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## Miscegenation and Monstrosity in *Our Nig*:

Life in the 19th Century American North Through the Perspective of Mixed-race Child\*

Kimiko ITOH

### Introduction

In the 19th century, several autobiographical narratives and novels by Black writers emerged, and these writers were often of mixed races. The first thing that comes to mind when one thinks of interracial reproduction is that White plantation owners forced Black slave women to bear children on plantations in the American South. Until the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution officially abolished Black slavery in 1865, White plantation owners forced their slave women, who were considered chattels, to bear children to become their property to increase the labor force on their plantations and satisfy their desires. However, interracial reproduction was not necessarily limited to plantations.

In the Northern free states, poor Whites occasionally married free Black people. During this period, the number of mixed-race children inevitably increased. The question of what skin color the children would be born with had a significant impact on men and women who had relationships outside the plantation.

There was vehement opposition to the birth of mixed-race children. In the 19th century, the addition of recessive Black blood to White blood was regarded as an abomination, partly due to the influence of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859). In support of the abomination, a statement in Congress that the "mulatto is a monster" was made. After the Civil War, the enactment of laws against interracial marriage accelerated in the United States of America, eventually expanding to 38 states (Kido, 134). It was undoubtedly a time when monstrosities would be compared with various other things. Margaretta Thorn, who was well acquainted with the mixed-race author Harriet E. Wilson, wrote in the Appendix of *Our Nig* (1859), a supposedly autobiographical narrative that, "I often wonder she [Wilson] had not grown up a *monster*" (78).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The title is as follows: "To the Friends of Our Dark-Complexioned Brethren and Sisters, This Note is Intended."

This study aimed to examine the treatment of mixed-race individuals with historical backgrounds in the nineteenth-century American North by focusing on the portrayal of Frado, the racially mixed protagonist in Wilson's *Our Nig*. This will help us understand who the true monster for interracial women at that time was.

### **Interracial Mixing Around the Time of the Civil War**

The term "miscegenation," which refers to interracial mixing, especially marriage between Whites and Blacks, was coined during the Civil War, which was triggered by slavery. In 1864, a pamphlet entitled *Miscegenation: The Theory of the Blending of the Races, Applied to the American White Man and Negro*<sup>2</sup> was distributed on the streets of New York City. The pamphlet contained the following statements in defense of or in praise of people born out of interracial marriages: "the miscegenetic or mixed races are much superior, mentally, physically, and morally, to those pure or unmixed" (Croly 8–9), and "a continuance of progress can only be obtained through a judicious crossing of diverse elements" (Croly 14). The word "miscegenation" was coined from the Latin words *miscere* (to mix) and *genus* (race) (Croly ii) because "amalgamation," a common word at the time, referred to the combining of metals.

Martha Hodes, however, argued that while relations between White women and Black men were treated relatively tolerantly in the antebellum time period, the transition from "amalgamation" to "miscegenation" was not merely a change in vocabulary. It was also a sign of the new demonization of "interracial interaction" as a symbol of Black liberation, according to the report (Hodes 1-6). Consequently, while the increase in the number of Blacks in the labor force was acceptable, the idea of Black blood entering the White population was frowned upon. After the Civil War, state-by-state laws were quickly and progressively enacted to prohibit interracial marriages. Evidence of these enactments can be clearly seen in the statement of Samuel S. Cox, a congressman from Ohio, who strongly condemned the Republicans who supported interracial marriage in his February 17, 1864 speech to Congress:

The physiologist will tell the gentleman [the authors of the pamphlet *Miscegenation*] that the mulatto does not live; he does not nor recreate his kind; he

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<sup>2</sup> The pamphlet was initially published anonymously. However, it was later discovered that it was written by David Goodman Croly and George Wakeman, who were employed by the New York World, the official newspaper of the Democratic Party, and were far from radical abolitionists. "*The Miscegenation* pamphlet and the word 'miscegenation' itself were acts of trolling on a grand scale." (Sussman 2019)

is a monster. Such hybrid races by a law of Providence scarcely survive beyond one generation. (Cox, *Miscegenation or Amalgamation* 5; underline mine)

Before Cox declared that “miscegenation is a monster,” he gave another notable speech. In his June 6, 1862 speech, “Emancipation and Its Consequences,”<sup>3</sup> he stated that many of the four million Blacks enslaved by the Civil War would undoubtedly be freed. He then compared the treatment of enigmatic slaves with that of mythical monsters.

What should be done with them? This is the riddle, more difficult than that of the Ethiopian Sphynx. Like that fabled monster, with the man’s head and the lion’s body, it has a puzzle, and we have no Oedipus to solve it. (Cox, *Eight Years in Congress* 242; underline mine)

He further stated the following about the mulatto. He may have been worried that Black traits, considered inferior in eugenics, would increase in America as a result of relations with Whites.<sup>4</sup>

What means the mulattoes in the North, far exceeding, as the census of 1850 shows, the mulattoes of the South? There are more free mulattoes than there are free blacks in the free States. . . . The mixture of the races tends to deteriorate both races. Physiology has called our attention to the results of such intermarriages or connections. These results show differences in stature and strength, depending on the parentage, with a corresponding difference in the moral character, mental capacity, and worth of labor. (Cox, *Eight Years in Congress* 249)

Reading the pamphlet *Miscegenation* and delivering critical opinions about slaves and mixed-race people, it is conceivable that he associated miscegenation with a monster. Consequently, Cox denied the existence of the mulatto. His assertion that the mulatto is a monster led to controversy.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word monster is defined as follows:

1.a. c1375- Originally: mythical creature which is part animal and part human, or combines elements of two or more animal forms, and is frequently of great size and ferocious appearance. Later, more generally: any imaginary creature that is large, ugly, and frightening.

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<sup>3</sup> This speech was recorded in *Congressional Globe*, 37th Cong. 2d sess., 1862, Appendix, pp. 242-49.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* was published in 1859.

Others include “6. an ugly or deformed person, animal, or thing.” Monsters began to appear in prose and novels, especially in Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726), where Gulliver calls the giant man pursued at Brobdingnag a monster (Swift 77) while he also refers to himself, who is seen as a rare animal in Brobdingnag, a monster (Swift 88); he calls evil and hurtful animals a monster at Houyhnhnms (Swift 209). Moreover, the most widely known monster is the one described in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818). In 1862, in an illustration by Henry Louis Stevens entitled “The New Frankenstein,” a Negro was depicted as a monster.<sup>5</sup> Regarding the comparison of the monster with something, prior to Cox, Frederick Douglass, a mulatto, had compared slavery to a monster in his 1852 speech, “What the Fourth of July is to Slaves,” calling it “the hideous monster.”

The existence of slavery in this country brands your republicanism as a sham, your humanity as a base pretense, and your Christianity as a lie. It destroys your moral power abroad; it corrupts your politicians at home. . . . and fling from you the hideous monster, and let the weight of twenty millions crush and destroy it forever! (Douglass 383; underline mine)

However, both Cox’s and Douglas’ statements were the opinions of men who addressed the public. How did Black women, who were placed in the lowest social positions, view 19th century society? This research defines a monster as evil, frightening, and incomprehensible and examines what a real monster is to the mulatto through Frado, the protagonist of *Our Nig*, which is set in New Hampshire, a free state at the time.

### **The Bellmont House is Called the White House**

The novel is known as the author’s autobiographical narrative, and at the time of its publication, was subtitled “In a Two-story White House, North. Showing that Slavery’s Shadows Fall Even There.” This novel narrates the story of Frado, a girl of a mixed race with a White mother and a Black father. Her mother, Mag, leaves Frado at the Bellmont residence, asking them to take care of her daughter while she is away. However, Mag never returns, and eventually, the 6-year-old Frado is treated as a servant by the Bellmonts until she turns 18. Through this book,

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<sup>5</sup> In the May 10, 1862 issue of *Vanity Fair*, a caricature by Henry Louis Stephens titled “The New Frankenstein” depicts a gigantic Black man holding Jefferson Davis, the president of the seceded Confed States of America during the Civil War and trying to push him down a ravine. The description also states, “A glimpse of the horrible fate in store for Jeff Davis at the hands of the Monster ‘rebellion’.”

the author reveals the cruel treatment of her White mistress and the hardships Frado experiences in society, which the author seems to have encountered in real life.

When Mag visits John Bellmont's house to deliver Frado, she describes her impression of the building as "Two miles beyond lived the Bellmonts, in a large, old fashioned, two-story white house" (13). In 1786, Nehemiah Hayward Jr.'s father, Nehemiah Hayward, who is believed to be the person on whom the character of John Bellmont was modeled, purchased 118 acres of property in the area that would later become a part of Milford. His son John married Rebecca S. Hutchinson, who is believed to be the Mrs. Bellmont who lived there (xix). Wilson's depiction of the white house is a symbol of America, as we see in further detail in the following section. Additionally, since Blacks worked on the construction of the White House,<sup>6</sup> it ominously suggests that this house is a symbol of Blacks supporting White lives.

First, the house residents are all White, and in addition to Mr. and Mrs. Bellmont, the family includes two sons, Jack and James; two daughters, Jane and Mary; and Mr. Bellmont's sister, Aunt Abby. Then, a six-year-old girl of mixed race, Frado, comes to live with them. Although the family lives in the North, Frado is considered an indentured servant, called a Nig, and treated like a slave.

Second, the room that Frado is given portends ominous things: through a dark passageway, then up an unlit stairway to an unfinished L-shaped room, where Frado has little room to move and must crouch to avoid bumping her head. Mrs. Bellmont says, "She'll have to go there; it's good enough for a nigger" (16). The cramped sleeping quarters mean that Frado will have to contort herself to become accustomed to the house's surroundings, implying that the house itself is an anxiety zone for her. If Frado's body no longer fits into the L-shaped room, as Mrs. Bellmont claims, "When she *does*, she'll outgrow the house" (17), but leaving the bondage of slavery would mean exchanging the status of an indentured servant for that of a poor girl in town. Eventually, until the age of 18, Frado remains in the house because there is no Black community nearby, and there is absolutely no guarantee in the world outside the house that she would be able to survive on her own.

The third is the amount of work Mrs. Bellmont assigns to Frado. At age seven, "It was now certain Frado was to become a permanent member of the family. Her labors were multiplied"

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<sup>6</sup> The election of Barack Obama in November 2008 produced a brief surge of popular interest in the relationship between race and the built environment, as U.S. news organizations rushed to report the apparently surprising historical irony—well known to scholars but not the general public—that the White House, similar to many official structures in the nation's capital, was partly built by African American slaves. (Gleason 195)

(18); so diligently does Frado work. However, Mrs. Bellmont does not consider that she is a child or girl. Frado begins her mornings with the task of feeding the hens, moves on to other outside jobs, such as herding cattle with Jack, then to the kitchen, carrying firewood, and doing various tasks. In other words, she was made to do both the kind of work that women do and the kind of outside heavy lifting that men do. Moreover, Mrs. Bellmont unnecessarily whips Frado when she departs from the mistress' rule. This shows that Mrs. Bellmont's style is affected by that of Southern slavery.

Frado was able to attend school from the age of seven, and her cheerful personality makes other children laugh. "During school time she had rest from Mrs. Bellmont's tyranny" (23). However, she is bullied by Mary, the Bellmonts' daughter, and is stopped from going to school by Mrs. Bellmont. Fortunately, she had mastered reading, writing, grammar, and arithmetic by the age of nine thanks to her intelligence. It is no exaggeration to say that she is completely held as a slave in the Bellmont house because she is no longer allowed to attend school, although New Hampshire is a free state. As these circumstances and discrimination demonstrate, Wilson depicts the white house as a symbol of the reality of American politics.<sup>7</sup> The next section focuses on the conflicts between Mrs. Belmont and Frado.

### **Frado and Mrs. Bellmont**

As mentioned above, Frado becomes an indentured servant and is forced to work in Mr. Bellmont's house until she turns 18; however, even in a free state, there were slaves. Mrs. Bellemont is the mistress and central figure of the house. As for the rest of the Bellmont family, Mr. Bellmont appears to be a warm-hearted man who sends Frado to school, but he seems to leave at a crucial moment, such that Mrs. Bellmont's frustrations are not directed at him. Three of the Bellmont children, except Mary, treat Frado tenderly, but to avoid Mrs. Bellmont's frustration with them, they eventually marry and leave the home one-by-one. Aunt Abby is the one who heals Frado, and although she can take her to church, she cannot to rescue her from the house.

Along with clarifying the situation of Frado, who was treated as a slave despite being born to a White woman and a free Black man, another interesting aspect of the novel is that while mixed-race Wilson narrates many of her own experiences through Frado, she also reveals the

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<sup>7</sup> From the way Frado, a girl with no relatives and a skin color different from everyone else's, is forced into a dark room and bullied by Mrs. Belmont (and Mary), it is easy to see why this novel is occasionally treated as a Gothic novel.

situation in the North from her perspective. For example, the importance of marriage: the tragedy of Frado's mother, Mag, a White washerwoman, being toyed with by a White man and miscarrying, which isolates her from her relatives. She marries a Black man for her sustenance and is forced to live in a de facto marriage after her first husband's death. In other words, some poor Whites show solidarity with and marry Black people at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Meanwhile, Mrs. Bellmont, who belongs to White lower middle-class society, prefers that her children marry into wealthy families rather than whom they love because she believes that the wealthier, the family, the happier they will be. Another reason for this could be her pride. Wilson was at the bottom of the social hierarchy; therefore, she could inform us about the reality of women forced into this type of household. Furthermore, it is important to note that when Mag decides to give Frado away, she calls her and another child "the black devils" (11), and when Mag leaves Frado at Mrs. Bellmont's, she refers to Mrs. Bellmont as a "she-devil" (14). This discussion will focus on Mrs. Bellmont as a symbol of the white house, that is, a "she-devil" and on mixed-race Frado and explore their monstrosity.

Nineteenth-century gender norms strictly separated the public and private (domestic) spheres. The public sphere was reserved for men and included the corporate, governmental, and intellectual spheres. The private sphere was reserved for women and consisted solely of the home. First, consideration was given to the sociocultural stance taken by women who were unable to participate in public life and were confined to the private sphere of the home. (White) Women were relegated to the house, and all labor or child-rearing activities had to occur within the home. Barbara Welter, a feminist historian, asserted that from the 1820s through the Civil War, the dominant ideology defining the boundaries of acceptable female behavior was the "cult of true womanhood," characterized by the following basic tenets:

[T]he attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society, could be divided into four cardinal virtues— piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. . . . With them she was promised happiness and power. (Welter 21)

Elizabeth Fox-Genovese describes the slave mistress as follows:

Mistress, even the kindest, commonly resorted to the whip to maintain order among people who were always supposed to be on call; among people who inevitably disappointed expectations; among people whose constant presence not merely as servants but as individuals with wills and passions of their own provided constant irritation along with constant, if indifferent, service. (Fox-Genovese 24)

While attempting to be a true lady-like woman, Mrs. Bellmont is happy to have Frado do the housework for her and turns to her to relieve her daily frustrations. “No matter what occurred to ruffle her, or from what source provocation came, real or fancied, a few blows on Nig seemed to relieve her of a portion of ill-will” (24). However, she fears that the violence she commits against her, such as the whipping, would be exposed to society. The same is true of her daughter, Mary, who has seen her mother’s behavior toward Frado. She eventually becomes close to Mrs. Bellmont. During her parents’ temporary stay with James in Baltimore, Mary has an emotional outburst against Frado and throws a knife at her, not because she wants to kill her but because she is afraid that her actions will be exposed (36).

Occasionally, Mrs. Bellmont, who has never seen mixed-race people, is surprised by Frado. For example, when Jack looks her and says, “She’s real handsome and bright, and not very black, either” (16), Mrs. Bellmont orders Frado to rake hay and guard the grazing herd, not allowing her to protect her skin from the sun, regardless of how hot the day is. However, “she [Frado] was not many shades darker than Mary now” (22); therefore, Mrs. Bellmont decides to make her work under stronger sun so that she will become darker. Frado’s skin does not turn dark as Mrs. Bellmont imagined. By the age of 14, her skin has added beauty, and she is becoming increasingly feminine. Mrs. Bellmont does not want to accept her charm; she shaves off all of Frado’s hair to eliminate any signs of femininity in the mixed-race girl.<sup>8</sup> “Mrs. B had shaved her glossy ringlets; and, in her coarse cloth gown and ancient bonnet, she was anything but an enticing object” (38). Moreover, Mrs. Bellmont, who is supposed to be a devout Christian, orders her not to go to church, saying that “religion was not meant for niggers” (38). Wilson shows that the most dangerous members of society are the lowest and most cruel, such as White women and children. They committed brutal acts against those who were more socially and legally marginalized than they were, that is, Black and mixed-race children. Mrs. Bellmont was especially irritated by the presence of Frado, who is neither White nor Black. As she had never experienced the presence of a mixed-race person around her, she finds Frado inexplicable and monstrous.

Mrs. Bellmont’s favorite method of abuse is to use a piece of wood to force Frado to open her mouth and shut it up. Wooden wedges are also used to prevent her from screaming while

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<sup>8</sup> There is also a description in William Wells Brown’s *Clotel* (1853) about a mistress cutting the hair of a mulatto. “[E]very married woman in the far South looks upon her husband as unfaithful, and regards every quadroon servant as a rival. Clotel had been with her now but a few days, when she was ordered to cut off her long hair.” (Brown 121)

she is being beaten, effectively silencing her, inflicting pain, and attempting to dehumanize her. However, the more Mrs. Bellmont's behavior deviates, the more she fears Frado's voice. This is evidence that she fears that Frado will expose her wrongdoings, but she becomes violent again because she is afraid. For example, after Frado tells James, who is sick, that Mrs. Bellmont forbade Aunt Abby from visiting him, Mrs. Bellmont seizes Frado, places the wedge of wood between her teeth, and beats her cruelly with the raw-hide to "cure her [Frado] of tale-bearing," (52). Similarly, when Mrs. Reed tells Mrs. Bellmont that Frado "told her of her experience" in church, the next morning, Mrs. Bellmont orders Frado that, "[Frado] should not go out of the house for one while, except on errands; and if she did not stop trying to be religious, she would whip her [Frado] to death" (58).

However, Mr. Bellmont notices that Frado is showing signs of illness. He advises her to avoid Mrs. Bellmont to the extent possible if she is convinced that she does not deserve to be flogged. Frado finds her voice and begins asserting a certain degree of autonomy. "'Stop!' shouted Frado, 'strike me, and I'll never work a mite more for you,' and throwing down what she had gathered, stood like one who feels the stirring of free and independent thoughts" (58). This scene continues as follows:

By this unexpected demonstration, her mistress, in amazement, dropped her weapon, desisting from her purpose of chastisement. Frado walked towards the house, her mistress following with the wood she herself was sent after. She did not know, before, that she had a power to ward off assaults. Her triumph in seeing her enter the doors with her burden, repaid her for much of her former suffering. (58-59; underline mine)

The words, "She did not know, before, that a power to ward off an assault," show that Frado has regained her sense of self. Recognizing the power of verbal resistance to defeat Mrs. Bellmont, Frado can mitigate the pain inflicted by Mrs. Bellmont. It is important to note that Frado does not use forceful violence against her mistress. If Frado suddenly lashed out and attacked Mrs. Bellmont in a way that Mrs. Bellmont did not expect, Frado might seem monstrous. This is precisely what Thorn is concerned about. However, when Frado makes that remark, the positions are reversed: Frado walks toward the house, and the mistress follows her with the firewood.

Clearly, this scene parallels Frederick Douglass's fight with Mr. Covey in his Narrative that marks his coming to consciousness. Yet the scene also demonstrates how the reclamation of the voice inverts the power relationship between Frado and

Mrs. Bellmont. While Douglass's moment of agency rests on his ability to physically whip Covey and regain his manhood, Frado employs orality to retrieve not just her womanhood, but her personhood as well. (Fulton 47)

Orality is important, as Fulton highlighted, and if she opposes Mrs. Bellemont by force, Frado, who is already physically weak, would lose her femininity and die as a chattel. Even as a child, her eloquence is described as being outstanding in school. "Her speeches often drew merriment from the children; no one could do more to enliven their favorite pastimes than Frado" (19). Thereafter, although she is unable to attend school and does not have many opportunities to speak her voice, a bright light shines upon her from the moment she utters the power of these words. Ultimately, Wilson's autobiographical narrative, written in her own words, enabled her to take domestic content and discourse, considered private by 19th-century standards, and make it public, exposing the mistress to public censure.

By comparing the two in this manner, it is possible to see that for Mrs. Bellmont, Frado is an unpredictable monster beyond her imagination. Frado, a light-skinned Black woman, holds the lowest social position but possesses physical strength, intelligence, and literacy. Mrs. Bellmont, who wants to solve everything through punishment and violence is nothing more than an ordinary monster.

When "women" and "lower classes" were analogically and routinely joined in the anthropological, biological, and medical literature in the 1860s and 1870s, the metaphoric interactions involved a complex system of implications about similarity and difference. (Stepan 45)

White women do not prefer to even walk along with Black and mixed-race women to maintain their place in the social order. However, White women cannot afford to maintain excessive distance because they depend on them for the physical labor that ensures their middle-class status. This complicated and unstable situation may have also been a cause of irritation for Mrs. Bellmont. To Mag, a poor White woman, Mrs. Bellmont is a mean lower-middle-class "she-devil" and her daughter Frado is a sallow-skinned, unwanted "black devil." However, within the framework of the white house, Frado is an incomprehensible monster to Mrs. Bellmont while Mrs. Bellmont is a heartless, violent monster to Frado. From this line of thought, it is possible to consider that for mixed-race women in the American North, such as Frado, the real monster in their proximity were their White mistresses.

## Conclusion

Although children born from miscegenation have been called inferior because of their Black blood and even monstrous owing to the difficulty in understanding their existence, Wilson's autobiographical narrative shows that they are by no means lowly. Wilson was treated as a slave, as we learn through Frado, even though she was in a free state. In the slave states of the South, of course, the terrifying entity that mulattoes and Blacks regarded as monsters were the White man who owned a plantation. Furthermore, the novel describes the existence of White mistresses who were confined within the private sphere. Such women not only existed in the free states but also must have been more numerous in the slave states. In conclusion, from this line of thought, it is possible that for mixed-race women in the North, such as Frado, the real monster near them was their White mistress. Of a style such as Wilson's, Mae Henderson writes: "These writers enter simultaneously into familial, or testimonial and public, or competitive discourses—discourses that both affirm and challenge the values and expectations of the reader" (Henderson 20).

By revealing what is in the private sphere to the public sphere, the abusive mistress shows that she does not conform to the 19th century gender ideals. In this family, the children leave their home, Mary dies of illness, and Frado leaves the white house once she turns 18. The mistress' refracted anguish and loneliness ironically rise only in the presence of Frado, who is always tied to a particular socioeconomic bottom line through the triumvirate of racial, gender, and class oppression. Had Mrs. Bellmont not known about slavery, she might not have had this relationship with Frado. In this novel, the reader learns that slavery distorted the perceptions not only Blacks and mulattoes but also White women.

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