

Religious Satire and Narrative Ambiguity in *The Known World*

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Edward P. Jones's 2004 Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Known World*, explores the troubling historical phenomenon of freed blacks owning slaves in antebellum America. Jones takes what is already a sensitive subject and further problematizes it by intermingling fictional and historical records, as well as displacing the chronology of events and character outcomes. This chaos proves calculated for the narrative voice to achieve a disorienting reading experience. Jones commented upon the non-linear structure of the novel in a 2004 interview: "It might be that because I, as the 'god' of the people in the book, could see their first days and their last days and all that was in between, and those people did not have linear lives as I saw all that they had lived" (4). Here Jones is referring to the literary concept of narrative omniscience, a frequently employed analogy that conceives of the author (and by extension, his narrative persona) as god-like in his knowledge of everything in the fictional world. When encountering what appears to be an omniscient narrator, readers have a tendency to trust the account as both authoritative and reliable. Yet we might pause to consider the relationship between knowledge and morality in an omniscient narrator, and whether these two attributes might conflict with one another. What if an omniscient narrator endorses slavery as a legitimate social practice?

The proleptic narrative voice in *The Known World* unsettles the reader with ambiguous religious and moral sentiments. Despite blunt parenthetical pronouncements regarding characters' destinies (success, death, etc.), random details from the past, and knowledge of incorrect census data caused by simple mathematical errors, the narrator expresses suspect religious views and reports anomalous supernatural occurrences that problematize the concept of narrative omniscience. My essay does not conflate the narrator with the author; therefore, my discussion will focus primarily on how the narrative persona expresses knowledge and makes value judgments along the way. Privileging the narrator with godlike attributes, as we shall see, proves problematic as the story unfolds. By discarding the concept of omniscience, my essay

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will demonstrate how the religious ambiguity functions satirically as a critique of Southern Christianity's sanctification of slavery and racial injustice. Through narrative ambiguity, Jones simultaneously indulges and exposes a worldview that sees no tension between Christianity and slavery.

Discussions of narrative omniscience often center on questions of moral authority. Narrative omniscience, largely understood to be a nineteenth-century convention prevalent in Victorian novels, privileged authors with a moral and cultural authority that they asserted on their public readership. Indeed, J. Hillis Miller's 1966 monograph, *The Form of Victorian Fiction*, considers narrative omniscience the determining principle of nineteenth-century English fiction (63). Paul Dawson argues that the recent resurgence of narrative omniscience in contemporary fiction serves as a literary reclamation of cultural authority among authors, which has eroded due to current demotic trends, such as the Internet, social media, and reality television. With the public no longer seeking moral guidance from literature, such a movement, in Dawson's view, betrays an anxiety contemporary authors feel as they seek to reassert themselves as public intellectuals in the new millennium (150).

However, narrative omniscience in the aftermath of postmodernism can no longer lay the same claims to authority in contemporary fiction. Contemporary novels that employ narrative omniscience often use the mode as a site of interrogation, to question the integrity and objectivity of the historical record and to place greater emphasis on the imagination and subjectivity. Yet, as Dawson points out, contemporary omniscience, even in the shadows of its postmodern lineage, pursues its reclamation through modes that differ from its traditional predecessor. One of the contemporary modes Dawson illuminates, *the ironic moralist*, proves relevant to our understanding of narrative omniscience in *The Known World*. According to Dawson, the ironic moralist "grapples self-reflexively with the legacy of the 'universalising' moral authority of classic omniscience, and it does so in the shadow of metafiction" (152). However, this modification to narrative omniscience falls short in accounting for Jones's problematic narrator who lacks self-reflexivity. Another mode, *the literary historian*, plays with "the authority of historical record and the possibilities of imaginatively recovering private or occluded moments in history opened up by postmodern theory"; Dawson categorizes *The Known World* in this elevation of literary imagination to augment the historical record (153). This essay will attempt to show that while these characteristics of elevating the imagination in the historical account are valid for the novel, they do not necessitate such modal categories of narrative omniscience. In

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addition, my essay will show how Jones's formal innovations are characteristic of neo-slave narratives that emerged in African American literature after the 1960s.

Set in the fictional Manchester County, Virginia, in 1855, *The Known World* revolves around Henry Townsend, a thirty-one-year-old slave owner whose plantation is plunged into chaos upon his early death. Henry's father, Augustus, was a former slave who bought his own freedom by selling carpentry work; in time, Augustus saved enough money to purchase his wife and son out of slavery. Yet the time that elapses between purchasing Augustus's wife and his son Henry proves formative for the latter whose apprenticeship under the most powerful white slave owner in Manchester County, William Robbins, leads to Henry's fateful decision to purchase slaves of his own against his father's wishes, initiating the central drama of the novel. With the belief that slavery is divinely sanctioned, Henry seeks to be a superior master to any white slave owner, as he eventually owns thirty-three slaves and more than fifty acres of land. Along with his wife, Caldonia, a black woman born free and educated in Washington D.C., Henry perpetuates the master-slave power structure of the antebellum South.

Early in the novel, the narrator discusses the open-air slave market in the eastern edge town of Manchester County, where "God was generous with his blessings the following fall and each day was perfect for buying and selling slaves, and not a soul said anything about constructing a permanent place, so fine was the roof God himself had provided for the market" (Jones 8). This problematic early passage not only assumes but also seemingly celebrates God's providence in controlling the weather and making his face to shine upon the institution of slavery. The insistence upon God's blessings and provision of the beautiful weather indicates that the narrator sees these things as a divine endorsement of the slave trade.¹

The narrative treatment of characters also proves ambiguous. When asked on his deathbed whether he would like Milton or Scripture read to him, Henry remarks, "the Bible suits me better in the day, when there's sun and I can see what all God gave me" (6). God's most generous gifts to Henry are the commodities of black slaves. One such slave, Elias, makes the mistake of fleeing Henry's plantation. Henry has part of Elias's ear cut off after authorities, notoriously vigilant in protecting the property rights of slave owners, apprehend him. Chained in a barn to stew over a revenge he would enact upon Henry's entire plantation, Elias believes confidently that he can snap the necks of screaming women because "God, being the kind of God he was, would give him strength" (86). Moffett, an itinerant plantation preacher who commits adultery with his wife's sister, palliates his conscience with the biblical

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models of God's beloved kings who had affairs, multiple wives, and concubines. "Did God deny David and Solomon any less?" observes the narrator through free indirect discourse. Since God did not deny nor condemn David and Solomon—men after God's own heart—Moffett knows he has plenty of time to pray and ask forgiveness (92). The narrator also informs us that "God's gift" to Ramsey Eaton, the compulsive gambler and husband to Fern, "was easiness with lies" (254).

The narrator further reveals a troubling rhetorical manipulation among the slave owners, as the phrase "slave uprisings" is reframed as "family squabbles" (148). The narrator makes an important observation about black slaves and their religious perspective: "The God of that Bible, being who he was, never gave a slave a good day without wanting something big in return" (337). Yet only Moses, Henry's first slave purchase, appears to wrestle with religious doubts, as the indirect discourse muses "that it was already a strange world that made him a slave to a white man, but God had indeed set it twirling and twisting every which way when he put black people to owning their own kind. Was God even up there attending to business anymore?" (9). As for the seemingly anomalous concept of a recently freed black man owning slaves of his own race, the narrator remarks that it is a "strange thing for many in that world," only to dismiss the idea with a fatalistic tone: "no matter what, though, the sun would come up on them tomorrow, followed by the moon, and dogs would chase their own tails and the sky would remain just out of reach" (61). Sarah Mahurin Mutter observes how this use of narrative understatement shocks readers by treating black slave owners as an unremarkable reality. While Henry Townsend's active participation in the slaveholding system after receiving his own freedom is strange and ironic enough, the powerful narrative force proves even more unsettling through its refusal to distinguish Henry from the white slave owners (Mutter 135-136).

As the novel unfolds, the reader can detect similarities between the narrative voice and those characters that possess authority in a slaveholding society. The nefarious relationship between religion and the known world of slavery is conspicuously verbalized through the rich and powerful William Robbins. In one of his mentoring conversations with Henry, Robbins prescribes a troubling theology: "God is in his heaven and he don't care most of the time. The trick of life is to know when God does care and do all you need to do behind his back" (Jones 140). When his slave mistress Philomena threatens to flee to Richmond with her "free papers," Robbins asserts the cynical truth about the pliable nature of religion and morality in a world of slavery: "He told her that in a world where people believed in a God they could not see and pretended the wind was his voice, paper meant nothing, that it had

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only the power that he, Robbins, would give it" (141). Robbins's ominous threat actually comes to fruition for Henry's father, Augustus, another of Robbins's former slaves who purchased his own freedom. Augustus frequently shows his free papers to the white patrollers in Manchester County as an authorization of his livelihood and self-determination. In the most disturbing scene of the novel, patrolman Harvey Travis declares to Augustus, "you ain't free less me and the law say you free" (211). Travis enacts total racial domination by tearing and eating Augustus's free papers, selling him and his mule for \$100 to the circuitous slave thief Darcy, and culminating the evil act by consuming Augustus's wagon in flames; Travis sadistically waits around for hours to watch the final embers burn away, only to kick dirt over all that remains of Augustus's life of freedom. In lieu of an absent God, the slave master and patrolmen authorize truth and morality as they see fit.

The narrator consistently employs biblical rhetoric to frame the relationship between master and slave in southern society. When Henry Townsend dies, his widow Caldonia perpetuates the perplexing enslavement of her own race, fulfilling the legacy of her mother Maude that involves "slaves and land, the foundation of wealth." Caldonia imagines Henry as an ideal slave-owner, the "shepherd master God had intended"; consequently, Caldonia views Henry as an embodiment of God himself, the "master looking down on them all" from his throne (180). Despite owning, beating, and rationing food to his slaves, Henry functioned as a "middleman" in Caldonia's eyes, an intermediary between his slaves and God. Caldonia rationalizes Henry's abuse of the slaves as simply following the warnings of Scripture that sparing the rod spoils the child (slave). The narrator uses more ambiguous indirect discourse to reveal Caldonia's source of spiritual comfort: "Her husband had done the best he could, and on Judgment Day his slaves would stand before God and testify to that fact" (180).

Following Henry's death, the plantation clamors in expectation about their own destinies: will their master's death dissolve the slave covenant and set them free? Caldonia settles the matter with a front porch speech of quintessential paternalism, and in her mind, assuages their fears of uncertainty: "Please do not worry yourselves. I am here and I will not be going anywhere. And you will be with me. We will be together in all of this. God stands with us. God will give us many days, good and bright days, good and joyful days. Your master had work to do, your master wanted better things for you as well. Please do not worry. God stands with us" (64). Caldonia's speech strikingly resembles the biblical language of God's covenantal reassurances with the people of Israel that are ubiquitous in the Old Testament. The narrator subtly adds that Caldonia's words of comfort came from "something she had

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read in a book, written by a white man in a different time and place” (64).

The narrator’s hermeneutical ease with biblical allusions implies a disturbing syncretism of two distinctly Southern institutions: both slavery and Christianity coexist in relative harmony, as symbolized by the two authoritative books that are continually mentioned throughout the novel. Robbins references both books in an illuminating conversation with Henry about his mother’s date of birth: “I got down the big book last week. Not my Bible. The other book” (140). The “big book” is the master’s ledger that keeps the official, authoritative “history” of his slaves. This “other book” serves to inform humans concerning their identity and place in the known world. All the knowledge and morality necessary to live in Jones’s fictional world can be found in one book or the other.

In dramatizing the moral quandaries of freed slaves becoming masters—largely a footnote in the history of the American South—Jones confronts his readers with a paradoxical world. The most difficult paradox in the novel, however, proves to be the reliability and morality of the narrator relating the very events by which we are to examine the ideological underpinnings of a slaveholding society. In “Morals in Fiction and Fictional Morality,” Kendall Walton explains how he handles the tension between an omniscient narrator’s knowledge and questionable moral sentiments:

I am happy to go along with an “omniscient” narrator who informs me that there are griffins and or fairies or that someone travels in time. But I jealously guard my right to decide questions of virtue and vice for myself, even in a fictional world. It is as though I would be compromising my actual moral principles, should I allow that different moral principles hold in a fictional world. The moral sentiments expressed by narrators are just that, it seems: their own personal moral sentiments. We are free to disagree, even though it is the moral nature of the fictional world, not the real one that is in question. (36)

Yet Walton’s solution to this tension does not prove helpful when we consider additional narrative ambiguities in *The Known World*. What also proves problematic for narrative omniscience are earnest descriptions of events that are scientifically impossible, such as lightning avoiding humans, dead crows flying upside down and being swallowed up by the earth, children spontaneously combusting in flames, cows endlessly supplying milk, humans vaporizing into thin air, and dead

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corpses speaking. These supernatural events provide a striking dissonance with the novel's overall historical and realistic atmosphere.

Jones's use of the fantastic highlights one of the primary aims of neo-slave narratives: to critique the historical representation of slavery. With the emergence of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the 1960s, as well as their subsequent impact upon academic institutions, scholars began to reconsider the history of slavery and its representation. New concerns about the agency of slaves engendered revisions that now focused historical attention "from the bottom up" on forms of resistance, empowerment, and cultural preservation among those of African descent. Rich fictional treatments materialized with the advent of Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966), Ernest Gaines's *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971), and Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* (1975), resulting in formal innovations and experimentations that deviated from antebellum slave narratives by elevating the voice of slaves; as Walker herself noted, a new narrative focus upon "characters looking up from the bottom rather than down from the top" contested historical representations that muted the voices of slaves (64).

Neo-slave narratives elevate the tension between written and oral text to highlight how, in the words of Cornel West, "issues of power, political struggle and cultural identity are inscribed within the formal structures of texts" (41). Whereas the prior written, western accounts served to control definitions of black identity and threaten erasure, the oral African tradition promoted cultural survival and preservation. In this sense, neo-slave narratives deconstruct written text as a manipulative form of administering history and morality. As Ashraf Rushdy observes, the formal innovations of neo-slave narratives enable authors to "experiment with the tension between a literacy that captures and an orality that liberates" (102). This tension functions in a liberating manner, according to A. Timothy Spaulding, as neo-slave narratives aestheticize the act of history writing by employing the supernatural "to claim authority over the history of slavery and the historical record" (2).

An example of supernatural employment as reclamation can be found in Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* (1990), a neo-slave narrative subversively written by the narrator on the slave ship's manifest log: a western textual form representing the commodification and mastery of African slaves becomes a tale celebrating African humanity and freedom. The narrator and protagonist, Rutherford Calhoun, a former slave from southern Illinois, sneaks aboard *The Republic*, a slave ship departing the port of New Orleans, to escape unpaid debts and the bonds of matrimony. Once aboard, Calhoun discovers the vessel is on a mission to collect and sell African slaves from the Allmuseri

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tribe. His culpability crushes him philosophically as he finds himself attracted to the tribe's nobility. In what is mostly a realistic novel in its painstaking details of human frailty and suffering in the face of the chaotic seas, Johnson veers into the realm of the supernatural when it is discovered that the monomaniacal Captain Falcon also captured an African god and brought it aboard the ship as cargo. Human encounters with the god drive them to madness, from a cabin boy aboard the ship to the historical Spanish explorer, Rafael Garcia. Near the end of the novel, after a violent storm and mutiny leads to the Allmuseri taking the helm, Calhoun is commanded to go below deck to feed the god with a rope tied to his waist. As he approaches, Calhoun realizes the shape-shifting god has taken the form of his father who deserted him as a child when they lived on a slave plantation; this encounter leads to an extended meditation on his father, whom Calhoun once despised for abandoning his family but now views more compassionately after seeing how enslavement robbed the Allmuseri people of their power, dignity, and humanity.

Johnson's interjection of supernatural elements in *Middle Passage* seems to achieve two purposes. First, the African god serves as a rupture in an otherwise bleak and violent tale of greed and destruction; the encounter affords Calhoun a moment of transcendence and revelation, which leads to a sense of immanence and understanding that his father, just like the Allmuseri tribe and Calhoun himself, struggled to salvage a sense of identity amidst oppression and enslavement. In a passage worth quoting at length, Johnson underscores the religious interplay between transcendence and immanence that not only transforms Calhoun's understanding, but also transfigures his physical appearance with snow-white hair from his experience with the African god:

A thousand soft undervoices that jumped my jangling senses from his last, weakly syllabled wind to a mosaic of voices within voices, each one immanent in the other, none his but all strangely his, the result being that as the loathsome creature, this deity from the dim beginnings of the black past, folded my father back into the broader shifting field—as waves vanish into water—his breathing blurred in a dissolution of sounds and I could only feel that identity was imagined; I had to listen harder to isolate him from the We that swelled each particle and pore of him, as if the (black) self was the greatest of all fictions; and then I could not find him at all. He seemed everywhere, his presence, and that of countless others, in me

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as well as the chamber, which had subtly changed. Suddenly I knew the god's name: Rutherford. (171)

Calhoun's ecstatic encounter enables him to see beyond the construction of racial identity and to embrace the unity of existence he shares with his father and the Allmuseri tribe. These supernatural elements also underscore the interplay between American and African cultures dramatized in *The Republic's* journey through the Middle Passage. In this sense, Johnson uses the African god and supernatural elements to fuse the narrative with both rational and mystical characteristics. Such experimental blending of brutal realism with the supernatural provides a tension characteristic of neo-slave narratives, such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), in which African mysticism is given equal voice to western empiricism. Jones himself addressed this narrative tension in *The Known World* by claiming the supernatural events were "just another way of telling the story by someone who grew up thinking the universe did weird things all the time" (Jones, "Interview" 5). These comments indicate how the factuality of the narrative events is largely irrelevant; it is only important that narrator believe these events could actually occur—a characteristic that certainly undermines narrative omniscience.

Recent scholarship on *The Known World* largely considers Jones's use of narrative omniscience as a form of deconstruction. Paul Ardoin contends that *The Known World* is a study of open contradiction, exposing systems of thought that inscribe power in the structure and space of the slaveholding South. The narrator models how these contradictions are aesthetically rooted, thus encouraging not only the characters but also the readers to interrogate and deconstruct systems of power and privilege. Ardoin observes how Jones's defiance of linear and temporal boundaries traditional to novels functions as a "formula for an intentional, productive, truthful falsity," exposing the arbitrary nature of time and space (639). In other words, Jones embraces contradiction in order to challenge constructed notions of stability that enable systems of power to flourish; therefore, as Ardoin claims, "Jones's choice to focus on the issue of the black slaveholder, then, is a fitting one for a study in open contradiction and the possible ways to put contradiction to productive work" (641). Maria Seger asserts that Jones intentionally troubles narrative omniscience to implicate the narrator within the structures of power that enabled slaveholding to flourish. Seger also categorizes *The Known World* as a postmodern slave narrative for its "skepticism of language's ability to transmit truth," and its interrogation of historical accuracy among those who appeal to such notions as a source of authority (1184). Jones's blending of historical fact with

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fiction parodies historical discourse as well as the trust readers place in history or historical fiction to convey a sense of truth; hence, Jones's narrative irony disorients his readers from start to finish. Moreover, Jones's troubling of narrative omniscience conveys a truer sense of history by implicating even the reader within the slaveholding power structure. While these readings prove fruitful in correctly identifying Jones's deconstruction of inscribed systems of power, they never consider discarding narrative omniscience despite the problems it poses throughout the novel.

In his aptly titled 2004 essay, "Omniscience," Jonathan Culler scrutinizes the unchallenged notion of the omniscient narrator, claiming that it is no longer a useful or necessary concept in the study of literature. Culler contends that we critics "obfuscate various phenomena that provoke us to posit the idea," invoking divine attributes when more reasonable explanations might be in order; therefore, Culler claims that the analogy of divine omniscience proves incoherent and offers no understanding of the epistemic narrative voice (22). Other critics contend that omniscient narrators differ in what they choose to communicate rather than what they know; some reveal, while others conceal. Meir Sternberg details such an argument by claiming that a narrator's omission of information need not imply a lack of knowledge (683). Culler disagrees by contending that we should never posit a narrator as a god-like entity to describe textual details that seem beyond the consciousness of a single human being. Because we lack positive knowledge of who or what God is, Culler contends that we have no way of knowing what it is like to be omniscient. Culler provides an inverse analogy that proves helpful by asking us to apply it to narrative itself: while the author (and by extension, the narrator) conceives the characters, she remains undetectable to these characters "who exist in the universe of the text this god created" (23).

Culler's analogy may prove helpful for theologians to understand God anthropomorphically by comparing deity to a fiction writer, but it does not provide us with any constructive knowledge in understanding what narrative omniscience actually means. To apply this to *The Known World*, Henry the character does not know Jones the author (nor the seemingly omniscient narrator), much less anything about his god-like attributes. Eschewing omniscience, Culler poses an alternative theory that conceives of narrators as instantiations of social consensus. As critics have observed in many nineteenth-century novels (e.g., George Eliot's *Middlemarch*), what we often call narrative omniscience "is in fact misnamed, that it is rather the voice of a collective subject" (31). Rather than positing "a judgment of the universe from without, from a position of divine authority," Culler argues that narrators "tend to have

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pervasive presence rather than transcendent vision, and to write is to identify with the general consciousness of a community, a collective mind" (31).

Culler's theory appears to work when we consider how Jones's novel concludes with a conspicuous narrative shift when the final chapter commences in the form of a letter. Calvin Newman writes from Washington D.C. to his twin sister and plantation owner, Caldonia. The letter is dated April 12, 1861—the date Confederate troops attacked Fort Sumter in South Carolina—and while no mention is made of the Civil War (perhaps to further insinuate the insulated nature of the characters), Calvin expresses the significance in a sentiment pregnant with meaning: "I take pen in hand to-day to write you not more than a fortnight after I have arrived in a City that will either send me back in defeat to Virginia or will give me more Life than my Soul can contain" (Jones 383). Ironically, Calvin himself makes a Lincoln-esque plea from the nation's capital to his sister that she realize her vulnerable state and morally compromised vocation as a southern plantation owner. Calvin details a chance encounter he had with two runaway slaves from Caldonia's plantation, Priscillia and Alice, in a downtown hotel they own, where Alice's patchwork art displays maps of Manchester County and the Townsend's own plantation. Meeting both and seeing the magnificent artwork evokes guilt and fear in Calvin. Repetition proves significant in his letter, as Calvin repeats the same observation of Alice's two maps to illustrate his sense of guilt: "It is what God sees when He looks down" (384-385).² Calvin also repeats his fear in the letter of having his history remembered as a slave-owner and being cast out by those his family injured: "What I feared most at that moment is what I still fear: that they would remember my history, that I, no matter what I had always said to the contrary, owned people of our Race. I feared that they would send me away, and even as I write you now, I am still afraid" (386). Throughout the novel, Calvin possesses a sensitive conscience that recognizes the humanity of those his family enslaves, taking time to learn all the slaves' names on the plantation. For Calvin to accept such responsibility and guilt proves all the more damning for Caldonia who still runs the plantation in Virginia.

The shift embodied in Calvin's letter provides an opportunity for readers to resolve the narrative tensions and understand how Jones employs irony to expose the moral contradictions of a southern Christian slaveholding society. While an ambiguous narrator who appears morally accepting of slavery frames the novel's predominant voice, Calvin's letter imbues the narrative with a contrasting sensitivity through the confession and renunciation of the sins of slavery. Calvin's letter provides a crucial narrative rupture with a humble plea to Caldonia, the

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embodiment of the narrative's dominant voice. This rupture is strongly indicative of Jones's use of narrative ambiguity and religious satire, for Calvin's morality is anything but ambiguous and his religious penitence appears sincere. The letter provides an opening of clarity and gestures toward a sense of hope in its conclusion. Almost. The novel returns to its primary narrative voice by concluding with its typically dark satire: Calvin's moral pleadings fall upon deaf ears as Caldonia is only relieved to hear her brother made it safely in his travels from Virginia to Washington. Jones reminds readers of the dehumanizing consequences of a social consensus by concluding his novel with the same character with which he opens: Moses, whose namesake suggests he might liberate his captive people on the Townsend plantation, instead embodies the toll exacted by a system of subjugation. Defeated, despondent, and catatonic, Moses refuses meals and proves incapable of human interaction. The hope Jones extends to his readers can be found in the date, April 12, 1861, indicating the approaching American conflict necessary to rid itself of the shameful legacy of slavery.

Social consensus proves to be a helpful way of understanding the narrative voice of *The Known World*. The narrator's worldview embodies the mindset of southern slave owners who assert god-like sovereignty over their fellow human beings. Slavery is *the known world* that colors and informs the narrator's—as well as every other character's—worldview in the novel, asserting an influence over religion, law, family, and economy; slavery even totalizes unknown worlds that hypothetically exist even in the characters' imaginations, as the narrator observes: "Negroes said that somewhere in the world, known or unknown, someone might not think twice about buying two happy white children with plump cheeks and able to write and sign like angels and do basic ciphering" (56). Jones remarks on the powerful influence of slavery in the narrative, stating that it "did things to everyone; some were able to transcend as with Celeste, and others succumbed" (Jones, "Interview," 5). We should also assert that slavery "did things" to Jones's narrative voice, as its ambiguity reveals itself to be an extension of social consensus, comprising a world of metaphysical and ethical contradictions. Such conflicting qualities reveal a compromised religious sentiment that proves anything but critical and self-conscious. Perhaps this is precisely Jones's purpose: to satirically expose the absurdity of a Southern Christian morality that did not challenge, much less seem troubled by, an evil institution that regarded black flesh as a commodity.

Notes

1. Matthew 5:4 states that God “causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” While this passage might serve to alleviate the narrative ambiguity of Jones’s passage, it is important to understand the context of this biblical passage: Jesus, delivering his famous Sermon on the Mount, is calling for his disciples to perform divine acts of love upon their own enemies. Scripture does not conflate God’s blessings of good weather upon the wicked as a sign of approval, which seems to be the sense of Jones’s passage.
2. It is noteworthy to contrast Alice’s map with an earlier episode that features a Hans Waldseemuller map hanging on the wall of the sheriff’s jail; the German map’s legend titles it “The Known World” (the source of the novel’s title) for its early depictions of European conquest. The map is characterized by scarcity and incompleteness, while Alice’s patchwork maps draw all the particulars of Manchester County and the Townsend plantation, down to the people who reside there.

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