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History, Memory, and Construction of Identity in Edward P. Jones's *The Known World*

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Abstract
Edward P. Jones is intensely aware of the significance of history and memory. In *The Known World*, his writing of the little-known history that blacks were slaverowners in the pre-Civil War south is to help African Americans reconstruct identity. In the novel, by aligning with white slaveholders, Henry failed to construct self-identity; while most slaves in the novel went out of the shadows of slavery and constructed their identities through personal and collective memories. *The Known World* itself as an act of memory reveals an unknown world that should have been known to all Americans. Jones suggests the readers that only in the process of sharing and remembering history, can African Americans inherit their culture and construct their identities.

Key words: Edward P. Jones; *The Known World*; History; Memory; Identity

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1. INTRODUCTION
Edward P. Jones's *The Known World* depicts a historical phenomenon that some free blacks owned slaves in the pre-Civil War south, portraying a little-known history. With the startling subject and affirmative power of art, Edward P. Jones won Pulitzer Prize and IMPAC Dublin Literary Award in 2003. The writing of slavery history in the United States has been a major choice for many contemporary African American writers. While in light of Jones's exploration of the truth of history, how does *The Known World* compare to other contemporary African American fiction about slavery? Why is Jones aware of the little-known black slaveowner's history? My article will attempt to address these questions.

History is important since it has made the present what it is, and how people understand the present will depend, in part, on the version of history to which they get access. What Jones uses is a red thread that goes through the different dimensions of history and manifests the function and effect of the recalling of the history. What Jones reveals in *The Known World* is that memory can be painful in individual experience, but it can be healing when it becomes communal property in shared experience. And, by inviting the readers to share the experience of slavery with him and his characters in the novel, Jones anticipates that African Americans can reassess this period of history and repossess it, and obtain new knowledge of its significance in African Americans. Therefore, by interweaving different layers of memory, Jones's text foregrounds the significance of the past to construct and reconstruct their identities.

2. HENRY'S FAILURE IN SEARCHING FOR SELF-IDENTITY
Over years, there is a cultural orphanage of African Americans whose ancestors were severed from their original names and places in slavery. Having lost their cultural heritage, hoping to change their social inferiority and achieve self-realization, African Americans have made many attempts. In *The Known World*, Jones lists a

usual approach in searching for self-identity: mainstream assimilation. This kind of assimilation can also be found in Toni Morrison's *The Song of Solomon*, in which she delineates the image of Macon Dead family who are eager to realize self-identity by assimilating to the white culture of value, beauty, and property. In Jones's novel, Henry Townsend's assimilation becomes much harsher, that is, being a black slaveowner as the white.

Similar to race, there is no good or bad culture in essence. While, when two or more cultures conflict under the same social background, they may seem strong or weak according to their different economic or political status. Usually, the strong one will influence the weak one and even control it gradually by taking use of its economic or political advantages. In *The Known World*, Henry's journey of searching for identity is a process of searching for assimilation of white culture. Jones represents a world in which black culture is totally dominated and controlled by white culture. For instance, Henry aspires to buy a lace shawl in the white man's shop which refuses black customers; the free blacks are forbidden to go out of Manchester County without the permission of the white patrollers; the white slaveowner William Robbins is portrayed as someone with a chilling lack of humanity, and readers can learn that "in his big book about the comings and goings of slaves, Robbins put a line in a slave's name, something he always did with people who died before old age or who were sold for profit" (Jones, 2003, p.179).

Bearing these humiliation and bitterness in mind, Henry pleases his master to win his trust and fondness. In his mind, to be a master can align with the whites and then construct his self-identity. As Bernard W. Bell states in his *The Afro-American Novels and Tradition* that "the economic opportunity that was imperative in order for former slaves to compete equally with whites and to realize the American Dream," (Bell, 1987, p.8) The effect of this ideology on Henry is evident. At the very beginning, he works as a house slave. As a house slave, he considers himself superior to the rest of the slaves. Later, when Henry becomes an apprentice, he is also a part of the category artisan slaves and can keep some portion of money what he earns. Finally he buys himself from his master and is emancipated to be a free black. On the day of Henry's emancipation, his father freeman Augustus is overexcited, he is finally able to unite his family and will have the opportunity to mend the damaged relationship with his son Henry. Instead of a sense of happiness and freedom, Henry has a sense of loss, since he is partly corrupted by the white culture and dreaming to be a wealthy slaveowner. Augustus is not given the time to pass on his legacy to his son. As grown man, Henry owes everything to his former white master Robbins who has helped him become a successful artisan, a landowner, and eventually a slaveowner. Robbins successfully passes on his legacy to Henry, and in other words, Henry has completely deviated from African culture.

Henry has opposed his parents' beliefs and not embraced his parents' legacy since he has been assimilated by white culture on Robbins plantation. He has received education which is supported by his master, and then been a skillful shoemaker for many white masters. While the parents align themselves with the other slaves, Henry aligns himself with the white master, which leads to their respective experiences of two extremely different sides of slavery and their different actions and convictions are a result of this.

As a black slaveowner, Henry is surprisingly disappointed to find his status and property do not bring him respect among the white. Even the poor white patrollers despise him as usual, "when you give niggers the same rights as a white man, something wrong will happen" (Jones, 2003, p.13). In their minds, no matter how rich the blacks are, "it frightened the white seeing the incongruity of a nigger with right, which frightened them more than walking into the barn and seeing a mule singing hymns or speaking the Load's words" (Jones, 2003, p.126). It can be seen the white refuse to acknowledge Henry's "achievements" and deliberately destroy his "pride" to be a slaveowner.

Accepting completely the white's value system, he tries to work diligently to gain the trust and respect of the white in power. As a result, he becomes a successful slaveholder who owns 33 slaves on his plantation. While, Henry has never been accepted and recognized by the white culture, and on the other hand, Henry should have been the one respected by his people, whereas he becomes lost and white-hearted in the pursuit of white American values, and thus is cast aside by his black community. Jones arranges Henry's death at his age of thirty, which suggests, to Jones, the approach of mainstream assimilation is proved to be a dead-end. He also believes the acceptance of one's African history and cultural heritage holds a key to African Americans' existence in the white dominant society.

3. MEMORY OF HISTORY IN PEOPLE'S CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY

The Known World is based on real historical account. In an interview with Robert Fleming, Jones stated it was a shock for him to know there were blacks having slaves, which was like a Jew who had joined the Nazis during World War II. (Fleming, 2003) For Jones, the story encapsulates the fierce cruelty of an institutionalized system that seeks to devastate people's humanity and deprive them of a viable identity.

As Jones shows in the case of Henry Townsend, the construction of self-identity can not be realized by assimilating into the white culture. One's identity is realized only when he/she becomes a full member of his/her community. Membership depends on both individual's

and the community's recognition of internalized ideologies of oppression. Jones's *The Known World* delineates a process of self-liberation and the construction of identity through communal support within the colonial context of slavery. This process involves both personal and collective memories.

3.1 The Significance of Memory for the Characters in *the Known World*

Though the black slaves in *The Known World* have obtained physical freedom in the end, they are still living in the shadows of the slavery system—suffering from the memories of the horrific past experience day and night. Even today, slavery is still a wound for African Americans. After one has read this novel, he is sure to share the writer's contemplations about the question: how can black people go out of the shadows of history and obtain psychic freedom? How can African American gain self-recognition and self-identity? As an African American novelist, Jones makes his mission to find a way out of the shadows of slavery for all his landsmen in *The Known World*.

Alice, one protagonist in the novel, relates many of the horrible details of an existence in slavery. So her struggle with memory is the hardest and most poignant one. In her memory, she "sprawled before them in the dirt after they had run her back" (Jones, 2003, p.13). It seems that the overwhelming pain of the past makes her half-minded. By refusing to recall the past, she pretends to be mad and spouting gibberish is her way of relieving traumas. Unfortunately, the past still keeps nibbling her. The more Alice tries to forget, the more horribly the past haunts her. Her experience of being sold in the property market always emerges in her mind. And it is even harder for her to bear that "their master was indeed a black man, two shades darker than themselves, owned them" (Jones, 2003, p.9). Alice's pains are demonstrated by Herbert Gutman's argument that "the past, until you confront it, until you live through it, keeps coming back in other forms" (Gutman, 1976, p.239).

After managing to escape from Henry's plantation, Alice and Priscilla opened a restaurant in Washington. Alice did not lead an isolated life as before. Instead of leaving the past behind, she intentionally shared her memory with Priscilla. To Alice's surprise, sharing and recalling made her "been good as God keeps me" (Jones, 2003, p.386). Attempting to remember their past on Henry's plantation, in a great hall of her restaurant, she is displaying artworks that she herself has created:

> 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 the 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 him. There is nothing missing, not a cabin, not a barn, not a chicken, not a horse. Not a single person is missing. (Jones, 2003, p.383)

In this map, what Alice has suffered and experienced as a slave in County of Manchester is shown. *The Known World* itself is Jones's attempt at such a "kind of map," from which nothing will be missing. Of course, maps are constantly lapsing out of date and are endlessly in need of being redrawn. In their new lives, both of them consciously guard the territory of their memories which no longer suffocate their lives and hinder them from the sight of a hopeful future.

Caldonia can not find her self-identity and conduct her business after the death of her young husband Henry Townsend. For her, memory has become an indispensable part. "How long did it take you and Henry to build this house?" (Jones, 2003, p.264) Asking Moses who has grown to become a slave overseer on Henry's plantation, Caldonia attempts to go out of sorrow of her husband's death. Eventually Caldonia marries Louis who is the son of Robbins. She reads her brother Calvin's letter in which Calvin urges her to face history, lead a new life, and share it with her new husband Louis. Taking Calvin's advice, she reads the letter at the grave of her former husband Henry and decides to confront the past and reality. Recalling as well as facing history drives her to seek for her new life.

Stamford is a former pursuer of young women on Henry's plantation and has a vision one rainy night of being pelted by dead crows and eggshell. After the war, the man is freed and founds the Richmond Home for Colored Orphans. In 1909 the colored people in Richmond unofficially renamed a very long street for him and his wife, and for decades those people petitioned the white people who ran the government of Richmond to make the name official. Instead of forgetting the past, he is able to transcend his past and hands down to his granddaughter who has published a 415-page book in which Stamford's history is the raw material (Jones, 2003, p.352).

Minerva, John Skiffington's wedding gift, stands for the new generation after the institutional ending of the slavery. Therefore, her quest for freedom and identity becomes more enlightening through remembering the unspeakable history.

> "She began telling him her story and he took her to the house where he lived with his parents and two sisters, […] The next day she and the man went to the constabulary to tell the authorities that she was not missing and she was not dead. She was, she said, nothing more than a free woman in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania" (Jones, 2003, p.381).

Being a wedding gift, she lacks an identity, which is in turn contingent upon her lack of history and community. Minerva attempts to center herself in her history, wanting only to hear the story of her birth and her name. While she fails and eventually loses her original name Pennsylvania. Only through the discovery of others' histories and others' truths can Minerva begin to develop an identity and shed the shame she has felt while living on the margins of

her community. As Alice Walker writes in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, "the truth about any subject only comes when all sides of story are put together, and all their different meanings make one new one" (Walker, 1983, p.49). In order to capture "truth," Minerva uncovers all of her stories and joins in collective memory of the black history. Near the end of the novel, the posters read, " 'Lost Or Harmed In Some Unknown Way On The Streets Of This City—A Precious Loved One.' They gave Minerva's name, height, age, everything needed to identify her" (Jones, 2003, p.381). Identity is not being, but becoming. According to Stuart Hall, "identity is grounded in re-telling of the past. But it no longer addresses us as a simple, factual 'past', it is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth" (Hall, 1990, p.226). By re-telling the past and re-naming herself, Minerva finally was identified.

The tension between repression and memory of characters permeates throughout the novel. To live on, the characters have struggled to forget the past, while it is proved that this kind of struggle is fruitless. It does not come from the indulgence in the memory of the past either, for it may weaken the present and hinder the future. Thus, what the characters in *The Known World* have to learn is how to live with memory and survive it. After all, decolonization is not only an individual process within a communal context, but also a collective occurrence. To get out of the haunting past, one needs the support of the whole community, and even the whole people, for memory exists as a communal property of friend, of family, and of people. The magic of memory is that it is interpersonal and it is the basis for constructing the relationships with the other who also has bitter memories. The reality of memory is that it must be experienced individually firstly, and then it becomes communal property. In individual experience, memory is painful, as Alice has discovered. In shared experience, memory is healing, as everyone in the novel eventually discovers.

3.2 *The Known World* Itself as an Act of Memory

The title of Edward P. Jones's stunning novel derives from a map that hangs on the wall at a jail where one of the book's controversial protagonists, Sheriff John Skiffington, holds forth. It is "a browned and yellowed woodcut of some eight feet by six feet… A Russian had passed through the town and Skiffington had bought the map from him. He wanted it as a present for Winifred but she thought it too hideous to be in her house. Heading the legend were the words 'The Known World'…The Russian said it was the first time the word America had ever been put on a map" (Jones, 2003, p.174).

Certainly the world as Skiffington knows is one that most modern readers find alien and uncomfortable. The world Jones reveals is also an unknown world which should have been known to all Americans. In a sense, *The Known World*, as a novel, is also a significant act of memory. It is Jones who documents a period of unknown history by writing *The Known World*. When Jones writes a nineteenth century story of slavery in America, he inevitably brings the past to the present. A past that people, black or white, would rather forget than remember. However, as a writer, his literary career has been to tell somebody something, and something is what has been lost or forgotten. Properly and artistically, Jones has evoked the past and brought it back into "living life."

As Homi Bhabha holds in *The Location of Culture*: "Remembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-remembering, a putting together of the disremembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present" (Bhabha, 1997, p.63). Remembering the past is vital for former slaves to claim "the self that is no self" (Bhabha, 1997, p.140). *The Known World* is just such a painful rememory of the past. However painful this "rememory" is, it is necessary.

Jones therefore insists that his book has to exist because no adequate memorial existence to commemorate those who have suffered under the system of slavery in America. *The Known World* stands as a monument to those who may otherwise be forgotten. That story, which is not merely a storytelling, has been erased from the collective cultural memory, and should be known and woven into the fabric of history. Jones articulates his awareness of historical record as a manifestation of power relations through alternative remembering and recording. However, many critics hold *The Known World* is a dutiful fiction filling in African Americans' understanding of the factual record. What research on the subject Jones undertakes quickly derails his writing after he happens upon an account of a white slaveowner who spends her days abusing one of her black slaves, a little girl, by beating her head against a wall. "If I had wanted to tell the whole story of slavery, Americans couldn't have taken that," Jones tells an interviewer. "People want to think that there was slavery, and then we got beyond it. People don't want to hear that a woman would take a child and bang her head against the wall day after day. It's nice that I didn't read all those books. What I would have had to put down is far, far harsher and bleaker" (Johnson, 2004, p.20). Thus, the intention of Jones's writing is not only a decription of American slavery but also to inspire African Americans remember their history consciously and unconsciously even though the history is harsh.

The way of rememorizing in *The Known World* is not through telling a single story, whether Henry's, Alice's, Caldonia's or Moses's, but by placing one story next to the other, insisting that each of these stories register and respond to each other. In this way the book creates a story that is simultaneously the story of family, community, and the history of an entire people. By gathering together the pieces of untold stories and placing one next to another, *The Known World* lets these pieces freely generate the future that will remember them hopefully.

3.3 The Significance of Memory for Readers

Jones's mission as a writer is largely the same as that of many black writers from ex-slave Frederick Douglass to postmodernist Ishmael Reed: to counter the construction of African Americans as the collectively marginalized "Other" in American mainstream culture.

However, different from Richard Wright's direct protest against white racism, Ralph Ellison's searching for universal concept of selfhood in the social context of black/white dichotomy, or Ishmael Reed's cultural nationalist program, Jones states it clearly in his preface of *The Known World*, "My soul's often wondered how I got over……" Thus, Jones is aiming at helping all of African Americans including himself get over from their little-known history and then acquire African Americans' identities.

Definitely, *The Known World* catalyzes the reader's memory. As memory is not only personal but also collective and historical, the reader, while reading the novel, also takes part in the significant act of remembering the past, and is invited to recall the very part of the past that may have been repressed, forgotten, or ignored.

Reader's participation is aesthetically made possible by the text's narrative strategy. Jones's text is developed as a series of fragments of the past that unfold throughout the novel. Pieces that have been "disremembered" and suppressed rise to the surface and should be integrated into text and into the characters' experiences. However, this integration is never complete. Like the characters, the reader should translate and order the fragments for him/her. In Robert Fleming's interview with him, Jones affirms, "I want to write about things which helped all of the readers to survive: the love, grace, intelligence and strength of African Americans as a people" (Fleming, 2003). As a matter of fact, *The Known World*, as well as his other two short story collections *Lost in the City (*1992) and *All Aunt Hagar's Children* (2006) which Jones has produced really "subdue the readers' preconceptions, enrich the readers' perceptions, and trouble their sleep" (qtd in Newsday).

> In fact, readers' participation in revisiting history is Jones's unchanging aim in literary creation. It is significant for the black readers, whom Jones has in mind in his writing, because history can repeat itself if one forgets the lesson it teaches him, and because without adequate knowledge of one's past he may not know his present and future, and, above all, because memories are the "ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" (Hall, 1990, p.222). Jones's emphasis on the recovery of black history, especially the history of slavery, as both a national and personal necessity for contemporary black readers is shared by other scholars. A century ago, W.E.B. Du Bois's stated in his magnum opus *The Souls of Black Folk*:
>
> Admitting and exploring the reality of slavery is necessarily painful for a black American, but only by doing so can he or she begin to understand himself or herself and American and Afro-American culture in general. The normal price of the evasion of the fact of slavery is intellectual and spiritual death. Only by grappling with the meaning and legacy of slavery can the imagination, recognizing finally the temporality of the institution, begin to transcend it. (Du Bois, 1903, p.123)

Sharing this piece of history is also significant for the non-black readers. "For better or for worse," as Charles Larson points out in his essay "each of us was born into an ethnocentrically sealed world. The purpose of any piece of literature, no matter what culture it was produced in, is to show us something we were previously unaware of. Just as literature is a bridge connecting a life lived with a life not lived, so, too, all literature that is a voyage into a previously untraveled world" (Larson, 1995, p.65). Therefore, *The Known World*, as a novel of remembering the unknown world and for memory, renders this observation intensely paradoxical: this is a story that people for some reason wants to be disremembered and unaccounted for, but this is a story that should be passed on, as in bell hooks's words, "the expression of[...] movement from object to subject—the liberated voice" (hooks, 1989, p.211).

4. CONCLUSION

As an African American writer, Edward P. Jones writes to and for blacks. He always keeps his eye on the situation of black people: their suffering, their helplessness, and their being at a loss. In *The Known World*, remembering history is a way for members of a group to relieve personal and historical traumas. Memory is not only the interweaving of different personal stories for communal healing, but also an act that should be always cautious of the obsessive reverence for questionable historical facts, and be cautious of essentialization and manipulation by invisible structures of ideology and power.

The end of this historical book is filled with good fortunes for most blacks. With this luminous ending, Jones makes clear his point: by remembering the little-known history, a new identity in the present is hopefully in process of making, and by uniting black people, in fact, all people, regardless of race, can African Americans stop the past trauma from hindering the present life and construct a better world.

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