

**Shadows and Houses: Politics and Place in *Our Nig* and *Mansfield Park***

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In their introduction to Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, In a Two-Story White House, North Showing that Slavery's Shadows Fall Even There*, Gabrielle Foreman and Reginald Pitts discuss the difficulties in placing this text within a single genre category. In connecting Wilson's work with the dominant genre forms of its time, they assert "*Our Nig* weaves together the conventions of sentimental fiction and slave narratives, it also includes strong references to a variety of popular genres, including the seduction novel and the captivity narrative" (xxx-xxxi). Centering on a free black female indentured servant, *Our Nig* seems to hold a nebulous space, as it can be viewed as a text that interacts with all of these various genre forms. No one critic can fully endorse viewing this text within one form; however, this novel's use of the sentimental novel traits and its place with that literary tradition is the concern of this essay.

In particular, the connections between Wilson's text and an earlier sentimental novel can help illuminate the ways in which *Our Nig* both conforms to and subverts the sentimental genre. Jane Austen's sentimental novel, *Mansfield Park*, has a very similar genre and plot structure to the Wilson text. On a basic plot level, both deal with a lower class girl's growth into womanhood while in the service of an affluent family. At the same time, both texts integrate issues of class, servitude, and political ideas into the sentimental genre form. Both use literary tropes aligned with the sentimental novel, such as the female bildungsroman. A comparison between the two texts can reveal many such similarities. This essay wishes to explore how both works use the domestic space and connect place to the issues of class and race. Despite the many similarities the two texts share, it is in the distinct differences in the treatment of domestic space that one can see the use of the sentimental genre within these two novels. In viewing the various uses of domestic space and the political issues surrounding such space within these two works, *Mansfield Park* serves as an example of how class, race, and domestic service can be firmly placed and justified within the sentimental mode, while *Or Nig* use the genre forms of the sentimental novel to express how sentimentality does a political disservice to such issues. This inherent difference in the two works can best be expressed through an exploration of how space and place figure within the novels.

**Transatlantic Sentimentality**

With *Our Nig* and *Mansfield Park*, the idea of transatlantic sentimentality can help firmly establish a connection between these two texts. Sentimental fiction was a favorite among nineteenth century readers on both sides of the Atlantic. In England and America, the sentimental novel gained much ground during this time and became a popular mode for both female authors and audiences alike. Marked by its tendency toward high emotion and its setting within the domestic space, this genre form as a whole was a way in which women's stories and

women's concerns could be positioned at the forefront in literature. It was also a space in which women could voice their opinions and positions on wider political issues.

At this point in literary history, there was much exchange between novels written in England and America. The print culture at the time, a reliance on sea trade, and a shared language made the exchange of literature and ideas between these two countries prevalent and accessible. Although it cannot be clear whether Harriet Wilson read Jane Austen's novel, Austen was well known in America, and in his introduction to *Our Nig*, Henry Louise Gates, Jr. asserts:

It is equally clear that the author of *Our Nig* was a broadly read constituent of nineteenth-century American and English literature. The texts epigraphs alone encourage speculation about the author's experience with books. [...] The structure of the novel itself would suggest that Mrs. Wilson not only read a number of popular, sentimental American novels, but also patterned her fiction largely within the received confines of that once popular form. (xxxix)

By establishing the reading knowledge of Wilson, Gates supports a transatlantic reading of this particular novel, and it is the shared concept of the sentimental genre in these two nations, and *Mansfield Park* and *Our Nig*'s vexed places within this tradition, which further aligns these two texts.

For *Mansfield Park*, the issues and concerns of the novel are highly debated among many literary scholars, but the novel itself cannot be denied a place within this sentimental mode, and its place within the sentimental mode may indeed be the foundation of much of the criticism this novel has received. Jane Austen has often been perceived as antithetical to the sentimental genre, as her heroines often exert a cynical commentary on domesticity and sentimentality; however, the contested nature of *Mansfield Park* within the canon of Jane Austen points to sentimentality as a cause for concern within the work. In "Fanny Price and the Sentimental Genealogy of *Mansfield Park*," Amy Pawl asserts that much of the critical issue literary scholars have with the novel and its heroine Fanny Price centers on its sentimental form:

Fanny's difference from other Austen heroines can best be understood through realizing her similarity to heroines of the eighteenth-century novel of sentiment. Fanny's personal traits, her family situation, and the relationship she has with her uncle and father figure, Sir Thomas Bertram, combine to make *Mansfield Park* in many ways typical to the novel of sentiment [...] Austen's most puzzling novel is the product of her attempt to take some forms of sentimentalism seriously. (288)

Viewing Fanny Price as the standard of sentimental female heroines allows a reader to place the “puzzling novel” *Mansfield Park* in a sentimental context. In viewing the text in such a way and grounding such political issues as class, poverty, and domestic service, this novel has become a literary goldmine for current theoretical concerns and their connections to sentimentality.

In many ways, the genre placement of *Our Nig* has been as debated as that of *Mansfield Park*; however the ways in which Wilson’s text mirror the sentimental mode makes a clear case for connecting the text to this genre. In *Harriet Wilson’s Our Nig: A Cultural Biography of a “Two-Story” African American Novel*, R.J. Ellis makes an explicit case for a sentimental reading of Wilson’s work:

*Our Nig* displays several motifs characteristic of the sentimental novel: a young woman’s sorrows, trials, and suffering, marriages frustrated or impeded, and death-bed scenes. Wilson’s depictions of these, conventionally enough, recurrently use the stylistic traits of the sentimental or the sensational. [...] It is plain enough from the start Wilson draws upon the well-established power of such sentimental writing. (77)

As already discussed, Gates, Foreman and Pitts also make a case for the connection to Wilson’s novel and the sentimental form in their introduction to the text. Although it is apparent that *Our Nig* cannot be classified solely as a sentimental novel, the comments from critics such as Ellis, Gates, Foreman and Pitts justify a discussion of *Our Nig* as a sentimental novel.

However, in recent scholarly work, the role and focus of the sentimental novel itself is highly debatable. As June Howard asserts in her essay “What is Sentimentality?” “[critics] still argue whether the form is complicit with or subversive of dominant ideology” (64), and it is within this debate over subversion and complicity that I would like to ground my argument. Explicitly, this question of subversion in regard to class and domestic space can best be explored through these two texts. If one views *Mansfield Park* as a debated standard among the sentimental novel, and *Our Nig* as a novel which explores sentimentality to a great extent, then much can be gained by viewing these two texts together, especially in connection with space, place, and the domestic sphere. Moving from an exploration of Austen’s work into a discussion on Wilson’s text will help illuminate how each combine ideas of sentimentality while also highlighting Wilson’s subversion of this transatlantic sentimental mode.

### **A Sentimental Place: *Mansfield Park***

*Mansfield Park* itself is titled after the country estate of the Bertram family in which much of the action of the novel takes place, a fact that exhibits place as a central figure to the novel. The novel’s heroine, the docile and timid Fanny Price,

is situated in Mansfield proper as a form of charity. The Prices, connected to the affluent Bertram's through marriage, are represented as a poor and degenerate group of individuals who can barely care for their ever growing family. Fanny is taken in by the Bertrams as a girl, in order to both alleviate some of the constraints on the Price family and to give her a proper education and upbringing. At the same time, Fanny is used as a "companion" to the weak and insipid Lady Bertram, which cements her role in the family homestead as a somewhat elevated servant. It is Fanny's interactions with the Bertram family, and her place within Mansfield Park, which situate her within the dominant domestic sphere of the sentimental novel. Most notably, her service to the Bertram family and her room within the estate continually situate Fanny within a specific place in the text.

This two-fold issue of place, which is both the physical locality and the position within the family, is the central concern of much of the novel. As Edward Said states in *Culture and Imperialism*, "*Mansfield Park* is very precisely about a series of both small and large dislocations and relations in space [...and] place itself is located by Austen at the center of an arc of interest and concerns spanning the hemisphere, two major seas, and four continents" (84). It is place in a real sense, a metaphorical sense, and a referenced sense that encompasses the novel. It is places seen, discussed, and lived that dominate the ever evolving relationship between Fanny Price and the Bertram family.

Upon entering Mansfield Park as a ward, Fanny is placed in a small attic nursery within the manor. Her Aunt Norris, a domineering and forceful figure in the Bertram household, explains the necessity of such a placement to Lady Bertram, stating:

I suppose, sister, you will put the child in the little white attic, near the old nurseries. It will be much the best place for her, so near Miss Lee [the governess], and not far from the girls, and close by the housemaids [...] for I suppose you would not think it fair to expect Ellis to wait on her as well as the others. Indeed, I do not see that you could possibly place her any where else. (9-10)

It is in housing Fanny in this part of the Mansfield domestic space, close to the servants of the estate, that her relationship to the family is early established. By placing her in the servant section of the house, the novel positions Fanny as an acquired servant, much the same as the governess and the maids. Although family, she is denied entry into the family section of the manor, thus establishing early that her status as a poor relation, and a member of a lower class, marks her different within Mansfield's space. Connecting her physical place with her class and place within the family even further, Amanda Himes accurately relates "Mrs. Norris enforces Fanny's servant status by denying her a fire in her bedchamber"

(254) thus depriving her of even the most basic of familial comforts within her small attic room.

At the same time, her place within the family is continually evoked in relation to her female cousins. When accepting her as a ward, Sir Thomas declares that the entire family should take pains to ensure that her nominal place must always be considered:

“There will be some difficulty in our way, Mrs. Norris,” observed Sir Thomas, “as to the distinction proper to be made between [my] girls as they grow up; how to preserve in the minds of my *daughters* the consciousness of what they are, without making them think too lowly of their cousin: [...and] to make her remember that she is not a *Miss Bertram*<sup>1</sup>. [...] They cannot be equals. Their rank, fortune, rights, and expectations, will always be different.” (10)

This distinction between the Bertram daughters and Fanny Price, a distinction which persists until the very close of the novel, is one based both upon class and domestic service. Fanny is inferior in parentage and class, and must never forget that. Mrs. Norris herself constantly reminds Fanny to “Remember, wherever you are, you must be the lowest and last,” (151-152) especially in any connection to the daughters of Sir Thomas. Her class and her place are continually reinforced through the comparison to Maria and Julia Bertram throughout the novel.

However, because of its reliance on the sentimental ideals of the healing and tranquil nature of the domestic space, the class distinction between Fanny Price and her female cousins are slowly but surely erased. As Fanny performs more and more stellar service within the domestic sphere of the Mansfield estate, she is allowed a more complete entry into the Bertram family. Most poignantly, Fanny domestic loyalty to the patriarchal Sir Thomas, as opposed to the shame his daughters bring to him, allows Fanny an actual position in the family, in that she and her cousin Edmund Bertram (Sir Thomas’ youngest son) are allowed to marry. By the end of the novel then, Fanny’s value as a docile domestic woman allows her entry into a higher social class, and consequently brings her fulfillment. Taking the sentimental genre trait of happiness and place established by a connected marriage to its full extent allows *Mansfield Park* to assert that class distinctions can be overcome through loyal domestic service within the home.

### **Sentimental Displacement: *Our Nig***

The happy marriage at the end of *Mansfield Park* may place that text squarely within the sentimental tradition, but there is no such happiness afforded to *Our*

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<sup>1</sup> Italics in this quotation are from the original text.

*Nig's Frado*. Although it deals with many of the same class and servant issues as *Mansfield Park*, Harriet Wilson's novel also brings in the mediating factor of race, which gives a new spin on the old sentimental genre. By connecting the issues of race, class, and service, Frado's place within the Bellmont family shows the happy and valued ending of the sentimental novel cannot always be achieved.

From the beginning of Frado's placement with the Bellmont family, her place within the domestic space of the novel is questioned. In "Dwelling in the House of Oppression," Lois Leveen asserts "social constructs of race are articulated, enforced, or challenged through the occupation of specific domestic spaces" (561) within this novel, and it is this differentiation of race that the deviation from the sentimental mode can best be established.

Like Fanny, Frado is placed within the Bellmont house through her connection to a lower class, but Frado's place within the family is never a delicate issue. Dropped on the doorstep of the Bellmont house by her poor mother, Mag, Frado is instantly recognized as an "other" within the domestic space. Her physical occupation of places in the house, as well as her place in connection with the Bellmont daughter, Mary, marks her experience as decidedly different from that of Fanny Price.

After the Bellmonts realize that Mag will not return for Frado, a discussion ensues on where she will be placed in the house. For Mrs. Bellmont, the obvious choice is "the L chamber" (16), which is a small attic space above the kitchen. When the Bellmonts youngest son, Jack, objects to this situation because of the narrow crawl space and rickety ladder leading to this room, Mrs. Bellmont replies, "She'll have to go there. It's good enough for a nigger" (16). For Mrs. Bellmont, Frado's race decides her physical location in the house, regardless of her class or servant status. The dilapidated, small, and cramped space of the L chamber is a physical manifestation of how Mrs. Bellmont views Frado's place in the household. Despite her loyal and hard service throughout the years that encompass the novel, Frado continues to reside in this place long after she has outgrown it. She is never allowed to acquire a new place within the household, unlike Fanny Price, as her "position as an African American child clearly differs from that of a white bound orphan [or ward] because the Bellmonts refuse to assimilate her into their household," (Leveen 564) and her permanent place within the L chamber is a physical representation of her lack of acceptance into the family.

Like Fanny Price, Frado's metaphorical place within the family is mediated through her comparison to the Bellmont daughter, Mary; however, her racialized body is the focus of much of this comparison and bars her from the assimilated status that Fanny eventually acquires. Mrs. Bellmont, determined to differentiate Mary from Frado as much as possible, even works to darken Frado's skin tone:

At home, no matter how powerful the heat when sent to rake hay or guard the grazing herd, [Frado] was never permitted to shield her skin from the sun. She was not many shades darker than Mary now; what a calamity it would be ever to hear the contrast spoken of. Mrs. Bellmont was determined the sun should have full power to darken the shade which nature had first bestowed on her as best befitting. (22)

This demarcation of the racialized body of Frado through her service to the family highlights another way in which Fanny and Frado's experiences starkly differ. Although continuing to perform a myriad of services for the family throughout her tenure at the Bellmont house, the family in general and Mrs. Bellmont specifically continually place Frado outside of the family circle. Her black body, along with her continued reference as "our Nig" sets her apart racially as well as economically. Fanny Price, through loyal service, was able to distinguish herself in the Bertram family. Frado, however, is always marked by her racial status, and thus cannot establish herself in a better place in relation to the Bellmonts.

The title reference to the "Two-Story White House" also helps to mark this racialized difference at the heart of *Our Nig*. The white house of the title, the Bellmont residence, is a domestic space marked by color from the start. In such a white house, the black body of Frado is not allowed a place firmly within its confines, and the additional details of the two floors of the house also point to the physical separation between Frado in the L chamber and the Bellmonts in the white house proper. Whereas Mansfield Park as a country estate was a place of exclusion for Fanny Price, her later inclusion into that space through valued labor erases her class distinction from the Bertram family. Frado's labor, as valuable and essential as it is to the family, will still never allow her a solid position within the Bellmont clan because her race will continue to differentiate her.

At the completion of the novel, Frado is never given a proper place within the Bellmont family. Unlike Fanny, she has no younger son to marry for inclusion and happiness. She leaves the Bellmont house at eighteen. Her labor, instead of allowing this inclusion and place, marks her body for the rest of her life. Irrevocably broken and sickened beyond repair, the body of Frado continues to struggle through racial and economic hardships. Because of this racialized body she is not allowed escape from her class markings, and her broken form begins anew the cycle of racial and economic hardships that will inevitably follow her for the remainder of her life. This novel does not end in a happy marriage, as Karsten Piep claims in "'Nothing New Under the Sun': Postsentimental Conflict in Harriet E Wilson's *Our Nig*," because "Wilson intentionally thwarts her audience's sentimental expectations of an unconflicted happy ending" (181). Rather, Wilson insists on a continued establishment of race and class markers that exclude Frado from all forms of the domestic bliss often realized in sentimental writing.

Although Fanny and Frado share much in common, especially within the confines of place and service, their experiences differ dramatically because of Frado's racialized body. Austen allows her heroine the happy marriage ending despite her class; however, Wilson cannot have this. The body of Frado marks both her class and her race perpetually, thus barring her from the sentimental ending that the genre would mandate. By using sentimental genre forms and not producing the most marked feature, happiness through marriage for the heroine, Wilson is commenting on the genre's unrealistic answers to certain political issues. For a black, poor female body, there seems to be no true or happy place within the domestic sphere, and Frado's continued struggles in life after her service to the Bellmonts convey the idea that she can never be what Fanny Price is at the end of *Mansfield Park*. Her race, much more so than her class, work to impede this sentimental ending and the addition of the political issue of slavery only compounds this racialized distinction between the two texts.

### **Sentimental Slavery: *Mansfield Park* and *Our Nig***

Any discussion of *Mansfield Park* and *Our Nig* could not be concluded without exploring the implicit and explicit references to slavery within both texts. In a transatlantic context, both works were published in a historic period when slavery was highly debated within each country. *Mansfield Park*, first published in 1813, came just six years after British Parliament abolished the transatlantic slave trade and just two years after Parliament made slave trading within the British Empire a felony offense. Published in America in 1859, *Our Nig* came into the literary landscape just nine years after the passing of the Fugitive Slave Act in Congress and only two years prior to the commencement of the American Civil War. Both texts, covertly and overtly, participated in the highly contested political debate surrounding slavery within the context of the sentimental genre.

Highly debated within literary studies, the focus on *Mansfield Park* and British imperial slavery came to light most notably within Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism*. Since then, the debate over slavery's place in the text has been contested, with critics discussing a range of options running the gambit from Austen's endorsement of empire (and slavery) to Austen as an abolitionist within the confines of *Mansfield Park*. This debate centers not only on the fact that *Mansfield Park* and the Bertram family are supported by Sir Thomas's slave holdings in Antigua, but also a small instance of silence within the text. When asked by Edmund why Fanny did not try to speak to Sir Thomas in the family drawing room, the following exchange between Fanny and Edmund confronts the silence of slavery within the Bertram household:

“But I do talk to him more than I used. I am sure I do. Did not you hear me ask him about the slave-trade last night?”

“I did – and was in hopes the question would be followed up by others. It would have pleased your uncle to be inquired of farther.”

“And I longed to do it – but there was such a dead silence! And while my cousins were sitting there without speaking a word, or seeming at all interested in the subject, I did not like – I thought it would appear as if I wanted to set myself off at their expense, by shewing a curiosity and pleasure in his information which he must wish his own daughters to feel.” (136)

Silence, then, becomes the identifier of slavery within *Mansfield Park*. At the same time, “curiosity and pleasure” and their connection to Fanny’s ideas about slavery can also point to the place of this political issue within Austen’s text. Although rarely discussed, the place of Antigua in the narrative, along with the silence surrounding it, does much to assert this issue, both in what is written on the page and what is not written. As Said claims, Austen “sees clearly that to hold and rule Mansfield Park is to hold and rule an imperial state in close, not to say inevitable association with it. What assures the domestic tranquility and attractive harmony of one is the productivity and regulated discipline of the other” (87).

In essence, whether discussed or not discussed, voiced or silenced, the issue of both empire and slavery permeate *Mansfield Park*. There could not be one without the other, for the wealth, splendor, and grandeur of the English manor is maintained only through the wealth received through slave labor. At the same time, Said’s claim also points to the issue of domesticity as it is compounded with slavery. The Bertram estate would not be the site for learned domestic knowledge and moral fiber if it were not a place of wealth, and by extension, did not gain that wealth through the subjugation of slaves in Antigua.

However, placing critical debate away from the text for a moment, one thing is clear: *Mansfield Park* both implicitly and explicitly confronts the issue of slavery through the speech and thoughts of Fanny Price as well as through the physical place and grandeur of the estate, Mansfield Park. *Our Nig* confronts slavery in a similar way, but with far more explicit commentary connected to Frado’s race. Frado’s thoughts, the physical space of the Bellmont home, and the institutions of slavery and sweeping racism at the time of *Our Nig*’s publication makes this political issue within the text difficult to ignore.

This explicit condemnation of racism and slavery in *Our Nig* begins within the subtitle of the text, which reveals that within the North, which was comprised of slave-free states, that “Slavery’s Shadows Fall Even There.” At the same time, it is not just the North implicated, but Frado’s residence in the North, the two-story white Bellmont house, is the very particular place where the shadows of slavery falls for Frado. Lois Leveen asserts “*Our Nig* exposes how the racial dynamics of slavery are replicated in interracial encounters outside of slavery, in part through the spatializing of hierarchies of power within the private home” (561), so it can be contended that the spatial resistance to Frado and her place within the family

are not particularly dominated just by race, but more so by the racial connection to slavery within a Northern context.

Viewed in the light of slavery and its influence in the North, the racial and spatial separation between the Belmont's and Frado is constructed solely within the confines of slavery, and unlike *Mansfield Park*, this issue of slavery is not silenced within the text. Frado's nickname, her racial discrimination by Mrs. Belmont and Mary, and the talk of abolition by the Belmont sons all explicitly voice the expression of slavery within the text. *Our Nig* and its explicit invocation of slavery cannot be silenced or debated like the instances of slavery in *Mansfield Park* because, as Piep states, "*Our Nig* is not a blueprint for easily achievable social reforms, but a literary attempt to 'startle' its readership into recognizing persistent political problems concerning race, class, and gender relations" (180).

Additionally, the connection to slavery and sentimentality can also be easily drawn in *Our Nig*, but in a far more explicit way. R.J. Ellis asserts, "*Our Nig*, like *Uncle Tom*, and unlike almost all other sentimental novels [...] directly introduces references to antislavery sentiment" (51). In drawing a correlation between *Our Nig* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Ellis points to a very particularly American literary tradition – the use of sentimental modes to comment on the institution of slavery. *Our Nig* can be seen as working within this particular form of sentimentality by connecting the emotional and bodily affliction of Frado in the Belmont home to racism and slavery in America. The voicing of Frado's pain becomes a sentimental refrain for Wilson, and works to endorse her political comment on the unjust institution of slavery.

In the end, this silencing and voicing of the issue of slavery, and its connections to space, place, and the domestic sphere bring the reader to the final, and most important, distinction between these two sentimental models. In *Mansfield Park*, Jane Austen makes subtle political comments about class distinctions and feminine virtue through Fanny Price by allowing her to progress through various stages of space and place within the Bertram family and estate. However, the explicit addition of race and slavery within Wilson's text makes this subtle political maneuvering impossible. This then is the shortcomings of the sentimental mode for Wilson. Although she can parallel her story to the sentimental genre, it can never fully fit, as the subtle political commentary embedded in this particular form cannot possibly contain the very visible and physical political issues of slavery and race for a young black woman in the Northern United States during the mid-nineteenth century. A British sentimental novel from 1813 may be able to subtly discuss slavery and domesticity, but a sentimentally inspired work written in America in 1859 could not afford to be subtle about such political issues, especially when the central character of the text is marked by a black, feminized body.

In many ways, it seems that Wilson invokes and forsakes the sentimental mode in an effort to make a more explicit political comment on slavery, race, class, and gender in antebellum America. This is the point when transatlantic tendencies breakdown. While class distinction in England at the time gave *Mansfield Park* a solid political position in relation to gender and domesticity, the absence of actual, physical slaves within the island of England made the novel an unlikely place for any explicit commentary of slavery and domesticity in the nineteenth century. Although both novels have correlations and similarities, the issues of slavery and race cause Wilson to shatter sentimental genre distinctions, which decidedly separates the two texts. While transatlantic similarities help connect the two novels, transatlantic issues of slavery and race also irrevocably divide *Mansfield Park* and *Our Nig*.

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