

# “I Do Not Own My People, I Own Slaves”: The Formation of Slave Owners’ Conscious- ness in Edward Jones’s *The Known World*

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**Abstract** The article deals with Edward P. Jones’s postmodern historical novel *The Known World*. The first part of the article concentrates on the revision of the official history of slavery. It is argued that the novel reconsiders the realities of the past through the narrator’s invention of facts. This symbiosis when history becomes fiction and fiction becomes history opens the possibility of filling the gaps that have been created by the grand historical narrative. In this particular novel, it is the invisibility of black slave holders in the dominant discourse of slavery. In the second part of the article, it has been argued that the novel correlates with recent criticism related to organic racial identity and with essentialist views about collective consciousness. The research then can be located in a broader paradigm of destabilizing the ideology of identity that privileged race, gender, and sexual orientation. The author pays particular attention to the technology of inventing the black slave owner’s consciousness. It is concluded that the black slave owners’ identities have been constructed through the interpretation of the raw material of the experience with a reference to the formulated practices and protocols of white slave owners. Although some of the slave owners understand that they are trapped into the ideology of slavery they cannot escape it. They become rather ambivalent about owning people of their race but still cannot resist the social structure. Being inserted into the ideology of slavery they must obey it.

**Key words** collective racial identity; the slave owner’s consciousness; Edward Jones; *The Known World*; a postmodern historical novel

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### **Introduction**

Edward P. Jones’s novel *The Known World* (2003) has initiated a new shift in the fictional discourse of slavery in the US. The realization of his endeavor correlates with a new sense of history and a new experience of historicity. The impossibility to capture the past in its totality, a denial of its fixity determined Jones’s fictionalization of history. This approach to history reminds Jean Baudrillard’s observation, “History is our lost referential, that is to say our myth” (Baudrillard 43). Frederick Jameson in his “The Historical Novel Today, or, Is It Still Possible?” sounds similar, “In the postmodern, where the original no longer exists and everything is an image, there can no longer be any question either of the accuracy or truth of representation or of any aesthetic of mimesis either” (Jameson 293). Taking as the main premise the impossibility of history, Jones chooses the strategy of producing fake facts and “post-truth” reality. The Oxford Dictionaries define “post-truth” as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion that appeals to emotions and personal belief” (qtd. in McIntyre 5). The aim of creating fake facts is not so much about lying as about showing indifference to what is considered to be true. McIntyre considers that in the era of post-truth feelings are more important than facts. Catherine Gallagher explains the nature of counterfactuals and alternative histories, “The belief in the contingency of historical facts is an invitation to speculate about what might have happened instead, and the thought experiments we call counterfactual history accept that invitation by imagining alternative historical events” (Gallagher 1129). Further, she underlines that the distinction between fact and fiction becomes negligible when we deal with literary texts that rely on counterfactual.

### **Inventing Facts and Creating Archive**

Edward Jones freely constructs and creates his version of the past of slavery as there is no archive for it. This simulacrum of history becomes history through producing

census and historical records, as well as historical places. Fiction does the work that history can not do. In an interview, Jones says: “The census records I made up for Manchester were, again, simply to make the reader feel that the town and the country and the people lived and breathed in central Virginia once upon a time before the country was ‘swallowed up’ by surrounding counties” (Jones 390). Accordingly, the novel starts with a bare statement that sounds like a historical record and datum: “In 1885 in Manchester County, Virginia there were thirty-four free black families, with a mother and father and one child or more, and eight of those free families owned slaves, and all eight knew one another’s business. When the War between the States came, the number of slave-owning blacks in Manchester would be down to five, and one of those included an extremely morose man who, according to the U.S. census of 1860, legally owned his own wife and five children and three grandchildren” (Jones 7). This historical fact as well as many other data in the novel is the bare invention of the author. Meantime, it does not mean that black slave owners did not exist at all. As Catherine Gallagher claims, “the actual history and the invented counterfactuals are closely interconnected in ways that preserve but also transform the facts” (Gallagher 1131). This symbiosis when history becomes fiction and fiction becomes history opens the possibility of filling the gaps that have been created by the grand historical narrative. In this particular novel, it is the invisibility of black slave holders in the dominant discourse of slavery. This lost history Jones is trying to verbalize.

As the narrative continues to unfold, the narrator provides us with historical places, numerous simulated US census, and other documents that function as authentic and therefore give the impression of the historical accuracy of the narration, its believability. Additionally, Jones specifies the year of each particular event and connects it to a broader “historical context” invented by him. For instance, the fire of 1912 in Manchester County, “when all the judicial records of the county were destroyed” (Jones 176); the year 1850, when “a delegate from Manchester had the law changed” and black slave owners were allowed to purchase slaves by themselves; and many others.

At times the narrator even confers his simulated historical facts by a hypothetical witness or a researcher like a University of Virginia historian or the Canadian pamphlet writer Anderson Frazier. Jones depicts the realities of the plantation life with such factographical accuracy that it is difficult to believe he has invented all the facts. For instance, the description of the institution of slave patrols (which was a reality of the system of slavery) is done with assurance and credibility: “But the idea (of the slave patrols—M. Sh.) would take root and grow with the

disappearance of Rita, the woman who became a kind of mother to Henry after Augustus Townsend bought his wife Mildred to freedom. Before the angel/man on the road and Rita's disappearance, Manchester County, Virginia, had not had much problem with the disappearance of slaves since 1837" (Jones 26).

If history and chronology are impossible in a postmodern world of simulacra then we can imagine them. Jones has created the locus of the county and town of Manchester, Virginia as well as the census records, but gave them the concreteness of truth and real facts. In the novel, a simulacrum of fact functions as a real historical fact, and the reader is engaged in the postmodern game called history. Jones invents his own history of the slavery era, where imagined events and places act as historical ones. The author's playing with the facts and milieu goes along the creation of a complex individuality of characters drawn from the epoch of slavery and historicizing them. *The Known World* is rich in characters that are described as real historical people. This is achieved with the help of a simulacrum of biography and biographical facts.

The omniscient narrator knows everything about Manchester Country, but how is it possible if the fire ruined all the documents. How does the narrator know about all the events he is sharing with a reader? Who knows the Known world? The only answer for this is the tapestry made by Alice Night, a former slave. The tapestry serves as a raw material that the narrator uses to reconstruct historical events. Calvin describes Alice's art to his sister Caldonia: "This one is about your home, Caldonia. It is your plantation, and again, it is what God sees when He looks down. There is nothing missing, not a cabin, not a bar, not a chicken, not a horse. Not a single person is missing. I suspect that if you were to count the blades of grass, the number would be correct as it was once when the creator of this work knew the world" (Jones 385). The tapestry preserves history and gives coherence to the fragmented stories that constitute the narrative.

The novel does not merely exploit the traumatic period of slavery in a linear array of causes followed by effects. The narration of the novel floats on different time zones, but fuzzy temporal orders are not constrained by remembering. It is worth mentioning that this shift from remembering to accounting makes Jones's narrative distinct from many African American writings of the second part of the twentieth century. He moves away from representing slave history through reliving or experiencing. In other words, he moves away from the strategy that W. B. Michaels defines as: "the conversion of history into memory", which helps the readers to make the historical past a part of their own experience. Instead Jones predominantly uses simulated factographical reports. Although the novel deals

with an unusual reality of the slave past (black slave owners), it is still indebted to slavery as a cornerstone stone of African American fiction, as its main metaphor. The fact of (re)making slave history situates Jones in the paradigm of melancholic historicism to some extent still dominating African American writing.

Thematic and enriched temporality goes beyond strict chronology. Jones accelerates time, gives it an incredible velocity. This helps him to unfold characters' lives according to a sort of organic temporality, in which a given moment is deeply connected with earlier or later moments. Temporal shifts are made with the help of the meager author's factual report. After the description of the death of a black slave owner Henry Townsend follows a dry factographical report about the future of some of this slave's children:

Tessie would soon be six years old and being the child of her parents who she was, she listened and stopped skipping. Tessie would live to be ninety-seven years old, and the doll her father was making for her would be with her until her last hour. She and the doll, long missing the corn-silk hair Elias her father had put on it, would outlive two of her children, and the doll would outlive her. (Jones 67)

The narrative pattern of proleptic references, which ruins a linear narration, takes place throughout the novel when the narrator describes the future lives of the characters. Jones's abundant use of ellipsis, when the discourse time skips to a later part of not only a specified story time, but to the "historical reality" (invented by himself), makes us believe that we are reading about real historical persons. An omnipresent voice can penetrate the fates of characters and tell us like an oracle what would happen to them in the future. This authoritative voice and his reports create the illusion of the historical truth within the narration. The narrator refuses to make things timeless or achronic. Instead, he locates them in time and therefore records in the present a vanishing past, or better to say a fictionalized past. The polychrony of the novel is organized on the grounds of the temporal continuum that stretches between story time and discourse time.

### **The Identity of Slave Owners**

The theme Jones (re)introduces, that is of black slave owners, correlates with the recent criticism of organic racial identity and essentialist views about collective consciousness. The novel can be located in a broader paradigm of destabilizing the ideology of identity that privileged race, gender, and sexual orientation. The main

agenda of identity politics—an attempt to construct and impose certain images and formal representations—has failed because people are marginalized or subordinated not only to these rigorous categories. As Adolf Reed argues, “The abstract and hermetic language of positionality, difference, and otherness fixes the interpretive lens at a point so remote from the way people live their lives and from themselves in the everyday world we all share—the world of seeking, working, worrying about a job, finding, and consuming healthcare, forming and maintaining personal attachments, paying bills, raising children, playing, fretting about the future, shopping for furniture, trying to make sense of current events—that it never confronts very mundane questions that expose the inadequacy of essentializing notions of identity” (Reed xvii). Nevertheless, for almost the whole twentieth century identity politics and cultural politics defined the fictional and critical discourse while, for example, class identity had been neglected.

Black community was formed as a community of oppressed individuals and as a community that resists oppressive outside forces. Therefore the focus has been shifted from internal to external dynamics. Mystification of black collectivity produced a homogeneous organic imaginary community of poor black people. In this context, denial or forgetting slavery leads to the disappearance or refusal of black identity. That is why the insistence on remembering slavery has become an imperative in the fictional works of black writers during the second part of the twentieth century. The invention and the following construction of monolithic African American collectivity in the twentieth century did not include the black middle class. The very mystification of black collectivity or the process of race-craft (Karen E. Fields, Barbara J. Fields) grounded on the idea and rhetoric of oppression and victimization did not allow the existence of black slave owners. Blacks did not belong to an economic class, but instead, they belonged “to a ‘group’ whose ‘cultural and social characteristics’ are a ‘historical legacy’” (Michaels 31).

In *The Known World*, Edward Jones is rewriting the ideology of black collectivity through the way of inserting into it “people who owned their own people”. Unlike Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, Rudolf Fisher, and Wallace Thurman, he is not writing about the urban middle class but starts with the formation of the first representatives of the black slave owners and their community. What is peculiar in this situation is the fact of the scrupulous description of the technology of inventing the black slave owner’s consciousness.

Before we analyze this process, it worth considering the epistemic nature of collective identity from the post-positivist perspective that problematizes two main biases toward identity: essentialist and postmodernist (fabricated). Satya P. Mohanty

observes:

The most basic questions about identity call for a more general reexamination of the relation between personal experience and public meanings—subjective choices and evaluations, on the one hand, and objective social location, on the other. (Mohanty 1)

The key issue in Mohanty's view of identity is personal experience (the variety of ways people process information) and its social interpretation. Personal feelings and emotions are the raw material for which society provides a particular interpretation.

The crucial and defining role in the construction of a black slave owner's identity belongs to a white slave owner who functions as an interpreter of feelings of the former. The white plantation owner William Robbins's desire to organize a black slave owner's community grows from his interests. Having two children, Dora and Louis, from his former slave, Philomena, Robbins is thinking about their future environment. They would not be accepted by the rich whites, so he is an organizer of their own community that includes free educated black slave owners. That is why Robbins is ready to pay for Henry's education: "He still wanted Henry in any world his black children would have to inhabit, but wrestling around with Moses had shown him how unprepared Henry was" (Jones 128).

Henry Townsend, the former slave of Robbins and the son of Augustus Townsend who bought himself out of slavery when he was twenty-two, owns thirteen women, eleven men, and nine children. He started his free life with one slave, Moses, whom he purchased from his former master. At that period of his life, his attitude toward Moses was not that of a master as his identity of a slave owner was in the process of formation. William Robbins makes sense of relations between a former slave and his property. One day, when he comes to visit his former groom and sees that Henry is working hard with Moses building the new house, he immediately urges Henry to recognize such friendship as illegitimate and unjustifiable.

"Henry," Robbins said, looking not at him but out to the other side of the road, "The law will protect you as a master to your slave, and it will not flinch when it protects you. That protection lasts from here"—and he pointed to an imaginary place in the road—"all the way to the death of that property"—and he pointed to a place a few feet from the first place. "But the law expects you to know what is master and what is slave. And it doesn't matter if you are not much more darker than your slave. The law is blind to that. You are the master and that is all the law

wants to know” (Jones 123).

In this case, Henry’s emotions need to be adjusted to what is acceptable or unacceptable in the society of slave owners. He acknowledges the rules and standards of the white world and interprets his personal experience accordingly. His social location is organizing his experience. The cognitive structures which social agents implement in their practical knowledge of the social world are internalized, “embodied” social structures:

The practical knowledge of the social world that is presupposed by ‘reasonable’ behaviour within it implements classificatory schemes (or ‘forms of classification,’ ‘mental structures’ or ‘symbolic forms’—apart from their connotations, these expressions are virtually interchangeable), historical schemes of perception and appreciation which are the product of the objective division into classes (age groups, genders, social classes) and which function below the level of consciousness and discourse. Being the product of the incorporation of the fundamental structures of a society, these principles of division are common to all the agents of the society and make possible the production of a common, meaningful world, a common-sense world. (Bourdieu 466)

A new slave owner needs to internalize the structures of his new habitus. Belonging to a social formation of slave owners he needs to share their set of perceptual schemes or better to say their social mythology. Henry’s subject construction, his shift from an individual to subject, is done through interpellation by the ideology of the plantation system.

Internalizing the social paradigms, practices, values, and ideologies of the slave owner, Henry puts himself in opposition to his father who doesn’t support the idea of owning people. Once Henry told his parents that he bought the first slave Moses, they could not accept the fact: Augustus said quietly, “I promised myself when I got this little bit of land that I would never suffer a slaveowner to set foot on it. Never.” He put his hand momentarily to his mouth and then tugged at his beard. “Of all human beings on God’s earth I never once thought the first slaveowner I would tell to leave my place would be my own child. I never thought it would be you. Why did we ever buy you offa Robbins if you gon do this? Why trouble with ourselves with you being free, Henry? You could not have hurt me more if you had cut off my arms and my legs” (Jones 138).

Embodying the power of language, the last sentence in this quote makes readers not understand but rather feel how the fact that Henry owns people hurts his

parents. According to Paul de Man, this language of force or power “has the materiality of something that actually happens, that actually occurs” (de Man 134). By the way, this power of language, when we experience a text (see and feel) but do not understand it, is strongly represented in postcolonial literatures. Thus, it led to the concentration on the descriptions of trauma in postmodern historical novels and “our experiencing (rather than learning about) things that never actually happened to us” (Michaels 21). In this sense trauma and memory are re-described as history and the past is no more “the object of knowledge” (Michaels 188).

Henry has been constructed as a subject within plantation ideology, and he responds to his father: “I ain’t done nothing that any white man wouldn’t do. I ain’t broke no law. I ain’t. You listen here” (Jones 138). Although he has not failed to recognize his interpellation, his ideological recognition of the situation is described through his building of the house and the choice of the locus for it:

When Henry, at twenty, bought his first piece of land from Robbins, he told his parents right off. The land was miles from where they lived but a short ride from Robbins’s plantation, though it was not connected. By the time he died he would own all the land between him and Robbins so that there was nothing separating what they owned. (Jones 122)

Henry reshapes his values and interprets the world according to his new identity. In the novel, he is not the only representative of free blacks who own slaves. Jones writes about a community of black slave owners who belong to “the great ideological mystification” (Althusser), realized in political, ethical, legal, and even aesthetic practices. For example, the teacher Fern Elston who did not “pass”, although she was white-skinned, owns “some Negroes.” When Anderson Frazier, a white man from Canada, traveling in the South and writing pamphlets about “curiosities and oddities” of life there, tells Fern that owning a slave reminds him of owning the people in his own family. She responds:

Well, Mr. Frazier, it is not the same as owning people in your own family. It is not the same at all... All of us do only what the law and God tell us we can do. None of us who believes in the law and God does more than that... I did not own my family, and you must not tell people that I did. I did not. We did not. We owned ... We owned slaves. It was what was done, and so that is what we did. (Jones 108–109)

Although some of the slave owners understand that they are trapped into the ideology of slavery they cannot escape it. They become rather ambivalent about owning people of their race but still cannot resist the social structure. Being inserted into the ideology of slavery they must obey. Calvin, the brother of Henry Townsend's wife, feels uncomfortable being a slave owner, but is afraid of his mother:

He and his mother had thirteen slaves to their names, but he was not a happy young man. Whenever he talked to her about freeing them, as he often did, Maude, his mother, would call them his legacy and say that people with all their facilities did not sell off their legacies... His father had died a slow death three years before, shriveling and drying up like a leaf in a rainless December, and Calvin always suspected that his mother had poisoned him because his father had been planning to free all their slaves—their legacy. (Jones 66)

Adding more details, Jones several times repeats special moments from Maude's life to describe the cruelest crime she committed, the murder of her husband, who wanted to free their slaves before his death. Possessing the false consciousness of the ideology of slavery, Maude even after that keeps the arsenic. She warns Caldonia after Henry's death: "I don't want you to be like your father, mired in so much grief he didn't know right from wrong" (Jones 180). For her as an interpellated subject of slavery right means following the rules and social structures of the plantation system. Maude's slave owner identity as well as other black slave owners has been constructed through the interpretation of the raw material of the experience with a reference to the constructed practices and protocols of white slave owners. As Satya Mohanty writes, "Our deepest personal experiences are socially constructed, mediated by visions and values that are 'political' in nature, that refer outward to the world beyond the individual" (Mohanty 3). The black slave owners read the world according to the strategies of the Significant Others.

The text also points to ambivalent feelings about owning people. Once Fern receives abolitionist pamphlets, her former pupils and then friends discuss the issue of slavery. Although they all cannot bear the idea of subjugation, still they speak as subjects of the plantation system. Fern states: "I realized all over again that if I were in bondage I would slash my master's throat on the first day. I wonder why they all have not risen up and done that" (Jones 288). Asked what side she would choose if there were a war between masters and slaves, the teacher answers: "I do not think I would fare very well as a dressmaker's apprentice. 'Yessum' and 'Yessuh' do not

come easily from my mouth. My hands, my body, they fear the dirt of the field” (Jones 289). They all depend on the economy of the slavery system, or as Maude said to Caldonia, “the legacy is your future” (Jones 180). Black slave owners make sense of their social reality with the help of the ideology of slavery. In this context Barbara and Karen Fields state:

Ideology is the language of consciousness that suits the particular way in which people deal with their fellows. It is the interpretation in thought of the social relations through which they constantly create and recreate their collective being. (Fields 134)

They (black slave owners) feel what is appropriate to feel in their social milieu, although some of them deep in their souls resist owning people of their race, they are trapped by the ruling ideology. Moreover, they have to repeat and follow its rituals on a daily basis, because “an ideology must be constantly created and verified in social life; if it is not, it dies, even though it may seem to be safely embodied in a form that can be handed down” (Fields 137).

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Edward P. Jones’s novel *The Known World* represents an approach to history as fiction and imagination. He invents the past and moves away from narrative strategies of (re)memory or conjuring, developed by Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, and bell hooks. Jones introduces a new topic in African American writings -- black slave owners, which is effective for destabilizing and deconstructing of the idea of organic racial ideology. The formation the identity of the black slave owners is realized through their appropriation of the ideology of slavery. Although some of the black slave owners understand that they have been interpellated still they can not escape the ideological chimera. Through the repetition of daily practices of racial intolerance and prejudice, they contribute to the functioning of the racial ideology.

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