

# **Escaping Expectations**

**A Close Reading of Edward P. Jones' *The Known World* through  
Tropes of the Neo-Slave Narrative**

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## Sammendrag

I denne oppgaven er utgangspunktet *hvorfor* Edward P. Jones' bok *The Known World*, utgitt i 2003, alltid blir klassifisert som en neo-slave narrative. Det viser seg nemlig at de fleste kritikere automatisk setter boken i denne "sjangerbåsen", uten nødvendigvis å nevne hvorfor. Er dette fordi man *forventer* at boken skal tilhøre nettopp denne sjangeren, ettersom forfatteren selv er afroamerikaner?

Det er helt tydelig at denne boken gjennomgående bryter med de fleste sjangertrekk innenfor neo-slave-sjangeren. Dette viser jeg konkret til i kapittel én, gjennom å analysere hvordan boken behandler to av de store tropene innenfor afroamerikansk litteratur: utdanning og religion. Tradisjonelt sett er disse to sjangertrekkene av stor betydning, men kanskje høyest står utdanning (særlig i de klassiske slaveberetningene), da disse representerer veien til frihet. I Homi Bhabha sin artikkel "Of Mimicry and Man" ser jeg på hvordan Jones presenterer de nevnte sjangertrekkene som *nesten det samme*, men ikke helt likt slik at den følger neo-slave-sjangeren.

I det andre kapittelet ser jeg på hvordan sjangertrekket flukt blir behandlet fra et grenseperspektiv. Gjennom Svend Erik Larsens artikkel om grenser og estetikk, "Boundaries: Ontology, Methods and Analysis", og diverse andre terminologier som alle omhandler grenser og såkalt "border poetics", utforsker jeg hvordan de ulike hovedpersonene i romanen oppnår eller ikke oppnår frihet ved å krysse (eller ikke krysse) grensene som omgir dem. Karakterene blir stadig utfordret til å utvide sin egen kjente verden, og jeg tar en nærmere titt på disse. Bhabha er relevant også her, siden dette også er en måte å etterligne sjangeren på.

Jeg returnerer til sjangerspørsmålet i det siste kapittelet, og diskuterer dette grundigere med støtte i artikler fra Mikhail Bakhtin, Jostein Børtnes og Peter Seitel, for å forsøke og finne ut av hvorfor *The Known World* er så vanskelig å plassere innenfor en viss sjanger. Jeg undersøker også, ettersom boken virker å være forankret i noe "annet", hvordan Michel Foucault sine seks prinsipper om heterotopiet kan passe denne romanen.

Det jeg til slutt kommer frem til er at vi som lesere av *The Known World* hele tiden blir utfordret til å tenke utenfor våre egne grenser og det vi antar som sikker viten. Når alt kommer til alt, hvordan kan vi være helt sikre på at det vi tror vi vet faktisk stemmer? Den eneste måten vi kan utvide kunnskapen vår er at vi tør å gå utenfor det vi selv anser som trygt og kjent.

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## Introduction

*It took Moses more than two weeks to come to understand 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 [...] God had indeed set [the world] twirling and twisting every which way when he put black people to owning their own kind. Was God even up there attending to business anymore?*

- Edward P. Jones, *The Known World* (pp. 8 – 9)

As we perceive from the quote, *The Known World* (2003) is indeed an unusual novel, as its main protagonist is a former slave who now owns his own “kin”. Although this is not necessarily the most significant feature of the work, black slave-ownership for commercial reasons (keeping slaves for profit and not for familial reasons) deviates from the treatment of slavery in most other novels. As *The Known World* is so very complex, with its fragmented plot- and timeline, perhaps this is the most tangible way to introduce the book? If this is the case, then certainly it is also very easy to then classify the novel as a neo-slave genre.

Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu (2006) divides the neo-slave narrative into two groups: “narratives that mimic the autobiographical form of the original slave narratives, and narratives that engage with the larger cultural and historical effects of plantation slavery” (p. 673). She writes that the “[former] group of narratives include texts such as Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora* (1975), Edward P. Jones’s *The Known World* (2003), and Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*.” (p. 674). In his *Neo-Segregation Narratives*, Brian Norman (2010) lists *The Known World* as a neo-slave narrative in the company of for instance Sherley Ann Williams’ *Dessa Rose*, William Styron’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner* and Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora*. Eve

Shockley in her article “Portrait of the Artist as a Young Slave: Visual Artistry as Agency in the Contemporary Narrative of Slavery” also classifies it within this genre. Theresa M. Rooney (2008) claims in her MA-thesis *Rewriting Boundaries* that “the neo-slave narrative revisits a moment in time in order to reclaim agency”, and that Jones does so by “placing the novel in dialogue with slave narratives like, The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl.” (p. 4). Although Rooney’s main argument is that Jones reinvents the neo-slave narrative, she never claims that *The Known World* should be classified outside of this genre. Venetria K. Patton lists quite a few works where, along with the renowned neo-slave narratives *Flight to Canada* by Ishmael Reed and *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, Jones’ novel is present. I include one more critic in this non-exhaustive list of examples, and that is Judie Newman (2007), who also claims that Jones, together with Morrison, Margaret Walker, and Sherley Ann Williams writes within the neo-slave genre. From these examples, the trend to coin Jones’ novel within the neo-slave narrative genre is obvious.

This triggered my mind, and I wondered *why*: Why do critics instinctively define *The Known World* within this particular generic framework? Is it because there exists a certain expectation to a novel focusing on slavery and written by an African American? In this thesis I explore the novel’s relation to the neo-slave narrative by analysing how the traditionally significant tropes of education, religion and escape are treated, in order to show how Jones’ work is *not* necessarily “trapped” by generic frameworks of the neo-slave narrative. My reason for questioning generic characteristics is because I feel much of *The Known World*’s individuality and meaning are lost when we view it solely through the conventions of the neo-slave genre. The close reading of the key characters and tropes in the novel is what mainly structures this thesis, and my aim is to show how much more there is to gain from the novel if it is appreciated from a perspective that is beyond the specificities of any given genre.



Before I discuss genre further, it is useful to give a synopsis of the novel. One of the features that makes *The Known World* such a complex narrative is that it never seems to stay put in its own time and place. The main setting of the novel is Manchester County, Virginia, around 1844; however, there are scenes where the narration suddenly jumps to the 20th century – 1994 to be exact. Although it is outside the scope of this thesis, I also want to briefly mention the novel’s chapter headings: sometimes they appear to impose meaning to the chapter, and other times they simply sum up the chapter in its entirety. Hence, giving a synopsis of the novel, with its endless list of characters and all of their fragmented stories, seems a hopeless enterprise. Despite this, it is possible to deduct from the novel that one very loosely follows Henry Townsend from childhood through adolescence and then into adulthood and as a young man until his death at the age of 33 years. Thus, instead of attempting to re-tell the novel, I think it is more fitting to thoroughly introduce the characters I treat in this thesis.

Henry Townsend is the main protagonist of the novel, in the sense that he is the one connecting all the other characters. However, in the very first sentence of the novel we learn that he is dead. At first glance, and as already mentioned, what makes Henry such an interesting character is the fact that he is a black slave-owner. However, as we get to know him better, it is his sense of self, the construction of his identity and his close friendship with his former owner William Robbins that really makes him a challenging character. It is this relationship that opens Henry’s eyes to the world of slavery, which will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

Henry is happily married to Caldonia, a woman who has been “educated all her days” (Jones, 2004, p.5<sup>1</sup>). He sets out to become a good and kind master: “good food for his slaves, no whippings, short and happy days in the field” (180). Of course, these notions are

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<sup>1</sup> All references to Jones, E. P. (2004). *The Known World*. London: Harper Perennial, will only be given by using page numbers throughout the thesis.

incompatible with the institution of slavery, and after his death Caldonia makes excuses for him:

Henry had been a good master, [...] as good as they come. Yes, he sometimes had to ration the food he gave them. But that was not his fault – had God sent down more food, Henry would certainly have given it to them. Henry was only the middleman in that particular transaction. Yes, he had to have some slaves beaten, but those were the ones who would not do what was right and proper. [...] Her husband had done the best he could, and on Judgement Day his slaves would stand before God and testify to that.

(181)

Caldonia's mother Maude owns several slaves herself. Thus, both Caldonia and her mother share Henry's view that he has just as much right as the next (white) man to own slaves, showing that slavery is the only way they know.

At the age of 22 Augustus Townsend, Henry's father, buys his own freedom and starts saving money so he can buy the rest of his family, as well. He buys his wife Mildred before Henry, probably an easy decision at the time, but Augustus is forever left to wonder whether he could have prevented his son from becoming a slave-owner by freeing him before Mildred: He disowns his son when he learns of Henry's first slave purchase. Of course, Henry's close relationship with his former owner clearly affects Augustus' own relationship to his son.

Henry's overseer at the plantation is Moses, also a former slave of Robbins' that Henry buys cheap. Alongside his new master, Moses helps build the main house, and although he is somewhat confused that Henry in fact is "two shades darker than himself" (9) but still owns him, he comes to terms with the situation. He inhabits a trusted position in master Henry's eyes: "I'm countin on you to run this place [...] [y]ou be the boss of this place. There's my word, then my wife's word, and then there's your word" (332). After his master's death, the estate slowly starts to fall apart, and this process only escalates as soon as

Moses stops paying attention. A close reading of Moses and his significance to the Townsend plantation, especially in relation to boundaries and how restricted his world is as a slave is given in chapter two.

Another slave character of importance in *The Known World* is Alice Night. She is supposedly kicked in the head by a mule as a child, and everyone believes she is crazy. What no one knows, however, is that at the plantation where she allegedly gets kicked, the owner is so afraid of mules that he has banned them from his land. Hence, already at the very beginning of the novel Alice's insanity is questioned. Because of her apparent craziness, she is allowed to roam free around the county at night; hence Moses' nickname for her, Alice Nightwalker. However, she is a very bright woman, and by venturing away from the Townsend plantation every night for more than six months, she knows every corner of the county – easing her escape to the North at a later stage in the novel. Alice is the only character who seems to disregard the borders around her, essentially freeing herself from slavery both physically and mentally. Her character and the grand wall hangings she creates are also treated in detail in both chapter two and chapter three.

The last “family” I want to introduce are the Skiffingtons: John Skiffington is the sheriff of Manchester County; however, he is “only” a deputy when the readers are acquainted with him. John Skiffington (I refer to him mostly by his last name throughout the thesis) is a very devout man, frequently citing or reading the Bible, and he has a strong sense of justice. He is also very ambivalent to certain issues such as slavery, since he both condones *and* condemns it. His wife Winifred is a sweet innocent young woman from Pennsylvania, but she is also ultimately affected by the Southern culture, as evidenced in the scene where her “daughter”, Minerva (originally a wedding present), is missing. The final member of the Skiffington family is John's cousin Counsel Skiffington (hereafter only referred to as “Counsel”). He loves to rub the fact that he belongs to the privileged class in his cousin's

face. When he suddenly loses everything he owns he eventually comes to work for John as his deputy, which he does not appreciate. In a moment of greed, he shoots and kills his cousin as they hunt Moses down after his escape from the Townsend plantation.

There are other characters I refer to and use as examples as well, such as Fern Elston and Elias, but I will introduce them as they appear in the relevant chapters.

It is necessary, I feel, to give a brief “introduction” to the neo-slave narrative, and also a short explanation of why I argue that *The Known World* does not belong to this genre. I will begin with the very first definition of the neo-slave narrative, namely Bernard Bell’s from 1987. He claimed that the genre consists of “residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom” (p. 289). In 2002, Angelyn Mitchell decided to call neo-slave narratives “liberatory narratives”, because of how they “centre on the enslaved protagonist’s attainment of freedom” (p. 4). In *The Known World* there are five attempts of escape, where three succeed. I will briefly present them:

There are the escapes of Rita, Gloria and Clement and of course that of Alice, Jamie and Pricilla. The latter attempt, perhaps the most important one in the novel, is not depicted at all. In fact, the only successful attempt described in the novel is Rita’s, and this is given six pages. However, and as I will come back to in chapter two, they are all present in Alice’s strange illustration of the Townsend plantation with all the slaves present, and I consequently doubt that Rita, Gloria and Clement achieve true freedom.

The first failed attempt of escape is Elias’, who runs away in his fourth month as a slave on the Townsend plantation. He does not get far, and is caught by Robbins that same night. As punishment, Henry decides to have half his ear cut off. However, I want to focus on the one made by Moses: After his master dies, he engages in a sexual relationship with Caldonia, which leads him to the anticipation of his freedom, and ultimately disillusionment when he realises that this will never happen. Thus he decides to run away. As I will elaborate

further in chapter two, Moses is not able to survive outside the borders of slavery. Not being able to successfully venture out into the unknown, he is eventually caught at Mildred's house. His punishment for escaping is a brutal hobbling, which ultimately breaks him physically and mentally. Thus, from all of the examples above, *The Known World* is difficult to perceive as a novel that treats and describes how the slaves found their road to freedom.

It is necessary to point out that these examples of escapes are not given much attention in the novel. Apart from Moses, the characters that attempt to run away are only the minor characters of the novel. This also includes Alice, as she also takes up little narrative space. Thus, as the main protagonist of the novel, Henry, has no goal of escaping the institution at all, the trope of physical escape seems to become marginal in the novel.

In *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*, Ashraf Rushdy (1999) writes about the neo-slave narrative that they “assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the ante-bellum slave narrative” (p. 3), and Beaulieu (1999) claims that works within the neo-slave genre are “contemporary fictional works which take slavery as their subject matter and usually feature enslaved protagonists” (p. xiii). As Jones' novel features a protagonist who owns slaves, this definition is not applicable to *The Known World*, despite the fact that Henry is not legally free (on paper he is still the property of his father). Beaulieu (2006) claims that the neo-slave novels are “narratives that mimic the autobiographical form of the original slave narratives” (p. 673). Together with Rushdy's definition then (“take on the first-person voice”), also here *The Known World* deviates as the narrative technique used is the omniscient (and at times intrusive) narrator.

However, referring back to Beaulieu's definition from 1999, it is true that Jones in *The Known World* takes slavery as a subject matter, but perhaps not in the way we expect. Because of the lines and boundaries that the characters do or do not cross, this novel is not shocking by the fact that blacks own blacks, but by the fact that humans own humans. Theresa

M. Rooney (2008) thus suggests that Jones challenges the traditional views on slavery, and shifts the focus from slavery as a racial problem to slavery as a social problem: “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” (p. 1). Although I agree with her statement, I will suggest that Jones does more than “just” challenging our views on slavery. He challenges our knowledge of the entire world we think we know, and he does this by encouraging us to look beyond our own limitations and explore new areas, in a sense expanding our knowledge.

The conventions of education and religion are *not* treated as in other neo-slave narratives: The number of educated black characters (scholarly, practically, or both) is high, and includes Henry, Augustus, Fern and Caldonia, to name a few. This is not common within the genre: In many neo-slave narratives, the characters fear the written word, and prefer the oral language.

While attaining the prohibited literacy is often cast as one of the crucial stages in the progress to freedom in slave narratives and later African American *Bildungsromane*, the written word is also a potent weapon against people [...] In general, in the neo-slave narratives there is much more of the distrust than the faith. (Rushdy, 2004, p. 99, original italics).

In *The known World*, however, there is no evidence of such fear, and the oral tradition there is little evidence of, although I will discuss the topic in the next chapter.

Since I treat the situations of the already introduced characters’ in detail in the next chapter, I use this opportunity to show other incidents where the atypical representation of education is presented: Jebediah Dickinson, although a minor character in the novel, is the only slave in the novel who is literate. In fact, he exceeds his owner in the art of literacy, and is an expert in forging signatures and handwriting. With clear references to Frederick

Douglass' narrative, it is Jebediah's mistress who teaches him how to read and write as a young boy. Although he uses his skills to set himself free, and perhaps has the same epiphany as Douglass did with regards to literacy, he is caught and severely punished. He is, however, eventually freed from slavery, but this comes at a great price: Not only does he lose a limb, he returns to freedom a broken man. As for the white characters in the novel, they are frequently unschooled. Several of the night patrollers are illiterate, and Jebediah's owner, Reverend Wilbur Mann, boasts of his wife's illiteracy seeing as it is a major advantage to him: "I got me a real smart wife now – she can't read nor write so she can't teach anybody what she don't know" (253).

Traditionally, education is considered a major force for social change. However, the learned characters such as Henry, Caldonia and Fern, do not use their scholarly education to change the world around them. Thus, every educated character in *The Known World* is static – they do not evolve or change throughout the course of the novel. Henry, as the only exception, is a *somewhat* dynamic character in the sense that he uses his education to move up the social hierarchy through slavery. It is rather ironic, then, that literacy, a life-changing feature to Frederick Douglass, constitutes no significance to any character in *The Known World*.

I also here want to examine how the trope of religion is treated in the novel. In the classical slave narrative, God and religion are essential. The early narratives are often divided into two groups; the captivity narrative and the spiritual autobiography, where the latter represents a "behavioural guide and instrument of moral leadership" (Pierce, 2007, p. 93). Religion often functions as a way of escaping the harsh realities of slavery, but I will argue that God in *The Known World* is arbitrary and mostly associated with hypocrisy, hardship or even suffering. Reverend Moffett, the black preacher in the novel, is supposedly God's servant in Manchester, County. However, as is shown in chapter one, he is perhaps the most self-centred character in the entire novel. Both Mary O'Donnell Conlon (a minor character

that only appears once in the novel) and Counsel Skiffington have their families taken away from them, and their faith in God is connected to both examples.

There are various definitions pertaining to the neo-slave narrative genre, and the examples I have listed above are far from exhaustive. However, as the genre is constantly evolving, its characterisation has widened to the extent that one may ask whether some of the definitions can be associated with this specific genre any longer. An example would be Valerie Smith's (2007) claim that the neo-slave narrative has evolved to include "texts set during the period of slavery as well as those set afterwards, at any time from the era of Reconstruction until the present. They approach slavery from a myriad perspectives [...] from realist novels grounded in historical research to speculative fiction, postmodern experiments, satire and works that combine these diverse methods" (p. 168). With such a range of characteristics, it seems as if Smith writes more about a neo-slave feature relating to the individual texts rather than discussing it as a genre of its own. However, I will leave the issue, as this particular discussion is not within the scope of this thesis.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I look at how the tropes of education and religion are treated in *The Known World*. Additionally, through these two tropes, I also look at the trope of escape. Both of these themes, perhaps especially education, are supposed to represent the way to freedom. Whether the characters *do* achieve freedom through their education I also explore. Through Homi Bhabha's article "Of Mimicry and Man" I explore whether his theories apply to how education and religion in the novel are presented as "almost the same but not quite," and thus whether this underlines my claim that Jones' novel does not pertain to the neo-slave genre.



The second chapter treats the trope of escape from a boundary perspective. As is shown, the various characters are constantly challenged to expand the world they perceive as known, by venturing outside their own borders. In light of Svend Erik Larsen's article on boundaries and aesthetics, and various concepts pertaining to border poetics, I observe how the characters may or may not manage to attain freedom by crossing the borders that surround them.

I return to the question of genre in the third and last chapter by reading *The Known World* against Michel Foucault and his six principles of the heterotopia, and in light of insights from Mikhail Bakhtin, Jostein Børtnes and Peter Seitel. This may eventually help clarify why the novel is so unruly when it comes to classifying it within the neo-slave genre.



# Chapter 1

## Escape through Education and Religion

*“The desire to emerge as ‘authentic’ through mimicry – through a process of writing and repetition – is the final irony of partial representation.”*

- Homi Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man” (p. 129)

### Education

I already here want to comment on the irony between the title of my chapter and how education is represented in the novel as a way of escaping: In *The Known World*, education as a way to freedom is not a focal point, in fact, there is no evidence of this in the entire novel. In the classic slave-narrative, and thus also neo-slave genre since it is deeply connected to its predecessor, education, especially the ability to read and write, has always been an important feature. Education would eventually lead to freedom, thus becoming the very key to escape slavery, as we see in Frederick Douglass’ (1993) narrative: “[Mrs. Auld] very kindly commenced to teach me the A, B, C. [...] From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom.” (pp. 57 – 58). Moreover, literacy appears to become a symbol stretching further than the act of reading and writing itself: Henry Louis Gates Jr. (1987) claims that “learning to write, as measured against an eighteenth-century scale of culture and society, was an irreversible step away from the cotton field toward a freedom larger even than physical manumission” (p. 4). Nevertheless, even if education *per se* is central to slave and master alike in *The Known World*, I find it necessary to define “education” more precisely: In this chapter I will use the word “education” not only in the scholarly sense, but also in the sense that it is a process of personal development and learning in a wider perspective. Thus, as I

treat education, it includes knowledge (e.g. education through oral tradition<sup>2</sup>) and practical skills (such as carpentry and wood carving) in addition to literacy.

It is worth noticing that all of the characters who are most educated are black: Augustus is a highly skilled woodcarver, known throughout the county, and even the state of Virginia. Elias is also an eager carver. Moses is a superb carpenter, and Alice is a brilliant artist. Fern is a learned woman, and she is the one who has schooled Caldonia, Calvin, Dora and Louis, and of course Henry Townsend. The latter, however, is perhaps the character who has the broadest education among them. Counting the *white* educated characters, there are but a couple, such as Robbins and the Skiffington's. This distribution of literacy between the races is highly unusual, and helps accentuate how *The Known World* relates to this trope differently from other works that are classified within the neo-slave genre.

Already as a boy the young Townsend is eager to learn, and quickly becomes William Robbins' favourite groom: "Henry was indeed better as a groom, far more eager than Toby had been, not at all afraid to rise long before the sun to do his duties" (20). It is Robbins who helps Henry achieve status as a highly skilled and accomplished boot- and shoemaker, and he in fact becomes known for making "the kind of footwear God intended for feet to have" (113). This would never happen if Robbins had not let Henry learn from his own shoemaker at the plantation, and hence it is the white master who provides Henry with his education:

It was Robbins who taught him the value of money, the value of his labors, and never to blink when he gave a price for his product. [...] Robbins had told him to trust the Manchester National Bank and Henry would put part of what he earned there. The rest he and his father would [...] bury in the backyard. (113 – 114)

Also the scholarly education, taught to Henry by Fern, is due to Robbins' insistence, although Robbins does not see such measures necessary until he finds his "prodigy" and Moses tussling

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<sup>2</sup> This is discussed in the part concerning religion in this chapter.

on the ground, as if they were equal: “the wrestling around with Moses had shown him how unprepared Henry was” (128) for the life as a slave-owner. Robbins consequently becomes more of a father figure to Henry than his real father is, and Henry adapts his former owner’s ways of seeing the world. Also here, in the sense that Robbins, the white master, eagers to educate his slave (and later as a kind of “son”), hints at how *The Known World* treats the subject of education in a way that does not fit the typical neo-slave narrative.

Ideally, the shaping and education of Henry’s future should be provided from his real father. Instead, however, we see that the privilege of influencing a young soul in need of guidance comes from Robbins, the man currently owning him. Throughout Henry’s childhood and most of his adolescence, his father Augustus is only a distant figure with a promise of a “home” – a notion Henry only associates with the cabin he, his mother and Rita (the slave that escapes with help from the Townsend family) used to live in. Although Augustus would like nothing more than for Henry to stay away from Robbins’ plantation after his manumission, Henry has tied close-knit bonds with his former master through his period as groom. It is highly ironic, thus, that Augustus observes himself becoming an estranged character in his child’s life: “though Henry was his son, he was not yet his property and so beyond his reach” (18). This effectively demonstrates that the only way to influence and exert power in this society is through ownership. The very thought of this, that Augustus has no possibility of affecting his son whilst at his most vulnerable, is of course atrocious.

However, after purchasing his son from Robbins, Augustus in a sense takes on the role as owner, if only as a legal formality. Both in the “real” antebellum Virginia and in the fictional world of Virginia, there is a law that prohibits freed slaves from living in the state for more than twelve months after their release<sup>3</sup>. Augustus is however exempted from this law due to his excellent woodcarving skills. Henry and Mildred, if listed as his property, are

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<sup>3</sup> A law passed by the legislators in 1806. Its limitations increased with the changes made in 1832, 1849, and finally in 1858, when Afro-Virginians could no longer buy family members. This is the same law referred to in *The Known World*.

allowed to stay on in Virginia: “[T]he law allowed freed slaves to stay on in the state in cases where they lived as someone’s property” (15). Thus, Henry remains forever registered as the property of his father.

Robbins has spent years preparing and educating Henry for the participation in his vision of creating “a little Virginia in big Virginia” (113). Moreover, the young Henry Townsend is influenced to such an extent that in addition to having his own cabin on Robbins’ plantation, “a cabin separate from the slave quarters” (169), he eventually buys his first piece of land as well as his first slave from his former owner. However, as a slave-master, Henry now fails because of his close relationship with his white superior: Having been treated as if he were Robbins’ son, Henry is confused regarding his own behaviour towards his property. Hence, Henry sleeps in the same cabin as Moses, and frolics with him on the ground as if there were no social (or legal) difference between them. Henry misinterprets where the boundaries between slave and master should be drawn. Robbins’ outburst (quoted below) and the fact that Henry assumes equality between himself and Moses, even though one owns the other, may represent how no race is neither inferior nor superior biologically: this type of “knowledge” or “belief” has to be taught. Robbins, probably feeling that he has “raised” Henry better, is infuriated and tells him exactly how he ought to behave as a master:

[T]he 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 around 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)

It appears that the law, as described by Robbins, is colour blind – it does not differentiate depending on the complexion of the master. Thus, Henry not only anticipates Du Bois in the sense that he crosses the colour line, he also crosses a social line which Katherine Bassard (2008) refers to as the “power line”. Henry has crossed the border from belonging to the inferior, to becoming a superior. This is also why it is possible to argue that Jones in *The Known World* treats slavery differently, because in the novel, slavery is not necessarily all about race, but more crucially about power. The crossing of the colour line that Henry makes was *not* the kind Du Bois had in mind when writing his masterpiece: Du Bois sought to undermine the line with scholarship and action, not joining the slave-owning culture, hence Henry’s traversing of the line is rather distorted.

Fascinated by Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Henry identifies with the Devil who would rather rule in Hell than serve in Heaven, and thinks that “only a man who knew himself well could say such a thing, could turn his back on God with just finality” (134 – 135). Through his education, the true scope of the “free” world is revealed unto him, and he can only see how restricted his world will become if he chooses to follow his parents into freedom. A free coloured man in Manchester County is still constantly at the mercy of his superiors, never being truly free to do whatever he pleases. The free papers they have to carry at all times do not hold the promise of freedom which they are credited, clearly shown when Augustus is sold back into slavery.

By playing into Robbins’ vision (“a little Virginia in big Virginia”) and travelling with him, Henry becomes acquainted with a world he eventually craves – the world of the slaveholder, where authority and influence are a real possibility. Henry, then, can only see the limitations of being “unbound” by the chains of slavery, which is ironic, if not a mockery of

the very institution of slavery and the idea of freedom alike. Thus he decides to gain power through the institution rather than serving the superior class in a world that is even more restricted if he chooses to follow the path of his parents. In effect, Henry has crossed the border from being free (though not technically) to being an oppressor, and as such, the unfree Henry “is not free to imagine a world in which the master-slave power line can be deconstructed or transcended, and he is thus doomed to replicate the social hierarchy that originally oppressed him” (Bassard 2008, p. 415). Of course, this does not only apply to Henry, as all characters involved in slaveholding are bounded in the sense that they never become truly free.

A common feature within the classical slave narrative and neo-slave narrative is the emphasis on motherhood, as for instance witnessed in Morrison’s *Beloved*. Due to the Roman doctrine *partus sequitur ventrem*, that the child follows the condition of the mother, fatherhood is effectively eliminated from slavery, and the focus remains on the mother. In her article on the parental relationship within the system of slavery, Hortense Spillers (1987) describes a culture that ultimately is “father-lacking”: “the condition of the slave mother is ‘forever entailed on all her remotest posterity’” (pp. 79 – 80). *The Known World*, however, challenges this traditional focus by emphasising the roles of fathers and father-figures: Each of them (perhaps with the exception of Moses and his son Jamie), are eager to prepare and educate their children for the future, either it is through scholarly education, allowing them to marry whomever they desire, or simply giving their children enough to eat and drink. Here I also have in mind Robbins and how he wants all of his children to read and write, and how he even considers having Fern over to teach his *white* daughter.

It is Henry’s loss of his mother that enables the focus on fatherhood as opposed to motherhood in the novel: When Mildred leaves the plantation, Henry is in a sense abandoned. By freeing Mildred, Augustus disrupts Henry’s sense of safety, stability, and notion of



“home”, making him vulnerable to influence from other parties, such as Robbins. This also enables Henry’s increasingly cooling relationship to his father. Spillers notes that “[t]he destructive loss of the natural mother, whose biological/genetic relationship to the child remains unique and unambiguous, opens the enslaved young to social ambiguity and chaos” (p. 76). This is especially evident when Henry conveys to his parents the purchase of Moses. Mildred immediately begins to search for *her* education of her son:

Pick the blueberries close to the ground, son. Them the sweetest, I find. If a white man say the trees can talk, can dance, you just say yes right along, that you done seen em do it plenty of times. Don’t look them people in the eye. You see a white woman ridin toward you, get way off the road and go stand behind a tree. The uglier the white woman, the farther you go and the broader the tree. But where, in all she taught her son, was it about thou shall own no one, havin been owned once your own self. *Don’t go back to Egypt after God done took you outa there.* (137, my italics)

Mildred has of course taken for granted that her son would never consider the possibility of owning another human: Having essentially been freed from slavery, no one could foresee the young Townsend “going back to Egypt” and becoming a slave-owner. Being his master’s groom, Henry eventually comes to see Robbins as a surrogate father, and eagerly accepts what *he* can teach him. When Henry finally has his freedom bought for him, he has come to the point where he associates freedom with power and dominance, thus he does not see how he can have a fruitful relationship with his parents, as he realises how restricted their worlds are. Robbins, however, presents an opportunity of showing him the “world”, thus Henry considers his gain from that relationship as more valuable.

Because of the uprooting of the family, Augustus is partly to “blame” for losing his son to the institution of slavery: The lack of influence on Henry during his early years is a contributing factor to his son becoming a slave-owner. When he finally has the ability to

affect his son, it is too late. As Augustus never had any intentions of owning anyone after his own manumission, he never behaves as if he does, thus he does not manage to influence Henry, as he has become too close to Robbins. The troubled relationship between Augustus and his son is epitomised in the passage where he and Henry converse about Henry's freedom and how it feels. Henry expresses mere indifference, because he is unsure of how he should respond:

Augustus said, "You feelin any different?"

"Bout what?" Henry said [...]

"Bout bein free? Bout not bein nobody's slave?"

"No, sir, I don't reckon I do." He wanted to know if he was supposed to, but he did not know how to ask that. He wondered who was waiting now for Robbins to come riding up on Sir Guildenham.

"Not that you need to feel any different. You can just feel whatever you want to feel." Augustus remembered now that Henry had told on him to Robbins about pushing him some years ago, and it occurred to him that if Robbins ever were to learn about Rita, Henry would be the one to tell him. He wondered if all would have been different if he had bought the boy's freedom first, before Mildred's. (49)

Henry's father has become a stranger to him, and due to Robbins' education throughout his adolescence, he does not know how to act. This is not surprising due to the fact that compared to most other slaves, Henry was indeed treated well by his master. That Henry is concerned about Robbins instead of enjoying his freedom, underlines how loyal Henry truly is to this former owner. The conversation between father and son seems forced and hesitant, and, Augustus, in fear of being caught for helping Rita cannot even trust his own son to keep him safe. This is also an example of how far the shadows of slavery truly reaches. Henry is already

in the process of adopting Robbins' view of the world, making the void between Augustus and his son wider.

In a sense, Robbins is imitating the role of Henry's father, or at least the importance the father *ought* to have. Thus, Robbins has the power to change the young Townsend into what he sees fit. What Homi Bhabha (1984) writes in his essay "Of Mimicry and Man" is transferrable to *The Known World*, even if it focuses on the effects of colonialism: "[m]imicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as *a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*" (p. 126, original italics). Robbins uses his position to transform Henry into something that is *almost* the same as himself, but not entirely. Bhabha further notes that "[m]imicry is also the sign of the inappropriate, however, a difference or recalcitrance which [...] intensifies surveillance, and poses an immanent threat to both 'normalized' knowledges and disciplinary powers" (ibid). It is arguably particularly "inappropriate" of Henry to own other human beings, having once been owned himself. When Robbins turns Henry into a slightly different version of himself, he becomes alien to most of the people of the same skin-colour:

It took Moses more than two weeks to come to understand 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. [...] Moses had 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. (8 – 9)

Although Henry sets out to become "a better master than any white man he had ever known," (64), this is ultimately impossible to achieve because nothing about the situation in the novel is "normal": the "normalized knowledges" are disturbed by the fact that Henry is black and owns his own kin. Also, Henry's thought of becoming a great or kind master is defied by the very idea of owning a plantation. His goal, thus, is ultimately unachievable.

Bhabha goes on to write that “[m]imicry is, thus, the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power” (p. 126). He gives an example of this ambiguity in the word *slave*: “first simply, descriptively as the locus of a legitimate form of ownership, then as the trope for an intolerable, illegitimate exercise of power” (ibid, pp. 126 – 127). Henry himself embodies the ambiguity represented in the latter quote since he at one point was owned by Robbins and then by his father – both perfectly legitimate forms of ownership at the time. However, as Henry grows into the role of a slave-owner for purely commercial reasons, he exercises powers he ethically should have declined. In my reading of this, the double articulation, or double vision as Bhabha later calls it, automatically evokes Du Bois and his theories about double *consciousness*.

Du Bois (2007) would describe how African Americans always feel a “two-ness, –an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings” (p. 8). His solution to end these strivings is to become a “co-worker in the kingdom of culture” (ibid, p. 9). However, Du Bois also writes that the African American will not “Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world” (ibid). Then, what culture is Du Bois referring to? I suggest that Henry, as far as he is relevant for Du Bois’ theories of double consciousness, is already a “co-worker in the kingdom of culture” – but of the slave-owning culture<sup>4</sup>. The two-ness Du Bois mentions appears to have disappeared entirely. As Henry lacks the duality at the core of his dark-skinned being, he will eventually get stuck within the institution of slavery, and ultimately fail at every task he sets forth, even his aim of becoming “the shepherd master God had intended” (180).

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<sup>4</sup> I am hesitant in naming this a “white” culture, as several black characters in the novel own slaves

One may ask what purpose Henry's educational training serves in the novel. He indeed has all the tools he could ever want: Not only does he have a vocational education in being an excellent shoemaker, he has also been trained in literature. Furthermore, he has a social position in Manchester that gives him a great deal of influence. Henry has a sturdy foundation, which could sustain the black American in the future modern state. This is a foundation that, according to Du Bois (1932), "[t]he Negro has not found." (p. 68). For Du Bois, the way to become the co-worker in the "kingdom of culture" is through education, and although Henry in the novel lives (and dies) before Du Bois is even born, he seems to symbolise what Du Bois ultimately calls for. Unfortunately the young Townsend uses his knowledge and skills to further construct an identity within the institution of slavery, and becomes what no one could predict.

The world of a slave in *The Known World* is so restricted that we can compare it to Du Bois' (2007) depiction of the prison-house: "walls strait and stubborn to the whitest, but relentlessly narrow, tall, and unscalable to sons of night who must plod darkly on in resignation, or [...] watch the streak of blue above" (p. 8). For a character like Moses, it is easy to see how this would fit: the "streak of blue above" for him represents the hope he once had when he was with Caldonia. However, after being refused by her and brutally hobbled after running away, he completely resigns, essentially giving in to the system of slavery. Henry, on the other hand, is not capable of seeing these walls, because he cannot identify with this imprisonment. Instead Henry sympathises with the laws of slavery, doing nothing "no white man wouldn't do" (138). Hence, he never sees himself through other eyes than those of his superiors, leaving him to "forget" that in addition to being an "American", he is also a "Negro".

Henry compares himself only to those equal to him or a station above him socially, essentially erasing his memories of ever being a slave himself. Just as Robbins mimics the

role of Henry's father, Henry in fact mimics Robbins (just as any son tends to do as they idolise their father): He is now a slave-owner and tries to assert himself with the same authority as his superior, despite that he in the very recent past was Robbins' slave. Bhabha writes that "[t]he desire to emerge as 'authentic' through mimicry [...] is the final irony of partial representation" (p. 129), where the "irony of partial representation" is embodied by Henry who does not understand his role as master, as he still refers to Robbins as *his* master, effectively demonstrating how Henry remains almost the same, but not quite.

How education is presented in *The Known World*, and also the role it plays in the novel, is what borders on or comes close to mocking the trope as it typically figures in the genre. This form of mimicking produces an ambivalence towards education: it is presented as *almost* the same as in other slave and neo-slave narratives, but *not quite*. Instead, education in *The Known World* marginalises itself by challenging its monumentality, mocking its own power to be an opportunity for achieving true freedom. Henry's education ultimately grounds him further within the system of slavery. Consequently, education as a way to freedom is ruled out from *The Known World* entirely.

One can of course argue that Augustus has gained freedom because of *his* education (the woodcarving). However, it is here necessary to differentiate between "freedom" and "manumission". Indeed, Augustus is no longer chained by slavery, however, he does not have true freedom either; rather, he lives a "free" life in a restricted world. His freedom is solely connected to a piece of paper, a frail piece of paper at that, as we see when Travis eats it and literally sells him back into slavery. Not only does this act show how fragile the written word truly is in *The Known World*, it also shows that Augustus has no power of his own, despite being "free": Although he knows every word written on his free paper by heart (despite his illiteracy), his freedom is jeopardised the instant he no longer can produce physical proof of

his freedom. “[I]n a world where people believed in a God they could not see and pretended the wind was his voice, paper meant nothing” (144).

### **Religion**

Just as *The Known World* mimics (and mocks) the trope of education, so, too, does it mimic that of religion. Traditionally, and especially in the early slave narratives, religion was represented as a “behavioural guide and instrument of moral leadership” (Pierce, 2007, p. 93). In Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee*, often acclaimed as the first neo-slave narrative, one of the foundations of the main character’s survival (and by extension her people’s) is her Christian faith. This, however, is rarely exemplified in Jones’ novel. One of the few instances when religion is referred to, is when God commands John Skiffington’s father to not hold “dominion over slaves” (30). Essentially, there is a touch of hypocrisy there, as Skiffington himself supports slavery in the sense that even though he will not own one himself, he has no problem legally upholding the institution. Additionally, the Skiffingtons have Minerva, although they do not “feel that they owned her, not in the way whites and a few blacks owned slaves” (43).

Although religion in itself was not a way to manumission, Pierce argues in her article “Redeeming Bondage: The Captivity Narrative and the Spiritual Autobiography in the African American Slave Narrative Tradition” that being “enslaved” to God and heavenly things in fact is a form of freedom:

The rhetorical message of the Christian faith promises freedom, liberation, and deliverance from bondage, particularly for those wrongly punished. The signs, symbols, and stories of this belief system reinforce the notion that the very least, the

most humble and the most abject are the ones who eventually inherit the kingdom. (p. 93)

In the *The Known World*, such stories and symbols are completely absent. However, throughout the novel, there are minor but frequent references to God, so that readers are at all times reminded that He is present: In Moses' stories about Henry to Caldonia, he makes him start building the house on a Monday, as if it were the first day of God's seven days of Creation; Henry dies on the seventh day of his sickness; Robbins believes his son Louis' lazy eye is a cruel act of God because of his relationship with his black lover, Philomena; In the slave market in the fall season, He has created a beautiful roof – the clear blue sky, in a sense condoning the tradition. Unlike the slave and neo-slave narratives, however, God is hardly ever associated with kindness, and nothing about Him promises the freedom and liberation Pierce writes of. Quite the contrary, religion in *The Known World* cannot be viewed as an escape from the harsh reality because God is mostly connected to episodes of death and despair. The quote below is about a character that one only comes across once in the novel, Mary O'Donnell Conlon, and her story about her first meeting with America:

Long before the HMS *Thames* had ever seen the American shore, America, the land of promise and hope, had reached out across the sea and taken her husband, a man who had taken her heart and kept it, and America had taken her baby – two innocent beings in the vastness of a world with all kinds of things that could have been taken first. She held nothing against God. God was simply being God. But she could not forgive America and saw it as the cause of all her misery. (51 – 52)

Mary alone has to make sense of her story, and chooses to blame America, which is much easier than blaming the very core of her faith. America, especially the America represented by the South, is difficult to perceive as the Promised Land.



Even though God punished Mary hard by taking her baby and her husband, no one in the novel is penalised as harshly as Counsel Skiffington (and for no apparent reason, at that): God has turned his back on him by sparing only himself and the farm animals from smallpox. Counsel loses every member of his family, and every single slave he owns. It ends with Counsel burning his whole estate to the ground, and only the cabins for his slaves remain, because they are close to empty: “Even God’s mansion world burn easily if there were a piano in the parlor and 300 books in the library from floor to ceiling and wooden furniture that came from England and France and worlds beyond” (226). At the end of his long journey through the South after the loss of his family, he still has a troubled relationship with God:

“You tell me what to do and I will do it”, he said to God. “Isn’t that how it has always worked? You say, I do. You say and I do.” He thought of the men in the large family Bible in the destroyed library who talked the way he was talking now. Sometimes God heard and acted, took pity on his creations, and sometimes he heard and ignored the creations talking to him. His daughters had liked the stories in the Bible, the Bible with their names and the days of their births written large and in ink the general store man had said would last for generations. [...] The ink will outlast you, Mr. Skiffington. (243)

The ink, however, does not outlast Counsel – nor do his daughters. Whereas Mary loses her husband and one of her babies, Counsel loses everything, and therefore the entire future of his family. It seems as if God in *The Known World* never takes pity, He only ignores.

When religion in the slave narrative, and thus the neo-slave narrative, was *not* connected to the promise of freedom and liberation, but rather the gruesomeness and horror, it was always in connection with the most devout slave-owners: “The narrators [of slave narratives] also portrayed religion in the slave South as a perversion of true Christianity. Slaveholders, they said, were wilfully blind to Christian principles” (Bruce, 2007, p. 30),

furthermore these slaveholders were “vile, immoral, and, moreover, ‘inhuman,’ lacking souls and unable to receive Christian redemption” (Pierce, 2007, p. 97). This is true also in Douglass’ (1993) classic narrative:

In August 1832, my master attended a Methodist camp-meeting [...] and there experienced religion. [...] If it had any effect on his character, it made him more cruel and hateful in all his ways. [...] I have seen him tie up a young lame woman, and whip her with a heavy cowskin upon her naked shoulders [...] and , in justification of the bloody deed, he would quote this passage of Scripture – “He that knoweth his master’s will, and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes” (p. 69).

In *The Known World*, however, there is no evidence of this kind of character. The closest we come is Henry when he has half of Elias’ ear cut off and when Luke, a twelve-year old boy, is worked to death in the fields, but this is not sanctioned through or justified by religious reasons.

Du Bois (2007) writes that “[t]hree things characterized this religion of the slave, – the Preacher, the Music, and the Frenzy” (p. 129). Music does not play a noticeable part in *The Known World*, and there are only two examples that come to mind: Celeste’s subtle humming, and Alice’s chanting in the night. “Frenzy” is never mentioned in the novel. Instead, the services are portrayed as serene and quiet, more like the subtle worshipping of God seen in Protestant churches: The black reverend advocates the white church “culture” instead of upholding the black traditions of the “frenzy”, thus effectively minimising the traditional focus of (and on) religion. Here we can return to the ideas of mimicry: “Mimicry *repeats* rather than *re-presents*” (Bhabha, 1984, p. 128, original italics), and we can argue that in this context it is the hegemonic culture that is repeated rather than re-presenting the subordinate culture.

Du Bois also describes the character of a typical preacher as “the most unique personality developed by the Negro on American soil. A leader, a politician, an orator, a “boss”, an intriguer, an idealist, – all this he is” (p. 129), and, in *Jubilee*, Brother Ezekiel is the prime example; no one tires of hearing him preaching and singing, and his masses are more “frenzy-like” than the ones presented in Jones’ novel:

No matter how tired Aunt Sally was at night, she never failed on Big Meeting Nights to go to hear Brother Ezekiel preach [...] Vyry was never too tired, she was too excited with the prospect of hearing Brother Ezekiel preach [...] There was wonderful and high-spirited singing. [...] Brother Ezekiel nearly always chose his text from the Old Testament, dwelling upon the great leaders of the Hebrew people. (Walker, 1999, p. 44 – 45)

From these few lines, it is easy to perceive that Brother Ezekiel is a cherished character, and how he embodies Du Bois’ qualities; he is an orator, an idealist and certainly a leader.

The preacher in *The Known World*, however, the free black Valtims Moffett, “a large man who suffered with gout and rheumatism, which, he was quick to tell people,” (82), and he used to say that “God put upon me the same way he put the cross on our savior Jesus Christ” (ibid). Being a reverend, Valtims represents the church and by extension God in Manchester County. What we learn about him, though, is that he is not the self-sacrificing, pious man, as his preacher “colleague” in *Jubilee*. Moffett is rather a slightly corrupt hypocrite, which his self-pitying comment above might suggest. He is always late for services, blaming his rheumatism, and his priorities lie with the money:

He had been paid \$1 for conducting the services the moment after he entered the house [and these services were rarely longer than 15 minutes, excluding the singing of

hymns]. In his early days of preaching [...] he had been paid 3 cents for every slave he preached to, but the county had been wealthier then. (88).

Not only does Moffett own a slave, who is his sister-in-law, he is also adulterous with her:

He took a perverse delight in hearing [the sisters quarrelling], was lulled into sleep by the sound of their fighting. [...] The women worked to please him. He knew God was not pleased about that, but he felt he had many years of life ahead of him, despite his ailments, and so there would be time to force his knees to bend before God and ask his forgiveness. [...] Did God deny David and Solomon any less? (92)

The spirituality as a “behavioural guide and an instrument of moral leadership” that Pierce writes about, is here represented by a man who obviously is misguided in his faith. The hypocrisy of religion in *The Known World* is also present in the conversation between Moffett, Caldonia and Henry: “Perhaps you could supplement my words, Reverend Moffett. Remind [Henry] that God would not be happy to see us work ourselves to death”, where the preacher continues “Laziness is one sin, Henry, but working too much is also a sin. [...] Keep the Sabbath holy is just God’s way of telling us not to overtax ourselves. Make God happy, Henry, and tax yourself just enough to pay your bill” (88).

Perhaps especially in these last sentences the mockery of religion is evident. While Luke, a 12-year-old slave boy, will die working in the fields, taxing himself more than any other slave, Caldonia wants Henry to worry less about *his* situation, claiming that he is overworked and exhausted.

Similar to religion, folklore also serves as a substitute for freedom to the slaves, and tales such as the one mentioned below function to comfort the slave in times of hardship. Moses, in relation to his master being two shades darker than himself, asks whether God is

“even up there attending to business anymore” (9). Elias, however, is not at all surprised by the fact that a black man could hold another black man as his slave:

Elias had never believed in a sane God and so had never questioned a world where colored people could be the owners of slaves, and if at that moment, in the near dark, he had sprouted wings, he would not have questioned that either.” (9)

The last part of the sentence may serve as a reference to the folklore tradition of story telling, more specifically to the stories where slaves escape by growing wings, e.g. “All God’s Chillen Had Wings”.

Tolagbe Ogunleye (1997) writes in his essay “African American Folklore: Its Role in Reconstructing African American History” that “[f]olklore represents a line to a vast, interconnected network of meanings, values and cognitions. Folklore contains seeds of wisdom, problem solving, and prophecy through tales of rebellion, triumph, reasoning, moralizing, and satire” (p. 436). These stories often portray the “Weak-but-Cunning Black”, or a trickster-figure (similar to the Norwegian character Askeladden) versus the “Strong-but-Duller White” (which in Norwegian would be the equivalent of Per and Pål, or the trolls) in order to restore hope where there is not supposed to be one. In this particular story, the slaves suddenly sprout wings and are able to fly away from the fields where they work, where the “weak-but-cunning black” is represented by an old man, and the “strong-but-duller-white” is the overseer.

What then, when the “Strong-but-Duller White” is substituted with a black character? Whether the black character is Moses or Henry is not of any significance, but it is important to notice that the moral of the tradition is mocked, just as Elias ridicules it in his remark above. The lack of respect for the oral tradition of storytelling is also present in Moses’ tales of Henry to Caldonia. He engulfs her with an idolised, make-belief and inaccurate version of Henry, and the widow devours every word. Moses, through the sayings among the slaves, is

warned that “the quickest ways to hell was to tell lies about dead people” (209), which of course foreshadows his future: Moses indeed slowly and painfully withers away on the Townsend plantation.

As Skiffington states very clearly, slavery is an institution that “even God himself had sanctioned through the Bible” (43), and he is not entirely wrong in this: Chapter 21 in Exodus cites the laws that sanction slaves and slave-owners. However, Exodus is also the Book in which Moses leads his people to freedom. Unfortunately, though, Moses the overseer will never embody the biblical figure with the same name. Instead of leading his people to freedom, Moses helps his master by keeping them enslaved. Regardless, Moses would never have been able to lead them anywhere, because, as we will see in the next chapter, he has no sense of direction.

*The Known World* itself takes a different direction than most novels of its kind in the sense that, by relating to the typical tropes of education and religion differently than the “norm”, or what one anticipates from the neo-slave genre, it tries to escape from certain, set boundaries. By trying to venture outside these borders, its readers are triggered (and almost forced) to follow the novel into unknown territory. I have already shown throughout this chapter how the trope of escape is mocked as education and religion fails to liberate any of the characters in *The Known World*. Not even Alice attains this through the tropes I have discussed here. However, Alice *does* manage to escape, making her the only character in the novel who ultimately is able to achieve true freedom.

## Chapter 2

### The Boundaries of Escape

*“[...] looked upon in a boundary perspective, aesthetics is the study of human interaction with already existing boundaries with the possibility of changing them.”*

- Svend Erik Larsen, “Boundaries: Ontology, Methods, Analysis” (p. 100)

“Beginning in the mid-1870s and continuing throughout most of the 1880s, a white man from Canada, Anderson Frazier, made a good living in Boston publishing two-cent pamphlets about America and its people, especially what he called their ‘peculiarities’” (105). Through his writings he informs Canadians about their neighbours, despite the fact that “[m]ost of what he published was gleaned from newspapers and magazines” (105). Anderson Frazier thus classifies or catalogues the American society, and this is especially evident in his most successful series (which probably would be popular with a Northern-American audience as well), *Curiosities and Oddities about Our Southern Neighbors*. Some titles of this series are: “Good Food Made from Next to Nothing”, “The Flora and Fauna”, “The Need for Storytelling”, “The Economy of Cotton”, and “Free Negroes who had owned other Negroes before the War Between the States”. In his pamphlets he would also include drawings and maps from his experiences. As the list indicates, this particular series focuses on the American South, although the United States of America certainly lies “south of the border” from Canada.

Frazier is essentially cataloguing American society by mapping its culture. The urge to classify our surroundings is based on the need for knowing what is currently unknown to us. Also, it is a way for humans to systematise knowledge we already *do* know. Indeed, Frazier’s

pamphlet on the flora and fauna of the South echoes Carl von Linné, who is mostly renowned for *his* work on the classification of the flora and fauna. As a representative for Enlightenment thought, Linné epitomises the idea that science and logic give more knowledge and understanding than do religion and tradition. Also in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, geographical mapping and the curiosity of the unknown are connected to the period of Enlightenment, which is hinted at already in the title of Jones' novel. Certainly, such a title begs questions such as “what world is known?”, “what world is *unknown*?” and, “what *is* the unknown?”. The title, being the first thing we as readers see invites to a closer reading of mapping and charting, and at the same time challenges us to see if they dare take the leap into the unknown. However, as I discuss the title thoroughly in the next chapter, I leave the subject for now.

The ground that Frazier covers throughout the novel, by going “up and down the east coast of America, down to Washington D.C. and all the way out to the middle of the country” (106) and then again on his journey through the South, is only one example of the geographical mappings that take place. Frazier, as he charts his way through both the North and South, uses the knowledge he obtains so that he effectively can expand his own known world. As we see, Frazier is not afraid of venturing outside his comfort-zone in order to discover worlds that are unknown to him.

One of the results of systematising information is that borders appear. The pamphlet writer, for instance, finds different cultures in different areas, and as he charts the maps that are to go with his pamphlets, he also draws lines between different towns or areas, defining what culture belongs where, thus defining what one can anticipate in Manchester County, but not necessarily in New York. As mapping becomes an important part of defining and finding borders, mapping also becomes a way to achieve freedom by expanding the borders one already knows. Consequently, the various characters' freedom depends on their reluctance or



openness to increase their knowledge by venturing outside what they already know. Svend Erik Larsen writes in his article “Boundaries: Ontology, Methods, Analysis” from 2007 that within a boundary perspective, “*aesthetics is the study of human interaction with already existing boundaries with the possibility of changing them*.” From this point of view aesthetics is the study of the basic activity that creates culture” (p. 100, original italics). I suggest that both the free characters *and* slave characters that I discuss in the present chapter symbolise what Larsen refers to as “basic activity”, and that slavery is the culture they “create”. Of course, the slaves have no choice but to participate in the creation of this culture, as it is the free characters that wield the power in this society. Due to the possibility of changing the existing boundaries, and the creation of culture, this chapter will also focus on how the characters contribute to keep the institution of slavery going, either by expanding their borders or actively choosing not to, or how they work to set themselves free from it.

Although Frazier is only a minor character in the novel, his work reaches beyond his role as such. This is evident by the fact that in the fictional, historical context of *The Known World*, the most successful pamphlet within the *Oddities* series survives for the future to read:

Only seven of those particular pamphlets survived until the late twentieth century.

Five of them were in the Library of Congress in 1994 when the remaining two pamphlets were sold as part of a collection of black memorabilia owned by a black man in Cleveland, Ohio. That collection, upon the man’s death in 1994, sold for \$1.7 million to an automobile manufacturer in Germany. (106)

The temporal aspect of this scene, that his pamphlets exist in “eternity,” is something I will return to in more detail in chapter three. Frazier is first introduced when he is gathering information for his pamphlets from Fern Elston. While she is debating what she should and should not tell the man sitting on her porch, she is reminded that Frazier is a white man, furthermore a white man from outside the South: “If he were to come to know things about

black people, about what skin was thought worthy and what skin was not, he would not learn them from her” (143). Fern, capable of passing as white if she chooses, is thus able to cross the border between black and white. By extension, the crossing of this border could have led her into freedom as a white woman. However, she chooses to stay “where everyone knew who she was – a free Negro” (130). Fern’s thoughts regarding skin colour are in connection to the innocent question of why Caldonia was not allowed to marry Henry had it not been for her father. Although this information is withheld from the pamphlet writer, the truth is that Maude would never accept her future son-in-law to be darker than her daughter. That people were judged by the shade of their skin colour is not an uncommon feature in the antebellum South, but I nevertheless point it out to underline that even here there is ongoing classifying or cataloguing, demonstrating how society is criss-crossed with boundaries.

The general conception of borders is that of physical boundaries between countries, states, or towns – lines one can see on a map. Nevertheless, a border is not restricted to the physical notion of maps. In fact, borders can be anything: it is what is on either side of the border that defines the border as such. Larsen also writes that all boundaries produce meaning. He uses the curb to illustrate his point: “The curb as a row of stones or blocks of concrete is not a boundary in itself until it produces meaning. Thus, the curb necessitates meaning, not any meaning as such, but a specific meaning related to traffic” (p. 98).

The curb is in other words not a border until it becomes what separates you from the vehicles in the street. Larsen also writes that “any given boundary met by an agency, human or not, presents this agency with the necessity of an *interpretation*: may it and can it be transgressed or not?” (ibid, original italics). Thus, this becomes the question for most of the characters, black or white, in *The Known World* as well: Is the institution of slavery a border that is crossable? Each boundary is categorised into two groups – the boundary *to* and the boundary *between*. A boundary is therefore either a barrier or a gate, where the *to* presents a possible

opening and the *between* presents a possible obstacle. Slavery is a border one must cross in order to obtain freedom and Henry as a slave-owner represents the obstacle keeping slaves from crossing that border into freedom.

Just as Frazier is mapping his way through America, Alice maps her way through Manchester County. She is the only slave character in the novel able to roam free about the county, at least at night. The woman, who has allegedly gone crazy because of a kick to the head from a mule, encounters no trouble from the patrollers when she is up and about:

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 patroller's night, worthy of no more attention than a hooting owl or a rabbit hopping across the road. (13)

Her mappings of the area of Manchester County, and also recordings of the patroller's routines, give her the opportunity to get to know the landscape around her, easing her escape later in the novel. Alice appears to be a border-crosser both physically and mentally. It is as if she refuses to acknowledge that there is a difference between being a slave and being free. The social borders she completely ignores by "grabb[ing] the patrollers' crotches and begg[ing] them to dance away with her" (12). She slaps their horses and calls the white men by make-up names and predicts their deaths. However, whether the patrollers respond positively or negatively to her depends on their moods that particular night:

Sometimes, [...] they would sit their horses and make fun of her as she sang darky songs in the road. This show was best when the moon was at its brightest, shining down on them and easing their fear of the night and of a mad slave woman and lighting up Alice as she danced to the songs. [...] But when they suffered ill humor, or the rain poured down and wetted them and their threadbare clothes, and their horses

were skittish and the skin down to their feet itched, then they heaped curse words upon her. (13)

In addition to denying the social borders, Alice also refuses to recognise the physical, topographical borders, for example that between Townsend land, where she legally belongs, and what is beyond this land. Despite her seemingly random wanderings, Alice appears to be oriented and attuned to her surroundings. By mimicking insanity, she is able to evade Henry *and* the patrollers, both functioning as obstacles, and ultimately transcend the boundaries of slavery.

Alice thus crosses the border between the known and unknown,. However, to cross the epistemological border and into freedom, a certain process of thought is required. It is possible to argue that Alice, through her wanderings, enters what some call a “borderland”, a space that exists around borders. In these transition zones, cultural and social hybridity can emerge, “resulting in the formation of a sub-cultural buffer zone within which movement from one side to the other eases up considerably” (Newman, 2007, p. 39). The epistemological border constitutes a binary system, in Alice’s case of slavery versus freedom. She plans to leave the world she knows in favour of a world she does not know – the North. Such a transition can be difficult to handle, but in this borderland, Alice is able to acculturate, making the transition easier for her as she crosses the border over to the other side. The conflict that structures Alice’s whole world (the escape from bondage to freedom), is also a conflict that is reflected throughout the novel: it is not possible to achieve freedom through neither religion nor education, and as I discuss in the next chapter, the novel itself is trying to break with the boundaries that the placement within the neo-slave genre imposes on it – it is essentially trying to free itself.

After successfully transcending borders and then escaping slavery, Alice makes two enormous maps of the Townsend plantation and Manchester County respectively. They are a

result of her memory of the nightly wanderings, and also of her every-day life at the plantation. The maps, or tapestries, are found at the very end of the novel, in letters from Calvin to his twin sister Caldonia, as he finally has travelled to the North. Calvin depicts these maps with wonder and awe, and I quote his descriptions at length because of their significance to both this chapter and the thesis:

People were viewing an enormous wall hanging, a grand piece of art that is part tapestry, part painting and part clay structure – all in one exquisite Creation, hanging silent and yet songful on the Eastern wall. It is [...] 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 there were but two stitched words. Alice Night. (384)

The other map is described with equal admiration:

This Creation may well be even more miraculous than the one of the County. This one is about your home, Caldonia. It is your plantation, and again, it is what God sees when He looks down. There is nothing missing, not a cabin, not a barn, not a chicken, not a horse. Not a single person is missing. I suspect that if I were to count the blades of grass, the number would be correct as it was once when the creator of this work knew that world. [...] [A]ll 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. (385)

The maps simultaneously serve as memories for the future and memories of the past.

Memories are also borders, temporal borders between the past, present and future. Having made the maps after her escape, to Alice they represent the past. Her handcrafting, however, will outlast her and will act as a memory of the past in the future. As such, they come to represent a temporal border, and thus also represent a liminal space. This type of space is characterised by ambiguity and potential for change. The maps of Alice appear serene and peaceful, but in reality they represent a horrifying institution. Also, as I will discuss more thoroughly in the final chapter, Alice juxtaposes tropes that essentially are incompatible. Hence, the maps come to represent the “in-between” space. Liminality is often connected to life-changing events, and Alice escaping slavery is certainly such a case. The liminal space that is constituted in Alice’s artwork thus serves as a space where the established entities are disrupted. By omitting herself, Jamie, and Priscilla from the map, she creates new identities for them, enabling them to start new lives. As she is making her tapestry, Alice creates her own rules and her own space. Thus, when Alice chooses to leave her life as a slave, her maps make sure that her past is never forgotten.

As mentioned above, Henry acts as an obstacle for the slaves to achieve freedom, and Alice successfully avoids being caught by him as she flees. The maps that Alice has recreated appear to be true to life in the sense that every person connected to the Townsend plantation is present, and by the fact that “there is nothing missing” (385). The worlds Alice present through her maps are “hopeful”: Every character’s face is “raised up as though to look in the very eyes of God” (385) and all of the characters except Henry have “come home”, as they stand by their spouses in front of their cabins. This, too, is also a form of mimicry: As mimicry is the desire for a “reformed, recognizable Other, as *a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*” (Bhabha, 1984, p. 126, original italics), Alice creates this “Other” through her maps. They are almost the same as the plantation, but not quite. Her

maps represent the “inappropriate” that Bhabha also mentions: Alice refuses to obey the rules that are imposed on her (as shown above), effectively representing the “recalcitrance” (ibid). Also, in making her maps so detailed and thorough, Alice in a way represents the level of surveillance. Not only do the characters look towards the sky and God, He and the audience viewing the maps as they hang in the art gallery can look down on them, watching the characters’ every move. Her maps, similar to the trope of education discussed in the previous chapter, become “a mode of representation, that marginalizes the monumentality of history” (Bhabha, 1984, p. 128) in the sense that they as representatives of the Townsend plantation essentially mock the actual plantation’s power to be a model.

In the maps, moreover, it is not only the living characters that never escape the world they once knew: Not even in death has true freedom come. In his depiction of the maps, Calvin notes that

The dead in the cemetery have risen from there and they, too, stand at the cabins where they once lived. So the slave cemetery is just plain ground now, grass and nothing else. It is empty, even of the tiniest infants, who rest alive and well in their mothers’ arms. (385)

Because the legacy of slavery always will be a part of who they are, this implies that the slaves are imprisoned within the memory of slavery. The legacy of slavery is one of the memories that remain in her maps. The slaves’ being held within their borders even in the afterlife is a strong symbol of the temporal border in the map: It illustrates that although years have gone by since Alice’s escape, time has stood perfectly still. The temporal border remains unchanged, and so do the persons within it. Thus, the tapestry’s representation also shows how strong a hold the institution of slavery has, not only on the Southern society, but also in the North (Washington, to be exact), where the dining hall in the hotel in which the maps hang is situated. As the audience looks at Alice’s map of the plantation, they only see how it

upholds a representation of failure and incompatibility, showing how Alice's maps are not able to transcend the temporal border. I discuss this further in the final chapter.

Calvin also writes about the maps that: "In the cemetery where our Henry is buried, he stands by his grave, but that grave is covered with flowers as though he still inhabits it" (385 – 386). There is an obvious difference between Henry and the other slaves that have been resting in the ground. Henry is the embodiment of his plantation's legacy: His grave covered with flowers may symbolise how slavery is still in full blossom, despite the fact that Henry himself is dead. Henry, the owner of the plantation and thus the very upholder of the institution, is still trapped within the institution of slavery, resting within his comfortable, known world. He is the only dead person on his plantation who still stands by his grave. Had he not been as intertwined in slavery, nor responsible for any other human being's misery through ownership, it would be natural for him to stand by his wife. As Henry enters death, we read that "[he] 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" (10 – 11). Henry enters a house that is not his own, which symbolises that he has not "come home" – he has not been able to cross the border as Alice has, and enters death whilst not at ease. One of the reasons for this may be that Henry himself is not truly free: He is still the legal property of his father at the time of his death, and by extension he is the property of the system. However, all of the other slave characters are properties, yet still they "come home". Thus, I think it is more important that Henry is the only character in the novel that follows in his surrogate father's footsteps by becoming a slave-owner. As a result, Henry becomes so deeply attached to the institution that it is impossible for him to ever free himself from it.

While Henry is still alive, he never expands his own map beyond what his former white master, shows him. This may also be part of why he still is trapped in death. As I argued in the previous chapter, Henry's attachment to Robbins results in him mimicking the



role of his former master. By spending a lot of time with Henry, Robbins becomes mutually dependent of his former groom, and he takes him wherever he goes. This results in Henry never learning what is beyond the borders of slavery. He indeed widens his map geographically and socially, but only within the world of the institution he already knows. Augustus, strongly opposed to the system that has enslaved him and his family for so long, is not at all comfortable with his son having anything to do with “the white man who had once owned him” (113), but he is ultimately convinced by his wife that “[t]hem free papers [Henry] carry with him all over the place don’t carry enough freedom” (ibid), and that “the bigger Henry could make the world he lived in, the freer he would be.” (ibid). Thus Augustus accepts that Henry and Robbins continue to socialise, though he could never have foreseen the horrific consequence this would cause.

That his papers “don’t carry enough freedom” is also an example of a play on the title of the novel: the more Henry learns about the world as a free man, and the more borders he crosses, the less disoriented he gets and the better his odds for survival. However, Henry does not see the value of learning what is beyond that which is already comfortable to him, although it is the crossing of this epistemological border that potentially could set him free. It is under Robbins’ influence that Henry takes the leap from slave to slave owner, and slavery becomes a way for Henry to climb socially and further construct an identity within the institution. Rooney suggests that “Henry has internalized the values of this culture of slavery, and he associates freedom with power and dominance; thus constructing his identity accordingly.” (p. 10). In other words, instead of hating the institution that kept him enslaved, he thrives in it.

One character who is closely connected to the plantation and all it stands for is, the overseer Moses. Whereas Alice “mapped her way again and again through the night” (295), Moses is not capable of obtaining knowledge of the world beyond his borders, because his

borders are imposed on him. After following Alice one time, he gets lost and spends half an hour trying to find his way home:

He was at a crossroads of sorts and he shivered to know how he had put himself there, that he had followed a woman whose neck should have been wrung long ago. He turned about. One road looked to be the correct one but when he looked at the other three, they seemed right as well. The stars and the moon were as bright as the night before but, as Elias was to say to Skiffington, he was 'world stupid,' and so the heavens meant nothing to him. (268)

He, unlike most of his fellow slaves, is not able to navigate by the stars. I say this is an uncommon feature for a slave character to not master. Why is this? In my reading, the answer is that Moses never has thought of running away. Thus, he has had no need of knowing anything about the world that surrounds him: Moses acts as a foil to Alice in that he knows nothing of the world outside the plantation. When he finally decides to break away, "[h]e did not know enough about the world to know he was going south" (334). Thus, by being unable to expand his own borders, hence also unable of escaping slavery, Moses is doomed to live as a slave for the rest of his life. At the same time he is in full control of his known world: "He could have found his way around Caldonia's plantation with no eyes and even no hands to touch familiar trees" (334). His world, restricted by slavery, is solely connected to the Townsend plantation.

In a sense, Moses *is* the plantation: In addition to having built the main house almost singlehandedly, he is the overseer and tends to the daily business of the estate. When his master dies Caldonia is left with the responsibility of running the plantation, but in reality Moses becomes the one in charge through her. He is also the one who keeps the Townsend slaves in place. Disillusioned by the sexual refusal from Caldonia, however, Moses eventually lets go of his control over the plantation. As a result the other slaves start running away.

Although one can argue that Moses sets his family free by letting them escape alongside Alice, he only lets go of them because he believes he will be the next Mr Townsend: “Where does a man put a family he does not need?” (293). As Caldonia’s husband, Moses envisions himself as a man of infinite possibilities – finally able to see what lies beyond the borders of the Townsend plantation and beyond the restrictions of the life as a slave.

One way in which Moses is similar to Alice is that they both are connected to nature. Alice has an organic and almost supernatural relationship with nature: “The moon gave more life to her shadow, and the shadow would bounce about with her from one side of the road to other [*sic*], calming the horses and quieting the crickets” (13). Although Moses does not have a calming effect on nature, it seems that nature has a calming effect on him: It is out in the woods he feels truly connected to himself, where he is without the restrictions that follows the status of slave. Moses’ way of freeing himself from the boundaries laid upon him in everyday life is through masturbation out in the open:

He opened his mouth; it was rare for him and the rain to meet up like this. His eyes had remained open, and after taking in all that he could without turning his head, he took up his thing and did it. When he was done, after a few strokes, he closed his eyes, turned on his side and dozed. (3)

Although Moses might never have had the intense desire to escape his situation prior to Henry’s death, these intimate encounters with nature might symbolise how they are the only chances Moses has to be his very own self: Out there in the woods, no one wields power over him, and no one can control neither him nor his sexuality. Thus, as he masturbates as opposed to engaging in sexual intercourse, it is within reason to suggest that spilling his own seed to the ground is Moses’ way of protesting that he is being owned by another person. Thus, as Moses is Henry’s property, and Henry “owned him and every shadow he made” (9), the spilling of the seed is also a form of appropriation: Moses takes what legally belongs to his

master and lets it go to waste, symbolising how, by taking control of his own sperm and additionally being on land outside of the Townsend plantation, he engages in short moments of freedom.

However, Moses also has a mechanical relationship to nature in the sense that he analyses and classifies the dirt he tastes. He tastes the soil in order to predict the strength and weaknesses of the field, but also because “the eating of it tied him to the only thing in his small world that meant almost as much as his own life” (2). These small encounters of intimacy with nature are moments of psychological liberation, and they appear to be the only escape available to Moses, as he is never able to escape physically.

Through the tasting and charting of the different “dirts”, essentially cataloguing them according to their taste in the different months, Moses indeed has a taxonomic approach to nature. As growing crops is his life, it is a great advantage to be able to taste how the dirt is different from season to season.

This was July, and July dirt tasted even more like sweetened metal than the dirt of June or May. Something in the growing crops unleashed a metallic life that only began to dissipate in mid-August, and by harvest time that life would be gone altogether, replaced by a sour moldiness he associated with the coming of fall and winter, the end a relationship he had begun with the first taste of dirt back in March, before the first hard spring rain. (2)

The way that the cycle of the earth is always the same, that it repeats itself year after year functions as a metaphor for Moses’ and the other slaves’ lives. The temporal aspect underlines how they can never escape the cycle. Their fates are forever intertwined in an unbreakable circle of the seasons and just as surely as summer follows after spring, neither Moses nor any other slave will supersede their property-status. Thus, the annual cycle represents a border that the slaves on the Townsend plantation can never cross.

Just as Moses does not know how to behave outside what is familiar to him, namely the Townsend plantation, Counsel Skiffington (the sheriff's cousin) is just as puzzled, only on a larger geographical scale: Even though he tries to expand the map of his known world, he does not succeed. As Counsel travels throughout the South, he experiences that he does not understand how to properly adapt and behave to the new cultures he meets. His long journey through the South starts in North Carolina where his own plantation, "A Child's Dream", now lies in ruins. He considers heading up north to Virginia because of his cousin there, but instead decides to go the opposite direction toward California. However, after a long ride through South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana, he does not get further than Texas before he decides to turn around again. While in Texas, he has a strange encounter with a huge crowd of "people of one color or another" (240):

Then, as if they had been invisible and chose just that moment to reappear, there were ten men and women on horses facing him, and Counsel could see beyond them even more people and horses as well as six or seven wagons, all coming with ease through the forest the way they would go along a well-kept road. (237)

The group travels together despite differences in colour, gender, and age. Counsel's encounter in the woods seems to be a gesture towards the future, a future where people of every colour or beliefs co-exist. In the group, some are from Mississippi whilst others from China. Some have light skin, others dark. The women are as loud and husky as the men, and Counsel has never seen or experienced this before. The group acts as a symbiotic organism, and Counsel is appalled. It is strange and unknown to him, and makes him react with contempt.

Preceding this meeting with the group of people, Counsel appears to be open to change, as he encounters a pack of dogs: "At some safe distance, he thought, he could have admired the wonder of them, the variety of colors and sizes, and the sense that they were sharing the same mind" (ibid). Although he cannot see "anything pure in the bunch" (ibid), the

mixing of colours and sizes that exists within this pack is satisfactory to him. However, when he sees a crowd of *people* living that way, he cannot accept it: “[t]here was something wrong here and the government of Texas should be doing something about it” (239). For Counsel to sit in his old library and read about the different continents and their inhabitants in a book creates a certain, and in his case comfortable, distance between him and the facts. The close encounter with the crowd of people living as freely as they do makes Counsel realise that the world he has read about becomes reality, and he is not yet ready for it. The way the group defies different cultural borders makes Counsel withdraw further into his set ways of thinking.

In addition to crossing the topographical borders of the many states he has roamed through, Counsel is also about to cross an epistemological border: Like Alice, he is about to go from what he knows over to the unknown (the world of the North in a manner of speaking, as California also was part of the Union). However, Counsel’s time in the “borderland” has had the opposite effect on him, as he is not able to acculturate to the new cultures he meets. Franco Moretti’s (1998) suggestion that “[n]ear the border, figurality goes up” (p. 45) could not be more fitting. It is change itself that Counsel fears, and the strange crowd of people acts as an image for this. The closer he gets to the border, the more frightened he becomes. This is what eventually makes him turn around before being able to cross the border completely: Although still in the South, which ought to be somewhat familiar to him, Texas is different from what he is used to, and this becomes too unmanageable. “[Texas], away from what he always knew, was a world he did not believe he could ever make peace with. He rode on and avoided towns, farms, any signs of people” (236). That Counsel is afraid of the new ways and landscape in Texas is more clear when a “thicket of vegetation came up” (242). The grass just keeps getting thicker and thicker until he finally gives up. To Counsel, both the group of people and the grass represent obstacles that keep him from crossing the border. They become borders in themselves, and as he is about to approach such a border, the figurality will go up

because Counsel cannot live in a changing world. It appears that the obstacles are images of entrapment, which is a little ironic, even mocking, as Counsel indeed becomes trapped within his own world as he is unable to cross the border.

It is as if Counsel in some ways is a representation of all the major characters in the novel: Similar to Alice, he is also mapping his way through the South, only he fails to cross the border into the unknown. He echoes Henry in the sense that he does not seem to find peace after death entered his life (although Counsel does not die physically). Counsel's journey is a result of him losing his family and everything he owns, essentially losing himself. However, just like Moses, Counsel cannot survive outside of what is familiar to him, outside his own borders. When Moses is lost in the woods after following Alice, he also faces the image of entrapment, as he cannot find his way back to the plantation. Thus, Counsel is only comfortable within the boundaries of his own plantation in North Carolina.

Counsel's cousin, sheriff John Skiffington, also prefers the safety of what is known, and this represented by the map that hangs in his office:

[...] a browned and yellowed woodcut of some eight feet by six feet. The map had been created by a German, Hans Waldseemuller, who lived in France three centuries before [...] The land of North America on the map was smaller than it was in actuality, and where Florida should have been, there was nothing. South America seemed the right size, but it alone of the two continents was called "America." North America went nameless. (174)

In "real life" *Martin Waldseemüller* was a German cartographer, being the first one credited for using the name "America" on a map in 1513. The Russian Skiffington buys his map from has told him that "it was the first time the word *America* had ever been put on a map" (174, original italics).

Skiffington's prisoner at the time, the Frenchman Broussard, offers to get him a better map, "a map of today, how the world out [*sic*] together today, not yesterday, not long ago" (ibid). Skiffington, however is "happy with what [he] got" (ibid). The map in his office is named "The Known World", and essentially represents the world in the novel: Skiffington's map is old and inaccurate, a misrepresentative of the world. Thus, as the sheriff rejects the offer to get a new map, he at the same time refuses to acknowledge that the world around him has changed. For Skiffington, the "known" world in *The Known World* is solely connected to slavery and the old ways of the South. Skiffington's refusal of having a more modern and up-to-date map comes to symbolise not only his content with the old ways and the known ways, but also his fear of the new and by extension that which is unknown. Just like his cousin, Skiffington is comfortable within his own boundaries.

Originally a present for his wife, Skiffington has assembled the huge map in his home. Winifred however despises it, and does "not want it in her house" (175). Moretti's idea of figurality and borders seems to fit also here: Skiffington having grown up on a plantation, the border between the spouses is marked by the fact that Winifred is born and raised in the North. The size of the map, together with its out-datedness is a figure for how much influence the ways of the South truly has in the Skiffington residence, regardless of its relocation to the husband's office. It is natural to assume that Winifred, being from Pennsylvania, is on the abolitionist side of slavery, and her revulsion towards the map confirms this: "slavery was not something she wanted in her life" (33). The map, representing the slave holding culture of the South, becomes a border that Winifred is not willing to cross. To her, the old map represents a threat, and becomes a metaphor for the border between human beings, which she as a woman of the South now has to accept. She already knows all she needs to know about the world she now lives in, and she is very much aware of what kind of culture she now must adapt to. Just living in Manchester County forces her to break her own principles about slavery, especially



evident in the scene with her wedding present from Counsel and his wife: Minerva, a “slave girl of nine years” (31). Winifred stays calm at the time, but this is clearly outside of her comfort zone: For her to own another human being is unimaginable, yet this is now her reality. She cries the next morning, but is convinced by her husband that Minerva would be better off by staying with them. Counsel’s sly comment to Winifred as he and his wife give the slave girl away underlines how differently the Northern culture is from that of the South: “It’s a good way of introducing you to the life you should become accustomed to, Mrs. Skiffington” (32).

Winifred has involuntarily crossed the border of ownership: From being against the ownership of fellow human beings she now owns one herself. This makes her the only character in the novel that goes from being free to being trapped within the system of slavery. The boundary between the North and the South is especially visible in this particular scene from their wedding: “All the people from Philadelphia were quiet, along with John Skiffington and his father, and the people from Virginia, especially those who knew the cost of good slave flesh, smiled” (31 – 32). Skiffington remains silent despite his childhood on a plantation, because although he condones slavery, the influence from his father after his mother’s death and his marriage to Winifred, he has accepted the idea of never entering the world of slavery as a slave-owner. However, “[d]espite vowing never to own a slave, [he] had no trouble doing his job to keep the institution of slavery going, an institution even God himself had sanctioned throughout the Bible” (43).

Skiffington loves the South, but he “gradually became comfortable thinking he could live happy in Philadelphia or in any part of the country and consider himself just another American who had become what he was because of what the South had given and taught him” (41 – 42). Skiffington thus appears to be open to change, to expand his horizons beyond that which he knows so well. However, his refusal of a new map reflects the fear of new ways. He

knows that owning other humans is wrong, but at the same time slavery is the only way of the South, and the only way he knows. In fact, it is what has given him his job as sheriff.

Throughout *The Known World* Skiffington's job rarely revolves around anything else. Law enforcement keeps slavery going, which is confirmed by Robbins when he corrects Henry after seeing him and Moses "tussling" on the ground: "The law will protect you as a master to your slave, and will not flinch when it protects you. That protection lasts [...] all the way to the death of that property" (123). The legal system that is supposed to protect humans becomes a border in itself, where Skiffington and his patrollers fiercely prevent slaves from crossing any border at all.

Another establishment that has a similar task to that of the judicial authority is Atlas Life, Casualty and Assurance Company. The insurance company keeps slave-holder and slave separated and in their places. An atlas is a collection of maps or charts and, obviously, when looking in an atlas, there are borders, physical borders between countries or states. An atlas is also a catalogue or a system, a tool for mankind to keep a steady overview of the world. The insurance company in question sells their services to slave-owners, and it helps keeping the institution of slavery going by making a profit on it. In the old Greek mythology, the god Atlas was condemned by Zeus to hold up the pillars of heaven. In other words he is a symbol of one who supports or sustains a great burden. Atlas the god keeps heaven and earth separated by holding up the pillars, and Atlas the insurance company makes money by keeping the slave-holder and the slave separated by upholding "the white mans' burden".

The pillars the mythical Atlas has to hold up were supposedly located beyond the most western horizon. In an atlas, all the cardinal directions are represented through a compass. In *The Known World* these directions get a lot of attention even if only through small hints or details. The North/South conflict is obvious and evidently central, but also East and West get their share of emphasis: Augustus and Mildred move further west in the county when they

accumulate enough money to buy their own property: “The land was at the western end of Manchester County [...] Augustus Townsend like it because it was at the farthest end of the county and the nearest white man with slaves was a half a mile away” (14 – 15). Patience, Robbins’ white daughter, names the different wings of their house according to the cardinal directions. Whereas the North and the South are only mentioned once in this connection, the West and the East are brought up frequently, especially the East, where Robbins’ wife spends most of her time. Alice’s maps are also connected to these two directions: the map of the Townsend plantation hangs on the Western wall and the map of Manchester County is on the Eastern wall: “an enormous wall hanging [...] all in one exquisite Creation, hanging silent and yet songful on the Eastern wall [...] the other Wonder on the opposite wall” (384 – 385). As for Counsel, he is also pushing west on his way through the South en route west to California, but returns east. These examples serve as small reminders that, rather than simplifying the central conflict down to the Union versus the Confederacy, the complexity of the novel reaches further.

Alice’s maps come to represent the known world. Additionally, just as Alice’s maps are representations of the world, they also point to the wider reaches of the historical trajectory of slavery: The novel itself comes to symbolise the totality of the world by pointing to all the corners of the world. Throughout this chapter, we have seen a world that is full of boundaries, and also how trope of escape has failed also here. The only exception is that of Alice, yet, her escape is not mentioned at all. Thus, the boundaries present in the novel become obstacles that operate geographically, physically and mentally, keeping the characters within their own limits and essentially “trapping” them in the world of the South.



## Chapter 3

### Escaping Genre

*This problem of the human site or living space is not simply that of knowing whether there will be enough space for in in the world [...] but also that of knowing what relations of propinquity [...] and classification of human elements should be adopted in a given situation in order to achieve a given end.*

- Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias" (p. 2)

In this last chapter of the thesis I want to base my discussion in the title of the novel. "The Known World" is an intriguing title, because it immediately raises questions such as "the known world for whom?", "what is the known world in this novel?", and, "what in this novel is 'the known'?". Certainly, a novel that explores the world in which a black man owns slaves of his own colour is rather an unknown territory. Historically it was not uncommon to own one's family members like Augustus does; owning slaves for commercial reasons is however rarely heard of. How, then, can this world within the novel be "known"? What messages are the title *and* the novel supposed to convey? The subject of how one can truly know anything at all seems reasonable to investigate, because the title indeed raises the question of knowledge. In her Open Lectures at Yale University (2008), professor Amy Hungerford asks, "how do we know anything?", and answers this question through the different types of "knowledges" she identifies in *The Known World*. Although her discussion on epistemology indeed is interesting and important, I suggest that the issue of *how* we know what we know is not as relevant for this novel as how we *think* we know what we know: *The Known World* is concerned with challenging its readers to question their own knowledge, to confront our

assumed facts and investigate whether there are alternative answers beyond our comfort-zone. We may compare Counsel and how he used to sit comfortably in his old library reading books and gaining knowledge to the readers of this novel: To Counsel's surprise when he meets the group of people on his way westwards, there are some he cannot identify because they were "not recorded in any of the books in his destroyed library" (239). Similar to him we feel safe and comfortable staying within that which we know, but *The Known World* upsets our assumptions on several levels.

In order to make sense of what "the known world" entails, I find it useful to define *which* worlds are presented in the novel, because there are more than one. First of all, there is obviously the overall world of slavery, thus implicitly the world of the American South. As I have argued, this world as it is depicted in the novel, serves to represent the old, traditional, never-ending ways – the ways that have grown into habits and life styles, and that are not easily (nor voluntarily) changed. The smaller realm within this greater world is the Townsend plantation. Being run by Henry, and indirectly by Robbins, the plantation represents the history of slavery. Fixed within this world are Henry, Caldonia, Calvin, the Skiffington cousins, Moses and Fern<sup>5</sup>. They have all grown up within it, and despite all of them having had the opportunity (except for Moses), none of these characters have dared to venture outside that world. This is especially evident in relation to the tapestries Alice creates, in the sense that all of the above are present in her map of the Townsend plantation.

Also represented in the novel is the world of the North, but the only depictions of it come from Calvin, and at times Winifred. However, although the concrete depictions of this world are lacking, details are still revealed to us through Alice, as she is the only character in the novel who advocates true freedom. Her maps serve as eternal memories of the past and reminders of the legacy of slavery, and her maps truly become recollections of the past ways

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<sup>5</sup> The characters here mentioned are the ones I consider the most important from the novel and for this thesis. Of course there are several other characters in *The Known World* who are born and raised in the South, but to list their names in order to be accurate is not apposite to this thesis.

of the South, because this world is about to be changed for ever: Calvin's letter to his sister is dated 12<sup>th</sup> of April 1861, the very date on which the Civil War broke out, as Fort Sumter was attacked by the Confederate States of America. However, the "known" world of the white hegemony in the South did not change significantly after the War, and Winifred can easily serve as a symbol of its stronghold on the Southern society: she "degenerates" from being a free, Northern woman with a certain set of values, to a woman of the South (at least for the most part). Winifred is the only character in the novel who goes from being white and free to white and enslaved by the institution. Nevertheless, just as Winifred might symbolise white power, Henry's passing may also be a foreshadowing of the end of institutionalised slavery, particularly because after his death, the entire world of Manchester County, at the very least the Townsend plantation, starts to crumble.

Neither Manchester County seems to serve as a Southern "utopia" where there is prosperity, peace, and close to no run-away slaves, that is, until Henry dies. However, in his essay "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias" from 1984 Michel Foucault explains different relations to space and place, and the utopia, he claims, is an unreal place, whereas the heterotopia serves as a counter-site, a place that exists outside of all places, although it might be possible to indicate their location in reality. The purpose of reading aspects of the novel against Foucault's essay in this final chapter is to show how the novel is anchored in the heterotopic "otherness", and thus also to help explain how *The Known World* is so unruly with regards to genre and the expectations we bring to it.

Manchester County, the Townsend plantation, nor Alice's replications of the two places can be called utopic. Foucault's heterotopia, on the other hand, is "a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live" (p. 4), similar to Alice's maps. Her tapestries are, as described by Calvin, an accurate imitation of the two sites: "There is nothing missing [...] I suspect that if I were to count the blades of grass, the

number would be correct as it was once when the creator of this work knew that world” (385). Foucault further writes that “we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed” (p. 1), and claims that the heterotopia is capable of “juxtaposing in a single place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible” (p. 6). Indeed, Alice here echoes such juxtaposition in the sense that she, in her map of the Townsend plantation, challenges tropes that are essentially incompatible: the living and the dead co-exist in this map; the relationship between slave and slave-owner “functions independently in the case of black slave-owners, of the customary hierarchy of white-over-black” (Bassard, 2008, p. 408); and also the relationship between white and black as Henry’s closest friend is his former white owner.

The fourth principle that Foucault describes about the heterotopias is that they most often are linked to “slices in time” (p. 6), and that they function at full capacity when “men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time” (ibid). He especially draws on institutions such as the museum and the library where time never stops building up, and therefore they are “heterotopias of indefinitely accumulating time” (p. 7). In the case of Alice’s maps, time stands still, a definite break with time. Despite being on display at a hotel and not a museum, the image of her maps as a heterotopia of accumulating time is appropriate, because the hotel here serves the same function as a museum – anyone can come in and gaze at the two “miracles”. Also Frazier and his pamphlets are fitting here: his “Free Negroes who had owned other Negroes before the War between the States”-pamphlets still are preserved in the Library of Congress, and also as they are preserved as memorabilia. Frazier’s pamphlets and Alice maps thus serve as symbols of how history cannot be erased, as history itself is the accumulation of time.

I briefly return to Moses in this context of the fourth principle, because his obsession with tasting and classifying the soil in the fields also serves as an example of how time is



manipulated. The cycle of repetition serves as a trope of inescapability, forever enslaving Moses to his habits. His obsession with tasting the dirt, of repeating the same ritual constantly, shows how he wants to enclose all the different tastes he has learned and how he connects them to time. His cycle of tasting and classifying echoes how humans never will stop cataloguing knowledge to confirm that we know that we think we know. The knowledge presented to the readers through the maps of Alice and the pamphlets of Frazier is also at the same time a knowledge with which we have a taxonomic relation. In both of Alice's maps, Calvin mentions that they show what God sees when He looks down. What God sees, is a systematic and organised world, categorised according to the norms of society. The same can be said about how *we* see Frazier's pamphlets in relation to taxonomy: He portrays the contemporary world by cataloguing the American society.

It is also interesting to return to Henry, who in Alice's map is doomed to forever stand by his grave, thus he, in his death breaks with time. Henry and Moses, together with Alice and Frazier, become a part of the "quasi-eternity" that Foucault mentions in connection to the cemetery: "for the individual, the cemetery begins with this strange heterochrony, the loss of life, and with this quasi-eternity in which her permanent lot is dissolution and disappearance" (p. 6). Thus, none of these characters can ever escape the legacy of slavery, however loosely connected to it they are. For instance, Frazier is not a part of the world of the South *per se*, but in the world of the novel his name is forever connected to it. Hence, he is also a part of the eternity that resides in Alice's maps.

I want to elaborate a bit more on Henry and his grave, because in his second principle, Foucault describes the special case of the cemetery. In Alice's map of the Townsend plantation, she has every deceased character brought back to life except for Henry. As Foucault explains, the cemeteries were once moved from the heart of the church to the outskirts of the city due to the rising obsession with death as an illness: "The cemeteries then

came to constitute, no longer the sacred and immortal heart of the city, but the other city, where each family possesses its dark resting place” (p. 6). As slavery was gradually being opposed and, as with death, looked upon as an illness, Henry, standing alone by his tomb represents the “other” side, the heterotopia that exists outside all places. Henry who is a black slave-owner, having more than thirty slaves to his name, resides in the dark resting place of slavery, forever alone. Of course, as there were separate cemeteries on the Townsend plantation, one intended for Henry’s future generations and one for the slaves, Henry would most likely not have been standing alone by his grave, had there been older or younger relatives to populate the cemetery prior to his death. Thus, it is obvious that the legacy of slavery is not only connected to Henry, but also the resting place itself – anyone who is buried in the slave owner’s cemetery contribute to uphold the institution.

Similar to Henry, who in Alice’s maps exists outside the social space of the plantation, the slaves themselves also subsist outside of society, as they were regarded as property and not as human beings. Thus, as Henry rests in the legacy of slavery, his slaves also live in this dark resting place. Since Henry is the only character still standing by his grave, he is also the only one who has not found redemption – he is caught in the tight grip of the institution. Thus, as explained in the previous chapter, Henry is condemned to represent slavery itself. Hence, as Henry once owned the plantation, it is possible to argue that slavery and the life on the plantation as a slave also becomes part of the representation of the other world that Alice’s maps are a part of, being heterotopias. In other words, slavery as institution becomes a heterotopia in and of itself.

That slavery indeed is a heterotopia is also confirmed by the first principle that Foucault writes about, at least in my reading of it: He there presents the heterotopia of crisis and of deviation. The institution of slavery appears to be a little of both, as it is “always” in a state of crisis, here meaning that slave-owners would have to work persistently in order to

uphold the system. At the time in which the novel is set, the mid-nineteenth century, political and social anti-slavery movements had begun to flourish. As “crisis” can loosely be defined as a turning point, slavery would “always” be at risk of ceasing to exist. Foucault also writes that as the heterotopia of crisis is about to vanish from the contemporary world, it is slowly being replaced by the heterotopia of deviation, where one of the examples he uses is the prison. Obviously, slavery can be viewed as a prison, as humans – by law – were being held captive against their will.

For Foucault, then, the question arises as to how one gets “inside” these heterotopias, because the heterotopic site is “not freely accessible like a public place” (p. 7). Further on in his description of the fifth principle Foucault writes “[e]ither the entry is compulsory [...] or else the individual has to submit to rites and purifications” (ibid). If, as I suggested in connection with the first and second principles, slavery itself represents a kind of heterotopia, it is possible to further argue in this context that the slave markets symbolise the “entry way” into that particular heterotopia. For a slave, the entry into the heterotopia of slavery would be compulsory, but the habitual bodily inspections, such as the checking of mouths and pinching of limbs to find out how fit they were, could represent the rites or rituals that Foucault mentions. I want to stress that my reading of the word “ritual” in this context is only in light of the general definition that something is done in the same way each time in a particular situation, in this case the slave markets.

Again returning to Alice’s “masterpieces”, Foucault’s theories apply also here: The oldest example of the heterotopia is the ancient garden. Alice’s maps are directly linked to such gardens, as they relate to rugs or carpets: “[a]s for carpets, they were originally reproductions of gardens (the garden is a rug onto which the whole world comes to enact its symbolic perfection, and the rug is a sort of garden that can move across space)” (p. 6). Indeed Alice’s maps resemble gardens by appearance. Foucault discusses heterotopias as

contradictory sites, thus it is necessary to point out that a plantation, although it resembles the garden, is a contorted form of it. Although the plantation presented to the public in the map appears to be peaceful, with all the characters looking towards the sky, the real-life plantation is a “garden” with strict boundaries, power-relations and traditions. And this makes Alice’s maps unable to move across space (and time), because they will always represent that particular epoch of history. What makes *The Known World* such a complex work is that at the same time as the image of the plantation itself is not able to move through time, Alice’s maps *do*: They are being looked at, and we read about them years later.

Foucault writes further that “[t]he garden has been a sort of happy, universalizing heterotopia since the beginnings of antiquity” (p. 6). This is not directly applicable to Alice’s maps, as she challenges the various tropes by juxtaposing them, and also by the fact that her maps will always represent the time of the institution of slavery: they can never portray happiness nor be universalising. Through her juxtaposing, then, Foucault’s “symbolic perfection” is instead underlined by the *imperfection* of the plantation (as symbol for a kind of garden), represented by the legacy of slavery and all that it entails.

In her maps Alice presents the world she once knew, and through her, to us as readers, it becomes ours as well: As her maps come to symbolise the totality of the world in the novel, they also represent the world of the novel. Both the maps *and* the novel aspire to “the will to enclose in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes, the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time” (Foucault, 1984, p. 7). Thus, her maps ultimately become symbols of what the novel sets out to achieve regarding genre. By enclosing “all times” and “all forms”, the novel cannot be viewed solely as a neo-slave narrative. As the maps are related to the garden, this agrees with Foucault’s claim that “[t]he garden is the smallest parcel of the world and then it is the totality of the world” (p. 6). The gardens Foucault writes of were supposed to “bring together inside its rectangle four parts

representing the four parts of the world” (ibid), and the maps, being related to the gardens, do the same. This is also a parallel in the novel, as it frequently, if often indirectly, refers to the cardinal directions – the four corners of the world.

In the sixth and final principle that Foucault describes, he writes about how heterotopias function in relation to the other spaces that remain. He says that

Either their role is to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned [...] Or else, on the contrary, their role is to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled. (p. 8)

Again, Alice’s maps are suitable in this context: As they represent the heterotopia of compensation, the reader can easily observe the discipline, calmness and regulation that exudes from the map of the Townsend plantation. This is quite the opposite of that particular estate after Henry’s death, when everything starts to fall apart. Foucault describes how certain colonies representing the heterotopia of compensation behave, how “[t]he daily life of individuals was regulated, not by the whistle, but by the bell” (p.8), and prior to Henry’s death, the same can be said of the Townsend plantation. Alice has indeed created worlds that are the complete opposite of the reality, effectively showing the perfect order or the ideal world of how the plantation *should* have run. In her maps, the dead are amongst the living, thus there is a significant element of redemption, emphasising “perfection”. Due to Calvin’s awe-like rendering of them in his letter, and also how he describes the persons looking towards the sky with such serenity, her maps exude some form of harmony. Alice’s ideal world that she would like to present in her maps, the world that is as perfect as “ours” is messy, is of course a world where slavery is non-existent.

If *The Known World* itself is a heterotopia, a novel that exists outside all other novels, to paraphrase Foucault, if the narration is so anchored in otherness, it is no wonder why it is

so difficult to place it within a specific genre. Connecting so profoundly to this kind of “otherness” is Jones’ way of accentuating the unnaturalness and foreignness of the institution of slavery. The novel appears to belong to a different space entirely, just as the plantation does. Again it is possible to draw on Larsen’s observations quoted before: “[A]esthetics is the study of human interaction with already existing boundaries with the possibility of changing them” (p. 100, original italics). I will suggest that this novel interacts with its “existing boundaries” by breaking with them, thus leaving the novel open up to change: The various tropes that *The Known World* defies and problematizes, as shown in the two previous chapters in this thesis, represent the already existing boundaries of the genre. The break with these is how the novel challenges our set definition of genre, and opens it up to us, demolishing our perceived knowledge we assumed as accurate.

However, there are so many different worlds and boundaries presented in the novel, which complicates matters because the reader has to take them into consideration all at once. By representing such an intricate view of the world and of what is “known”, is Jones trying to challenge our assumptions of how the world should be perceived, or is he just mirroring our own contemporary world? Again this resonates with my initial question of how we *think* we know what we know. How can we classify *The Known World* within a specific genre, a specific kind of “world?”

The term “genre” originally stems from the word “kind”, related in turn to “kin”, which implies that all genres in one way are connected. Also, they are familiar to us in the sense that we “know” them; they are already classified and sorted. Cleverly illustrated throughout the novel, for instance by Frazier or Moses, categorising is our way of making sense of the world, and as such, the taxonomy of genre is comfortable to us. Jostein Børtnes (2007) writes that genres are “open and meaningful ‘form-shaping’ principles, subject to historical change and modification” (p. 197). *The Known World* plays heavily to this, in the

sense that the genre Jones supposedly writes within has been modified to the extent that the novel may no longer belong to the neo-slave genre. Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) writes that “[a] genre lives in the present, but always *remembers* its past, its beginning” (p. 106, original italics). *The Known World*, then, will resonate with the neo-slave genre (which of course in turn “remembers” its predecessor the slave narrative), simply because that is its heritage, its legacy.

How a genre is more than just a result of taxonomy is clearly stated in Peter Seitel’s article “Theorizing Genres – Interpreting Works,” that “[a] work may exploit the logic of time [and] space [...] in the world of the encapsulated genre to develop the fullness of its own form.” (p. 280). This is applicable to *The Known World*, as the novel rather than representing its genre exploits its “form-shaping principles” to evolve into its own. Below I look at how time and space are used or presented in the novel, in order to underline how they are used to break with traditions and challenge the reader.

It is especially through the fragmented narrative that the sense of time is disrupted: Only some of the stories run through the novel, such as Moses’, Henry’s, Fern’s, Caldonia’s and Robbins’; meanwhile many of the minor character’s, such as Mary’s, Patty’s and Broussard’s, do not. Also, the narrative extends well into the past *and* into the future for some of the characters. In the case of Stamford, we get to know both: He visits his past by dreaming about his parents and his childhood. He worries that he cannot remember their names, and asks himself whether they were real or not, but his navel convinces him that he indeed was somebody’s son once.

Stamford lay back down and tried to find a comfortable spot on the straw. [...] It worried him that he could not remember their names. Maybe if he had thought of them more throughout his life. He closed his eyes and took his parents in his hands and put

them all about the plantation where he had last seen them. [...] He put them in the fields, he put them in the sky, and at last he put them before the cemetery where there were no names. And that was it: his mother's name was June. [...] His father's name did not come to him, try as he might to put him all about the plantation. [...] [J]ust before dawn he awoke and said into the darkness, "Colter." (192, 193)

That he is unable to remember his own parents' names of course has to do with deprivation of freedom and isolation: Stamford has been enclosed in one specific place and milieu only, and in the culture where he has been looked upon as a piece of property that can be sold away at any given moment, parenthood and love are not prioritised. In fact, maybe Stamford's forgetting has been a way of defending himself against the hardships of slavery. Such emotional numbness is the inevitable consequence of deprivation, including that of his memory.

There are also other examples where temporality or temporal borders are broken: As we follow Frazier's story, we get to know some of his past, as he "sees" his siblings in Fern's garden when he interviews her. A parallel can be drawn to Alice's map of the Townsend plantation here: Just as Alice has chosen to represent both the living and the dead in her representation of her former world, Frazier sees both his deceased and his living siblings. Furthermore, they are all present in a garden – echoing Foucault's "totality of the world."

From a more general point of view, the time-aspect of the novel is also manipulated by the fragmented plot: The disrupting of the chronology defines how the novel exploits time in order to emphasise how it challenges the set conventions of the genre. Of course, *The Known World* is neither the first nor the last novel where narrative style is fragmented and post-modern as such, but, as the typical neo-slave genre conventions maintain a first person narrative, the deviation is underlined through the narrative technique. Traditionally, as defined



by Ashraf Rushdy, the neo-slave narrative uses the first person narrator. *The Known World*, however, operates with an intrusive, omniscient narrator, making it easier to avoid the chronological narrative as well. For instance, typically, one follows the protagonist on his or her way from bondage to freedom – either from the past to into present, or from the present to a future where the character is free. However, as there is no freedom for any of the protagonists in the novel, this kind of narrative is impossible. I here exclude Alice, because she, despite the focus she has in this thesis, only plays the role of a minor character in the novel.

Similar to time, space in the novel is treated differently in *The Known World* than in (most) other novels, and contributes to its coming into its own: it is the geographical explorations, or the lack of them (that the characters venture outside or stay within their borders), in the novel that underline how the title “mocks” the genre, the world it represents, and everything we think we know about it. The title of the novel reflects the world of the characters, and cartography (also a type of classifying) is a common feature for most of them. They are all exploring their own worlds, whether it is unfamiliar to them or not. Frazier first travels from Canada to the United States, and then he explores the entire country. Henry and Robbins, however, keep their journeys within Manchester County. Alice, too, keeps within the borders of the county until she finally can escape.

In *The Known World*, space is also related to the trope of moving from bondage to freedom. None of the characters, except for Alice (and Pricilla and Jamie too, since they are excluded from the map), achieve liberty. Although all of them are challenged or given the opportunity to expand their own maps of their worlds, all characters (excluding Alice, Frazier, and the minor characters that only appear once) choose to stay within their own, known, borders. Caldonia, educated and privileged despite the colour of her skin, chooses to never raise her head and look beyond the horizon of her own world. Fern Elston, highly respected

and even able to pass as white and disappear across the “color line” if she pleases, chooses to stay in Manchester County and live her life as she always has done, as a slave-owner and educator. Counsel and his cousin John both comfortably reside within the safety of the world they know, and clearly show how uncomfortable it is to explore the world outside. For Henry, Caldonia and Moses, their known world is connected to the Townsend plantation, and for John Skiffington it appears to concern Manchester County, thus the cultural space of the old South.

As the novel tries to break out from the genre that is “expected” of it, Alice and Frazier are the two characters that echo this in the sense that they are the ones who dare venturing outside their comfort-zone and explore that which is unknown to them. For Alice, her mapping is essential in order to execute her planned escape. In mimicking craziness, she also simultaneously mocks everyone who believes her insanity because they are not able to see past which they think they know. By expanding their own worlds, Frazier and Alice are able to challenge the already set expectations of society. Frazier does this in his pamphlets, for instance through the education of the northerners on the traditions of the southerners. Again the question pertaining to knowledge applies here: we expect that we already know the world, but in reality this is impossible if we are to stay solely within our own borders.

As readers of the novel we are thrown into a world that is *unknown* to us, challenging us to discard everything we thought we knew, so that new knowledge can be stored. Thus, the novel achieves what it sets out to do – it forces its readers to rethink what we consider to be certain. Thus, a much more extended space is revealed to us, which we have yet to explore.

One can almost say that genres are extended spaces as well, and I want to return to the Seitel article and his perspective on genres:

A genre presents a social world or a partial view of one that includes configurations of time and space, notions of causality and human motivation, and ethical and aesthetic

values. Genres are storehouses of cultural knowledge and possibility. They support the creation of works and guide the way an audience envisions and interprets them. (p. 279)

Again the first association that springs to mind is that of Alice's maps: They, too, are such storehouses, and they indeed display a social world, with a specific legacy. The social worlds presented in *The Known World* are those of the ante-bellum South, and as such there is an easy explanation as to why critics generally place the novel within the genre of the neo-slave narrative. However, through the configurations of time and space, as shown above, the novel tries to break free from this. I suggest that when Seitel claims genres are "storehouses of cultural knowledge and possibility", he implies that genres indeed contain traces of the old, but there is also an opportunity to change the genre entirely, in a sense echoing Bakhtin when he writes that the genre lives in the present, but always remembers its past. This opportunity is seized by Jones, as I have tried to show throughout this thesis, when he defies the typical tropes of the neo-slave genre, such as education and religion, and instead effectively mimics the neo-slave genre. I here refer back to Bhabha and how he explains that "[m]imicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other" (p. 126), and Jones, trying to break out of the genre, creates a novel that is *almost the same* as the neo-slave narrative, but not quite.

In fact, one cannot claim that a novel belongs to a specific genre, because genres are never set in stone – they are not closed systems. They are, however, as I already said, "open and meaningful 'form-shaping' principles, subject to historical change and modification. New genres may emerge, and old genres may die and be reborn" (Børtnes, 2007, p. 197). Thus, genres are changeable, and Jones may reflect this in his novel, by "mocking" the genre that it is expected from him to write within. Bakhtin (1986) says that the author is "captive of his epoch, of his own present" (p. 5). Jones appears to be highly conscious of his own epoch, as he is able to present the old world of the South and the institution of slavery in the somewhat

unorthodox way he does in *The Known World* – he represents it through the eyes of our contemporary culture:

In the realm of culture, outsideness is a most powerful factor in understanding. It is only in the eyes of *another* culture that foreign culture reveals itself fully and profoundly (but not maximally fully, because there will be cultures that see and understand even more). (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 7, original italics).

This is transferrable to the novel because the culture of slavery in the ante-bellum American South is now a foreign culture to the readers. Thus, that culture can now more fully reveal itself unto us because it is entirely different from what we know today: The distance from that epoch is now great enough. However, as Bakhtin points out, there will be other cultures, perhaps when the time-gap is even greater, that will see and understand that particular period in time differently, and perhaps even more knowingly than we do today. Thus, “[e]very single literary work ought to be recognised as a unique aesthetic utterance, carrying its own unique aesthetic meaning” (Børtnes, 2007, p. 195), and not be generalised in a specific genre.

Seitel also discusses Bakhtin’s use of the speech genres, and how there are certain sets of rules they all follow. Although speech genres are in themselves very interesting, it is unfortunately not within the scope of this thesis to explore them any further than what is explained here. For my purposes here it is what Seitel says about genres generally I want to focus on:

[S]peech genres [...] define, refer to, or contain in some way a particular social *world*, or a particular sector of a larger social word. All genres are also *tools* for living in society, chunks of communication that do work, and are designed to do that work [...] Finally, all genres are *frameworks of expectation*, established ways of creating and

understanding that facilitate human interaction and the communication of meaning. (p. 277, original italics)

However, he claims, he has consciously decided to omit the taxonomic feature of the genres, because it “seems to inherently to lead away from the goal of a critical approach to individual works” (ibid). Nevertheless, Seitel also claims that the exception is when a single work can

be named by contrasting taxonomic terms depending on the speaker’s or listener’s intent. [...] [A]ttention to the systematic differences between each performance or instantiation of the work – in stylistic or other adaptations to different social contexts or in generic expectations about the hierarchy of expressed themes – may provide critical insight into both the genres and the individual works. (ibid)

In my reading of this *The Known World* appears to fit perfectly. The novel is one of the works where taxonomy and comparison may provide a fuller critical insight into the genre it supposedly belongs to and also into the work itself. Taxonomy, in this case defined classes of abstract categories, has lead literary scholars to “turn away from the treasure of literary art, reiterating the old idea that certain groups of individual works share a stable generic essence, and that by abstracting these essences from the actual text we are able to define their generic belonging” (Børtnes, 2007, p. 193). I therefore also agree with Børtnes that taxonomy keeps us from discovering the full potential in literary works, because of the tendency to classify works within genres may disrupt our full reading of the potential meaning of the work.

However, I also agree with Seitel’s statement that in some cases, for instance in this thesis, taxonomy is necessary in order to fully understand and appreciate the complexity of the novel by seeing that nothing is the way we *think* it is. Also, as Børtnes claims, “[t]he ‘form-shaping ideology’ of any reasonably complex genre is [...] never reducible to a system, a set of rules or immanent laws” (Børtnes, 2007, p. 195). This underlines the concern in this

thesis, that placing a novel within a specific world, a specific genre, is not necessarily the most rewarding exercise, and that a more open reading of both this novel and genre in general may be more yielding.

How we tend to catalogue and classify works often depends on our expectations: Since Jones is an African American, with the legacy that entails, and writing a novel whose setting and focus is what it is, the audience and critics expect and assume his work to be labelled as a neo-slave narrative. Novels, and not just Jones', but novels in general, as individual works are often in danger of being bereft of their individuality and their individual power to mean independently of shared frameworks, as the genres they supposedly pertain to are "frameworks of expectations". Adena Rosmarin observes that

genre is the critic's heuristic tool, his chosen or defined way of persuading his audience to see the literary text in all its previously inexplicable and 'literary' fullness and then to relate this text to those that are similar to or, more precisely, to those that may be similarly explained. (Rosmarin quoted in Seitel, p. 275).

Jones uses his text to make the readers challenge themselves and their borders. As for other texts that are "similar to" or can be "similarly explained", it is impossible for me to claim that *The Known World* is "unique" and "one of a kind." Seitel writes that, "[a] generic work evokes a characteristic world to an audience and then may enrich that portrayal by including other worlds within itself. The world contained is subordinated to the containing work, supporting the latter's development with relevant features" (p. 280). In *The Known World*, there are many worlds revealed unto us, such as Alice's, Henry's, Moses' or Caldonia's, and many of the worlds presented consist of fragmented stories that never quite come together.

However, through the worlds and the characters presented in the novel, it is as if Jones tries to remove the spotlight from specifics of the genre and make it more universal, essentially trying to erase the notions of the genre. This is evidenced for instance through

Henry: By making him a black slave-owner, Jones puts the focus on slavery itself, and the fact that humans own humans, and not that whites own blacks. Thus, it is as if the novel tries to tear down the tradition of genre and our tradition of classifying other works into the specificities of these genres.

This sense of universalising applies to Alice's maps as well: Although they perhaps mainly serves as a representation for Alice's past on the Townsend plantation, they are at the same time memories of the past in the present and future. The past will always be present in her maps, and it is the same with genres: At the same time as *The Known World* is not a neo-slave narrative, the legacy of that genre will always be present because it "remembers" its roots. With Bakhtin's theory in mind, then, it is unavoidable that *The Known World* would not contain traces of the neo-slave *and* the slave narrative genre, simply because that is its heritage. However, the novel, rather than representing its genre, exploits its time, space and causality to evolve into its own.





## Conclusion

I find myself constantly returning to the maps of Alice as I discuss and read about genre and *The Known World*. The spatial relations I mentioned in the previous chapter tie the past, the present, and the future together, and they all come together in her maps. In a sense, they become the very symbol of the “known” in *The Known World*, if not a symbol of the entire novel itself. As Skiffington refuses help from Broussard to get a new and more modern map in his office, Jones writes that it was *Hans Waldseemüller* that had made his current map. However, as I also pointed out in chapter two, the real name of the cartographer is Martin. Why would Jones change that simple fact? I regard it impossible for Jones to be oblivious to the real name, when all the other census information and references to laws et cetera in the novel, though fictional, are well within the range of actual historically correct numbers. This cannot be coincidental, and I think that even a small detail such as this, however insignificant, underscores what I am trying to argue – that Jones challenges what we *think* we know.

I want to briefly return to the end of the previous chapter and how the novel tries to universalise genres, because I think Børtnes’ following quote neatly summarises what I try to explain regarding this:

Genres are treasure-troves of potential meaning inherited from the past and by the artist’s creative activity brought over into the future to be liberated from the text by the creative understanding of new generations who will read the works from their points of view and in different contexts. (p. 197)

Thus, with Bakhtin’s theories of how a genre remembers its past and the “outsidedness” of culture, this quote serves as a significant reminder that genres are constantly evolving and developing. I here remind the reader of Foucault and how, as I suggested in the previous

chapter, both the maps *and* the novel aspire to “the will to enclose in one space all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes, the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time” (p. 7). In my reading, *The Known World* encloses all times and epochs, forms and tastes through its characters (for instance Moses and his tasting of the dirt), Alice’s maps and its fragmented timeline (expanding from the sixteenth century up to the twentieth). Thus, by constantly challenging us as readers to look beyond the expectations of genre, *The Known World* is no longer trapped within one kind of knowledge.

A peculiar feature in the work is how Alice’s act of insanity becomes the way to freedom as opposed to happening through education and religion, and as such, this is also a way of challenging the reader’s views on what one thinks one knows. It seems that every character in the novel accepts Alice’s madness without batting an eye, even if Moses gets suspicious of her eventually. What does Jones want to imply by claiming that education is not the way to freedom, but that discovering new knowledge and experience, learning to know the world even better than one already does, is the better way? In confronting his readers in this manner, I think it is possible to suggest that Jones creates a world in which everything and everyone can be questioned or doubted, effectively mocking the certainty of assumptions and expectations.

How we as readers of the novel are challenged to open our minds and rethink our knowledge, has served as a sort of alarm, at least on my part: Instead of conforming to a set conventions it is important to be able to think for oneself. Thus it is important to never stop seeking new knowledge: “[T]here was the promise of glory and remembrance and the adoration of a public hungry for the real truth of America” (357). Thus, the “known world” as we think we know it may not be as known as we think or imagine it to be, neither in *The Known World* nor in our “own” world.

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