On the Curious Case of a Black Slave Owner in Edward P. Jones's *The Known World*—or a Queer Reading of Black Abjection and Autonomy

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Abstract:
This exploration of the queer dimension in the African-American literary imagination will focus on Edward P. Jones's Pulitzer winning historical novel, *The Known World* (2003), in which a fictional black slave holder, Henry Townsend, maintains a curious intimacy with his former owner, William Robbins, during and after his enslavement. An alternative reading of the novel which this essay will offer is that Henry's slave owning stature is a manifestation of his reciprocated affection for his former master. This reading may first appear to be wishful, but if we look more closely at the favors that William does for Henry after he is emancipated, including purchasing Henry's first slave on his behalf and securing customer retention for Henry's business, it is clear that there is something more than friendship in the relationship between a white slave owner and his erstwhile black slave in an era when the two races were so deeply segregated. In thinking through what I dub a "queer apprenticeship" between Henry and William, this essay ultimately posits that interracial relationships are a site of ambivalence – on the one hand, Henry becomes the locus that orientates white subjectivity; but, on the other hand, since their affective tie is undergirded by William's fetishism for the structure of slavery, it in turn re-articulates black abjection.

1 Unlike many recent historical fictions set in the antebellum South, the primary emphasis of Edward P. Jones's Pulitzer Prize winning neo-slave narrative *The Known World* (2003) is not the gruesome violence that chattel slavery inflicted upon black individuals and families. Instead, by presenting the case of Henry Townsend, a fictional black slave owner, Jones's novel explores the ways the moral degradation of slavery and the political economy of the plantation corrupted social relationships among African-Americans within an apparently homogeneous community. Black slave owners are not unheard of in the historical archive of slavery, but they are certainly uncommon. Readers are reminded of the rarity of such instances by Henry's first slave Moses's difficulty in processing the fact that his master's skin is lighter than his. The novel exaggeratedly states that it takes Moses two weeks "to come to understand that someone wasn't fiddling with him and that a black man, two shades darker than himself, owned him and any shadow he made" (8-9). Henry's improbable journey indeed forces readers to question how it was achieved. It is this "unspeakable" secret of the mysterious slave owner that this essay aims to unravel.

2 *The Known World* begins with the premature death of Henry, who is survived by his wife, Caldonia, 33 slaves, and 50 acres of land in Washington County, Virginia. Henry was born a slave on William Robbins's plantation and was set free by his father's purchase;

thereafter, he financed himself by making boots and shoes, which eventually earned him a sufficient amount of money to own his first slave, Moses. It is worth noting that Henry, as a slave owner, is known for his benevolence — he never lynched any of his slaves except for a rare occasion in which he hired a Cherokee patroller to chop off one third of a misbehaving slave's ear. But of course one may ask if Henry was that sympathetic to his slaves, why would he participate in the cruelest trade of all?

3 The novel never addresses such question. A peripheral clue which readers are left with is Henry's aspiration to be "a better master than any white man he had ever known" (64). Despite his good intentions, Henry after all is still a black slave owner who enslaves his kinsman for personal gain. Because of it, it is not hard to imagine the waves of controversy that such a contentious character had triggered in the African-American community when the novel was first released. In an interview with Maryemma Graham (2008), Jones recalls how two African-American men verbally harassed him during a commercial break in a radio program to which he was invited in Philadelphia. These two men scathingly censured *The Known World* as a dangerous book which displaces the responsibility of black slaves' sufferings from white supremacy to black complicity, suggesting to Jones that the novel won the Pulitzer prize because it "makes it easier on the white people" (429).

4 Given the unfavorable attention the novel received in the mass media, it has achieved relatively little critical consideration. Consistent with the public's avoidance of the novel's theme of intra-racial subjugation, there is a conspicuous silence in the existing scholarship of the novel where Henry's slave owning stature is concerned. The majority of scholarly work focuses on the ways in which *The Known World* structurally revises and challenges the blueprint of a traditional slave narrative. Susan V. Donaldson's "Telling Forgotten Stories of Slavery in the Postmodern South" (2008) is an example, in which she claims that *The Known World* is a postmodern slave narrative which disrupts history by "allocating" subjectivity to the "enslaved people" (271). The analysis commits the fallacy of conveniently equating African-Americans to the enslaved, overlooking that there were black slave owners in Africa who facilitated the slave trade in its heyday. With this in mind, Henry's story is not exactly a subversion of history by imagining the counterfactual, but a transparent conduit which allows us to see the white capitalist motive resting at the heart of slavery which rewards Africans for selling their own kinsmen.

5 A more straightforward discussion of the problems germinated by slavery within and beyond the African-American community can be found in John Vernon's review of *The Known World*, "People Who Owned People" (2003) published in *The New York Times*.

Vernon speculates that Henry's desire to purchase his kinsmen, despite his father's violent resistance, was prompted by his ambition to demonstrate his free-man status, and in the antebellum South, this was achieved by possessing black slaves. Vernon's conjuncture about Henry's slave owning decision is a starting point to engage in the inter and intra racial sociopolitical dynamics that *The Known World* represents. Building upon Vernon, this essay will read Henry as a double-edged character who is both subjugated and empowered by the slave trade. In order to fully understand how Henry's abjection oscillates between the positions of the agent and the recipient of power, a queer reading is in order.

6 Abjection, as Julia Kristeva theorizes in *Powers of Horror* (1980), is a fearful feeling that an object produces in us, which renders us abject. In other words, abjection emanates from the horror-inspiring, border transgressing, disordered object, or the deject, because it reminds us that our bodies, too, can transgress borders, or become disordered. To illustrate with one of Kristeva's examples, a corpse is an eerie spectacle which makes us feel abject because its resemblance to life reminds us of the imminence of death. The half-cold-and-half-warm body that lingers between the border of life and death causes abjection because it reifies a body’s fallibility. On our part, the necrophobic feeling is a self-protective mechanism generated in reaction to confronting death; the phobia is a denial that severs us, the abject, from the horrific corpse, or the uncanny object, guarding our consciousness from the disturbance of discomfit. In his groundbreaking monograph *Extravagant Abject* queer theorist Darieck Scott applies this Kristevan account of abjection to gender and race studies, appropriating it as a descriptor of a "historical legacy" and a "social condition" "underlined by a defeat" (17). A distinctive feature that distinguishes Scott's formulation from that of his precursor is its investment in the survival possibility that comes with and in abjection. Following Leo Bersani's observation on s/m culture, which conceives powerlessness as a powerful position, Scott reclaims abjection as a necessary experience in an object's transformation into a subject. He argues that:

> Abjection established itself in the development of subject-object relations: the subject is produced by relation with objects, as the two mutually bring one another into being. Abjection is experienced in the realm where the development of object relations is belayed or strays — thus preventing, even if only transiently, the subject from making its normal appearance. (15)

Scott's formulation of inter-subjectivity is illuminating in this discussion not only because it aptly summarizes the interdependence between Henry's and William's subjecthoods, but also because it charts the trajectory of Henry's status escalation from being a servant to a free man. All this to say, Scott's queer interpretation of abjection opens up an alternative reading of *The*

Known World, one which understands abjection as a structure of feeling which enables Henry's and William's mutual affection for each other to flourish in the form of slave and master relationship. This reading may first appear to be wishful, but if we look more closely at the favors that William does for Henry after he is emancipated, including purchasing Henry's first slave on his behalf and securing customer retention for Henry's business, it is clear that there is something more than friendship in the relationship between a white slave owner and his erstwhile slave in an era when the two races were so deeply segregated. In thinking through the affection between Henry and William, this essay problematizes Scott's reading of inter-subjectivity by positing that interracial relationships are a site of ambivalence — on the one hand, Henry becomes the locus that orientates white subjectivity; but, on the other hand, since their affective tie is undergirded by William's fetishism of the structure of slavery, it in turn re-articulates black abjection.

7 Even though the queer sub-text in *The Known World* may not be speaking as loud as its neoliberal fore-text, it is definitely available. The queer buzzword sodom makes a brief appearance when it is used to compare William's annoyance caused by his visits to Richmond, in which the narrator says "He often had to go to Richmond but he thought it as bad as Sodom"(115). Sodom, here, is significant in our understanding of *The Known World*'s queerness not because it demarcates Richmond as a place where homosexuals congregate, but because it informs us that what the world inside the novel considers as queer is not quite the same as that in the world inhabited by the novel's readers.

8 According to the Old Testament, God destroys the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah because the Sodomites violate the courtesy of hospitality out of lust, raping the two angels for whom the kind hearted Lot promised to provide shelter. I am not trying to allegorize William as Lot or one of the promiscuous sodomites with this biblical etymology, but to suggest that the likening of Sodom to Richmond is symbolic of how the depiction of (non)heteronormativity is bound up with space in the novel. Richmond recalls the biblical Sodom in Robbins's mental cartography because it is a site of disruption which puts the tranquility of the Robbins plantation at risk. The vice that wrecks havoc in the Robbins familial fabric is not homosexuality, but miscegenistic extra-marital relationship. Behind the back of his wife Ethel, William sustains another family with his black mistress Philomena Cartwright, who he bought when she was sixteen. With her, Robbins rears two mulatto children, namely Dora and Louis. At a young age, an older slave, Sophie, presented an idyllic picture of Richmond to Philomena. Even though Sophie has not been closer to Richmond than a peripheral countryside called Goochland, she is certain that Richmond is a city of

honey and milk where slaves are so sufficiently provided for that they can afford to have their own slaves. This fantasy about Richmond ceases to fade in Philomena's mind when she grows up, and she is most compelled by the urge of moving there when she felt William "is not treatin' her right" (116). When Dora was eight and Louis was six, Philomena decided to run away with them to Richmond. Philomena's extended distance away from the Robbins plantation is actually the tip of an iceberg, underneath which rests *The Known World*'s plan of stratification mapped out in accordance with racial hierarchy: relationships that perpetuate white kinship are posited close to the center of the plantation, with the white nucleus family composed of William, Ethel and Patient Robbins at the radius, black servants in the peripheral, and Philomena as well as her illegitimate children lying outside of the domain of the plantation.

9 A caveat to note is that deviant relationships are able to stay inside a plantation if they appear as non-threatening to the purity of white lineage, and *The Known World* shows that queer relationships between two men might slip through the plantation's homophobia. Given the frequent inter-class and inter-race interactions taking place within its boundary, the plantation is, as a matter of fact, equipped with the potential to be what Jack Halberstam calls a queer space. Dissimilar to a place, a space does not necessarily occupy a tangible location; it is more of a "place-making practice" (Halberstam 6), a creation of an evanescent habitus which emerges and dissolves. I contend that a plantation is conceivably a queer space because of its homophobic surveillance, which is so caught up in prosecuting non-reproductive relationships that it fails to read beyond the apparent heterosexuality of some homosexual relationships. A particular form of queer relationship that transpires and unexpectedly flourishes in the homophobic plantation culture is that between a black slave and a white master, whereas other male-male queer relationships which do not accord with the black-and-white, slave-and-master structure — such as that between two slaves, two free blacks, and two whites — are predestined to wither. An inter-racial queer relationship that is conceived in slavery has the special ability to pass strict scrutiny because it can be read as a manifestation of white benevolence, flourishing under the guise of the white slave master's paternal love for his black slave when other permutations of queer relationships between the two races cannot. An example that testifies to this is Caldonia's brother Calvin's affection for William's mulatto son Louis. Setting itself in contrast to the affection between Henry and William, which packages itself in subtlety, Calvin's feeling for Louis is characterized by a fervency eager to let itself be known. Calvin's desire is best encapsulated by the scene in which Louis is lying "less than five inches" (188) next to him on a bank after they swim. The

novel's homosexual subtext becomes clear at the moment when Calvin leans over to Louis, wanting to drink the pool of sweat and water accumulated in the "small depression at the base of Louis's neck" (188). Unfortunately, Calvin loses his chance, because Louis has already walked away by the time that Calvin gathers enough courage to take action. This episode, which indicates Louis's ignorance of Calvin's love, underscores the axiom that a queer relationship that is inconsistent with the structure of slavery, in this case, between two free blacks, is impossible in the plantation. As the narrator says, the best remedy to cure Calvin's love sickness perhaps is to leave the plantation: "there was no solution for caring about the man with the traveling eye [Calvin]. Maybe New York could help take away the love, along with everything else" (188). The glimpse of hope that New York provides for Calvin re-inscribes the geographical stratum of race and sexuality in *The Known World* where different places allow for and exclude different forms of affection.

10 Henry and William's secretive mutual affection manages to grow through the antebellum South because it begins as a normal master and slave relationship. Growing up in veneration of his master, Henry is eager to cultivate intimacy with the man. The first step that he takes is bribing William's groom Toby for his position. Henry demonstrates his attentiveness to William through subtle means. For instance, he would rise every morning before dawn, stand in front of the mansion, and welcome his master and his horse's arrival with a beating heart (20). In this case, William's horse, Sir Guilderham, becomes a channel of affection in this master-slave complex. Under slavery, Henry's feeling for his master is normalized into a form of labor. As a stableman, Henry's duty is to take care of his master's horse. Henry's devotion to Sir Guilderham shows that he deems this menial labor more than a task to earn a living, but a performance to win his master's recognition. Henry would skip other duties of the day if possible, just to "comb the mane until his hands [are] tired" (21). Here, the meaning of Henry's life is condensed in the horse's physical condition, the only method through which he can outlet his desire for his master under a complex cluster of social surveillance.

11 Henry's unrequited yearning for his master's notice is eventually requited. After seeing the boy shiver in the "rags he tied around his feet" (27) in his first winter as a groom, William orders him a pair of shoes, permits him to eat in the same kitchen where the house slaves eat, and be clothed the same way as they do. Nonetheless, William's kindness towards Henry is in fact self-serving. During William's ride back from his mistress' place every morning, he suffers from headaches. These ailments miraculously disappeared upon the sight of Henry. If intimacy reveals a person's innermost nature and character, William's attachment to Henry

springs from his insecurity; that is to say, Henry's subservience becomes a blanket that shelters William from his marital and health crises. As Scott's subject/object dialectics informs us, a master's subject position is reciprocally defined by his subjugation of slaves. As such, Henry's servitude, particularly his patient waits every morning, enables William to recuperate from his split conscience which wanders back and forth between his wife and mistress, and to realize that he is a wholesome master anticipated by his slaves.

12 As time goes by, William "came to develop a kind of love for the boy, and that love built up morning after morning" (8). To read William' affection for Henry in a more materialistic way, Henry in fact is an object in which William can find a transient form of security, of which he is deprived when he is with either his wife or mistress. Under the same constellation of technologies that constrains Henry's desire, William's affection for Henry remains unspoken, but is expressed through Henry's rising price. To keep Henry's parents from buying and thus freeing their son from his plantation, William claims that Henry's worth increases as his stablemanship develops: as the narrator says, "the cost of [Henry's] intelligence was not fixed and because it was fluid, it was whatever the market would bear" (17).

13 The intimacy between Henry and William is subtle but it does not go unnoticed; characters in the novel actually describe the post-slavery relationship between William and Henry as unnatural. In the scene after William reproaches Henry for wrestling with his own slave, Moses, William goes to Fern, a black teacher to free blacks, and signs Henry up for her class in the hopes that schooling can transform Henry into a more proper slave owner. After William leaves, Fern recalls a rumor that "there might be something unnatural between him and Henry. Why else would a white man of his stature spend so much of his life with a young man he had once owned" (128). This behind-the-scene gossip not only reveals two of the underlying phobias in the antebellum South, namely miscegenation and homosexuality, but also shows that people in the community are suspicious of William and Henry's apprenticeship. However, the suspicion is hushed because inter-racial same-sex intimacy is such a taboo that talking about it without any concrete evidence at hand would be a serious offense to the house of Robbins.

14 Having that said, the townsmen in Manchester County, both black and white, have every possible found reason to deem Henry and William's post-slavery bond unnatural, especially because free blacks who were once in slavery often keep a distance from whites, and some of them even keep them out of sight. For instance, after Henry's parents, Augustus and Mildred, bought themselves out of slavery, they found a house at the edge of town.

Augustus likes its location "because it was at the farthest end of the county and the nearest white man with slaves was half a mile away" (15). However, unlike his father, Henry does not observe such separatist rituals. His relationship with William after his slavery contract ends remains close and has further developed into a form of business mentorship. From William, Henry learns "the value of money" and "the value of his labors," (113) acquiring knowledge to be a full-fledged free man.

15 This apprenticeship in fact benefits both the protégé and the mentor — it not only acculturates Henry into the white capitalist society, but also appeases William's nostalgia for Henry. William admits that he "misses the boy [but] he had not been so surprised about his feelings for a black human being since realizing that he loved Philomena" (112). As William continues on to his reverie about Henry's anticipation for him at the entrance of his mansion every morning, he compares his waiting disposition to that of "a father waiting for his prodigal sons" (112). In order to keep Henry's "calming ways" (112) in his company after he was bought out of the plantation, William "had the boy come back again and again to make boots and shoes for him and his male guests" (112). Proceeding from this, it would not be wrong to say that this amiable inter-racial friendship in which a free black economically profits from his former holder's favoritism of him is in fact charged with eroticism, which accords with Darieck Scott’s theoretical discussion of testeria.

16 Testeria, according to Scott's explication, is a metaphor of a "psychic disturbance" in which "a black male's testes is substituted for the female's uterus," a figurative speech which refers to the emasculated position when "black males are called into being in white supremacist patriarchy" (137). That is, what appears to be the black male subjectivity is in reality an object position "analogous to that occupied by women" (137). To put it in Freudian terms, black males inhabit the "untenable space" which identifies with and yet is dislocated from the "Symbolic Order of the White Father" (137). The eroticism that rests at the heart of the psychic life of testeria emerges when the black male strives to appear masculine in a white supremacist environment, finding himself stuck in the conundrum of resisting and at the same time identifying with the white male power. It is precisely this combination of and confusion between wanting and refusing white masculinity that marks black men's relationship with white men erotic. Uncovering this sexual undertone that lies deep in the homosociality between black and white men grants for the realization that the mentee position that Henry occupies in his relationship with William is testeric, in which he is interpellated as a forgiving father, cared for like a black mistress, and summoned like an obedient servant. Distinctive in this inter-racial intimacy, then, is Henry's ease in inhabiting

what Scott dubbed as the "untenable" space. Willfully responding to William's call for returning to the plantation, which other free blacks would have avoided like the plague, Henry surrenders to the objectified subjectivity that is imposed upon him. His submission to and identification with William revises Scott's formation of black male sexuality, which is characterized by complicity and discordance with white male power, to total docility, which, in turn, renders him as an object of desire for William. The provocative conclusion that this reading offers is that hidden underneath Henry's coming-of-age are his desire for whiteness and dis-identification with the African-American community. Indeed, it is not hard to imagine why *The Known World* is not well received in the African-American community. Henry's eventual financial independence which is made possible by William's assistance implies that submission and compliance were the requisites for African-Americans to become successful in the white supremacist antebellum South. To use Kristevan language, Henry is the deject figure who renders contemporary African-Americans readers abject, because his success confronts them with the knowledge, despite the fictional and temporal distance, that their freedom is always dependent upon the whims of hegemonic powers. But equally important is to realize that this conclusion is informed by a white supremacist perspective, for reading William as the exclusive distributor of freedom in fact re-articulates the superiority of whiteness. Scott's investment in the eroticism inherent in abjection proves to be useful when thinking through this thought loop, as his formulation of abjection argues that subjects are reliant on objects as much as objects are dependent upon subjects in "bringing one another into being" (15). To review Henry and William's queer apprenticeship through this lens, it is true that Henry's economic prowess is a result of his services to William, but, William's masterly subjectivity is simultaneously undergirded by Henry's servanthood. As such, Jones did not tell a 'sell-out' story, but presented a vision of a discursive form of black agency, a subjectivity that is not gained through white interpellation, but resided in the historical legacy of defeat, a condition which oppositionally orientates the white master identity.

17 Before delving deeper into the psychopathology of slavery, I would like to briefly review how the slave trade has distorted the genealogy of the slaves' families. This social contextualization will assist us in understanding that Henry's queer psyche, which prioritizes William, his father *de jure*, over Augustus, his father *de facto*, is not a reflex of a personal hysteria, but a manifestation of the nation's historia. In her article "Mama's Baby, PaPa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" (1987), Hortense Spillers explains that African-American community's present matriarchal structure is a consequence of its slavery past. Chattel slavery has given rise to the mental phenomenon of "dual fatherhood" in the slave

community, a mental complex that is comprised of the presence of the slave's "captor father," meaning his/her master, and the absence of the slave's biological father. Unlike many of the slave families whose father was sold to other plantations, Henry grows up in close physical proximity to his father, but that does not exclude him from being a victim confused by the state of "dual fatherhood." It is true that Henry's childhood is nothing close to being traumatic, but his parents' departure from the Robbins plantation during his early years seems to have left a fissure in his psyche. When Henry was six, Augustus bought himself out of slavery. Three years later, Augustus purchased his wife. Upon her departure, Henry sobbingly pleads, "please, les go back" (16), begging his mother to return to the plantation. As an attempt to appease his inconsolable son, Augustus says to Henry "Before you can turn around good, you will be comin home with us" (16). At this time, Henry tries to make sense of the word "home." The first image that his mind conjures up is a cabin in which he, his mother, and Rita, who is a good friend of his mother, huddle around the fire place. It is important to note that his father Augustus, as Spiller would expect, is absent in Henry's visualization of home. What deepens this scene's significance is Henry's first close encounter with his master. Perturbed by the crying child, Robbins approaches the crowd and asks Henry why he is crying. Henry responds "For nothin" (16). It is not so much the verbal exchange that deserves our attention here, but Henry's perception of the size of his master, which appears to him as a "mountain separating [him] from the sun" (16). To encapsulate this scene using object-relation theory, the moment when Augustus "pulls his wife from the child" (17) creates frustration and anxiety in Henry, but these feelings are immediately soothed by Robbins's commanding appearance which promises him protection in replacement of his mother.

18 Starting from the winter of 1834, Henry's relationship with his parents becomes further strained. Their visits are cut short because of the cold, and there are even times that Henry will skip them without compelling reasons. Having stood in the cold in vain for many hours, Augustus eventually grows weary of his son's attitude. During a February Sunday afternoon visit, he "grab[s] [Henry]," "sh[akes] him" and "push[es] him" (19) to the ground. This act of violence is reported. The next Sunday, Augusts and Mildred are greeted by William, who reproachfully says "I heard you did something to my boy, to my property" (19) and decides "no more visits for a month" (19). This scene is troubling to readers because it suggests that Henry has become a 'turn-coat.' This may be true, but I would like to point out that Henry's report to his master on his father's violent abuse on him begs a social diagnosis. To properly understand this scene's queer social implication, I turn to Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Mask* (1952).

19 In chapter 6 of Fanon's monograph, "The Negro and Psychopathology", Fanon reminds us that to impose "evil spirits" on either the white or black men in cases like Henry's is "a major error in education" (148). Instead, he suggests we should recognize that the notion of family has a social bearing. Fanon says that, in a (post)colonial context, "white family is the agent of [...] systems" and "a country is the sum of these white families" (148-9). In other words, each individual in a society is trained and shaped by the white family ideal. Using Freudian terms, this ideal will be internalized by the society's members and eventually form their superegos. Problems then arise when a child of color comes in contact with the white world. For instance, if a black subject acquires the white superego, it will change him or her in a fundamental way, for the white superego will supersede and cast their black family structures "back to the id" (149). As Fanon eloquently sums up "the individual who climbs up into society — white and civilized — tends to reject his family — black and savage — on the plane of imagination" (149). In Henry's case, he, indeed, only identifies with his "captor father," while his biological father is partly dislocated by slavery, and partly taken away by freedom. One has to bear in mind that William did not sell Augustus in order to interfere in the Townsend's family; it is Augustus who purchased himself. As such, since the early age of six, Henry, without his biological father around, can only identify with a form of mediated black masculinity through the reflection of his "captor father's" gaze. Fanon's theory remains applicable when we look at Henry's mentality after his emancipation. On the first day of his freedom, Augustus asks him, "you feelin any different?" (49) Henry replies: "No sir, I don't reckon I do" (49). It is not until this moment that Augustus realizes his son is different from other black subjects, who always pine for freedom. Augustus starts to ponder whether or not "all would have been different if he had bought the boy's freedom, before Mildred's" (49).

20 The chasm between Henry and the rest of his community is further widened at the moment when he bought his first slave from William. As a black man, Henry does not find enslaving another black man ethically problematic until he confesses it to his parents. Augustus and Mildred are enraged by their son's choice, especially Augustus, who slams a stick across Henry shoulder, and demands that he leave the family. Even after experiencing his family's hostility, Henry still does find fault with owning black slaves; it is this jarring ignorance of the wrong in owning his own kinsmen as property that cries out for closer scrutiny. In what begins as a reunion dinner scene, Henry tells his parents that he "got his own man [whom he bought] cheap from Master Robbins" (137). Trying to contain his temper, Augustus rhetorically asks his son, "Don't you know the wrong of that?" (137); to this, Henry defiantly answers "Nobody never told me the wrong of that" (137). His naivety

soon betrays itself as a defensive strategy when he repeatedly evokes the legal language of law and rights: as he begs innocence to Augustus, he argues, "Papa, I ain't done nothing I ain't a right to. I ain't done nothing no white man wouldn't do" (138). Henry goes on to rationalize his slave holding decision by equating himself to white men as he pleads again: "I ain't done nothing that any white man wouldn't do. I ain't broke no law" (137). This episode demonstrates an uncanny structural resemblance to Eve Sedgwick's delineation of coming out in *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990). Henry's closet houses his secretive obsession with white male power, and the two halves of his schizophrenia — namely his black skin and his white psyche, which are partitioned by the closet door — converge when he acknowledges his possession of Moses. The tension that this acknowledgement sets forth in the Townsend family is, as Sedgwick describes, an unlocking of "a powerful unknowing as unknowing, not as a vacuum or as the blank [the closet] can pretend to be, but as a weighty and occupied and consequential epistemological space" (77). That is, Henry's secretive obsession with white male power is paradoxically made known to his family as an unknown, or more precisely, an innocence, an inability to fathom the problematics in his engagement in the slave trade. Henry's innocence, furthermore, can be interpreted as a symptom which diagnoses his slave owning stature as a manifestation of his white superego at work, a mental bifurcation that indicates the queering of his psychic apparatus by chattel slavery.

21 The controversy around Henry's slave owning stature suggests that black success in plantation life is marked as queer. Henry is rendered scandalous not because he is sexually pervasive, but because he poses as transgressive — his economic success posits him as an equal of white people. Lee Edelman in *No Future* says that "the queer comes to figure [...] the resistance [...] to every social structure of form" (4); to build my conclusion upon Edelman, Henry and William's apprenticeship is queer precisely because it does not conform to the heterosexualized concept of homosexuality. In the form of slave/master relationship, William and Henry's intimacy slips through the plantation's homophobic surveillance, allowing William to fashion Henry into a black slave master, an identity which confuses the conventional way of viewing property ownership and private intimacy as exclusively white rights, which ultimately disrupted the plantation tradition which is built upon white kinship.

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