

Our Nig: fettters of an American farmgirl

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From her who ever was and still's a slave (Mary Collier, 1739)¹

Following its rediscovery by Henry Louis Gates Jr in 1982, Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859) was quickly identified as a double first – the first African-American novel published by a woman and the first African-American novel published in the USA. It was also rapidly located within its ante-bellum abolitionist literary contexts. Plainly *Our Nig* draws upon Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and slave narrative writing of this period.² My purpose is not to gainsay these perspectives, but to identify, complementarily, how *Our Nig*, the work of a Northern free black, also provides a working-class portrait of New England farm life, removed from the frontier that dominates accounts of American agrarian life.³ The novel articulates a young female farm servant's class position and lack of agency.⁴ Consequently its engagement with the pastoral is highly original – an originality promoted by Wilson's African-American identity: the pastoral tradition to hand was a white Western one, from which she was largely alienated.⁵ She was therefore compelled to bring to her experiences the resources of the only literary tradition coherently available, the slave narrative. As a consequence, that tradition's stress on labour emerges in her writing in the very face of Western pastoral conventions.⁶

This transposition to a rural setting in the 'free' North of frankness about toil and its consequences means that *Our Nig* stands as not simply some type of slave narrative variant, but also what I will call an 'apastoral'. Just as, in Toni Morrison's words, Chinua Achebe 'insist[s] on writing outside the white gaze, not against it', so Harriet Wilson does not write against pastoral conventions in the way an anti-pastoral does,⁷ but stands outside the pastoral's 'gaze' – *without* it (in both senses of the word). Her

novel offers a close engagement with power and economics in the New England countryside, illuminating from without the way the pastoral preserves a near-silence on both sides of the Atlantic concerning farm labour's exhausting physical demands (though this illumination stayed unrecognised for over 120 years, whilst the novel remained unreviewed and largely unread until Gates's facsimile was released).

We now know, thanks to the work of Gates and Barbara H. White, that *Our Nig's* story-line is autobiographical, and that its probable setting is New Hampshire.⁸ Frado, the book's central character, as a child becomes a type of indentured servant to the Bellmonts, working on their family farm in the fictionally named town of 'Singleton', where she is treated with abominable cruelty. This farmhouse is a 'Two-Story White House', the novel stresses, in an irony reflecting on the two-story concerning race and slavery peddled both by America's political establishment and by the town of *Singleton*. But also, equally plainly, Frado labours as a farm servant,⁹ so providing a bottom-up view of her society's rural way of life. As such, her portrait is not unrepresentative. Indenturing of children was common in the ante-bellum North, and when she flees from her mistreatment upon coming of age to try to make her own way, she joins a transient group of 'tenants . . . and the landless . . . an important part of the population, . . . moving from farm to farm and township to township, never settling permanently because they owned no land'.¹⁰

Frado's story, then, offers a grim version of New England country life, laying bare pastoralism's underlying rural class structure. It thereby counters what Joan M. Jensen describes as the 'muffling' of class differences and conflicts in the rural North, where members of communities tended to be highly interdependent and so appear unified.¹¹ Considered from this perspective, *Our Nig* emerges as both one of the first fictional portraits of farm life produced by a working-class writer and one of the earliest prose accounts of any kind written from the point of view of the rural working class in either the United States or Britain. Furthermore, it offers a female viewpoint on this condition.¹² This is quite another way of identifying the novel as a 'first', one opening up a large new area in which to locate the text – stretching back down what Raymond Williams has described as the 'backward moving escalator' of the pastoral tradition, transmitted originally from classical Rome, taken up during the Renaissance and, subsequently, in neo-classical Enlightenment forms.¹³ I will begin, then, by identifying how this pastoral 'escalator', moving away from emerging issues of class on both sides of the Atlantic, is one upon which *Our Nig's* dislocations of fictional representations of farm life conspicuously do not stand.

One starting point in this respect, if not an obvious one, is Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cousin Phillis*, a near-contemporaneous novella published in 1864.¹⁴ This offers a rare fictional account of a female working in the fields. Cousin Phillis is not working class, but she is the daughter of a far-from affluent minister who also works a small farm (which he apparently owns) in order to make ends meet. The family lead frugal but comfortable lives, though relying on all members of the family pulling their weight, in line with a Protestant work ethic that Gaskell knew well from her Unitarian involvements in Manchester and its environs. Phillis always works steadily, for the most part at light domestic tasks such as mending clothes and knitting (*CP*, pp. 17, 38). But, significantly, she also helps out on the farm. We see her feeding chickens, carrying hens' eggs and picking peas (*CP*, pp. 18, 35, 65). The climax to this farmwork comes during two hay harvests (*CP*, pp. 80ff.). Initially the book does not portray her engaging in the harvest but instead standing beside her father in the hayfield admiring the theodolite of an engineer staying at the farm. However, extraordinarily, she *is* finally depicted at work in the fields, 'leading the row of farm-servants, turning the swathes of fragrant hay with measured movement' until 'the red sun was gone down' (*CP*, p. 118).

This type of fieldwork is precisely the sort that women above the servant class are never portrayed as undertaking in fiction up to this time. As such it is worth focusing upon, for the moment is carefully circumscribed. Phillis's work is unavoidable, since harvest time requires all possible hands – so much so that the book's narrator (a visitor to the farm) joins in. Secondly, her labours are carefully framed. No specific mention is made of her using an implement as she 'lead[s] the row' (though earlier we have been told she 'throw[s] . . . her rake down' to welcome her cousin, *CP*, p. 118) and stress is placed on how 'some sort of primitive distinction of rank' is preserved. The intimation is that Phillis risks losing 'rank' as a consequence of her farm work. Significantly, other farm work is predominantly done by labourers or the house servant, Betty, busy churning, 'washing out her milk-pans in . . . cold bubbling spring water', or hard at harvest work whilst Phillis inspects her engineer's apparatus (*CP*, pp. 15, 64, 60). By portraying a woman of Phillis's standing working in the fields Gaskell's story tests the limits of propriety. Yet Gaskell also must – and does – recognise the omnipresence of rural labour.

What I am suggesting is that the discourse that became established in the nineteenth century – that 'Man [is] for the field and women for the hearth' (in Tennyson's 1847 phrase)¹⁵ – is in practice undermined by a whole series of inevitable exemptions. Women can work as dairymaids

and shepherdesses, and even fieldworkers – but only if they are working class (unless chicken or baby animal feeding or gentle garden work is involved).¹⁶ Phillis trespasses across this line, despite the narrative circumscriptions designed to excuse her in what is, otherwise, a largely conventional text in terms of its preservation of pastoral boundaries (though one is also made aware how theodolites impact on the rural idyll – Gaskell’s engagement with the pastoral is far from naive).

The book’s adherence to the pastoral idyll is clear. The farmhouse interior is one where ‘such things as were to be white and clean, were just spotless in their purity (*CP*, p. 27), whilst ‘The court was so full of flowers that they . . . were even to be found self-sown upon the turf that bordered the path’ (*CP*, p. 18). In the kitchen-garden, ‘profuse in vegetables and fruits . . . raspberry-bushes and rose-bushes grew wherever there was a space’ whilst ‘the warm golden air was filled with the murmur of insects . . . the . . . sound of voices out in the fields, the clear far-away rumble of carts’ (*CP*, pp. 64–5, 117). As the escalator moves backwards to this utopia, the beasts gain human feeling: ‘all the dumb beasts seemed to know and love Phillis’ (*CP*, p. 147). The way that nature produces its bounty free from human labour (abundantly self-seeding), and the beasts possess human sensibilities, even intelligence (‘know and love’), generate a ‘dream world’ – if one with disturbing implications for those who perform the actual, largely concealed, labour.

Female work poses a problem in this country utopia, needing to be massaged into conformity with the mid-nineteenth-century discourse of feminine fragility, as it is in *Mary Barton* (1848), in which Alice, gathering heather (‘such pleasant work . . . for . . . it was so light to carry’), ‘sit[s] down under the old hawthorn tree (where we used to make our house among the great roots . . .) to pick and tie the heather up.’¹⁷ The ‘pleasant . . . light’ labour is finally domesticated: the explicit claim is that, nestled in the hawthorn’s roots, she somehow sits ‘indoors’. A problem with pastoral discourse such as this, particularly in nineteenth-century writing by the ‘solid middle classes’ (as Gaskell might be characterised),¹⁸ is the precariousness of this balancing act, which always threatens to summon up the discourse of working-class labouring life as ‘slavery’. This comparison, fuelled, of course, by transatlantic abolitionist accounts of slavery’s hardship, which often focused upon enforced female labourers’ sufferings, occurs in *Mary Barton*’s opening chapter: ‘We are their slaves as long as we can work; we pile up their fortunes with the sweat of our brows.’¹⁹ We shall see how the tropes used to minimise this problem in *Cousin Phillis* are characteristic. Perhaps the way they result in distortions of country

life is symbolised by the fact that ‘Claude glasses’ were popularly used by the bourgeoisie to frame and tint the landscape so that it resembled the Claudian paintings hanging on their walls.²⁰

The pastoral’s careful framing of its landscapes to excise most farm labour and almost all female farmwork signals both how labour compromises the pastoral idyll and how behind such framing lies some recognition that rural work was harsh and hard. In *North and South* (1854–55), in particular, Margaret Hale talks at some length about the distresses experienced by rural labourers: ‘They labour on, from day to day, in the great solitude of steaming fields – never speaking or lifting up their . . . downcast heads. The hard spadework robs their brain of life . . . they go home brutishly tired.’²¹ To some extent this is part of a pattern of encouraging urban workers to contrast their lot favorably with that of rural workers, as when a pair of Dorset farm labourer’s trousers, much distressed by hard toil, was part of an exhibition held in Manchester in 1853.²² Nevertheless, this sort of emphasis made it all the more imperative that female farm labour go largely unrepresented, except within circumscribed, ‘fecund’ bucolic roles (such as (idle) shepherdesses or milking/churning dairymaids).²³ However, generally speaking, what E.P. Thompson describes as ‘polite culture’ established a barrier to the portrait of all ‘habitual . . . daily labour’, which meant that ‘little precedent’ existed for such portraits.²⁴ There is an acute shortage of accounts of farm labour, and a particular hedge around portraits of women’s fieldwork until later in the nineteenth century. *Our Nig* diverged astonishingly from this polite convention.

Gaskell, by contrast, drew back – a recoil also prompted by a contemporary controversy. Middle-class distaste for women labouring in the fields gathered momentum in the UK at this time, part of an increasingly hostile attitude towards working women and in response to a rising emphasis on the harshness of rural work. Arguments focused upon the use of mixed-sex agricultural work gangs, which, it was claimed, gave rise not only to ‘hardship’ but also ‘immorality.’²⁵ The commissions set up as a result to investigate the state of rural labour heard testimonies allowing a glimpse of what lay beyond the pastoral’s limits. For example, a woman testified in 1843: ‘My eldest girl has a thorough dislike to [fieldwork]. She almost always goes crying to her work. She would do almost anything than it.’²⁶ Relatedly, W.S. Gilly, in *Peasantry North of the Border* (1842), endorsed the idea that ‘The greatest evil in our rural districts, is the degradation of the female sex, by their employment in labours adapted for men.’²⁷ Consequently a rare working-class prose account of farm life,

Alexander Somerville's *The Whistler at the Plough* (1852), despite its ironic title and its concerted anti-pastoral perspective on rural working-class life and poverty, offers a portrait of women farmworkers as not just degraded, but depraved.²⁸ The pastoral idyll was becoming more tightly contested in the mid-nineteenth century, and the female was the first to be squeezed out.

It was these debates, following the caustic poetry of 'peasant poets' such as John Clare and Robert Bloomfield, that account for the change of perspective found in Charles Kingsley's *Yeast* (1848), 'tear[ing] down . . . the vision of a rural idyll' as it confronts the unhappy condition of the rural poor, summed up by the maxim 'day-labourer, born, day labourer live, from hand to mouth' and its characterisation of field women: 'It's the field work . . . makes them brutes in soul and manners . . . It wears them out in body, sir . . . They must go afield, or go hungered'.²⁹

Unease with pastoralism, swelling under such assaults – albeit assaults recurrently marred by patronage and usually devoid of specificity³⁰ – is captured in an essay by George Eliot. Ruminating in 1856 upon 'How little' was 'known' of 'the real characteristics of the working-classes', she visualises them at work:

Observe a company of haymakers. When you see them at a distance, tossing up forkfuls of hay in the golden light . . . and the bright green space which tells of work done gets larger and larger, you pronounce the scene 'smiling'. . . Approach nearer and you will certainly find that haymaking time is a time for joking, especially if there are women among the labourers; but the coarse laughter that bursts out . . . is as far as possible from your conception of idyllic merriment.³¹

Within Eliot's assumption that she can discriminate accurately between types of merriment (with all its patronising implications) lurks a discomfort about the role of labour in the rural idyll, which in turn can be related to the rise of mechanised modes of capitalist practice in farming and their relationship to industrialisation and factory labour.³² Such a revision of the pastoral discourse in the context of changing agricultural practices, representing female labours as degrading (de-grade-ing), makes it apparent why it is so awkward for Phillis to participate in the hay-harvest, and helps account for the novel's insistence on her superior rank and the other careful qualifications hedging her labours. Such defensive deployment of the pastoral idyll are repeatedly encountered.

By contrast, almost no accounts exist by rural working-class women of definitively unidyllic experiences during this period.³³ Sayer has

unearthed an account by a Mrs Burrows of her work in an agricultural gang in the 1860s (a retrospective one, only published in 1931): 'In the evening we did not leave the fields until the clock had struck six, and then of course we must walk home, and this walk was no easy task for us children who had worked hard all day'.³⁴

The sheer shortage of such working-class perspectives means that middle- or upper-class views dominate. In this respect, Harriet Martineau's *Brooke and Brooke Farm*, published in 1832, can be regarded as a kind of apotheosis. Written as a defence of enclosure, Martineau's novella tells the story of the enclosing of common land in the village of Brooke.³⁵ This account is reassuringly framed by pastoral conventions. The opening describes how Brooke Farm, 'a solid English mansion' surrounded by 'blooming peachtree[s]' and 'flourishing plantations' nestles in the 'loved' village of Brooke (*BB*, pp. 1–3). The ending, predictably, portrays 'harvest home', with reapers 'stooping to the cheerful toil', in a scene of fullness and benevolence: 'How goodly looked the last waggon, laden with golden grain . . . leaving a few ears dangling from the sprays for gleaners' (*BB*, pp. 134, 135). The bulk of the text is taken up by propagandising explanations of why it is for the best that, post-enclosure, only large farms can flourish. Small farms cannot afford the initial capital outlays to enclose their holdings, stock them, fertilise them adequately or properly fund their upkeep. The Brooke inhabitant, Norton, is therefore misguided when he purchases a few extra fields, failing to recognise 'the improvidence of beginning to farm without a sufficient capital of land or money' (*BB*, p. 126). Norton inevitably fails.

The baldness of the language is striking: 'It cannot be, you see, that any very small capitalist can compete with a large one' (*BB*, p. 97). The issue of class is summoned up by such formulations, in which the destiny of those who must surrender their land is to work for others. So Norton ends up a bailiff thanks to the paternalistic intervention of the owner of Brooke Farm. It is just possible to hold on to an 'allotment', but this will need to make a 'good profit' (*BB*, p. 38). And even then it will be necessary to sell part of one's labour to nearby large landowners: thus the allotment owner, George Gray, must also work for Sir Harry Withers. To sustain the message that this arrangement is propitious for all, labour must be presented as near-effortless. So a larchwood's fertility increases 'without any assistance from human labour beyond that of putting larch plants into the ground . . . What wonder that Sir Harry planted many larches!' (*BB*, p. 60). Labour is elided, right alongside the book's contention that the title of labourer is wholly 'honourable' (*BB*, p. 102).

The best that usually happens is that, like *Middlemarch's* Dorothea, we are left looking sympathetically out of (upper) middle-class windows, scopically distanced: 'in the field she could see figures moving . . . she felt the largeness of the world and the manifold wakings of men to labour and endurance'.³⁶ It is hard to find literary texts crossing this pastoral remove in either Britain or America. Exceptions to such aloofness and to the contrived omission of representations of labour cannot be found in British fiction prior to 1859; instead, the only resort must be to two peasant poets of the eighteenth century, Mary Collier and Stephen Duck, and to two of their poems: Collier's 'The Woman's Labour', written in response to Duck's 'The Thresher's Labour'.³⁷ *Our Nig's* bald frankness about labour is almost matched by these, yet finally Wilson's novel remains much more of a scopic reversal: its unmediated 'two-story' of middle-class abuse of farmworkers lacks the buffering (however subliminal) necessitated by the sponsorship of wealthy patrons that Duck (especially) and Collier enjoyed.³⁸

Frado, the New England 'free' farm servant, subject to appalling beatings at the hands of her mistress, Mrs Bellmont, experiences fully this other story of farmhouse life. Consisting of vicious mistreatment legitimated by a racism that the novel intimates infects all in the 'free' North, it causes her to end up a chronic semi-invalid. This is the farm economy that underpins Mrs Bellmont's resolve to 'beat the money out of her if I can't get her worth any other way' (*ON*, p. 48). Mrs Bellmont measures Frado monetarily repeatedly: 'Just think how much profit she was to us last summer. We had no work hired out; she did the work of two girls' (*ON*, p. 48).³⁹ Her life is a matter of the extraction of all her potential 'profit' to the Bellmonts. She is particularly fully commodified, not just because she is African-American, but also because – though a 'Free Black' (*ON*, p. xxxix) – she is indentured and so, like farm family labour, readily exploited.⁴⁰ The ironic way she is a *cost-free* 'free black' means a two-story of labour and exploitation is intercalated with the two-story of racism, in disturbing and sophisticated textual economics. Frado's story offers a piquant perspective on the relationship of labour to economics and 'free' enterprise. The result is an extraordinary 'apastoral' departure from the pastoral in a text about rural life.

To understand this more fully, it is necessary to explore briefly some further tensions within American pastoralism.⁴¹ The writings of Jefferson constitute an appropriate departure-point, since *Our Nig's* opening promise to portray a 'two-story white house' calls up not just an image of a New England farmhouse, but also an image of the White House itself,

the symbolic centre of the American republic, its president sworn to guarantee the freedom of its citizens as ‘an inalienable right’.⁴² Jefferson was in 1859 still its most renowned inhabitant and he had famously celebrated farmwork: ‘Those who labor on the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever He had a chosen people . . . It is the focus in which he keeps alive that sacred fire’.⁴³ Yet Jefferson himself conspicuously does not labour upon his land but rather rides or rambles over it, recurrently in a supervisory capacity (*SW*, pp. 389, 552, 556). This is, of course, a matter of political economy; Jefferson both celebrates self-sufficiency yet also acknowledges that he is able to enjoy his civilised life through entering the field of commerce. As Charles A. Miller comments: ‘Jefferson wanted it both ways’ in that ‘If American farmers took seriously the doctrines of independence and self-sufficiency, they would not produce for commerce at all’.⁴⁴ In the same way the dignity of self-sufficient labour celebrated by Hector St John de Crèvecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer* does not extend to its narrator, James, or the character Mr Bertram, who tells a Russian visitor that ‘I direct and advise more than I work’ since ‘Being now easy in my circumstances, I have ceased to labour’⁴⁵ (*AF*, pp. 183, 192). Bertram instead employs ‘hired’ farmworkers (*AF*, p. 189).

Our Nig offers up a similar arrangement: the Bellmont family, particularly Mrs Bellmont and Mary, ‘direct’ Frado’s farm labours. Wilson’s text, like Jefferson’s or Crèvecoeur’s, represents farmers as ‘free’ to supervise, aligning all their writings with Harriet Martineau’s portrait of Brooke’s Sir Harry, ‘going [his] rounds amongst the labourers’ (*BB*, p. 61).

Crèvecoeur’s *Letters*, then, unsurprisingly lose coherence when considering labour and its relationship to his beloved ‘free’ farmers. This matters because, as Alexander O. Boulton observes, both Jefferson and Crèvecoeur ‘invented a “New American,” a free and independent farmer . . . opposed to hierarchy, dependency and slavery . . . [an] ideological citizen [seen as a] . . . prerequisite for the creation of a national self-identity’.⁴⁶ Yet this invention was riven by contradictions, not least because, as Timothy Sweet notes, ‘farming often required a good deal of wage labour, supplied by landless men and women’, once Northern slavery was abolished.⁴⁷

Consequently, drawing on a trope characteristic of much ante-bellum writing, Crèvecoeur is driven further, representing labour not only as operating in a command-free vacuum but also as almost magically issuing from nature’s bounty. In the process his political economy draws on a pervasive American version of the backward-moving pastoral escalator, which, like its British cousin, again subsists in simply allowing

nature's bounty to issue forth.⁴⁸ So 'nature's kind luxuriance' causes her to 'open her broad lap to receive the perpetual accession of new comers, and to supply them with food' (*AF*, pp. 186, 11) whilst farm animals look after themselves, bequeathed self-nurturing wisdom by an ever-fecund mother nature: 'some of them seem to surpass even men in memory and sagacity' (*AF*, p. 186). Such moments chime with equivalent moments of wonder in Jefferson's writing: 'I am never satiated with rambling through the fields and farms', he observes, since 'our own dear Monticello' is where 'nature spreads so rich a mantle under the eye'. The accent shifts to contemplation: 'We had not peas nor strawberries here till the 8th day of this month. On the same day I heard the first whip-poor-will whistle . . . Take notice hereafter whether the whip-poor-wills always come with the strawberries and peas' (*SW*, p. 460). As the cultivation of strawberries and peas is seamlessly united with the natural cycle of the whip-poor-wills' migration, the facts of labour and class are elided; farmwork disappears and all men appear (labour[er]-)free, legitimating the enjoyment of leisure.

This is unsurprising, given the contradictions in a formulation by which Jefferson and Crèvecoeur represent labour as both a dignified link to the soil and also, paradoxically, as merely an *effortless* gathering of bounty. The links with Gaskell's carefully hedged representation of Cousin Phillis's farm life are clear, but these American elisions are noticeably more extreme. One way of accounting for this is to suggest a closer link with a common source for this pastoral discourse, Classical representations of a Golden Age, in which visions of Arcadian perfection have millenarian overtones sitting well with America's cultural aspirations and self-representations.⁴⁹

Even more pertinent, though, is the premium put upon success by the discourses of emigration, given the heavy personal and financial investment required from immigrants. This stokes up a more Manichean tone in the American pastoral. Compared to its English equivalent, it is pervaded by sharper binary divisions that prove inherently unstable.⁵⁰ So, for example, Jefferson's famous paean to 'freedom', which he opposes to 'dependence', which 'begets servility and . . . suffocates the germ of virtue' (*SW*, p. 259), is destabilised by his actual employment of leasees, servants and slaves. The binary divide is ultimately rooted in a division of labour.

The final, desperate resort is to emphasise that America's democratic ideal is modest in scale. So Jefferson simplifies his ideal of the farmer by eulogising the smallholder: 'The smallholders are the most precious part of a state' (*SW*, p. 362). Similarly, Crèvecoeur's James claims 'I am a simple farmer' (*AF*, p. 200). However, such Rousseauvian sentiments prove hard

to sustain. James may finally revert to being a simple farmer, but only by the extraordinary device of deserting his life as an 'opulent farmer . . . surrounded with every conveniency which our external labor, and internal industry could give' in order to procure 'a simple subsistence with hardly any superfluity, [which] cannot have the same restrictive effect on our minds' (AF, p. 225). In this formulation the phrase, 'external labor, and internal industry', seeking to distinguish between outdoor and indoor work, proves ambiguous. It can also be regarded as recognition of how labour has become 'external' to these 'opulent farmers'. '[S]urrounded with every conveniency', they operate an 'internal industry' – the running of a farm business. Crèvecoeur's James feels that the way these farmers have realised 'surplus . . . into solid wealth' will lead to 'fatal consequences' (AF, pp. 225–6). So 'simple farm[ing]' must be preferred.

The instability of this final, desperate resort is made clear by the logic of capitalism Harriet Martineau spells out in her 'Illustration of Political Economy', in *Brooke and Brooke Farm*. Untroubled by the type of democratic egalitarianism recurrently fuelling a desire within both Britain and America to establish utopian egalitarian communities (such as Brook Farm, 1841–47), and consequently able to air openly issues raised by 'the division of labour' (BB, p. 94), Martineau urges that it is 'Better [to] call one-self a labourer . . . and have plenty to eat, and a whole roof over one's head than pinch and starve for the sake of owning a couple of fields' (BB, p. 93). Her advice starkly illuminates how Crèvecoeur's and Jefferson's praise of simple farmers sets up an impractical backward-moving escalator eliding not only the issue of labour (and who labours) but also, concomitantly, the issue of class. This is why, in one further recognition of these discursive instabilities, Jefferson ushers paternalism on the scene: 'Take every possible occasion for entering into the houses of labourers . . . see what they eat, how they are clothed, whether they are obliged to work too hard' (SW, p. 139).

Let us then observe Jefferson's injunction, and seek to discover how Frado is fed and clothed, and whether she is 'obliged to work too hard'. And for once, this is easily done – almost uniquely in ante-bellum fiction. (Melville's 'The Tartarus of Maids', 1855, and the writings of George Lippard redress this imbalance somewhat, in an industrial setting.) *Our Nig* indeed depicts a farm labourer's life. The near-total absence of alternative accounts marks out Wilson's novel as a significant first in a new way, not least because, *pace* most versions of American farm life, farming often required wage labour.⁵¹ As in Britain, there are very few prose accounts of American farm labours, especially female farm labours, until

later in the century. As Joan M. Jensen laments, ‘historians have relatively few written records from which to derive the rural woman’s past.’⁵² Women involved with utopian experimental communities do consider farm labour. Louisa M. Alcott penned a brief, retrospective account in 1876 of her mother’s work in an experimental transcendental community in 1843, and Marcia Bullard describes a female’s fieldwork in a Shaker community.⁵³ On the frontier, too, accounts crop up, like Mollie Sanford describing her anxiety-ridden donning of male clothes in an attempt to make her Nebraskan farmwork easier, and Stephen Fender quotes one Janet Johnson, writing to her sister from Beverly, Upper Canada in 1846: ‘*Dear Jane, I never was in a place under the sun I liked worse I helped James with the turnips hoying. I was to fall down with the heat and when taking them and the potatoes up I was al shaivering of cold*’.⁵⁴

Such prose accounts – almost always, as in these four cases, published later than *Our Nig* – are scarce, which is why I have been forced as far afield as Canada. Accounts by farm labourers are even thinner on the ground. Mostly we are limited to the sort of perspective encountered in *Walden*, in which Thoreau gives an aloof account of his encounter with an Irish farm-labourer, John Field, ‘an honest, hard-working, but shiftless man’, squatting in an abandoned farmhouse with a leaking roof and contracted to dig a farmer’s field ‘with a spade or bog hoe’: ‘I trust he does not read this, unless he will improve by it’, Thoreau opines,⁵⁵ in a scopic arrangement bearing comparison with George Eliot’s.

Such near-universal neglect of the precise details of farm work add to *Our Nig*’s importance. Its portrait of Frado, as Jefferson requests, focuses on her inadequate diet, her poor clothing and the way she is worked too hard. It is not just slavery that possesses a politics of the body. Indeed, the account of her life with the Bellmonts opens with her being led to inadequate accommodation, ‘an unfinished chamber . . . [with] the roof slanting nearly to the floor’ (*ON*, p. 13) and a list of her tasks:

Her first work was to feed the hens . . . She was then . . . to drive the cows to pasture . . . Upon her return she was allowed to eat . . . a bowl of skimmed milk, with brown bread crusts, which she was told to eat standing . . . she was placed on a cricket to wash the common dishes. . . she was to be in waiting to bring wood and chips, to run hither and thither . . .

A large amount of dish-washing for small hands followed dinner. Then the same after tea and going after the cows finished her day’s work. The same routine followed day after day, with slight variations; adding a little more work and spicing the toil with ‘words that burn’, and frequent blows on her head. . . . Her labours were multiplied . . . (*ON*, pp. 13–14)

Details of Frado's demanding tasks constitute a refrain in *Our Nig's* account of her life at the Bellmonts'; stress is placed on the way these increase as she grows up: 'There had been additional burdens laid on her . . . She must now *milk* the cows . . . Flocks of sheep had been added to the farm . . . In the absence of the men, she must harness the horse . . . go to the mill' (*ON*, p. 27). Jefferson's paternalistic insistence on discovering details can be readily observed:

From early dawn until all were retired, was she toiling, overworked . . .

Exposure from heat to cold, or the reverse, often destroyed her health for short intervals. She wore no shoes until after the frost, and snow even, appeared . . .

. . . manual labor was not in reality her only burden; but such an incessant torrent of scolding and boxing and threatening. . . (*ON*, p. 35)

Ironically, when one of the Belmont males seeks to help Frado, by performing one of her tasks, driving home the cows, he 'unintentionally prolonged her pain', since she could therefore be left bound and gagged as punishment all the longer. By the end of these accounts of Frado's labours it is easy to understand both the irony of Mrs Belmont's reflection that 'she could not well spare one who could adapt herself to all departments – man, boy, housekeeper, domestic, etc.' and the comment of 'Margaretta Thorn', concerning how the Bellmonts 'ruined [Frado's] health by hard work, both in the field and the house' (*ON*, pp. 63, 77).

These details of labour and its debilitating effects run exactly counter to the Jeffersonian discourse's representation of labour as an effortless engagement with the bounty of nature. So Frado's laborious daily cow-herding contrasts with *Letters'* portrait of the same activity, which, obliterating the labour, represents the cows apparently marshalling themselves, with brute sagacity: 'His cows were then returning home, deep-bellied, short legged, having udders ready to burst'. Indeed, when labour must be acknowledged – the cows cannot milk themselves – the work is still effortless'. The cows actively 'seek . . . with seeming toil, to be delivered from the great exuberance they contained' (*AF*, p. 186). Again, the trope silently erases the labourer in the phrase – a deeply ambiguous one in this context – '*seeming toil*'. *Our Nig*, by contrast, excludes any such beneficent representation of farm life. Indeed, the land and its qualities are almost totally absent from Wilson's account, in sharp contrast to the repeated careful measuring by Jefferson and Crèvecoeur of fertility and productivity, extending to details of soil variations (*SW*, pp. 127ff.; *AF*, p. 23). Land for Frado simply represents

labour. All we are otherwise told, curtly, is that ‘the Bellmonts [lived] in a large, old fashioned, two-story white house, environed by fruitful acres, and embellished by shrubbery and shade trees’ (*ON*, p. 9). The words ‘fruitful’ and ‘embellished’ are the only ones in the whole of Wilson’s apastoral novel that might be held to acknowledge the pastoral tradition. And it is significant that in this very sentence the Bellmont’s farm is given the description ‘two-story white house’ (the phrase contained in the novel’s subtitle).

I want to weigh this moment carefully. It is a highly transatlantic literary moment. Wilson has, I believe, chosen the name Bellmont with precision. Firstly, it can summon up Jefferson’s shade, for ‘*bel mont*’ in French carries a meaning related to the Italian ‘*monticello*’ (‘hillock’). Thus not only the White House but also Monticello, where Jefferson kept his slaves, is invoked. Palladian houses like Monticello were customarily mounted on a small hill, so as to command prospects but not dominate them and preserve a harmonious unity with nature (making these hills, indeed, ‘*bel monts*’). Belmont, Portia’s ‘park’-set home in *The Merchant of Venice*, would have sought such harmony in the sixteenth-century Veneto (where Palladio built his villas) and, just as Shakespeare’s play exposes the underlay of money and legal trickery supporting Belmont, so Frado exposes what supports her Bellmonts’ white house.⁵⁶ The effect of these dense allusions is to summon up a transnational pastoral web ensnaring Frado in a fruitfully embellished sheen of beauty she cannot escape even when she comes of age, because beyond it lies only beggary.⁵⁷

Indeed, once Frado risks all and leaves the Bellmonts, her life becomes a constant and unequal battle with poverty. At one point she becomes a species of straw hat outworker (*ON*, p. 67). As such, incontestably a ‘free wage labourer’, she draws attention to her previous, closely comparable class-location.⁵⁸ Though she claims that being a free wage labourer is easy for her compared with her farm labours (in a further undermining of pastoralism), her constant lot is always to labour as hard as her destroyed health will allow her.

Consequently, I read her confrontation with a ram in the Bellmont’s sheep-flock allegorically:

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, till . . . she resolved to punish him. The pasture in which the sheep grazed was bounded . . . by a wide stream, which flowed on one side at the base of precipitous banks. The first spare moment at her command, she ran to the pasture with a dish in her hand, and mounting the highest point of land nearest the

stream, called the flock to their mock repast. . . . The willful sheep came furiously leaping . . . far in advance of the flock. Just as he leaped for the dish, she suddenly jumped one side, when down he rolled into the river . . . (ON, p. 28)

It is easily possible to join in with the watching men, ‘convulsed with laughter at the trick’. But perhaps the text cautions us not to be readily drawn to their merriment, since it points out how, only moments before, her audience was watching in ‘breathless’ anxiety as Frado stood precariously at the edge of a cliff, down which she could well have been bowled to her death. In some ways this figures both her relationship to her work and the way that hard labour customarily leads to an early death or disablement and poverty once strength or dexterity fails. Frado at this early point is young enough still to have her health, and hence nimble enough to skip aside from the dangers to which her constant hard work exposes her. But these dangers gathered in frequency in an American agricultural environment, which, by 1850, was becoming heavily capitalised, with three-fifths of the rural population ‘labourers, domestic servants or artisans.’⁵⁹ By the end of the book, her health chronically compromised by the attrition of rural labour, lamed by a fall at work, Frado bodily testifies to these processes of change.

I must finally note that Frado’s labours on the farm are literally doubled by her domestic chores as a female farm servant, and how, eventually, farmwork gives way, after the labour of childbirth, to labours devoted to keeping her son out of the County Farm orphanage. Such doubling and redoubling of labour runs directly counter to the ruminations of Jefferson on the impropriety of allowing women to work.⁶⁰ It is precisely because Frado is always yoked to the bottom of her particular socio-economic pile by the tripartite oppression of class, race and gender, that she can expose the pyramidal structures looming over her.

Our Nig establishes how the ‘inalienable rights . . . of liberty and the pursuit of happiness’ (SW, p. 234) are demonstrably partial and relative for ‘free’ blacks almost as much as slaves, particularly since the indenturing of African-Americans was quite common in the ante-bellum North.⁶¹ But it also does more than this. *Our Nig* recasts the available literary resources for portraying farm life in anglophone writing by standing not only *without* that version of the American pastoral casting the American rural landscape as feminine,⁶² but also *without* the pastoral tradition generally. The resulting apastoral creates a topography of labour providing – uniquely, in fiction up to that time – an explanation of how it was that the

pair of Dorset labourer's trousers exhibited in Manchester in 1853 could stand up unsupported, they were 'so patched and stiffened with sweat and animal grease'.⁶³ *Our Nig's* grim economics, whilst rooted in the particular racist constructions of American life, forcefully exposes this labour-intensive side to farm life, otherwise so perfidiously omitted from pastoral discourse on both sides of the Atlantic.

Notes

My thanks to Julia Swindell's assistance, and John Lucas's invaluable advice, leading me to *Cousin Phillis*, the Dorset farmworker's trousers and Portia's Belmont. My thanks are also due to the British Academy for their support for my work.

- 1 Mary Collier, 'The Woman's Labour', in *'The Thresher's Labour' by Stephen Duck and 'The Woman's Labour' by Mary Collier: Two Eighteenth Century Poems* (1989 [1739]): 15. Hereafter *TL* and *WL*.
- 2 See Gates 1983: xi–lv; also Foreman 1900; Gates 1987; Smith 1987.
- 3 Accounts of women's farm labours on the frontier are commoner than for other American locations, because of the high ideological loading placed on frontier life as the archetypal American experience, stimulating both consensual and oppositional accounts. See Fairbanks and Sundberg (1993), who show that most accounts of pioneer life post-date *Our Nig*; also Jensen 1981; Peavy 1996; Jeffrey 1998.
- 4 I use the word 'class' in the sense offered by E.P. Thompson: 'class . . . [is] something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships' (Thompson 1966: 9).
- 5 Little is known of Wilson's reading (and, consequently, of her awareness of the pastoral tradition), but she did read the poems of Henry Kirke White, since she quotes from three in *Our Nig*. See R.J. Ellis, 'Notes', in Wilson 1998: 87–9. Hereafter *ON*. Pastoral flourishes abound in White. See, for example, his 'Childhood: A Poem' (White 1830: 244 and passim). White's attractiveness for Wilson is clear, given the melancholic bent of his poems and their recurrent recognition of the presence of poverty and toil.
- 6 See, for example, Frederick Douglass's many portraits of slave labour (Douglass 1982 [1845]: passim).
- 7 Toni Morrison, quoted in Jaggi 2000: 6. The anti-pastoral is defined by Pearl Brown (1992). It is primarily marked by its inversions of pastoral conventions – necessarily setting it in a dialogue with the pastoral. However, few pastoral works unremittingly endorse the virtues and innocence of country ways, as set against city vices and corruption. From William Empson onwards, things have always been identified as more complex. See Empson 1935.

- 8 See Barbara White 1993; also Curtis and Gates 1990.
- 9 Karen Sayer defines farm servants as ones who ‘did domestic work on the farm, and were available to do field and harvest and dairy work when required’ (Sayer 1995: 6). This definition largely fits Frado (though a requirement to carry out farmwork is more systematically factored into her workload).
- 10 Jensen 1986: 41–2. The age that Frado becomes indentured, six, is typical; the average age for white children being five, of black children, seven. See Jensen 1986: 72.
- 11 Jensen 1986: 45.
- 12 Accounts of pioneer life, whether memoirs like Rebecca Burlend’s, or novels – and only one predates *Our Nig*, Carolyn Kirkland’s *Western Border Life*, describing a female’s travels on the frontier – do not exactly stand as working-class accounts. See Burlend 1968 [1848]; Kirkland 1856.
- 13 Williams 1973: 18ff. See also Squires 1971; Tolliver 1971.
- 14 Elizabeth Gaskell, *Cousin Phillis* (1995 [1864]). Hereafter *CP*.
- 15 Alfred, Lord Tennyson, ‘The Princess: A Medley’ (1847), in Tennyson 1909: 202.
- 16 See Sayer 1995: 25ff. Arthur Hugh Clough’s *Bothie of Toper-na-Fuosich* (1848) portrays a farmer’s daughter digging up potatoes, but she labours in a farmhouse garden, not the fields.
- 17 Gaskell 1970 [1848]: 70.
- 18 Uglow 1993: 203, 8.
- 19 Gaskell 1970 [1848]: 20. Charles Kingsley in *Yeast* describes a country ‘wretch’ as ‘a man and a brother’ (1994 [1851]: 76).
- 20 E.P. Thompson, ‘Introduction’, *TL*, p. i. Sayer (1995) unearths a brief portrait of a woman weeding, written in the eighteenth century by James Hurdis. See Hurdis 1800.
- 21 Gaskell 1854–55: 382.
- 22 Lucas 1966: 193.
- 23 Mary Wollstonecraft, when proposing that women serve as carpenters and sailors (whilst conceding that the key role was motherhood), fails to draw attention to a main indicator of women’s hardiness – their established role as female fieldworkers and farm servants. See Sayer 1995: 17.
- 24 Quoted in Uglow 1993: 32.
- 25 Sayer (1995: 37) quotes Assistant Commissioner Stephen Denison, 1843. See also Sharpe 1992.
- 26 Sayer 1995: 37.
- 27 Quoted in Sayer 1995: 60.
- 28 Somerville 1852–53.
- 29 Sayer 1995: 41; Kingsley 1994 [1851]: 120, 125.
- 30 Kingsley 1994 [1851]: 125: ‘the promise of the [lofty] brow [was] . . . almost always belied by the loose and sensual lower features’.

- 31 Eliot 1856: 52–53.
- 32 Sayer notes that James Caird calls this transition period (1846–73) that of ‘High Farming’, when ‘more farmers than ever before were practising the new methods and using the new science of capitalist agriculture’ (1995: 85). This emerges in *Cousin Phillis*, when Phillis’s farmer father and the narrator’s engineer father design a ‘new model of a turnip-cutting machine’ (*CP*, p. 50).
- 33 Sayer 1995: 87, 174.
- 34 Quoted in Sayer 1995: 88–9.
- 35 Martineau, *Brooke and Brooke Farm* (1832). Hereafter *BB*.
- 36 Eliot 1965 [1871–72]: 846.
- 37 ‘The Thresher’s Labour’ was an aberration within Stephen Duck’s oeuvre, since, though he was a former agricultural labourer, he had been taken up by Royal patronage, and his verse mostly reflects his patrons’ ideas of propriety. In ‘The Thresher’s Labour’, Duck portrays a remorseless pattern of hard labour leading to exhaustion (*TL*, pp. 3, 6). Mary Collier reserves her main fusillade for a female who oversees her work when she returns from the harvest fields to carry out domestic labours. She is harshly overworked (*WL*, pp. 21–2). The narrator is harshly over-worked: ‘Not only Sweat but Blood runs trickling down / Our wrists and fingers; still our Work demands / The constant action of our lab’ring Hands’ (*WL*, p. 22). This pattern (a frank portrait of a female farm servant’s labours laced with resentment towards an oppressive female supervisor) re-emerges in *Our Nig* over one century later, even more forcibly.
- 38 In Duck’s case, subscribers included Queen Caroline, the Prince of Wales and a long list of others; in Collier’s case, the list is substantial, though shorter and less august. *TL*, pp. vi–ix.
- 39 Barbara White 1993: 33ff.
- 40 See Atack and Bateman 1987: 186ff.: ‘the large farm family . . . created a pool of captive labour’.
- 41 Even on the frontier, shortage of labour of all kinds provided a justification for women to work. See Jeffrey 1998: 78.
- 42 *ON*, p. xxxix. For discussions of the nuances of Wilson’s subtitle, see Jackson 1989: 351; Doriani 1991: 212; Ellis 2000. Nine of the first twelve Presidents owned slaves. African-American authors repeatedly explore the ramifications of this hypocrisy, most famously William Wells Brown, in *Clotel*. *Clotel*’s central character results from an affair between Jefferson and one of his female slaves (Brown 1989 [1853]). See also Ellis 1999. For discussions of this ‘two-story’ aspect to Jefferson, see Miller 1988: 43; Regis 1992: 95; Semonin 1992: 17; Onuf 1993; Temperley 1997.
- 43 Thomas Jefferson, *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (1998): 259. Hereafter *SW*.
- 44 Miller 1988: 208.

- 45 J. Hector St John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer* (1971 [1782]): 183, 192. Hereafter *AF*.
- 46 Boulton 1995: 486.
- 47 Sweet 1994: 59. See also Atack and Bateman 1987: 37, who note that in 1860 in the north-east only 37 per cent of the population were farmers, whilst 28 per cent were labourers and that some 'farmers without farms' and 'part-time farmers' would also have been labourers.
- 48 See, for example, Enos Hitchcock's *The Farmer's Friend*, whose main protagonist notes, 'Here in a calm retreat . . . resides felicity . . . industry without servility . . . order without an over-rigid discipline – everything good and amiable' (1793: 104–5). See also Dunne 1991.
- 49 See Fender 1992: 28, 63, 93. For such Arcadian visions of a 'Golden Age' see Hesiod 1973: 66; Virgil 1983: 18–19, 22.
- 50 Except when this, too, is deeply influenced by Classical examples – as was Ben Jonson's 'To Penshurst': 'The painted partrich lyes in every field, / And for thy messe, is willing to be kill'd / . . . / The blushing apricot, and woolly peach/ Hang on thy walls, that every child may reach' (Johnson 1954: 77). Even then the American mode is usually more hyperbolic, since 'so urgent was their need to turn their cultural loss to advantage that they fell upon, as if inventing anew, a whole, traditional rhetorical complex' (Fender 1992: 60). Given the exaggerated scale of statements of pastoral ease in American writing, when contradictions emerge, these are often stark. See Miller 1988: 64–5.
- 51 See Jensen 1986: 45ff.; Atack and Bateman 1987: 194; Sweet 1994, 59ff. Accounts of frontier farm labours are still sparse, since many pioneers were not literate and it was difficult for pioneers, especially pioneer women, to find time to write of their labours. See Jeffrey 1998: 8, 77.
- 52 Jensen 1981: xvii.
- 53 Alcott 1981 [1876]. For Marcia Bullard's story, see Jensen 1981: 55–7. Writing in 1906, Bullard describes work from around 1866.
- 54 Sanford 1959 [1857–1866]: 53; Fender 1992: 210.
- 55 Thoreau 1957 [1854]: 451, 452, 456.
- 56 Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, III.iv.84. Again the problem that little is known about Wilson's reading arises, though each chapter of *Our Nig* opens with a well-chosen quotation – one of these by Shelley and three by Kirke White. See also note 5.
- 57 Jefferson rules beggary out of court: 'Vagabonds without visible property or vocation, are placed in workhouses, where they are well clothed, fed, lodged and made to labor . . . you will seldom meet a beggar. . . I never yet saw a native American begging in the streets or highways. A subsistence is easily gained here' (*SW*, p. 253). Cobbett reproduced this discourse in 1818, maintaining that there is 'no *begging*, properly so called' in America (quoted in Fender 1992: 136). See also Cobbett's *Cottage Economy*, which claimed that the 'Yankee' was 'Never servile, always civil. This must necessarily be the

- character of freemen living in a state of competence' (Cobbett 1979 [1822]: 108).
- 58 Note the ironies nestled in the phrase 'free wage labourer', which I take from Kulikoff (1992: 6).
- 59 'Rapid price convergence of products after the war [of Independence] suggests that farmers participated with increasing regularity in regional commodity markets . . . [in an] enthusiastic reception of capitalist economics and class relations'. Indeed, 'by the 1850s, if not earlier, competitive small capitalist farms had replaced those of the yeomanry in much of the [North] . . . Less than two-fifths of the household heads in 1860 owned or leased farms; most of the rest were labourers, domestic servants or artisans' (Kulikoff 1992: 23, 36, 43, 47).
- 60 *SW*, pp. 127, 198. Yet, as Jensen points out, 'Thomas Jefferson had both male and female sicklers at work on his plantation . . . in 1795' (1986: 48). Similar work to Wilson's was imminently to be performed by Rebecca Harding Davis in an industrial context in *Life in the Iron Mills* (1998 [1861]).
- 61 Jensen 1986: 41–2.
- 62 See Kolodny 1975.
- 63 John Lucas, Personal correspondence with R.J. Ellis, 9 November 2000. See also Lucas 1966: 193.

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