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Past into Present and Back : A (Mis)Use of the Southern History in Edward P. Jones' "The Known World"

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**PAST INTO PRESENT AND BACK:
A (MIS)USE OF THE SOUTHERN HISTORY
IN EDWARD P. JONES'S *THE KNOWN WORLD***

“The conviction that there exist solid facts, objective and independent of historical interpretation is a common illusion, and a difficult one to eliminate” wrote E.H. Carr in his series of lectures entitled *What is history*¹. Although the book, published as early as 1964, inspired other theoretical sources to clearly show the relationships which bind history to culture and how complicated they are², there is still an emphasis on authenticity and accuracy as the keys to “true” history rather than on understanding that our only contemporary access to history is through the stories we tell about it³. This is because discerning the “real” facts of history without filtering them through many past, present, even future

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¹ Quoted after E. Baldwin, B. Longhurst, S. McCracken, M. Ogborn, G. Smith: *Wstęp do kulturoznawstwa*. Poznań 2004, p. 225. Translation mine.

² For a discussion of New Historicism and its theoreticians see e.g. A. Burzyńska, M.P. Markowski: *Teorie literatury XX wieku*. Kraków 2006, p. 497–513; M. Wilczyński: *Badania literackie w latach osiemdziesiątych i dziewięćdziesiątych. „Nowy Historycyzm”, spory o kanon literatury amerykańskiej, perspektywa postkolonialna*. In: *Historia literatury amerykańskiej XX wieku*, t. II. Ed. A. Salska. Kraków 2003, p. 741–750.

³ For an interesting discussion of this problem see T. McPherson: *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender and Nostalgia in the Imagined South*. Durham–London 2003, p. 101–105.

sensibilities primarily allows to “grip” the past as if it were – to quote culture critic Susan Steward – a “souvenir”⁴, and thus, to sentimentalize it. This sentimentalization, in turn, helps in propounding the past as a prelapsarian state which, as a part of the untroubled present to be moved forward towards a bright future, therefore contributes to an understanding of history as a monument to memory that subsumes all except the sense of experiencing the sacred. In effect, instead of investigating the ways in which different past events produce meaning today, so understood history only reproduces clichéd emotions that thus also become the memory’s sole mental legacy.

With reference to the southern historical context that this paper concentrates on, the role of such a mental legacy has undoubtedly been ascribed to slavery. This is visible in the fact that there seems to exist no account of even the contemporary southern history that would not touch upon, address or overtly discuss southern issues within the context of the “peculiar institution”, as slavery is still referred to⁵. Moreover, all these accounts, by deconstructing the institution’s appearance of a “family, white and black” – which is frequently realized via resorting to the archetypal image of the cruel white master and the noble slave yearning for freedom – leave no doubt about slavery’s outcome, namely, that it was all southerners’ horror⁶. Finally, such a collective feeling of horror, by becoming, via history as an element of cultural narration, a tangible part of also non-historical southern discourses is thus suggested as the southern culture’s emotional keepsake that in the end contributes to defining the South in terms of its fascination with the “familial”. Consequently, the “familial” horrors of slavery playing the part of the region’s most sought-after cultural “collectible” – as is evidenced for example by the large amount of fiction (by southern and non-southern writers) tackling this subject – therefore attests to the “peculiar institution” as not only the South’s but all America’s very precious mental legacy⁷.

In view of the above, the 2003 publication of Edward P. Jones’s novel entitled *The Known World* that challenges slavery’s sacred status of the American infa-

⁴ S. Steward: *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. Durham 1993, p. 135.

⁵ See e.g. D. Goldfield: *Still Fighting the Civil War: the American South and Southern History*. Baton Rouge 2002.

⁶ See e.g. N.I. Painter: *Southern History Across the Color Line*. Chapel Hill–London 2002.

⁷ Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* for which the writer was awarded the Nobel prize is probably the best evidence of this.

mous heritage seems to be primarily a historical breakthrough. This is because although Jones presents the fictional antebellum southern community of Manchester, Virginia (that, typically for the pre-Civil War South, consists of slaves and freemen) as a universal context where all humans fit in, he achieves this effect primarily by providing the reader with fake, albeit historically founded⁸, statistics of Manchester County:

The 1840 U.S. census contained an enormous amount of facts, far more than the one done by the alcoholic state delegate in 1830, and all of the 1840 facts pointed to the one big fact that Manchester was then the largest county in Virginia, a place of 2, 191 slaves, 142 free Negroes, 939 whites, and 136 Indians, most of them Cherokee but with a sprinkling of Choctaw. A well-liked and fastidious tanner, who doubled as the U.S. marshal and who had lost three fingers to frostbite, carried out the 1840 census in seven and a half summer weeks. It should have taken him less time but he had plenty of trouble, starting with people like Harvey Travis who wanted to make sure his own children were counted as white, though all the world knew his wife was a full-blooded Cherokee. Travis even called his children niggers and filthy half-breeds when they and that world got too much for him...(22)⁹.

Supported with their creators' back stories including these people's own fates, lives, deaths and legacies that in turn develop into still other people's stories frequently embracing far more than the southern antebellum context (in terms of both time and space), Jones-created statistics – a tool believed to be used for specific scholarly purposes – therefore allow for this slavery-limited context to become universal. Consequently, they also suggests slavery as an “ordinary”

⁸ In the interview with Robert Birnbaum, Jones explains this as follows: „...this is a real county. I just gave it a different name... I was going down to Lynchburg (VA) to visit a friend of mine and use his county as a setting for the novel. I was going to call whatever his county is Lynchburg County or something. But I never got around to visiting him. So I had to create my own place. In doing that I was sort of freed [up], because had I used his county I would have had to know every single thing there is to know about that place in case someone came along and said, “Well, you got this fact wrong”. But if I created my own Manchester County I can say the U.S. Census in 1840 said this many people, and this many people. I can say these three people in the 20th century wrote these history books about this county and they said this, that and the other”. *Edward Jones. Author of The Known World converses with Robert Birnbaum.* <http://www.identitytheory.com>. Accessed September 20, 2008.

⁹ All the quotations from *The Known World* that his paper uses come from the following edition of the book: E.P. Jones: *The Known World*. New York 2004.

rather than sacred phenomenon and thus an organizing principle of the world which, as Jones rightly claims, is well “known” to all people.

Such a familiar understanding of slavery Jones identifies, in turn, with people’s universally serving the idea of mastery itself. In *The Known World*, this is demonstrated, however, by yet another historically grounded but little-known fact that the book makes a major use of, namely, that in the years before the Civil War there existed in the South a class of black slaveowners¹⁰. Accordingly, the narrative of *The Known World* is introduced by the story of Henry Townsend, who, born into slavery on the plantation of white William Robbins (whose lifestyle he adores) and bought to freedom by his father (which fact he accepts only very reluctantly), dies as a black master of thirty three slaves. Henry’s ultimate status as a slaveowner, representative in turn for what Jones later develops into the motif of an entire “free Negro class that, while not having the power of some whites, had been brought up to believe that they were rulers waiting in the wings” (5) is thus central to the further construction of *The Known World* not only in that it suggests mastery as an idea underwriting slavery in general. Since Henry’s death – apart from foreshadowing the motif of the class of black slaves – initiates an avalanche of events which actually affect each and every citizen of Manchester County, this death – the death of a black slavemaster – therefore also attests to the death of the idea of mastery that American history used in order to define it as only a white, elite and male anomaly.

The anomalous, in turn, for an individual, consequences of believing mastery is the privilege of the elect is best demonstrated via Jones’ rendition of the character of Moses, Henry’s first slave. Purchased from William Robbins for the purpose of helping the young Townsend build the house in which he eventually lived with his wife Caldonia, Moses, who later on becomes Henry’s overseer, remains throughout the book incapable of understanding:

that someone wasn’t indeed fiddling with him and that indeed a black man, two shades darker than himself, owned him and any shadow he made... it was already a strange world that made him a slave to a white man, but God had indeed set it twirling and twisting every which way when he put black people to owning their own kind. Was God even up there attending to business anymore? (125).

¹⁰ See e.g. L. Schweninger: *Black Property Owners in the South 1790–1915*. Urbana–Chicago 1997, p. 61–141.

The inability to accept mastery as symptomatic of human nature and therefore also his own rather than accepting it, as the quotation suggests, as a manifestation of some God-granted, fixed order of things causes Moses to feel insecure and thus to seek ways of freeing himself from this feeling.

Accordingly, before Henry dies, Moses who during the day is a very strict, even cruel overseer to his fellow slaves, goes alone at night to the nearby forest so as to eat “dirt” (1), for he feels this is the “only thing in his small world that meant almost as much as his own life” (2). This does not change even after the death of his master, when Moses becomes the lover of his widow in the conviction that the attachment to a representative of the masterclass will guarantee him freedom from the insecurity that makes his life “dirty”. Determined to marry Caldonia so as to get rid of this feeling, Moses even effectively arranges for the escape of his own family from the plantation. When Caldonia refuses to manumit and marry him, Moses, free now from his own family attachment, eventually breaks his ties also with his “family, white and black” and flees from the plantation that he once helped establish. Hiding in the nearby house of a free black woman only to be accidentally found there by the sheriff’s white deputy who is looking for somebody else, Moses ends up with his Achilles tendon sliced through. Thus hobbled for the rest of his life at the moment he thought he was finally the master of this life, the character of Moses suggests that identifying, as American history used to teach us, mastery with individual freedom is a lame idea, too.

None of Jones’ characters populating *The Known World* exemplifies this idea better than Augustus Townsend, the father of Henry the black slaveowner. A carpenter who bought his own freedom with money earned from his carvings and furniture, Augustus is a figure apparently epitomizing another great historical truth, namely, that slavery can be overcome by work. This is primarily because, having literally carved through dependence towards the status of master of his own life, Augustus does not consider such a status a laurel to rest on. Not only does he, as a free man, carve on so that, after a time he is capable of buying first his wife and then his son out of slavery, but these carvings, ornamenting his very renowned furniture that he sends or delivers in person in and outside Manchester County, also bring freedom to Rita, Henry’s foster mother on Robbins’ plantation, as they help her escape the South.

Thus using, for years, his work for doing both what, in his own words, “[he] got a right to do” (212), and what, in the words of one of his white clients, makes others happy, Augustus is stopped one night while returning from one of his

delivery trips by white patrollers for a routine control of his “free” papers. Bored and with nothing else to do on this particular night, the white men, all Augustus’ neighbours, eat his papers only to sell the carpenter himself afterwards to the illegal slave traders passing by. Taken as far away from Virginia as “Georgia near the Florida line” (346)¹¹ – where he is eventually purchased by a poor white man who can hardly afford a “nigger” but who buys him because he “just wanna feed [his] family” (345) – Augustus dies there, shot by his new master, as soon as he refuses to be his slave (which happens right after he steps down from the traders’ wagon). In this way, Augustus becomes an ironic illustration of yet another historically proven “truth”, namely, that work, while liberating people, should simultaneously make them happy.

These miserable rather than positive effects of pursuing happiness as one’s inalienable right and hence also a guarantee of progress can best be demonstrated via the example of Fern Elston, a free black woman and teacher of free black children. On the surface, as a descendant of a family whose motto: “human beings should never go back. They should always go forward” (74) encouraged her to become educated in order to help others venture beyond the “known world”, Fern seems to be progress incarnated. This general “progressive” spirit of Fern is further confirmed by the fact that, although as white as any white person, Fern Elston, unlike the rest of her equally “whitened” family, “had never been one to suffer white people” (107), a condition that, as Jones puts it, “had only worsened over time” (107). As a result, despite her mother warning her to “marry nothing beneath [her]” (74), Fern chooses to become the wife of a man whose skin colour is evidently darker than hers because she loves him. She also resolves, again unlike her kin, to stay with him in Manchester County, for outside it she who could easily pass as white “might have gotten her husband killed” (130), thereby demonstrating that her happiness is what she is after.

Yet, when realized in such a “domestic” context, Fern’s “happy” love for Raymond Elston, instead of progressing, only funnels Fern’s former mental and emotional independence into a mere sense of duty. This means that once becoming a wife of a gambler, as it turns out soon after she marries Raymond, Fern does nothing about her husband’s “slowly gambling away their little fortune” (74) except watch it happen and hope for her “whitened” family to keep sending

¹¹ This place being historically referred to as the “Deep South:” the part of the South that all slaves were threatened to be sent to when misbehaving also means that, ironically, freeman Augustus ends up in square one, the place that he worked so hard all his life to avoid.

her money. Additionally, left to herself for the long weeks Raymond needs to go gambling, Fern, the woman whom Jones describes as unable to “wait for her husband at the window” (132) organizes her life solely around dinner parties that she gives every fortnight to her friends. These friends, all Fern’s former students whom she hosts out of shortage of other company that she would consider worth passing the time with, thus clearly attest to the fact that Fern’s identity as a pursuer of happiness is not so progressive at all, for actually realizing the only potential white elite southern women, or southern ladies were allowed to ever realize: of the teacher. As such, Fern’s identity – much as the white identity that she so despises – hinges on the notion of being, rightly or not, given and denied credits, rightly or not. In consequence, it also suggests her fate, the fate of the Teacher, as she wants to have her grave marked (“that before all else, even my own name” (141)), follows along the standardized rather than “happy” line¹².

That standardization, on which all women’s history is founded can be synonymous with historical victimization becomes visible via the life of Barnum Kinsay whose character Jones creates for the sake of representing the class of southern antebellum “white trash”. Being a county slave patroller earning eight dollars a month and an owner of some land, Barnum’s status as the poorest of white men inhabiting his fictional Manchester County, or rather, his inability to use his assets so as to feed his very large family results from the fact that he is a heavy drinker. Although Barnum’s previous experience makes him aware that his drinking is a question of his decision: “he knew... that if he could survive the fourth – maybe even the fifth – week without drinking, he could move through the rest of the year without the craving that had often seized him in those first weeks” (210), he prefers to put the blame for this on some mysterious curse that runs along the male line in his family:

His grandfather, who had also been a drinker, had died in the winter, gone out for a drink and froze to death on the fourth-coldest night of that winter. Barnum’s father had not been a drinker, so Barnum had been thinking for a long time that the curse tended to skip generations, for no one of his sons from his first marriage showed a need for the stuff. The boys from the second marriage had yet to smell themselves so drink wasn’t yet a problem. As for the women through the generations in his family, the curse had avoided all of

¹² That is why Fern also wants the markers: “Mother” and “Wife” (“ ‘Dutiful Wife’ if [chiseler] can manage it” (141)) to follow that of the “Teacher”.

them, and they moved through the world unsoiled, their minds clear without a need for a challenge every winter God sent (210).

Such a perspective, a perspective of a victim of external forces over which he has little control, limits Barnum's possibilities of coping with his addiction – and suggestively, with what he perceives as his white trash fate – to mere crying and praying for it to end, which, on the whole, makes him and his like, in the eyes of the world, “little more than a nigger”(76). This status, in turn, particularly in the happy periods when God seems to answer his prayers and allows Barnum to take control of his addiction (and so, to do his work as a patrolman decently) makes him vulnerable to accusations of “takin the nigger side against the white man” (217), working through which label pushes Barnum into another drinking spree. Thus unable to productively solve his identity problem which also makes him socially insignificant, Barnum with his family eventually leaves Virginia for Missouri, thereby, typically, escaping what history suggests as a synonym for unchangeability for the sake of what stands for an epitome of compromise. It is no wonder then, that he dies on the way to freedom and the fact that his own son buries him under a tombstone with many labels carved on it and only periods to divide them: “Husband. Father. Farmer. Grandfather. Patroller. Tobacco Man. Tree Maker” (375) additionally suggests the reason why he dies: because, regardless of his place of abode, Barnum would have existed only as a set of nouns with no verb puling them all together into one meaningful creation.

Such incomplete human existence being, as Barnum and his family history indicate, due to the way the world functions, that is, by the rule of the label, thus suggests there is a map charted; a map that represents all of this world's historically defined, or “known” aspects in such a way that they do not allow people to feel at ease with their own lives. This map could be the one that is hanging on the county jail's wall and is a possession of John Skiffington, sheriff of Manchester County. Composed of twelve parts, each weighing three pounds, this map, created by a German who “lived in France three centuries ago” (174) and entitled *The Known World*, shows America at the time this word had ever been put on a map. It is the land “...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). Consequently, because Skiffington's map (which he still uses), a metaphorical representation of the new world, furthers this world as a mere image of a place

enslaved in time and space, it also confirms the popular understanding of slavery as a mental souvenir left by history that can be fascinating and even creative, but only to the point of reproducing its incomplete labels.

There is, however, another map depicted in the book that is hanging on the wall of a multiethnic hotel in Washington. Jones refers to it, via the words of Caldonia's twin brother, Calvin as both a "kind of map of life of the County of Manchester, Virginia" (384) and a "grand piece of art that is part tapestry, part painting, and part clay structure – all in one exquisite Creation" (384). It seems to represent a bird's eye view of Jones' known world, and consequently, of slavery itself. This is the view embracing "no people... just all the houses and barns and roads and cemeteries and wells... It is what God sees when He looks down on Manchester" (384). Opposite it hangs another Creation: a sort of a worm's eye view of Manchester County concentrating on all the possible details of Henry Townsend's plantation, which might be metaphorically understood as a micro-cosmic representation of slavery. In this microcosm "there is nothing missing, not a cabin, not a barn, nor a chicken, not a horse. Not a single person is missing... The dead in the cemetery have risen from there and they, too, stand at the cabins where they once lived" (385).

Put together, these two maps seem to suggest slavery: the organizing principle of our "known world" as a primarily creative phenomenon that thus does not claim to be representative of some essentially uniform entity but is instead a medley of many identities. What is more, these identities, while differently structured and yet related, at the same time are more than this; an exchange is taking place among them that in the end also transforms their nature and in the long run, the nature of slavery they underwrite. In so doing, they echo the identity of their creator, in this case Alice Night, the former Townsend plantation slave considered insane whom overseer Moses sends away to freedom together with his wife and son, and who, at present, along with her two runaway friends, co-owns the hotel in question. Posited at the end of the story whose plot and main character, due to the many layers and people it embraces, it is impossible to define, Alice, therefore as well as what she represents: insanity turned inspiration becomes the clearest possible demonstration that the novel's centre is the slavery no longer understood as America's all people's familiar "horror" but as a vast and complex artifact.

Keywords: *slavery, history, democracy, identity, South, performativeness*

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Summary

The article aims at demonstrating how the South's major narrative: slavery can be contemporarily used so that it no longer has the status of a rigid historical paradigm and becomes instead a campy, or else, culturally "masqueraded", space. The author claims that the major contemporary function of the so understood southern slavery is the advancement of the region it represents as a complex cultural artifact whose nature is primarily subversive. The author attempts to substantiate this thesis by analyzing the book by a contemporary Afro-American writer Edward P. Jones entitled *The Known World* (2003). This 2004 Pulitzer Prize winning novel introduces the story of the southern antebellum slavery from the point of view of a black slaveowner only to undermine the idea of mastery as only white anomaly. In consequence, so construed a narration compels readers to also reconsider other "inalienable rights" which the idea of mastery entails, individual freedom, pursuit of happiness, or clearly defined identity among them.

Translated by Sylwester Jaworski

**TAM I Z POWROTEM PRZEZ CZAS. (NAD)UŻYCIE HISTORII POŁUDNIA
W POWIEŚCI EDWARDA P. JONES'A PT. *ZNANY ŚWIAT***

Streszczenie

Ideą artykułu jest zaprezentowanie, jak niewolnictwo – główny „wątek narracyjny” amerykańskiego Południa i jednocześnie niepodważalny, „sztywno” zdefiniowany fakt historyczny – może stać się współcześnie przestrzenią kampową, a więc i swoistą kulturową „maskaradą”. Autorka wysuwa tezę, iż główną funkcją tak rozumianej idei niewolnictwa jest potrzeba ukazania amerykańskiego Południa wczoraj i dziś jako w pierwszym rzędzie niejednoznacznego kulturowego artefaktu. Tezę tę autorka udowadnia analizując książkę pt. *The Known World (Znany świat)* napisaną w roku 2003 przez afroamerykańskiego pisarza Edwarda Jonesa. Powieść, która jest finalistą Nagrody Pulitzera z roku 2004, otwiera wątek czarnego właściciela niewolników. Tym samym *Znany świat* podważa ideę władzy jako wyłącznie biały „stan posiadania”.

W konsekwencji, wątek ten prowadzi do zrewidowania poglądów czytelnika na wszystkie „niezbywalne prawa”, jakie amerykańska konstytucja łączy ze stanem posiadania, a do których należą, między innymi, prawo do potwierdzania się jako jednostka, do poszukiwania szczęścia czy do samookreślenia.