

5-2008

# REWRITING BOUNDARIES: IDENTITY, FREEDOM, AND THE REINVENTION OF THE NEO-SLAVE NARRATIVE IN EDWARD P. JONES'S THE KNOWN WORLD

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REWRITING BOUNDARIES: IDENTITY, FREEDOM, AND THE REINVENTION  
OF THE NEO-SLAVE NARRATIVE IN EDWARD P. JONES'S  
THE KNOWN WORLD

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
English Literature

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by  
Theresa M. Rooney  
May 2008

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Accepted by:  
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## ABSTRACT

In the 2003 Pulitzer Prize winning novel, The Known World, Edward P. Jones employs many of the same devices and themes found in traditional slave narratives and neo-slave narratives. Jones presents a complex and ironic model of slavery in his novel, and he uses this unconventional representation of slavery to explore identity and freedom as social constructs, creating a dialogue with slave and neo-slave narrative texts. By placing the novel in a dialogue with slave narratives like, The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass and Incidents in the Life of a Slave girl, Jones succeeds in grounding his book in a historical context. He uses intertextuality as a tool to reinforce the relationship between identity and freedom. Jones's novel enters into a dialogue with nineteenth century texts like Uncle Tom's Cabin as well as more contemporary texts, such as Beloved in a way that re-examines the genre. The intertextuality present in The Known World is indicative of the progression of the genre. Born out of the slave narrative tradition, the neo-slave narrative revisits a moment in time in order to reclaim agency. This study aims to explore freedom and identity as a way of placing Jones's novel in the literary canon, and because his novel re-examines and re-invents the genre, it is a new neo-slave narrative.

## DEDICATION

To my family and friends for their love and support—especially my parents, Mick and Claire, and my brother Luke.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank all of my professors at Clemson University, especially my committee members, Dr. Susanna Ashton, Dr. Bill Koon, and Dr. Kimberly Manganelli, for their time, feedback and their encouragement. Without these professors this project would not have been possible.

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## INTRODUCTION

Edward P. Jones's 2003 novel The Known World explores how identity and freedom are socially constructed within the system of slavery. Jones presents a complicated atypical model of slavery in which a black man, Henry Townsend, owns slaves. This scenario raises questions about the impact of slavery on identity, and the fragmentation of identity. Jones also creates Alice Night, a similarly fragmented, but very different character from Henry. Alice, one of Henry's slaves, is a mad woman who ultimately transcends the system of slavery and makes the leap Henry cannot—to freedom. While exploring questions about identity and freedom in the novel through these two juxtaposed characters, this thesis will also look to determine a place for The Known World in the literary canon. While Jones complicates issues of the slave narrative and neo-slave narrative, he also holds true to the traditions of the genre. Jones's novel ultimately proves to be a re-examination of literature's treatment of the history of American slavery. Thus, Jones's text is a re-invention of the neo-slave narrative.

Henry Townsend is born a slave, but he grows up to be a powerful slave owner in Manchester County. Jones uses Henry to explore what happens when the traditional understanding of the master-slave relationship is complicated. Jones removes race from the equation, in the sense that his novel focuses more on the social system of slavery, and less on the physical characteristics of what separates the slave from the master. Henry is able to “pull himself up by his bootstraps” and go from being a slave to being a fairly well to do slave owner, but what Henry never finds out is that he lives his whole life as a slave under the law. Despite the fact Henry gains wealth and status he is vulnerable

because both can be lost at any moment. Thus, Jones raises questions about what freedom is and what it means to be truly free.

While Henry obviously lives a life of privilege, he is in actuality oppressed by the institution of slavery. Henry learns to identify with his white master, William Robbins, and as a result he becomes a plantation owner, participating in the oppression of his own race. Henry grows to be an ambitious man, modeling his success after his former master, William Robbins. His desire and ambition reveal that while he lives as a free man, the institution of slavery and the social conventions governing a slave society trap him. Henry is himself a slave to the system of slavery. The ultimate irony of Henry's life is that he was born a slave and he dies a slave despite wealth, power, and the fact he is the master of slaves himself. Through the character of Henry Townsend, as well as others, Jones also explores the psychology of slavery, and rather than presenting freedom as a physical state, Jones explores freedom as a state of mind.

Alice Night presents an altogether different complication of the representation of the institution of slavery in the novel. Alice is said to be insane, but this insanity is questionable, and as a result she exemplifies another side of the psychology of slavery: mimicry and performativity. The story behind Alice's odd behavior is that she was kicked in the head by a mule, and the trauma from that blow caused her madness. Alice is a haunting, eerie, and uncanny character whose night wandering goes unchecked as a result of her alleged madness. Alice's insane behavior pardons her from social obligations and allows her to do as she pleases, with few restrictions. Yet Jones complicates this character by calling her madness into question; at times Alice's act seems just that, an act. Alice's

behavior, in a way, is a performative response to social trauma. Considering how severely oppressive the institution of slavery is, Alice must reject all conventions of such a society to gain her own sense of mental freedom, including sanity. She liberates her mind through madness, and in the end this leads to physical freedom. Similar to other neo-slave narratives, like Beloved, Jones explores the implications of female hysteria in his novel. Alice is Henry's foil, because though he believes he is free, he is part of the system of slavery. On the other hand, Alice, while physically enslaved throughout most of the novel, is able to mentally transcend the system of slavery and the culture that produces it, by rejecting the conventions that have been so deeply ingrained in Henry's identity. In the end, Alice finds true freedom while Henry dies a slave.

Within the novel there exists a direct relationship between freedom and identity. Thus, it stands to reason that both freedom and identity are socially constructed. One must either reject the conventions of society, or a part or whole of their identity, in order to construct and attain freedom. Jones presents the reader with two models of identity construction; Henry and Alice both manipulate their identities in order to survive slavery and attain freedom. Their success and failure in this endeavor is not necessarily the main objective for representing this relationship between identity and freedom in The Known World.

What really matters is why Jones chooses to present the reader with such a contradictory and complicated model of slavery and social construction in his novel. Of equal importance is Jones's contribution to the genre and his re-examination of the neo-slave narrative.

By placing the novel in a dialogue with slave narratives like, The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass and Incidents in the Life of a Slave girl Jones succeeds in grounding his book in a historical context. Jones uses intertextuality as a tool to reinforce the relationship between Henry's identity and freedom. He also successfully uses this tool to explore madness through Alice's characterization and the conversation he enters into with nineteenth century texts like Uncle Tom's Cabin, as well as more contemporary texts such as Beloved. The intertextuality present in The Known World is indicative of the progression of the genre. Born out of the slave narrative tradition, the neo-slave narrative revisits a moment in time in order to reclaim agency. In the case of the slave narrative, like that of Frederick Douglass, the act of writing itself reclaims agency. Harriet Jacobs's autobiographical novel, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl marks a shift from a purely personal account of slavery to a semi-fictitious retelling of her own experience. Jacobs's work fills the void between the slave narrative and nineteenth century texts like Uncle Tom's Cabin, fictional stories about slavery intended to make the reader think or feel a certain way about the institution of slavery. Like Uncle Tom's Cabin, Beloved and Flight To Canada also seek to impart a message to the reader, only in these more contemporary cases the author is usually attempting to impart a socio-political message through a slave narrative framework.

The Known World complicates the traditional model of the neo-slave narrative, and the result is that it is hard to find a place for this novel amid more established neo-slave narrative texts. Yet, if one considers postmodern neo-slave narratives such as Kindred, Beloved and Flight To Canada, all have traces of the fantastic, so while Jones's

novel may be shocking and uncomfortable it is not entirely unlike the texts that precede it. While these texts experiment with style and form, Jones does the same with subject, reinventing the neo-slave narrative. Henry's story functions as a tool for the re-examination of literatures' treatment of the history of American Slavery, similar to the way magical realism or anachronistic qualities function in other novels.

Ashraf H.A. Rushdy gives an analysis of Reed's Flight To Canada that can be a useful tool in examining Jones's text. Rushdy looks at Reed's postmodern and anachronistic re-writing of the neo-slave narrative. Rushdy writes:

Here, now, we can turn to Reed's play with the form of the Neo-slave narrative. Having shown us that slaves perform their racialized roles (especially when they are pretending to be docile), and that slaves are inspired by the gods when they engage in resistance, Reed shows us that the way for slaves to avoid having their texts appropriated or their racial identities entirely subject to the hegemonic racial formation is for slaves to produce narratives that are just as performative as their lives. (128)

Like Reed, Jones also plays with the typical neo-slave narrative. While Jones's form is more conventional, taking on the third person omniscient narrator, his story is unconventional. Jones writes characters, specifically Henry and Alice, who do not take on the typical racial roles but use a performative form of resistance. Like his character, Jones's novel can be considered a performative form of resistance in itself.

Rushdy argues, in his book Neo-slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form, that there are certain key elements of the neo-slave narrative. While Jones

complicates some of the broader and more obvious conventions of the genre, he also employs specific tools in the text that prove Jones's novel fits within the genre. Though Jones depicts a contradictory and ironic version of slavery in The Known World, he is simply re-examining the same ideas about freedom, society and identity through a new lens. Like many authors of the neo-slave narrative, Jones rewrites the past in an attempt to better understand history and the implications of literature on the past and the present.

## CHAPTER ONE

### CONTRADICTION AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY IN

#### THE KNOWN WORLD

Edward P. Jones explores how identity is socially constructed in his novel The Known World (2003). This unconventional novel of slavery presents a complex and contradictory situation in which a black man, Henry Townsend, becomes a plantation and slave owner. Consequently, Jones creates a setting in which race is neither the only nor the primary factor in determining the relationship of power and dominance. The ability to own a slave is not solely based on race in the novel; this kind of power is instead attained through social interaction. In writing into being a setting and characters such as these, Jones challenges the model of the slave narrative and neo-slave narrative while at the same time reinforcing some of the same themes that are characteristic of both genres. One main topical concept of specific importance to this study is that of identity and identity construction. In The Known World, identity is socially constructed, and Henry Townsend is conditioned by social conventions to act in such a way as to desire success and gain power. Jones presents the counterintuitive and unsettling illustration of a black man owning slaves in the American South. Henry, a former slave, constructs an identity based on social conventions and performs this role in order to assert not just his power in society but also his freedom. As a result, the construction of freedom and identity are directly linked in the novel, and both depend heavily on the influence of society.

Henry Townsend, the son of Augustus and Mildred Townsend, is born a slave, the property of William Robbins, the most powerful man in Manchester County. The strain

in family relations, as a result of the institution of slavery, is established early on in the novel. It becomes apparent that from a very young age Henry seeks the approval and acceptance of his master rather than his parents. Henry grows to emulate and identify with Robbins rather than his own father, and because Henry is separated from his parents at such a young age, he develops a deeper connection with social relationships rather than with familial bonds. Henry's father, Augustus, works to buy his own freedom, as well as that of his wife Mildred. Thus, the family is fragmented, and it becomes apparent that this separation proves more trying for the parents than the child. The Townsends are allowed visits with their son, but the older and more socially aware Henry grows, the less satisfying these visits with his parents become because he has no real attachment to them. Henry stands to gain very little by fostering a deep relationship with his parents; on the other hand, the fonder William Robbins becomes of Henry, the higher Henry's station becomes within the structure of slavery and society. While Henry's relationship with his parents devolves, his relationship with Robbins greatly develops. Henry is appointed a position as Robbins's groom, and Henry's faithfulness to his master increases as their interaction increases. Henry is rewarded for dedication to Robbins. And yet the better Henry is treated, the more deeply entrenched in the system of slavery he becomes. As Robbins's groom, Henry waits for his master to return from his long and often arduous journeys, and Robbins, in turn, looks forward to seeing Henry because he is a sign of rest and relief. Jones writes:

No matter what weather God gave Manchester County, Henry would be waiting. That first winter seeing the boy shivering in the rags he tied

around his feet, Robbins had his slave shoemaker make the boy something good for his feet. He told the servants who ran his mansion that Henry was to eat in the kitchen with them and forever be clothed the right way just the same as they were clothed. Robbins came to depend on seeing the boy waving from his place in front of the mansion, came to know that sight of Henry meant the storm was over and that he was safe from bad men disguised as angels, came to develop a kind of love for the boy, and that love, built up morning after morning, was another reason to up the selling price Mildred and Augustus Townsend would have to pay for their boy.

(27-28)

As Robbins grows to find comfort in Henry's presence, he also grows to love Henry in a way, albeit a selfish love. As a result, Henry is treated better; he is fed, clothed and given status amongst the slaves. Yet, as this status increases his comfort, it also increases his value, and his parents are forced to pay a greater price for their son's freedom: this is no doubt Robbins' effort to keep the boy in his possession longer. The lesson is that gaining the love of one's master comes with fringe benefits. Henry's relationship with his parents is the complete antithesis of his relationship with Robbins. While Henry waits for Robbins to return home, Henry's parents wait for him to visit with them. Unfortunately, Henry does not always arrive on time, or at all, for his visits with his parents. Henry cannot see the benefits of fostering a relationship with his parents; they have very little tangible positive reinforcement to offer him. What Henry does not realize is that he stands to gain everything, his freedom included, from a relationship with his parents, but

he becomes indoctrinated with the psychology of slavery and begins to construct an identity grounded in social conventions.

The importance of the relationship between Henry Townsend and William Robbins lies in that this relationship has the most directly influential impact on the course of Henry's life. Henry makes the leap from a slave to a slave owner, and instead of hating a social institution that denied him basic rights and freedom Henry endeavors to proliferate such an institution. Henry has internalized the values of this culture of slavery, and he associates freedom with power and dominance; thus constructing his identity accordingly. The sad irony of Henry's life is that while he enjoys most of the rights and privileges of a free man, he unknowingly dies as the legal property of his father.

Henry's parents are intent on reuniting the family outside the bonds of slavery, so Augustus Townsend purchases his son. This practice of buying family members is not an altogether uncommon one in the history of slavery, but because of the statutes concerning freed slaves in Manchester County, Henry is never actually granted freedom in the legal sense:

Augustus did not seek a petition for his wife Mildred when he bought her freedom because the law allowed freed slaves to stay on in the state in cases where they lived as someone's property, and relatives and friends often took advantage of the law to keep loved ones close by. Augustus would also not seek a petition for Henry, his son, and over time, because of how well William Robbins, their former owner, treated Henry, people

in Manchester County just failed to remember that Henry, in fact, was listed forever in the records of Manchester as his father's property. (15-16)

This fact, made clear to the reader though not to Henry, adds a layer of meaning to the scene of Henry's death. Understanding that Henry has basically lived a lie informs a reading of his character. Henry, a man who is considered property in the eyes of the law, is a slave owner; thus, he is both literally and figuratively a slave to social convention and the institution of slavery. He has been conditioned to think that the way to gain respect and power is to be an owner of men, and in a sense this is true. Henry does gain more power and a greater position in the community of higher standing than even some white men. Yet, while he has power and status, Henry lacks freedom because he is a slave to social convention. He does not reject the oppressive institution of slavery. Instead, Henry seeks prosperity within it, and constructs an identity based on this system of slavery. Henry is literally a slave under the law and figuratively a slave to the institution of slavery itself.

Henry's enslavement to ideas is apparent at his death. In the final moments of his life, he has a dream-like vision of symbolic meaning. The scene exhibits elements of magical realism in which Henry has an almost out-of-body experience. The truth about his freedom and that he is living a lie are symbolically revealed to him all too late. Henry dies not knowing the truth about his legal status, unable to recognize his flawed understanding of his own identity. Jones writes:

...death stepped into the room and came to him: Henry walked up the steps and into the tiniest of houses, knowing with each step that he did not

own it, that he was only renting. He was so disappointed; he heard footsteps behind him and death told him it was Caldonia, coming to register her own disappointment. Whoever was renting the house to him had promised a thousand rooms, but as he traveled through the house he found less than four rooms, and all the rooms were identical and his head touched their ceilings. (10-11)

Henry's status as a plantation owner affords him an affluent lifestyle. Henry and his wife live in a large house he and his overseer, Moses, built, so Henry's deathbed vision of renting a house too small to fit inside is strange. Henry Townsend is living someone else's life on borrowed freedom. The idea that Henry is not the owner of the house he finds himself in is a parallelism for not owning himself: he is not a free man; in fact, he is his father's property. It seems as though some part of his subconscious knows everything he has built his identity on is a lie, and it takes death to show Henry his folly. Henry experiences a grave sense of disappointment in his final moments of life, and it seems a part of him knows that the life he lived was not his own, yet for Henry, this feeling is unclear because he does not fully understand the truth of his situation. Similarly, Henry's head touching the ceilings in all the rooms is significant. The implication in this statement is that he did not fit in his place, or belong in the social position he attained. Considering the stooped position one would physically take if one's head touched the ceiling, the scene can be read as a manifestation of the oppressive nature of slavery as a societal institution: Henry was trapped or confined by slavery as an institution even if he did experience relative privileges in his adulthood.

The scene of Henry's death can be juxtaposed with the narrative of Harriet Jacobs's autobiographical novel, Incidents In The Life of A Slave Girl. The idea of confinement and physical space is in both cases relative to freedom. Furthermore, one's freedom is constructed within these spaces. For Henry Townsend, the shrunken rented house is confinement and in a sense a return to the life of a slave. He has lived his adult years as a slave master in a large plantation house, and through this space he has constructed his identity and his freedom. For Jacobs on the other hand, a confining space is where she finds her freedom. Jacobs's account of, her alter ego Linda's escape is unique in that Linda does not immediately head north; instead, she spends many years hidden in a confined storage space. Upon first reaching the space Jacobs writes, "I went to sleep that night with the feeling that I was for the present the most fortunate slave in town. Morning came and filled my little cell with light. I thanked the heavenly father for this safe retreat" (246). This uncomfortable crawl space is likened to a heavenly retreat. Jacobs thanks God for the solace and safety she finds in this retreat. While physical confinement over a long period of time may be oppressive, the confinement of a lifetime of slavery proves significantly more oppressive. In this limited space that Linda begins to construct the identity of a free person, or of one outside the system of slavery. She no longer participates in the socially constructed roles of the slave society; thus, she has transcended slavery, formed an identity, and forged her freedom.

Henry, like Linda, allows space and place to inform how he constructs his identity and his freedom. In Henry's case though, the larger the space the more immersed in the system of slavery he becomes. Henry first purchases land from William Robbins and

then builds a house with the intentions of attaining wealth and power like Robbins. Jones writes, “by the time he died he would own all the land between him and Robbins so that there was nothing separating what they owned” (122). Henry aspires to be like Robbins, and at the time of his death nothing separates the two— their possessions are alike. Henry has constructed an identity for himself that mirrors Robbins. Just as Robbins owns slaves, so does Henry; Moses is the first slave Henry Townsend acquires, and together they build the large main plantation house. It is this house and incidents surrounding its construction that solidify Henry’s identity as a free man and plantation owner. As a result, Henry constructs his identity, quite literally, as he constructs his house.

When Henry visits his parents to tell them about the house, he is at once proud of his accomplishments and ashamed that he has become a slave owner. This scene is the last time Henry demonstrates any vestige of a common cultural identity with his parents. Henry’s desire for wealth and status causes the final and irrevocable break with them. He explains to his father that he is building a large house with two floors; “It’s gonna be a good house, Papa. Even white people will say ‘What a nice house that Henry Townsend got’” (136). Henry is clearly looking for the approval of white society more so than for the approval of his own family or his own race. As Henry explains, he has purchased a slave to help in building the house his father becomes angry. Henry’s purchasing a slave is significant because this action lays the foundation for the life and the identity that he will build. The scene between Henry and his father finally culminates with physical violence, a parallel to the scene from Henry’s childhood. Jones writes:

‘I ain’t done nothing that any white man wouldn’t do. I ain’t broke no law. I ain’t. You listen here.’ Beside the door, Augustus had several racks of walking sticks, one under the other, about ten in all. ‘Papa just cause you didn’t, that don’t mean...’ Augustus took down a stick, one with an array of squirrels chasing one another, head to tail, tail to head, a line of sleek creatures going around and around the stick all the way to the top where a perfect acorn was waiting, stem and all. Augustus slammed the stick down across Henry’s shoulder and Henry crumpled to the floor. ‘Augustus, stop now!’ Mildred shouted and knelt to her son. ‘Thas how a slave feel!’ Augustus called down to him. ‘Thas just how every slave every day be feelin.’ (138)

Henry’s justification for his action is that he has broken no law; he has done what any white man would do. But is this what any black man would do? Henry seems to criticize his father for not being more assertive and trying to rise above his own station as well. Augustus beats Henry down so that he will know the feeling of slavery, and yet, this act of violence shatters Henry’s former identity and affirms his new role. Clearly, Augustus feels Henry has no concept of what it means to truly feel enslaved. Though he was born a slave and lived as the property of William Robbins for most of his childhood, Henry does not identify with the black-slave community. Instead, Henry aligns himself with the socially dominant white slave owners of Manchester County. Henry is like the squirrels carved on the walking stick Augustus beats him with, because Henry is chasing the tail of a dream that will never come true. Henry may prosper in his large house and he may gain

power, but he is never free. He constructs an identity that is based on the institution of slavery. Thus rather than transcend slavery to gain freedom, Henry has merely become part of the system in a startling way.

As Henry builds his house with Moses, their relationship undergoes a transformation. The interaction between Henry and Moses grows less friendly and their relationship devolves. William Robbins pays Henry a visit when he is half-finished with the house, and he finds Henry and Moses are altogether too friendly. Robbins points out Henry's mistake in treating Moses as an equal and argues that this kind of behavior is unwise and dangerous. Robbins lectures Henry:

‘...the law will protect you as a master to your slave, and it will not flinch when it protects you. The 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 does not 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. The law will come to you and stand behind you. But if you roll around and be a playmate to your property, and your property turns round and bites you, the law will come to you still, but it will not come with the full heart and all the deliberate speed that you will need. You will have failed in your part of the bargain. You will have pointed to the line that separates you

from your property and told your property that the line does not matter.’

(123)

This speech sets the tone for the rest of Henry’s life. From this point on, his interactions with Moses become more formal. Rather than see Moses as a peer, an equal, or an employee, Henry recognizes the important distinction of calling Moses his property. William Robbins stresses that it is not just a privilege to own slaves, but also a responsibility, and Henry must be mindful of such a responsibility. Henry must not only know the distinction between master and slave, he must also internalize that distinction and teach it to his property. Henry, seeing William Robbins as a mentor, takes this speech seriously, and begins to reshape his identity. He is the master, and as such he redefines his relationship with Moses. Their once-friendly interaction takes on a more serious tone as Henry becomes stern and demanding. If Henry is going to be the master of a plantation, he must act as one, and that means identifying as such an individual. Robbins makes certain to point to the law to support his argument. He argues that the law will protect Henry, regardless of his skin color, because Henry is the master and what the law cares about is the distinction between master and slave. Yet, if Henry blurs the line between master and slave, the law will still protect him, just not as efficiently. This statement highlights an interesting fact: race does not necessarily determine one’s protection or place under the law, but society, it seems, makes this distinction. As a result, it serves Henry best to sever all ties to his race and his roots (family and past) and construct an identity that will aid him in gaining status. This identity will bring him the sense of freedom he so desires. The irony once again being that technically under the law,

Henry is property himself. Henry's identity is based on a falsehood—it has its foundations in the construction of his house—but in the end it is clear that this freedom is just a falsehood. Henry lives a free man who is never truly free from slavery, because he is enslaved by the institution of slavery and his socially constructed desire to rise above his station and fulfill a greater destiny. By denying his family and his race, he denies a part of himself and consequently, must reconstruct an identity.

It is important that Henry believed he was free even though he was a slave, because his understanding of the world around him and his relationship to it, or position within it, highlights how identity is socially constructed. It also allows for a deeper examination of the implications of a society in which slavery exists. Henry's identity is constructed based on his aspirations; the image of William Robbins that he strives to emulate. Interestingly enough, Henry does not just desire freedom, he aspires to be something well beyond his station and entirely counterintuitive. One would expect that he would seek freedom and a life outside the system of slavery, but Henry seeks power and status and he does, in fact, attain his ambition. Henry wants to carve out a place for himself in society. Through his atypical relationship with, William Robbins, Henry gains credibility and is ultimately able to achieve his goal. Similar to The Narrative of The Life of Frederick Douglass, Henry is legitimized by his relationship with a white man. Through his deep bond with William Robbins, Henry is able to rise to a position of such power and establish social status within the community.

Douglass's narrative is framed with letters offering an explanation to the reader as to why he is a credible source despite his skin color. In a like manner, William Robbins

sets the tone for Henry's life and success through their relationship and interaction. Through his depiction of this relationship Jones accomplishes two things within the novel: he simultaneously links The Known World with the tradition of the slave narrative and distinguishes this novel as something entirely different within the neo-slave narrative genre. Henry Townsend is privileged and powerful, but he is not free, and he does not gain wealth and power on his own accord. The white community is still the source that Henry derives validity as a person from and the foundation on which he constructs his identity. For all his success, Henry is in an unstable position because he is only free as long as his father allows him to be so. Henry has grounded his identity, that of a free and prosperous man, in a falsehood. Henry Townsend is simultaneously living as the oppressor and the oppressed.

Douglass makes the point in his narrative that slavery, as an institution, is as damaging to the slaveholder as it is to the slave himself. Douglass's narrative refers to the relationship between himself and his master's wife. At the outset their interactions are friendly: she teaches him to read and seems to truly care about Douglass's well being. His mistress is a virtuous character, but before long her attitude towards Douglass and slavery drastically changes. His mistress is utterly transformed through her exposure to slavery and the social practices and beliefs associated with the system. Douglass writes of his mistress:

Slavery proved as injurious to her as it did to me. When I went there, she was a pious, warm and tender-hearted woman. There was no sorrow or suffering for which she had not a tear. She had bread for the hungry,

clothes for the naked, and comfort for every mourner that came within reach. Slavery soon proved its ability to divest her of these heavenly qualities. Under its influence, the tender heart became a stone, and the lamblike disposition gave way to one of Tiger-like fierceness. (49)

As Douglass points out, the institution of slavery is harmful to society, slave and free alike. His mistress, a kind hearted woman, is transformed under the influence of a society that condones the abuses of slavery. The influence of ideas is unavoidable, and this once tender woman is bestowed with “tiger-like fierceness.” Like Douglass’s mistress, Henry Townsend is also susceptible to social influences and dominant ideas. Henry was born into slavery, so this social system of slavery is the only way of life he knows. Henry has no concept of an alternative way of life. He is, like many slave children, separated from his parents, and consequently, he identifies with his master rather than his parents. He is never part of a conventional family unit so the development of his identity is conditioned by the psychology of slavery. To survive and more so to be successful, one must adhere to the conditions of slavery. Rather than try to escape these conditions and strive for true freedom as Douglass does, Henry stays in Manchester County, becomes a part of the system, and in the end remains enslaved, both literally and figuratively.

Undoubtedly, identity is a characteristic greatly affected by the oppressive conditions of slavery. Bertram Wyatt-Brown explores the effects of slavery on male identity in the essay, “The Mask of Obedience: Male Slave Psychology in the Old South.” Wyatt-Brown writes:

...in American slave culture, as in all societies, community life can be rendered unstable with differing effects upon the individual members, as circumstance, temperament, and the general situation shape their response. Under oppressive conditions, what traits are most affected may be subject to debate, but the issue of damage itself must be faced. (25)

The effects of slavery can vary, but the overall damage to society is apparent. Not only is the individual affected negatively by slavery, but the culture is as well. Furthermore, the social effects of slavery are felt by everyone; neither master nor slave is free from the influence of slavery. Wyatt-Brown goes on to detail the various ways one can see the damaging effects of slavery on the individual. Many psychological studies have been conducted exploring the relationship between the enslaved and the enslaver in order to better understand how this dynamic affects identity construction. Wyatt-Brown writes, “this mode of adaptation to an oppressive system very much resemble what Anna Freud called “identification with the aggressor” as a “potent” means for surviving danger” (30). If this concept is true, then Henry’s identifying with Robbins rather than his own father is a mechanism for survival within the system of slavery. Henry’s identity is shaped by this skill, and as an adult and “free” man, he takes on these learned characteristics in order to survive within a great social situation rather than just the microcosm of plantation life. It is through mimicry that Henry is able to attain wealth and power. By emulating the behavior of the oppressor, William Robbins, Henry becomes a slave master and gains the power he was so denied in his formative years, when his survival was solely based on the will of his own master. Wyatt-Brown writes, “this identification with the owner’s

perspective rather than with their own suggests mimetic feature of dependence: the desire to imitate the master's ways" (31), in relation to slavery in the American south, the argument presented is that, "... they did so to raise their own low self-esteem and create a distance between themselves and others whose own positions in society was not so lofty. When American slaves belonged to "quality folks," they often disdained the so-called "po' white trash" (31). Identifying with the white master was a way to construct a more positive self-image. Henry's identifying with Robbins coincides with this logic, because Henry disassociates himself with the slave community in order to create a new and free identity. Through the construction of a new identity—that of a slave owner not a slave—Henry constructs a kind of freedom for himself. While Henry is able to live and participate in free society throughout his life, it becomes clear at his death that this freedom was nothing more than a myth, truly a performance. Henry buys into the system of slavery, and as a result, he can never truly be a free man. The fact that he remains, legally a slave, unbeknownst to all except the reader, serves to highlight this truth.

As is often pointed out in slave narratives and neo-slave narratives, the institutions of slavery holds negative consequences for the slave as well as the master. The Known World also picks up this line of reasoning, and Henry Townsend is an example. From Frederick Douglass to Harriet Beecher Stowe, authors have explored the overall effects of slavery on all members of society. Wyatt-Brown writes:

As Elkins correctly argued, naked power, unchecked by any custom or institutional restraint, morally but not necessarily emotionally deforms both victimizer and victim. In other words, repudiation of ordinary and

mediated ethics on the master's part could have induced an excessive servility shamelessly. (35)

The argument is that power deforms on both parts; the victim and the victimizer: it deforms relationships as well as the identity of the individual within the system. It stands to reason that society itself would be deformed if slavery were accepted as a natural and normal convention of such a society. Thus, Henry Townsend forges a new and deformed identity. He rejects his past as a slave, his community, race, and his family. Instead, he identifies with the group in power, the upper-class white-male population, more specifically William Robbins, his former master. In order to gain power in a deformed society that propagates the oppression of slavery, Henry attempts to move from the victimized group to the dominant group in order to gain freedom.

While Henry does successfully make the transition from a slave to a slave owner, he ultimately fails in gaining freedom. The problem lies in the deformity of society and that he endeavors to participate in the system of slavery rather than transcend the system. Henry is marked by the psychology of slavery, and as a result, he is never able to truly shake off the chains of bondage and attain freedom. This lack of true freedom is a result in The Known World attaining freedom is a two-fold process: first, one must free one's mind then free one's body. Henry's mind is possessed by slavery. He lives as a "free" man but under the law he is always a slave. Because of the social damage caused by the conventions of slavery, Henry cannot transcend the psychology of slavery; he cannot free his mind, and the fact that he is legally a slave serves to reinforce this truth of the novel. Henry's identity is still constructed by the system of slavery. He cannot construct a true

freedom, because he once again finds himself a slave, this time to the system—the idea and the practice—rather than as a direct participant. He is the oppressor, but in that role he is also oppressed. Identity and freedom are inextricably linked and socially constructed in The Known World. True freedom, thus depends on how one constructs one's identity. Henry fails to create a free identity, but other characters within the novel do successfully transcend slavery. In their transcendence they create an identity free of the markings from slavery.

## CHAPTER TWO

### CONSTRUCTS OF FREEDOM IN THE KNOWN WORLD

*Well, I guess Canada, like freedom, is a state of mind.*

- Flight To Canada 178

Certain conditions must exist in order to foster the possibility of slavery. One such condition is a state of mind conditioned to be complacent. Many slave narratives explore the psychology of slavery, both what it does to the slaveholder as well as the enslaved. The idea of control over the mind, as opposed to control over the body, is one that is central to the slave narrative. Fredrick Douglass most poignantly points out in his narrative that in order to make someone a slave, “It is necessary to darken his moral and mental vision, and, as far as possible annihilated the power of reason” (98). Thus, slavery must become a mind set, a way of thinking, devoid of reason. The neo-slave narrative takes this idea one step further. To the author of the neo-slave narrative figurative freedom is a luxury. They are able to write in more loose definitions of freedom and slavery, because quite frankly, these authors are not now, and never have been slaves. Further, they are not trying to convince their audience that slavery is wrong; rather they are exploring new aspects of slavery. Orlando Patterson considers this notion in his work “Slavery and Social Death.” Patterson writes, “total domination can become a form of extreme dependence on the object of one’s power, and total powerlessness can become the secret path to control of the subject that attempts to exercise such power” (4). Thus, while insanity has been used as a tool for resistance one pays a high price for freedom gained through madness in the neo-slave narrative. It is from this reference point, about

the psychology of slavery, that the neo-slave narrative The Known World should be studied.

Edward P. Jones, like many other authors of the neo-slave narrative, constructs freedom in a new sense. In his novel, freedom is arguably a state of mind. He comments on the psychology of a culture dominated by the ideas of slavery. In such a society, he questions the sanction of the law. Can anyone, black or white, ever really be free of the detrimental effects of slavery? As a result of this reasoning, in The Known World to find freedom, one must construct a new reality. Thus, Jones creates the character Alice Night. Alice suffers a mental illness that is the result of severe head trauma. This accident causes her to break from the “realities” of slavery. Consequently, this accident liberates Alice, and ultimately leads her body to freedom as well. The female psyche is something often explored in trauma literature, such as the neo-slave narrative, so Jones explores the psychology of slavery, in his novel The Known World, and furthermore, he constructs freedom in a similar fashion to Ishmael Reed, as a “state of mind.”

In his novel Flight to Canada Ishmael Reed explores the philosophical implications of freedom. He seems to ask the question, what is the difference between actual and imagined freedom? In the novel, the protagonist, Raven Quickskill, is quite literally making his *flight to Canada*. What Quickskill comes to realize is that the Canada in his mind is not the Canada that actually exists, and in a sense the same can be said of freedom.

He preferred Canada to slavery, whether Canada was exile, death art, liberation, or a woman. Each man to his own Canada. There was much

avian imagery in the poetry of slaves. Poetry about dreams and flight.

They wanted to cross that Black Rock ferry to freedom even though they had different notions as to what freedom was. (88)

In this passage there is a progression from Canada to freedom. Canada and freedom are just labels, and as such they are synonymous and interchangeable. Just as Canada is constructed in the mind by expectations, so is freedom. Further, freedom means something different for everyone. In the neo-slave narrative especially, freedom means more than something physical, or bodily. Reed writes, “She said slavery was a state of mind, metaphysical” (95). Edward Jones applies this idea of freedom as a state of mind in his novel.

In The Known World, Jones redefines all notions of freedom and slavery. He writes a novel about slavery, in which black slaves are owned by a black master. As a result the reader’s typical ideas about race and slavery are shattered. As Jones reshapes the reader’s understanding of slavery, he also reshapes the way freedom is defined. Freedom, and who is free for that matter, no longer depends on race or gender. Freedom is fluid in the novel; it has the ability to transform. Furthermore, just because an individual is considered “property” in the eyes of society and the law, does not necessarily mean they are not free, and the converse is also true. Applying Reed’s idea of freedom as a state of mind, it is quite clear that Alice Night is free, and she gains her freedom through her mental illness. Thus, what traps Alice in perpetual “night,” the darkness of her mental illness, liberates her from the conventional condition of slavery.

The story went that the mule that kicked Alice in the head when she was years younger had been a one-eyed mule, but no more ornery for being one-eyed than any other mule. The story continued that when she regained her senses, moments after the kick, she slapped the mule and called it a dirty name. This was before Henry bought her for \$228 and two bushels of apples from the estate of a white man who had no heirs and was afraid of mules. It was the dirty name that made everyone know she had gone down the crazy road, because before the kick Alice had been known as a sweet girl of sweet words. (61-62)

Arguably, after the kick she regained her identity or rather gained power, and she cast off the mindset of slavery. Alice created her own reality and constructed her own freedom. Alice entirely detaches herself from the reality around her and the person she once was. In this way, she is no longer a slave. She is no longer “sweet [Alice] of sweet words,” instead with the kick, she is jolted to freedom and returns a slap of victory. Through this physical manifestation of her transformation, the dirty name and the slap, one sees the shift in power. Alice goes from a passive state as a slave to a more active one.

It is through this detachment from reality that freedom is achieved. By rejecting that model presented by Patterson, and creating new psychology of slavery, Jones reconstructs ideas of freedom. In the end, Alice is able to lead others out of slavery, because her mental state has allotted her privileges, or rather, excused her from conventional constraints of slavery. Moses calls Alice the “Night Walker” because she

wanders in the night, by herself, and no one stops her. When the patrollers confront her, she is defiant, making them uneasy due to her mental illness. She is not treated like any other slave breaking the rules and going out in the night, because in a way she is beyond the rules and the normal conventions of slavery. The patrollers do not return her, because they are afraid of her. Jones writes,

Toward the middle of her third week as Henry and Caldonia's property, the patrollers got used to seeing Alice wander about and she became just another fixture in the patrollers' night, worthy of no more attention than a hooting owl or a rabbit hopping across the road. (13)

At first, the patrollers try to make Alice conform to the regulations of the slave holding society. When she begins to wander she is treated as any other runaway slave and returned to her master. Henry, knowing that Alice is mentally ill, makes allowances for her, and in the end, her wandering becomes commonplace. Because Alice persists in behaving as she pleases, the patrollers as well as Henry give in to her actions. As a result, Alice derives freedom, and in a way power, from her mental illness because rather than conform to the limitations of slavery Alice makes the patrollers and Henry accept her behavior. Madness, or rather female hysteria, has long been used as a tool of the neo-slave narrative to resist oppression, yet this form of resistance has its costs.

In Toni Morrison's Beloved, Sethe, the protagonist, is driven mad by the prospect of returning to the Sweet Home plantation, and to slavery, and even more importantly the thought that her children might have to endure the horrors of slavery. It is not a blow to the head, but rather one to the heart that prompts Sethe to mad action. The threat of

further violence and exploitation, especially of her children, is the cause of Sethe's psychological break. Sethe creates a new reality for herself; one in which her desperate and gruesome act is logical and justified; a reality where murder is desirable as opposed to slavery. She commits the violent act because she cannot let slavery take *her* children. This possessiveness changes Sethe. Morrison writes,

The prickly, mean-eyed Sweet Home girl he knew as Halle's girl was obedient (like Halle), shy (like Halle), and work-crazy (like Halle). He was wrong. This here Sethe was new. The ghost in her house didn't bother her for the very same reason a room-and-board witch with new shoes was welcome. This here Sethe talked about love like any other woman; talked about baby clothes like any other woman, but what she meant could cleave the bone. This here Sethe talked about safety with a handsaw. This here new Sethe didn't know where the world stopped and she began. Suddenly he saw what Stamp Paid wanted him to see: more important than what Sethe had done was what she had claimed. It scared him. (193)

Sethe claims her children, her freedom, and theirs in her violent act. She suffers little consequences for her actions, and neither she nor her children are brought back to Sweet Home; to a life of slavery. To Sethe, slavery is something only she can free her children from. Paul D. is Sethe's love interest at the outset of the novel. He is a man who comes to find himself trapped between the women in the novel. Most importantly, Paul D. is the witness, and he comes to the realization that Sethe is different from the woman she used to be. The new Sethe possesses a new value system, a new way of assessing life,

and this scares Paul D. Sethe no longer subjects herself to the “normal” social code. She is like other women, but not of them, “what she meant could cleave the bone,” her new way of thinking, could be disastrously liberating. Sethe is beyond social and moral constructs, she rejects these norms and by doing so she frees herself; takes possession of herself and family. Clara Escoda Agusti writes: “...the experience of oppression is so intense that it can only lead to madness, or female violence” (30). Sethe, with no other options, is driven to madness and violence, as a result of her oppressors. Yet, despite this madness she gains power and agency. The same can be said of Alice Night in The Known World. Though she may not have been protecting her children, like Sethe, the oppression of slavery for her is such that madness is her only escape. A direct physical bodily escape is more difficult to accomplish, yet a mental escape can in fact lead to bodily freedom.

In her article “Strategies of Subversion: The Deconstruction of Madness in *Eva’s Man, Corregidora And Beloved*,” Agusti explores female madness in the neo-slave narrative, specifically, Beloved. She further speculates about the meaning of Sethe’s actions. “But because Sethe’s act escapes the definition of woman, it escapes culture; Sethe’s act of self-affirmation cannot be rationalized in patriarchal discourse except by labeling it mad” (Agusti 32). Killing one’s children totally rejects the maternal instinct to nurture and protect, and yet through this action she protects her children from slavery. By challenging this cultural definition of a woman, Agusti argues that Sethe challenges the male discourse, one may add *white* to the definition of such discourse. Sethe’s actions are

outside of language, society and law, and she as a result must be mad. Thus, in this madness Sethe does, in fact, find freedom.

The same ideas about madness and freedom can be applied to The Known World. Using this framework, Alice's actions are clearly beyond acceptable social conduct, and this is her path to freedom. Though Alice never acts in such an extreme and violent manner as Sethe, her actions are disturbing none-the-less, to the white patrollers, who are primarily white men. Her behavior is often odd, uncanny and perverse. She wanders in the night, singing and chanting eerie songs; she is most certainly a haunting figure. The reader is presented with a series of events that illustrate Alice's madness. The climax of her insanity comes when Moses follows her and witnesses one of her encounters with the patrollers.

He did not know how far he would follow but less than a half a mile from the plantation he heard the horses galloping toward them. He steeped down into the ravine and could see her and the horses and their men many yards away. Alice lifted her frock and danced and tried to climb onto the horse with one man. The man pushed her away just as the horse reared up.  
(271)

This behavior is clearly beyond any socially acceptable practice. As a result the patrollers find no reason to acknowledge Alice. She refuses to communicate with them and almost delights in tormenting them. She, in fact, derives power over them from her bizarre and mad behavior. As a result Alice is left alone, to do what she likes; she answers to no one because she is perceived as insane. In this way Alice constructs her

own freedom. Moses queries, “Maybe you could just be crazy by pretending to be crazy for a long, long time. He lay down, and before he went to sleep he went through his memory, trying to remember if there had been any slave who had escaped from the Townsend plantation. There had never been” (272). After witnessing a series of strange behavior on the part of Alice, Moses questions her state of mind. Is she really crazy or might she just be pretending. The seed of doubt is planted; is Alice mimicking insanity? Then, artfully, Jones links madness with freedom in the mind of Moses, and consequently in the minds of his readers. Moses’ thoughts before bed are of freedom, and he wonders if anyone has ever escaped from the Townsend plantation before. The answer to that question is no, yet no one has ever been quite as removed from the social constructs of slavery either. This scene not only solidifies both Alice’s madness and her freedom, but it also serves to foreshadow coming events. Through madness Alice is able to free of her mind from the psychology of slavery and construct her own reality, this process facilitates her later bodily freedom. The reader will also come to question her whether her insanity was real, or had it just been a tool she used to manipulate her situation, and gain privileges.

In the conclusion of her article, Clara Escoda Agusti argues, “Madness, therefore, is difference confronting patriarchal language and economy, asserting itself as other than what patriarchy has relegated the female to be” (37). In a way Alice is doing just this; she is confronting the conventional thinking within society. By refusing to acknowledge her surroundings, as a result of her madness, she is refusing to accept that she is property. Therefore, she rejects the economics of slavery. Alice is able to retreat into her mind

where truth depends on her perception and interpretation of reality. Jones writes, “Alice was no different than she was on any other day: a good worker who didn’t sass and who seemed to go up and down a furrow in the time it took most people to turn around good. Occasionally, he would rise from his own work and look over at her, but, as always, she was in her own world” (269). Though she complies with the system and performs her function as a slave, Alice does not see herself as a tool. If she refuses to accept the fact that she is part of the economic machine of slavery then she transcends the thing itself. While she works, Alice retreats into her mind, into a free space she creates for herself. So, while she physically complies with the condition of slavery she is mentally rebelling against the system. She is free of mind if not of body, and this state of mind is the first step toward achieving physical freedom.

Alice also rejects patriarchal constructs. She does not act as a typical female slave; her behavior is bold and wildly inappropriate. She has been “relegated” to a certain role by society, and her madness is her total rejection of that role, and consequently that society. Women are often likened to marginalized minority groups, so this logic applies to Alice not because she is a woman, though it works in this sense as well, but for the purposes of this study because she is a member of a larger marginalized group: slaves. Alice derives power from her madness, Agustí continues, “Thus, these writers make us look at madness not as severed from society, but existing as a political response to it” (37). In the context of The Known World, this definition of madness makes perfect sense. Alice exists in a society where she is voiceless, and powerless to change her situation. As a result, she responds to society in her own way, by rejecting its conventions, in favor of

her own reality. Agusti argues that madness itself is a social construct, because it is a label that society, or patriarchal discourse, applies to that which does not conform. Still the acts and the thoughts that exist under this label belong solely to Alice, in the case of The Known World. Further, it is this label that causes society to dismiss Alice, and by asserting her madness, Alice finds freedom.

Alice is excused from social convention, and as a result she is able to use this “metaphysical” freedom as a path to physical freedom. Her night wandering is perceived as part of her insanity, yet it is this wandering that may more aptly be labeled escapism. Not only is it a way for her to escape the oppression of society, it is practice for her actual escape at the end of the novel. Benjamin D. Reiss further explores the idea of playing a part, to comply in such a way that society is able to label the individual, while at the same time the individual is able to maintain, in secret their own identity. As a result of this “game” the individual is able to gain some power and individual rights. What Reiss illustrates in his article is “mimicry.” He discusses Herman Melville’s “Benito Cereno,” and this idea of mimicry translates well to The Known World. As Reiss explains, in “Benito Cereno” there is a slave uprising, and the slavers were “performing a strange kind of strategic blackface minstrelsy” (4). In this way the slaves are putting on a show to trick the sailors. Similarly, Alice is “masking” or putting on a minstrel show. In both situations the mimicry, or charade, is the liberating force. In both situations, the truthfulness of the madness is questionable. Reiss writes, “The simulator or concealer of insanity performs a type of “passing” that is not unlike that of the mulatto or quadroon seeking freedom, and can hatch plans of deceit akin to those of Nat Turner...” (5). As a

way to escape to freedom, slaves often impersonated, or tried to pass as, free individuals. In the same way, as a way to escape the harsh realities of slavery Alice impersonates an insane individual. Through this simulation, she is released from social bondage, and later she will use this impersonation as a tool to escape to freedom. In a way Alice is like Nat Turner, she may not begin a rebellion, but she is resistant, and she does lead Moses' wife and son to freedom. Alice, along with Priscilla and Jamie, are the only people to ever escape the Townsend Plantation, in The Known World.

If, on the other hand, Alice really is insane, and her behavior is not an act of mimicry, Reiss has a theory that supports this idea as well. Since in the novel Moses is unclear as to whether or not Alice really is insane, it is important to explore both sides of the argument. Reiss explores this idea of social trauma and social alienation, two inherent qualities of the slave narrative, as well as the neo-slave narrative. Reiss writes, "Strangely enough, though, early psychiatrists found that many of the causes of this somatic insanity rested with disturbances of the social body, rather than the individual one" (7). This notion is applicable to The Known World and neo-slave narratives. Alice's insanity is a result of slavery as a social condition. At no point in the novel does the reader find that Alice suffers, in an extreme manner, any more than any other slave. Yet, Alice acts out, and is labeled mad. According to Reiss' theory, Alice's madness is the result of the fact that she is a member of a group that suffers social alienation. Reiss states,

Melville's parallel between the fate of the silently insane and the silenced slave emerged at a time when discussions of mental illness were becoming strangely entwined with questions of race and slavery, not only in terms of

the conflicting definitions of citizenship and property rights, but etiological terms as well. (11)

In the case of The Known World, the “silenced slave” is also the insane, and this insanity is a result of racism and slavery. An entire race is enslaved, irregardless of individualism, and individual rights are ignored. Alice regains her sense of self, and her individualism, and as a result gains individual right and privileges. Arguably, had she not been oppressed in such a manner, as part of a greater whole, she would not have had her onset of madness. She is property, and as property she has no rights because she is not a citizen, she is not a whole person, in a legal sense, nor in a figurative sense. Yet whether she is truly mad or just mimicking madness, it still stands to reason that it is through this behavior that she gains power and agency as well as freedom.

For the most part, in the novel, Alice is silenced. She rarely speaks, even when she is directly addressed; rather, she chants eerie, disturbing little songs of her own invention about the world around her. This lack of language, or silence, illustrates her rejection of the oppression of slavery, and a patriarchal society that categorically denies individual rights. Still, the reader is led to question Alice’s madness, because in a moment of crisis, she is calm and communicative. When Moses directly challenges Alice, and accuses her of planning an escape she denies the accusation, ““You ain’t foolin me goin all over Robin Hood’s barn, girl. I know you. I know what you been up to.’ ‘I ain’t been up to nothing. I’m just Alice I told you’” (296). Such an exchange is very rare for Alice, and she acts as if the accusations are unfounded. Yet, when Moses asks her to help his family escape, she is prepared and willing. Furthermore, she is lucid, confident and

fearless during the escape. She is the leader of the escape party, rather than a follower with a mental handicap. Alice no longer seems mad, maybe because the others have now entered into her world, a world where one must construct their own freedom. Nevertheless, rather than be part of the hysteria of the escape, Alice is the voice of reason.

In the woods Priscilla began crying. "Moses, why can't you come now? Please, Moses, please."

Alice stepped up to her and slapped Priscilla twice. Moses said nothing and Jamie said nothing. Who was this new woman, who was this Alice acting like this in the night? She said, "You just stop all that crying right now. I won't have it. Not one tear ever watered my thirst, and it wont water yours neither. So just stop it all right now." (297)

This exchange clearly demonstrates that the characters adopt a new social hierarchy and Alice is the sane one in this situation. This may be the most clear a commentary on the psychology of slavery, in that Alice has rejected the psychology of slavery, in favor of her own construct of freedom which will lead to actual physical freedom. Maybe she has been both sane and free, in her own way, all along. If so, the others, the slaves that conformed, are mad, for participating in such an oppressive society. Either way, it is evident in this scene that Alice is prepared to lead the escape party to freedom. When Moses looks at her, he no longer sees the mimicry, the Alice "passing" for insane, he sees her reality, and a sane Alice in control of the situation. A

symbolic moment occurs in the text where Jones, very subtly, transforms Alice from the unsettling social outcast, to the almost divine heroine of the novel. Jones writes,

In the dark of the woods, they could not see faces straight on, so the only way anyone could see a person was to stare at something just to the side. Only then did a face come clear. Alice looked at the tree next to Moses. “If they say they see you on the other side, then they know better than I do.” To look at Alice, he looked at his son beside her. “Then I’ll see yall.” (297-298)

The idea of “seeing” becomes a key element of the story, which Jones artfully highlights in this section. No one ever really did see Alice for who she was in the novel. It is taken for granted that she is insane, and as a result she is dismissed by society, and never given a second thought. Alice is a threat to no one; even if she is disturbing, she is not considered dangerous. All the while in her mad behavior she has been free. She has constructed her own space, through her madness where she can act as she wants. She has been building up her metaphysical freedom; in order out one day achieve actual physical freedom. In the final moment, before Moses and Alice part ways forever, he finally understands Alice, yet he cannot see her. Just as he never really saw her all the days they were slaves together, Moses cannot physically see Alice, in the dark of night when she reveals her true self. He must look to the side, and focus on something else, just as everyone has been focused on her mental state all along. Moses’ parting remark is “I’ll see yall” and this statement is highly ironic. Moses never does see them again, he never

sees freedom, and he never sees these people as individuals. He is truly oppressed by the psychology of slavery, and this dim mental state blinds him like the darkness of night.

Jones ends his novel with a letter. Calvin, Caldonia Townsend's brother, has gone north, and he describes how he happens upon Alice. Calvin goes to a hotel where he finds people admiring a tapestry. In this scene, Alice's madness and sanity come together, and the reader gains a window into her mind. Calvin describes what he sees,

It is, my Dear Caldonia, a kind of map of life of the County of Manchester, Virginia. But a "map" is such a poor word for such a wondrous thing. It is a map of life made with every kind of art man has ever thought to represent himself. Yes, clay. Yes, paint. Yes, cloth. There are no people on this "map," just all the houses and barns and roads and cemeteries and wells in our Manchester. It is what God sees when He looks down on Manchester. At the bottom right hand corner of this Creation were but two stitched words. Alice Night. (384)

This dramatic revelation is crucial to Alice's characterization. First, the "map" explains how the three runaways were able to find their way to freedom. Through the mimicry of insanity she was able to wander undisturbed, through wandering she was able to escape, thus her madness was a vehicle for freedom. Various mediums were used in the creation of the "map" which is itself a work of art, lending itself to the notion that Alice has some higher artistic sensibilities. Finally, the "map" is called a "Creation," with a capital "C," and is said to be from the vantage point of God. These elements suggest some sort of divine intervention. In the Bible, Moses leads his people to freedom, but in

The Known World, he only helps to enslave them. Moses must call upon Alice to help; Alice is the only one who knows the way to freedom. Finally, the name on the map must be considered. In the slave narrative, naming is important. Jones ascribes Alice the surname “Night,” because in the darkness she is liberated, the darkness of the actual night, and the darkness of her mind. This work of art is the Manchester County of Alice’s mind; this is the space she created for herself, devoid of people, oppression and slavery. It is the Manchester County of her night wandering; it is her free place, an invention of the mind, in a way it is what Reed would call, her *Canada*.

Calvin describes the second tapestry he sees while there, and rather than depicting “metaphysical” freedom, it depicts actual freedom. It seems in Manchester County, regardless of the law, everyone is a slave to something. No one understands this idea better than Alice, for she has transcended the language that struggles to define everything in The Known World. Calvin describes Alice’s representation of this idea:

In this massive miracle on the Western wall, you, Caldonia, are standing before your house with Loretta, Zeddie and Bennett. As I said, all the cabins are there, and standing before them are the people who live in them ere Alice, Priscilla and Jamie disappeared. Except for those three, every single person is there, standing and waiting as if for a painter and his easel to come along and capture them in the glory of the day. Each persons face, including yours, is raised up as though to look in the very eyes of God.

(385)

Calvin describes this piece of art as a miracle. This description of the eyes raised to God, furthers the notion of divine intervention on the part of Alice. Patience, faith and good planning will lead to freedom. In the painting everyone is present except Alice, Priscilla and Jamie, because they are truly free. Free in a sense that no one in The Known World or Manchester County has ever been, or could be. The tapestry is a picture of slavery, and slavery oppresses everyone, not just the enslaved. These works of art are reminiscent of the folklore about quilts and maps to freedom. This is Alice's way once again to assert her freedom and individuality in a subversive way.

The neo-slave narrative comes from a tradition of slave narrative, where a discourse of freedom is unavoidable. Yet, the neo-slave narrative is given more room to bend the notions of freedom into literal and figurative definitions. The Known World is a novel that rejects various conventional definitions, among these ideas freedom. Jones questions freedom; what it really is and who has it. Jones creates a world of slavery that destroys everyone regardless of race, gender, or socioeconomic status. Out of the wreckage of this disastrous society steps Alice Night, a mad woman, in a mad world. It is her insanity that allows her to cast off the bondage of slavery. She rejects the conventional psychology of slavery, and creates her own space for freedom out of madness. As a result of her insanity, she is virtually ignored by society. In the end this metaphysical state leads her to physical freedom. Just as in many other neo-slave narratives, Jones narrative suggests that freedom is a state of mind, and the path to freedom begins with rejecting the psychology of slavery, in favor of a self-determined psychology of freedom.

Ashraf H. A. Rushdy explores the psychology of slavers and how that plays a role in identity construction in his book Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form. Rushdy examines Charles Johnson's Oxherding Tale, Rushdy writes:

In almost all his fiction, and in much of his critical writing, Johnson has articulated and worked out his concerns with the problematics of race and personal identity...Conceiving "identity" itself as a "theoretical concept," he nonetheless believes that it is deeply implicated in the politics of racial inequity in American Society. Johnson notes that "black subjectivity" is produced through the "intentionality" of white agency...(167)

Rushdy makes an important point about how race plays a role in the construction of personal identity. He argues that identity is a "theoretical concept" and that the politics of race help to shape this concept. Considering the politics of race within the system of slavery, it stands to reason that this model for examining construction of identity presented by Rusdy applies well to Alice Night and The Known World. If "black subjectivity" were contingent upon "white agency" then the practice of slavery would be the penultimate form of white dominance over the formation of black identity. Since in the case of Alice Night she refuses to see herself through the lens of white society, or even that she refuses to conform to the dominant discourse of slavery (that of white men), she has freed herself from the cycle. Alice is able to create her own identity and therefore produces her own agency. Rushdy writes,

Whereas the Neo-slave narratives that focus on the performance of racial roles examine how certain discourses constitute strategies for defining

authenticity, those focusing on the performance of racial subjectivity explore the processes through which race itself is reinscribed in daily actions, superstructural activities, and infrastructural developments. (167)

Considering what Rushdy has to say about performativity, Alice's ability to transcend these behaviors ascribed to racial roles is a result of her identity formation and agency. Jones revisits the Neo-slave narrative and re-invents black identity within the text. By redefining the traditional roles of master and slave and the relationship between the two he "re-forms the past" as is suggested in A. Timothy Spaulding's Re-Forming The Past: History, The Fantastic, and the Postmodern Slave Narrative.

CHAPTER THREE  
REWRITING HISTORY AND RECLAIMING AGENCY THROUGH  
THE KNOWN WORLD

The unusual circumstances of slavery depicted in the text causes one to question if this novel truly is a neo-slave narrative or if it fits into a wider context of postmodern literature. Though Jones blends a unique narrative voice with an alarming representation of slavery, it is clear his novel is a re-examination and re-invention of the postmodern neo-slave narrative. While the depiction of slavery Jones gives is uncommon, his subject matter and mode are similar to that of the neo-slave narrative. Jones clearly places his novel in a direct dialogue with slave narratives and neo-slave narratives creating a complex intertextuality, returning to common issues of the slave narrative and neo-slave narrative like education and sexuality. Jones's choice to revisit the neo-slave narrative form reflects the impact of social trauma on cultural identity. He creates tension between the individual and the collective to further explore ideas about slavery and race. In a way, Jones's form, the neo-slave narrative, is a reflection of a socially constructed cultural identity, rewriting history and reclaiming agency.

It is important to first explore the neo-slave narrative genre in order to understand why Jones uses this format for his novel, and how form adds meaning to the text. According to Ashraf H.A. Rushdy, there are social causes for, and implications of, the neo-slave narrative genre. In his book, Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form, Rushdy examines the reasoning behind writing neo-slave narratives. Rushdy writes: "the social logic of the Neo-slave narrative form is twofold: first, the form

evolved from a change in social and cultural conditions in the late sixties; second, later deployments of the form have engaged in dialogue with the social issues of its moment of origin” (5). Rushdy argues the Black Power movement of the 1960’s set a tone that fostered the development of the neo-slave narrative. Subsequent works in the genre have “engaged in a dialogue” with the issues that originated in the movement. Rushdy points to some germinal texts, such as Styron’s The Confessions of Nat Turner and Ishmael Reed’s Flight To Canada, to illustrate his point. He further argues the goal of the neo-slave narrative attempts to return to the slave narrative form, using this genre as a framework for highly politicized exploration of the “black subject” and cultural production.

Rushdy further explores black subjectivity in Reed by emphasizing the relationship between violence and property. Rushdy writes, “his insistence on creating a dialectic between violence and property, though, has to do with Reed’s argument about the institutional conditions necessary for the formation of that black subject, with establishing the optimal arrangement of the social forces acting on the subject” (103). He highlights the dialogue Reed sets up between texts by “invoking Uncle Tom and Nat Turner.” In Reed’s case, the physical conditions of violence as a part of the institution of slavery arguably act upon the subject’s formation of identity. According to Rushdy, some of the issues the study of violence and slavery raises—slave uprisings, for example—are related to the debate over contemporary social issues of the period.

Jones also examines the social forces acting on the subject in the novel, but rather than study violence as an institutional condition of slavery, he explores the psychology of

slavery. Social conventions and the ramifications of slavery directly impact the formation of one's identity in The Known World. Whereas Henry Townsend forms his identity in order to gain power as a participant in the culture of slavery, Alice Night's identity is formed as a means to escape the oppressive conditions of slavery. Alice, through her performed insanity, transcends the system of slavery and creates a mental freedom for herself that eventually leads to physical freedom. Henry, on the other hand, is so deeply entrenched in the culture of slavery that he cannot transcend the system. Rushdy's argument that the neo-slave narrative both addresses social issues and highlights the social forces working to create black subjectivity is thus challenged by Jones's text. The Known World is a close study in social construction and social issues, but these issues are less important than Jones's rewriting of history. It is important to understand that Jones's text looks at how cultural identity is influenced by the past, how it is reformed through this interaction, and how it lends to a literary re-interpretation of history. The neo-slave narrative is a postmodern approach to the legacy of slavery in literature.

Like Rushdy, A. Timothy Spaulding addresses concepts of identity and social convention in his study, Re-Forming the Past: History, The Fantastic and the Postmodern Slave Narrative. Spaulding argues that the African American approach to the slave narrative is a postmodern re-examination of history:

Ultimately, what sets the postmodern slave narrative apart is its orientation toward the act of representing slavery in narrative form. By creating characters that defy the conventions of time and space (as both Butler and Reed do), by using formal devices that subvert the conventions of

narrative realism (as Morrison and Johnson do), or by mining genres that many regard as escapist (as Delany and Gomez do), African American writers re-form traditional historical representations of slavery from a contemporary perspective. They compel us to re-examine the past in a way that acknowledges its impact on the present. (7)

Jones's novel also compels the reader to re-examine the past and looks at its impact on contemporary culture. So, while he does not primarily focus on social issues, there is some inherent awareness of social relevance in this form of writing. The novel's form sets it amongst traditional literary studies of history, but the uncomfortable circumstances of slavery in the novel serve to further complicate the issues. Jones looks at slavery from the contemporary perspective of social construction and psychology. The issues he raises about the influence of society on individual subjectivity and the relationship to freedom are complicated in such a way that Jones is able to re-invent the traditional neo-slave narrative.

Spaulding talks about the neo-slave narrative as part of the African American postmodern discourse. By placing the neo-slave narrative in this context, he shows that it is through this form that the community of African American writers is able to re-claim and explore the slave experience. Spaulding argues, "Contemporary African American writers suggest that our continuing conflicts with race, class and gender has its roots in the Western ideology that created, developed and perpetuated American Slavery" (21). Certainly, the argument is that modern social problems are an offshoot of the Western ideology of American slavery, and the neo-slave narrative is a reflection of these

problems. Specifically in Jones's novel, these problems are socially constructed through the oppressive psychology of slavery. In the introduction to his book, Spalding writes:

Within the genre, the texts that interest me most in *Re-Forming the Past* are those that reject the boundaries of narrative realism in their retelling of slavery. As part of a larger tradition that sets out to recover the stories of our past obscured by time and by an official historical record that devalued the perspectives of the slaves themselves, many African American writers, particularly in the last decade of the twentieth-century, sought not only to recover these stories, but also to redefine the way we narrate the slave experience. (1-2)

Jones may not be as dramatic in his retelling of this recovered slave story as authors such as Reed, Butler and Johnson, but he explores a type of story that is a radical departure from the norm. While other postmodern contemporary authors of neo-slave narratives bend time and place or subvert convention, Jones tells a story that seeks to subvert traditional retellings and understandings of the slave experience, departing more from subject than style. So, while his novel adheres to the traditional narrative form, Jones like other postmodern authors of neo-slave narratives redefines the narrative of the slave experience. The novel itself is the political act that neo-slave narratives born out of the 1960's sought to impart:

The postmodern slave narrative provides the contemporary reader with a model of individual and collective agency in the face of interrelated forces of economic, political, racial and cultural oppression. In this sense,

contemporary writers retain the basic theme, structure and function of the nineteenth century slave narrative. Just as the traditional slave narrative offered commentary on cultural dilemmas of the nineteenth century, slave narratives of the late-twentieth-century turn to the past in an effort to reform both history and the historiography of the present. In spite of the fact that the postmodern slave narrative focuses on the historical institution of slavery, its re-formation of the past marks an interrogation of our postmodern condition. (Spaulding 21)

The political act of writing returns agency and subverts convention. These texts while calling into question our understanding of the past also force us to reevaluate conditions of the present. Jones retains similar themes in his novel, such as issues of race, class and gender, but he is more concerned with the individual than with collective social issues. He returns agency to the enslaved in a symbolic act of reclaiming and rewriting history like others within the genre.

Just as the text questions the world, it also questions itself. The inherent wrong that exists when one man owns another is obvious, but Jones further complicates this model of slavery by writing a story about a black slave owner. In creating Henry Townsend, Jones raises questions regarding race and class, and gives them a voice. Moses, the first slave Henry Townsend buys, and overseer on the plantation is an observer, or witness, for the reader. He voices some of the questions and concerns that the text raises:

It took Moses more than two weeks to come to the understanding that someone wasn't fiddling with him and that indeed a black man, two shades darker than himself, owned him and any shadow he made. Sleeping in a cabin besides Henry in the first weeks after the sale, Moses has thought that it was already a strange world that made him a slave to a white man, but God had indeed set it twirling and twisting every which way when he put black people to owning their own kind. Was God even up there attending to his business anymore? (8-9)

In this passage it becomes obvious that race is not the singular characteristic on which the institution of slavery is based. As Moses points out, Henry has a darker complexion, and yet it is Henry, the darker man, that plays the master's role. By creating this situation, Jones simultaneously liberates race and deeply disrupts the psychology of slavery. If race is not inherently flawed in The Known World, then the source of slavery exists within the individual, not the collective. In other words, one's identity is not necessarily tied to race or a collective identity, and it is this fact that allows for more socially constructed identity and subsequent freedom. Though freedom is socially constructed, Jones seems to undermine his own text to re-write history. Moses highlights the fact that slavery itself is unnatural but that there is something even more disturbing in black people "owning their own kind." Moses articulates the concerns of the reader that God may not be tending to his business, and Jones, as the creator of this story, most certainly complicates his own business of writing a neo-slave narrative. Spalding suggests that Jones does not just

complicate his representation of slavery to make the reader uncomfortable, and he offers an explanation for the circumstances of the novel:

...Jones forces us to embrace a more complex view of slavery as a social system rather than merely an economic one. By creating characters like Henry Townsend, the black slave owner, and John Skiffington, the conflicted white sheriff who abhors slavery but upholds the slave laws of the South, Jones suggests that a narrow view of the past ultimately leads to a limited conception of race, intraracial relationships and interracial relationships. (126)

As Spalding points out there are various ways and multiple characters that Jones uses in order to present a more complex representation of slavery. Slavery, being a social system in the novel, focuses more on the individual and relationships, rather than the collective or groups. Through attention to individuals Jones highlights these character anomalies. Characters like Henry Townsend and John Skiffington necessitate a counterintuitive understanding of slavery. These characters force the re-examination of history and the dialogue that occurs between history, literature and contemporary society.

Intertextuality is not a new idea in literary studies. Authors constantly create tensions between texts, as well as re-write the work of their predecessors in order to create layers of meaning and explore various ideas and themes within a text. A historical sensibility is ever present in the literature of this genre; it is inextricably linked with the themes. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. explores why African American Authors revisit the neo-

slave narrative in his essay, The blackness of blackness: a critique of the sign and the Signifying Monkey:

Afro-American literary history is characterized by such *tertiary* formal revision, by which I mean its authors seem to revise at least two antecedents texts, often taken from different generations or periods within tradition. [...] It is clear that black writers read and critique other black texts as an act of rhetorical self-definition. Our literary tradition exists because of these precisely chartable formal literary relationships, relationships of signifying. (290)

Gates makes the point that African American authors rely on the texts of the past, and this principle holds true for Jones as well. The Known World borrows from the tradition of the slave narrative, and at the same time the text is in dialogue with earlier neo-slave narratives. The texts Gates highlights can be from different “generations or periods within the tradition” and it is clear that this is precisely the tactic that Jones employs. Jones pulls from early slave narratives, like that of Frederick Douglass, while at the same time drawing significant connections with writers like Reed and Morrison. Gates argues this intertextuality found throughout the African American literary tradition is an act of “rhetorical self-definition,” and considering the key issues that Jones focuses on, in his text this label of self-definition is an apt description. Writers are able to ground their work in their own unique literary tradition, as well as continue to redefine the past and the present through critique and interpretation of other texts. On the surface terms like identity and freedom are obvious enough concepts, but the way they work together in the

text, as well as how Jones is joining the discourse on African American literature, are what makes the text unique. How Jones re-invents identity and freedom in the text, and how his text not only fits into, but also challenges the African American literary canon is significant. Gates also points out that the African American author seems to be revising these previous narrative forms, especially true of Jones. This revision of the relationship between texts allows for the study of signification within The Known World.

Just as Jones's novel is in dialogue with society, the past, and the present, it likewise engages in a dialogue with the tradition of the slave narrative and the neo-slave narrative. Jones addresses many of the same ideas and thematic concepts of the slave narrative. For example, Jones explores education and literacy. Many of the women in The Known World are educated and literate. Henry's opinion and attitude presents a contrast to the typical representation of a slave's attitude toward literacy, and he most sharply contrasts Frederick Douglass's The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, in regards to reading and writing. While both Henry Townsend and Frederick Douglass's stories are in a sense, framed by white men, the development of their respective identities is vastly different. Douglass has a great appreciation for education, specifically the ability to read and write. Douglass frees himself from the psychology of slavery through education, and it is through writing that he is finally able to escape and gain freedom. Douglass has an epiphany; the defining moment in the development of his identity is when he fully understands there is a link between mental and physical freedom. Douglass writes: "I would at times that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy" (51). It is through

education and reading that Douglass is able to fully understand his condition in a way that his understanding of his condition is not augmented by the condition itself. Education for Douglass is a curse and a blessing because he is able to fully comprehend his situation and realize that there are other possibilities that would be infinitely more favorable.

Henry, on the other hand, is far less interested in education, because he does not have to work for it, and unlike Douglass. Henry is not barred from literacy, but there seems to be nothing substantial for him to gain from education. Henry's freedom was handed to him, he did not have to work to buy it, and he maintained a close relationship with his master, so he has a minimal appreciation for freedom and education and the relationship between the two. Freedom and education are things other people, namely Augustus Townsend and William Robbins respectively, have given him. Henry Townsend has a limited education and very little concern for it. "He had received some education when he was twenty and twenty-one, education just enough to appreciate a wife like Caldonia, a colored woman born free and who had been educated all her days" (5). Henry has the power, station, and wealth that he desires, so education offers him very little benefits. He does, however, appreciate It is clear in this passage that Henry understands perfectly well the importance, or the implication of education, but ultimately education is of little use to him considering he has attained all the things he desires. This attitude expressed by Henry creates tension between The Known World and The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass. Unlike the slave narrative, in The Known World education is not a vehicle to freedom.

Similarly, Henry does not seek out education, like Douglass, but his former master William Robbins does decide Henry needs an education. It is not that Henry has a poor education; it is instead what he is educated in that poses the problem. Douglass reads newspapers and a book about the relationship between a master and slave, written by an author named Sheridan. What Douglass reads has some relevance to his life. His literacy helps to cultivate his mind and helps him to consider alternatives to his situation. Douglass writes: “What I got from Sheridan was a bold denunciation of slavery, and a powerful vindication of human rights. [...] The silver trump of freedom had roused my soul to eternal wakefulness” (51). For Douglass, education is useful and reading helps him understand that there is an alternative to slavery, thus Douglass can create a new value system for himself, transcending his status as a slave. Henry, on the other hand, reads classic works of literature, authors such as Milton and Grey, who offer no commentary on the slave condition. Henry’s interpretation of the Devil in *Paradise Lost* reflects his worldview based on his social conditioning. Fern Elston, Henry’s teacher, discusses Henry’s education:

“Now and again some book would take a firm hold of him and he would talk about it for days. Do you know Milton, Mr. Frazier? Do you know *Paradise Lost*, Mr. Frazier?”

“I do, Mrs. Elston.”

“So did Henry. ‘Ain’t that a thing to say’ is what he said of the Devil who proclaimed that he would rather rule in hell than serve in heaven. He thought only a man who knew himself well could say such a thing, could

turn his back on God with just finality. I tried to make him see what a horrible choice that was, but Henry had made up his mind about that and I could not turn him back. (134-135)

Henry's attitude towards the devil reflects his attitude towards life. He explains that it takes a very secure person to turn their back on God, God being the ultimate master figure. In many ways Henry's own behavior reflects the attitude of the Devil. Rather than be a slave, and serve a white master, Henry becomes a slave master himself. While this is not to say that slavery under a white master is good or proper, this example serves to illustrate a point about Henry's character. Henry uses his education to his own benefit, but in a different way than Douglass. First, he does not seek education out himself, instead William Robbins arranges for Fern to teach Henry. Second, Henry does not come to some epiphany about slavery and freedom as a result of his education. In this way he is placed in juxtaposition with Frederick Douglass. The third and final contrast that Jones makes is in how Henry responds to the words of the Devil in *Paradise Lost*. Rather than Henry's eyes being opened to some greater philosophical or ontological truth on the nature of freedom through literacy, he imposes his pre-existing ideas on the text. Just as Henry makes up his mind about the text, he also makes up his mind about life and social order. The attitude he has toward his own station is reflected in how he interprets the text. Henry decides it is far better to be a master than a slave based on life experience and social conventions. Milton writes: "The Mind is its own place, and in itself/ Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n" (l.254-255). Henry's mind is the mind that makes a heaven from the hells of slavery. Again the unfortunate irony of what the Devil says only

parallels the irony of Henry's life. In the end, it is clear the God controls everything, even if the Devil thinks he rules in hell. This parallels Henry's situation within the context of slavery. Henry believes that he is a free man and while he is a slave owner, he is also a slave to the corrupt system he has immersed himself in. The issue of Henry's freedom and the complicated state he lives his life in is a constant concern of the novel, and Jones uses education to add another dimension to Henry's character. While it is clear Henry does not know he is legally a slave throughout his adult life, he does understand the gravity of the decision he makes to own slaves. Henry knows what he wants in life, and he understands the choices that he makes to achieve his goals. Henry's education does not entirely contrast that of Frederick Douglass's. Jones is careful to create a sort of balance, so that Henry does not become one dimensional and un-relatable. Henry, like Douglass, is educated enough to appreciate certain aspects of life, like for example his wife. So, Jones uses education to both highlight similarities between Henry and Douglass as well as to emphasize the paradox that exists within Henry's characterization in regards to freedom and identity.

Jones is able to use education as a theme to further solidify and give credibility to this novel as a neo-slave narrative. Jones relies on the tradition of the slave narrative for context; he also creates a dialogue between his text and Douglass's. Jones constantly creates tension between The Known World and other texts within the genre and then releases that tension, in an ebb and flow of ideas. Through the complication of Henry's characterization and education Jones returns agency to Henry. In Henry's commentary of *Paradise Lost* there is the echo of Henry's own life and a voicing ownership of his own

place in society. Hints of self-determinism lie in his words. Jones does not portray the typical image of slavery in his novel and as a result he deepens the social commentary of cultural identity. While his concerns are still the concerns of the neo-slave narrative author, they are also the concerns of one bringing a new voice into the discourse of the scholarly literary community. Jones re-invents the neo-slave narrative by telling an untold story, but he employs the same tools and methods of exploration as the neo-slave narrative author. It is in revealing these secrets, even when they are shocking, uncomfortable, and hard to understand, when we learn the most.

Jones explores the failed contradiction of identity and freedom through Henry's characterization, and in response to Henry's failings Jones creates Alice Night, a triumphant contradiction. While in Henry's case it is important to look at attitudes towards education within the text, in the case of Alice it is important to return to the theme of madness and female hysteria. A popular theme in the neo-slave narrative, it is not unusual to see traces of almost gothic madness in Jones's text. As with Henry's character, Jones also explores complex identity formation in Alice's character. While Henry internalizes social values Alice rails against these ideas and practices. Alice arguably *performs* mad behavior and through this behavior she is pardoned from adhering to social norms, thus she is given more freedom. Jones writes:

From the first week, Alice had started going about the land in the night, singing and talking to herself and doing things that sometimes made the hair on the backs of the slave patrollers' necks stand up. She spit at and slapped their horses for saying untrue things about her to the neighbors

[...] she told the patrollers she planned to marry after the harvest. She grabbed the patrollers' crotches and begged them to dance away with her because her intended was forever pretending he didn't know who she was. She called the white men by made-up names and gave them the day and time God would take them to heaven, would drag each and every member of their families across the sky and toss them into hell with no more thought than a woman dropping strawberries into a cup of cream. (12)

Jones details Alice's bizarre behavior and as a result of her madness she is able to "get away" with a lot. From the very first week that Henry owns Alice she takes extreme liberties, like wandering in the night. Her behavior makes the slave patrollers so uncomfortable that they leave her alone for the most part. Yet, beyond these liberties, Alice also derives some small sense of power from her insanity. For example, because she makes the patrollers uncomfortable, she asserts some power or dominance over them and inverts the typical relationship between run—away slave and slave patroller. Alice invades their personal space and physically asserts herself over these men. There is much more below the surface of Alice's behavior. First, this depiction of random abuse mirrors the abuse of the slave by the overseer or master. Alice mimics the behavior of the dominant social group and inverts the power structure through her actions. Second, by grabbing their crotches she asserts herself over these men physically and sexually.

Like Harriet Jacobs, Alice uses her sexuality as a weapon rather than allowing herself to be victimized because she is a woman. Jacobs, has an affair with a white man, but refusing to be taken advantage of by her master, who makes constant advances

toward her. By rebuffing her master and taking a lover, particularly a white man, Jacobs asserts power over herself, her sexuality, and her master:

There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except which he gains by kindness and attachment. A master may treat you as rudely as he pleases, and you dare not speak; moreover, the wrong does not seem so great with an unmarried man, as with one who has a wife to be made unhappy. There may be sophistry in all this; but the condition of a slave confuses all principles of morality, and, in fact, renders the practice of them impossible. [...] I knew nothing would enrage Dr. Flint so much as to know that I favor another; and it was something to triumph over my tyrant even in that small way. (Jacobs 192)

Making a decision and having a choice is akin to freedom for Jacobs. As she argues, a slave must submit to her own master or risk the peril of harsh physical punishment. Taking a lover, on the other hand, requires that the lover ingratiate himself through kindness towards Jacobs. She also states that the revenge exacted from knowing her taking a lover would enrage Dr. Flint is a small triumph. Here Jacobs reveals the inversion of power. She takes control, and rather than allow herself to be victimized, she uses her sexuality to hurt her master. Jacobs undergoes a transformation here, and her greatest vulnerability becomes her strongest weapon. Similarly Alice's grabbing the patrollers' crotches is her physical assertion of sexual power over these men. While the patrollers have not made any advances towards her, the symbolism of a slave woman objectifying a white man is present in the interaction. It is clear to see the conversation

between texts that Jones creates in this depiction of Alice. She is a strong woman and through her mad behavior Jones pointedly subverts the power of the slave master.

While Alice is a slave, she does in fact have power over the patrollers because they fear her. As a result of their fear they leave Alice alone to wander in the night. Jones explains that Alice predicts the day and time of their death, and she prophesizes that God will cast the patrollers and their families into hell. While Alice's prediction may be nothing more than the insane ramblings of a mad woman, whether she truly is some kind of soothsayer is debatable, and that little bit of doubt that exists in the minds of the patrollers as a result of fear is enough to severely unnerve the men. Alice's eerie presence allows her to possess power over these men. So, while Jones complicates the relationship between Alice and the patrollers, he in turn, revises the models of the female slave, sexuality, and insanity presented by Jacobs and Morrison.

Jones addresses concerns similar to those of both the slave narrative and the neo-slave narrative in The Known World. While his text portrays an unfamiliar and complicated version of American slavery, the underlying issues of identity, freedom and society remain the same. Jones creates a version of slavery that while alarming, it is itself an untold story. Spaulding writes of novels like The Known World, "They assert the need to revisit slavery through the narrative act and to destabilize our knowledge of this history" (127). If we take for granted Rushdy's argument about the influence of the black power movement of the 1960's on the neo-slave narrative genre, then it is clear that Jones is re-visiting and re-inventing the genre. Jones does not have the same social and cultural identity issues to contend with that writers that grew out of this movement did. Jones

destabilizes our knowledge of the history and legacy of slavery by showing the complexity of the issue. Obviously slavery is not a mere matter of race or economics, but as Spaulding puts it, slavery is a social system. Jones argues for transcendence of social conventions for true freedom is a complicated matter not easily attained. Henry Townsend, a black slave owner, is a living contradiction, and he is also the embodiment of failed contradiction. The duplicitous nature of his existence and position in society cause the reader to re-examine the system of slavery in a new way. Alice Night is also a contradiction of sorts in the novel. Alice, though a slave acquires freedom through her own self-determination. Alice is perceived as insane, and while typically mental illness is cast as a handicap, in the neo-slave narrative the condition is liberating. Through characters like Henry and Alice, Jones is able to create a conversation between his text and other slave narratives and neo-slave narrative. By placing characters and situations in juxtaposition as well as highlighting distinct commonalities, Jones is able to place his text within the postmodern neo-slave narrative genre. Spaulding argues:

In these novels, as in the tradition of slave narratives, the individual must confront the ways in which she has been enslaved by the real and identifiable social and political structure of American slavery. Although these texts establish slavery as an oppressive and hegemonic force, they also depict the slave's ability to liberate himself from this pervasive and oppressive ideological, political, and economic system. Within a cultural moment when traditional postmodernism proclaimed the fragmentation of the individual subject, the slave narrator/protagonist, both original and

postmodern stands as an example of individual agency and successful resistance. Far from a romanticized notion of individuality, postmodern slave narratives depict freedom as contested and wrought with conflict.

(21)

Jones's novel seeks to further complicate the typical understanding of the postmodern or neo-slave narrative as explained by Spaulding. Jones's novel complicates the traditional neo-slave narrative and in many ways re-invents the genre. The text aims to return agency to the oppressed, give voice to the enslaved, subvert the social and political structures that proliferate American slavery, and express the slave's ability to liberate oneself. Jones writes characters with conflicted identities, adding layers of meaning through intertextuality, to create a complex idea of what it means to be free in The Known World, re-inventing the neo-slave narrative.

## CONCLUSION

The Known World is an exploration of freedom and identity. Both of these ideas are obviously socially constructed, and it is in the complication of these seemingly mundane concepts, that Jones creates a new and revolutionary kind of neo-slave narrative. Jones uses the subject rather than the form to complicate his narrative unlike other contemporary neo-slave narrative authors. The attitudes and opinions of Henry Townsend, serve to both explore the psychology of slavery, and create the central irony of the text. Henry's character is contrasted with Alice because in the end she is ultimately able to transcend the psychology of slavery and attain true freedom. These characters, and their ironic, fractured identities are tools for the re-examination of the genre. And, while Jones does indeed complicate his text, by placing it in dialogue with the typical slave narratives and neo-slave narratives, Jones clearly creates a place for his text in the canon.

This thesis aims to closely examine identity and freedom through the characters Henry Townsend and Alice Night in order to illustrate the function of the text as a neo-slave narrative. The argument builds towards some questions about the nature of the neo-slave narrative, how it functions, and where Jones fits into the genre.

Just as slave narratives and neo-slave narratives are at times didactic, so too can Jones be in his text. Jones removes race as the central criteria for slavery and focuses on the individual, rather than the collective. Jones destabilizes the readers understanding of slavery by offering a different representation of the system. Thus, Jones forces the reader to look at slavery through a new lens. He challenges the reader to think about the untold

stories of American slavery through his representation of slavery in The Known World. Jones takes enough of a departure from the conventional neo-slave narrative, to make the point that issues presented in the genre are often complex and complicated, and these issues cannot be easily untangled.

Yet, while Jones's novel is a revolutionary text he is sure to adhere to some more subtle conventions of the genre. The Known World abounds with intertextuality. The novel highlights the progression, or development, of the genre. The novel also draws attention to the foundation of the neo-slave narrative in the tradition of re-writing the slave narrative form. This thesis takes up issues of identity and freedom in the text, and how Jones re-imagines the slave experience through these concepts, while simultaneously engaging the neo-slave narrative tradition.

While Jones illustrates points about transcendence, freeing the body and freeing the mind, he also demonstrates the liberating power of art. The Known World ends with the description of two tapestries made by Alice. These tapestries are maps of Manchester County depicting all the places and people from Alice's past. Alice, being the artist, has gained control over figures that represent the system of slavery. Through her art, Alice has power and she subverts the system, much like the author of the slave narrative and neo-slave narrative. By writing the text, Jones gains power and he also returns power to the black subject. So, while neo-slave narratives may experiment with form, or in Jones's case with subject, they hold true to function. These texts seek to subvert the relationship of power between master and slave, as well as explore questions pertaining to race, identity, literature and history.

The Known World leaves room for speculation about how well it fits into the neo-slave narrative genre. Jones may not express exactly the same concerns about concepts like race, identity, literature, history, and culture as some of the earlier writers of neo-slave narratives, but that is because he is writing in a different context than those authors. What is certain is that Jones tackles some of the same ideas and themes as these earlier writers. While his motivation may be different Jones uses some of the same techniques and strategies in his novel. Just as Reed and Morrison look to the past, and history to draw inspiration for their novels, so too does Jones. Jones's novel speaks to both the slave narrative and the neo-slave narrative. He creates a conversation between his text and both previous forms, in order to more completely explore how identity is socially constructed. Jones also uses his text as a way to return power to the oppressed. As Spaulding suggests, this form allows for re-examination and re-formation of history and texts. Jones is able to critique and revise the canon of African American literature through this form. Within the bounds of the neo-slave narrative, he has room to explore the history of the genre. Jones adds to the continuous discourse between these authors, on concepts like identity and freedom. Jones is also free to push the boundaries of the form, and show that slavery can be recast and yet still have cultural, literary, and political relevance. Thus, The Known World is arguably Edward P. Jones's *new* neo-slave narrative.

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