"To Tell the Kitchen Version": Architectural Figurations of Race and Gender in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig*

By Katja Kanzler, University of Leipzig, Germany

Abstract:
I propose to engage the spatial dimension of antebellum domesticity by exploring architectural figurations in two texts by African American women authors. This reading, first of all, seeks to challenge prevailing assumption about the antebellum American home as a culturally coherent and cohesive space that finds its conflicts with the world outside rather than within its own. Quite to the contrary, the structures of domestic architecture allow writers to engage complex systems of social ordering, the spatial signification and enforcement of as well as the resistance against socio-cultural hierarchies. In the context of thus interrogating architecture as a system of cultural signification, I focus on the kitchen as the room that most centrally hosts narratives of gender and racial difference.

1 The scholarship on 19th-century American women's literature and culture has greatly benefited from understanding domesticity as a discursive operation. From Barbara Welter's seminal work on the 'cult of domesticity' onward, historians and literary critics have described and critiqued what they variously called the ideology, virtues, practice, or cult of domesticity. The discourses these terms reference, however, also have a spatial dimension, which surfaces most insistently in the notion of 'separate spheres' that continues to shape scholarship on antebellum gendered culture(s). For at least two decades, literary and historical scholarship alike has struggled to come to terms with the complex operations of the separate spheres paradigm in antebellum culture, as well as its equally complex reverberations in the scholarship.[1]

2 In the following, I propose to engage the spatial dimension of antebellum domesticity by exploring architectural figurations in two texts by African American women authors. This reading, first of all, seeks to challenge prevailing assumption about the antebellum American home as a culturally coherent and cohesive space that finds its conflicts with the world outside rather than within its own. Quite to the contrary, the structures of domestic architecture allow writers to engage complex systems of social ordering, the spatial signification and enforcement of as well as the resistance against socio-cultural hierarchies. In the context of thus interrogating architecture as a system of cultural signification, I want to focus on the kitchen as the room that most centrally hosts narratives of gender and racial difference. Arguably the epicenter of domestic operations, the kitchen occupies a remarkably

[1] Cf., for example, the various essays anthologized in Elbert and in Davidson and Hatcher.

marginal space in most narratives of the antebellum home: It commonly figures as the domain of those members of the household who occupied the most inferior positions within the domestic hierarchy — employed, indentured, or enslaved 'servants' — while the 'work' of the mistress of the house unfolded in the parlor. The kitchen thus presents itself as antebellum domesticity's spatial unconscious, the largely concealed flip-side of discourses of bourgeois femininity. Theorizing Literary Architecture

3 Critical inquiries into the creative interplay between literature and architecture arguably find their beginning in Ellen Eve Frank's Literary Architecture (1979). Frank primarily relies on a phenomenological approach indebted to Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* to explore the genealogy of, in her words, "the habit of comparison between architecture and literature" (3). As such an approach is chiefly interested in the experience of architecture as universally human and transcending boundaries of, say, gender or class, it should come as no surprise that Frank exclusively discusses canonical texts by male authors: by Walter Pater (who coined the term 'literary architecture'), Gerard Manley Hopkins, Marcel Proust, and Henry James.

4 Subsequently, scholars have directed their attention to the multiple resonances between discourses of cultural difference and literary figurations of domestic architecture. In Dwelling in the Text, Marilyn Chandler insists on the significance of historicizing literature's architectural figurations. She points to American national narratives as an explanation for the prominent role of houses in U.S. literature. The preoccupation of narratives of the American nation with homesteading — with claiming territory by settling it, with transforming wilderness into national territory by way of domestication — reinforce more fundamental assumptions about the mutually reflective relationship between a person and his/her house. Chandler's readings suggest that literary houses lend themselves to reflecting (and refracting) several aspects of 'personhood': 'identity' figured in psychological as well as social ways, bodily appearances, histories, memories, and virtues.

5 Most significantly for my present purpose, the national narratives Chandler identifies as the center of the symbolic exchanges between characters and houses accommodate both male and female subjectivities. Thus 'homesteading' and 'domesticating' represent distinct yet complementary practices that provide a matrix for reconciling gender difference with a shared national identity. In fact, gender emerges as a key fault line in the engagement with literary houses. Chandler singles out two gender-specific master-narratives: 'masculine' home-ownership and 'feminine' housekeeping. This dual blueprint proves quite compelling as it neatly reflects the duality of dominant gender narratives.

6 And indeed, recovering housekeeping as a mode of engagement with houses that lends itself to literary self-fashioning and self-authorization enables Chandler to add to the canon of literary houses a number of dwellings penned by female authors. Next to the sheer accomplishment of recovery, however, anchoring the cultural significance of housekeeping in narratives of national identity opens up avenues for recuperating 'public' dimensions in women's 'private' work. Such potential to subvert the 'separate spheres' ideology surfaces throughout Chandler's readings, e.g., when she discusses housekeepers meddling in questions of property, or female characters from Kate Chopin's Edna Pontellier to Marilyn Robbinson's Sylvie Fisher altogether rejecting the role of housekeeper.

7 Millette Shamir, in her essay "Divided Plots," more specifically addresses the signification of gender by way of literary architecture. Asking in how far the interior structure of houses allows for the organization of gender difference, she recovers in antebellum American fiction a battle between the sexes within the confines of the middle-class home. She diagnoses "a material and metaphorical division of the house's interior between feminine and masculine realms" (434). This division, Shamir argues, performs important cultural work by managing antagonistic narratives of 'home': "visions of a romantic interiority *and* of self-denying morality, visions of the ideal of solitude *and* the ideal of intimacy" (434).

8 Focusing on this set of cultural antagonisms — respectively sustained by antebellum discourses of (masculine) romantic individualism and domestic femininity (433) — draws Shamir's attention to two particular rooms in the middle-class home: the study and the parlor. These rooms represent essentially masculine and feminine spaces, and the definition of each room reflects the dynamics of the gender discourse it accommodates. While the study is entirely dedicated to man's withdrawal and privacy, the parlor serves as a social space where not only the members of the family would gather but where also guests would be received. For man, Shamir accordingly suggests, the meaning of home is predicated on individual privacy and juxtaposed to the public world of business and politics. For woman, home is a place where she dispenses affection, maintains family and social ties and manages intimacy; her capacity to do so, however, is (also) predicated on a specifically feminine 'interiority' — the model woman in antebellum America distinguishes herself neither by her skills nor by her actions but having internalized a set of values that enable her to "feel right" (cf. Romero 25).

9 Where Chandler's and Shamir's work helps uncover the ways in which domestic architecture maps gender, Homi Bhabha proposes to theorize the complex interplay between space and (postcolonial) culture. Although he generally works with more broadly conceived notions of spatiality, his essay "Locations of Culture" includes a brief discussion of artist

Renée Green's architectural installations. Especially Green's use of the stairwell attracts Bhabha's attention as it aids him in elaborating his concept of the 'beyond' and the 'in-between':

> The stairwell as liminal space, in-between the designations of identity, becomes the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper and lower, black and white. The hither and thither of the stairwell, the temporal movement and passage that it allows, prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities. This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy […]. (4)

Owing to Bhabha's interest in destabilizing the fixed notions of (gender, race, ethnic, class) identity imposed on subjects by colonial power relations, his essay above all seeks to make useful metaphors of in-between-ness and iteration. Such metaphors sketch out spaces that — while circumscribed by the imbalances and exploitation of colonial power relations — accommodate subversion and resistance. With its half-forgotten chambers, corners, nooks, and passageways, the home provides such metaphors in abundance. While rooms such as the study and parlor stage the gender difference between master and mistress of the house, other domestic spaces — maybe smaller, less significant, not as easily grasped in writing — may host different narratives, apart from, underneath, or in contrast to the narratives scripted in the grand, representative rooms. They may both render legible subjectivities peripheral in the antebellum American household and thus invisible in the grand rooms, and they may uncover nuances, ambiguities, and instabilities in the spatial definition in the home's owners otherwise concealed.

10 Next to the home's ability to illustrate Bhabha's notion of the in-between, domestic spaces figure in his concept of the 'unhomely,' in which Bhabha brings Freud's concept of the 'uncanny' to bear on the postcolonial experience. He picks up on Freud's uses of the home (*Heim*) as the quintessential space of the familiar to spell out his notion of the uncanny, *das Unheimliche* (or the 'unhomely'), signifying the eruption of the repressed into the seemingly most safe and well-known spaces, and correlates it with colonial history which buries its own unspeakable episodes (of displacement, enslavement, disenfranchisement, but also of resistance) that may erupt into signification. As Bhabha's readings of literary texts from a variety of cultural contexts make apparent, the home again and again furnishes the stage where the traumas and conflicts of colonial history erupt into characters' lives. Thus, Bhabha invites us to register the ways in which the ostensibly 'private' space of the home becomes the

place where the aftershocks of 'public' history manifest themselves, and he prepares us for the potentially fleeting, oblique, and uncanny quality of these manifestations (9-18).[2]

11 The diverse scholarship I briefly sketched out provides a valuable blueprint for reading domestic architectures. Although the kitchen does not explicitly figure in any of them, the critical impulses provided by Frank, Chandler, Shamir, and Bhabha frame it as an extraordinarily rich signifier. If we pursue housekeeping as a productive metaphor of selfhood and authorship, there is no way around the kitchen as the gravitational center of domestic work. Extending on Virginia Woolf's famous call for 'a room of one's own,' I will suggest that women have always had a room of their own — the kitchen — and that they did write there. Of course, the conditions for authorship the kitchen offered fall far short of the room Woolf envisioned, but they still circumscribe a valuable feminine literary tradition. In addition, the kitchen presents itself not only as a gendered space — it also bears connotations of class and, certainly in the American South, of race. More than any other room, the kitchen brings the mistress of the house together with (varying numbers of) servants or 'help.' The work each of them performs in the kitchen as well as the tracks on which each may (or may not) move through the rest of the house are carefully scripted, and these scripts host complex negotiations of gender, class, and race. The kitchen seems to represent a thoroughly paradoxical space as it accommodates both some of the most central domestic operations and the most peripheral members of the household.

Writing the House of Slavery

12 Turning more specifically to houses built and operated on the basis of slave labor adds another dimension to the web of cultural differences negotiated in writings of the antebellum American home. As scholars working with a wide range of cultural artifacts have emphasized, slavery operates on the basis of a spatial logic. Historian Stephanie Camp notes, "[a]t the heart of the process of enslavement was a geographical impulse to locate bondpeople in plantation space […]. Slaveholders strove to create controlled and controlling landscapes that would determine the uses to which enslaved people put their bodies" (533).[3] This spatial logic of domination provoked equally spatial strategies of accommodation and resistance, which Camp terms "rival geographies" (533). In a similar vein, John Michael Vlach maintains in his

[2] Neither Bhabha nor Freud explicitly address the gender connotations of the private home vis-à-vis public history. The oblique quality of unhomely moments may partly owe to the prisms of gender through which colonial experiences travel on their way from 'public' to 'private.'

[3] As Vlach points out, plantations make for only a fraction of slavery's workplaces (7). In the popular imagination, however, especially that vented in an abolitionist context, plantation slavery has become established as the quintessential form of bondage (Sanchez-Eppler 260).

study of plantation architecture that "[s]laveowners set up the contexts of servitude, but they did not control those contexts absolutely" (1). Slaves found myriad of ways to appropriate the spaces to which slavery confined them.

13 Given the material and cultural import of spatial formations for slaveowners as well as for slaves, the architecture[4] of slaveholding properties is charged with particular significance. Their structures and designs organize the complex power relations in the slaveholding household, display the family's social standing, and give material expression to the virtues and values according to which the lady of the house executes her role as mother and wife. In performing such multifaceted cultural work, Southern dwellings participate in proliferating debates about domestic architecture throughout the United States. As Lori Merish elaborates in her study of gender and material culture, the formation of the discourse of feminine domesticity in the antebellum years entailed a growing concern about the material structures in which this ideal of domesticity was to unfold. Thanks to the value evolving notions of 'true womanhood' placed on the domestic, architectural choices were invested with increasing cultural and 'civilizational' significance.

14 Accordingly, the structures and uses of domestic architecture appear uniquely qualified for spelling out not only the regional idiosyncrasies of Southern living but also the particularities of slavery. They help define slavery as a 'feminine' concern, a topic that women authors, from their supposedly domestic perspective, would be particularly authorized to address. While most texts spatially conflate the racism represented by the institution of slavery with the South, I wish to include in my discussion a novel that makes a point in disjoining the two. The two texts I selected are part of a broader literary tradition in which authors writing from a variety of perspectives — from abolitionist to pro-slavery — have focused on the architectural formations of the 'house of slavery' to flesh out the 'peculiar institution.'[5] Domestic structures allow writers to stage both the differences and the similarities of slaveholding and non-slaveholding households: They may mark the different — but comparable — organization of workspaces and spaces of residence, stage encounters between slaves and slaveholders, and outline the specific arrangements of domestic labor. If, as many scholars have noted, 'family' figures as the primary touchstone for representations of slavery (again, in texts indebted to a variety of politics), domestic spaces present themselves

[4] Camp and Vlach sometimes use the terms architecture, landscape and geography interchangeably. When I speak of (literary) architecture, I wish to denote (the literary representation of) built structures along with the uses that map them. While my focus rests on homes, sometimes other 'architectured' spaces need to be considered alongside them, such as gardens or outbuildings. Especially Southern plantations, Vlach reminds us, need to be understood as ensembles of 'Big House,' slave quarters, and workspaces (1-3).

[5] Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, to which I return throughout my argument, may serve as the most widely known representative of this tradition, and so do the many texts written in response to Stowe's novel.

as the sites where familial relations gain material substance so as to lend themselves to representation. In all constellations, a focus on domestic architecture offers readers outside the South moments of recognition that other aspects of the plantation economy might not. Thus, architecture provides a perceptual angle through which slavery becomes 'readable.'

15 In exploring domestic architecture as a system of signification, I want to zoom in on the kitchen as the one room where, in text after text, the operations of slavery become most readily intelligible. It is precisely the fact that the kitchen connotes a distinctly feminine labor — and female laborers — that makes it useful for dramatizing the exploitative and abusive nature of slavery. In the two texts I will discuss, the kitchen unfolds its signifying potential through its strategic use as a setting as well as its architectural contextualization within the house as a whole. From John Michael Vlach's material perspective, the kitchen occupies a curious position on Southern plantations as part, yet not quite part of the 'Big House': Those Southern home owners who could afford it would relegate the kitchen to a separate building somewhere between the master's house and the plantation's workspaces and slave-quarters. While pragmatic considerations certainly played a role here, separating the kitchen from the living-space of the slaveowner's family also codified hierarchical relationships "between those who served and those who were served" (Vlach 43). At the same time, cooking of course remained a key domestic operation, resonating with the cultural and affective significance discourses of domestic femininity invest it with. Finally, detaching the kitchen into a separate building diminished the influence of the lady of the house (as well as the rest of her family) over that room, increasingly ceding it to the slaves who work there.

16 The writings of Andrew Jackson Downing — antebellum America's most influential architect — further help appreciate the cultural significance of the Southern kitchen. As William Gleason notes, architectural guide books of the period, and Downing's among them, remain conspicuously silent about slavery (154). Downing's *The Architecture of Country Houses*, however, offers one telling exception: In elaborating one of his regional designs, "A Small Country-House for the Southern States," Downing identifies two features that distinguish Southern from other modes of architecture — the kitchen and the veranda. In defining their distinctiveness, he needs to make reference to the particular social structures generated by slavery: "A peculiar feature in all Southern country houses is the position of the kitchen — which does not form part of the dwelling, but stands detached at a distance of 20, 30, or more yards. This kitchen contains servants' bed-rooms on its second floor […]" (313). Throughout his discussion of this design, Downing returns to the "detached kitchen" as the one architectural principle that gives spatial expression to the racial segregation underwriting

the slaveholding household.[6] Downing thus acknowledges the ways in which domestic architecture reflects the social hierarchies of slavery, and he singles out the Southern kitchen as its most potent signifier.

17 Antebellum literary conventions offer a rich and varied language to write the houses of slavery. Authors navigate this terrain in often eclectic ways, utilizing and combining conventions of domestic, sentimental, and Gothic fiction along with those of autobiographical and advice writing. In the process, they flesh out an amazing array of literary homes, sometimes taking the reader on grand tours, prying open the last door and directing our attention to the minutest detail, sometimes tightly controlling and delimiting our access to them. Next to the specificities of such spatial formations, the culturalization of domestic architecture the texts work on finds its final context in the act of writing the texts represent — in varying ways, they explore the interplay between writing a house and owning a house, between domestic labor and authorship.

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl

18 The kitchen figures as the central setting in many African American writings of the houses of slavery. Slave narratives, irrespective of whether they detail female or male experiences of slavery, typically set many of their plantation scenes in the kitchen of the 'Big House.' In Frederick Douglass' most canonized narrative, the kitchen accommodates scenes that flesh out the exploitation of slave labor, the violent abuse of slaves, and the dynamics of the slave community that regularly assembles in that room. Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* certainly participates in this representational practice. At the same time, however, her protagonist's very different — and, as several critics maintain, highly gendered[7] — strategies of escape lend another twist to the architectural figurations in her narrative.

19 Jacobs' narrative takes its readers through several homes, located in the South as well as in the North, owned by slaveholding as well as non-slaveholding whites, including even one black-owned property. Throughout, the text picks up on the way in which contemporary domestic discourses picture the home as a safe haven, arguing that this promise fails to materialize for African Americans. In a key scene, the house of Linda's black grandmother — a free woman — is easily violated by white raiders as they search for runaway slaves. Even

[6] Gleason offers an intriguing reading of the human figures featured in Downing's sketches of the design, which, he argues, pinpoint Downing's ambivalence about representing the "ostensibly unseen labors of the southern slave" (157).

[7] Typically, the 'feminine' quality of Jacobs' narrative is located in the strategies of escape it narrates (hiding inside domestic settings rather than fleeing, geared toward liberating her children rather than just herself) and in the generic conventions it employs (sentimental fiction). Cf. Morgan and Gray.

more pronouncedly in the narrative's descriptions of the house of Linda's oppression, the Flints' mansion, the privacy typically associated with 'home' assumes a meaning radically different from that in dominant (white) narratives of the time: The relative publicity of the Flint household, where family and slaves are constantly present, affords Linda some degree of protection. She panics when Dr. Flint announces his plans to build for her a cottage of her own because the privacy of this space would place her entirely at his mercy.

20 These two episodes involving the Flints' and the grandmother's houses outline a perversion of the public vs. private binarism central for antebellum culture. For the slave narrator, the connotations of public and private have been reversed: While publicity signifies (albeit limited) protection, privacy signals vulnerability and exposure. Throughout its elaboration of privacy thus perverted, the text aligns the question of African American's control over their dwellings with that of control over their bodies — the plot most immediately thrives on Linda's efforts to protect her own sexual integrity. Ownership — expansively defined to encompass economic as well as semiotic control over one's surroundings, possessions, and self — figures as the text's central language for charting the evils of slavery.

21 Another moment of critique presents itself in the narrative's depiction of the Flint-household, where the kitchen plays an important role in fleshing out the insidiousness and perversity of slavery. In thus using the kitchen, the text extends on conventions established in Frederick Douglass' foundational slave narrative which, though narrated from the perspective of a male slave, employs female characters to illustrate the abusive nature of slavery. In a key scene, the young narrator of Douglass' text witnesses the whipping of one of his aunts. He frames this scene — which, symptomatically, takes place in the kitchen — as his first initiation into slavery, "the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of the slavery, through which I was about to pass" (7). Along similar lines, Jacobs' narrator singles out the family's cook as a paradigmatic figure of victimization, subject to constant harassment. Her work in the kitchen regularly exposes her to the whims of her master and mistress. Their preferred mode of disciplining the house-slaves proves particularly vicious:

> If dinner was not served at the exact time on that particular Sunday, [Mrs. Flint] would station herself in the kitchen, and wait till it was dished, and then spit in all the kettles and pans that had been used for cooking. She did this to prevent the cook and her children from eking out their meagre fare with the remains of the gravy and other scrapings […]. The cook never sent a dinner to [Dr. Flint's] table without fear and trembling; for if there happened to be a dish not to his liking, he would either order her to be whipped, or compel her to eat every mouthful of it in his presence. The poor, hungry creature might not have objected to eating it; but she did object to having her master cram it down her throat till she choked. (22)

Alternating between keeping their slaves hungry and force-feeding them, the Flints employ food as an instrument of punishment, a practice whose evilness contemporary discourses would highlight. As virtually the entire South depends on black labor for their sustenance — from mother's milk to gourmet cooking — the Flints' regime of punishment turns a key service the slaves render their masters against them. Where in antebellum writings of the ideal home the preparation of food figures as a labor of love, as material expression of a mother's love of her family, strengthening family tie,[8] it here becomes a service that is forced, occasioning the diners' wrath and abuse rather than their love and gratitude. Food prepared and served, withheld and force-fed this way fails to nourish and sustain; it rather violates and perverts the sacramental potential of food.

22 Turning our attention to the various homes of *Incidents*, we are presented with almost labyrinthine structures which feature a wealth of secret spaces that help the narrator in her eventual escape. Both the elaborate mansion of some unnamed (slaveholding) benefactress and the humble cottage of Linda's grandmother provide secret rooms that shelter the narrator from her persecutors. Linda finds one of her most stunning hiding-places in the above mentioned mansion: After Dr. Flint pretends to know of Linda's whereabouts, the lady's cook — Betty — removes Linda from the attic, where she had been hiding, to the kitchen, where she conceals her underneath the floor-panels. There, the narrator not only passes one day perfectly protected, she also witnesses several conversations in which Betty involves whoever enters her kitchen, all of which testify that her whereabouts are entirely unknown in the neighborhood.

23 Betty's kitchen presents itself as a highly polymorphous space: a room many people pass through — servants of this and of other households, merchants, occasionally the master and mistress of the house along with their guests — both a junction within the household and a contact zone to the world outside; yet in midst of this ostensible publicity, the kitchen offers Linda perfect seclusion. The room's secret spaces — its corners, recesses, and the space underneath the floor-paneling — are entirely under the control of the slave-cook. Betty's kitchen both extends on the depiction of kitchens in other antebellum texts — especially their porous boundary to the marketplace — and contrasts with pictures like that of the Flint-kitchen which position this room as the paradigmatic place of slavery's exploitation of (female) slave labor and highlight the vulnerability the slave suffers in the kitchen. Against this background, Betty's kitchen can be read as symbol of resistance, outlining ways in which

[8] Note, for instance, the sacramental mis-en-scène of the meal Rachel Halliday serves in Uncle Tom's Cabin.

slaves appropriate the spaces slavery assigns them. There is an unmistakable trickster-quality to Linda's hide-out in Betty's kitchen — it is not only about hiding from but also about eavesdropping on the people who hunt after her, especially the detested Dr. Flint, and hearing about (and rejoicing in) the wrong tracks they are following.

24 The episode in Betty's kitchen focalizes the figure of the eavesdropping slave that recurs throughout writings of slavery,[9] which, in turn, draws attention to the pervasive association of liminal domestic spaces with resistance. Precisely because slavery alters the meanings private and public spaces bear for the slave, her resistance needs to unfold in the in-between, in spaces too small or too slippery to control (in material as well as in epistemic terms) for slavery to fully colonize. Jacobs' narrative here invites a postcolonial reading: Homi Bhabha's concept of liminal domestic spaces helps appreciate the architectural dynamics of Jacobs' houses of slavery. The kitchen presents itself there as a place of both oppression and resistance, as representative of the in-between spaces (and of its protagonist, the eavesdropping slave) at once created by and subverting slavery.

25 Overall, the dwellings in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* are far from the readily legible structures in that most successful novel about slavery, Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The text shows no ambition to flesh out any of these buildings in detail. Instead, the narrator's attention rests with individual rooms, that are invariably off the tracks the white inhabitants take through their houses. The text's glimpses of kitchens and attics never connect to pictures of entire houses. In contrast to the narrative voice in Stowe's novel, Jacobs' narrator does not seem to feel entitled to owning the houses she chooses as her setting. She rather takes narrative possession of those rooms literary conventions would picture in the Gothic mode — rooms that are neither fully ownable nor knowable. This narrative stance further adds to the narrator/protagonist's framing within a subaltern subjectivity. Next to its appropriation of sentimental conventions, the text uses architectural conventions as a touchstone to both connect with its readers and to flesh out its indictment of slavery.

Our Nig

26 Although Harriet Wilson's novel features a Northern setting, and her young black protagonist Frado is not a chattel but 'merely' an indentured slave, the text unmistakably calls for readings that contextualize it within the narratives of slavery circulating at the time of its publication. The novel tracks houses of slavery even to the 'free' North, demonstrating that their crippling effects are neither bound to the South nor to the system of chattel slavery. As

[9] Texts as different as Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Hannah Crafts' *The Bondwoman's Narrative* feature eavesdropping scenes at key moments in their plots.

several critics have noted,[10] the text draws much of its power from questioning the certainty found in most abolitionist texts that once African Americans leave the South, or once slavery were abolished, the effects of slavery would be undone. Wilson's novel unfolds an analysis that locates the evils of slavery not in the provisions of Southern law, but in the colonial impulse that informs Southern law as much as it informs Northern racism and capitalism.

27 Against that background, *Our Nig* furnishes an important link between writings of the house of slavery and the broad literary tradition of architectural figurations set in the 'free' North. Mrs. Bellmont's decision to take the dark-skinned girl Frado into the house is motivated by her frustration with the domestic service contracted on the market of free labor. Her remark, "'If I could make her do my work in a few years, I would keep her. I have so much trouble with the girls I hire, 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. I am tired of changing every few months'" (26), echoes a sentiment recurring throughout writings of the non-slaveholding home. The novel positions a labor relation that, to everybody involved, looks exactly like slavery as a remedy to the much belabored problem of supposedly inadequate and unreliable domestic service.

28 The text correlates Mrs. B.'s abuses of Frado, whose brutality the narrative details, with the principles of domestic management generally outlined as exemplary. There is an uncanny resemblance between Rachel Halliday's regime of 'gentle admonitions' in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the principles spelled out in domestic advice literature like Stowe and Beecher's *The American Woman's Home*, and Mrs. B.'s violent beatings of Frado: All of them are motivated by an ostensible interest in educating dependent members of the household. In the logic of antebellum culture, this dependency translates into a 'civilizational' hierarchy which may ground itself on differences of age, race, class, or gender.[11] While the novel's narrator considers racism the reason for her mean treatment, parallels to 'Northern' texts suggest that the injustices indicted in writings of the house of slavery are not limited to slavery and to racism against blacks. Rather, antebellum discourses of domesticity provide for, even necessitate, 'civilizational' hierarchies that sustain a colonial logic right within the American home. This colonial logic finds its focal point in the labors and relations of the kitchen.

29 *Our Nig* most explicitly associates its protagonist with the kitchen in the Bellmonts' house. Since Frado performs most her work in the kitchen, it becomes the room where she has

[10] Cf. Leveen; Stern.

[11] Cf. Dudden's depiction of familial hierarchies in her discussion of the "blur[red] […] line between paid and unpaid housework" (18) in early 19th-century US households.

most contact with her mistress and, thus, where she suffers most from her incompetent and sadistic mode of housekeeping:

> It is impossible to give an impression of the manifest enjoyment of Mrs. B. in these kitchen scenes. It was her favorite exercise to enter the apartment noisily, vociferate orders, give a few sudden blows to quicken Nig's pace, then return to the sitting room with such a satisfied expression, congratulating herself upon her thorough house-keeping qualities. (66)

The narrator associates the kitchen with an ever-expanding work-load (52) and with the experience of violence and abuse. Indicatively, the only detail she relates concerning the kitchen's interior is the presence of a tool of punishment — "a rawhide, always at hand in the kitchen" (30). As Julia Stern observes, even banal kitchen paraphernalia such as a dish towel, which Mrs. B. stuffs into Frado's mouth to silence her, are converted into tools of torture (Stern 449).

30 In addition, Frado also has to eat in the kitchen, "standing, by the kitchen table, and must not be over ten minutes about it" (29). As Faye Dudden's study of domestic service indicates, the place where domestic servants took their meals served as a key indicator of their place in the household (36-37): Whereas the temporary, often neighborly workers 19th-century Americans called 'help' ate with the family, workers employed permanently and on the basis of a contractual relationship, 'domestics,' were expected to eat separately, relegated to the kitchen while the family ate in the dining room. The question of where a domestic worker would eat — whether her presence in the house would be entirely confined to the kitchen — figured as a key battleground in the negotiation of the relationship between employer and employee in antebellum American homes. Altogether, then, the kitchen in Mrs. B.'s house presents itself as a highly un-motherly place, articulating a critique of the domestic worker's exploitation through its very lack of care and nurture.

31 Mrs. B.'s insistence on Frado's kitchen meals contributes to the characterization of the white woman's attitude toward the little black girl as void of any maternal impulse.[12] Rather than adopting the abandoned child into the family to care for and educate her as contemporary discourses would rationalize the indentured domestic servitude of children,[13] Mrs. B. makes an effort to keep her outside the family circle. Her refusal of adequate meals goes hand in hand in the novel with the refusal of an adequate education and with restrictions on Frado's practice of religion. Mrs. B. systematically denies her adopted child those dimensions of nurture — physical, intellectual, and spiritual — contemporary discourses code as maternal.

[12] Cf. Stern for a discussion of the novel's maternal politics.
[13] Cf. Dudden for a discussion of the bound-out orphan's "ambiguous position between servant and nonservant" (20).

Her treatment of the child not only disavows any familial relationship to her, it also dehumanizes and commodifies Frado. But the work of Mrs. B.'s torture of Frado reaches beyond reinforcing her status as commodity. As Stern notes, Mrs. B. and her daughter Mary bond over the abuse of the black girl, "[t]heir intimacy can be confirmed only by a ferocious ritual of exclusion, as maternal-filial ties are reforged over Frado's bleeding body" (452).

32 As 'ferocious rituals of exclusion,' the abuses the two Bellmont women inflict on Frado become meaningful only in concert with the spatial logic according to which family relations are organized. Repeatedly, Mrs. B.'s son James, who figures as Frado's most important supporter in the family, makes a point in taking Frado to the parlor — to sit with him (50), to meet his wife (67), and to eat at the family's dining table, after the family have finished their meal (68). When Mrs. B. objects vehemently, the text has her voice that objection in spatial terms: "'Take that nigger out of my sight'" (50), or, "'according to you [Mr. B.] and James, we should very soon have her in the parlor, as smart as our own girls" (89). The parlor here circumscribes both a set of social practices marked as leisure — conversation, meals — and it signifies social proximity. Mrs. B.'s spatial rhetoric highlights the significance of architectural divisions in encoding and maintaining hierarchies within her house.

33 Accordingly, Frado is given a room in close proximity of the kitchen. Already announced by members of the family as a highly unattractive room, yet "good enough for a nigger" (26), the narrator's introduction to her chamber takes her through several "nicely furnished rooms" to reveal, after a "dark, unfinished passage-way", "an unfinished chamber over the kitchen, the roof slanting nearly to the floor" (27). The passage describing Frado's walk to her chamber, which furnishes the only tour of the house on which the narrator takes the reader, underlines the way in which Mrs. B. uses the architectural structures of her house to signify the child's position in the family. Her chamber presents itself as thoroughly different from the other rooms: accessed through a lengthy and unwelcoming passageway — claustrophobic, make-shift — it does not even seem to belong to the house.

34 At the same time as this non-room over the kitchen encodes Frado's abject position in the household, it also emerges as a space of tacit protection and empowerment. As the narrator details the abuses Frado suffers from Mrs. B., who hunts her to every corner of the property, she remarks: "But there was one little spot seldom penetrated by her mistress' watchful eye: this was her room, uninviting and comfortless; but to herself a safe retreat. Here she would listen to the leadings of a Saviour, and try to penetrate the veil of doubt and sin which clouded her soul, and long to cast off the fetters of sin, and rise to the communion of

saints" (87). Precisely because Frado's chamber lacks all the qualities of a proper room, because it is in every way distinct from the rest of the house, it affords the protagonist some degree of protection as well as a place where she can mature spiritually and intellectually by reading the Bible. Again, a liminal space, originally conceived to accommodate a hierarchical relationship, becomes a space of resistance. As Lois Leveen notes, "Frado learns to use the spatial differentiation [of the Bellmonts' house] to her advantage," not only by taking advantage of her mistress' dislike of the attic over the kitchen, but also by spreading her own version of the injustices she suffers — narratives the text calls the 'kitchen story' — among sympathetic members of the family" (n.pg.). This moment of resistance by telling the "kitchen version of the affair" (71-72), together with the education and meditations of her chamber, pave the way for Frado's change of occupations signaled by the novel that tells 'her' story.[14]

35 The novel's authorial voice — expressly marked as autobiographical in the preface and appendices — is entirely predicated on the author/narrator's experience of the kitchen and of her kitchen-chamber in the "two-story white house, North." As many literary efforts by women, and especially by women not of the middle-class, Wilson's authorship bears ambivalent connotations. On the one hand, leaving the Bellmonts' house and her occupation as domestic servant to become a writer gives Wilson a degree of control over that space and her experiences there she emphatically lacked during her presence in that kitchen. The publication of her life-story is intimately connected with Frado's kitchen stories in the narrative and, thus, with resistance and empowerment. On the other hand, the authority of Wilson's narrative utterly depends on its autobiographical framing. Becoming a novelist out of economic necessity, the author is bound to capitalize on her life-experiences. Her authorship thus bears an uncanny resemblance to the domestic work the novel details — both occupations are entered out of economic hardship, and both entail the commodification of the black woman's self, of her body with its ability of physical labor, and of her life-story.[15]

36 To conclude, architectural figurations allow both of the texts I discussed to characterize and critique the oppressions of slavery. Unfolding slavery in domestic settings not only enables the texts to highlight a specifically feminine experience, it also offers them a cultural register they could expect to resonate with their audience, which chiefly consisted of white middle-class women. The writings of the kitchen on which I specifically focused

[14] The novel's preface and appendices most explicitly identify the protagonist with the author.

[15] The novel's conflicted authorship adds to other moments of ambivalence in the text. Leveen explores some of its key ambiguities, e.g., in the narrative's slippages between first and third person, or in its choice of 'our nig' as both title, protagonist, and pseudonym for the author.

pinpoint the conflicting negotiation of victimization and resistance the texts engage in, along with the ambivalences of authorial self-fashioning that emerge out of it.

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