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## **A Material Stratum: Black Bodies and Environmental Exploitation in Edward P. Jones' *The Known World***

Julia K. Woodward  
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### **Introduction**

In a rapidly accelerating era of global climate change, 'Anthropocene' has become a buzzword among scientists, policy-makers, activists, writers, and concerned citizens, a buzzword that gives verbal shape to a truth long recognized but rarely stated: humans have taken over the earth. The exact date at which the Anthropocene began, or what aspect of human activity it was that broke the proverbial camel's back, is still highly debated, but the general import of the idea is clear: we have reached a geological era in which the single most influential element is the human. Our presence and effect on earth has been carved into geological history; human interference can be seen in "analyses of air trapped in polar ice [that show] growing global concentrations of carbon dioxide and methane."<sup>1</sup> The Anthropocene shows up in the very dirt of our earth, a tangible, material stratum of environmental impact.

Recently, Kathryn Yusoff has begun to consider what else makes up the material foundations of the Anthropocene. What else has been crushed and pressed into the calcified layers of a degraded earth? What else has been relegated to a category of exploitable materiality? For Yusoff, the answer is clear: black bodies. In her short work *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, Yusoff explores the ways in which white colonialism has aligned the non-human and the black human together as a material property, a tool to be exploited in the name of capitalism and world-making. Richard Hardack underscores this alignment in his analysis of Edward P. Jones' 2003 novel *The Known World*, noting that: "whites sometimes didn't want to

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<sup>1</sup> Crutzen, Paul J., "Geology of Mankind," *Nature* 415 (2002): 23.

acknowledge that slaves were born of and taken from mothers and fathers who were enslaved, so they represented slaves as ‘growing,’ or sprouting from the earth, as if **they were part of nature itself**” [*emphasis added*].<sup>2</sup> This process of alignment and subsequent extraction is broken down usefully in Yusoff’s preface:

Another way to conceive this would be to understand Blackness as a historically constituted and intentionally enacted deformation in the formation of subjectivity, a deformation that presses an inhuman categorization and the inhuman earth into intimacy. This contact point of geographical proximity with the earth was constructed specifically as a node of extraction of properties and personhood ... The proximity of black and brown bodies to harm in this intimacy with the inhuman is what I am calling *Black Anthropocenes*. It is an inhuman proximity organized by historical geographies of extraction, grammars of geology, imperial global geographies, and contemporary environmental racism. It is predicated on the presumed absorbent qualities of black and brown bodies to take up the body burdens of exposure to toxicities and to buffer the violence of the earth. Literally stretching black and brown bodies across the seismic fault lines of the earth, Black Anthropocenes subtend White Geology as **a material stratum** [*emphasis added*].<sup>3</sup>

That is, black people have been “pressed into proximity” with the earth through centuries of white colonialism, and both have been conceived of as things to be exploited and extracted from. Yusoff understands black bodies as having been literally transformed into a material stratum to enable the Anthropocene. However, she also sees a hopeful potential praxis having emerged from this process, a way of remaking black selfhood in pursuit of survival: “At the same time, this forced intimacy with the inhuman was repurposed for survival and formed into a praxis for remaking other selves that were built in the harshest of conditions.”<sup>4</sup>

Jones foresees a similar praxis in *The Known World*. Taking his cues from the genre of the slave narrative, Jones constructs a story that examines the entirety of a life in slavery. Like

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<sup>2</sup> Hardack, Richard. “A House is Not a Home: Property Lines in Edward P. Jones’ *The Known World*” in *Critical Insights: The Slave Narrative*. Ed. by Kimberly Drake. Salem, 2014. Accessed January 31, 2022, [online.salempress.com](http://online.salempress.com).

<sup>3</sup> Yusoff, Kathryn. *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*. (University of Minnesota Press, 2018), xii.

<sup>4</sup> Yusoff, xii.

slave narratives such as those written by Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and Olaudah Equiano, *The Known World* is the story of the ‘life and times’ of Henry Townsend, a black slave-owner, beginning from his birth as a slave on the plantation of William Robbins, the wealthiest man in Manchester County, through his childhood, eventual freedom, growing wealth and status as a slave-owner, and ultimately, his death. That Jones is borrowing his form from the slave narrative is signaled by the very first lines of the novel, which begins with the chapter title “I - Liaison. The Warmth of Family. Stormy Weather.”<sup>5</sup> A common conceit of slave narratives, list-like chapter titles detail the events of each section of the narrative, each meaningful and/or pivotal moment in the life of the slave. Take for example, the first chapter title from Frederick Douglass’ third autobiography, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, which reads: “Chapter I - Author’s Birth: Author’s Place of Birth - Description of Country - Its Inhabitants - Genealogical Trees - Method of Counting Time in Slave Districts - Date of Author’s Birth - Names of Grandparents - Their Cabin - Home with Them” and so on.<sup>6</sup> Jones adapts this kind of summary of chapter contents, using the form but often changing the items included in the summary to reflect more personal and ambiguous events. Though Jones’ first chapter gives us much of the same background information indicated in Douglass’ title, Jones’ selection of “Liaison,” “Warmth of Family,” and “Stormy Weather” as his chapter bullet points indicates his interest in a story defined by relationships among humans (‘Liaison,’ ‘Family’) and between humans and nature (‘Stormy Weather’), rather than by the strict timeline of a single life. As such, *The Known World*, while ostensibly focused on Henry Townsend, is also inextricably linked to place, land, and nature; incorporates the narratives of many different residents of Manchester

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<sup>5</sup> Jones, Edward P. *The Known World*. (Amistad: An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Douglass, Frederick. *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*. (New York: Library Classics of the United States, Inc., 1994), 3.

County, including white slaveowners, white lawmen, poor whites, black slaves, free blacks, Native Americans; and plays around in time, eschewing the linear account of a life for a form that weaves in and out of the present, past, and future, and examines the ‘life of Henry Townsend’ even after Henry Townsend’s own death.<sup>7</sup>

For all these transmutations in form and scope, though - which work to redefine relationships between humans, nature, and time - Jones’ novel still centers on one of the most quintessential aspects of the slave narrative - the transition from slavery to freedom, or, as Yusoff phrases it, the remaking of black selfhood in pursuit of survival. Anticipating the ways in which Yusoff sees a new way of being in the world born from the forced relationships of black people and nature, Jones latches on to the slave-to-free aspect of slave narratives as a way to tell the story of this new mode of being, and how it comes to be. He seeks to understand not just how a given person gets from slavery to legal freedom (like Henry Townsend), but how some (like his character Alice Night) achieve a deeper and more meaningful freedom that suggests a way forward, a way out of the deformation, extraction, and exploitation of black bodies, and of the earth. *The Known World* illustrates the journey described by Yusoff, weaving the formation of Black Anthropocenes into narrative some fifteen years before she put the concept into words, and anticipating her hope for a new relationship with the world.

### **Forming Black Anthropocenes: Inhuman Earth**

Two primary assumptions undergird the historical formation of Yusoff’s Black Anthropocenes. One is that the earth is a lifeless entity, fundamentally different from the human,

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<sup>7</sup> For further elucidation, Richard Hardack puts together quite a comprehensive analysis of Jones’ variations on slave-narrative traditions in “A House is Not a Home” ([online.salempress.com](http://online.salempress.com)). My list of ‘transmutations’ here aligns with his in many of the tropes identified, though I focus on how they speak to Jones’ ideas about nature and time, whereas Hardack is primarily interested in questions of voice and authenticity.

and that it exists solely to be used by humans. The second is that some humans, too, are fundamentally different, and lesser - that is, less than human. Those who are less than human in this view - black people, among others - are simply objects, like the earth, objects that are there to serve the 'real' humans. Based on the first of these two assumptions, then, the initial step in the process of constructing what Yusoff terms White Geology is a solidification of a way of being in the world that is separate and above the non-human, including the very land and environment. From this perspective, the earth must be seen as a resource to be exploited and possessed by human industry and ingenuity. A white European concept of private property is one of the most obvious manifestations of this worldview, and is inextricable from preconceived ideas about the "proper" usage of land. For instance, one historical justification for the colonial seizing of Native American lands was the idea that indigenous peoples were *wasting* the natural resources they had been given by living on a subsistence, rather than a for-profit, capitalist basis. John Locke's 1690 treatise *Of Property*, for example, describes how land became property - through Western agricultural labor: "*As much Land as a Man Tills, Plants, Improves, Cultivates, and can use the Product of, so much is his Property. He by his Labour does, as it were, inclose it from the Common.*"<sup>8</sup> If lands were not being properly used in this way (tilled, planted, improved, cultivated, and for the generation of product and profit), Locke argued they could be claimed as property by anyone who would perform these labors, as European settler-colonists did on indigenous lands, what Jennifer Wenzel calls: "argument by encroachment: first a slow drift, then a sudden claim and consolidation of facts on the ground."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Locke, John. *Two Treatises of Government: A Critical Edition with an Introduction and Apparatus Criticus*. Ed. by Peter Laslett. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 2:32.

<sup>9</sup> Wenzel, Jennifer. "From Waste Lands to Wasted Lives: Enclosure as Aesthetic Regime and Property Regime" in *The Disposition of Nature: Environmental Crisis and World Literature*, 141-174. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020), 145.

Wenzel usefully notes the early European explorer mindset that understood America as *waste lands*, “the original raw material of capitalism and colonialism awaiting transformation into arable, cultivated, revenue-producing land.”<sup>10</sup> Wenzel shows how Locke’s conception of *waste* meant “unenclosed, unimproved land awaiting the infusion of human labor. For land to be left in that state of nature would be profligate (i.e., wasteful), contravening the intentions of the Creator who gifted the earth to ‘men in common’ to labor upon and make productive.”<sup>11</sup> Locke and his contemporaries believed nature and the earth were divine gifts; gifts that existed solely to serve humanity, that must be transformed into servants of man, God, and the so-called natural order: “The Earth, and all that is therein, is given to Men for the Support and Comfort of their being...all the Fruits it naturally produces, and Beasts it feeds, belong to Mankind in common.”<sup>12</sup> And, as Wenzel notes, “the engines of this transformation are enclosure and ‘improvement.’”<sup>13</sup> Enclosure, here, is the basis for ideas of private property. For Locke, man must own land, and if the non-human should be owned and used as private property, so too should man own and use the less-than-human. A reflection of this reasoning at work in American chattel slavery is evident in Jones’ novel.<sup>14</sup> Upset with his young son for missing an arranged visit to his parents, the newly-free Augustus Townsend has no recourse to chastise or change Henry’s behavior because he has no right to his son *as property*: “though Henry was his son, he was not yet his property

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<sup>10</sup> Wenzel, 142.

<sup>11</sup> Wenzel, 142.

<sup>12</sup> Locke, 2:26.

<sup>13</sup> Wenzel, 145.

<sup>14</sup> The scholarly debate over whether or not American chattel slavery was a capitalist or anti-capitalist (hinging on the idea that enslaved persons are not the same as a proletariat class) has a long history. In treating the system as absolutely intermixed with capitalism, I side with Beckert and Rockman who recently suggested that American chattel slavery and American capitalism grew up together and are inextricably linked, that there is no separate capitalist North and slave South, no use in trying to separate the American slave system from the capitalist American economy. I refer readers to their recent collection for a full explication of their evidence and argument: Beckert, Sven and Seth Rockman, eds. *Slavery’s Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016.

and so beyond his reach.”<sup>15</sup> In this worldview, only the property owner has the authority to determine the use of material property. Similarly, the proper person is responsible for the upbringing and disciplining of *human* property: not the father, but the property owner. As Katherine Bassard notes, “It doesn’t matter who fathered you, only who owns you.”<sup>16</sup>

Jones depicts both of these hegemonic ideas - land as property, and the proper use of that property - in *The Known World*. We see the basic concept of private property most enthusiastically utilized by William Robbins, the white slave-owning mentor to Henry Townsend, the black slave-master. Robbins speaks frequently about the value of the land he owns, and he passes that desire for land ownership onto Henry; in fact, facilitates Henry’s initial transition from property to property-owner: “When Henry, at twenty, bought his first piece of land from Robbins, he told his parents right off. The land was miles from where they lived but a short ride from Robbins’ plantation, though it was not connected. By the time he died he would own all the land between him and Robbins so that there was nothing separating what they owned.”<sup>17</sup> As Henry accumulates property - first land, then people - he becomes more aligned with a white way of being. Jones depicts how owning land moves Henry away from his black parents geographically and philosophically, and closer to his white mentor. In this way, Jones closely associates the concept of earth-as-property with a white colonialist worldview. He also recognizes that this way of life is definitionally unsustainable: “Henry had always said that he wanted to be a better master than any white man he had ever known. He did not understand that the kind of world he wanted to create was doomed before he had even spoken the first syllable of

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<sup>15</sup> Jones, 18.

<sup>16</sup> Bassard, Katherine Clay. “Imagining Other Worlds: Race, Gender, and the ‘Power Line’ in Edward P. Jones’ *The Known World*.” *African American Review* 42, no. 3-4 (2008): 408.

<sup>17</sup> Jones, 122.



the word *master*.”<sup>18</sup> Here, Jones critiques a white European mode of living that can *only* lead to destruction; destruction represented by Henry’s ultimate failure: he dies, his plantation falls apart, his slaves escape, and in many cases, go on to lead meaningful lives in freedom, away from a world dominated (and doomed) by its skewed understanding of subjectivity as inherently white.

Jones shows how the destructive conception of land as private property is inherently tied up with capitalist values that emphasize profit over sustainability. When Counsel, another white landowner, travels west, he remarks of the land he sees: “it was a place that might well sustain a man and his family, if sustain was just all he ever wanted.”<sup>19</sup> Implicit in the second clause of this sentence, and particularly in the use of the word *just*, is a condemnation of those who do not use their resources for profit and personal gain. Counsel is not interested in land that will sustain, but in land that will generate profit. Jones points out here that profiting is an inherent goal of a world-view that sees the earth only as an exploitable resource. To do more than “just” subsist requires exploitation and extraction.

On only the second page of the novel, Moses, Henry’s black disciple and overseer, describes a patch of land on the edge of the Townsend plantation as having “yielded nothing of value since the day his master bought it.”<sup>20</sup> Value here is defined as profit, or something that helps the plantation to increase profit, and is explicitly connected to money - he *bought* it. Caught up in Henry’s worldview, Moses cannot see how the value of this patch of “useless” land may actually be the place of refuge it provides for him, or may even lie in its simple existence, which Jones renders rather majestically as, “soft, blue grass that no animal would touch and

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<sup>18</sup> Jones, 64.

<sup>19</sup> Jones, 229.

<sup>20</sup> Jones, 2.

many trees that no one could identify...trees and their mighty summer leaves.”<sup>21</sup> “Trees no one could identify” signals a worth that has nothing to do with human influence or categorization. Though Moses misses it, Jones indicates to the reader through his language and through Moses’ very use of the space that this patch of woods is inherently valuable, not just a bit of inhuman land waiting for John Locke’s “transformation.” Jones thus critiques Locke’s worldview, the worldview of White Geology, where the earth is inhuman and ripe for exploitation, from the very opening moment of his novel.

### **Forming Black Anthropocenes: Inhuman Subjects**

As Yusoff importantly notes, it is just a small mental step from exploitation of and extraction from the non-human (the land) to exploitation of and extraction from the less-than-human (the black subject), and racialized chattel slavery is born.<sup>22</sup> Though slavery as an institution certainly predated John Locke and his theories of property, in its particular instantiation in seventeenth-century Europe and the Americas, colonizers justified mass enslavement through racialized hierarchies of the human that regarded people of color as inherently less-than. As Hardack observes, Jones “intimates that slavery was coterminous with the discovery and conceptual mapping of the new world.”<sup>23</sup> Jones reminds us throughout his novel that the discovery of a new world ripe for enclosure and exploitation (the world depicted in Sheriff Skiffington’s map of “The Known World”) within an already-existing system of racial slavery created the perfect storm for designating humans as property. “‘I had almost forgotten where I was,’ Winifred said, meaning the South, meaning the world of human property.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Jones, 3.

<sup>22</sup> Yusoff, 65-67.

<sup>23</sup> Hardack, [online.salempress.com](http://online.salempress.com).

<sup>24</sup> Jones, 34.

“Robbins said Patterson was doing nothing as property just up and walked away.”<sup>25</sup> A white colonial conception of black people as equivalent to property, or chattel, leads to centuries of dehumanization and exploitation - treating people as inhuman things, as a natural resource, and extracting every last breath of labor from black bodies before throwing them into the ground to become part of the material stratum subtending the Anthropocene. Wenzel corroborates the truth of this process, noting that transforming land from the seventeenth-century European concept of *waste* inherently meant excluding the people already on that land, “their previous lifeways and very presence often criminalized.”<sup>26</sup>

It is clear throughout Jones’ novel that white settlers have “enacted a deformation in subjectivity,” onto black bodies, as Yusoff suggests, and “criminalized their very presence,” as Wenzel argues. One of the most arresting instances of this deformation is the introduction of the character Minerva. Jones writes, “Counsel and his wife, with some discussion from his dying father, brought a wedding present for Winifred from North Carolina. They waited to present it until...Belle went out to where her maid was in the backyard and returned with a slave girl of nine years and had the girl, festooned with a blue ribbon, stand and then twirl about for Winifred.”<sup>27</sup> It is significant that Minerva’s name is not mentioned in this introduction. Jones shows how she has no personal identity, but is only a thing, an “it,” a nice wedding present wrapped in a pretty bow, akin to a tea kettle or a new set of bath towels. This is further underscored a few sentences later when Counsel’s wife speaks to Minerva: “She said to the wedding present, ‘say hello. Say hello to your mistress.’”<sup>28</sup> The contrast is clear in this sentence - Counsel’s wife is referred to using the proper personal pronoun “she”; Minerva is still an “it.”

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<sup>25</sup> Jones, 39.

<sup>26</sup> Wenzel, 142.

<sup>27</sup> Jones, 31.

<sup>28</sup> Jones, 32.

Thus, Jones demonstrates clearly the ways in which black people were robbed of subjectivity and treated only as objects through the language he uses to talk about Minerva and her mistress.

Jones also shows the criminalization of black presence in myriad ways - specifically, for example, in the kidnapping of Augustus Townsend and his subsequent sale back into slavery, the hamstringing of Moses for leaving the plantation without permission, the removal of Elias Freeman's ear for an attempted escape; and generally, through his depictions of the whole system of slave codes, papers, passes, laws, etc. Sheriff John Skiffington in particular emphasizes the criminalization of blackness when he performs the mental gymnastics needed to enact his law enforcement duties upon black bodies despite his discomfort with owning people. Skiffington owns Minerva, but he thinks of her as a daughter, enabling himself to both own her and to nightly promise God never to own a slave. Skiffington forms a slave patrol in his office as Sheriff and takes pride in enacting the law of the South even as he plans for a future in the North, away from the institution of slavery. "Despite vowing never to own a slave, Skiffington had no trouble doing his job to keep the institution of slavery going."<sup>29</sup> When Elias Freeman makes his unsuccessful bid for freedom, Skiffington presides over the removal of the would-be runaway's ear, determined to enforce the law upon a black body that is always already criminal. "A runaway slave," Skiffington reasons, "was, in fact, a thief since he had stolen his master's property - himself."<sup>30</sup> Elias cannot legally exist outside of his master's slave plantation. He can be only one of two things - a slave or a criminal. Thus, black bodies in Jones' novel, free or slave, are not simply objects, but criminal ones.

A significant consequence of objectification and criminalization is lack of reverence - that is, we do not care for things as we care for humans, or for criminals as we do for citizens -

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<sup>29</sup> Jones, 43.

<sup>30</sup> Jones, 94.

and subsequent vulnerability to harm. Throughout Jones' novel, black characters live a precarious existence, liable to be beaten, injured, sold, overworked, maimed, discarded, kidnapped, or killed at any moment, and with no recourse for justice or consequences for white perpetrators. It is in this sense that black bodies become pressed into the material substratum of the earth, literally and figuratively holding up the Anthropocene. This is especially true in the American South, as Jones illustrates in *The Known World*. Black bodily harm is omnipresent in the novel, as it was in the historical South, and the ultimate consequence is a return to the earth. "Merle believed in feeding his workers plenty of food, but they gave it all back in the field, from sunup to sundown, and no one that year gave up more than Luke did. After Luke died in the field..."<sup>31</sup> Here, the slave Luke pours out his life's energy into the earth, and when he dies, he and the earth go from being treated the same to being literally the same. Luke becomes a tangible part of the material stratum that, as Yusoff says, subtends White Geology and the Anthropocene. Jones gives a similar example later on in the novel: "Stennis had dumped the dead child, Abundance, on the side of the road long before they hit North Carolina...dropping the girl's body in the weeds."<sup>32</sup> The slave girl's name, Abundance, is particularly telling in this instance: the slave system has killed the idea of a natural Abundance, opting instead for violence, degradation, and capitalist exploitation. Jones shows how it is only on the backs of people like Luke and Abundance that a white capitalist world can thrive.

### **A Way Forward**

At the same time, however, that Jones fills his novel with examples of land and black bodies categorized as tools for exploitation, he also points to a kind of hope that comes from this destruction, a remaking of black selfhood that not only allows black humans to survive amongst

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<sup>31</sup> Jones, 103.

<sup>32</sup> Jones, 275.

“the harshest conditions,” but also speaks to the ultimate possibility of a different way of being in the world, one that does not rely on material extraction and death. This remaking is intimately bound up with a different kind of relation to the earth, one that is harmonious rather than extractive. The clearest embodiment of this idea that Jones gives us is the transformation of the character Stamford, a misogynistic and mean womanizer who is re-born into a philanthropic father figure after a bizarre encounter with the natural world. Oddly compelled to pick blueberries for two hungry children in the middle of a thunderstorm, Stamford finds himself seeking out lightning, hoping to die. “The lightning had not moved, and as Stamford ran toward it, the lightning flowed down to the ground so that it was now a line of fire laid out across the grass, which did not burn. Stamford ran faster. When he was some five feet from the lightning and the woods, the lightning shot off away from him and stabbed itself into another tree, splitting that tree in half.”<sup>33</sup> In this passage the lightning exercises agentic capacity, rather than acting simply according to its physical, electrical properties, and actively chooses to spare Stamford’s life. Stamford and the lightning are united together in their categorization as inhuman, but that very unity allows them both new agency and a new understanding of the world. After this experience, Stamford leaves behind his indolent womanizing and goes on to found a home for orphaned children of color in the post-Civil War south. Jones shows how his intimacy with the natural world - the way in which he is literally placed within the same category of the inhuman, as Yusoff points out - opens up a space for a new kind of self-hood that emphasizes compassion over self-interest, and allows Stamford to survive, and even thrive, in a society that is hostile to his existence.

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<sup>33</sup> Jones, 204.

The ultimate hope, then, that both Jones and Yusoff express, is the possibility of an environmental rebirth that starts with those voices that have been living in (forced) intimacy with the earth. Jones expresses this hope subtly early on in *The Known World* when his characters engage in hopeful activities that imply possibilities for changed relationships with nature: “Behind them and way off to the left, there was a creek that had never seen a fish, but slaves fished in it nevertheless, practicing for the day when there would be better water.”<sup>34</sup> Most obviously, though, Jones expresses this hope through Alice Night, the madwoman in the woods. Contrary to the familiar Victorian trope of the madwoman in the attic, Alice is not doomed to destruction, nor is she really mad.<sup>35</sup> Alice attains intimate knowledge of the earth through a veneer of madness that allows her to wander unharmed, and this, rather than destroying her, quite literally sets her free. It is her knowledge of the land that allows her to successfully escape slavery. This unlikely escape in itself would be a powerful argument for a reconceived relationship to the natural world, but Jones takes it one symbolic step further, indicating the truly generative and transformative possibilities of this reconception.

Early on in the novel, we learn that Sheriff Skiffington has an enormous map hanging in his jail, a copy of an actual historical map entitled “The Known World” created by Hans Waldseemuller. The map shows the entire world from a Western perspective - that which the West has claimed to discover - and is covered over with a legend that denotes what natural resources can be found and extracted from each place in the world, things like gold in the American West, or sugar cane in the Caribbean, or, tellingly, slaves in southern Africa. Such a map could only come from a worldview that is predominantly about extraction, about taking and

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<sup>34</sup> Jones, 18.

<sup>35</sup> For further discussion of the trope of the madwoman in the attic, see the seminal work of Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar: *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the 19th Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979.

making use of what the land has to give. And, of course, the presence of slaves as a natural resource on the map underscores the white colonialist understanding of people of color as part and parcel of the category of the inhuman. To emphasize the long-term futility of this worldview, Jones describes how the world shown on the map is distorted, “The land of North America on the map was smaller than it was in actuality, and where Florida should have been, there was nothing. South America seemed the right size, but it alone of the two continents was called ‘America.’”<sup>36</sup> This distortion reflects the distorted white capitalist view of the natural world as something other, something that is only an inanimate, non-agentic object.

At the end of the novel, Jones contrasts this map - with its distortions and emphasis on political borders and available resources - with Alice’s map, an enormous multimedia work of art that she creates and displays in Philadelphia, which shows her very different conception of the earth. Alice’s map is intimate and detailed, indicating a close relationship to the natural world, and cares nothing for the extraction of resources or the drawing of political boundaries. It is a different way of being in and with the world made visual. Calvin describes the map in a letter to his sister as:

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... But a ‘map’ is such a poor word for such a wondrous thing. It is a map of life made with every kind of art man has ever thought to represent himself. Yes, clay. Yes, paint. Yes, cloth. There are no people on this ‘map,’ just all the houses and barns and roads and cemeteries and wells in our Manchester. It is what God sees when He looks down on Manchester.<sup>37</sup>

This map of the known world represents a very different kind of knowing the world. For one, it is made up of many different types of materials, both natural and man-made, emphasizing interconnectedness and harmony. And it is telling that Calvin describes the map as “man

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<sup>36</sup> Jones, Edward P. *The Known World*, 174.

<sup>37</sup> Jones, 384.



representing himself” when in fact the map de-centers the human. There are no people on the map. Evidence of their existence is there - the buildings, etc. - but they are not the primary focus, they do not have to be first and foremost, or superior to the rest of what is represented. Of course, there is a second part to Alice’s map, which hangs on the Western wall: “This Creation may well be even more miraculous than the one of the County...There is nothing missing, not a cabin, not a chicken, not a horse. Not a single person is missing. I suspect that if I were to count the blades of grass, the number would be correct as it was once when the creator of this work knew that world.”<sup>38</sup> Although this second map depicts actual humans, Jones notes how it, too, de-centers the human. No human is missing, true, but neither is anything else. Equally as important as the humans are to this world, are the horses, the chickens, the slaves, the masters, the very blades of grass. They are numbered and known individually - a kind of existence that we normally reserve for those within the human category. Alice’s maps reflect a truer, more compassionate knowing of the world, rather than the distorted understanding of the Waldseemuller map. And in this knowing, the Creation (Jones meaningfully employs the capital C) - the world - is what matters, not John Locke’s Creator, who makes man in his image and the world for that man’s use.

## **Conclusion**

Alice’s two maps, which frame the closing of Jones’ novel, represent a remade understanding of the world; an understanding that Yusoff and Jones recognize as transformative, and hopeful. In *The Known World*, Jones renders the process that Yusoff describes, the process by which the world has come to the brink of ecological disaster (or perhaps even past the brink) into a narrative that clearly demonstrates how the white, colonial, capitalist worldview has exploited that which it considers inhuman to the point that those inhuman objects have become a

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<sup>38</sup> Jones, 385.

literal, material foundation stone for the Anthropocene. We need only look at the fates of Henry and Alice to see the critique of this prevailing worldview implicit in Jones' novel. While Alice, who follows a completely different path from Henry - a path where success is defined by relationships to nature and to other humans, rather than by capitalist clout - thrives and creates in freedom; Henry dies and destroys in slavery. But the narrative is not a doomsday prediction of the deaths of the Henrys of the world, but an assertion of hope, an effort to see how the world might be transformed, and to begin that transformation. The novel, no more than Yusoff or myself, cannot provide an answer to the question of what can be done; what can be done to repair these injustices, as they have been wreaked upon the black body and the body of the earth for centuries, but it does offer up a space from which to begin the discussion. A re-making of the world is possible; but it must come *from the world*, from a reconceptualization of how we know the world, from the voices of Alices who have lived in intimacy with the earth, not from long-dead, white, male, European mapmakers who have destroyed it.

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