

Abstracts/Paper Proposals for Panel: Faulkner and Contemporary Black Writers

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Tracing a line from Benedict Anderson's idea of "imagined communities," psychoanalysis, and recent trends in southern studies that investigate the South's abject national status and using Jennifer Greeson's idea that "our South always points beyond the national borders" (4) I argue that Faulkner's *Flags in the Dust* (1929)¹ and Danticat's *The Dew Breaker* (2005) portray the way an abject status of a nation is refracted and absorbed by its male citizens/characters who are most concerned during the time periods of the novels with nation making and defending.

In their respective novels, Faulkner and Danticat look back at an earlier time period than that in which they are writing. Faulkner goes back a decade to illuminate the modernizing post-World War I South and the larger United States. Danticat magnifies the crisis of the military state and the inherent problems that Haiti faced in the 1950s. Each author investigates the ideas of nation through a description of the respective author's male protagonist, limned mainly through the character's violent and pathological actions, but aided by the description by the female characters around them. I argue that each protagonist is affected by and symbolic of the region they are associated with. Bayard Sartoris is affected by and symbolic of his crumbling South and the artist's unnamed father is affected by and symbolic of his violent and precarious and in-flux Haiti. In other words, the problems of male character and nation stem from the same root issues.

I investigate what Benedict Anderson after Tom Nairn describes as the "pathology" of nationalism, arguing that it is this internalized pathology which causes Bayard's dissolution and death and incites the tortuous protagonist in *The Dew Breaker* to his evil deeds before he leaves his native Haiti. In other words, I argue that the idea of "nation" suffocates its victims, literally making their space smaller and smaller.

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"It was enough that the name was written.": Ledger Narratives in Edward P. Jones's *The Known World* and Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*

My essay will examine the place of the plantation ledger in Edward P. Jones's *The Known World* (2003), which I will use to reconsider the McCaslin ledgers in William Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses* (1942). While Ike's formative experience with the ledgers in *Go Down, Moses* is in some ways a central

¹ *Flags in the Dust* was first published in 1973 and *Sartoris*, the cut version of *Flags*, was published in 1929.

turn in the novel, I will focus on the plantation ledger in *The Known World* as one of many recorded mediums under revision in the novel. The novel features plantation ledgers, judicial reports, pamphlets, and census reports to form a faux-historical backbone for Manchester County, the fictional Virginia locale in which the novel is set. When read in one novel, these varied modes of recording form an archival pastiche that throws the historical objectivity of any one of them into question. That is, Jones's neo-plantation novel suggests that one needs a mixed-genre medium to introduce and undermine the plantation ledger's historical objectivity.

Questions about Faulkner's use of plantation ledgers must also account for components outside his novels. After Sally Wolff's study, *Ledgers of History* (2010), we know that Faulkner read and possibly relied upon the plantation ledgers of Francis Terry Leak as an historical blueprint when writing *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, *The Unvanquished*, and, of course, *Go Down, Moses*. Wolff traces the names and settings from many of Faulkner's most important novels to the Leak ledgers. Therefore, Wolff's study allows us to read Ike's experience with the McCaslin ledgers as possibly being informed by Faulkner's own experiences with the Leak ledgers.

I will use *The Known World* to reexamine *Go Down, Moses*, focusing on the ways in which the decentered plantation ledgers in the former might interrupt the narrative that the latter seems to establish. However, I will also explore the possibility that *Go Down, Moses* behaves similarly, acting as a narrative vehicle that at once deploys and decenters the McCaslin ledgers. That is, in each case, the plantation ledger is contained and controlled by the imaginative novel space. The novel space of *The Known World* increasingly forecloses the narrative authority of the plantation ledger by raising more questions than answers about any single plantation narrative. I suggest that Faulkner's experience with the Leak ledgers, which he himself may have been fictionalizing in *Go Down, Moses*, demonstrates a similar sort of skepticism with the way the plantation ledger has been read as the literal master narrative of the plantation South.

First, my essay will examine *The Known World's* multiple modes of recording, arguing that the novel delivers the plantation ledgers strategically, alongside other modes of communicating and interpreting the plantation. As a brief introduction to this step, let me turn to an early scene in which the narrator mentions a plantation ledger in which Rita, a slave, is described: "It was enough that the name was written somewhere in his large book of births and deaths, the comings and goings of slaves. 'Noticeable mole on left cheek,' he had written five days after Rita's birth. 'Eyes gray'" (16-7). Here, the plantation ledger obviously places the historical agency — the ability to control what is known and how it is known — in the hands of slave owners. The narrative presented in a plantation ledger belies its seeming objectivity through its narrative framing, which suggests that minor physical details adequately convey Rita's place in the mind of William Robbins, the plantation owner. Robbins uses the space to describe Rita's body: it has a mole, and its eyes are gray. Rita is rendered as a specimen.

Yet *The Known World* offers competing narratives for Rita, who only appears in the ledgers briefly. For example, when another slave, Augustus, helps Rita escape to New York in a box of walking sticks a la Henry 'Box' Brown, she is renarrativized in the novel space: "When she was in it, with her head just an inch or so from the top and her feet with a little less than that from the bottom, [Augustus] put wrapped walking sticks to either side of her. . . . Rita's people had always been people of more bones than meat and muscle, and at long last that was a blessing" (47). Rather than describing Rita's defining marks, the novel provides a thicker narrative description, detailing her escape, ancestry, and relationships with other slaves. While Rita might be called a minor character in a novel that ostensibly investigates the life of a slave turned slave master, close attention to Rita's narrative construction and reconstruction illuminates the way *The Known World* introduces and decenters so-called historical texts.

In *Go Down, Moses*, Ike uses the McCaslin ledgers much as Wolff suggests that Faulkner used the Leak ledgers, as both Ike and Faulkner attempt to recover an historical narrative through the generic plantation ledger. While Faulkner does not use a proliferation of historical documents in his novel, he does account for and decentralize the ledgers in *Go Down, Moses* by showing Ike's reaction to them as one among many, as we must place it alongside Tomasina's suicide, Toney's Terrel's escape attempts, and even Lucas Beauchamp's sense of his own history. So if plantation ledgers are read as providing a clearer understanding of history, then *The Known World* and *Go Down, Moses* complicate that understanding, albeit through different narrative styles and techniques. My final contention, then, would be that both Jones and Faulkner prove that it is not sufficient to name and describe slaves in the plantation ledger, the "large book of births and deaths," which invented the plantation under the guise of documentation. Rather, both novelists demonstrate that the novel space allows for a fuller account of history that can contain, deploy, and disauthenticate the plantation ledger.

Title: Census or Ledgers: A Rhetorical Strategy of Verisimilitude in Faulkner and Jones's Southern Narratives

by Dai Xiaoli

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A two-page abstracts for 20-minute panel papers submitted to Faulkner & Yoknapatawpha 2013: "Faulkner and the Black Literatures of the Americas" July 21-25, 2013

Like black-and-white photos, *Absalom, Absalom!*, *Go Down, Moses* and *The Known World* conspire to draw a panoramic picture of the rise and fall of the southern plantation economy and its patriarchic relationship between the plantation owners and their slaves. To some extent, *The Known World* can be regarded as a palpable allusion to the former two in many aspects. Moreover, the plantation owners' large books that recorded slave transaction mentioned frequently in *The Known World* reflect Isaac McCaslin's family ledgers in *The Bear*. Obviously, it is not coincidental that the two authors take plantation ledgers as substantial witness to the past.

Both William Faulkner and Edward P. Jones create literary worlds with census data to attain narrative verisimilitude. With these imaginary figures, no matter in Faulkner's Mississippi County---Yoknapatawpha, or in Jones's Virginia County---Manchester, the two authors elaborate most aspects of the institutionalized slavery in American South around the Civil War. Their works penetrate into the southern psychic trauma, reveal its pervading sufferings and exhibit the tolerance displayed in both black and white people. They convincingly demonstrate the torturing consequences of slavery that under an immoral and dehumanized economic system, both the black and the white are victims; each party (the oppressor or the oppressed) in the society is imprisoned either physically or spiritually; no race could be truly free unless all the bondages are dismantled.

A narratological probe into the two writers' tour de force can discover more distinct intertextuality. On the story level, *The Known World* repeats some plots in *Absalom, Absalom!*. The most similar scene in the two novels is the initial period of the plantation construction when the slaveowners and their slaves not only work side by side, but also play together to enjoy their leisure time. Thus we can find the same

plots as Henry Townsend's tussling with his first slave and Thomas Sutpen's boxing and wrestling with his slaves. However, such ignorance of social hierarchy between classes results in different public response. For Thomas Sutpen, a white plantation owner, it is merely a disgraceful behavior in his wife and the townspeople's eyes. But William Robbins, Henry Townsend's former master and spiritual father, thinks that even if the master and the slave are both African Americans, they should abide to the social rules and perform in line with the conventional conduct code of master and slave. Ironically, it is Robbins, the slave owner, who teaches Henry, the former slave, to understand the most inhuman truth of slavery: slaves are deprived of humanity; they are merely inanimate properties.

Although these novels are narrated in multi-level structures, Faulkner's narration seems more experimental in exploiting the expressivity of complex syntax and the narrativity of garrulity while Jones inclines to endow his with a matter-of-fact tone. Jones holds that the readers will believe in what he is telling with these census data and figures. Consequently, *The Known World* is dotted with the price of slaves. And Faulkner directly embeds some excerpts from a family ledger in *Go Down, Moses*. The revelation of these ledgers in *The Bear* eventually leads the plantation lineage heir to relinquish resolutely the family legacy on account of his ancestor's incestuous miscegenation with his mulatto daughter, as slave owners usually did at that time.

A fruitful disquisition on the narrativity of ledgers has been made by Sally Wolff in her reference study on Faulkner's once intimate friend's family ledgers. In *Ledgers of History: William Faulkner, an Almost Forgotten Friendship, and an Antebellum Plantation Diary*, Sally discovers that Faulkner employs a myriad of original data from those large books. The significance of ledgers, as Faulkner describes in *The Bear*, is like "two threads frail as truth and impalpable as equators yet cable-strong to bind for life them who made the cotton to the land their sweat fell on"(1994, 242). Thus, these ledgers, acting as reminders and witnesses of the past, as springs of inspiration, offer the authors raw materials to build up their own fictional kingdom.

Faulkner's motive to leave "at least a scratch on something" drives him to make a detailed yet artistic recounting of the southern stories. It is the same for Jones to expose a neglected world of the black slave owners to the readers. Their effort and endeavor jointly accomplish a complete record of the southern slavery and its effect. While asked what his favorite books and authors are, and which writers have most influenced his work, Jones mentioned Faulkner. In my opinion, *The Known World* could be regarded as a tribute to *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Go Down, Moses*, and Jones is one of Faulkner's formidable black successors and literary heirs.

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Point-of-view and Verisimilitude of Absalom, Absalom!; Rosa's Argumentation: An Appeal for Love and Truth; Cooperative Principle: Violation and Illocution---Rhetorical Narrative Strategy in Absalom, Absalom!; Variations on Light and Shadow: The Symmetrical Images in Light in August, which are published in Chinese scholarly journals as *Foreign Language and Literature, Thinking, Journal of Chongqing University of Posts and Telecommunications (Social Science Edition)* etc..