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Racialization, sexualization, and resistance: a “subtle” look at Our Nig and “a subtlety”

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RACIALIZATION, SEXUALIZATION, AND RESISTANCE: A "SUBTLE" LOOK AT *OUR NIG* AND "A SUBTLETY"

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Introduction

This thesis builds on the extensive work by black women artists and scholars from the nineteenth- through the twenty-first centuries, joining them by paying closer attention to black women's representations of black womanhood, white representations of black womanhood, and the difference between the two. With the rise of these careful theorizations of black women by black women (and men), this thesis turns to Nicole Fleetwood's *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness,* Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America,* and Tavia Nyong'o's *The Amalgamation Waltz,* as essential frameworks for my analysis that follows of sexualizations and racializations of black women in literature and visual culture, to understand both their past and enduring "cultural work" with a necessarily more inclusive and interdisciplinary understanding of that work than in the original introduction of this powerful phrase.

For my literary analysis, I focus on Harriet Wilson's novel *Our Nig* and the character Frado, who is the fictionalized persona of Wilson. Specifically, this analysis looks at Frado/Wilson's racialization as a mulatta figure living in a "free" state. Wilson's novel combines slave narrative traits with abolitionist novel traits in a literary portrayal of the torture and hardships she endured during her indentured servitude. This section argues that the sexualization of black women's bodies is entirely woven into the racialization of black women, which can be traced back to the image of Sara Baartman, and other dark-skinned and spectacularized black women through descriptions of their physical features that differed from whites, such as an "exaggerated buttocks" (Gilman 20). Wilson's complicated racialization as a mixed-race woman also provides insight into fears of amalgamation that were prominent in the nineteenth century and how the identities of black women were compromised. This hybrid novel shows the functions of

racialization and simultaneous sexualization as a means for controlling black women. Likewise, it poses various forms of resistance to white patriarchy and its limited representations of black women in both its literary form and in Frado/Wilson's actions throughout the novel.

Following my discussion of Wilson's novel is an analysis of Kara Walker's 2014 sculpture, *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby* and its direct commentary on the hypersexualization of black women's bodies and the history of representing black women's bodies. Walker's sculpture—completely constructed out of sugar, a main commodity in the slavery-based economy—exemplifies the historical commodification of the mammy figure as an exploited servant for white families. The sculpture also powerfully reclaims the features that have been hypersexualized in the stereotyped figure of the jezebel (large buttocks and large breasts). At the same time, these aspects of Walker's sculpture demonstrate a resistance to white idealized representations of the desexualized mammy. Walker's sculpture thus serves as a valuable connection to the various ways black women are racialized and sexualized that, paradoxically, also render us ultimately invisible. In analyzing Walker's work alongside Harriet Wilson's, I hope this thesis sheds light on the historical patterns of racialization and sexualization and how those have created visual depictions of black women that are not only still being shown today, but also powerfully reclaimed and resisted by black women activists as forms of protest.

Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection* (1997) theorizes that all performances of blackness are always under the influence of slavery. Hartman argues that "there was no relation to blackness outside the terms of this use of, entitlement to, and occupation of the captive body, for even the status of free blacks was shaped and compromised by the existence of slavery" (Hartman 25). Knowing that both ideas of and lived experiences of blackness in the United

States were forged under the conditions of slavery and continue to be shaped by it long after it has been abolished, it is important to know how blackness has been continually governed by dominant ideologies of the white patriarchy. In my work, blackness is considered in its pluralities of identity, based on Michelle Wright's *The Physics of Blackness* (2015) in which she argues that blackness is not looked at on a simply linear and "progressive" timeline or narrative, but rather for *where* and *when* that blackness (and its multiple identities, including sex, gender, class, etc.) exists (Wright 14). Therefore, this undertaking explores the multiple temporalities and identities of blackness as created within and always influenced by the system of slavery.

While understanding blackness and its continual relationship to the system of slavery, Nicole Fleetwood's *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (2011) and her theories of enacting what she terms "excess flesh" and "hypervisibility" also scaffold my work of analyzing racializations and sexualizations of black women. She defines excess flesh as "an enactment of visibility that seizes upon the scopic desires to discipline the black female body through a normative gaze that anticipates its rehearsed performance of abjection" (Fleetwood 112). Likewise, "Excess flesh enactments… suggest that the black female body is always troubling to dominant visual culture and that its troubling presence can work productively to *trouble* the field of vision" (Fleetwood 113). However, excess flesh produces the hypervisibility of the black woman's body. As Fleetwood explains, "By *hypervisibility,* I mean to refer to both historic and contemporary conceptualizations of blackness as simultaneously invisible and always visible, as underexposed and always exposed, the nuances of which have been depicted in art, literature, and theory" (Fleetwood 111). Excess flesh, then, is the black women's body being seen as "too much" by the white male gaze that wants to correct it under the terms of white femininity. For black women artists, to enact excess flesh in their visual portrayals of black women and black

womanhood is to use the troublesome visuality of the black woman's body by dominant culture purposely and productively as a form of resistance to the hypervisibility that renders the black woman's body as always seen as flesh but ignored in its humanity.

Finally, this thesis uses Tavia Nyong'o's notions of amalgamation—or the nineteenth-century term for racial mixing—and fears of amalgamation in *The Amalgamation Waltz* (2009). Nyong'o states, "Historically speaking, as a metaphor of transformation, amalgamation appeared as a performed and potential transgression of the boundaries of blackness and whiteness. At the same time, it did so within a deployment of sexuality and a project of racialized governmentality" (Nyong'o 103). Therefore, amalgamation became a vision of what America would look like upon the abolishment of slavery and the social advancement of black people that was both a racial and sexual transgression in the nineteenth century. These transgressions prompted fear that caused governmentally instituted means of policing black bodies to maintain the separation of the races. In this project, I use the fear of amalgamation that Nyong'o depicts as both racially transgressive and sexually transgressive to analyze the underlying fear of the product of amalgamation itself; the mulatto. As we see in *Our Nig*, the fear of the mulatto as the very embodiment of post racial society proves especially threatening in a white supremacist society.

Under the frameworks outlined above of performances of blackness, the enactments of excess flesh, and the fears of amalgamation, and through an intersectional and intermedia analysis, I analyze how the racialization and sexualization of black women's bodies in nineteenth-century antislavery literature influences contemporary artworks that directly put themselves in conversation with slavery-era representations of black women. Thus, my analysis specifically focuses on Harriet Wilson's hybrid novel and narrative *Our Nig* and Kara Walker's

sugar sculpture *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby*. Further, this thesis contributes to ongoing rethinkings of white women's literary writings and scholarly readings of racializations and sexualizations of black women in nineteenth-century antislavery literature and representations of black women by focusing on feminist works by black women, including nineteenth- and twenty-first century literary and visual works created by black women, and black feminist readings of white-created representations of black women. A complex understanding of the relationship between the racialization and sexualization of black women's bodies in nineteenth-century antislavery literature and contemporary visual art and forms of resistance to it is only possible from our current vantage point that the newest wave of feminism and cultural studies offers through its more broadly representational considerations of the complex intersectionality of identities.

Literature Review

Early feminist scholarship primarily focused on representing black women's bodies through the eyes of white women and white feminism, which black women artists and scholars challenged in the second and third waves through their representation of black women in art, and with the emergence of black feminism in society and scholarship. An early and influential example of second-wave feminist recoveries of white women's representations of black women in literature is Jane Tompkins' *Sensational Designs* (1985). In it Tompkins argues for the importance of the sentimental novel and for studies of women in the domestic sphere, claiming that the sentimental novel

> [r]epresents a monumental effort to reorganize culture from the woman's point of view; that this body of work is remarkable for its intellectual complexity, ambition, and resourcefulness; and that, in certain cases, it offers a critique of America society far more

> devastating than any delivered by better-known critics such as Hawthorne and Melville (Tompkins 124).

According to Tompkins, the sentimental novel offered a new approach to critiquing society that challenged male dominated ideologies by resituating them through a woman's eyes. Further, Tompkins argues that, "Out of the ideological materials at their disposal, the sentimental novelists elaborated a myth that gave women the central position of power and authority in the culture; and of these efforts *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is the most dazzling exemplar" (Tompkins 125). Through the use of the sentimental, Stowe attempted to conduct a spiritual conversion of Americans to abolish slavery under domestic practices of Christian Love (the ideological material at her disposal), which Tompkins proposes as the novel's important "cultural work" (Tompkins 133). Tompkins and other white women scholars that called attention to this cultural work of the sentimental novel—with *Uncle Tom's Cabin* being the exemplar—arguing that these novels should be the basis of women authors being inserted into the male dominated literary canon. With this, Tompkins argued not only for an expanded literary canon, but also for a radical revision of the terms of admission to it. As she observes, the male-dominated literary canon to that point traditionally included work that did not "attempt to change things" and instead only attempted "merely to represent them" through "specifically literary language whose claim to values lies in its uniqueness" (Tompkins 125).

Another major work of second-wave white feminist scholarship that directly builds on, but also critiques, Tompkins's work is Gillian Brown's *Domestic Individualism: Imaging the Self in Nineteenth-Century America* (1992). Brown uses Tompkins's notion of politicizing domesticity and complicates it, arguing that "Stowe seeks to reform American society not by employing domestic values but by reforming them… Stowe's domestic solution to slavery, then, represents

not the strength of the sentimental values but a utopian rehabilitation of them, necessitated by their fundamental complicity with the market to which they are ostensibly opposed" (Brown 18). While Brown agrees with Tompkins that Stowe's turn to the sentimental via politicizing the domestic sphere was important cultural work, she believes that Stowe doesn't just use domestic values but also reforms them in a way that works with the patriarchal influenced market, including the buying and selling of enslaved persons.

Likewise, Brown recognizes how the political use of domesticity in Stowe's work is dependent on liberal individualism—that is, on the logic of possession and ownership. She states, "The sentimental accents that Stowe places on ownership stress a domestic and maternal organization of the dynamic of possession, which she advances as an alternative to slavery" (Brown 40). In "[e]laborating the investment logic of possessive individualism," Brown argues, "Stowe develops an aesthetics of property relations that proves to be as characteristic of a certain racism as it is of abolitionism" (Brown 40). Brown's theorization initially agrees with Tompkins that Stowe utilized the ideological materials she had at her disposal and sentimentalized them. However, Brown complicates Tompkins' emphasis on the sentimental as a crucial aspect of Stowe's novel in stating that the promotion of domesticity supports abolitionist ideals, but Stowe's domestic practices are racist since the use of the sentimental is still being entangled with property relations with the property being the enslaved. While Brown mostly agrees with Tompkins and the important "cultural work" of the sentimental novel, her recognition of its racist undertones points to the larger issue of white women writers and scholars neglecting many aspects of the negative cultural work that Stowe's representations of black characters did. Even so, both Tompkins and Brown failed to discuss the negative representations of the black female

characters in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. This neglect prompted incisive critiques by black women scholars such as Hortense Spillers and Hazel Carby.

Hortense Spillers's "Changing the Letter: The Yokes, The Jokes of Discourse, or Mrs. Stowe, Mr. Reed" (1987) directly challenges Tompkins and her only readings of white women and her limited readings of black women in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as well as Tompkins' claim that the novel is "by, for, and about women" (Tompkins 124). Spillers states that Topsy and other dark-skinned women in the novel are "carnivalesque propositions" who "inscribe 'growths' and 'bumps' on the surface of Stowe's fiction" (Spillers 185). Spillers' important work points out the improper and lacking representations of black women by white women in literature more broadly, as well as in white woman-centered feminism.

Hazel Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (1987)—which also directly critiques Tompkins' influential argument at moments--changed the way that literary and feminist scholars understood the contributions of black women themselves to literature, thereby providing a much-needed correction to previous studies of gender and authorship in antislavery literature in second-wave feminism. Carby's work rejects essentialist approaches to depicting black women that rely on a shared experience of all black women. Instead, Carby "interrogates sexual ideologies for their racial specificity" and looks at both whiteness and blackness as racial categories (Carby 18). Carby considers the historical context of racism and gender oppression of both black and white womanhood through textual analyses of black women's writing. Further, this pivotal work addresses the sexualizations of black women are part and parcel of racializations of black and white womanhood and the need to confront these racist sexual ideologies.

Such sexualizations of the black female body predate Stowe's and other white women writers' representations of black women in their work. One of the earliest and most noted origins of these sexualizations lies in the emergence of The Hottentot Venus in the early nineteenth century. The South African woman, Sara Baartman, or the Hottentot Venus as she was popularly known, was first brought to England and placed on display in 1810. After her death in 1815, her autopsy written by Georges Cuvier was widely circulated, casting a mold for racialized and sexualized understandings of black women's bodies and femininity by using the authority of science. Sander Gilman's "The Hottentot and the Prostitute: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality" (1985) argues that Baartman was marked by her physiological differences from white women, which made her into not just a sexual object, but also *the* icon for black female sexuality and white spectatorship. Further, Gilman states that Cuvier's description of Baartman had two intentions: "the likening of a female of the 'lowest' human species with the highest ape, the orangutan, and the description of the anomalies of the Hottentot's 'organ of generation'" (Gilman 17). Likening Baartman to a peculiar animal as well as describing her genitalia as an anomaly established a dominant understanding for both racializing and sexualizing all black women under these terms.

The popular understandings of blackness based on this identification informed Stowe's and most whites' understandings of blacks as different from, if not inferior to, whites. The racists portrayals of the black women in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—the most popular novel of the nineteenth century—further hardened the mold for understanding black girls and women as animalistic and misunderstood "creatures." In the early days of recovering this body of literature and expanding the literary canon, white feminist scholarship often ignored or sentimentalized these

representations of black women in support of the sentimental novel and white women's cultural work.

The interventions of black women scholars, including Carby and Spillers, brought overdue attention to nineteenth-century white women's representations of black women, and to the narrowness of twentieth-century white feminist scholarship, and redirected critical attention to other means of representing blackness (both the concept of it and the experience of it), the black female body, and to black women's bodily forms of resistance to racialized sexualized practices that had been ignored by second-wave white feminist scholars and white women writers in the nineteenth century.

Building on this work, Carla Peterson, in *Doers of the Word: African-American Women Speakers and Writers in the North (1830-1880)* (1995) argues that black women's writing in the nineteenth century became a necessary hybrid that "[a]ppropriated many different cultural discourses" including "[t]he adoption of standard literary conventions in order to become producers rather than mere consumers of literary expression" (Peterson 22). To construct this argument, Peterson turns to novels like Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* and suggests that Wilson's move from the black male-dominated use of autobiographical narrative to that of fictional characterization "[d]ismantled essentialized notions of black subjectivity" (Peterson 149). Peterson further argues that Wilson rejects the white woman-dominated sentimentalist plot of the tragic mulatta that normally focuses on a mixed-raced girl whose father is normally her master and works to evoke love and sympathy from readers. Instead, she argues, Wilson creates a real tragedy centering a mulatta figure that "[b]ecomes emblematic of African-American economic dispossession and homelessness, of the difficulties of forging home on American soil, of the need to continue working toward the construction of an African-American local place that is

defined by neither public nor private spheres" (Peterson 156). Thus, Peterson's textual analysis presents a form of resistance to dominant ideological practices of representing black women and writing as a black woman in literature.

Adding a dimension beyond the textual, Hank Lazer and Harryette Mullen argue that oral examples of resistance should be recognized as no less important in black representations of black womanhood. In looking more broadly than white patriarchal-dominated representations and sexualizations of black women in the slavery era, scholars have also turned to recovering and analyzing black women's visual self-representations, creating a much fuller archive of self-representation that demands much richer understandings of black female subjectivities. However, before those can be addressed, it's important to look at significant bodies of scholarship that sought to redeem/recover dismissed and degraded "minority" positions, as this scholarship also plays a role in black women's visual self-representations and the reclaiming and redemption of the black women's bodies.

Queer theory attempts to take the redeem the degraded "minority" by looking at sexuality, gender representation, and gender performance. One of the earliest works of queer theory is Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1978), in which Foucault argues against the established notion that sexual desires were repressed and needed to be released. Foucault argues that "An imperative was established: Not only will you confess to acts contravening the law, but you will seek to transform your desire, your every desire, into discourse" (Foucault 1504). The forced confession of sexual acts attempted to repress certain sexual desires, but instead it brought up more discussion surrounding them, which proliferated into other discourse communities as time went on. This provided a form of knowledge about the subject; what types of sexual tendencies people had that helped set norms of sexuality and sexual desires. With the establishment of these

norms, “peripheral sexualities” were created and the medical diagnosis of “homosexual” emerged and these “peripheral sexualities” became visible to maintain a “[n]atural order of disorder” that involved pathologizing homosexuality and imposing it onto identities (Foucault 1517-1518). Foucault’s argument challenged the labeling of “minority” bodies as “perverse” to maintain the standard body politic and cautions people from embracing the term “homosexual” because of its reductivity. Later queer theory scholars began to challenge the performances of sexuality and the essentializing of “normalized” sexualities.

Another largely influential work in queer studies, as well as in second- and third-wave feminism, Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1999) expands and dissects Foucault’s studies of juridical notions of power that “[r]egulate life in purely negative terms” (Butler 4). Butler argues against a universal definition of feminism and instead argues that the political task of feminist scholars is “[t]o formulate within this constituted frame a critique of the categories of identity that contemporary juridical structures engender, naturalize, and immobilize” (Butler 8). Therefore, Butler asks feminists to consider the various categories of identity (race, class, etc.) that are established and restricted by power structures of language and hegemony when attempting to represent the subject of women and womanhood. Further, Butler suggests that gender itself is a performance of gender identity that is “[r]econceived as a personal/cultural history of received meanings” in which those received meanings are “[i]mitative practices which refer laterally to other imitations” meaning that a “[p]rimary and interior gendered self” is an illusion (Butler 176). Butler’s notion of gender as a performance troubled the ideas of what constituted as “normal” in terms of both sex and gender and redeemed identities for those who had been historically marked as “abnormal” by arguing that gender itself is an illusion. However,

to make these claims, Butler's argument relied on previous scholarship on signification that was later augmented to include non-western cultures.

Turning to critical race theory, Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (1988), is an innovative study on the relationship between African and African American English Vernacular (AAEV) and black literature that uses the African American folklore of the trickster, the Signifying Monkey to revise previous signification in black literature. In Gates's argument "[t]he Monkey's language of Signifyin(g) functions as a metaphor for formal revision, or intertextuality, within the Afro-American literary tradition" (Gates xxi). Related to Mikhail Bakhtin's double-voiced discourse, which refers to the diversity and possibility of language within a culture, Signifyin(g) takes this double-voiced discourse and makes it "[i]ndigenously African" and used to specifically analyze African American texts (Gates 22). Through an analysis of Signifyin(g) in African American texts, Gates suggests that the work of African American writers is built off of and reflective of the work of other African American writers and uses the trope of the Talking Book (the belief of early black writers that books used to talk to them) to re-establish the importance of African American texts. Gates argues that the use of the Talking Book trope allows readers to "[w]itness the extent of intertextuality and presupposition at work in the first discrete period in Afro-American literary history" and reveals the tensions between black vernacular and the "[l]iterate white text" that has been turned into a theme by black writers who were "[l]iterally writing themselves into being through carefully crafted representations in language of the black self" (Gates 131). Further, Gates argues that, "The trope of the Talking Book became the first repeated and revised trope of the tradition, the first trope to be Signified upon" (Gates 131). Thus, Gates' work provided a reclamation of black writing from a black vernacular perspective that allowed it to speak for

itself as well as showed the importance of black literature in revising tropes applied to black writers. The importance of reclaiming black produced texts through analyses and critiques by other black scholars through a changing of signifying within tropes used to represent black bodies also holds a place in black women's visual culture and their representations of other black women.

With respect to the visual, Jasmine Cobb's *Picture Freedom: Remaking Black Visuality in the Early Nineteenth Century* (2015) provides a modern perspective on nineteenth-century black women's awareness of dominant racist ideologies and stereotypes used to represent black women and how these stereotypes were manipulated to resituate and control the white male gaze. Cobb argues that since the nineteenth century, "Black women activists were intensely aware of public perceptions of their femininity" (Cobb 69). Further, Cobb believes that this awareness allowed black women to create new ways of seeing themselves outside of "[t]he backdrop of slavery's visual culture" (Cobb 70). By enacting a form of double-consciousnesses, black women were able to understand the specific perceptions of both black womanhood and blackness itself by white people. The knowledge of these perceptions became a means for controlling them, which was often done through clothing. Cobb argues that "Free Blacks who dressed themselves in splendid ways or garnered public attention further disrupted peculiar visual logic of slavery by commanding the gaze, rather than retreating from White stares" (Cobb 131). Dressing in nice clothing that followed the respectability politics of nineteenth-century white women indicated control over one's personal appearance, which was not possible for enslaved people. For black women to both control their outward appearance, but to intentionally to do so in a way that garnered attention from the white gaze challenged the typical white male gaze that was imposed upon black women. Instead, black women forced white people to look by means of covering up

their bodies which "[r]epresented a new entitlement for women of African descent" (Cobb 119). Thus, Cobb's argument provides an early glimpse into new ways of signifying black women's bodies through forms of self-reclamation. Similarly, scholarship explicitly analyzing the critical artwork of Kara Walker, a black woman artist, expands on the new ways of signifying black women's bodies through the interactive nature of Walker's exhibits.

In *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* (2010) Christina Sharpe situates herself amongst other scholars like Saidiya Hartman who argue that performances that were produced and circulated during times of enslavement were normalized and remain present. Though most of the book focuses on textual evidence of Sharpe's argument, in the final chapter Sharpe analyzes Kara Walker's silhouettes in her exhibit *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven* and the women that are represented in the piece. Sharpe argues that Walker's silhouettes of southern plantation life show "[e]xcessive sexual(ized) violence" and "[i]ncorporate all of her viewers" which prompts anxiety in viewers and critics who both "[a]pplaud her work and those for whom it is regressive, minstrelsy" (Sharpe 154). Walker's work forces the viewer to interact with the bodies that she has crafted and acknowledge their excessiveness. Within these silhouettes that Sharpe describes, Walker uses black cut outs to represent both black and white people on a white background. Sharpe suggests that the white characters are necessary otherwise all the viewer sees is "[n]onchalance and not horror in these black performances" and "[t]he excessive sex and violence that we see might well be described as the phenomenon called 'black-on-black crime'" (Sharpe 176). Sharpe believes that the presence of white people in the images, represented by black cut outs, forces viewers to make a racialization of all the represented women's bodies and without racialized white bodies present, the images would not be as horrific. Further, Sharpe emphasizes that all viewers of Walker's

silhouettes "[f]ind themselves, as if against their will, looking and looking again" (Sharpe 156). The need for viewers to look, and the feeling of it being against their will, demonstrates the larger argument that Sharpe makes that the violence of slavery is inescapable especially regarding racialized and sexualized violence (Sharpe 176). Thus, the interactive nature of Walker's exhibits which asks viewers to look at racialized and sexualized bodies, points to the violent past made present in visual representations of black women's bodies.

Kara Walker's later work continues to draw on representations of black women that, as Sharpe pointed out, has been viewed as "[r]egressive minstrelsy" (Sharpe 154). However, in these later works, Walker points to stereotypical representations of black women as excessive in ways that re-signify their sexuality to reclaim both their bodies' characteristics and their sexuality.

As seen in this review of the scholarship, black woman-made literature representing black women written in the nineteenth century also alludes to dominant stereotypical representations of black women and, within the constraints of the time that they were written, challenge these reductive stereotypes that have been imposed onto them. Thus, the literature written by nineteenth-century black women and twenty-first century visual representations of nineteenth-century black women created by black women work together to provide important interventions on conceptual and experiential blackness and black womanhood and to find new means for reclaiming and redeeming overly sexualized black women's bodies.

The Tragedy of the Mulatta Surviving the "Free" States

In *Our Nig*, Wilson sheds light on how the system of slavery in nineteenth-century America affected the "free" states and the black bodies that occupied those spaces, not just enslaved people and nominally free blacks in slaveholding states. Likewise, she focuses closely on how

the racialization of her own body, through the character of Frado, formed a new, split identity under the intersectional forces of racial discrimination, patriarchy, and class. In what follows, I examine how Frado's mixed-raced identity posed a threat to the white women in of the Bellmont family, which prompted a blackening and de-sexualization of her body both psychologically and physically rooted in white supremacists perceptions of the black female body as sexual and in the fear of amalgamation. From this examination, I argue that the imposing of her blackness onto Frado psychologically and physically caused her to create two identities for herself as a way to survive the Bellmont home. In order to make this argument, it is important to begin with brief descriptions of the historical background of the novel, the historical reproduction of slavery in "free" states, and the histories of racialization in nineteenth-century America. Further, to analyze how Frado's racialization prompts her sexualization, I look closely at scenes in which Frado's blackness is imposed upon her psychologically and physically through Mrs. Bellmont's punishments, as well as scenes in which Frado's separate identity is established by the Bellmonts and herself. To support this close reading, I call on Fleetwood, Hartman, and Nyong'o to provide performance and critical race theoretical frameworks for understanding racialization and identity in this context.

Our Nig is a fictionalized re-telling of Wilson's experience within the home of the Hayward family, a known Milford, New Hampshire farming family in the 1800s, as Barbara White has determined (White 22). Likewise, White deduces that Mrs. Bellmont is based on Rebecca Hayward, the matriarch of the Milford farming family. Although in the "free" state of New Hampshire, it is clear that racism and even many equivalents to the practices of plantation slavery were still nonetheless prevalent, which is important to keep in mind given Frado/Wilson's status as an indentured servant. Thus, while she is not legally enslaved, the

systems of slavery and racism expose her to treatment that is little different than she would have been exposed to as an enslaved person.

Historical Reproduction of Enslavement in the "Free" States

In David Brion Davis's *Challenging the Boundaries of Slavery*, he discusses Southerners' and Northerners' interrelated reactions to the slave emancipation that occurred in Britain and its territories and to uprisings of enslaved people in the Caribbean. He states, "It was their fixation on the Caribbean […] that led Southerners to escalate their demands, even crossing the boundary of states' rights with the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, until neutral and moderate Northerners began to fear a true nationalization of the now 'peculiar institution'" (Davis 3). The fear created through these demands caused a passive, but no less significant participation in the system of slavery, the "peculiar institution", by Northerners in the nineteenth century U.S.

Specifically, in response to the law, Northerners would often give free blacks or fugitive slaves to the slave states as a way to avoid repercussions from the Fugitive Slave Act and to keep slavery out of the "free" states. Beyond Mrs. Bellmont's/Mrs. Hayward's need for a good and efficient worker, this behavior of white Northerners amidst their fear of legal slavery becoming nationalized could explain the reason why the Bellmonts/Haywards decided to take Frado/Wilson in at all. That is, they may have done so to keep their hands clean from the institution of slavery by not directly selling her to the slave states and to keep up their appearance with fellow abolitionists. As White explains, "it is quite possible that the she-devil herself [Mrs. Bellmont/Hayward] had abolitionist sympathies. Rebecca could have been influenced not only by her son and Hutchinson cousins but also by her minister, the Reverend Humphrey Moore; he presided at her marriage in 1806, and in *Our Nig* Mrs. Bellmont is still a churchgoer" (White 37). Moore was a devoted abolitionist who, due to this devotion, was elected

by antislavery men to the House of Representatives in 1840 (White 37). Thus, the Haywards could not be directly associated with slavery as they would be shut out by committed abolitionists comrades like Reverend Moore. However, their abolitionists ties and even the possible antislavery attitude of some family members does not automatically mean they were antiracist or above subjecting a girl of African descent to hard physical labor and physical and emotional torture. Clearly, the Haywards viewed blacks as inferior, and at best as only fit for being servants; their racist attitudes are reflected in their taking in of a black child and placing her in the role of servant rather than a foster child. Keeping her in indentured servitude and out of legal slavery allowed them to keep up their abolitionist appearances. Even so, they effectively treated her no better than if she were enslaved.

Their effective practices of racial slavery, furthermore, can be traced back to the lack of resources and support for previously enslaved people. In *Scenes of Subjection,* Saidiya Hartman provides valuable insight into the condition of formerly enslaved people after their emancipation that also help us to understand further some reasons why Frado might have chosen to stay within the Bellmonts' home and how she was subjected to the same practices of racial slavery in her indentured servitude. When explaining the appearance of contentment by slaves at the coffle, Hartman states, "Indeed, there was no relation to blackness outside the terms of this use of, entitlement to, and occupation of the captive body, for even the status of free blacks was shaped and compromised by the existence of slavery" (Hartman 25). In other words, blackness could not exist outside of the system of slavery even for those living in the "free" states like Wilson/Frado. With this, Hartman shows that these conditions were inescapable and mapped on to black bodies whether that body was free or enslaved. Mrs. Bellmont's treatment of Frado, although she was a free during her indentured servitude, is connected to this intertwining of blackness and slavery

that Hartman points out, as we will see below in analyzing the imposition of Frado's blackness onto her body by Mrs. Bellmont. Hartman further explains the conditions of freed blacks in her chapter on freed enslaved people in stating that "the emancipated identified the sources of adversity as their lack of resources, the government's unwillingness to provide reparations, the pervasiveness of white violence, and the failure of the law to protect black lives" (Hartman 136). As Hartman here makes clear, slavery may have been illegal in the North, but racism was not, nor were structural conditions that created situations akin to enslavement. Therefore, white violence toward black bodies continued in the North after emancipation and support was still not easily offered to black folks due to this racism.

Given this situation, Frado may have found it better to stay in a space where she knew at least that she would have meals and a roof over her head rather than struggling alone and potentially starving to death or dying of exposure in the North as her mother nearly had. Therefore, the prevalent structural and personal racism in the North tied with the fear of nationalized slavery combined to compel Frado/Wilson to remain with the Bellmonts/Haywards, which subjected her to racist practices and degradation. In addition to Frado's compulsion to stay in the Bellmonts' home and the treatment received by Mrs. Bellmont, one must also consider the all-or-nothing racialization that she undergoes despite being a light skinned woman with a white mother. It is the intolerance of a mixed race identity that also ultimately turns her exoticized body into a sexual object.

History of Racializations and Sexualizations in the Nineteenth Century

As noted above, whites' sexualizations of the black female body as an important means of control can be seen as early as 1810 in the example of Sara Baartman, the African woman brought to England and placed on exhibit who was also known as the Hottentot Venus. Deborah

Willis explains the way Baartman was viewed at that time: “The ‘Hottentot Venus’ was admired by her protagonists, who depicted her as animal-like, exotic, different, and deviant” (Willis 4). Such depictions of Baartman’s appearance and behavior as “animal-like”, “exotic”, and “different” according to the standards of the dominant white culture of the time demonstrate the specifically sexual attention given to her racialized body. Likewise, this sexual attention is given because her sexuality is seen as “deviant” from that of her white counterparts and this is intriguing to white men (and women).

This notion of the “deviant” black female’s body has placed a further “hypervisibility” upon the body in addition to visible racial differences. Nicole Fleetwood further contextualizes this historic hypervisibility of the black female body exemplified by the Hottentot Venus, arguing that that hypervisibility effectively renders her humanity invisible: “Baartman in performing the ‘Hottentot Venus’ constituted the being of excess flesh for audiences of the period, that is, her flesh and body registered excess” (Fleetwood 119). Baartman represented one of the earliest and best known examples of the black female body being deemed “too much”, or of excess, within white culture, which made her humanity less visible, as we have seen in the depiction of her above as “animal-like”. This viewing of the black female body thus as hypervisible was not limited to Baartman but continues through the present day, Fleetwood explains: “the black female body functions as the site of excess in dominant visual culture and the public sphere at large. The explicit black female body is an excessive body (from the Hottentot Venus to Josephine Baker to Miller Jackson, Pam Grier, and Serena Williams in her cat suit)” (Fleetwood 109). Through the gaze of a white audience, seeing according to white ideals of body type, the black female body appears excessive, especially when seen naked or looked at specifically for her physical attributes that differ from white women. Throughout *Our Nig*, Frado’s body is both

sexualized and de-sexualized after her blackness is imposed onto her and her mixed-race identity that it erased. By close reading moments of her blackness being forced to the forefront of her identity, one can see the simultaneous racializing, sexualizing, and de-sexualizing happening to her psychologically and physically.

The Psychological Blackening of Frado

After Frado is left at the Bellmonts' by her mother, she is quickly introduced to the entire family and begins her complicated existence in the household. While the women, specifically daughter Mary, immediately notice her blackness and are not excited about having a black child in the house, the boys do not fully think of her as black just yet. Likewise, Jack, one of the two Bellmont sons, would like to keep her around. Wilson writes, "'Keep her,' said Jack. 'She's real handsome and bright, and not very black, either'" (Wilson 16). Thus, Wilson makes it clear that in describing her as "not very black," Jack is not fully thinking of her as completely black identified yet. However, in stating that she's "real handsome" at the same time, Jack is beginning to see her as sexual even though she is a child. In mentioning both of these things at once, Jack suggests that it is her mixed-race appearance that makes her attractive. By simultaneously putting her whiteness above her blackness through the denial of that blackness, her blackness is still registered, and it is registered with her sexual attractiveness.

At the same time, both Mary and Mrs. Bellmont recognize the sexuality being mapped on to Frado's mixed-raced body by Jack based on her partial whiteness and they are threatened by this whiteness as much as by her blackness—if not more. Thus, her mixed-race identity provokes a mixture of attraction and revulsion within the Bellmont family, differing according to the gender of the beholder. Further, it is quite possible that Mrs. Bellmont fears her sons or husband acting on a possible sexual attraction to Frado—and on her sexual availability because of her

servant/quasi-enslaved status–as she gets older. Tavia Nyong'o elucidates the extension of this fear in his account of a historical conversation between an abolitionist travel agent and fellow abolitionists about what to do with free blacks if slavery is fully abolished: "If free blacks were permitted to remain, they asked, what would prevent them from marrying into white society and creating a mongrel posterity?" (Nyong'o 69). This fear of what was known in the nineteenth century as amalgamation likely underlies Mrs. Bellmont's fears, in addition to the danger of Frado being seen as an equal to her through her partial whiteness and her attractiveness to the white men of the family. Mrs. Bellmont's logic automatically assumes whites will lose their supremacy if she or her daughters are seen as equal to a girl or woman with any "black blood" in them. Further, the fear of amalgamation was linked to whites' own desires, which was seen as a form of blackness in itself. In his book *White*, Richard Dyer explains that sexuality, has always been defined as bestial and dark based on its equivalence to rape in the nineteenth century; similar language that was used to describe black people. Whites had to have sex to maintain the survival of their race but "[t]he means of reproducing whiteness are not themselves purely white" (Dyer 26). Thus, sexuality for whites became a form of blackness, which causes Mrs. Bellmont to fear the possibility of the men in her house engaging in the multiple dimensions of this blackness: sexual acts themselves but also sexual acts with a black woman. Thus, fears of amalgamation posed a threat to maintaining whiteness in the Bellmont home.

Due to these threats, Mrs. Bellmont and Mary begin to make sure that Frado's blackness becomes the only thing that she can be identified by, which is seen when the family debates sending her to school with Mary. Wilson writes, "Mrs. Bellmont was in doubt about the utility of attempting to educate people of color, who were incapable of elevation. The subject occasioned a lengthy discussion in the family. Mr. Bellmont, Jane and Jack arguing for Frado's education;

Mary and her mother objecting" (Wilson 18). While Mrs. Bellmont may not believe that people of color can elevate to the position of whites, the fact that the men, who want Frado to go to school, do not view her as fully black is a threat that Mrs. Bellmont must eliminate from her household. To do so, she and Mary vehemently disagree with sending Frado to school, insisting on the belief that people of color cannot elevate, out of fear that she might actually prove that she could. By doing so, they enforce this impossibility and, thus, maintain white supremacy by enforcing complete blackness onto Frado's mixed-raced body. By contrast, Jane (although not one of the men of the house, she is described as being an invalid, which separates her from the able-bodied women of the house), Jack, and Mr. Bellmont all want Frado to attend school. Their desire for Frado to attend school with Mary appears to be for a multitude of reasons. The first being the belief that all children deserve access to an education even if they are black, which is apparent in Mr. Bellmont being adamant about Frado attending school. Wilson writes, "At last Mr. Bellmont declared decisively that she *should* go to school" (Wilson 18). This declaration by Mr. Bellmont is especially indicative of the force of his belief that all children, black or white, should have access to education, since "[h]e was a man who seldom decided controversies at home" (Wilson 18). Therefore, we understand that in advocating for Frado's education, he goes against his own nature of normally avoiding conflicts in the home because he feels so strongly about children having access to education.

At the same time, the fact that Jack, Mr. Bellmont, and Jane see her as "not very black" demonstrates another dimension to the reasons why they want her to attend school (Wilson 16). Specifically, because she has a physical and biological proximity to whiteness, they may believe that she holds a higher possibility of being educable. On the other hand, Mrs. Bellmont and Mary choose to ignore her proximity to whiteness. While the threat of her whiteness may be a

contributing factor to Mary and Mrs. Bellmont opposing her education, it is her racialized identity by Mary and Mrs. Bellmont that is the real threat, because allowing a black girl to receive an education with whites holds the possibility that she could become equal with those whites, which would undermine white supremacy. The threat posed by her mixed-raced identity causes Mary and Mrs. Bellmont to vehemently reject the idea of her going to school because, with an education, Frado could elevate and become equals with them as well. Important additional dimensions of this early imposition of blackness as well as sexuality onto Frado over her more complicated identities otherwise—as mixed race, and as a child and not yet a woman—can be further understood through a psychoanalytic reading of the text.

To understand the different stages of how Frado understands and experiences her racial identity, Franz Fanon's explanation of racialization as the consequence of cross-racial contact is helpful. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon offers a crucial explanation of the condition of a black person when thrown into a strictly black-white segregated society and encountering a white person for the first time. Fanon states, "I have just shown that for the Negro there is a myth to be faced. A solidly established myth. The Negro is unaware of it as long as his existence is limited to his own environment; but the first encounter with a white man oppresses him with the whole weight of his blackness" (Fanon 150). The myth that Fanon explains here is racism based on racial difference, which a black person is not familiar if they have only interacted with other black people until they are put in contact with white people. For Frado, the equivalent is that she may not have thought much about her mixed-raced identity and how that appears to white people as only blackness because she grew up with a white mother and black father and did not know much else outside of that specific family dynamic in which there was no segregation. This is especially true because her mother, Mag, is considered below her white community for betraying

the norms of both her gender and her race. Of her mother's first gender-based, then race-based segregation enforced by white patriarchal society, Wilson explains, "Poor Mag. She has sundered another bond which held her to her fellows. She has descended another step down the ladder of infamy" (Wilson 9). By marrying a black man, Mag–living so below the poverty line that even a black man (Frado's father) feels sorry for her condition–falls even further away from being equal with the white community that she had already lost her privilege in because of her violation of her gender and its norms (having a child out of wedlock) that resulted in her poverty that led her to marry Frado's father. Frado's exposure to whiteness in her early life is thus limited to her relationship with her mother, who is seen by larger white supremacist patriarchal society as less-than white. So, when she is thrown into an all-white family, the Bellmonts, she is confronted with her blackness more directly and more completely than she has been before because they uphold the white supremacist norm of segregation based solely on race. For the Bellmonts, it does not matter that her mother is disgraced, but only that Frado is available for work and subjected to abuse because of her racial identity.

As mentioned earlier, this blackness begins to be imposed onto her psychologically when she firsts arrives in the home by Mrs. Bellmont and Mary, who are sure to emphasize her blackness. This can be seen when she first arrives in the house and Mrs. Bellmont says, "'I don't mind the n– in the child… 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'" (Wilson 16). Mrs. Bellmont makes sure to identify her as the n-word, further pushing the notion of her blackness and her being below them because of this. However, while she uses the n-word to describe Frado, Mrs. Bellmont says that she doesn't mind that part of Frado, meaning, she does not mind her blackness. Rather, Mrs. Bellmont prioritizes Frado's status as a child, because it makes her trainable from an early age as an ideal servant. But

her tone quickly changes regarding Frado's blackness when she says that the "L chamber" (Frado's dark and cramped living quarters) is "[g]ood enough for a n–'" (Wilson 16). Therefore, in expressing her desire to train a child as an ideal servant while referring to her as the n-word, Mrs. Bellmont shows that her plans on establishing Frado's identity for her as a child is also racially dependent so that Frado learns "her place" in the system of not only the household, but also wider society early on and is compelled to stay and endure her treatment longer. Essentially, Mrs. Bellmont wants to make sure that Frado knows she is black, viewed as less than, and that working in the Bellmont home as an indentured servant really is her only option even in the free states. Therefore, when thrown into a white middle-class whose racial identity is upheld by their class status family, Frado experiences Mrs. Bellmont oppressing her "[w]ith the whole weight of her blackness" (Fanon 150). While this oppression begins psychologically when Frado first arrives into the house, it quickly becomes physical.

The Physical Blackening of Frado

Moving from the psychological to the physical as Frado begins school, Mrs. Bellmont begins attempting to physically blacken Frado:

> At home, no matter how powerful the heat when sent to rake hay or guard the grazing herd, she 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 upon her as best befitting (Wilson 22).

By sending Frado out into the sun without any proper protection from its rays, Mrs. Bellmont is literally and purposefully imposing Frado's blackness upon her by darkening her too-light skin in a strictly black/white society. Likewise, in Wilson's pointing out that before being blackened by

the sun that she was not many shades darker than Mrs. Bellmont's daughter, Mary, Wilson further shows the threat that Frado's mixed-raced identity poses to the Bellmont women because it is not acceptable for the black servant to be close in skin tone to Mrs. Bellmont's white daughter. Mrs. Bellmont's actions reaffirm her white supremacist logic that one must be either black or white and that there is no in between. Further, by stating that the sun would, "darken the shade which nature had first bestowed upon her as best befitting," Wilson explains that Frado is being made to look as dark as she is understood to be in that society– thus, her blackness must outweigh any perceptible whiteness as that whiteness holds the possibility for her to equal with the Bellmont women. Enforcing Frado's blackness thus enforces the white supremacist binary that one is only either black or white, with no possible middle ground from which to challenge white dominance.

Tavia Nyong'o further explains the white supremacist, binary idea of race that Mrs. Bellmont enforces in her physical blackening of Frado and the aspect of its enforcement through strict sexual segregation. While describing E.W. Clay's *An Amaglamation Waltz* and similar images, Nyong'o explains that, "In each case, racial equality was conflated with sexual intermingling, and imagery of 'the world turned upside down' was employed to argue that elevating blacks could only be accomplished by degrading whites" (Nyong'o 83). In depicting a "world turned upside down" as a result of interracial sexual mingling, Clay's images show the fear that so-called amalgamation poses. Specifically, Nyong'o explains that for whites in the nineteenth century, amalgamation always implied that the elevation of black people and their fear of the corresponding degradation of whites due to racial mixing directly undermining the white supremacist logic that one can only be black or white. Without this binary, racist segregation practices cannot be enforced.

In Mrs. Bellmont's case, Frado represents the embodiment of this challenge to the white supremacist binary as a mixed-race person who is both black and white. Therefore, in order to re-establish and maintain this binary, Mrs. Bellmont must find ways to physically blacken Frado so that she is immediately racialized as unmistakably and only black. Along with the physical blackening of Frado, Mrs. Bellmont demonstrates her understanding that amalgamation happened through sex and recognizes the possibility of sex and amalgamation happening in her own household due to the proximity and attractiveness of Frado to the men in the household, which prompts Mrs. Bellmont to de-sexualize Frado as well.

Mrs. Bellmont makes a point to physically de-sexualize Frado by shaving her head, which Jack points out to Frado. Toward the beginning of the novel, before she is left at the Bellmonts', Frado is described as, "a beautiful mulatto, with long, curly black hair" (Wilson 11). Later on, when Jack comes back after being away from the Bellmont house for a while, he and Frado converse and he points out her missing curls:

> "'Where are your curls, Fra?' asked Jack, after the usual salutation.
>
> 'Your mother cut them off.'
>
> 'Thought you were getting handsome, did she? Same old story, is it; knocks and bumps?'" (Wilson 39).

Wilson points out that he makes this comment almost immediately after saying hello to Frado, which shows how his immediate attention turned to her physical appearance and the traits that make her "exotic"– specifically, her long and loose curls that aren't typically associated with blackness as tighter coarser (often described by whites as "wool-like") curls are. Likewise, he points out that Mrs. Bellmont must have noticed that she is becoming more attractive. Therefore,

in cutting off Frado's curls, Mrs. Bellmont shows that she feels threatened by Frado's sexuality and the way her sexuality and physically "exotic" traits could be perceived by the Bellmont men.

During this time, it was common for mulatta slaves to be seen as a sexual threat by wives of slaveholders. Ayana Byrd and Lori Tharps explain the dynamics of these sexualizations of the mulatta figure:

> Slaves with light skin and straight hair also might have been favored because it was easier for the White masters and mistresses to have people with familiar physical features waiting on them in their own home. And, of course, the 'exotic'-looking mulatto female slaves were often chosen to work in the master's house because he had every intention of making her his sex slave (Byrd & Tharps 19).

In other words, the light skinned appearance of mixed-raced slaves allows some points of relation for white slave owners. Likewise, the favoring of light skinned enslaved women that allowed them to work in the home created easier access to them by their masters, which didn't allow for any protection of light skinned enslaved women. This easy access to and lack of protection of light skinned enslaved women demonstrates the power of both patriarchy and slavery because the white male master justified his sexual abuse of light skin enslaved women by compelling them to believe he was doing a kindness to them by allowing them to be in the house rather than in the harsh conditions of the field. The sexual violations and relations, and reproduction that resulted, contributed significantly to reinforcing white supremacist and patriarchal structures that kept freed enslaved people compliant to racists practices.

With respect to the manipulation of feelings of indebtedness, Hartman further explains that after the abolishment of slavery, freedom itself was used as a means for keeping previously enslaved people compliant:

> The very bestowal of freedom established the indebtedness of the freed through a calculus of blame and responsibility that mandated that the formerly enslaved both repay this investment of faith and prove their worthiness… Moreover, indebtedness was central to the creation of a memory of the past in which white benefactors, courageous soldiers, and virtuous mothers sacrificed themselves for the enslaved. This memory was to be seared into the minds of the freed (Hartman 131).

Through the use of feelings of indebtedness and guilt both within and after slavery, white people maintained their status in society by coercing formerly enslaved people into practices like indentured servitude as a means for paying back their debt to those that "fought for their freedom". Arguably, this practice started with moments such as allowing enslaved mulatta women to remain in the house rather than the field because they were coerced and guilted into believing that they were being treated kindly. Once they were convinced of this by their manipulative masters, they became unprotected as they were one of the few in the home with their master at all times and, thus, as Byrd and Tharps pointed out, subject to sexual abuse and sexual slavery (Byrd & Tharps 19). Further, the white supremacist logic of all-or-nothing racialization kept these women unprotected by the law since they were racialized as only black; therefore, their sexuality was "[i]inextricably bound and acted to intensify the constraints of slave status by subjecting the body to another order of violations and whims" (Hartman 87). In other words, the mulatta's racialization as only black, under white supremacist logic, made her inherently sexual and therefore her "[r]acial difference usurped the category of rape" (Hartman 87).

Byrd and Tharps discuss the threat that the socially-sanctioned rape of mulatta women posed to the wives of slaveholders as well:

> Coincidentally, as these female slaves with long, loosely curled hair entered the plantation houses, the plantation wives instituted a new form of punishment for them. The jealous mistress of the manor often shaved off the lustrous mane of hair, indicating that White women too understood the significance of long, kink-free hair (Byrd & Tharps 19).

Plantation wives created the punishment of cutting off a mulatta slave's curls as a means of de-sexualizing them to thwart their husband's attraction to them, thereby punishing other women instead of men for the crimes of patriarchy. Further, in cutting off their curls, this shows that white women were fully aware of the sexuality inscribed onto a black woman's body and this sprung about the fear of amalgamation, or mixing, of white and black blood in their own homes.

Eve Allegra Raimon further contextualizes the fear of amalgamation that Mrs. Bellmont exhibits in physically de-sexualizing Frado through these same means and enforcing her strict blackness in ways that make Frado recognizable as a "tragic mulatta" figure that had become familiar in antislavery literature of the period. Raimon writes, "Indeed, only the sexual vulnerability of mixed-race female subject and the reproductive potential she represents and enacts within the plot allow her literally to personify the anxieties and fantasies about the ascendant nation's interracial future" (Raimon 8). Essentially, the sexual vulnerability to which the mulatta is subject comes from the sexuality imposed onto her body, which is tied to her exotic traits (Frado's longer, looser, curls for example). Further, her sexual vulnerability also comes from proximity: the enslaved and free mulatta woman is closer to the master of the plantation or the house since she is in the home rather than the field or out working in public, which leaves her unprotected from private, domestic sexual abuse and patriarchal power.

Of the replication of these power dynamics in nominally free society, Hartman explains that, "The effort to maintain the color line or, properly speaking, black subordination involved securing the division between the races and controlling the freed population. Central to this effort was the codification of race, which focused primarily on defining and containing blackness" (Hartman 187). Therefore, blackness had to be given rules/traits to govern it as well as identify it. However, even the fear of the possibility of interracial relationships and amalgamation made it harder for whites to racialize bodies as completely black or white. As Fleetwood suggests, "one could argue that the white public's obsession with enforcing racial categories even when their vision betrayed them suggest an insecurity about what exactly it means to be white" (Fleetwood 75-75). The desire for white people to racialize bodies that are hard to identify comes from the insecurity of whiteness when confronted with blackness (or, more specifically, the combining of "black blood" and "white blood"). In other words, whites wanted to have sex with blacks, which meant that they must have seen blacks as human on some level that at least made blacks desirable as sexual partners. That desire itself was an admission of the emptiness of the argument that blacks were a "separate species" and inferior to whites as well as it challenged the very idea of whiteness by admitting that the "impurity" of the white race was ultimately the fault of the white race itself because inter-racial heterosexuality "[b]reaks the legitimation of whiteness with reference to the white body… If white bodies are no longer indubitably white bodies, if they can no longer guarantee their own reproduction as white, then the 'natural' basis of their dominion is no longer credible" (Dyer 25). Therefore, if whites admitted a desire for black people, they would be admitting that the "impurity" of their race was in fact their fault and would challenge white supremacy and the necessary binary to maintain it. Thus, mixed-raced people have been, as Fleetwood points out, identified as black because the white public has enforced the racial

binary of black or white as a means of protecting and purifying whiteness. This strict division also helped deny the sexual attraction whites had to blacks that negated the argument that blacks were inferior and of another species. We thus can see that this insecurity is felt by Mrs. Bellmont when she realizes that Frado is almost as light as Mary, and in how she works hard to alleviate it by physically and psychologically blackening Frado as we have seen so far. Mrs. Bellmont's battle with her insecurity created by the morally shameful desires that she suspects could be happening in her household demonstrate the mythology that was built up about blacks as being less-than-human and thus more animalistic bodies, uncontrolled by reasonable minds and uncontrolled sexually.

In a U.S. context, we can see the efforts to keep the races strictly segregated traced back to 1787 and Thomas Jefferson's influential Query XIV of *Notes on the State of Virginia*, which contributed significantly to the established myth that blacks were animalistic and uncontrollable sexually. In this particular section, which addresses slavery in Virginia, Jefferson asserts the differences between whites and blacks and argues that "[i]n this country the slaves multiply as fast as the free inhabitants" (Jefferson 151) and ultimately arrives at the conclusion that blacks "[a]re inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind" (Jefferson 151,153). Thus, blacks were established as overly sexual and without reason, which made them inferior both on the basis of body and mind. However, Jefferson's theory did not match up to his practices at home as many people, especially black authors, knew about his relationship with Sally Hemings, Jefferson's black enslaved "concubine" (Pinto 66). Jefferson's "[c]onsent to be emotionally and socially connected to a black woman, in the form of his unbroken, long-term entanglement with Hemings" was a blatant contradiction to Jefferson's theory that black people were inferior to whites (Pinto 72). Fanon ventriloquizes this myth, Jefferson's contradictory

practices, and statements like Jefferson's by pointing out that blackness had been historically equated with an abundance of animalistic sexual behaviors and poses a threat to whiteness because of it:

> As for the Negroes, they have tremendous sexual powers. What do you expect, with all the freedom they have in their jungles! They copulate at all times and in all places. They are really genital. They have so many children that they cannot even count them. Be careful, or they will flood us with little mulattoes (Fanon 157).

As a product of the actual sexual relations that were almost always initiated by whites, not blacks, the mulatta became a sensationalized bodily representation in fiction and popular culture of that possible mixed-raced future and threat to white supremacy as blackness and whiteness become indistinguishable.

In Frado's case, the fact that she has physical traits (lighter skin, long and loose curls) that could make her look both more attractive according to white-dominated standards of beauty at the time and just different enough from other white women to be alluring heightens the possible further amalgamation of the races that would lead to their ultimate indistinguishability. We see this in the Bellmont men noticing her as "handsome" and "not that black," in their wishes for her to be educated, and in their feeling concern for her–simply feeling anything at all for her is a threat that they could feel more for her/desire her sexually. Mrs. Bellmont's resulting imposition of strict blackness onto her mixed-raced body and the de-sexualization of her girl's body on the cusp of womanhood eventually causes Frado to take on a split identity through the concepts of "Nig" versus "Frado".

Frado as a Black Tomboy

When Frado first enters the Bellmont home, she is given the name "Nig" by Jack when he tells Mary, "[i]t won't be long before you would be telling the girls about *our* nig, *our* nig" (Wilson 16). In this moment, both ownership of Frado and her position, based on her race, within the home are established, even if Jack creates some distance between himself and his sister in the desire to own Frado. However, Wilson as author only uses that name during Frado's caricature moments of her black trickster and tomboy-style activities. For example, when she is sent to feed the sheep and decides to pull a trick on one of them Wilson writes, "Mr. Bellmont, with his laborers, were insight, though unseen by Frado" (Wilson 31). In this moment, the men on the property are watching her at a distance, but they are unseen by "Frado"; Wilson's designation of her fictional self as such suggests that this is arguably her human self. Earlier in the same passage she refers to herself as "Nig" when Wilson writes, "Among the sheep was a willful leader, who always persisted in being first served, and many times in his fury he had thrown down Nig" (Wilson 31). Thus, Wilson first refers to herself as "Nig" within the activity of serving the sheep and performing her servantly duties, then shifts to call herself "Frado" when she does not see all of the men watching. This distinction between names further demonstrates the split identity she must grapple with. In this moment in the narrative, "Frado" cannot see them because she is behaving under the identity of "Nig", a blackened tomboy.

In taking on this role as a tomboy, Frado also demonstrates her awareness of the sexualization and racialization that she undergoes within the Bellmont house. I read her tomboyish behavior as Frado's own attempts to de-sexualize herself, similar to but distinct from Mrs. Bellmont's efforts. By this point in her life, Mrs. Bellmont has imposed her blackness upon Frado and stripped her of her femininity. Thus, by performing the role "Nig," which Wilson

signals as a performance in specific narrative moments where she nominates herself as such, Wilson is able to demonstrate the separation between her blackened, dehumanized, and de-sexualized self (Nig) and her human self (Frado). Likewise, in self-identifying as "Nig" during her black tomboy moments, Wilson calls attention to how she came to understand the black identity that she was "supposed to be" in white society and performed it during the times where she was expected to fit the caricature. However, as we can see when Wilson self-identifies as "Frado" in the narrative in moments in which she asserts her individual humanness, she demonstrates how she also internally rejected that racialized identity and its expected roles and how she came to understand that she must behave in the role of "Nig" to survive her circumstances. Put most simply, Mrs. Bellmont's psychological and physical blackening of Frado causes her to take on the role of "Nig" while still maintaining the separation of "Nig" and "Frado".

Yet as we also see in other narrative moments in which Wilson self-identifies as "Nig," Wilson demonstrates her young internalization of the racial identity of blackness that has been imposed onto her, as is especially noticeable when she sincerely wishes and prays to not be black. For example, when Frado and James discuss her feelings about religion when she is still a child, she says that she does not like God, "'Because he made her [Mrs. Bellmont] white, and me black. Why didn't he make us *both* white?," she implores (Wilson 29). God making someone that is so evil white upsets her and makes her wish they could both be white, which would allow her more freedom and the ability to stand up for herself or even allow her to avoid her status as an indentured servant in the Bellmont home. Frado, at this point, thinks that God made a mistake and is unjust in making a bad person white, which also shows that she is a developing Christian since a fully converted Christian would not pass the judgment on God as the young Frado has

here. In this moment, she seems to really be thinking of herself as "Nig", the wholly black, de-humanized, and de-sexualized version of herself and wishing that she could completely get rid of that racialized identity (as black) to avoid her hardships. Her internalization of this idea of blackness that has been imposed upon her causes her to begin leaning more toward the identity of "Nig" rather than "Frado", which shows that she is losing the separation between her two identities as a black racial identity is imposed upon her more and more. Further, Frado shows that she is still a developing Christian in her equating of whiteness with goodness, and at this point she does not understand that it is not God but whites who are the unjust ones. By making whiteness equivalent with goodness, young Frado's misdirection causes her to aspire to whiteness in her desire to be good. Later on, adult Wilson exposes this as the sin of white supremacy as she becomes a converted Christian and begins to re-establish the validity in her own humanity.

Wilson brings readers to see Frado beginning to re-establish her two identities as she gets older even as she still takes on the self-identification and racialization of black rather than mixed-raced that was enforced on her in her youth. Of this slow transition, Wilson writes:

> Frado, under the instructions of Aunt Abby and the minister, became a believer in a future existence–one of happiness or misery. Her doubt was, *is* there a heaven for the black? She knew there was one for James, and Aunt Abby, and all good white people; but was there any for blacks? She has listened attentively to all the minster said, and all Aunt Abby had told her; but then it was all for white people (Wilson 47).

At this point, Frado understands that blackness does not need to be equated with being less-than human or "evil," as she has been taught in the Bellmont home as a child. However, we also see that her mixed-raced identity is no longer apparent—that she sees herself as only black and can

only hope that there is a heaven for black people. Even as she imagines heaven to be as segregated as Earth, this hope in a heaven for black people demonstrates her ability to maintain her humanity while still identifying as only black because heaven is meant to be for good people. But, in separating a white heaven and a black heaven, we recognize that Wilson is displaying more of her own youthful and lingering internalization of the white supremacist logic that one must be black or white, with no in-between, that maintains segregated practices. Thus, Wilson subtly shows how "Frado" still demonstrates a form of resistance to "Nig" as less than, but also makes clear that this resistance is still rooted in white supremacist logic that she has internalized in the Bellmont home.

While we might see Frado's internalization of her racial identity as a personal/individual failing, Fanon sheds important light on how family significantly shapes the way one eventually identifies and understands oneself. He writes, "The family is an institution that prefigures a broader institution: the social or the national group…[T]he white family is the workshop in which one is shaped and trained for life in society" (Fanon 149). Thus, we see how white family and its behavior both reflect and reinforce larger society. This dynamic becomes apparent as Mrs. Bellmont, an exceptionally powerful matriarch within her sphere, adjusts the way Frado behaves to more accurately match the role she is meant to occupy within their family–that is, as the black, de-sexualized servant—not an adopted child and/or potential love interest or sexual partner/victim--and, thus, permanent inferior. Within this structure of oppression, Frado creates her split identity to better match the role Mrs. Bellmont would like her to perform, "Nig", while maintaining her identity, "Frado". This separation becomes Frado's best chance at survival and maintaining any bit of her humanity.

Of the young black child's experience of racial identity and its dependence on family and place, Fanon explains that "[a]s long as he remains among his own people, the little black follows very nearly the same course as the little white. But if he goes to Europe, he will have to reappraise his lot… The Negro makes himself inferior. But the truth is that he is made inferior" (Fanon 149). With this, Fanon suggests that until a black person is put in direct contact with, or placed under direct influence of, whites, they have every possibility of elevating to the same level as whites, but on their own terms, without comparing themselves to whites. However, once they are exposed to whites and placed under the influence of white-dominated society, they are made to feel lesser than their white counterparts. Subsequently they internalize that feeling and identity based on the dominant white ideology that is rooted in the practice of racial slavery and does not see any possibility that blacks could be equal.

In Frado's case, we see how up until she is left at the Bellmonts', has no understanding of either her racial or gendered identity until it is imposed on her psychologically and physically. We also see how the creation of "Nig" by the Bellmonts is a way to make Frado inferior to them. But by strategically separating "Nig" from "Frado" in various parts of the novel like those mentioned above, Wilson shows how even as a young girl she understood, to at least some degree, her ability to be equal with her white peers. In Wilson's careful depiction of moments in which Frado maintains her human identity when she is not playing the role of "Nig" for the family and other whites that expect her to occupy that role, we recognize both her youthful instinct of equality and her adult understanding of the workings, real impacts, and ultimate emptiness of white supremacy.

As Frado gets older, Wilson is careful to show how she no longer associates black identity with being less than human. Specifically, when Frado is eighteen and finds work in

Massachusetts, we see her recognize the possibility of her elevation. Wilson writes, "[F]rado experienced a new impulse. She felt herself capable of elevation; she felt that this book information supplied an undefined dissatisfaction she had long felt but could not express. Every leisure moment was carefully applied to self-improvement, and a devout and Christian exterior invited confidence from the villagers" (Wilson 69). In recognizing the possibilities that she has to elevate on her own outside of the Bellmont home, Frado begins to see that her blackness doesn't equate with "badness" as she did when she was a child. Likewise, she still turns to Christianity as a means of seeking that elevation, which shows the coming of age aspect of this novel in which we first see Frado as a developing Christian passing judgment on God and associating goodness with whiteness, which prompted anti-black attitudes towards herself. Frado's coming into her own racial, Christian, and individual identity is further seen in the final chapter of the novel written about Wilson's adult life when she says that "Nothing turns her from her steadfast purpose of elevating herself. Reposing on God, she has thus far journeyed securely" (Wilson 72). Therefore, she has moved past recognizing her possibility to elevate and focuses, as an adult, on continuing her elevation as an individual. Likewise, she relies on her Christianity to help her elevate as an individual black woman. Wilson telling her life to this point exemplifies this novel as a coming of age novel in which Frado catches up to the Wilson who understands her internalizations of anti-blackness, and how she grew out of them– not just with age, but with encouragement from some good Christians and her own strong character and resistance.

Again, beyond showing Frado's initiation into black inferiority and her growth out of it, Wilson's depictions of Mrs. Bellmont's treatment of Frado reveal how racialized slavery in the South also affected the "free" states in the nineteenth century, creating segregation through custom instead of law. As Frado's story reveals, the resulting abuse of black women like

Frado/Wilson in this no less white supremacist society caused black women to find ways to survive such oppression. Through Frado and "Nig," we learn how black girls and women in the segregated North, by performing their expected blackness and denying their femininity, both internalized and resisted victimization through racialization and sexualization—powerful forces that combined to enforce their oppression. As we have seen, the long history of the sexualization of the black women's bodies dates back at least to the Hottentot Venus, establishing popular understandings of them as both exotic others and powerful threats to white femininity through the possibilities of equality and racial mixing.

Wilson's fictionalized representations of her own racialized and sexualized body in *Our Nig* also demonstrates the degrees of resistance that were possible under the white supremacist logic of binary racialization. While this resistance was not necessarily pure because it had to operate under white supremacist logic and a white-dominated society, Wilson shows us, through her coming-of-age story of Frado, the carefully constructed forms of resistance that were possible for her given the tools that she had at her disposal at the time.

Because time and circumstances matter to racialization, twenty-first century depictions of black women's bodies necessarily take a different approach to resistance. Some still call on some constructs of dominant white culture, such as the stereotypical constructions of the mammy and the jezebel figure, with many black women artists creating work that represents black women's bodies in what Fleetwood call, enactments of excess flesh. But as Fleetwood makes clear, these enactments—like Frado's--"[s]ignal historical attempts to regulate black female bodies" and, thereby, challenge the possibility of a "[t]otalizing gaze" and "highlights the limitations of regulatory systems" (Fleetwood 112-113). In other words, twenty-first century black women artists that create work that represents black women's bodies through exaggerated

stereotypes that work to challenge both the dominant white gaze and the stereotypes that arise from that gaze, precisely by reflecting those stereotypes back onto themselves as constructions rather than essential identities. In this next section, I move to analyzing Kara Walker's sugar sculpture, "A Subtlety," her uses of excess flesh enactments, and the productive uses of resistance that are possible through reflecting dominant white culture's stereotypes of black women's bodies back onto whites themselves.

Reclaiming the Black Woman's Body in the Twenty-First Century

Kara Walker's *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby* was a site-specific installation located in the old Domino Sugar Factory in Williamsburg, Brooklyn in 2014. This location was once used to process raw sugar brought to the U.S. from the Caribbean. At one point, the factory refined more than three million pounds of sugar a day. Once a powerhouse of the country's productive sugar industry and now abandoned, the rafters of the building still have traces of sugar and molasses coated on them (Becker 66). Walker's installation conjures the exploitive and horrifying past of the sugar industry and confronts that history directly.

Kyla Wazana Tompkins provides crucial information on the sugar industry and sugar's direct association with black bodies in the nineteenth century. Sugar itself was considered "foreign" and exotic as it was a product of Asia or the tropics and, as such, became a desired commodity by Europeans and then European colonizers in America as they "[d]eveloped the taste for both bitter drinks such as coffee and tea that needed the addition of sugar and sweetened goods as candy and jam, all of them cheap and easy sources of carbohydrate energy" (Wazana Tompkins 97). The demand for sugar thus increased and became "inextricable from slavery's moral 'stain,'" providing another justification for continuing the practices of racial slavery as it helped boost the economy (Wazana Tompkins 97). This economy, produced and maintained by slavery,

treated black bodies as food to be consumed by crops hungry for labor and, thereby, the people craving them. Thus, Walker's figure is rooted in the "violent intimacies of the slave economy" which can further be seen in literary and commercial product tropes such Aunt Jemima and Little Black Sambo (Wazana Tompkins 90). Likewise, Walker plays with the term *subtleties*, which anthropologist Sidney Mintz explains were large and expensive sculptures created out of sugar and were usually featured at royal feasts in fifteenth- and sixteenth- century Europe (Mintz 93). Instead of placing her subtlety at a royal feast, the colossal sugar sculpture is in an industrious setting that once feasted on the labor of enslaved peoples as sugar was refined in that setting.

Walker's installment not only takes on these tropes, as I will analyze in more depth later on, but also, by crafting her 40-feet tall and 75-feet long sculpture out of refined sugar within the very confines that once produced refined sugar, she creates a black woman that cannot be easily visually consumed by her white audience as she is "too much" (Becker 67). More specifically, the viewer cannot take in the entire sculpture at once glance. Instead, the viewer has to walk completely around it to see the individual parts and their details that make up the entirety of the sculpture. Likewise, instead of using raw sugar, which is often brown in color, she uses refined (bleached) sugar, which is white. This choice prompts racializations of the sculpture that are not dependent on the sculpture's outward color—thus, the equivalent of skin color—but on other physical traits historically associated with racial identity instead. Walker challenges the color line by reversing its effects— instead of making the sculpture's outward color, or skin color, darker she makes it white and, therefore, harder to racially identify as black. Likewise, in reversing the color line (having the viewer racialize a body that is white-passing as black), Walker also reverses the power dynamics that both maintained the color line and puts the power in control of the white-presenting black body. In challenging the color line that was essential to

maintaining the practice of racialized slavery, she also foregrounds the history of sugar production and the economic benefit it had on the country at the expense of black bodies. What is more, in sculpting the sugar into deliberately exaggerated stereotypes of black women, Walker also exaggerates whites' historical idea of black women's excess fleshiness that work to both resist the white gaze while simultaneously reflecting dominant white culture's stereotypes of black women's bodies back onto whites themselves. To look at these excess flesh enactments and their productive uses, I analyze the front, side, and back views of the sugar sculpture paying special attention to the way that Walker both applies stereotypes of black women and the way the sculpture complicates and counteracts those stereotypes precisely by embodying them to extremes.

The Front View: The Headscarf, Exposed Breasts, and the Facial Expression

When approaching the installment from the front (see Fig. 1), there are a few physical traits given to Walker's construction to note: the straight-faced expression and head scarf on the head of the sculpture and the exposed breasts. At first glance, it appears that Walker has constructed a mammy figure based on the scarf on her head. As Michael Harris explains of the characteristics of this stereotype, the mammy figure "[w]as large, dark skinned, usually smiling, and covered from neck to ankle with clothing. In no way did she resemble the woman of mixed race who so fascinated the New Orleans dandies […] She wore a scarf and an apron, both of which signified that she was a domestic worker" (Harris 166). From this physical description of the mammy figure, the scarf signifies that we are looking at this trope that has been used to represent older, dark-skinned, black women who occupy domestic roles. Walker, aware of this trope, places the signifier of the scarf on the head of the sculpture to conjure the mammy images, like Aunt Jemima, in the minds of the viewer. However, the facial expression Walker has chosen to

construct prevents the viewer from seeing the woman solely as the mammy stereotype. Rather, in constructing a straight face on the sculpture, Walker forces the viewer to take another look at these previously established representations of black women.

Fig. 1. Front view of Kara Walker's "A Subtlety" from Hilton Als; "The Sugar Sphinx"; *The New Yorker*; 08 May 2014, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-sugar-sphinx.

As Harris mentions, the mammy was typically smiling and depicted as enjoying her work as the loyal servant in the white home. However, Walker's sculpture, although wearing an Aunt Jemima-styled scarf on her head, has a straight-faced and somewhat sullen look. To understand this expression, Hartman's argument that tropes like the constantly smiling mammy figure are rooted in performances of enjoyment that occurred during the time of enslavement is especially relevant:

> The affiliation of performance and blackness can be attributed to the spectactularization of black pain and racist conceptions of Negro nature as carefree, infantile, hedonistic, and indifferent to suffering… The constitution of blackness as an abject and degraded condition and the fascination with the other's enjoyment went hand in hand. Moreover,

> blacks were envisioned fundamentally as vehicles for white enjoyment, in all of its sundry and unspeakable expressions; this was as much the consequence of the chattel status of the captive as it was of the excess enjoyment imputed to the other…. (Hartman 22-23)

In other words, enslaved black people were thought by whites to be self-indulgent and child-like, which made them indifferent to suffering. Likewise, both pain and enjoyment and the expressions of these emotions by black people were also spectacles to whites, who took pleasure in being viewers of these expressions and emotions. The spectacle of black enjoyment, no less than black pain, was encouraged and normalized in chattel slavery as mutually important means of domination. Thus, the mammy's consistent smiling and appearance of happiness that is often caricatured (as seen in the figure of Aunt Jemima) has its roots in chattel slavery and the enjoyment that was created for enslaved blacks by masters to manipulate enslaved people into believing that they were the benevolent master as a way to keep them in line and compelled to work. With this history in mind, we can see that Walker, in positioning the mammy figure with a straight face rather than the caricature smile, points to the still-apparent representations of black women in visual culture that are rooted in chattel slavery and directly rejects them. That is, Walker's installment represents the mammy in a way that does not ignore the painful conditions of her role and, further, points to the simultaneous sexualization and de-sexualization of black women in the mammy role.

This simultaneous sexualization and de-sexualization is also suggested by her head scarf, which was traditionally worn to keep dirt out of a black woman's hair; as further Harris explains of such characteristics' incorporation into stereotypes, they, "were exaggerated or overemphasized in visualizations of the mammy figure, and they were given social and symbolic

values to represent most, if not all, black women in ways useful to whites" (Harris 167). In using this sign of the mammy trope that has been exaggerated and overemphasized in the stereotypes and to an extreme in her giant sculpture, Walker both invokes and critiques the typical dress of the mammy figure. The size of her sculpture calls heightened attention to exaggerated uses of the scarf in stereotypes of the mammy figure and, thereby, suggests how the scarf became a marker for whites to use black women for their own gain— the scarf on a dark-skinned enslaved woman would point to her having domestic value and skills that could be used to benefit whites. Likewise, having a mammy in the home historically signaled high social status for whites. Further, the scarf's indication of domestic value was also historically used to de-sexualize the mammy:

> The headscarf/bandanna literally covered up these potentials [of participating in black women's traditional hair practices] and soon became a demeaning sign of racial and social status […] The headscarf worn by Aunt Jemima, the paradigmatic mammy/servant, and seen in so many mammy images, suppressed her individuality and effectively separated her from the African American discourse about hair. Instead it located her within the derogatory racial discourse that objectified her (Harris 168-169).

The scarf on Walker's sculpture triggers the mammy image in the viewer's mind; however, within that specific trait of the mammy image is a history of objectification through whites' denying black "mammies" control over their own bodies. The headscarf was an African and African American tradition used to keep dust and dirt out of black women's hair that still exists today. However, the forced need to use the headscarf while performing duties during enslavement became "[e]exaggerated or overemphasized in visualizations of the mammy" because they represented enslaved black women in ways that were "[u]seful to whites" because

the presence of the mammy in the white home represented high socioeconomic status for whites (Harris 167). The appropriation and enforcement of the headscarf to serve whites' ends denied black women the ability to participate in traditional hair styles. By not being allowed to participate in black women's traditional hair styles by placing her in a head scarf, women made into mammy figures were de-sexualized and thereby separated from other hypersexualized images of black women, like that of the mulatta woman. Likewise, the mammy was deliberately de-sexualized by whites so that white women could feel comfortable with a black domestic servant in the home. That comfort wasn't possible for white women with enslaved mulattas as domestic servants because the behavior of their husbands made them a sexual threat to white women. The mammy, then, "would mask the harsh realities of interracial sexuality and provide a protected space for the white woman" (Harris 166). The need to de-sexualize the mammy figure by putting her in a scarf and often an apron still sexualized her even as it attempted to neutralize her as a sexual threat that needed to be removed.

However, it was not the mammy herself who posed the sexual threat, rather, the sexual threat came from white men and slavery; slavery for putting her in close proximity to the white man of the house without any protection, and patriarchy's for making white women take their husbands' untrammeled licentiousness out on enslaved black women. Given the licentiousness of white men, even when the black enslaved woman is de-sexualized to become the mammy figure, she is still sexualized by the white men who find her appearance titillating because the physical attributes that are considered arousing are hidden, and white men desire to see these hidden attributes simply because they can. Walker's choice to place a scarf on the head of the straight-faced mammy figure shows the harmful effects of the creation and perpetuation of the mammy figure as a caricature and instead Walker shows that the reality of the mammy is one of

racialized sexualization that de-sexualizes the mammy and cannot be smiled about. However, Walker does not stop at challenging just these indicators of white dominant creations and representations of black women. She makes other choices that turn the trope of the de-sexualized mammy figure on its head just from this front view of the installation.

Walker presents the sculpture as nude with her breasts completely exposed and commanding of attention. In making the breasts exposed, Walker points to another trope that has been used to represent black women— the jezebel. The jezebel was the "sexual primitive embodied by [Sara] Bartmann" (Harris 164). In other words, the jezebel, like Sara Baartman, was viewed as animalistic and overly sexual. In an analysis of Tracey Rose's *Venus Baartman*—a photograph of a naked black woman in an overgrown field crouched as if she's preparing to take off in a sprint—Fleetwood points out the characteristics of the Hottentot/jezebel trope: "[R]ose performs the role of black female savage—unclothed and untutored—as visualized through Western scopic regimes" (Fleetwood 118-119). As this piece makes especially clear, the appearance of an unclothed black woman signals the trope of the jezebel to a viewer through what Fleetwood deems an excess flesh enactment: "To enact excess flesh is to signal historical attempts to regulate black female bodies, to acknowledge black women's resistance to the persistence of visibility, and to challenge debates among black activists and critics about what constitutes positive or productive representation of blackness, by refusing the binary of negative and positive…" (Fleetwood 112).

The excess flesh enactment that Walker uses is the nakedness of the sculpture and its position that confronts viewers with the exposure of her breasts. Likewise, these exaggerated features further signal the trope of the jezebel for the viewer. Showing the black female body in excess (naked and with very large exposed breasts, exaggerated by the sheer size of the

sculpture) exposes the historical tropes that have been created as an attempt to regulate and control black women's bodies dating back to chattel slavery. However, instead of becoming so hypervisible that one's humanity is invisible, excess flesh enactments, like Walker's, force the viewer to be conscious of how they are looking at the woman figured by the sculpture and question their notions of black femininity and sexualizations of the black female body. Specifically, Walker's choices to establish an explicitly sexualized mammy figure further complicate the white gaze on the black female body because it forces one to see the mammy as more than the de-sexualized and loyal servant of whites. Rather, the overly sexualized mammy figure shows a reclamation over her body that was normally "[c]overed from neck to ankle in clothing" (Harris 166).

The Side View: The Crouch and the Sphinx

As the viewer moves from the front to the side view of the installation, they are confronted with other aspects of the sculpture's excess flesh enactments rooted in historical symbols. From the side view of the installation, we see more clearly that Walker didn't construct the woman to be simply topless, but that she is entirely naked and positioned as a sphinx like the Great Sphinx of Giza (see Fig. 2). The Great Sphinx of Giza is meant to be the head of a human (a pharaoh) on a lion's body. Since sphinx figures were figures of worship and mythology, they represented positive animalization. However, not all viewers of Walker's sugar sphinx may recognize her immediately as a sphinx figure, but instead, viewers may just see the sexualization of the crouch position she is in, which shows a negative animalization because it pictures the sculpture as less-than human as well as subservient. Thus, Walker makes direct connections to animalistic traits that are assigned to the black woman's explicit body in constructing a naked mammy figure in the form of a sphinx. This analysis of the side view of Walker's sculpture

begins by explaining the negative aspects of the sphinx-like position as this is the more explicit reading that the sculpture suggests. After this, I analyze the positive aspects of the sphinx-like position that offers a redemptive/celebratory reading of the sculpture, which is the more implicit reading that it suggests when the viewer looks deeper than the physical stereotypical aspects and details of the sugar sphinx.

The naked mammy figure complicates the controlled image of the mammy that white women had established as a means of controlling white men's sexual desires for enslaved black women. Likewise, Walker seems to be pointing to the cross-species desire of whites that influenced their sexual desire of black people that they had likened to animals by associating the naked body of the mammy with a lion. Whites like Thomas Jefferson built up the mythology that black people were less-than-human and were uncontrolled sexually and animalistic bodies that were uncontrolled by reasonable minds as a means of dealing with their desires since they violated Christian prohibitions (Jefferson 153). Therefore, Walker's use of the naked black woman's body in the sphinx pose exposes this myth and how it shaped sexualizations of black women's bodies as well as effected the representation of them in various forms of media. In this case, the enactment of excess flesh doesn't attempt to reconcile the conflation of the black woman's nakedness as animalistic and overly sexual. As Fleetwood argues, "It is an enactment of the gaze that does not necessarily attempt to heal or redress the naked, exploited, denigrated black female body tethered to the black imago but understands the function of this figuration in dominant visual culture. This productive look lays bare the symbols and meanings of this weighted figure" (Fleetwood 111). Therefore, in enacting excess flesh through the nakedness of the sculpture in a sphinx pose, Walker doesn't attempt to heal the naked and exploited black female body but instead points to the way the black woman's naked body is looked at in

dominant visual culture and exposes the racialized sexualizations that conflate animalistic traits with the black woman's body.

Fig. 2. Side view of Kara Walker's "A Subtlety" from Sara Krulwich; "Sugar? Sure, but Salted with Meaning"; *The New York Times,* 11 May 2014, www.nytimes.com/2014/05/12/arts/design/a-subtlety-or-the-marvelous-sugar-baby-at-the-domino-plant.html.

Further, the sphinx-like positioning and sizing of the naked mammy figure points to a possible reclamation and celebration of the black woman's body. As mentioned before, the mere nudity of a mammy figure functions as a reclamation because it allows the mammy to embrace her black femininity and sexuality that was once denied to her; however, the history of the Great Sphinx points towards the possibility of rewriting previously established histories and towards celebrations of black womanhood. Historian Willis Goth Regier explains that the scars and markings on the Great Sphinx of Giza "[p]roves nothing else than [the ancient Egyptian king] Chephren's revision of history. Chephren ordered workmen to hack off the Sphinx's female face and make it his, reshape her hair as his headdress, erase her utterly" (Goth Regier 10). The original creation of the Great Sphinx was meant to represent the face/head of a woman and that was erased by King Chephren to be replaced with his. The erased the face/head of the woman entirely and the scars and markings are the only memory of the woman that was erased. In

Walker's installation, the only thing left to indicate the mammy figure is her head scarf, which also reminds the viewer of the history of the mammy as a de-sexualized servant in white households. However, the larger appearing lips, exposed breasts, and size of the buttocks also conjure a racial identification of the sculpture without the suggestion of skin pigmentations, in keeping with both stereotypes and actual characteristics of some black female physical traits. Thus, the mammy scarf worn by the sculpture goes beyond racialization to suggest both a black female domestic worker and enslaved woman. Thus, the sculpture is racialized by the appearance of its physical body and then sexualized through the association of the mammy scarf with the black female domestic worker and enslaved woman through what's worn on that racialized physical body, which shows the still apparent need to racialize and then sexualize bodies. The ability of the viewer to racialize the white sculpture as black because of the head scarf and then associate the head scarf with the mammy figure shows the still apparent need to racialize and then sexualize bodies.

At the same time, the location of the sculpture, its size, and its historical ties with the sugar industry work at another, more subtle level to reclaim and celebrate black womanhood. As Goth Regier explains, sphinxes "[w]ere thrones of God, they were associated with the sun, and they were given the tasks of guarding sacred spaces" (Goth Regier 12). In this case, Walker's sculpture is the guardian of the Domino Sugar Factory as well as a guardian of the history of enslavement that is associated with the sugar industry, especially considering that installment is surrounded by brown boys crafted out of resin and cast sugar. Given its position and size, on its own and in relation to the brown boy figures, we recognize the sculpture as the guardian of these smaller, younger brown boys made out of burnt sugar—their burntness alludes to how sugar cultivation physically used up the bodies of young black men. Moreover, the size, position, and

cultural significance of the sculpture suggest that she has laid claim to the space that holds the history of refined sugar that furthered justification for enslavement since it was a large contributor to the booming slavery-based economy. By placing a mammy figure as the largest sculpture of the installment and in the sizing and positioning mirroring the Great Sphinx, the sculpture calls attention to herself, and the viewer can assume the large role that she has played in the booming economy and national history.

With respect to how the excess fleshiness suggested by the sculpture furthers its claim on this space and history, and on the sculpture's implication in this history, Fleetwood's argument is again helpful:

> Excess flesh performances in mass culture produce a sharper lens to see the operations of the discourse of captivity and capital that frames that black body in the field of vision. The visible black body is interpreted through the discourse of commodification and the simultaneous punishment of circum-Atlantic trades in the flesh and the structures of racialization that emerges through these practices (Fleetwood 127).

In producing this larger-than-life guardian mirroring the Great Sphinx, Walker thus produces a more focused lens to view the horrifying history of refined sugar that makes the black female body visible. Further, Walker's sugar sphinx points to historic racializations by making the sculpture identifiable as a black mammy figure despite her outwardly white appearance due to the medium of the sculpture being refined sugar. However, when we also recognize the sphinx's history as a guardian, we understand how Walker complexly reclaims this racialized history by positioning the black woman as a guardian mother figure to the smaller molasses-colored boys and, thereby, to the entire history of enslaved people. Thus, through signifying black female excess flesh and the sphinx positioning, Walker switches the view of the sculpture and her body

as being simply animalistic and sexualized in her crouch to legible as a lioness guardian of herself, black children, and their history.

The final thing to note about the side view of Walker's sculpture is the attention given to the buttocks, which are exaggerated as large and prominent. According to Sander Gilman, the buttocks of black women, specifically the Hottentot Venus, were understood to represent "[a]ll the anomalies of her genitalia" (Gilman 20). Walker especially exaggerates this physical characteristic associated with Hottentot Venus and other black women, which again prompts the viewer to associate the sculpture with the jezebel and as sexually deviant. Likewise, the large buttocks cause the viewer to racialize the sculpture as black while simultaneously sexualizing her for her exaggerated sexual body parts that have been historically associated with the black woman's genitalia. However, as the viewer shifts to the back side of the sculpture, these tendencies of the historically dominant white gaze are challenged.

The Rear View: The Naked Mammy

When looking at the rear view of Walker's sculpture (see Fig. 3), the viewer's eyes are immediately drawn to the exposed genitalia of the naked mammy figure. The exposure of the genitalia is the sculpture's most explicit excess flesh enactment that aggressively confronts anxieties whites had about interracial sexual relations implied in their fears of amalgamation. According to Nyong'o, amalgamation "[w]as a political deployment of sexuality through which American subjects were gendered and racialized. Insofar as amalgamation conjured up the body as the site of visibility, responsibility, and a potentially aberrant 'taste'" (Nyong'o 75-76). As this helps us understand, talk of amalgamation was a politicization of sex and its possibility between black and whites that required strict intraracial heteronormative coupling and binary racializations of all bodies as strictly black or white. For radical abolitionists who advocated for

interracial marriage, these activists imagined a post-racial state where black and white people reproduced mixed-raced children that would "transcend" race. Both views amalgamation foregrounded black and brown bodies extremely visible and as responsible for these sexual interactions.

With this complicated history in mind, we can see that Walker's large exposure of the naked mammy figure's genitalia forces white viewers to look at it and directly confront their historically based fears of black female sexuality and the lingering feeling of threat that comes with recognizing the possibility that black women are attractive to white men, as well as possibly equal with white women.

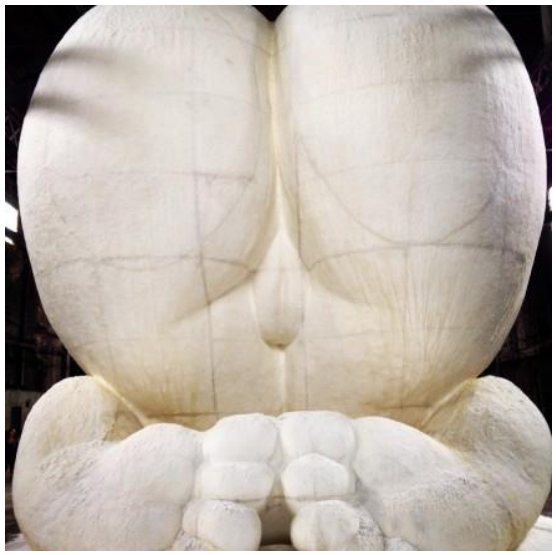

Fig. 3. Back view of Kara Walker's "A Subtlety" from O.C. Yerebakan; "Kara Walker: 'A Subtlety' at the Domino Sugar Factory Through July 6th, 2014"; *Art Observed*; 03 Jul. 2014, http://artobserved.com/2014/07/new-york-kara-walker-a-subtlety-at-the-domino-sugar-factory-through-july-6th-2014/.

At the same time, Walker does not make the genitalia itself exaggerated or otherwise out of the ordinary by any means. This deliberate contrast with the rest of the sculpture's excess flesh displays both subtly and explicitly challenges preconceived notions that the black woman's

genitalia was an anomaly. As Gilman explains of the significance of whites thinking that black women's genitalia were distinctly different, "If their sexual parts could be shown to be inherently different, this would be a sufficient sign that blacks were separate (and needless to say, lower) race, as different from the European as the proverbial orangutan" (Gilman 18). Thus, by not exaggerating the naked mammy's genitalia, Walker rejects the possibility that it could be understood as evidence that supports historical notions that blacks are a separate and lower race that are likened to animals. Likewise, it makes the sculpture impossible to racialize from the back view since there are no marked differences that can be coded as specifically black or white. In making it impossible to racialize the sculpture in this way, this aspect of Walker's excess flesh enactment by exposing the sculpture's genitalia, but without exaggerating them, is "[p]roductive in conceiving of an identificatory possibility for black female subjects that refuses aberrant representations of the black female subject in dominant visual culture" (Fleetwood 122). At the same time, because the large buttocks of the black woman were also supposedly representative of the biological difference between the white woman and black woman's genitalia, for Walker to exaggerate the buttocks from the side and then present genitalia that does not appear to be strange or out of the ordinary contradicts both historical representations and lingering understandings of the overly sexual black woman marked by her large buttocks.

Through these strategic excess flesh enactments and moments in which Walker makes it hard for the viewer to ignore either the sculpture or their ways of seeing, Walker takes a twenty-first century critical approach to resisting the oppressive power of the white gaze by turning it back onto itself and forcing its critical examination. Likewise, Walker's signification through exaggeration on stereotypes of black women and representations that have been created by dominant white culture productively challenges white dominant culture's historical

representations of black women and constructions of black femininity. To do so, Walker employs these same stereotypes in conflict with one another, which causes the viewer's associations with these signs (physical features of black women) to change through its deployment of key sex-positive aspects of twenty-first century feminism and the autonomy of bodies in which expression of one's sexuality is encouraged as a means of resistance. In other words, by sexualizing the mammy figure with traits of the jezebel, Walker both activates and critiques readings of these stereotypes and celebrates black womanhood. Finally, in sexualizing a figure that was historically de-sexualized due to lack of ownership and autonomy over her own body, Walker reclaims the mammy's body and represents it in opposition to the way whites represented her, which again points to positive understandings of black womanhood that challenge the wholly negative racializations and sexualizations of black women of the past.

Conclusion: Historical Patterns of Racialization, Sexualization, and Resistance

The most obvious similarity of both works is the forced racialization of Wilson's character Frado and of Walker's sugar sphinx sculpture. Wilson's critique comes from the novel's exposure of how Mrs. Bellmont imposes Frado's blackness onto her both physically and psychologically as a means of enforcing the white supremacist logic that one must fit into the binary racial category of black or white, thereby forcing Frado's mixed-raced body to become racialized as black. Similarly, Walker's choice to create her sculpture out of white refined sugar requires a forced racialization of the sculpture by the viewer to be able so that this process of racialization can then be engaged with on a critical level. This racialization, then, can only occur based on the viewer's knowledge of dominant stereotypes of black women, which Walker makes sure is possible by signaling the literary and visual culture trope of the Aunt Jemima-esque mammy figure that viewers can easily identify due to its historical circulation. The forced

racializations of Frado by Mrs. Bellmont and the sculpture by the viewer, as crafted by Wilson and Walker respectively, demonstrate both Wilson and Walker's knowledge of dominant stereotypes of black women and the function of racializations of all bodies as either black or white in order to maintain white supremacist ideological structures. However, these are not the only identities that are forced onto Wilson's Frado and Walker's sugar sphinx.

Both Wilson and Walker's figures also undergo forced sexualizations based on the dominant practice of placing black women into the categories of jezebel or mammy. Through Mrs. Bellmont's forced physical de-sexualization of Frado to make her unavailable to the men in the house, Wilson makes the point that even a child could be viewed as either a jezebel or a mammy simply based on her black racial identity. However, because Frado is lighter-skinned, and thus even more attractive to the men in the family, Mrs. Bellmont seems to place her in the category of the jezebel. Due to Mrs. Bellmont's fear that Frado's overly sexual nature as a jezebel—which Wilson makes clear is not a consequence of Frado's sexuality but of the Bellmont men's—Mrs. Bellmont elects to cut off Frado's curls, thereby de-sexualizing her, rather than prohibiting the men from taking advantage of her. However, in de-sexualizing Frado, Mrs. Bellmont still must first sexualize her. And as Wilson shows and thus critiques, Frado cannot consent to either process (her sexualization or desexualization) as a black child and indentured servant in the home.

On the other hand, Walker purposely sexualizes her sugar sphinx mammy by making her completely nude, with a large buttock, and exposed vagina. These moves directly tie to the biological discussions of the Hottentot Venus (the jezebel) and her buttocks that were studied because of their size, as well as her genitalia that was seen as anatomically different. In overtly

sexualizing the established mammy figure, Walker points to the historical process by which the mammy was first be sexualized before she was de-sexualized for the white home.

The third similarity between the two works is the initial establishing of split identities for both Frado and the sugar sphinx that are, eventually, blurred together. Wilson establishes the split identity of "Frado" and "Nig" for her fictionalized self. At first, this split seems to invest her humanity in "Frado" and quarantine the caricature of the trickster black child in "Nig." However, as Wilson's fictionalized child self grows up in the Bellmont home she begins internalizing antiblackness since she has been taught, by the Bellmonts, that blacks are inferior to whites and associated with badness and inferiority. As she becomes an adult, the identities of "Nig" and "Frado" dissolve into just "Frado" as she stops associating blackness with inferiority and instead begins recognizing the possibility of her elevation as a black woman, especially after she leaves the Bellmont home to begin working for herself. The reconciliation of these two identities into one begins to shed light on ways that Wilson is resisting dominant representations of black women.

Similarly, Walker visually and exaggeratedly takes two completely conflicting identities (the overly sexualized jezebel and the de-sexualized mammy figure) and puts traits from both onto the same constructed body, creating one identity— the sugar sphinx. By conflating the two dominant tropes that are used to represent black women in literature, visually, Walker beings to resist the reductive nature of these tropes and stereotypes and to reclaim them in a sex-positive way that challenges histories of denying black women control over their own bodies and desires.

Through these commonalities in representing black women by two black women, one begins to see the forms of resistance that black women of the nineteenth century (Wilson) and black women of the twenty first century (Walker) were able to take given the time each work

was crafted. Likewise, the fact that similar representations first seen in the nineteenth century black women's writing are also seen in twenty-first century critical artwork by black women sheds light on the impact that black woman-made nineteenth-century literary representations of black women has on twenty-first century black woman-made visual representations. To conclude this work, I will look at the similar representations of black women by both Wilson and Walker that I've outlined through the critical frameworks that have been applied throughout this thesis through readings of Fleetwood, Nyong'o, and Hartman.

Fleetwood argues that "Excess flesh is not necessarily a liberatory enactment. *It is a performative that doubles visibility: to see the codes of visuality operating on the (hyper)visible body that is its object*" (Fleetwood 112). The hypervisible bodies that Fleetwood references are the bodies of black women who are constantly viewed as excessive under the white gaze. Thus, enacting excess flesh is a performative act that takes the already extremely visible black woman's body and commands the gaze onto it. It isn't immediately liberatory because it commands the body to be under scrutiny, but it becomes a liberatory act as the hypervisible body gains agency by controlling/commanding the gaze on its own terms. Both Frado's coming-of-age story in *Our Nig* and the use of exaggerated bodily traits on Walker's sugar sphinx represent coming to a moment when excess flesh enactments become liberating.

Mrs. Bellmont shaving of Frado's head demonstrates the hypervisibility of the black female body rendered so excessive and visible that it becomes invisible. That is, by shaving Frado's head, Mrs. Bellmont assures that Frado's body will be rendered invisible. Specifically, Mrs. Bellmont shaves Frado's head because of white supremacist mythology that believes black people were inferior in intellect and animalistic in body. Due to this myth, Mrs. Bellmont takes action to assure that Frado's animalistic/sexual self is removed (marked by her long curly hair)

and that she is only left with her intellectually inferior self. However, we see that when Frado grows up and stops associating her blackness with inferiority that she moves away in an attempt to elevate herself by finding work outside of the Bellmont home (outside of the white supremacist logic that marks her as inferior and animalistic). While this may not be an attempt by Frado herself to enact excess flesh by and to her own ends, Wilson exposes Frado's hypersexualization by the white gaze and white hands. Further, Frado leaving the Bellmont home entirely resists the white gaze that Wilson's excess flesh enactment has created. Instead, Wilson shows, from her adult perspective, Frado's development from a hypersexualized and invisible body as a child to an adult who resists the gaze that once made her simultaneously hypervisible and invisible by leaving on her own terms. On the other hand, Walker uses excess flesh enactments a bit more explicitly.

Walker constructs a hyperexaggerated stereotype of the hypersexual black woman's body through the naked and exposed mammy image. In crafting a forty-foot tall, exaggeratedly hypersexual black woman's body, Walker commands her viewers to look and look again at the sculpture and its confrontational features whether they want to or not (Sharpe 156). Walker refuses to allow the sugar sphinx to be rendered invisible in her sexuality. Likewise, for the viewer to understand the historical relevance of the sculpture, they have to engage with the sexualized image of the sculpture. Therefore, Walker's excess flesh enactment resists the control of the gaze and instead controls the gaze by commanding its attention in its excessiveness. However, both Wilson and Walker's hypervisible characters are made hypervisible initially by the white gaze. Then, under the white gaze, before Frado and the sugar sphinx enact their resistance, they become hypersexualized due to the mythology of the inferior and animalistic black body that pushed its desire onto whites in its excessiveness. This myth, long established by

white figures such as Thomas Jefferson and reinforced by white women living under patriarchy, has been the driving force of established stereotypes of representing black women and their bodies. It was rooted in a simultaneous admission and denial of the desires of white men to have sexual relations with black women prompting, which would "lessen" the purity of the white race.

Nyong'o comments on the white supremacist myth Jefferson helped build and argues that "Black subjects eavesdropped on an anxious discourse of white superiority, black inferiority, and the dangers of racial contamination. Overhearing this discourse, they replayed and refracted it, precisely in the hopes of shaming whites about it as well as using it as evidence to rouse other blacks out of their acquiescence to the present state of affairs" (Nyong'o 89). Therefore, black people becoming aware of whites' anxieties arising from their imposed myth of black inferiority internalized and altered the myth to rally black people together and resist these notions that were being imposed upon them. For Wilson, this resistance to the mythology of the inferior black comes from her leaving the Bellmont home (an environment steeped in this notion) to find work and elevate herself— demonstrating her intellectual abilities that were not allowed to be shown in the Bellmont home. Similarly, Walker's resistance to this mythology comes from crafting a white-appearing, sexualized, mammy figure rather than a molasses-colored one like the small boy statues that surround her. The need to racialize the sculpture as black in order to engage with it reflects the same fear of the whites who constructed the mythology of the inferior black, which required the constant racialization of bodies to maintain the color line.

The need for both Walker and Wilson to come up with forms of resistance to this myth in their work that strategically operate within structurally established representations of black women speaks as well to Hartman's theoretical work in performances of blackness established during times of enslavement. Hartman's argument on what is needed to redress the previously

enslaved body aids in understanding the routes that Wilson and Walker take to create their forms of resistance:

> Redressing the pained body encompasses operating in and against the demands of the system, negotiating the disciplinary harnessing of the body, and counterinvesting in the body as a site of possibility. In this instance, pain must be recognized in its historicity and as the articulation of a social condition of brutal constraint, extreme need, and constant violence; in other words, it is the perpetual condition of ravishment[…] the violation and suffering inextricably enmeshed with the pleasures of minstrelsy and melodrama, the operation of power on black bodies, and the life of property in which the full enjoyment of the slave as thing supersedes the admittedly tentative recognition of slave humanity and permits the intemperate uses of chattel. This pain might be described as the history that hurts—the still-unfolding narrative of captivity, dispossession, and domination that engenders the black subject in the Americas (Hartman 51).

Redressing black bodies that were previously enslaved requires one to work within the system and against the system's structure. Likewise, it must be recognized that black bodies were conditioned by a violent system of oppression that was pleasurable spectacle or whites, and that this system, although no longer called "slavery," still functions as beneficial to white people and painful to black people today. Thus, to remedy black women's bodies that have been represented under rigid stereotypes created during times of enslavement that were used to both sexualize and de-sexualize them, black women must work within and against them. Both Wilson and Walker do so by complicating the rigid stereotypes that their representations of black women were supposed to be boxed into.

For Wilson, she takes the two separately created identities of “Nig” and “Frado” and turns them into one— adult Frado— who has learned that being black doesn’t make her inferior and that she no longer needs to undergo Mrs. Bellmont’s beatings any longer, which prompts her to leave and work outside of the home that has made her feel inferior her entire life. Likewise, the ability for Wilson to create separate identities for “Frado” and “Nig” that portray two very different versions of black women— the mulatta indentured servant, and the black trickster— onto a single character shows her resistance to dominant stereotypes. Wilson could have crafted the tragic mulatta story to evoke sympathy from the reader for “Frado,” or she could have simply made “Nig” into a caricature like Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Topsy. Instead, Wilson resists the dominant culture’s wishes to box in her character into one identity or another and creates a character that undergoes a multitude of identities as she develops into an adult.

As has been pointed out, Walker clearly troubles the stereotypes of the mammy and the jezebel in her visual representation of a black woman. However, she pushes this even further by using the very material that was used to justify enslavement for the better of the economy to create this black woman figure— a representation of black women who were forced to cultivate sugar cane during enslavement. Walker’s work both resists the system that once enslaved black people, and the stereotypes that have been used to rigidly represent black women. Likewise, in sexualizing the de-sexualized mammy figure, Walker not only resists the reductivity of these stereotypes, but she reclaims a body that was not able to represent itself in its multitudes. Further, she embraces the stereotypes that are used to sexualize black women in her own terms, which demonstrates a modern-day black women’s pride in their bodies that may differ from white women. This pride commands the white gaze on black women’s terms and not white men or women’s terms.

As we move through a history of works that attempt to represent black women, what's important is that *Our Nig* and "A Subtlety" were created by black women. While Wilson and Walker's representations of black women differ because of the times they were created in, they both call attention to the dominant stereotypes that have been historically used to represent black women based on both phenotypical differences and the myth of blacks as a separate species. In noticing the similar modes of representing black women in both *Our Nig* and "A Subtlety," one could argue that "A Subtlety" (created and displayed in 2014) was indirectly influenced by *Our Nig* and other representations of black women by black women in the nineteenth century. Likewise, both works push back against dominant structures that had been established in the nineteenth century by working within them and manipulating them in a way that puts control of representing black women back in the hands of black women. While Wilson's was written at a time that did not allow her to explicitly resist the power structures that oppressed her, she finds a way that Walker later turns into a reclamation that represents black women as proud of their bodies that were once marked inferior.

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