Mrs. Stevens his outrage and his plan to rectify this breach of social law: “I should compel the teacher to dismiss the Garies, or I should break up her school. Those children have no right to be there whatever. I don’t care a straw how light their complexions are, they are niggers nevertheless, and ought to go to a nigger school” (153). Stevens’s rant sounds strikingly similar to that of the raging threats of mid-nineteenth century Southern politicians who declared that Southern states would separate from a union that dared to interfere with their right to maintain slavery.

Mr. Stevens represents the South, transplanted North: he embodies the terror of the white South waged against blacks. It is a terror rooted in hate, but equally rooted in greed. Slaves are terrorized to maintain them in a state of fear to control their labor, the foundation of wealth in the antebellum South. While Webb could have placed greater emphasis on blacks as victims in his novel, he seems more interested in emphasizing and critiquing the failings of his white characters. Webb’s characterization of Stevens stands out in this regard. In his pursuit to acquire a section of profitable Philadelphia real estate—that happens to be owned by blacks—he devises a plan to instill fear in the blacks, thereby forcing them to sell out. He explains the strategy to Mr. Morton, his cohort: “if we can create a mob and direct it against them, they will be glad to leave that quarter, and remove further up into the city for security and protection” (166). Similarly, Mr. Stevens draws from Southern racial codes to disinherit the Garie children after Mr. Garie’s death. Though sympathetic to their plight, the children’s lawyer explains that with no will and Stevens the next of kin, “these children being the offspring of a slave-woman, cannot inherit, in this State (except under certain circumstances), the property of a white father” (253).<sup>5</sup> Stevens is the embodiment of terror: employing both violence and the law, he is able to take for himself the rightful possessions of the Garie offspring. Just like the plantation lords of the South, of which he is a descendant, Stevens comes into his wealth through terror and privilege at the expense of black life and rights.

Although the violence against the Garies occurs in the North, the long reach of Southern slavery and white terror fuels the demise of the Garie family North of the Mason-Dixon Line. The very horror that the Garie parents hoped to escape by leaving the South played out hundreds of miles North of their Georgia plantation home. The fate of the Garie family as well as the mob violence directed at black fami-

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lies in this Northern city, highlights a black racialized gaze that locates the South as the seed of white terror with branches shooting out well beyond the racist rule of Southern law and society. Webb is a Northern black author, but his fictional depiction of black life in the North originates in the South. The fortunes of his fictional free black Philadelphia community are shaped (or miss-shaped) by white Southerners in the North, particularly, Mr. Garie and Mr. Stevens, and a legacy of white violence and intimidation that is the foundation of Southern plantation culture.

While the setting for Harriet Wilson's 1859 novel, *Our Nig*, begins and remains in the North, Wilson's narrative is also framed by the ubiquitous effects of Southern slavery and white terror. Before readers enter this story of a mulatto girl made slave in a Northern, white, middle class household, the novel's title foretells the story of terror conveyed within. To begin, "Our Nig" immediately suggests a relationship of human subjugation or ownership—namely, slavery. The word, "nig," signifies black; the word, our, signifies ownership; the possessor of nig would thus be presumed white. With just those two words, readers are asked to visualize a relationship synonymous with slavery. The following subtitle section, "or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black," further draws the connection to slavery. While the first two words of the title foretell a story of human subjugation, this subsequent subtitle reminds readers that while her story will read like a slave narrative, this is actually the narrative of a free black. The two subtitle sections that follow further signal the narrative's parallel to Southern slavery: "In A Two-Story White House, North. Showing that Slavery's Shadows Fall Even There." The irony of the ensuing narrative is thus revealed: the reader can expect to witness the unthinkable or unexpected. In the North, in a white house—a symbol of the American middle class working household and, of course, the nation's own white house—we will witness the story of a young girl who finds anything but democracy and fair wages. On the contrary, this white house will prove more reminiscent of the great plantation houses of the South where blacks are forced to labor for the benefit of plantation lords. Since its re-publication in 1983, the subversive nature of *Our Nig* has not gone unexamined. Scholars have noted the novel's critique of antebellum white Northern racism. While there is significant scholarship that underscores Wilson's keen fictionalized gaze of whiteness,<sup>6</sup> none explicitly considers the novel's reflection of a black historical gaze that aligns whiteness with terror.

*Our Nig* conveys the plight faced by many blacks in the antebellum North. While blacks may not be slaves in the mid-nineteenth century North, they find themselves living as second-class inhabitants. Wilson does not have at her disposal the twentieth and twenty-first century

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terms that describe the legal, social and economic injustice commonplace in her time. Some nineteenth-century writers would refer to this treatment of blacks as representative of an American caste system or as simply America's hatred for blacks. These writers were describing what is today commonly referred to as racial discrimination or violation of civil rights. In 1850s America, the majority of blacks were slaves and slavery was deemed the system that deprived blacks of opportunities for prosperity and freedom; as such, most literary works that examined black life focused on slavery. Slavery was deemed the evil, and there was no regular or established vocabulary to describe the institutionalized sufferings of Northern blacks. It is this linguistic deficiency that leads Wilson to borrow slave narrative tropes to tell a story of Northern black struggle.

The novel begins not with the story of the black, mulatto heroine, but rather with her white mother. We meet Frado only after we have been introduced to her mother, Mag, and learn the story of betrayal that leaves her a social outcast. Mag has been deceived by one whose voice "seemed like an angel's," and she has not been the only victim of this demon disguised as angel (Wilson 6). Instead of the security and protection commonly offered defenseless heroines by chivalrous heroes of sentimental fiction, Mag meets with destitution. In a society where a woman's chastity is the capital with which she negotiates marriage and respectability, Mag surrenders her chastity to this fallen angel and is left to make her way in the world, with child. Although Mag is white, she is outcast and finds herself accepting a proposal of marriage from another social outcast—a black man. Frado is born out of this union; however, with Jim's death some years later, young Frado is thrown into a world of terror. Mag takes off in the hopes of finding a better life, leaving Frado to the care of a woman that she "had applied the epithet 'she-devil'" (Wilson 21-22). Much like the masquerading angel who precipitated Mag's fall, the she-devil, Mrs. Bellmont, is by sentimental conventions, an unlikely source of evil.

Mrs. Bellmont is the outward exemplum of sentimental womanhood: she is married to a man whose fortunes maintain her in the safe confines of domestic space. Mr. Bellmont provides the financial means to maintain the Bellmont household, and Mrs. Bellmont is the caretaker of the home. Though in the North, their home could be mistaken for a plantation estate of the South: they lived "in a large, old fashioned, two-story white house, envired by fruitful acres, and embellished by shrubbery and shade trees" (Wilson 21). Though in the North, Mrs. Bellmont's housekeeping is reminiscent of Southern plantation households that are maintained not through the labor of the mistress, but rather that of the slaves. She is not initially thrilled with having Frado

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dumped on her doorstep; however, as she considers how the young child might serve her, the prospect of her remaining sits well with Mrs. Bellmont. She explains to her family that she is not put off with Frado's race when she considers the benefit Frado might bring to her household: "I don't mind the nigger in the child. I should like a dozen better than one . . . If I could make her do my work in a few years, I would keep her. I have so much trouble with girls I hire, I am almost persuaded if I have one to train up in my way from a child, I shall be able to keep them awhile" (26). Mrs. Bellmont's description of Frado's potential usefulness could serve as a description of Southern slavery. Slavery in the Atlantic world was born out of white desire for wealth and leisure, and forced, free black labor was the answer. Plantation lords could free themselves of field and household labor with a sufficient force of slaves, and those born into slavery could be trained from childhood to serve their masters for years. This benefit of slavery is apparent to Mrs. Bellmont, and she feels no trepidations about making a young child her long-term personal servant.

Just as white terror precipitates the unfolding of Webb's plot, it similarly informs the outcome of Wilson's novel. Mrs. Bellmont and her daughter, Mary, are the incarnation of evil as white. It is Frado's fear of Mary and her mother that inform not only Frado's actions, but also her worldview. Frado scrutinizes prevailing paradigms of a white-black dichotomy that deems blackness synonymous with the undesirable or subhuman, and whiteness the signifier of goodness and desirability. Even as a child, Frado can discern the clear contradictions to suppositions that equate whiteness with goodness. Witnessing firsthand the unchecked violent authority unleashed by the white mistress of a middle class household in the free North, Frado understands that whiteness can be the embodiment of the more heinous and inhumane side of the human self. Mrs. Bellmont evokes fear that knows no pause, for there is no predictability to her tirades, especially with Frado as target: "No matter what occurred to ruffle her, or from what source provocation came, real or fancied, a few blows on Nig [Frado] seemed to relieve her of a portion of ill-will" (Wilson 41). For as much as it constitutes the violent act itself that often lacks predictability or reason, terror is also rooted in the threat of violence. Mrs. Bellmont's tirades against Frado are marked by this element of terrorism, and she anchors her verbal violence in Frado's blackness.

Accounts of the many floggings suffered by Frado at the hand of her mistress echo the slave narrative accounts of the brutal beatings unleashed by masters upon their slaves. In two well-known nineteenth-century slave narratives, Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative* and Harriet Jacobs's 1861 *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, we find



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countless recollections of brutal beatings. In his opening chapter, Douglass recalls the violence he witnessed at the hands of two masters and an overseer while he was yet a young boy. Of the beating meted out by Captain Anthony, Douglass recalls a scene so horrific that his own feeling was a mix of shock, pity, and fear: "I have often been awakened at the dawn of day by the most heart-rendering shrieks of an own aunt of mine, whom he used to tie up to a joist, and whip upon her naked back till she was literally covered with blood . . . The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped; and where the blood ran fastest, there he whipped longest . . . It was a most terrible spectacle" (51). Similarly, in her account of life as a slave, Harriet Jacobs recalls the abuses suffered by slaves under the authority of violent, avaricious, work-shy masters. None is as exemplary in this regard as Jacobs's mistress, Mrs. Flint, who bears a striking resemblance to Wilson's fictional villain, Mrs. Bellmont. Jacobs introduces Mrs. Flint with the following description: "Mrs. Flint, like many Southern women, was totally deficient in energy. She had not strength to superintend her household affairs; but her nerves were so strong, that she could sit in her easy chair and see a woman whipped, till the blood trickled from every stroke of the lash" (12). Just as the accounts of real life beatings in Jacobs's and Douglass's narratives, Wilson's fictional tale paints the stalking nature of whiteness. In a scene that calls to mind Jacobs's and Douglass's horrific tales of slave experience, Wilson's narrator describes a brutal beating suffered by Frado. After Mrs. Bellmont finds her seated in a chair, ill and not fit to work and daring to suggest that her work stoppage is due to illness, Mrs. Bellmont responds in a fit of violence: "she suddenly inflicted a blow which lay the tottering girl prostrate on the floor. Excited by so much indulgence of a dangerous passion, she seemed left to unrestrained malice; and snatching a towel, stuffed the mouth of the sufferer, and beat her cruelly" (82). While this scene clearly arouses sympathy for Frado, Wilson shrewdly gazes at whiteness through the depiction of Mrs. Bellmont. Frado is suffering, but what the narrator emphasizes here is Mrs. Bellmont's cruel, savage nature.<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, we learn more about Mrs. Bellmont in this scene. Like masters on Southern plantations, she is unpredictably violent and ever a looming threat to her black servant.

Frado's submission to Mrs. Bellmont occurs not only because she fears Mrs. Bellmont's violent abuse, but as many slaves who contemplated escape, Frado fears that there is no refuge or escape from the master's reach. The institution of slavery was not maintained simply by the immediate threat of the master's violent hand. The longstanding survival of slaving was anchored in rhetoric as well. Slaves were told that they were an outcast race, that there was no place for them

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in American society, and that society and laws were in place to protect the rights of masters regarding ownership of their slaves. Thus, when Frado considers running away from the Belmont household and Mrs. Belmont's reach, she is stifled by the prospect of destitution and a possible return to Mrs. Belmont's clutches: "She determined to flee. But where? Who would take her? . . . She was black, no one would love her. She might have to return, and then she would be more in her mistress' power than ever" (Wilson 108). Ironically, Frado remains in a world of violence and abuse because outside that world, the threat of the same violence and abuse remains. Just as Frado cannot leave the Belmont household and escape the reach of Mrs. Belmont, the novel suggests then that slavery's shadows follow the slave even into the free North.

For Frank Webb's fictional black Northerners as well as Harriet Wilson's Frado, the imprint of slavery looms large. North of the Mason-Dixon Line, free blacks find their lives and their fortunes under constant threat. Without notice or provocation, whiteness can present itself in the form of terror, and the result can be catastrophic for blacks. In connection with the narratives of their Southern-born counterparts, these black authors reveal the far-reaching import of slaving in the African American literary imagination. Slavery's legacy has instilled in black writers a prototype of whiteness that calls for caution, suspicion, and fear. From African American works as early as Phillis Wheatley's poetry to those at the dawn of the twenty-first century, this prototype has survived over time and geographical boundaries. In both lived and literary spaces, whiteness in the black imagination continues to be shaped through memories of violence that are transferred to new generations. This reality is poignantly depicted in the 2013 image of the little 3-year-old black girl standing among Atlanta protesters, displaying a brief text that voices a long and troubling black gaze of whiteness: "YOU LOOK Suspicious!!"

## Notes

1. Historians have arguably led the way in this regard. In his groundbreaking historical work, *From Slavery to Freedom*, first published in 1947, John Hope Franklin does not use the term terror to name the psychological and physical violence against slaves, but his accounts of the plantation system clearly depict what Harris and hooks point to as terror. In the essay, "To Make Them Stand in Fear" (*The Peculiar Institution* 1956), Kenneth Stampp recounts the historical employment of fear that maintained white rule in the antebellum South. Franklin and Stampp's works speak to white practices and discourses that maintained a prevailing atmosphere of fear among the enslaved. In later historical works such as Lawrence W. Levine's *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*

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(1977), however, we begin to consider the power of blacks to critically and actively gaze, define, judge, and even subvert whiteness.

2. In Chapter Two of *African Spirituality in Black Women's Fiction* (Lexington Books 2011), expanded from the 2007 essay, "Making the Awakening Hers: Phillis Wheatley and the Transposition of African Spirituality to Christian Religiosity," I address the importance of Wheatley's poetry as a literary cornerstone to the evolution of black women's fiction with respect to engaging African spiritual origins.

3. For a brief overview of the mixed historical interpretations of Wheatley's work, see Bly, Antonio T. "By her unveil'd each horrid crime appears': Authorship, Text, and Subtext in Phillis Wheatley's Variants Poems." *Textual Cultures*, vol. 9, no.1, 2014, pp. 112-141.

4. Recent examples of this shift in scholarship on Wheatley's work include Will Harris's essay, "Phillis Wheatley's Muslim Connection," in which he makes the convincing case that Wheatley's spiritual worldview originates not in Christianity, but rather in Islam. In his 2008 monograph, *Phillis Wheatley's Poetics of Liberation: Background and Contexts*, John Shields traces the radical aura of Wheatley's poetry. In his 2011 monograph, *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage*, Vincent Carretta rejects the historically simplistic reductions of Wheatley's work and shows the clever and informed mind behind the poetry that must be read through the poet's careful manipulation of multiple meanings.

5. In her 2009 article, "The Property of Blackness: The Legal Fiction of Frank J. Webb's *The Garies and Their Friends*," Elizabeth Stockton's focus is not explicitly the black gaze; however, as she examines how Webb's novel reflects the complicity of the law in the interest of slavery, she also illustrates the pervasiveness of white terror in black life. Paralleling the story of the fictional Garies with the real life account of George and Susan Stephens, Stockton poignantly illustrates the role of the legal system in maintaining the ever present threat of white rule over blacks—North and South of the Mason Dixon Line. As Stockton explains, though married and living in the North, George and Susan are separated as she is remanded to her former master who travels North and successfully petitions the court for the return of his "property" (16).

6. Among works that consider Wilson's and/or Frado's power to critique whiteness, Elizabeth Breau's article, "Identifying Satire: *Our Nig*" (1993), examines Wilson's use of satire to effect this end. Elizabeth J. West's 1999 article, "Reworking the Conversion Narrative: Race and Christianity in *Our Nig*" (1999), considers Wilson's critique of Christianity as a concomitant critique of whiteness. In "Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig*: A Look at the Historical Significance of a Novel that Exposes a Century's Worth of Hypocritical Ideology" (2010), Lisa Elwood Farber focuses on Wilson's indictment of white Northern racism. H. Jordan Landry's article, "Bringing Down the House: The Trickster's Signifying on Victimization in Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig*" (2013), examines Wilson's critical gaze through the prism of the African American trickster figure.

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7. See Landry, Jordan H. "Bringing Down the House: The Trickster's Signifying on Victimization in Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig*." *Callaloo*, vol. 36, no. 2, Spring 2013, pp. 410-460. Landry offers a detailed examination of how the novel subverts conventional tropes of black female victimization and counters with a narrative of black female agency.

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