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## "Black Matters": Race and Literary History in Mat Johnson's Pym

Jennifer M. Wilks

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<sup>1</sup> There is an eerie correspondence between "Black Matters," the title of the first chapter of Toni Morrison's essay *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), and Black Lives Matter, the movement created in 2012 after the exoneration of George Zimmerman in the murder of unarmed black teenager Trayvon Martin (Garza, n.p.). Though separated by the span of twenty years, both chapter title and activist call raise the questions of how and why race continues to be important in American society, with Morrison focusing on the literary canon and contemporary activists taking on the spate of highly publicized, extrajudicial killings of black women and men that have punctuated life in the 2010s United States. Both book and movement posit a long, critical view of history as a prerequisite for understanding the dynamics of U.S. conceptions of race and iterations of anti-black racism. Whereas Morrison argues that Black(ness) matters because one cannot understand whiteness without appreciating the other against which it is constructed, today's activists assert that black lives matter because they, too, warrant the "basic human rights and dignity" more readily accorded white lives ("About Us").

<sup>2</sup> To juxtapose Morrison's literary criticism with the political work of Black Lives Matter is not to be flip but, rather, to consider the often inextricable relationship between literary text and social context. As scholar Ashraf H. A. Rushdy argues, the "cultural conversation ['comprising literary and extraliterary issues'] occurs within the field of cultural production but is nonetheless a refraction of the struggles in the social order within which that field is situated" (14, 15). The publication of *Playing in the Dark* came on the heels of a decade that brought the

presidency of Ronald Reagan and saw the emergence of two figures, "the welfare queen" and the menacing criminal, who were ostensibly unraced but nonetheless became vehicles for positioning African Americans as foreign rather than integral to American identity. The former rose to national prominence "during Reagan's failed 1976 bid for the Republican presidential nomination" (Kohler-Hausmann 335). In campaign speeches, Reagan used the case of Linda Taylor, an Illinois woman charged with defrauding the state's social service programs, as an example of how such programs wasted taxpayer dollars. The latter figure emerged in the person of Willie Horton at the end of Reagan's second term as president. In conjunction with an advertisement released by an independent group, then Vice President George H. W. Bush cited Horton, a convicted murderer who assaulted a couple while released on a furlough program, as a reason that the country would not be safe if Massachusetts governor—and Democratic nominee—Michael Dukakis were elected president.

<sup>3</sup> On the surface, the Taylor and Horton cases were matters of fiscal responsibility and public safety, respectively. As scholars have noted, however, race was pivotal in each as both Taylor and Horton were African American. Historian Julilly Kohler-Hausmann has argued that the reforms built around stereotypes such as that of the welfare queen "help[ed] solidify the public perception of a racialized, criminal 'culture of poverty'" (330). Likewise, political scientist Tali Mendelberg has observed that, although Horton's story was but one talking point in Bush's discussion of crime, the "case [...] was saturated with racial meaning" via its imagery, especially the circulation of the young black man's mug shot by the media (138). The Taylor and Horton stories indicate that the ever-present yet suppressed blackness that Toni Morrison deems "Africanism" and discusses within American literary history is not, in fact, limited to "the field of cultural production." On the contrary, "denotative and connotative blackness" has also served as a means of "talking about and a way of policing matters of class, sexual license, and repression, formations and exercises of power, and meditations on ethics and accountability" in the world beyond the page (Morrison 6, 7).

<sup>4</sup> Deeply informed by Morrison's landmark work, Matt Johnson's satirical novel *Pym* (2011) likewise invites the reader to contemplate the relationship between literary text and social context. Johnson revisits one of the examples featured in *Playing in the Dark*—Edgar Allan Poe's nautical adventure *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838)—to explore how race and racism remain pervasive elements of twenty-first-century American society. His protagonist is Chris Jaynes, an urbane black Philadelphian recently fired from his position as an English professor at a liberal arts college. Intent on proving that Dirk Peters, a character from Poe's *Narrative*, actually existed, Chris enlists a motley crew to retrace the itinerary described in Poe's novel. Johnson inverts his predecessor's chromatic and geographic scheme by having his African American characters land in Antarctica, where they stumble upon a settlement of massive white monsters and, among them, an ancient,

pickled Arthur Gordon Pym, whose life and nineteenth-century racism have been preserved in the frigid climate. Where Poe's *Narrative* concludes with a vision of perfect, all-encompassing whiteness, Johnson's *Pym* closes with Chris and his friend Garth landing in a mysterious place where a vision of warm, reassuring brownness greets them.

<sup>5</sup> Yet Johnson's task in resurrecting Poe's work is not to celebrate how multicultural the United States has become since the mid-nineteenth century. Like Morrison before him, Johnson encourages his readers to take a long view of history; indeed, *Pym* presents the antebellum United States of sometime Baltimorean Poe and the "colorblind" nation in which Chris resides as points along a troubled, underexamined continuum rather than as discrete eras. Johnson's characters, black and white, alternately reject and embrace the fixed, racialized roles that early-twenty-first century society still expects them to play. Consequently, although the explicit reason for Chris' quest is to verify a rare manuscript that has been attributed to Peters, his implicit mission is to decode the meaning behind, and to escape from, the long life of race in the United States.

<sup>6</sup> That said, Chris' fascination with the Peters manuscript serves as more than a plot device. Johnson uses the artifact to cast his literary net even wider to include not only the seafaring tale but also the neo-slave narrative. Dating the genre to the 1970s and 1980s, Rushdy locates the neo-slave narrative's "origins in the social, intellectual, and racial formations of the [1960s]" and contends that its texts also "engage [...] in dialogue with the social issues of [their] moment of origin" (3, 5). With Dirk Peters' account of his service at sea and Chris' report of his time in Antarctica, Johnson creates a multi-layered neo-slave narrative that speaks to the ways that the early 2000s, like the 1960s, have represented a period of both promise and peril for Americans of African descent. As the passage of major civil rights legislation in 1964 and 1965, respectively, was followed by the assassinations of black leaders such as Malcolm X and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., so the 2008 election of Barack Obama as the first U.S. president of African descent has been succeeded by the repeal of significant portions of the Voting Rights Act and the heightened awareness of anti-black violence ("The Voting Rights Act: A Resource Page"). Indeed, the April 2015 death of African American Freddie Gray in police custody, and the uprisings that followed, prompted many observers to compare present-day Baltimore to the city in April 1968, when the assassination of King provoked two weeks of unrest.<sup>i</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Johnson also confronts the paradox of his historical moment by using humor, particularly satire, to explore how blackness and black lives mattered in the nineteenth-century United States and how their twenty-first-century manifestations resonate with their antecedents. Corresponding to Darryl Dickson-Carr's characterization of "the African American satirical novel" as a text that features "unremitting iconoclasm, criticism of the current status of African American political and cultural trends, and indictment of specifically American forms of racism," Johnson

reveals the degree to which the nation's racist past reverberates in the lives of his madcap cast of characters (16). As refracted through their improbable adventures, the history of race in the United States is a constitutive element of contemporary social dynamics. Furthermore, blackness and whiteness are inextricably bound constructs not simply for Pym the antiquated racist and Chris the scholar of race but also for everyone around them, from the proud black nationalist to the staunch Tea Party conservative. Finally, in a more frightening vein, one might also read *Pym* as suggesting that, because race and racism seem to be inescapable in organized societies, the only way to end recurring patterns of alienation, exploitation, and inequality is to end the world itself. In other words, one might argue that, far from suggesting a postracial paradise, *Pym* takes a key question of 1960s civil rights movements—that of whether substantive, lasting change can best be effected through reform or revolution—and proposes a third, even more disruptive option: apocalypse.

## 1. "What's Past Is Prologue": Morrison, Poe, and Johnson

<sup>8</sup> Appreciating the historical critique in *Pym* requires revisiting the works that set the literary-critical stage for Johnson's raucous satire. As indicated above, Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* challenges assertions of American literature as the exclusive "preserve of white male views, genius, and power [that] are without relationship to and removed from the overwhelming presence of black people in the United States" (5). Counter to such visions, Morrison diagnoses what she calls "American Africanism" as "a disabling virus within literary discourse" that can be located in the work of such canonical mainstays as Poe, Willa Cather, and Ernest Hemingway (7). It is "inextricable from the definition of Americanness," and to fail to appreciate this relationship is to neglect the multilayered dimensions of American literature (Morrison 65). Thus, *Playing in the Dark* presents the color "black" and the race(s) it evokes as integral elements of American culture, as subjects ("matters") that warrant further examination and that carry great weight ("matter").

<sup>9</sup> According to Morrison, Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* is central to understanding the enduring presence of blackness in the American psyche. Partially published as a serial in the *Southern Literary Messenger* in 1837 and released as a novel by Harper & Brothers the following year, the *Narrative* chronicles the travels of its title character, a white New England teenager who, with the help of his best friend Augustus, stows away on the whaling ship *Grampus*. After a mutiny and treacherous weather dispense with most of the ship and its crew, Pym, Augustus, and "hybrid" (European-Native American) Dirk Peters resort to cannibalism before Augustus succumbs to injuries sustained during the mutiny (Poe 57). Rescued by the British schooner *Jane Guy*, Pym and Peters join their new ship's voyage to the South Seas

and the tropical island of Tsalal. Inhabited by black "savages" who eventually ambush the *Jane Guy's* crew, Tsalal is Pym and Peters' final stop before, accompanied by islander Nu-Nu, they sail into an unspecified, but overwhelmingly white, horizon (Poe 163).

<sup>10</sup> "Romancing the Shadow," Morrison's second chapter, opens with an extended citation of Poe's vision of whiteness. Adrift in the Antarctic Ocean, Pym, Peters, and Nu-Nu travel by canoe in a scene rich with contrasting images of dark and light. At one moment they are beneath "[a] sullen darkness"; at another they are overtaken by a "white ashy shower" (Poe 217). In the novel's final paragraph, the darkness "materially increase[s]" only to give way to the other end of the color scale: "But there arose in our pathway a shrouded human figure, very far larger in its proportions than any dweller among men. And the hue of the skin of the figure was of the perfect whiteness of snow" (Poe 217). Morrison reads the scene as evidence of the persistent coupling of whiteness and blackness in American literature, of the use of the latter to distinguish and buttress the former. Like the nation whose identity it emerged to represent, early American literature had to negotiate the excitement and anxiety of freedom, and figurations of darkness, indicative of "the not-free" (the country's enslaved population) and "the not-me" (the character of African rather than European descent), were central to that negotiation (Morrison 38). Blackness, however, is not solely a matter of negation. Morrison brings her reading to a close with the claim that Johnson will take up in his novel's narrative climax: blackness and whiteness are mutually constitutive, and "[w]hiteness, alone, is mute, meaningless, unfathomable, pointless, frozen, veiled, curtained, dreaded, senseless, implacable" (Morrison 59).

<sup>11</sup> Morrison's study and others interrogating the role of race in Poe have prompted much debate among Poe scholars. Critic John C. Havard describes the prevailing camps as those who deem the *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* "a simple reflection of racist, proslavery thought" (107) and those who, like Havard and Dana D. Nelson, read the novel as a more sophisticated, more nuanced engagement with said thought. Scholar David Faflik likewise writes that Poe infused his novel with racist imagery to cater to the tastes of antebellum readers, not to advance a particular political agenda, and that to label Poe a racist Southerner is to ignore his varied background along with the regional complexity of the United States (283).<sup>ii</sup> However, it is important to note that, although Morrison deems the "Africanist presence" a predominant part of American literary discourse in Poe and elsewhere, she refrains from labeling any of the authors she discusses "racist" (Morrison 6). Indeed, she concludes *Playing in the Dark* by clarifying that her "deliberations are not about a particular author's attitudes toward race" (Morrison 90). Similarly, my primary purpose here is not to read Mat Johnson's reimagining of *Pym* as evidence that Poe was racist. Instead, my interest lies in how Poe's *Narrative* reflects its author's context, a society in which "the vast majority of white Americans, from the most virulent proponent

of slavery to the most radical abolitionist, held racist views of some sort" (Havard 108), and in the correspondences that Johnson finds between that period and the one in which he sets Chris' story. In other words, it is not Poe that matters as much as it is the historical and fictional lives of race in his work and beyond.<sup>iii</sup>

<sup>12</sup>In *Pym*, whose opening pages signal Johnson's debt to Morrison, the inquiry into the power and persistence of race begins in a setting often thought to be a bastion of progressive thought: a selective liberal arts college nestled in a picturesque Northeastern town. It is this institution, however, that denies Chris promotion with tenure for, among other things, his insistence on teaching the unpopular course "Dancing with the Darkies: Whiteness in the Literary Mind" (Johnson 7). By riffing on Morrison's title, Johnson situates Chris as heir to her call to investigate the nation's "racial pathology" through the study of early American literature (8). Through the usage of the epithet "darky," Johnson also casts his protagonist as a picaro whose glib, disruptive behavior will "lay bare the normative constructions of positive social values as false and illusory" (Dickson-Carr 36). As a result, while failing to meet an institution's pedagogical goals may read as valid grounds for dismissal, the circumstances leading up to and following Chris' firing prove to be far more troubling. For if Morrison reads Poe and his peers in order to consider the implications of nineteenth-century racial constructions for "the served" and their descendants, Johnson chooses to foreground the ramifications of race and racism for the descendants of those charged with "serving" (Morrison 90).

<sup>13</sup>Although the psychological and physical toll of nineteenth-century enslavement only exists in Chris' life as an object of study, and his academic position shields him from twenty-first-century iterations of physical labor, he discovers that "service" remains a fraught, racialized issue in his seemingly ideal professional environment. Rather than being perceived as groundbreaking or important, Chris' introduction of the topic of race into the presumably neutral domain of "American" literature is deemed transgressive, as is his refusal to sit on the Diversity Committee. "Everyone has a role to play," the college president intones to the newly fired Chris, and by failing "to purvey the minority perspective," he has rendered himself useless to his employer (14, 13). In brief, his role at the institution was to diversify the predominantly white campus by embodying blackness, not by critiquing the category and its analogues.

<sup>14</sup>Johnson complicates his exploration of racialized service via Chris' (re)turn to Poe after his firing. For the character's struggle with race is not only a question of escaping demands that he play the part of the "Professional Negro" but also of recognizing his own desire to categorize identity (7). This longing informs Chris' interest in a tattered manuscript attributed to Dirk Peters, the tenacious mixed-race sailor from Poe's *Narrative*; in his mind, it is Peters who performs the role of "the serviceable and serving black figure"—a part that Morrison attributes to

Poe's Tsalal native Nu-Nu—and whose life story, if verified, will unlock the mysteries of race in the U.S. (Morrison 32). Although Poe initially presents Peters as "the son of an Indian squaw [and] a fur trader," shortly thereafter he describes the character as having "Herculean" limbs and an "immense" head "with an indentation on the crown (like that on the head of most negroes)" (Poe 49). Chris contends that this language, which recalls stereotypes of African Americans as monstrous and inhuman, suggests that Peters' non-Native American half is of African rather than European descent.<sup>iv</sup> Consequently, as Poe's Peters eventually ascends to whiteness toward the end of the *Narrative*, when Pym describes the two of them as "the only living white men upon the island" after the Tsalalians attack the *Jane Guy* crew, so Johnson's version (of Peters) gradually inhabits blackness over the course of Chris' analysis (Poe 188). The latter reading is apparently confirmed by Chris' acquisition of the aforementioned Peters memoir, which includes an illustration of its author as "a pale man, mulatto by feature and skin tone: his hair hinting at the slightest of kink, thin lips betrayed by a wide nose and the high West African cheekbones" (Johnson 38).<sup>v</sup>

<sup>15</sup>The transformation is "apparent" rather than "certain" because if Poe and his Anglo American peers used blackness, as Morrison argues, to consolidate whiteness, Johnson and African American contemporaries such as Percival Everett and Danzy Senna juxtapose racial categories in order to complicate blackness.<sup>vi</sup> While the consolidation of identities still appears in these early twenty-first century texts, it tends to function as a target of critique rather than as a desired narrative end. This dynamic manifests itself in *Pym* through the double-edged nature of Chris' interest in Dirk Peters, and through his satirical lens Johnson directs the reader to ask how Peters operates as a "serviceable and serving black figure," to revisit Morrison, for the beleaguered African American academic (Chris) as much as he does for the antebellum white author (Poe). If Chris can authenticate *The True and Interesting Narrative of Dirk Peters*, he promises to revive his academic career, but if he can validate his reading of Peters as black he is poised to do something that is perhaps far more difficult: stabilize an identity—his own—that is more precarious than he would like to admit.

<sup>16</sup>Johnson extends this narrative thread via the character of Mahalia Mathis, a Gary, Indiana, resident and Peters' descendant to whom Chris turns for information; their first conversation reveals a clear disconnect between their respective interpretations of her racial identity:

"I am of Greek, Hopi, Crow, Blackfoot, Chinese, and Danish descent," she interrupted me to declare immediately after I mentioned the genealogical page on her [web]site. Hearing this, I poked my head back at the computer screen to look at the image of the Negro there looking back at me. (Johnson 46)

<sup>17</sup>The immediate purpose of this incongruity is to present Mrs. Mathis and other members of her civic group, the "Native American Ancestry Collective of Gary (NAACG)," as tragicomic figures (52). Their protestations to the contrary, the group looks to Chris "like any gathering



of black American folks, some tan and most brown," and the genetic tests they order indicate that their resources might be better invested in the civil rights organization with a similar acronym but different purpose: the NAACP, or National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (53). In brief, Chris aligns Mrs. Mathis and friends with the tradition of black Americans' claiming Native American heritage in order to downplay, if not deny, having African ancestry.<sup>vii</sup>

<sup>18</sup>While Chris paints the NAACG episode with a farcical brush, Johnson invites a more careful consideration of the politics of identity. Garth Frierson, Chris' best friend, responds to a laughter-filled account of the Gary expedition by charging Chris with having a narrow, condescending view of blackness: "So that's it, everybody has to play their roles, right? Black people can't be Indians, don't matter what's in their blood or how they was raised or what the freedman did for red folk" (57). In Garth's eyes, Chris is no better than the administrator who chided him for not performing the part of "Professor of African American Literature" to the college's expectations. One might also read Garth's assessment as a charge that Chris is playing another role all too well. In keeping with Dickson-Carr's study of the African American satirical novel, Johnson positions Chris as a means of taking on "the current status of African American political and cultural trends," in this case the figure of the conscientized black intellectual who is so invested in tackling white supremacy that he is unable to see how his critical approach might produce its own limited and limiting conceptions of identity and belonging (16).

<sup>19</sup>Instead of advancing his interrogation of race and racism, Chris' views blind him to the complexity of Mrs. Mathis' subject position as well as his own. In the essay "Why Most Black People Aren't 'Part Indian,'" Henry Louis Gates, Jr. reflects that, even with significant statistical evidence to the contrary, "it was much easier for black people to invent a putative Native American ancestor to explain mixed-race features and hair textures than to confront the terrible fact that we have so much European ancestry because of forced or cajoled sexuality during slavery" (n. pag.). This observation suggests that Mrs. Mathis' reaction to her DNA test, along with that of her fellow NAACG members, may indeed be rooted in denial, but not denial of African ancestry *tout court* so much as of the "monstrous intimacies," to borrow from Christina Sharpe, through which African and European Americans coexisted in the antebellum era (Sharpe 3). In a discussion of the usage of visual imagery in anti- and pro-slavery arguments, Sharpe asserts that photographs of "pure" Africans served the latter position because of the presumption that "injury [caused by sexual violence] cannot be read on the unmiscegenated black body" (12). The unstated inverse of Sharpe's claim is that injury *can* be read on the *miscegenated* black body, and it is perhaps this legacy of injury, violence, and subjection that Mrs. Mathis and her peers wish to eschew in favor of their adoption of Native American heritage. However

problematic, such an affiliation nonetheless provides access to an inheritance of sovereignty and nobility.

<sup>20</sup>The issue of the miscegenated black body is even more pertinent to Chris' construction of his own identity. When Chris castigates Mrs. Mathis' reluctant blackness, Garth retorts, "You [*sic*] so scared someone's going to kick you off Team Negro that you think everybody's got to stick to some crazy one-drop rule" (57). Hypodescent, the practice of using the identity of the "more socially subordinate parent" to "determin[e] the classification of a child of mixed-race ancestry" (Riley), functions here not to protect whiteness but to reinforce Chris' otherwise tenuous claim to blackness. The import of Dirk Peters' identity, then, both intersects with and extends beyond the literary historical mystery that Chris hopes to solve. Offered mid-way through *Pym*, Chris' self-portrait exposes the more immediate reason he may be drawn to the "pale man" in the frontispiece of Peters' memoir. The passage bears citation at length:

I am a mulatto in a long line of mulattoes, so visibly lacking in African heritage that I often appear to some uneducated eyes as a random, garden-variety white guy. But I'm not. [...] Mandatory ethnic signifiers in summary: my hair is fairly straight, the curl loose and lazy; my skin lacks melanin—there are some Italians out there darker than me. My lips are full and my nose is broad, but it's really just the complexion and hair that count. [...] I am a black man who looks white. (135)

<sup>21</sup> Earlier in the novel Chris speaks of the eternal American quest for "a romanticized ancestral home," a geographic construct in which one can anchor one's identity (30). His confession of racial indeterminacy proposes reading "home" in an additional manner, as an affective construct that entails finding shelter and stability within oneself. In this vein, what matters is not how Poe, Mrs. Mathis, or Chris views Dirk Peters, or how others read Chris' racial identity, but how the characters define themselves.

## 2. Racial Revision and the Specter of History

<sup>22</sup> Rather than elide race, then, Johnson revises notions of identity in order to depict the myriad ways that race is chosen, experienced, and, manifested in the lives of his characters. Indeed, Chris' relationship to blackness is not the only one considered in *Pym*. He and Garth become best friends in middle school because neither of them conforms to expected notions of black boyhood in their "working-class neighborhood in [...] 'Black is Beautiful era'" Philadelphia: the former is ostracized because he is a "symbol of Whiteness and all the negative connotations it held," the latter because he is a nerd who "[wears] his Boy Scout uniform every day" (135, 136). The boys take refuge in the school library, where Chris develops a love for African American literature and Garth a passion for art history. Johnson continues to complicate the character's blackness into his adulthood, during which Garth becomes a devoted fan of fictional

artist Thomas Karvel. Much like the work of Thomas Kinkade, his historical analogue, Garth's treasured Karvel prints have little to do with African diasporic places or people; if anything, these bucolic landscapes suggest the mythic American homeland that Chris contemplates when studying Poe's fiction and that, through concepts such as manifest destiny, was believed to be the exclusive province of white Americans (15).<sup>viii</sup>

23

Johnson further destabilizes the notion that blackness is in any way monolithic with his characterization of the other members of Chris' Antarctic expedition. His cousin Booker Jaynes, "probably the world's only civil rights activist turned deep-sea diver," heads the group (70), and two couples complete the roster: Jeffree and Carlton Damon Carter, water treatment specialists and creators of "an 'Afro-Adventure Blog,'" and Angela and Nathaniel Latham, Chris' ex-girlfriend and her second husband (76). As Chris assembles a crew for the appropriately named Creole Mining Company, so Johnson collects a range of archetypes through which to parse contemporary African American identity. With his historically evocative name, flowing dreadlocks, and dog named "White Folks," Booker embodies the figure of the black nationalist (99); with their expensive gear and omnipresent camera, Jeffree and Carlton Damon Carter represent social media celebrities as well as gay urbanites; and, with their impressive academic credentials and social connections, Angela and Nathan epitomize upwardly mobile professionals. Early in his 2011 book *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness? What It Means to Be Black Now*, social critic Touré notes that "[i]f there are forty million Black people in America then there are forty million ways to be Black" (20). Johnson cannot cover as broad a spectrum within the confines of *Pym*, but he nonetheless presents a diverse assortment of African Americanness.

24

One can trace his interest in part to Morrison's consideration of how people of African descent are not inherently uniform but have been reduced to uniformity by legal, social, and literary constructions. In *Playing in the Dark*, she identifies six "linguistic strategies" used to manage the Africanist presence in American literature: "[e]conomy of stereotype," "[m]etonymic displacement," "[m]etaphysical condensation," "[f]etishization," "[d]ehistoricizing allegory," and "[p]atterns of explosive, disjointed, repetitive language" (67-69). These strategies echo the dehumanizing methods deployed to justify and perpetuate the enslavement of Africans and their descendants. For example, Morrison explains that in metonymic displacement "[c]olor coding and other physical traits become metonyms that displace rather than signify the Africanist character" (68). While the previously mentioned practice of hypodescent can disrupt the power of skin color, that disruption depends on knowledge of the mixed-race person's background.

25

Although Johnson's revision of racial scripts resists such displacement, his characters cannot escape the specter of history. Chris and company travel to Antarctica thinking of themselves as intrepid modern explorers, with Chris intent on verifying Dirk Peters' account and the others intent on making money from Booker's mining scheme. Yet when they stumble across Pym, miraculously alive in the twenty-first century, his language and outlook take them back in time: "So tell me, then," Pym inquires of Chris, "have you brought these slaves for trading?" (Johnson 134). The question disregards the possibility that Chris might identify as other than white and flattens the differences that the narrative has so carefully ascribed to his fellow travelers. In Pym's mind, phenotype connotes race, and race determines whether one is enslaved or free. The humorous component of Johnson's novel might tempt one to dismiss Pym as a delusional relic from the past, as Chris himself wishes to do, but the critical element of that humor prompts one to confront how, as Sharpe asserts, "all modern subjects are post-slavery subjects fully constituted by the discursive codes of slavery and post-slavery" (3). If not directly impacted by modern-day iterations of the dehumanization, violence, and submission that characterized the antebellum period (with such experiences being the impetus behind the Black Lives Matter movement), the relative freedom lived by Chris and his friends is still, Sharpe would argue, haunted by this tragic legacy. In other words, Johnson's fictional manifestation of this inheritance may be fantastic, but the historical subtext of his narrative is all too credible.

26

Lest one reject this provocative collapse of historical time and social progress, Johnson doubles down on his engagement with the neo-slave narrative by imagining the enslavement of his "post-slavery" characters. After a botched trade deal with the Tekelians, the white snow monsters with whom Pym resides, everyone except Garth is indentured to the creatures for one hundred years.<sup>ix</sup> Effectively enslaved, Chris, Booker, Angela, Nathaniel, and Jeffree and Carlton Damon Carter are joined in their shared bondage and utter lack of preparation for their predicament. As Chris confesses, "Turns out [...] that my thorough and exhaustive scholarship into the slave narratives of the African Diaspora in no way prepared me to actually become a fucking slave" (Johnson 160). The characters' personalities re-emerge as they adapt to and cope with captivity; their reactions run the gamut from Jeffree's open resistance to Nathan's cultural entrepreneurship. Others, like Booker and Chris, form affective bonds with their captors. Regardless of their respective strategies, however, each character finds himself in a contemporary rendering of the Hegelian dialectic: he must assert his identity in opposition to or in cooperation with that of his owner (Hegel, 228-240).

27

If blackness as lived and experienced beyond the confines of racist thought is always already diverse and multiple, then whiteness is also a

construction that obscures the many ways in which that identity is lived. Johnson first allows for the complexity of whiteness via his narrator's musings about the landscape; during an excursion with Garth, Chris discovers that although the "Antarctic gives the impression of being white, [...] really it's blue. Almost entirely constructed of that pale, powder blue that at times can darken to a rich, cobalt haze, as it did now around me" (95-96). This passage recalls the original Pym's reaction to Tsalal; the island's darkness may seem constant, but it is not. The water, Pym observes, "was *not* colourless, nor was it of any one uniform colour—presenting to the eye, as it flowed, every possible shade of purple, like the hues of a changeable silk" (Poe 168). Where Johnson departs from Poe is in his extension of this depth and variety to his white characters, a consideration that Poe does not allow the Tsalalians, whom he depicts as uniformly ignorant and savage.

28

As with all aspects of *Pym*, Johnson's examination of whiteness requires that the reader appreciate the novel's polyvocality. In his introductory images of the Tekelians, from their embodiment of the "shrouded," perfectly white figure at the end of *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* to their menacing homogeneity, Johnson seems to channel his literary antecedent (Poe 217). Of the first encounter between the Tekelians and the Creole crew, Chris remembers,

Their size alone, their towering presence, would have been enough to provide a spectacle. Given my own height of six four, I would have to say that their median height was at least seven four or higher. Their bodies were mountainous and hidden, covered in hooded capes that hung broadly from the shoulders and concealed their bulk in folds. [...] The only things that were clearly visible were their heads, and those were what froze us. What I at first glance had assumed to be horrific masks proved instead to be *their actual faces*. The color, or lack of it, was striking" (emphasis in original, 124-125).

- 29 With their "hooded capes" and menacing stature, the Tekelians evoke the similarly attired Ku Klux Klan, the hate group known for perpetrating anti-black, anti-Semitic violence in the United States. Johnson underscores this connection by naming Chris' owner "Krakeer," a moniker that echoes the epithet "cracker," which is commonly used as an insult for poor Southern whites (163). Yet just as "cracker" identity, which scholars have traced to ethnicity (in this case, Celtic origin) rather than social class, is more complex than regional stereotypes allow, so the Tekelians have an array of temperaments and occupy different positions in their society's hierarchy.<sup>x</sup> Krakeer, whom Chris renames "Augustus...in honor of Pym's fallen shipmate," lives in modest conditions and feels guilty when he is unable to feed Chris properly (163). He is "soft and harmless," in stark contrast to Barro, the powerful, wealthy Tekelian who responds to Jeffree's defiance by stabbing him (170). Like American whiteness in Morrison's analysis, Tekelian identity is consolidated only in opposition to external difference.

30

Consequently, although Pym worships the Tekelians as "perfection incarnate," he, too, occupies a liminal position, albeit not an enslaved one, within Tekeli-li (140). Unassailable in his nineteenth-century New England context, Pym's whiteness is diminished by his humanity in his adopted twenty-first century Antarctic setting. Because he is a different species than the Tekelians, he is an outcast who is at odds with society biologically as well as temporally. Chris discovers the precarity of Pym's position on a visit to a Tekelian bar. Well versed in the interplay of geography, race, and socioeconomic status in the nineteenth-century U.S., in which being the descendant of a prominent New England family usually entailed some degree of privilege, Chris assumes that Pym is the establishment's owner. Yet Pym is neither the proprietor nor a customer; instead, he passes his time waiting to consume the scraps discarded by Tekelian patrons. His ability to communicate with the Creole crew may have temporarily improved his status, but it has not made his whiteness equal to that of the creatures that he celebrates as "the Gods" (199).

31

A different, contemporary example of decontextualized whiteness emerges in the figure of Garth's beloved artist Thomas Karvel, whom Garth tracks down while his friends are enslaved.<sup>xi</sup> In Karvel's case, decontextualization serves as a means of bolstering, not diluting, his identity. The Dome of Light, the high-tech refuge that the artist has built for his wife and himself, is a collage of different Karvel paintings, with palm trees in one area and an authentic English cottage in another. In contrast to the exterior Antarctic "snow with its frozen white death," the Dome's interior is color-saturated, warm, and vibrant (233). When explaining his relocation to Garth and Chris, who reunites with his friend after escaping Tekeli-li, Karvel never speaks of race, only of wanting to recreate "America without taxes, and big government, and terrorist bullshit" (236). Indeed, the African American newcomers are welcome to stay in the Dome as long as they produce their own food. If the Dome of Light was an all-white space before Chris and Garth's arrival, it would seem that its racial exclusivity was circumstantial, the result of Mr. and Mrs. Karvel's being its only residents, rather than intentional or discriminatory.

32

Karvel's whiteness, however, is no more independent than that of his historical and literary predecessors. In presenting his "perfect world" to Chris and Garth, Karvel marshals language that recalls Morrison's description of early European immigrants to the United States. If Morrison imagines these travelers viewing early America as a place where "[o]ne could be released from a useless, binding, repulsive past into a kind of history-lessness, a blank page waiting to be inscribed" (35), Johnson has Karvel celebrate the Dome of Light as "'a place without history. A place without stain. No yesterday, only tomorrow'" (241). Karvel believes that he has created a postracial paradise unsullied by the

legacies of slavery and inequality that haunt the United States. Indeed, Karvel's words echo the conclusion Chris reaches just before trading deathly cold for Technicolor comfort:

I saw it all become clear to me. That is how they stay so white: by refusing to accept blemish or history. Whiteness isn't about being something, it is about being no thing, nothing, an erasure. Covering over the truth with layers of blank reality just as the snowstorm was now covering our tent, whipping away all traces of our existence from the pristine landscape. (Johnson 225)

- 33 In this moment of crisis-induced clarity, Chris fully grasps the articulation (in the sense of "linking or connecting") of race and morality in the American psyche: to be white is to be superior and blameless, to fortify one's identity through a necessary but, ultimately, expendable other (Edwards 11). It is this ideal whiteness that Karvel attempts to create, and sustain, in the isolated, pastoral world reconstructed from his paintings.

34

Chris and Garth's presence in the Dome of Light not only reveals the correspondence between Chris' critique of whiteness and Karvel's vision but also exposes the cracks in the dome's idyllic façade. While Garth delights in their new home's Edenic wonders, Chris finds troubling reminders of American history at every turn. The cottage in which he and Garth are housed recalls the compromise through which delegates to the 1787 Constitutional Convention allotted legislative representation in the U.S. Congress: "Representatives and direct taxes shall be apportioned among the several states which may be included within this union, according to their respective numbers, which shall be determined by adding to the whole number of free persons, including those bound to service for a term of years, and excluding Indians not taxed, three fifths of all other Persons" (*U.S. Constitution*, Art. 1, Sec. 2). The phrase "all other Persons" referred to enslaved people, the vast majority of whom were of African descent and, in this constitutional accounting, determined to be less than the "free persons" who were predominantly of European descent. In *Pym*, Chris and Garth's cottage in the Dome of Light appears to be "the adjective quaint made manifest" with its "thatched roof," "handblown glass" windows and "candlelight flickering behind each one" (242). Upon closer inspection, however, the building is really "three-fifths of a house" with an unfinished interior (244). Contrary to Chris' initial concerns, black people can exist in Karvel's fantasy world, but their existence is circumscribed and their access to resources limited.

35

Johnson further explores the workings of Karvel's whiteness by addressing how race, gender, and nationality intersect in the construction and experience of identities. Early in *Playing in the Dark* Morrison identifies masculinity as a characteristic that is "championed" by the Eurocentric American literary canon; she later notes that the figure heralded by that canon was neither gender- nor race-neutral but, rather, "a new white man" (Morrison 5, 39). Similarly, Johnson depicts Thomas

Karvel as a character who constructs his world around his gender identity as well as his artistry. In addition to leaving the United States to avoid taxes and other government oversight, he has sought to flee "[a]ll that PC nonsense [that] made men soft" (Johnson 237). When Karvel discovers that his habitat's palm trees do not bear coconuts, he demands that some be added because "[n]ature was created to serve man. And now this man wants some coconuts up there" (252). Karvel's interlocutor in the coconut exchange—and the other against which his gender is defined—is his wife. The character is known only as "Mrs. Karvel," and, during Chris' first days in the dome, he notes that "[she] seemed perpetually stressed, rarely out of motion any time I saw her. Standing still for a moment, without food or an emptied plate or a feather duster in her hand, seemed almost a painful act for her" (244). When Karvel insists on having coconuts, Mrs. Karvel rolls her eyes "like her corneas were going on a world tour," but she also quietly and invisibly fulfills her husband's wish (252).

36

Yet despite appearing to revolve solely around the Master of Light, Mrs. Karvel's womanhood, like the other identities investigated in *Pym*, proves to be much more complicated. Mrs. Karvel is the engineer who realizes her husband's artistic visions and, when necessary, recognizes their limitations; life in the Dome of Light would not be possible without her labor. As the aforementioned eye-roll suggests, Mrs. Karvel's domestic efficiency is edgy, not cheery, and this sharpness becomes incontrovertible when the Tekelians attack the dome. Reaching back even further into the annals of American history, the Mistress of Light proposes an Antarctic Thanksgiving during which the Karvels and Tekelians can discuss their differences over "[g]ood home cooking" (278). Just as the first contact between European colonists and Native Americans resulted in the decimation of the latter group, so Mrs. Karvel's generosity is a premise for a darker, genocidal plan: to serve the Tekelians "a good, strong supper" that will be laced with rat poison and, consequently, "take care of all [their] troubles" (279). The chilling stratagem exposes the true architecture of the Karvel marriage, for it is Mrs. Karvel's strength, not her submission, which enables and supports her husband's masculinity in the face of external challenges.

37

In addition to dispelling notions of Mrs. Karvel as a compliant helpmate, the deadly Tekelian supper rounds out *Pym*'s study of the dimensions of whiteness. Although the Tekelians and Karvels share a skin color, they do not have a common cause. Conceived of as a self-contained, self-sustaining habitat, the Dome of Light becomes a fossil-fuel dependent environmental hazard after Thomas Karvel alters the original design. Once its supply chain is disrupted, Mrs. Karvel begins looking for a new home, and Tekeli-li strikes her as a promising location. The Antarctic natives, in contrast, descend on the dome because its "exhaust fan [...] is blowing heat straight into Tekeli-li" (274). White or not, the Karvels are



causing the destruction of the very site they envision colonizing. This antagonism bespeaks the "isolation, the separateness" that Morrison identifies as "always a part of any utopia" (Morrison 1998). Neither the Karvels' Dome nor Pym's Heaven (Tekeli-li) is equipped to accommodate outsiders; their respective residents only do so when prompted by exigent circumstances, and their reluctance to accept change ultimately causes the collapse of their respective societies.

### 3. Racial Utopias and the End(s) of the World

38

Like Poe's *Narrative* before it, Johnson's *Pym* ends on an intriguing yet inconclusive note. The poisoning of the Tekelians provokes a human-snow creature battle that results in the explosion of the Dome of Light and implosion of Tekeli-li. After traveling by boat for days, Chris, Garth, and Pym, the only survivors, reach land; Chris describes the scene that greets them as follows:

Rising up in our pathway was a man. He was naked except for the cloth that covered his loins. He was of normal proportions, and he was shaking his hand in the air, waving it, and we, relieved, waved ours back at him. [...] On the shore all I could discern was a collection of brown people, and this, of course, is a planet on which such are the majority. (322)

39 The academic-turned-adventurer confesses that he cannot confirm whether they have reached Tsalal, and, given the skin color of its inhabitants, the land does not quite correspond to Chris' fantasy, entertained at the novel's beginning, of a "great undiscovered African Diasporan homeland [...] uncorrupted by Whiteness" (39). By the novel's end, however, perhaps Chris has come to realize the fallacy of such a vision in the twenty-first century. The simultaneous fall of Tekeli-li and the Dome of Light reveal that, even in the absence of racial difference, "great," "uncorrupted" homelands are not immune to social conflict, ecological imperatives, or other challenges, be they anthropological or natural. In sending Chris and Garth to a place where blackness and whiteness have mingled to such a degree that they have ceased to be distinct categories, Johnson suggests a need to engage with multiculturalism not as an empty ideal but as a lived reality.

40

If the construct of race is as weighty and as contingent as Chris' experience implies, what are the consequences for the world that he and his fellow characters have left behind? How viable is a society whose structure and self-identity are, as Morrison argues, so invested in something that is omnipresent and invisible, biologically inconsequential yet politically and socially significant? One of the fascinating aspects of *Pym* is that the annihilations of the Dome of Light and Tekeli-li are but two of multiple catastrophes, real and imagined, that appear in the novel. Jeffree and Carlton Damon Carter's blog features their video coverage of the September 11 attacks in New York City, and their search for

excitement and heroism also prompts them to travel to Ohio "during the [fictional] Dayton Dirty Water Disaster" (77). In Antarctica, the Tekelians' enslavement of the Creole crew is precipitated by an unexplained global cataclysm that cuts off the Americans' contact with the outside world. Just prior to their departure for Tekeli-li, they all receive the same anonymous email message with no content save the "ominous [...] subject line: ARMAGEDDON" (152). As noted toward the beginning of this essay, Morrison portrays whiteness in isolation as "dreaded, senseless, implacable" (59). I would argue that Johnson expands upon this contention to propose that Eurocentric perspectives disregard history, the humanity of others, and the far-reaching consequences of a community's actions to the detriment of global society. More specifically, without serious, sustained attention to issues such as racialized violence, income inequality, and climate change, the wider world seems poised to follow Tekeli-li and the Dome of Light on the path to destruction.

41

Shortly after his firing, Chris meets the hip-hop scholar who has been hired to replace him. When Chris tries to explain his scholarly turn to Poe, the aptly named Mosaic Johnson snaps back, "'Poe. Doesn't. Matter'" (21). Although his name evokes cultural diversity, the fictional Johnson's retort reveals his willingness to accept the superficial multiculturalism sought by the college administration in lieu of the substantive, often difficult engagement with difference that Chris seeks. Yet as Morrison argues in *Playing in the Dark* and Johnson elaborates in *Pym*, Poe and other white early American authors do matter if one wishes to understand the roots of race and racism in the United States. Likewise, blackness matters not because it is a fixed, immutable identity, but because it is a flexible, ever-changing one in and of itself and in relation to other categories. Whiteness also warrants examination and interrogation, Johnson contends, because it is not invisible, independent, or stable; instead, it is inextricably bound to the identities through and against which it is normalized and subject to its own internal divisions. In the end, *Pym* does not posit a postracial fantasy that enables its characters to escape the complications of race and history so much as it projects a multi-layered, multiracial world in which such complications might be acknowledged and worked through.

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## NOTES

- i. The cover of the 11 May 2015 issue of *Time* magazine featured a black and white photograph of the April 2015 protests and the phrase "America, 1968" in white type. The "1968" has been crossed out and a red, apparently handwritten "2015" placed above it. See Laurent n. p. See also "Baltimore '68: Riots and Rebirth."
- ii. While Faflik's claims about present-day scholars misconstruing, if not altogether dismissing, the importance of regional identities in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century U.S. are convincing, his apparent attempt to disentangle questions of race from those of region is less so. The Yankee-Cavalier (Southerner) split Faflik outlines is incomplete without discussions of race (273-274), as is an analysis of relations among the U.S.-Mexico border, the location toward which Faflik turns his attention at the end of his essay (284-288).
- iii. For another reading of representations of race in Poe's novel, see Jessica Jacquél's M.A. thesis.
- iv. Havard argues that such representations were part of the "'average' [anti-black] racism" of the *Narrative's* time; he uses the term "average," or typical, to reiterate his claim that the segregated nature of the antebellum United States led most Anglo Americans to hold anti-black views of some sort (108).
- v. Johnson also uses the fictional Peters manuscript as an opportunity to reference Jules Verne's 1897 novel *Le Sphinx des glaces* (*An Antarctic Mystery*), an earlier sequel to Poe's *Narrative*. In Peters' manuscript he recounts traveling to France to confront Verne about the use of his (Peters') story.
- vi. See, for example, Everett's *Erasure* and Senna's *You Are Free: Stories*.
- vii. Zora Neale Hurston challenges this ethno-racial subterfuge at the beginning of her essay "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," in which she writes that she is "the only Negro in the United States whose grandfather on the mother's side was not an Indian chief" (Hurston 152).

viii. Karvel, whom Garth describes as the "Master of Light" (35), is a fictional double of Thomas Kinkade (1958-2012), the American artist known as the "Painter of Light" and famous for painting "bucolic scenes of cozy cottages, gardens, streams, villages and rural churches." (Jacobs).

ix. In Poe's *Narrative*, the Tsalalians, the residents of the dusky tropical island, cry "*Tekeli-lil Tekeli-lil*" in terror whenever they see a white object or being (195). In Johnson's *Pym*, Chris utters the same terrified cry upon seeing his first Antarctic "humanoid" and subsequently learns from Pym that the creatures' subterranean world is named "Tekeli-li" (96, 141).

x. Grady McWhiney writes, "Some Crackers were rich, others poor, and still others were neither; but they all more or less shared the same values. And that is the point: Cracker does not signify an economic condition; rather, it defines a culture" (xiv).

xi. Garth finds the artist using the Karvel print *Shackleton's Sorrow* as his guide; the title further links *Pym* to the history of Antarctic exploration as Ernest Shackleton (1874-1922) was an Anglo-Irish explorer who led three expeditions to the region.

## ABSTRACTS

After being denied tenure for expanding his teaching of race and literary history beyond exclusively African American texts, Chris Jaynes, the protagonist of Mat Johnson's novel *Pym* (2011), sets out to retrace the voyage from Edgar Allan Poe's 1838 novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*. This essay examines how Johnson uses Jaynes' own shipwreck—he and his crew are stranded in Antarctica—to posit the history of race in the United States as a national disaster that overdetermines contemporary social dynamics. Using intertextuality and satire, Johnson follows Toni Morrison's precedent in depicting blackness and whiteness as constructs that are inextricably bound and that cannot be understood one without the other. Central to this claim are Johnson's mirroring of the progressive, 21<sup>st</sup>-century African American Jaynes with his narrative foil: the pickled, ancient Anglo American Arthur Gordon Pym. I contend that Johnson not only revisits Morrison's argument but also expands upon it; for, as Jaynes and his fellow characters confront the thorny legacy of race and racism in the United States, they must also face a future in which the country's changing demographics will render questions of identity more, rather than less, complicated.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** 19th century, 21st century, Edgar Allan Poe, literary history, Mat Johnson, *Playing in the Dark*, *Pym*, race, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, Toni Morrison, United States

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