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# Their Eyes Were God's: A Counter-Cartography of "The Known World"

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**Jonathan Howard**

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## Their Eyes Were God's: A Counter-Cartography of "The Known World"

What makes a map so useful is its genius of omission.  
It is reality uncluttered, pared to its essence,  
stripped of all but the essentials.

—Phillip C Muehrcke

Cartography has a confession to make. After completing his world atlas in 1594, Cornelis D. Jode decided "Speculum Orbis Terrae" (Mirror of the World) was the title best suited for his cartographic masterpiece. And so this famous cartographer provided the initial strain for what has since become an ever-growing web of longitudinal and latitudinal lies. Naming his map thusly, Jode ironically blasphemes the very Earth of which he and his fellow cartographers are supposed disciples. His insistence upon cartography's objectivity, that maps, in spite of all they must omit to arrive at their final image, totally, naturally and neutrally reflect the world as a mirror would, is a deception of tragic implications, particularly for the slaves of Manchester County. Perhaps it was with a guilty conscience, then, that cartographers contrived the confession contained in the title of that segment of a map that divulges the meaning of its symbols: the "legend."

Edward P. Jones, however, would have a more explicit confession of cartography's erring claim to objectivity, even at the threatening point of his meticulous pen. Frustrated with the criminal omissions contained in maps, Jones writes *The Known World*, a novel of meticulous, if (in the opinion of some) exhausting, narration that strives to tell every story and omit nothing. In order to call attention to cartography's mounting lies, Jones both literally and literarily arrests cartography's canonical masterpiece, Hans Waldseemuller's 1507 world atlas entitled "Universalis Cosmographia" (The Entire Cosmography) and popularly known as the "The Known World." Hanging "The Known World" upon the wall of the Manchester County jail, Jones interrogates the first ever

visual representation of America about its implication in the ideological foundations of American slavery.<sup>1</sup>

## LEGEND

There are several maps throughout *The Known World*, but none more peculiar and unconventional than William Robbins' home, from which the structure of this paper is derived. Robbins is the most prominent slave owner in Manchester County and his daughter, Patience, executes the novel's most unusual act of cartography.

The downstairs of his mansion his daughter called the South and the upstairs she called the North. "Go to the East, Mama," Patience, the daughter, would say years later on that day Dora came to the mansion. It was the day Patience thought William Robbins was near death. "Go to the East and I will seek you out there. Please Mama. Please sweetheart..." The two daughters had never seen each other before that day. (119-20)

Families live in homes. When Robbins constructs his—a cartographic act in its own right to the extent that it is an organization of space—he makes a vital omission since he must leave in order to visit "a black woman and the two children he had with her." (20) But Robbins' omission of the rest of his family is not to be mistaken for their absence. They occupy that section of the house that Patience comes to call the "West." Years later Patience shows her half-sister, Dora, to the room her omission had already been saving for her, revising her father's cartography with her own counter-cartography.

In the manner of Patience's counter-cartography, then, this paper divides itself into the four orientations of the compass. Beginning in the East and proceeding clockwise, the East, where Patience sends her mother, will feature a close reading of Hans Waldseemuller's "The Known World." The atlas will be established as a site of the omission and distortion of black humanity, and its over-looked role in the formation of

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<sup>1</sup> "The Known World" was the first map to feature the word "America."

American slavery will also be explored. The South, that geographic address slavery, will detail precisely how the visual dehumanization of Africans contained in Waldseemüller's atlas creates a world of slavery. For this purpose, it will consider the execution of democracy in the antebellum period as an extradiegetic parallel to Manchester County once it is transferred to the judicial supervision of the democratically inclined sheriff John Skiffington. The West, the site of Patience's counter cartography, will perform a close reading of the map that concludes the novel as well as divulge the counter-cartographic method of its author, a fugitive slave named Alice Night. Finally, the essay will conclude in the North, the geographic address of liberty, where the end of slavery's jurisdiction signals possibility for the recuperation of freedom.

## **EAST**

There, on the wall of the Manchester County Jail, hangs history's first cartographic illustration of America. Han Waldseemüller's canonical masterpiece was printed in St. Die, France in 1507 on twelve individual sheets of woodblock that could be assembled into a wall map.<sup>2</sup> Jones is precise in his rendering of the map in everything but the year he chooses to uncover it. After its printing in 1507, Waldseemüller's revolutionary view of the world fell into obscurity. For more than 300 years, the only remaining copy lay dormant on the shelves of a German library until its re-discovery in 1901. Thus, the "The Known World" was ironically unknown in the antebellum age in which Jones chooses to resuscitate it. In this way, Jones manipulates history's distribution of existence to render an actual historical map a piece of fiction, no more real in its time

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<sup>2</sup> Hessler, John W. *The Naming of America: Martin Waldseemüller's 1507 World map and the Cosmographiae Introductio*. Library of Congress, 2008.

than the fictional county over which it presides. A fictional truth claim, then, the map is ripe for the employment of postmodern deconstructionist methodologies.<sup>3</sup>

This conceptual leap—that a map can and should be interpreted as a piece of fiction—is easy to make when, as is the case with Waldseemüller’s map, we find literal text embedded in the map itself. (Image 1) Furthermore, a literary close reading of this map, in particular, is encouraged since its primary influences, by Waldseemüller’s own articulation, are literary:

Few will deny that it is also profitable to learn from books the location of lands...Therefore to the best of my ability I have studied with the help of others the books of Ptolemy from a Greek manuscript and, having added the information from the four voyages of Amerigo Vespucci, I have drawn a map of the whole world...<sup>4</sup>

Here we learn that Waldseemüller’s map is complete with its own bibliography, one populated with unquestionably subjective sources that disavow his claim to the production of “true and precise geographic knowledge.”<sup>5</sup> And as we begin to analyze the fictional elements of Waldseemüller’s atlas, we may situate his map within the literary traditions represented by the literatures mentioned above: Greek mythology and the travel narrative.

Deconstruction encourages the postmodern reader to read in the margins of the text. Fittingly then, we begin our textual reading of “The Known World” from its margins. There, immediately evidencing the influences of Greek mythology, we see the Four Winds—Boreas, Eurus, Notus, and Zephyrus—teeming about the Olympian Clouds

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<sup>3</sup> Cartographer J.B. Harley should be credited with introducing the map as an object needing the attention of deconstruction. In “Deconstructing the Map,” he writes, “Deconstruction urges us to read between the lines of the map— ‘in the margins of the text’ —and through its tropes to discover the silences and contradictions that challenge the apparent honesty of the image. We begin to learn that cartographic facts are only facts within a specific cultural perspective. We start to understand how maps, like art, far from being ‘a transparent opening to the world,’ are but ‘a particular human way...of looking at the world.’

<sup>4</sup> Hessler, John W. (72)

<sup>5</sup> Hessler, John W. (35)

that constitute the map's periphery. (Image 2) Centrally located and visually deified in the Olympian clouds, we also find the portraits of Amerigo Vespucci and Claudius Ptolemy, each depicted beside a sub-map of the New and Old World respectively. (Images 3-4) Thus, Waldseemuller credits Vespucci and Ptolemy with the discovery of the parts of the world that he so famously synthesizes in "The Known World." Deified in this manner, Vespucci and Ptolemy occupy a seat of power otherwise reserved for Zeus in the context of Greek mythology.

In addition to his seat of power, it seems that Ptolemy and Vespucci also appropriate Zeus' unique ability of parthenogenesis. According to Greek mythology, Zeus autonomously births Athena from his head in a nativity scene evacuated of maternity. Similarly, Waldseemuller's world is visually constructed as the posterity of the joint parentage of Ptolemy and Vespucci. It is conceived in the union of their cartographic knowledge, the sub-maps we behold in the center of the map, and delivered through the mouth of the North Wind, which is interestingly depicted as a type of birth canal. The lines extending from the mouth of the North Wind, then, may be conceptualized as longitudinal umbilical cords joining the creators to their creation. (Image 5) Thus, Vespucci and Ptolemy's conception of the world, like Zeus' conception of Athena, is an achievement of the mind and not the phallus. "The Known World" is not the conception of nature, but rather the invention of human reason such so that reason is constructed as a creational force, a sentiment consistent with the intellectual currents of the European Renaissance and the burgeoning Scientific Revolution.

From the margins of the text alone, we may already conclude that Waldseemuller's map accomplishes anything but the objective production of scientific



knowledge. As we extend our analysis further into the map, we acquire further evidence against Waldseemuller's erring claim to objectivity. Within the body of the map one may distill the visual rhetoric of white supremacy, which underlies the organization of the map's iconography. First, by visually constructing Ptolemy and Vespucci as the founding fathers of the entire world, the majority of the world's inhabitants (indeed, those who would not claim Ptolemy and Vespucci for their fathers and vice versa) are orphaned and excluded from what the map discursively isolates as a supreme strand of human subjectivity.

Waldseemuller further articulates the supremacy of whiteness in the discrepancy of detail he affords white and non-white geographies and persons. In the Southern tip of Africa, we notice the only other humans featured in Waldseemuller's map besides Vespucci and Ptolemy. In comparison, these Africans are depicted much smaller and in far less detail than Vespucci and Ptolemy. They are naked and equipped with bows. Little detail is afforded to their faces and they all go nameless (Image 6). This disparity is not surprising since it is consistent with the representational methods of Waldseemuller's primary source, *The First Four Voyages of Amerigo Vespucci*.

They eat little flesh except human flesh: for your Magnificence must know that herein they are so inhuman that they outdo every custom even of beasts: for they eat all their enemies whom they kill or capture, as well females and males, with so much savagery, that merely to relate it appears a horrible thing...and this your Magnificence may take for certain, that their other barbarous customs are such that expression is too weak for the reality.<sup>6</sup>

Vespucci insists that Native Americans are "inhuman" cannibals. Elsewhere he adds that "their arms are bows and arrows."<sup>7</sup> In this way, Amerigo creates an authentic strand of

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<sup>6</sup> Vespucci, Amerigo. *The First Four Voyages of Amerigo Vespucci*. London: Bernard Quatrich, 1885. (13)

<sup>7</sup> Vespucci, Amerigo. (8)

humanity that Native Americans are not only excluded from, but also to which they are a threat. It is in accordance with Vespucci's threatening representation of non-whites, then, that Waldseemuller equips his Africans with bows and portrays them as inhuman savages. Waldseemuller also seems to inherit Vespucci's naming tendencies. Throughout the duration of Vespucci's narrative not a single Native American is named, while Vespucci and his conquistador party have names aplenty. Similarly, Waldseemuller's Africans lack the luxury of the nametags afforded Ptolemy and Vespucci. (Images 3-4,6)

Waldseemuller also extends this unequal distribution of names to his representation of non-white geographic spaces. For instance, we observe that Europe is portrayed with tremendous detail and covered extensively in lines and names. But this commitment to detail and naming wavers substantially with increasing distance from Europe and most rapidly with respect to Africa and the New World. Indeed, it seems Waldseemuller believed Africa and the New World had no need for names superseding the need of future colonizers to speak of their future conquests. Thus, Waldseemuller named the New World after the subjects who discovered it and not the subjects who lived there.

In the place of a more informed name or more names in general, the cartographer chooses instead to include an inventory of America's precious metals. In a text box near the continent he writes, "Here a greater amount of gold has been found than any other metal,"<sup>8</sup> cartographically reiterating Vespucci's claim that, "we saw nothing in the land of much profit, except some show of gold."<sup>9</sup> Thus, in our excavation of the underlying rhetoric of Waldseemuller's fictional representation of the world, we observe not only the

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<sup>8</sup> Hessler, John W. (13)

<sup>9</sup> Vespucci, Amerigo. (13)

rhetoric of white supremacy, but also a corresponding objectification and depreciation of Africa and the New World.

Another feature of Vespucci's narrative that may have inspired Waldseemuller's sparing cartographic depiction of non-white persons and geographies is the explorer's recording keeping. After a skirmish with the indigenous peoples, in one of many similar scenes, Vespucci writes, "There were killed of them about 15 or 20, and many were left wounded: of ours 5 were wounded, and all escaped death."<sup>10</sup> The calculation of the European wounded is exact while that of the Native American dead allows a margin of error of up to five lives. Thus, Vespucci suggests that mathematical rigor and detail should favor whites and waver with respect to the non-whites. Perhaps it was in adherence to this mathematical principle that Waldseemuller failed to account for the southern tip of Africa (which had only recently been discovered) in his cartographic projections. Looking again upon the African continent, we notice that Africa still has one foot in non-existence. Its geography spills over into the otherwise un-interrupted confines of Earth, not only visually reiterating the inhumanity of nonwhite persons, but even going so far as to dismiss them as extra-terrestrial. Furthermore, that a professional map could be printed with such a blatant error demonstrates the general disregard Waldseemuller and his readership possessed for Africa and its peoples. (Image 7)

Thus, we may produce the following summation of Waldseemuller's cartographic method: the interpretation of travel and academic literatures to produce a representation of the world that selectively privileges whiteness in its visual organization and distribution of geographic detail. But, perhaps, more alarming than Waldseemuller's cartographic method is his utter reliance upon Vespucci's narrative to locate America in

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<sup>10</sup> Vespucci, Amerigo. (15)

space. The precise latitudinal and longitudinal coordinates of America used in Waldseemuller's map are taken directly from Vespucci. Invoking Harley's assertion that maps are a "particularly human way of looking at the world," Waldseemuller's particular perception of America is viewed entirely through Vespucci's textual lens. Considering the conclusion to the first of Vespucci's four voyages, this is particularly alarming and regretful for the slaves of Manchester County:

We thereupon made sale for Spain with 222 captive slaves: and reached the port of Cadiz on the 15 day of October 1498, where we were well received and sold our slaves. Such is what befell me, most noteworthy, in this my first voyage.<sup>11</sup>

Interestingly much more precise in his calculation of enslaved Native Americans than dead ones, Vespucci arrives in the Americas with enough irons to enslave at least 222 captives. We must ask ourselves, then, what base number of shackles a ship must eclipse before it is to be considered a slave ship. If we agree that 222 are sufficient, then the cartographic conception of America, that document locating her within both geographic space and, more significantly, the imaginations of her future colonizers, derives from what is in essence the documentation of a slave trade. It is no wonder, then, that the particular way of looking at the world forwarded by Waldseemuller's map hangs so ominously upon the prison wall of a slave-holding county.

## **SOUTH**

Early in *The Known World*, the democratically inclined John Skiffington is selected to be the new sheriff of Manchester County. For reasons to be further explored, an antebellum America divided over the enterprise of slavery provides an extradiegetic

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<sup>11</sup> Vespucci, Amerigo. (23)

parallel for Skiffington. In becoming the new sheriff of Manchester County, Skiffington assumes the judicial guardianship of a slave-holding county. Yet, the sheriff promises God that he and his “family will not own slaves,” (43) a moral aversion that is materially expressed by his endeavors to keep another promise, this time to his wife, to move to the North. Like the thesis and antithesis of democracy and slavery in antebellum America, then, Skiffington’s competing loyalties place him in a dialectical conflict, the resolution of which reveals Jones’ own suspicions of whether America, in spite of her war, ever truly sided with freedom.

In spite of Skiffington’s moral and geographic ambitions, he dies a Southern slave owner. How is it that Skiffington he so grossly violates both his promises? Through his deployment of cartography, Jones suggests that the compromise of Skiffington’s promises is ultimately the sedition of a map, the very same map which is featured in the East of this paper and hangs so ominously on the wall of the Manchester County jail.

Skiffington’s promises, to both God and his wife, are not broken in one definitive gesture, but rather gradually in a series of compromises. But before detailing these compromises and explaining how they derive from Waldseemuller’s map, it is fruitful to consider the compromises featured on America’s political resume in the antebellum period, since these parallel Skiffington’s own compromises. In so many words, America reiterates Skiffington’s promise to God. It is only after declaring herself “one nation under God” that America pledges herself to the provision of “liberty and justice for all.” Implicit, then, in the very phrase responsible for creating Americans is a promise that the American national “family will not own slaves.” Nevertheless, both Skiffington and America are enlisted in the preservation of the same institution to which they have (at

least rhetorically) a moral aversion. For antebellum America, this liminal position encourages America to make a series of compromises between her pro and anti-slavery factions, two of which Jones reimagines cartographically.

The first of these compromises is contained within the insurance policy of the playfully named “*Atlas* Life, Casualty and Assurance Company.” After enduring a rash of runaway slaves, Caldonia, the widowed mistress of the Townsend plantation, settles on an insurance policy stipulating that “For a total of just one dollar every month Caldonia would receive three-fifths the value of any runaway slave.” (356) That *Atlas* constructs African-Americans as three-fifths human signifies upon the infamous Three-Fifths Compromise. Recalling the mathematical imprecision Waldseemuller affords non-white persons and geographies, one wonders whether America, in miscalculating the African’s humanity, wasn’t simply realizing the discriminating niche created for her by her first visual representation. For America’s geographic roots were planted in the soil of a world that systematically undervalues Africans. Thus, one may read the Three-Fifths Compromise as a simple instance of maturity, America all grown up.

Jones reimagines another of America’s compromises within the innocent act of cartography performed by Barnum Kinsey, a slave patroller, and his son, Mathew. Jones writes:

Days before he and his family left the county forever, one of his sons, Matthew showed his father where they were going, took his father’s finger and traced the route from Virginia to Missouri. “A long way,” Barnum said. “Yep,” the boy said. (304)

Here, Jones signifies upon the Missouri Compromise of 1820, which stipulated that, with the exception of Missouri, slavery in the Louisiana Territory would be prohibited north of the southern border of Missouri. However, if we perform some replacement of names the

actual historical compromise likely proceeded very similarly. Let us imagine Mathew as the United States Congress and the finger he takes as that of America's founding cartographic fathers, Hans Waldseemuller and Amerigo Vespucci. Read this way, when the unrecognized cartographers seated in Congress penciled in the "long way" of slavery featured in the Missouri Compromise, they traced the dehumanizing and depreciating lines of their cartographic fathers. In doing so they exemplify how the visual organization of the world on a map may be related casually to the organization of the world in reality.

To understand this last point, we must consider the map as a geo-ontological declaration or global biography. Through its visual representation of the earth's geography, the map convinces its reader that "the world is this way." Harley writes:

Maps, it is assumed, are statements of geographical fact; they are produced by neutral technologies; they just are. Maps have been thoroughly naturalized within our society; they are natural objects.<sup>12</sup>

Maps are as the world is natural, objective and true. The ideological power wielded by a map, then, is immense, since its representation of the world will orient and direct people's actions within it. Thus, we begin to recognize the peril of the presence of Waldseemuller's map on the wall of the county jail in which Skiffington works. Day after day, sheriff Skiffington gazes into a map that has been demonstrated to articulate a visual declaration of the inhumanity of Africans. And he trusts it with the unquestioning trust one places in a mirror. When offered a more accurate map, a "map of today," he declares, "I'm happy with what I got." (174) The implications of Skiffington's unquestioning trust in maps are reflected in Foucault's mirror. In his famous essay "Of other Spaces," Foucault writes:

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<sup>12</sup> Harley, J.B. "Deconstructing the Map." *Cartographica*. 26.2 (1989).

In the mirror I see myself, there where I am not...From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze that is, as it were directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and reconstitute myself there where I am.<sup>13</sup>

As Skiffington gazes upon “The Known World” his democratic leanings are subjected to the dehumanizing illustration of Africans contained in Waldseemuller’s atlas. Believing the map’s reflection of the world to be true, he sees himself there where he has promised he morally isn’t and physically will not be, that is, within a world of slavery. Proceeding with Foucault’s paradigm, from his reflection within the map, Skiffington begins to direct his eyes back toward himself to reconstitute himself there where he is. This process of reconstitution, oriented from within an ideological justification for slavery, spoils Skiffington’s original moral and geographic ambitions. Over the duration of the narrative, then, Skiffington reconstitutes his promises in such a way that evidences his visual consumption of Waldseemuller’s particular way of looking at the world. We observe precisely this when Skiffington seems to contract “The Known World’s” discriminating naming practices.

Once Skiffington realizes that Mildred, a former slave, is housing a fugitive slave, his moral convictions are placed in direct and unavoidable conflict with his responsibility as sheriff to preserve slavery, creating his own personal civil war. When Skiffington orders Mildred to deliver the fugitive, he forgets her name. Trying to remember her husband’s name, he notices that he has forgotten his as well. The carelessness of Skiffington’s memory recalls Waldseemuller’s failure to name the Africans in his map. It is only natural that after years of looking at the nameless depiction of Africans on his

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<sup>13</sup> Foucault, Michel. "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias." *Rethinking Architecture*. Ed. Edmund Leach. London: Routledge, 1997.



prison wall, Skiffington's would forget that Mildred and Augustus had names. Indeed, (just as it was easy for Vespucci to slaughter nameless Native Americans, and just as it was easy for Europe to colonize the sparsely named geographies on their maps) it would be easier to shoot Mildred while she went unarmed with the humanity in her name.

When Counsel, who accompanied Skiffington in order to retrieve the fugitive slave, commands Mildred to "surrender the goddamn property," Skiffington says:

"How many times have I told you not to take the name of the Lord in vain? How many times, Counsel?" He had opened his mouth too much and the *air* came in and pounded the tooth's nerves. Skiffington turned back to Mildred...The nerves all about the tooth pounded back, and Skiffington forced his words through a nearly closed mouth. "I have not come all this way to be denied by a—by a nigger. Do you hear me, Mildred? No nigger will stand between me and my duty." (365)

Since he chastises Counsel for taking the Lord's name in vain, we may assume this particular transgression bothers Skiffington enough not to do it himself. Thus, by rebuking Counsel, Skiffington indirectly reiterates his promise to not own slaves since he would not vainly mention the Lord's name in relation to a promise he didn't intend to keep. But by making such a promise in a county over which Waldseemuller's visual justification for slavery presides, Skiffington opens his mouth "too much." But what feature of Waldseemuller's map is capable of producing the *air* which compromises Skiffington's speech and, by extension, his promise, in the way we observe in this passage? Let us recall again the four winds teeming about the margins of "The Known World." Perhaps the air of slavery produced from these found their way into Skiffington's mouth to close it and physically conform his speech to its hateful rhetoric—blow away the names of black Americans and replace them with racist epithets.

The scene above concludes with Skiffington's murder of Mildred and, in a plot twist, his murder at the hands of Counsel. Thus, Skiffington's internal civil war resolves on the side of slavery. The well-intentioned sheriff never reaches the North and dies a slave owner (he accepts a slave girl as a wedding present that he intended to free upon reaching the North).

## **WEST**

Though they would not have the academic certification to show for it, perhaps no one in the antebellum South practiced astronomy more rigorously than slaves, for whom certain stars were the astronomic antonyms of slavery and would bear them to freedom if they could wade deep enough. And no one in Manchester County (or St. Die, France in 1507 for that matter) practiced cartography more meticulously than Alice Night. Having deconstructed "The Known World" and observed its compromise of Skiffington's promises to both God and his wife, we grow suspicious of its cartographic method and its particular representation of the world. Thus, we direct our attention to Alice's counter-cartography.

Prior to an analysis of Night's map, it is useful to distill the counter-cartographic method that produces it, paying particular attention to its crucial deviations from the conventions of cartography exemplified by Waldseemuller. To this purpose, we fittingly begin with Night's recuperation of an inhuman omission. Crucial to Alice's counter-cartography is her ability to wander freely about the Townsend plantation. She purchases this right through her performance of madness.

Alice could describe everything about the Sunday the mule kicked her in the head and sent all common sense flying out of her. No one questioned her because her story was so vivid, so sad—another slave without freedom and now she had a mind so addled she wandered in the night like a cow

without a bell. No one knew enough about the place she had come from to know that her former master was terrified of mules and would not have them on his place, had even banished pictures and books about mules from his little world.

Here, Alice recuperates what her master had systematically erased from the world—mules—and integrates it into a performance of madness that allows her to wander in the night and eventually escape to the North. In this regard, Alice constructs a cartographic method inimical to omissions. Thus, the genius of Alice’s cartography is not omission, as Muehrcke asserts, but rather her omission of omission. The fact that the omission is inhuman is also significant since blacks in Manchester County and Waldseemuller’s atlas were also considered inhuman. Thus, Alice’s recuperation of the omitted mule anticipates her resuscitation of the humanity of slaves omitted from “The Known World” and the fictional county over which it presides.

Furthermore, that Alice has only “half a mind” is significant when we consider her antebellum peers with similar aspirations of freedom. In 1851, American physician Samuel A. Cartwright patented the mental illness *drapetomania*, defined as “an irrestrainable propensity to run away.”<sup>14</sup> In the context of antebellum America, then, freedom is diseased. Thus, the madness of Night, who escapes to freedom and arguably knows freedom best, is fitting. But lest we reduce Alice’s feat to some spontaneous act of intuition, we must also acknowledge her cartography as an act of reason. The rigorous geographic scholarship she performs under the guise of her mad wanderings evidences the virtuosity of her intellect. Her appropriation of the stigmatized, mentally disabled body is calculated and genius. She does not have “half a mind” so as she utilizes the fact that she may be perceived as such in order to wander without suspicion.

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<sup>14</sup> White, Kevin. *An Introduction to the Sociology of Health and Illness*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2002.(41)

In addition to Alice's omission of omission, we acknowledge her second deviation from the cartographic conventions we observe in Waldseemuller's map: an earnest commitment to naming. Slaves, Stamford and Alice, and freeman, Calvin, each demonstrate meticulous detail in the naming of slaves, and all three reach the North.<sup>15</sup> In the following scene, Stamford beautifully executes this counter-cartographic method in his attempt to remember the names of his parents.

He closed his eyes and took his parents in his hands and put them all about the plantation where he had last seen them...He left off for a moment to touch his navel and that told him that he had once been somebody's baby boy, been a part of a real live woman who had been with a real man...In his mind, Stamford took up his parents again and put them in front of the master's big house, he put them in front of the master and the mistress, he put them in front of the master's children...he put them in the fields, he put them in the sky, and at last he put them before the cemetery where there were no names. And that was it: His mother's name was June, and so he opened his right hand and let her go. His father's name did not come to him, try as he might to put him all about the plantation. Maybe God had slipped just that one time. Stamford slept, and just before dawn he awoke and said into the darkness, "Colter." (192-93)

One wonders whether Skiffington would have had room enough to handle a gun if he allowed Mildred's name to crowd his hands this tenderly. But "Mildred" exists outside the authentic strand of humanity depicted on Waldseemuller's map, and thus, is not entitled to the luxury of memory. In contrast, Stamford's operating definition of humanity is a navel, the phenotypic marker of birth, the scar from life's initiating cut. Having first defined himself and his parents as human, this reality entitles Stamford's parents to the rigorous and mentally exhausting process of memory, which is uniquely ethnographic since he carries them to all the places he knows they've been. If Waldseemuller operated with a similar definition of humanity, he might have noticed that one of his longitudinal

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<sup>15</sup> Technically, Stamford only makes it to Richmond. But throughout the novel, Jones constructs Richmond as a Northern utopia in Philomena's stories.

umbilical cords was attached to the Africans depicted in his map and considered giving them names. Furthermore, if his cartography shared Stamford's rigor, he may have visited the continent, studied its languages, and been pleasantly surprised to learn that Africans do in fact wear clothes.

Alice's commitment to naming is more songful but equally rigorous. Through Alice, Jones remembers a rich tradition of Negro spirituals and re-creates the freedom in their lyrics. Throughout the novel, Alice chants this song as she performs her counter-cartography:

*I met a dead man layin in Massa lane  
Ask that dead man what his name  
He raised he bony head and took of his hat  
He told me this, he told me that. (14)*

In the beginning of the novel, Henry Townsend, the master of the Townsend plantation, dies. Massa lane, then, is a reference to the slave cemetery, where, as we know from Stamford's account of his naming procedure, there are no names. Even in death, Manchester County refuses to remember the names of its slaves. Such is the rigor of Alice's cartographic method, then, that she researches even the names of the dead. In this way, Alice functions as a living tombstone, an expansive epigraph who would carry the ontological bookends of the Townsend dead to freedom—first and last names, *this* and *that*.

In our distillation of the slaves' counter-cartographic method, perhaps nothing is more peculiar or crucial than the fact that some slaves eat dirt. *Geophagy*, or "earth eating," evidences a more intimate and reciprocal relationship with the geography to be mapped. Waldseemuller had never seen Africa and America let alone poured out his work, blood, and sweat in order to map it. In the opening of his novel, Jones writes:

He [Moses] was the only man in the realm, slave or free, who ate dirt, but while the bondage women, particularly the pregnant ones, ate it for some incomprehensible need, for that something that ash cakes and apples and fatback did not give their bodies, he ate it not only to discover the strengths and weaknesses of the field, but because the eating of it tied him to the only thing in his small world that meant almost as much as his own life.

Although Alice never explicitly eats dirt, she does eat Stamford's roses (91), which were picked from the dirt. Furthermore, Jones details that the only others to eat dirt besides Moses were "women, particularly the pregnant ones." Perhaps consuming dirt reminded the slaves of their humanity the same way touching his navel had for Stamford—a type of creational Eucharist where they could eat in remembrance of the Genesis cut, when God first cut man from clay. If we accept Alice's consumption of roses as a type of *geophagy*, then she may be included among the "pregnant ones" that eat dirt for "some incomprehensible need." Her counter-cartography, then, may be read as a type of pregnancy, in the same way Ptolemy and Vespucci's cartography was demonstrated to be the conception of their reason.

In delineating the final distinction between the methodologies of cartography and counter-cartography, we must distinguish between Night's maternal *geophagy* and Waldseemuller's paternal ingestion of academic papers and travel literatures. You will recall that Waldseemuller depicts his map as the offspring of Vespucci's and Ptolemy's collaborative parthenogenesis.

Waldseemuller writes that, "Few will deny that it is possible to learn from books the location of lands." Alice Night would be numbered amongst said few. Reality can not be entrusted to the script, since the script itself exists within reality and reality existed before the script. In contrast to Waldseemuller's parthenogenesis, a world birthed from

reason and nurtured by abstraction, Night's counter-cartography may be read as an immaculate conception. When she stumbles upon Moses masturbating in the woods on the evening of Henry's death, Night was "in her *six* month of wandering about in the night (3-4)." Luke 1: 26-28 reads "Now in the *sixth* month the angel Gabriel was sent by God...to a virgin...The virgin's name was Mary." Perhaps, like Mary, it was in the sixth month on the evening of her master's sudden death, that Alice wholly conceived freedom as a real possibility.

Further suggesting that the map is Alice's progeny is Calvin's description of Alice's "Creation." Fittingly, Jones chooses to illustrate Night's map in a letter written by Calvin in Washington D.C. back to Caldonia in Manchester County. This choice is deliberate, since it exactly parallels and revises Vespucci's letters to the Spanish monarchs. Calvin describes Alice's creation:

*People were viewing an enormous wall hanging, 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, my Dear Caldonia, a kind of map of 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...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...I raised my hand to it, not to touch but to try to feel more of what was emanating...It was then that I noticed over her shoulder another Creation... This one is about your home Caldonia. It is your plantation, and again, it is what God sees when He looks down. There is nothing missing, not a cabin, not a barn, 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...The dead of in the cemetery have risen from there and they, too, stand at the cabins where they once lived. So the slave cemetery is just plain ground now, grass and nothing else. It is empty, even of the tiniest infants, who rest alive and well in their mother's arms.*

Thus, we behold the literal method to Night's madness—the fruit of her rigorous wandering, ethnography of Manchester's dead, attention to names, and meticulous survey of Manchester's geography. For all of cartography's omissions, "there is nothing missing" from Night's Creation. Night preserves the canvas of the wall map, but deviates from Waldseemuller's cartography in every other respect. Perhaps the most important feature of the map is that "it is what God sees when He looks down," precise to the exact number of "the blades of grass." This feat of immaculate detail signifies on Mathew 10: 30, which reads, "But the very hairs of your head are all numbered." Thus, Jones re-imagines God's celestial gaze. Unlike the map, or any other enterprise (history being another) that attempts to encapsulate all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes, God does not sacrifice detail at the altar of encapsulation. The mortal gaze naturally adjusts for distance. The further we step away from time and space to take in more of it, the more our eyes biologically adjust reality so that what was just there is now different than what was there a few feet or a few years ago. Thus, depending on how close or far away, reality, however imperceptibly, is different. That is postmodernism's basic intervention—the acknowledgement that there is an infinite amount of real images and our assignment of truth to one of them is arbitrary, the acknowledgement that the retina is significantly smaller than everything we see, and, thus, everything we see is misperceived. A map, like a retina infinitely smaller than what it is charged to depicting, is also a misperception. Perhaps, this is why it makes no difference that Alice wanders at night, without a lantern in a world of little to no artificial light. How did she see it all, to depict with such precision? Jones might answer, "with the eyes of God."

## **NORTH**



Edward P. Jones encapsulates his literary intervention in cartography in a scene when Mathew Kinsey buries his father.

Mathew, stayed up all the night before he was buried, putting his father's history on a wooden tombstone. He began with his father's name on the first line, and on the next, he put the years of his father's coming and going. Then all the things he knew his father had been. Husband. Father. Farmer. Grandfather. Patroller. Tobacco Man. Tree Maker...The boy filled up the whole piece of wood and at the end of the last line he put a period...The boy knew better than to put a period at the end of such a sentence. Something that was not even a true and proper sentence, with subject aplenty, but no verb to put it all together. A sentence, Matthew's teacher back in Virginia had tried to drum into his thick Kinsey head, could live without a subject, but it could not live without a verb"

After reading *The Known World*, some would say that Jones knew better than to put a period at the end of this novel. At least with respect to the conventions of the novel, Jones' narrative is grammatically incorrect. It is non-linear, there is no distinguishable plot (plots might be more appropriate), and there is no clear protagonist or antagonist. Trudier Harris-Lopez would complain, "I was never sure of the significance of several characters or why Jones seems so committed to revealing particular information about them. It was therefore difficult to align allegiances with any of them." Like Mathew's sentence, Jones' novel has too many subjects and not enough verbs. But one wonders whether verbs, and specifically action verbs, are the problem. For it is what cartographers do to the world that creates problems for Manchester County, and it is what Alice doesn't do to the world that empowers her to produce a representation of the world as God would see it. If we, like Jones, omit the action and eliminate the work that transforms subjects into direct object, freemen into slaves, humans and chattel, we are left with simply the grammatical and ontological right to be.

Thus, in *The Known World*, Jones invites his reader into the antebellum South with a vivid remembrance and recreation of the reality and tragedy of its featured institution: slavery. And though it is a world, it is one that is ironically unknown to most who will read it, a readership so familiar with freedom, and, thus, significantly less adept at picking out the North Star or pointing out the big dipper. The reader's acculturation into this world is not aided by the invisibles we enjoy in our own. Star might call it "San Francisco" without the abstraction, the actual enumeration upon the "750,000 individual bodies, biographies, dwelling places, habits, salaries, diets,"—slavery in all of its messiness and clutter.<sup>16</sup> Jones' literary counter-cartography, then, is an omission of omission as he leaves no story untold and meticulously recuperates history's silences. If his reader is to participate in this world, he or she is forced to become the objective and rigorous historians and cartographers their respective disciplines boast. And in the exhaustive act of participating in a world evacuated of freedom, we forget its luxuries, and become as reliant on Alice's cartography as Priscilla and Jamie. Perhaps, like Skiffington, the world has made its "own way," and having pasted it on maps, we do not suspect its reality. *The Known World*, then, is an opportunity to double back and make sure that freedom really is where and what we say it is.

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<sup>16</sup> Star, Susan L. "The Sociolog of the Invisible." *Social Organization and Social Process*. New York, NY: Aldine Transaction, 1991. 265-82.

# Appendix

Image 1

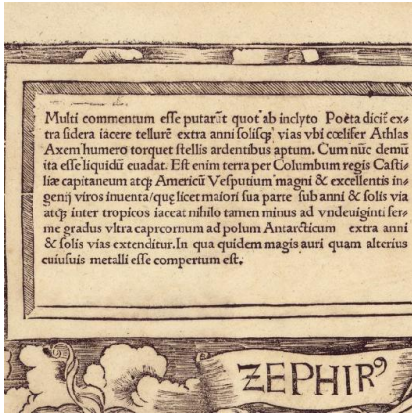


Image 2



Image 3



Image 4



Image 5



Image 6



Image 7

