

# Navigating and Negating the Ownership Fallacy in Edward P. Jones's *The Known World*

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In *The Known World*, Edward P. Jones narrates an obscure practice whereby free black men own black slaves to raise this question: are black slave owners more unnatural than white slave owners? Jones seems to assume that most readers answers will agree, and he crafts his introduction of black slave ownership to ignite their shock: “[Moses] was thirty-five years old and for every moment of those years he had been someone’s slave, a white man’s slave and then another white man’s slave and now, for nearly ten years, the overseer slave for a black master” (4). Jones explicitly affirms the reader’s initial surprise when he relates how Moses, suddenly owned by a black man, muses that he “had thought that it was already a strange world that made him a slave to a white man, but [that] God had indeed set it twirling and twisting every which way when he put black people to owning their own kind” (9). Yet, as the novel continues, Jones moves beyond a sensationalist writing of slavery and begins undermining the strangeness of black slave ownership by rooting his attention in the deeper implications of what it means to own another person. Jones spends considerable energy depicting social constructions that have historically allowed slavery, including law, government, and religion, but his attention to the nature of ownership simultaneously destroys the authority of such social constructions and indicates the important role participation plays in the survival of master/slave relationships. Jones employs two key devices in his exploration of ownership. First, he relentlessly compares ownership through slavery to ownership through family, prison, and prostitution in an effort to determine what constitutes ethical ownership, if it exists at all. Second, he spends considerable time contemplating paper-based ownerships—free papers, legal papers, and insurance papers—to demonstrate their largely symbolic nature, indicating that these symbols work only when both owner and owned believe in them. Through these devices, Jones suggests that the United States’ continual failure to erect

ethical social constructions might derive from its adherence to highly specific learned lessons: killing white men is wrong; raping white women is wrong. According to Jones, what nineteenth-century America lacks is the insight and courage to look beyond such lessons to the ethical principles that lie at their heart.

Jones prompts his readers to consider why black slave owners should be any different from white slave owners, and—although he suggests that there is ultimately no real difference—he shows that people create an ideological difference anyway based on their own illusions of likeness. Initially, the concept of black slave owners is shocking. It seems unbelievable that a black man would subscribe to enslaving his own people after experiencing slave life himself; in a modern society that vehemently condemns slavery, it seems inconceivable that a slave, once freed, would not strive to free the rest of his people. “People” becomes a key word. Even though slavery is outmoded due to principles of equality and autonomy, modern citizens continue to think of humanity in terms of likeness: blacks are a people, whites are a people, and Indians are a people.<sup>1</sup> Jones deconstructs these perceptions and asks readers to view humanity as one people. The novel should shock not because blacks own blacks, but because humans own humans. Jones thus rebuilds the disgust toward slavery that has been diluted into sadness and regret as a result of a passive acceptance of American history.

Jones strives to extend his readers’ shock over black slave owners past attachments with likeness to the realization that upsetting racial balances does nothing to the institution of slavery, due to the permanence of what Katherine Bassard calls the “power line” (Bassard 2). Bassard’s power line consists of a hierarchy based on economic power and property ownership rather than racial identity. She demonstrates that historically, black slave ownership was allowed because, rather than threatening the institution, it secured slavery’s hold on society. That a free black slave owner like Henry Townsend should thrive economically in comparison to

<sup>1</sup> Jones’s terms.

his free black father who shuns slavery reinforces the system as economically valuable and therefore necessary to society. Whether one finds little difference between white and black slave owners (like Larry Koger), or finds black slave owners different due to their “commitment...to the preservation of their own freedom” rather than a “commitment... to slavery” (like James Roark), is unimportant; the motivation for slave owning does not matter as much as the continued reinforcement of slavery does (Koger 273).

This reference to motive is important because, throughout the novel, Jones astutely reveals the conflicted motives of each power-wielding character. John Skiffington refuses to own slaves despite upholding slavery in his position as deputy. Barnum, on the slave patrol, believes selling Augustus is morally reprehensible, but he allows it because he fears being called a “nigger kisser” (303). William Robbins owns slaves while “losing his mind” (21) for love of Philomena and the children he fathers by her. Henry owns slaves because Robbins insists upon its necessity, yet he initially treats Moses as a friend. Although these motivations seem varied, they are similar in their attention to loyalties. These characters remain uncomplicated in their support of slavery where slaves remain commensurate pieces of property distinguished only by names written in the ledger book. However, as soon as personal relationships develop, their commitments to slavery are blurred by love and compassion. Recalling that Barnum’s neighbour insisted he was “saved... from bein a nigger only by the color of his skin” (42), Jones reveals how something more nebulous than skin colour created slavery. If white men had used some other signifier, such as poverty, to justify having white slaves, perhaps American slavery would not have been a racial problem.

By including black slave owners as a central feature of the novel, Jones undermines the assumption that slavery was solely an act of racism; instead, he indicates that, although widespread, racism was not slavery’s sole driving force. Furthermore, he avoids writing a standard novel about slavery where white men abused black men and he does so without in-

validating the importance of these novels. Instead, deconstructing these common perceptions allows Jones to move past them, and in doing so he raises a serious question crucial to understanding slavery: while slavery consists of the ownership of people, is it truly possible to own a person? Using Augustus and Jebediah, Jones applies Hegel's master-slave dialectic to demonstrate that it is not possible to own another person and shows that any evidence to the contrary relies on the owned people's compliance with a system that claims to own them<sup>1</sup>. In order to explore the nature of human ownership, Jones includes a significant amount of discourse focused on the power relationships that exist in several institutions other than slavery—namely family relationships, criminal incarceration, and prostitution. Of these, family relationships and the owning of family members are his primary focus.

Jones frequently relates family hierarchy to slave hierarchy, and through these comparisons he unearths a fundamental difference between their respective conceptions of ownership. In his book *Slavery and Social Death*, Orlando Patterson argues that a third party cannot “buy back [a] slave’s freedom” because this merely passes the ownership to “the third party who now owns the slave” (210). Accordingly, Jones uses the language of ownership to describe families who have purchased freedom, and each of the free black men portrayed in the novel owns one or several of their own family members. Although Jones includes Patterson’s “property transfer” in the characters’ vernacular, his overarching narrative voice indicates that third parties cannot buy freedom for a deeper reason: the ownership of a person is fundamentally impossible. This contradiction between Jones’ message and the characters’ beliefs illustrates rampant misconceptions regarding ownership that thrived in nineteenth-century America. Jones demonstrates—through two parallel families, the Robbins and the Townsends—that ownership fallacies cause irreparable harm through power imbalances that exist in familial relationships. Power relationships

<sup>1</sup> It is not the goal of this paper to provide an apologetic for the institution of slavery or to minimize the suffering of nineteenth-century slaves.

built on compassion and respect thrive, while those built on ownership fail because they are unable to appropriately respect each person's autonomy.

Both Mildred and Philomena's grandmothers exemplify characters whose familial relationships are built upon mutual respect. Despite being owned by their husband and daughter, respectively, their relationships continue unchanged because the foundations of their lives together are not based on that ownership. As a result, the language of ownership others use to describe them remains powerless. Augustus and Mildred were already married before he purchased her, so the three years of savings Augustus spent to buy her function as an act of love rather than an act of economics. His 'ownership' means nothing: it remains a matter of convenience, since, "when he bought her freedom... [Augustus] took advantage of the law to keep [a loved one] close by" (15). Similarly, for Philomena and her grandmother, the ownership "didn't mean anything between them" because the basis of their relationship far predated her purchase from Colfax and her daughter's relationship with Robbins (122). Thus, although such power relationships that exist within families might resemble ownership, they are not ownership-based at all, because any authority one member holds over the other stems from mutual respect. Nevertheless, Bassard argues, and rightly so, that Augustus's purchases of his family members function only to "reinforce the system of slavery by strengthening the line of economic power and property" (Bassard 8). Although this act casts a shadow over Augustus's standing at the moral center of the novel, his purchases still illustrate important principles about ownership within hierarchical institutions other than slavery.

In contrast to these benign power-based relationships, Jones develops other familial ties that lack mutual respect because their bonds were based upon false notions of ownership; Robbins's ties to Philomena and their children are a primary example, and the differences between Robbins's powers as father versus his powers as lover are particularly illuminating. Although Robbins loves Philomena, he buys her from Colfax without her consent. Philomena complies with this arrangement because Robbins improves her lifestyle by buying her a house and maid to replace

her life working on the plantation. Furthermore, Philomena's Richmond fantasy stokes her willingness to perpetuate a loving relationship with Robbins: Richmond enchants her because she believes that even as a slave she could be rich and have slaves of her own and that her own slaves could have slaves, and so on. Thus the exchange underlying their relationship is material: Robbins buys Philomena, and Philomena owns a house. Since Robbins initiated their relationship with a purchase, and since Philomena participates in it by fulfilling her ownership fantasies, their relationship remains tenuous because it was founded on inequality. Philomena still feels owned, and so, after the novelty of sharing property with Robbins has dissipated, she attempts to leave. The lack of respectful principles between them results in outbursts of physical violence. In the Richmond hotel, punching and yelling are used in vain attempts to assert and create both acceptance and respect. In contrast, the Robbins' relationship with their children is more deeply grounded in mutual love and respect, as evidenced by Louis' fervent excitement on visiting days and their loving nicknames, "horsey" and "princely prince" (23). Yet, at age eight, Louis was still listed in the census as Robbins's property, and Robbins's problem with Philomena diffuses to affect Louis as well. The overarching structure of false ownership remains intact. Fittingly, Dora and Louis then begin calling him "Mr. William" rather than "father." In this light, the nicknames and games Louis and Robbins play together become symbolically meaningful. Louis, the prince, mounts Robbins, "horsey Mr. Williams," mirroring in role and name Robbins's relationship with his horse Sir Guilderham. Unconsciously aware of the strange nature of their relationship, their play enacts a reversal of ownership, granting Louis the dominance over Robbins he might not otherwise have held. Despite this power-reversal, their play also indicates the immense reliance Louis places on Robbins to keep him safe, just as Robbins relies on Sir Guilderham to guide him home safely during his storms.

Jones compounds the ownership fallacy he introduced through examples of familial ownership by reconfiguring the issue through two

other institutions, the jail and the brothel, and to startlingly different effect, though both Saskia's brothel story and Broussard's jail story add to Jones's discussion of human ownership by implicating a fundamental difference between the body and the self (222). Before Saskia's husband, Thorbecke, sold her into prostitution, she had worked as a maid, prompting the reader to consider the difference between a maid and a prostitute. Paid house-work and prostitution both rent the use of one's body. On a fundamental, philosophical level then, completely voluntary prostitution poses no ethical problem so long as the woman is not volitionally compromised (Davidson 84–6).<sup>2</sup> Note that Jones points out Saskia "did not make much as a maid" (222). Saskia's prostitution fails ethically because she does not willingly choose prostitution: her husband does, driven by a greed for wealth. Jones depicts both the slave and the prostitute as involuntary workers. Interestingly, only slavery claims ownership in his narrative, and only slaves believe they can be owned. When Carlyle buys sex from Saskia, he falls madly in love with her, forgetting that he has bought only her body, not her person or her love. But Saskia never forgets, because, despite her forced employment and despite the entrapment of her body, she retains her sense of self.

Broussard's imprisonment is similarly depicted, and Jones introduces the jail as an archetype for the restraint of a body without an ownership fallacy. In practice, slavery and jailing seem alike because both involve an involuntary confinement of the body. Yet Skiffington claims no ownership over his prisoner Broussard. Unlike slavery, criminal incarceration is based on a societal acknowledgement of each person's equal rights, where one person's infringement on another's receives just punishment, such as Broussard's murder of his partner. During his imprisonment, Broussard maintains complete ownership over himself, his thoughts, and

<sup>2</sup> Note that Jones does not enter into a dialogue about the ethics and social morals of prostitution; rather, he identifies a fundamental logical difference between slavery and prostitution in order to make his argument about human ownership more clear. Jones strongly condemns human ownership, while his portrayal of Saskia embraces some of the difficult ambiguities that accompany serious discussions of prostitution in literature.

his property. While in prison, Broussard even sells Moses and Bessie to Robbins for a profit. He has simply lost mobility. Jones indicates that a person's confinement must be based on a system that acknowledges individual autonomy and must not invalidate that person's claims of ownership<sup>3</sup>.

Despite Jones's presentation of the ownership fallacy, one character evades classification in the terms outlined so far: Henry Townsend. Henry's apparent contradiction of these terms allows Jones to depict how an individual's will interacts with social environment and how differing social environments interact with one another. Although Jones carefully illustrates that relationships built on respect and love trump those built on ownership, Henry idolizes Robbins and neglects his own father. At first, this preference seems to contradict Jones's association of Augustus with love and Robbins with ownership. Yet the details of Henry's boyhood complicate this distinction. When Henry is nine years old, his father buys his mother and takes her away. Henry has not lived with his father in four years. While Augustus tells Henry he will go home with him soon, Henry envisions "the cabin with him and his mother and Rita that home represented [and] could no longer remember when his father was a part of that home" (16). Thus for Henry, Augustus comes to represent ownership. Since he cannot remember Augustus representing home, his purchase of Mildred appears to uproot developed respectful relationships in favor of new bonds dictated by cash and free-papers. Furthermore, while Augustus mediates this radical change, Robbins slowly enters the scene, coming closer to Henry than he "had been in a very long time" (16). Raised "high on his horse, a mountain separating the boy from the fullness of the sun" (17), Robbins dictates the unfolding scene with all the power and majesty that Henry wants to possess by giving instructions to the slaves and telling Henry not to cry. Then, as Robbins retreats, Sir Guilderham's "black tail

<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately for Broussard, Jones indicates that his court proceedings may have been unjust, but since these issues do not pertain to ideas of ownership they will not be discussed here.

[flips] first one pretty way and then another, as if [it] were separate and so had a life all its own” (17). This tail, vitally connected to Robbins, yet with a life of its own, powerfully symbolizes the relationship that will develop between the two men, and it is at this moment Henry stops crying. Henry identifies something in Robbins that grants him a sense of autonomy. As time passes, Jones reinforces the distinction between Henry’s two father figures that this scene generates. Robbins grants Henry special status, making him groom’s boy and excusing him from hard work by allowing him to comb Sir Guilderham’s mane. Yet, Augustus bribes Henry with food to spend time with him. Furthermore, although Augustus holds stronger ethical principles than Robbins does, he nevertheless respects Robbins’ apparent ownership of his son and refrains from chastising or teaching Henry because “he was not yet his property and so beyond his reach” (18). Augustus fails to assert his principles when dealing with his son. Although this choice may be out of fear that Robbins will not release Henry if Augustus misbehaves, he never explains this possibility to him, and so Henry never realizes the true nature of Augustus’s love.

By depicting Henry as caught between the worlds of Augustus and Robbins, Jones is able to illustrate how the ownership fallacy thrived in nineteenth-century America by pointing to a lack of moral education. Henry remains suspended between the conflicting codes of his father and his master, men who both love Henry without ever fully respecting his autonomy. Robbins takes a vested interest in Henry’s education, paying Fern Elston handsomely for lessons in reading and writing out of an interest in Henry’s future welfare. His desire to help Henry stems from fears that the latter’s “blackness” will harm him in a world that prizes white values and behaviors. His motivation is thus emotionally driven, as was Augustus’s lack of assertion over his son’s upbringing. Both of Henry’s father figures neglect lessons of morals and virtue while including lessons that carry the unconscious message that Henry’s identity cannot thrive in its natural state. This message leads to Henry’s powerful ambitions to advance socially, purchase his own land and slaves, and follow in the footsteps of

the father figure who was most untouched by the fear these men embedded within him. Furthermore, since both men have indicated that human ownership is a valid threat, Robbins by owning men himself and Augustus by allowing Henry to be owned, Henry accepts that he is unable to change the world around him. Jones hints at this mindset of Henry's when he relates how attracted he was to *Paradise Lost*, identifying strongly with Satan's preference to "reign in Hell than serve in Heaven" (134). Henry recognizes that the institute of slavery constitutes some sort of Hell, but cannot envision a proper heaven or a way to reach it. These childhood influences lay the groundwork for later conflicts between Henry and his father. When Henry argues in response to his parents' outrage that "[n]obody never told [him] the wrong of [owning a man]" and Augustus cries, "Why should anybody haveta teach you the wrong, son" (137), it becomes clear that "the wrong" must be taught because there are simply too many false opinions and ideas that guide too many men—one small boy cannot be expected to sort them out all on his own. Jones reiterates this idea several times, such as when he describes Elizabeth, a white slave owner. After her husband dies, her slaves take over the farm and work her as their own slave. When rescued, "she did not remember that she was supposed to be the owner, and it was a long time before she could be taught that again" (11). Thus, although human ownership does not truly exist, Jones indicates that each person must be shown their own autonomy; otherwise, they are too easily deceived by abusive and illogical ideas that deny this basic right.

Through Henry, Jones indicates the power belief has in sustaining socially acceptable slavery, yet he enforces this idea materially as well by emphasizing the tremendous importance slaves and slave owners place on paper-based evidence of their ownership. Slave patrollers, slave owners, and freed men often treat free papers and other such indications of ownership as the highest authority on human property status: ledger books describing the ranks of the slaves are the official stories of individual plantations; Mann insists upon the bill of sale he has for Jebediah; Fern and Augustus wield their free papers like medals of honor; John Skiffing-

ton labours over criminal reports and allows the written word to influence his opinion of particular crimes; and there is a pervasive insistence on the permanence of ink, such as when Counsel recalls being told the “ink will outlast [him]” (242). Jones suggests that, without these apparently arbitrary and finite documents, distinguishing between free and owned men becomes impossible because the ownership fallacy is given no credence.

Jones incorporates Caldonia’s purchase of Atlas Slave Insurance as a way of signaling the logical error in asserting human ownership through paperwork. As Ray Topps carefully explains his insurance policy to Caldonia, he stresses that “there will be no protection at this time on the perishment [of] human property” (356). As long as the slave remains alive, however, Caldonia can reap monetary awards for anything from snakebites to limb loss. Although these guidelines are discussed in terms of Caldonia’s “property,” Jones hints that this label is a misnomer. Insurance policies on material properties consistently cover the complete destruction or “death” of that property. Jones’s choice to elucidate the many ways a slave could die and then have Topps carefully refuse to insure each one points clearly at the difference between material property and a slave. Caldonia’s financial gains from the insurance are not based on ownership of a piece of property, but on robbery of a person, and it is only possible to rob a person as long as he remains alive.

Accordingly, various characters repeatedly negate the value placed in these paper documents throughout the novel; even though Jones indicates the commonality of these symbols, he points to the tenuous influence they have on social conduct. Robbins accurately explains to Philomena that “paper meant nothing... it only had the power that he... would give it” (144). Jones indicates that unfortunately, papers which attempt to reinforce the ownership fallacy are allowed to thrive, while papers guaranteeing autonomy and freedom are treated as useless. For Robbins, the description of Rita with the “noticeable mole on left cheek” (17)—written in his ledger book and on the wanted posters he distributes—exists as an absolute claim to ownership over a specific property that he otherwise

cannot distinguish as his. On the other hand, Travis destroys any value papers possess when he eats them in front of Augustus. Previously, any slave patrollers who read the free papers let Augustus pass because they believed in the validity of the document. By his actions, Travis indicates that without this belief, the document's power dissipates. Travis refuses to recognize Augustus's autonomy, and the paper becomes garbage. Interestingly, as his later negotiations with Darcy over Augustus' selling price proceed, all objections to the sale are made with no reference to papers. Darcy lowers Augustus's price because buying a free man poses a risk to him. This risk remains even with the free papers chewed up, because the belief in Augustus's freedom exists independently of the paper, even though he is not freed. Similarly, Mildred comments that "them freedom papers [Henry carries] don't carry enough freedom" (113), not because Henry has the wrong type of paper, but because the necessity of this paper indicates how tenuous society's belief in his freedom is. No white men carry papers, because their freedom is undisputed, but a paper becomes necessary to create the belief in Henry's freedom that would otherwise not be granted.

Having indicated that autonomy and ownership are concepts that rely on being taught and believed, Jones includes two characters who retain their sense of self-worth despite repeated attacks on their autonomy: Augustus and Jebediah. Through them, Jones illustrates how autonomy should reign over ownership in both morally sound and unsound people. Even though Jebediah is depicted as morally base and associated with prostitutes and gambling, Jones does question whether this is due to his own moral standards or due to his refusal to comply with a "demon state" (260). Nevertheless, Jones indicates that poor moral standing does not impede a sense of one's own autonomy. Jebediah has the strongest sense of his own freedom and the strongest disdain for the system that tries to deny it. Able to write, Jebediah consistently writes his own free papers whenever he finds himself owned again and never shows fear over being reclaimed as a slave. When Fern buys him, he remains on her property not because he feels owned, but because he wants his "damned \$500... every

penny” (256); Although Fern insists that “the law does not say” Jebediah is free, Jebediah insists that “Mann ain’t knowed what he talkin bout. I am free” (256). Augustus acts similarly when sold to Darcy. Despite his body being confined again, Augustus retains his sense of mental freedom, a freedom he has learned to recognize after buying himself from Robbins and a freedom that perhaps his own father taught him when he was “chastised as a boy” (14). While being sold, he repeatedly declares his own freedom. Later, when Darcy tries to sell him again, Augustus actively foils Darcy’s plans by pretending to be deaf and dumb. A particularly poignant recognition of Augustus’s autonomy occurs in the exchange between him and Stennis. Stennis cannot see past his own enslavement, but says of Augustus’s freedom that he “can see that [freedom] with [his] own two eyes” before walking back to Darcy (284). Augustus’s sense of self-worth radiates through him such that it alters how others perceive him. The extent of Augustus’s belief in his own freedom even reaches past verbal validation. Finding himself sold to a new master, Hillard, being called “their nigger” (345), and being ordered about like a slave; Augustus walks north toward a state that will recognize the freedom he feels, risking his life to assert that freedom. Hillard recognizes his will and, helpless against it, is driven to shoot Augustus in order to exert his ownership. However, having killed Augustus, Hillard only has his body. Augustus’s spirit is already striding home to Mildred, a final reminder of the part of Augustus that could not be restrained.

Three hundred pages after being shocked by black slave ownership, readers find that Jones’s novel illuminates one of the most fundamental enablers of slavery: the ownership fallacy. Jones deftly weaves the diverse psychological and social influences that drive his characters into a map of the fears and lessons that circumscribe their individual worlds. He identifies both relationships and moral education as primary influences in their subscription to these worlds, while still maintaining that individual belief acts as the final perpetrator of a person’s reality. Ultimately, though, Jones places no blame. Instead, he illuminates what needs to change.

Jones's only critique of his characters is of their subscription to pre-existing systems. Through all his characters, especially Skiffington, Jones shows that a desire for guidance should not justify the continuation of a set social norm. Instead, each person should be taught their own worth and autonomy, and how to judge and create values for themselves. Instead of being satisfied with the map he has, Skiffington should question Broussard and strive for the best map possible. So although Priscilla insists, "i would hate to go from massa henry's place, i would hate all that not knowin again where in the world i was" (56), Jones would have his readers insist that an unknown world is better than a comfortably oppressive known one.

*I'm currently completing my final year towards a BSc in Microbiology and a BA in English, and I am very much looking forward to the chance to get back to my growing non-academic reading list! But that's not to say I haven't enjoyed my academic reading; this paper studies an excellent novel I read in English 310: The Known World. While reading the novel, I was impressed by Jones's innovative approach to writing a 20th-Century African-American slave narrative, and was excited to discuss how his choices explored the concept of human ownership. I was particularly fascinated by the way Jones's gestures away from the socio-historical moment of the novel toward the importance of understanding fundamental ethical principles. If you're feeling up for a complex but beautifully written narrative I highly recommend you read The Known World!*

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