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Oral Presentation

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Harriet E. Wilson was the first African American woman to publish a novel in the United States. Wilson's first, and apparently only novel, *Our Nig* was printed in 1859 by the Massachusetts firm of George C. Rand and Avery. The book's full title is *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*. By "*Our Nig*", she expresses the author's intentions to write about her own life as a free black woman living in New England. *Our Nig* was not well received and was entirely ignored until Henry Louis Gates, Jr. reissued it in 1983. The book's failure mirrors the lack of information about Wilson's personal history.

According to the federal census a 22-year-old woman by the name of Harriet E. Adams resided in New Hampshire in the year 1850. Public documents also reveal that a marriage license issued to Adams in 1852 lists her birthplace as Milford, N.H. In 1860 the Boston federal census listed her as being born in Fredericksburg, Virginia in the year 1807 or 1808. However, the material in *Our Nig* implies that Wilson was living in Massachusetts in 1859 when she wrote the novel. There is not much information about her prior to 1850. The facts we do know concern her life from 1850 to 1860, the same years that she represents in her novel. It was the verification of these biographical details of her life that allowed for the positive identification of Wilson as both the text's author and subject.

*Our Nig*'s autobiographical novel implies that as a child she was abandoned in Milford by her mother and forced to live in the home of a white family by the name of Boyles as their indentured servant. After many years of hard work, abuse, and neglect, her health deteriorated and she was no longer able to work for the family. In 1850 Wilson moved to Massachusetts to live with a Mrs. Walker. She attempted to become a seamstress but due to her poor physical health she was forced to become Mrs. Walker's house servant. In 1851 she met Thomas Wilson, a fugitive slave who had accompanied a "itinerant colored lecturer" to town. Thomas and Harriet were married in October 1851,

and then moved to New Hampshire. Their son, George Mason Wilson, was born nine months later. Prior to the birth of their son Thomas abandoned his wife and ran away to sea. Harriet gave birth to her son in a poor house (Hillsborough County Farm).

Thomas Wilson returned to his wife and child and Harriet was able to take her son home to live with her. However, her husband deserted them again, leaving Harriet with no means to care for her son. Because of her deteriorated health and inability to pay for her son's care she was forced to return to Hillsborough and give her son to a gentle, kind, and caring white couple who took George in as a foster child. Leaving her son behind, Harriet moved to Boston in 1855, and once again attempted to become a dressmaker. However, her health had not really improved and she had to find another way to make money so that she could return to New Hampshire to reclaim her son.

In the preface to *Our Nig*, she states that she wrote the novel with this purpose in mind. Wilson's novel seems as ambiguous as her personal history. The novel's protagonist, Frado, is of mixed race, born to an African American father and a white mother. After her father's death, Frado is abandoned by her mother and left with a white family by the name of Bellmont. Mrs Bellmont is a ruthless woman who physically, emotionally, and mentally abuses Frado. She is befriended by Mr. Bellmont and his sons, and they often comfort her and give her words of encouragement. Through the years Frado hopes that one day one of the Bellmont children will take her to live with them, but it is not to be. After her eighteenth birthday Frado leaves the Bellmont home. After years of suffering and abuse her health is weakened and she cannot perform physical labor, and is forced to seek public charity. She then learns how to sew and becomes a hat maker. Eventually she meets a traveling lecturer named Samuel and marries him. Samuel abandons her, she gives birth to a son; Samuel returns, then leaves again, her son dies, and all the while Frado's health is rapidly deteriorating. This part of the text comes the closest to mirroring Wilson's own life.

Wilson's *Our Nig* is a novel that represents the life of a Black American woman. Wilson depicts the hardship, pain, and suffering that she has experienced in her own personal life. She begins the novel with a focus on her illness and the fact that she is writing in order to provide for herself and her child. She reveals to the reader her inadequate skills as a writer, and makes an appeal for the support of other African

Americans. In the end of the novel Wilson once again asks the reader to purchase her book so that she can retrieve her son. The letter written by "Allida" in the novel's appendix states that she (Allida) hopes that those who buy the book will remember how much they will be helping a woman who is worthy of their generosity. Another letter, written by "Margaretta Thom" describes Wilson's life as a slave, her poor health, and praises her son's attributes telling the reader that he is intelligent boy who will one day be a smart man. Margaretta appeals to the reader to help the mother and son by buying this book. *Our Nig* was published on September 5, 1859, five months before Wilson's son, George Mason Wilson, died of "fever." The last public record of Harriet E. Adams Wilson is listed in the Boston City Directory of 1863.

Generally accepted as an autobiographical novel, Wilson's innovative work integrates two genres of the American literary tradition- the Sentimental Novel and the 19th century Slave Narrative- and stands today as the first known novel published by a black woman in English and the earliest novel published in the United States by an African American.

Questions:

1. What do you feel Wilson was trying to suggest by titling her novel, "Our Nig" as opposed to using the full word, "nigger?"
2. Wilson plays with typical gender roles in her novel by making the men of the Bellmont family sympathetic instead of the women who are usually more nurturing. Why do you think this is the case?